SIX.

Research Context Essay
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Long-take and single-take contemporary screendance, highlighted against the trend of increasingly short shot lengths in films generally, represents a largely unused form of filmmaking. My research (1) has revealed only limited examples of such productions. My film *Six* responds to this finding.

As a part of my research I examine my single-take film *Six* (2014) as part of a broader selection of single-take works. I argue that a moving camera single-take screendance work may suggest the point of view, among other possibilities, of someone (or something) who (that) is motivated to observe the dance but is never seen, and whose identity can only be constructed by a mixture of camera movement, camera positioning, on-screen hints, and the viewer's consciousness. The film has no cuts, has a deep depth of focus, and shows the full lengths of the dancers' bodies.

Mary-Ann Doane comments on the notion that cinema engenders a sense of familiarity with life, in that it reflects the moving/happening world that we inhabit. She notes that this familiarity has limitations:

> Imposed by the necessity of an ending, which is always yoked to the arbitrary, given the fact that things go on, while the film cannot. This limit is mirrored or mimicked internally by the cut, which disrupts and shatters the continual unfolding of real time of the shot (Doane 2004, p.261-2).

Doane's observation applies to all screendances in that they always end, unless perhaps they loop.[2] Looped film however must at some point return to its start and cannot therefore truly represent the continual unfolding of real time. However for the duration of a long-take, or a whole film if it is a single-take, a film might, temporarily at least, mirror a 'real' continuous unfolding of time which reflects our own conscious experience and supports a connection between the original dancing/filming event and the screen viewer.

In this context, edited film can only suggest a temporally inauthentic experience, a visual narrative unrepresentative of human consciousness. Edited film has the power to provoke sensations by re-assembling fragments of images, sounds, and perspectives in a manner that reflects qualities of events, but it cannot reflect the linear nature of a conscious lived experience. For example, the fast cuts of the car chase sequence in *Heat* (Michael Mann

1995) mirror the fast reactions associated with an adrenaline rush in a dangerous situation, but do not mirror what a driver would actually see in such a situation. Similarly in the dance sequence in *Pride and Prejudice* (Joe Wright 2005) the party guests surrounding Mathew MacFadyen and Keira Knightley's duet are made to disappear as the couple dance. This editing illustrates how they are entirely absorbed in one another's presence, but the disappearing party guests are not what we, as observers, would really experience.

Though edited film like these examples present to the viewer the qualities of an event, only the single-take film shot with a steadicam or a handheld camera, at angles, heights and speeds that are humanly replicable, or a mechanically controlled camera programmed to mimic such movements, can imitate the unfolding of an event that could be experienced in real time. Branigan proposes aspects of camera use that support this replicable view point:

> One property of a camera, for example, that may be described as being analogous to a human property is based on the position of the camera in diegetic spaces: is such a position in space a possible or usual place of viewing that a human observer might or would take in order to see a particular thing? Does the camera have a view and act in a way comparable to what we might imagine for a human observer? Also relevant are the height and angle of the camera, and the focal length of the lens (and perhaps focus, film stock, and filters). In addition, if the camera is moving, then it's speed, rhythm, and acceleration will be relevant if it's movement is to be matched to a human movement, such as the movement of a person's body (Branigan 2006, p.37).

In the production of a single-take screendance, the dance has to really happen, from start to end as it is shot. Unlike fragmented shooting for edited film, there are no pauses between sections to be filmed from a different angle, and no pickups to catch a close up or a wide shot. The camera and dancer perform the work from the beginning to the end in the same way that a live performance on stage would unfold.

This shooting style creates particular demands on everyone involved on the production event. The moving steadicam or hand-held camera also creates a consistent perspective that never reveals a physical character that might own its point of view. The 'looker' in this context is hidden by the very nature of the shooting style, as in our own conscious living experience where we do not see our own faces except in a reflection. Branigan proposes multiple possible points of view embodied by the camera: 'The author, implied author, ideal spectator, tacit narrator, explicit narrator, invisible observer, character, or actual spectator, to name a few possibilities' (Branigan 2006, p.40). Any of these may apply in the single-take film. However, if the camera's point of view is structured in a way that suggests that what we experience is

what a 'character' or an 'actual spectator' experiences, then the physicality of this person is never revealed. The camera operator could turn the camera upon themselves, akin to a video 'selfie', but the point of view then becomes assigned to the camera itself rather than a 'character' or an 'actual spectator'.

Typically, in edited film, the viewer may see someone who is looking, then an implied object of their look, suggesting that this is their viewpoint. With the single-take, the camera's view cannot switch from one to another, the screen spectator is locked into a single physical viewing perspective. Vivien Sobchack remarks: 'Watching a film, we can see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as see the moved' (Sobchack 1994, p.42). With the single-take film, the seer and the hearer as camera perspectives are physically masked. Only the movement of the camera, the movement of the performers, and sound, remain to suggest points of view. It is this position, the never visible character designated to the camera, that this research explores.

With a fixed shot the camera provides less evidence of a physical observer than it does when it is moving, as the viewer observes without the possibility of a mediating consciousness suggested by camera movement. Lindgren remarks: 'The movement of the camera draws attention to the imaginary observer whose movements it reproduces' (Lindgren 1963, p.164). The moving camera is also able to distract the viewer from its own possible identity by attaching itself to the identity of a visible other. An example of this is in the opening section of Christian Larson's screendance *Valtari* (2013) where the eye level camera moves in a way that suggests an imaginary observer but this identity may be deflected onto another.

The first two fixed camera shots of the film establish a sense of place, an industrial building in an empty area. The third fixed camera shot (figure 1) shows a person, at a distance, walking across some waste ground, and the fourth shot (figure 2) is a moving camera 'over-the-shoulder' shot of the person as she walks towards some buildings that might be assumed to be those in shots one and two. In this shot the camera is assigned to share her experience with that of an imaginary observer but the viewer has only one visual physical presence, that of the walking woman. As the film progresses a man is shown dancing inside the building. The shots then alternate between him dancing and her entering and walking through the building. All shots of him are fixed mid to wide-shots, and all shots of her are mobile and are mid through to close-up shots. Up until this point in the film (1.45) the camera work emphasises observation of the male dancer from a remote position, as compared to sharing the experience of the female dancer.

Figure 1. *Valtari* (Larson 2013). Shot 3 with distant person in landscape.

Figure 2. *Valtari* (Larson 2013). Shot 4, mobile camera follows person.

Where the camera is mobile and following the female dancer into the building, there is a close movement relationship between them, for example, if she were holding the camera herself it might move in a similar way. Were the moving camera to take the same route across the field and into the building without the woman in shot, there would be no visual 'other' to deflect the point of view onto, and the camera's presence would be foregrounded suggesting an embodied viewpoint.

In Rodrigo Pardo's single-take film *Uma Toma* (2006) a different possibility is revealed. In the film the camera travels along a corridor inside a building revealing, through internal windows, action in the rooms that it passes. On seven occasions the camera and its operatives can be seen as it passes reflective surfaces (figures 3 & 4). The dolly-mounted camera movement throughout the film is smooth, and progresses at a consistent speed. Observing the performers through the internal windows promotes a sense of voyeurism but the absence of

any movement associated with a steadicam or handheld camera makes possible a viewing territory that combines that of an imaginary observer and of the more passive, removed viewpoint offered by the static camera shot. However, the reflection in glass panels of the camera and its operators adds the further perspective of the artist at work, the filmmaker's process, and the mechanism by which the spectacle is created.

Figure 3. *Uma Toma* (Pardo 2006). Reflection of camera with operators screen left and right.

Figure 4. *Uma Toma* (Pardo 2006). Reflection of camera tripod on trolley.

The camera operators, Marloeke van de Vlugt and Rodrigo Pardo, are acknowledged in the credits as 'camera operators–performers', which recognises their identity in the film alongside those who perform in front of the lens in the conventional sense. This same recognition is made in my film *Six* where the credits acknowledge the performers as being five dancers and one camera (the reason for the film's name). Vlugt and Pardo's interaction with the performers is, however, relatively limited compared to *Six* in which camera mobility is more flexible and is integrated with, and is a part of, the choreography of the performers.

Whenever the camera is revealed in the reflections, *Uma Toma* exposes the mechanisms of the filming event. Clearly the people pulling and pushing the camera are concerning themselves with filmmaking rather than acting or dancing, but by sharing screen space with the dancers and other performers, they acquire a similar status to them. There is no further layer to be revealed, no other camera filming the filmmakers, and as such the entire performing/filming event is self-contained on screen.

The camera in *Uma Toma* is mobile, but not in a fashion in which it interacts with the dancers. Indeed, it remains separated from them by the glass windows through which it is filming, and the operators appear solely concerned with the act of its operation as they push it along on the dolly. In *Six,* although the camera is credited as a performer*,* its implied point of view is different: no reflective surfaces are passed and the camera offers the possible viewpoint of an unseen observer that moves freely among the performers. *Six* was filmed with a steadicam-mounted camera (figure 5), which gave a smoother movement than a handheld camera but a less steady movement than a track-mounted camera as in *Uma Toma*. The resultant movement has more of a suggestion of a human observer than *Uma Toma* but less suggestion of the physicality of a camera-holding observer than *To Be Watched While Eating an Orange* (2014).

Figure 5. Steadicam, minus body vest, on location of *Six* (Lewis-Smith 2014).

In *Six,* the camera's journey through the filming environment provides visual information that suggests a shifting point of view. None of the dancers look at the camera, adhering to Mulvey's observed convention where: 'The conscious aim [is] always to eliminate intrusive camera presence' (Mulvey 1975, p.15), until the very last moment of the film when the principle character of the film looks directly at the lens in recognition of the camera's presence (figure 6). The role of the camera as an invisible observer is subverted. The act of observation is presented as a mutual awareness existing between the dancer and the camera: the main dancer's final glance at the camera suggests that she may even have been aware of being observed from the start of the film. Up until this point, the viewer has observed from behind an imaginary fourth wall, but her glance proposes a new range of possible camera/viewer/dancer relationships and the viewer is left to re-negotiate their position retrospectively.

Figure 6. *Six* (Lewis-Smith 2014). Oddy looks directly at the camera in the closing moment of the film.

At the start of *Six,* the camera moves out from behind a pillar to observe Lean Oddy, the main dancer, entering the shot. The suggestion of voyeurism is introduced by the fact that the camera is partly hidden (figure 7). The camera then follows her as she travels through an urban space and enters a building, followed by four other dancers. It takes a different path from her, observing her from behind objects, continuing the suggestion of voyeurism (figure 8). The camera then changes from following to leading the dancers and the possibility of a voyeuristic presence changes, although no one looks at the camera even though it is close to them.

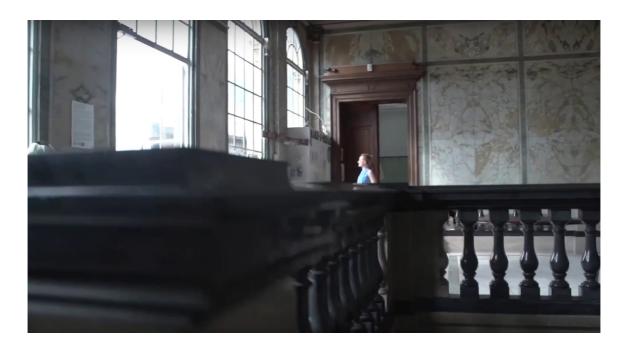Figure.7. *Six* (Lewis-Smith 2014). Camera views approaching dancer from behind pillar.

Figure.8. *Six* (Lewis-Smith2014). Camera views dancer from behind balustrade.

The camera alternates between following, observing from a distance, and leading, at one point at arm's length, but at no time does Oddy make eye contact with it. The camera viewpoint becomes unmoored, presenting options including a voyeur, an invisible observer, or even perhaps a presence that the performers have simply chosen to ignore. Residing in the space between an explicit revelation of the camera's presence through its movement, and Mulvey's

position that aspires to hidden camera presence, the camera's motivation is unclear and multiple viewpoints are possible.

At times the camera passes closely behind objects, obscuring the dancers and the wider environment. Losing touch with them means that as spectators we are momentarily alone. Our 'looking' is bounced back upon ourselves to reference our own consciousness in the act of watching the unfolding screen event. Sobchack asserts: 'What we look at projected on the screen […] addresses us as the expressed perception of an anonymous, yet present, 'other', and as we watch this expressive projection of an 'other's' experience, we, too, express our perceptive experience' (Sobchack 1994, p.40). As the camera passes briefly behind something that obscures the subject whose journey we were sharing, our own 'perceptive experience' as watcher is foregrounded until the subject reappears. The same 'bouncing back' occurs in *Uma Toma* but the camera movement is less characteristic of a human, less like our own movement, than it is in *Six.* In *Six,* the camera movement is suggestive of a person witnessing the event, although little identity is suggested by a rapport with the performers as they do not acknowledge camera presence, until the very end.

In Chelsea McMullan's single-take screendance *Slip* (2012), a more explicit relationship between camera and principal performer develops from early in the film. Here, as at the end of *Six*, only one of the performers acknowledges the camera. *Slip* is set in the woman's changing room of a swimming pool in Toronto. The steadicam-mounted camera (McMullan 2016) slowly approaches a bather who is dyeing her hair at a sink. The bather notices the camera and a flirtatious relationship ensures, lasting until the end of the six-minute film when the bather disappears, leaving the camera searching for her. Unlike *Six* the camera/dancer relationship is clearly illustrated by the interactions between them. The sound of uneven breathing, added to the film in post-production (McMullan 2016), accompanies the camera, establishing a greater sense of a human personality and heightened emotion than in *Six*. The fact that the remaining eighteen dancers in the changing room ignore the camera at all times suggests that the camera identity might perhaps be female. McMullan commented:

> Yeah, something that is important to my work, and the work of other people is this idea of the female gaze and the way women look at other women. The cinematographer in the film was a woman; most of the key creatives were women. I think it's really interesting to develop this counter female gaze, and the way that, if the gaze were a male gaze the people in the changing room would have reacted to the camera, it would have been different. I have seen it as being a female gaze, probably representative of myself (McMullan 2016).

The camera's point of view in *Slip* corresponds most clearly to Branigan's 'character' perspective. The camera is clearly motivated throughout the film and corresponds to all of Branigan's 'camera positions' above in regard to replicating human movement. The principal performer maintains eye contact with the camera at all times, except when she is playfully hiding from it. At this point the camera moves left and right trying to find her. The performer hides and the camera finds her and a game of hide and seek happens before the performer disappears completely and the camera is left searching for her in the by then empty changing room.

Of the few single-take screendances that I have identified in the my database, McMullan's film provides one of the clearest senses of camera point-of-view in relation to performer. The steadicam movement can be readily equated with human movement without highlighting the apparatus itself through the quicker movement associated with 'camera holding' or the smooth movement of the dolly mounted camera, as in *Uma Toma*.

Film theorist Elspeth Kydd suggests that the type of screen movement that results from a hand-held camera is associated with documentary film, bringing with it a sense that what is seen on screen was 'witnessed' by the camera and might have happened anyway even if the camera had not been there. She observes: 'Hand-held camera operation establishes a sense of immediacy, that the action is right there, captured by the camera and drawing the audience into the world of the film' (Kydd 2011, p.138).

Kydd's observation brings to camera-work of this kind a sense that 'this really happened'. She suggests that the viewer is drawn into the film, and thus the link between dancer, camera, and viewer may become a conduit through which action can be channelled in a manner that is more effective than with a fixed camera. This handheld camera motion is manifested in my own performance as I accompany Oddy and the other dancers across the street and through the building, resulting from my movement and my point of view.

Film theorist Christian Metz suggests that camera presence is part of the spectator's consciousness anyway:

> The spectator is aware that cinema involves a process of perception as the film is brought into existence through machinery. For instance, if the image tilts, the spectator is aware that the camera has rotated, as she or he has not moved her or his head (Metz 1975, p.39).

With contemporary film spectators increasingly familiar with acts of filmmaking, perhaps in no small part due to its accessibility through devices such as mobile phones, Metz's suggestion of the inevitability of camera presence may actually de-complicate the options for the viewer of films that do not comply with the conventions of mainstream film, with the 'filmmaking act' a ready option for the viewer's interpretation of camera identity. Mainstream films and television programmes increasingly reveal aspects of their making, bringing their means of production into the viewer's consciousness and perhaps strengthening Metz's argument. For example *Planet Earth 2* (Attenborough 2016. BBC) concludes each episode with a section that shows how part of the film was made, and the DVD versions of feature films often include additional sections that comment on the making of the film. For example as in all of the *Star Wars* films (George Lucas Rian Johnston, J.J. Abrams, Colin Trevorrow, Irvin Kershner, Richard Marquand, Dance Filoni 1977 – 2016).

This is not however to suggest that the 'filmmaking act' might have become the over-riding influence on the viewer's interpretation of camera identity in *Six*. The film is similar to all the other mentioned single-take screendances in that it provides information that suggests more than one possible camera point of view, which *may* include the filmmaking act. In spite of this ambiguity, *Six* and *Slip* in particular suggest, through the humanly possible camera movement and camera pathways, the option of human observation and therefore a possible character.

(1) [This database](#) examines the shot lengths of one hundred and forty-four screendance works made between the years 1979 and 2020. It calculates the average shot lengths of films made between 1993 and 1996 (inclusive) and 2013 and 2016 (inclusive),

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