The Evolution of the 'A' Word

Changing Notions of Professional Practice in Avant-garde Film and Contemporary Screendance

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Time was in the world of screendance when we all knew where we were: in order to be professional, the dancers danced; the choreographers made up steps for them; and the producers and directors made the decisions. Such a model is most certainly no longer the sole option. In an indeterminate meshing of grey areas and interdisciplinary zones, demarcation lines have crumbled, fragmented and dissolved. Choreographic practice takes place on either side of the lens and at the keyboard and in the wider world, recessionary factors mix with new technological capabilities. Lightweight, hand held cameras liberate filming possibilities for dance-aware operators; editing software programs for domestic computers function as high-end industry standard, and rapid expansion of the specialist festival circuit provides a ready-made network of international screening outlets for often minimally funded work. Assessing this developmental arc, allows useful parallels to be drawn from within the traditions of filmic practice, which helps to disentangle an interrelated web of economic, operational and artistic factors.

> The more one is dependent on circumstances exterior to one's own adaptability, the more discouraging the entire effort. One is not likely to take the time to arrange the angle and framing very precisely when either the clouds are mounting rapidly from the horizon, or the 'extras' are becoming thoroughly tired, bored, hungry and disillusioned about the 'glamour of film-making.' Under such pressure one hurries through, hoping that somehow it will turn out better than it does. It never does.
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> Maya Deren[1]

Recent research by Patricia Zimmerman in the United States, and Ian Craven in Britain, has focused on the historical and cultural impact of twentieth century amateur filmmaking. While artists such as United States-based academic and activist Melinda Stone are engaging directly with the community-oriented fora of camera clubs.[2] Even as this model of amateur practice—undertaken as a pastime or hobby, and set apart from notions of commercial gain or career advancement—continues along firmly established lines, it can no longer be said to straightforwardly exist in opposition to a one-dimensional categorization of 'professional,' namely one set apart by specialist knowledge, and financially recompensed for labor. Dissolution of the professional/amateur dualism has attracted continuing reappraisal, with a highly significant strand of discourse emerging from mid-twentieth-century, North American avant-garde film. Artists including Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas addressed the making practices of the amateur, with Deren noting that "the very classification [...] has an apologetic ring" (Stone 234) and Brakhage observing that it has been "'hatched in criticism,' acquiring the currency of insult, equating to a term like 'Yankee' ("Amateur - Go Home")" (144).[3] The Deren/Brakhage

appraisal can be read as a corrective: a refusal to carry the categorization as a mark of artistic deficiency, with exemption from commercial concerns equated with enhanced levels of long-term developmental potential. Deren noted derivation from the Latin "'amator' or 'lover,' as 'one who does something for the love of the thing rather than economic reasons or necessity'" (17) and in an identification with this motivating spirit, Brakhage noted that over the course of his career, he attracted a variety of labels to describe his own role, including "professional," "artist" and "amateur," observing that "of those three terms, the last one—amateur—is the one I am truly most honored by" (Brakhage 142).

Deren's antipathy to traditional filmmaking practice is well-recorded. Characterized in highly negative terms, she cites a "collective monster" comprising "enormous personnel of assistant directors, cameramen, lighting men, actors and producers" as obstructions lying in the path of the artist in the realization of their ideas (20). Setting her own working processes entirely apart from externally-funded production models, Deren regarded the resulting operational parameters as requiring an opening up, rather than a restriction, of creative engagement specific to the medium (Deren 158). This entirely accords with what she characterizes as the single greatest advantage of amateur status, identified as "*freedom*—both artistic and physical" (17).

Brakhage also observed that "I have a growing conviction that something crucial to the development of the art of film will come from amateur home movie making,"[4] and the Deren/Brakhage anti-industrial stance dovetails with recent developments in the field of moving image production. Film editor Walter Murch has acknowledged the transformative potential of digital technology to mainstream filmmaking practices, observing that "I can see down the road it's possible that a film crew will be a very, very small bunch of people" (214).[5] Murch has further observed that the advent of digitization has the capacity to revolutionize the way in which all image-makers are categorized, likening its development to the introduction of money within the essentially agrarian economy of the Middle Ages. Murch asserts that "a media currency" has the potential to "create a kind of 'middle class' that's neither filmmaker nor consumer" (335).[6] For screendance artists, using professionally-acquired skills to operate outside of traditional funding contexts represents a breach in the accepted, industry-sanctioned causal link between commission and production. Exploring creative and operational territories, characterized by Murch as inhabiting "the wide spectrum between home movies and feature films" (*Behind The Seen* 334) artists can find themselves adrift within a hybridized limbo of looking-glass economic models, effectively making on the indefinitely-deferred payment basis of the never-never, as the work itself attains the status of proto-currency: units of credit with the potential to be redeemed within an academic research economy, or accrued as notional capital with each curated festival screening. While this model can serve those securely footed on an academic or arts-funded career ladder, many choosing to explore alternative pathways can find themselves on the outside of a closed financial loop, requiring equally alternative solution-focused approaches.

Feeding into a counter-cultural stew of 1960s experimental filmmaking, the Deren/Brakhage appraisal of amateur practice disseminated outwards, recognizably in the emergence of the low or zero funded independent filmmakers of the 1970s onwards. While many from this generational grouping subsequently assimilated into mainstream film production, the avant-garde filmmaking community retains a strong preoccupation with

notions of amateur practice. Contemporary commentator Ed Halter has re-examined the issue noting that cultural ambivalence, characterized as a "simultaneous embrace and disavowal of professional status" pulls an increasingly career-focused artist into a Goldilocks-like consideration of an aesthetic equation in which "amateur = too sloppy, professional = too perfect."[7] Halter proposes use of the term "sub-amateur" in order to differentiate from what he sees as traditional level of non-professional filmmaking, and there can be little doubt that new thinking and terminology is required to adequately assess the breadth and complexity of contemporary creative and economic identities in the current outsourced era of portfolio careers and multi-jobbing.

Looking beyond the boundaries of roles clearly defined as "professional" can be particularly problematic for dance trained artists, who have traditionally faced a range of barriers to the recognition of their skills, experience and status. However, close examination of relevant discourse reveals a through-line from the aspirational ethos of the post-war filmic avant-garde, which can be read as feeding into the high watermark of cross-disciplinary activity at the Judson Church in late 1960s New York. In Britain, this lineage is traceable through the influence of New Dance of the 70s and 80s, and its legacy in the community dance movement, with each in turn calling into question the dominance of conventions often left to go unchallenged under the catchall banner of "professionalism." In particular, the latter has pioneered a model of inclusive practice fusing a concern with quality of experience and process-led creative strategizing which, at its most effective, can render hierarchical impositions of professional/community demarcation artistically irrelevant. Commissioned by the Foundation for Community Dance in 2001 and directed by dance artist Rosemary Lee, the screen project *Dancing Nation* illustrates four case studies mapping the effects and diversity of such practice. Lee's live dance work is strongly rooted in the notion of cross-generational, non-traditional participation, with screen works *boy* (1995) and *Infanta* (1998), co-created with Peter Anderson, constructed around the particular qualities of their respective central performers, rather than imposed as pre-determined, codified dance vocabulary to generically trained bodies.

By extension, the potential for screen-based work to bypass narrowly-defined notions of virtuosity as synonymous with "professionalism," has intersected with the emergence in Britain of integrated dance practice. Early examples of screendance commissioning in this field present a further problematizing of attitudes to, and expectations of, work presented within a professional arena, and include Victoria Marks' screen collaboration with CandoCo in 1993's *Inside Out*, and Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie's integrated casting for *Beethoven in Love*, from 1994. More recently Katrina McPherson and Simon Fildes engaged with the movement worlds of sighted and visually impaired performers in 2001's *Sense8*, and adults with learning difficulties in 2005's *There's Something You Should Know*. Commissioned by Channel 4 television in 2004, Lloyd Newson's translation of his stage-based work for DV8, *The Cost of Living*, features physically disabled performer and CandoCo alumnus David Toole. As one sequence among a series of Newson's loosely strung narrative episodes, the relaxed dynamic pacing and easy shifts of weight characteristic of release-based work is used to explore and celebrate Toole's distinctive movement vocabulary of body weight supported by hands and arms. Non-naturalistic framing acts as a focal point for viewing engagement, as close-up shots of ground level hands follow feet, hips and torsos, in a continuous sea of movement, entirely filling the screen space.

Brakhage observed that the term amateur was "most often used in criticism of the work I have done by those who don't understand it" (144). Tracking the often convoluted intertwined branching of contemporary professional identities, no longer necessarily presents as a straightforward task. My own status as a screen-literate, unfunded dance artist holding a mobile phone camera undoubtedly presents a challenge to any notion of discrete categorization, embodying a convergence of multiple genealogies often characterized as "alternative" or "independent" in the shifting lexicon of contemporary dance/screen terminology. This hybridity translates into a mixture of highly specialist professional dance training and experience, combined with self-taught experimentation in the field of digitized moving image. Disentangling such a complex web of influence and approach requires careful consideration of a range of work recently created within the field, with professionally acquired skills and experience used to hold open a space for alternative perspectives.

Within the context of British screen culture, experimentation with longer form documentary has included work such as Patrick Keiller's *London*, from 1994, and Andrew Kötting's *Gallivant*, from 1996, with both playfully subverting notions a professionally distanced and supposedly objective stance. Shown within recent screendance festival programming, Alex Reuben's *Routes*, from 2007, similarly emerges explicitly from the personal preoccupations of its maker, engaged on a geographical and cultural exploration of the southern Unites Sates' intertwined folk traditions of music and movement. The works' improvisatory-oriented, non-linear arrangement is entirely reflective of its subject matter, while also drawing on Reuben's professional grounding in both visual art and music, highlighting a notion of choreographic screen practice as image composition, rather than straightforward translation of pre-made movement material.

A particular strand of professional experience, familiar to dance artists working within community and education-based contexts, has been transferred to screen with a great measure of integrity in the work of Bristol-based Lisa May Thomas. In *The Elders*, from 2006, Thomas makes use of poetic documentary form, interweaving the minimalism of formalized movement content within a larger framework of additional creative elements. From the following year, *Challenge 59* threads together task-generated imagery communicating the experience of creative work with primary school age children in a way rarely presented within a festival context. Brighton-based artist Becky Edmunds' professional background in dance performance and documentation generates a subtlety of engagement with subjects, met on their own terms. *El Fuego*, filmed in 2007 in the expansive landscapes of rural Argentina, sets the weather-toughened face of a gaucho in late middle-age among black-burning smoke clouds. In its interrelation of single character to highly specific environment, the work can be seen to sit within a tradition including Orkney-based independent filmmaker Margaret Tait's *Portrait of Ga*, from 1952. Both works emerge from highly personalized, non-mainstream perspectives, involving a minimum of equipment and personnel. Deren observed that for filmmakers the most important part of your equipment is yourself: your mobile body, your imaginative mind, and your freedom to use both" (18). Thomas and Edmunds are dance-trained artists, undertaking a long-term shift into screen-based contexts. While no doubt retaining their professional economic and operational codes, these artists' engagement with lightweight, small scale, relatively low budget digital video production allows for a level of creative freedom within the arena of screen composition,

which appears close to the aspirationally-oriented model of amateur practice as outlined by Deren and Brakhage.

A sideways glance at parallel practices reveals that for many involved in the music industry, a recording contract is no longer sole passage to a public profile, as Facebook and MySpace bypass the gatekeepers of A&R as audience-building platforms. These developments can be seen as part of a large-scale wave of ongoing change in the processes of marketing and distribution, articulated by Chris Anderson in 2004 in a highly influential article for *Wired* magazine. Identifying the market potential of the remote consumer, Anderson put forward the theory that making available a greater range of options in the non-physical data space of the internet allows for a redefinition of potential audience base, noting that "many of our assumptions about popular taste are actually artifacts of poor supply-and-demand matching."[8] However, translation of this expanded consumer base into revenue-generation is set against the demographic backdrop of the download generation's coming of age, with the attendant expectation that the fruit of cultural labor comes free of financial charge, and many image-makers continue to chase their own long tails through an ever-expanding series of yet-to-be–Monetized online distribution niches.

Walter Murch has recounted the experience of his first day at graduate film school in the mid nineteen sixties.[9] He and many of his classmates, advised to abandon career plans for an industry in transition between the crumbling power-bases of the old studio system and the rise of television, decided instead to persevere and to experiment. Murch characterizes this mind-set as "the freedom of all bets being off" (328). It is not difficult to identify parallels between this era and the current state of digitized cultural flux. Now, as then, artists can find themselves engaging in multi-layered improvisational processes, in a constant state of adaption to rapidly changing circumstance, rather than following pre-established professional paths.

Contemporary notions of professional dance/screen practice present as a complex series of navigational processes, requiring skillful triangulation of rapidly shifting economic, operational and artistic factors. Worldwide recession and shifts in domestic policy agendas can leave arts funding or academic research budgets vulnerable, as a globally-homogenized entertainment industry promotes overwhelmingly commercially and aspirationally-driven models of achievement and success. While an unpaid artist—albeit an amateur by default when judged on economic criteria alone—can proudly adopt the status of "independent," re-examining the ideals of the mid twentieth-century filmic avant-garde can provide a range of alternative models for informed consideration, including "amateur" as locus of genuine creative exploration; as conscientious objector in the conflict zone of overriding commercial imperative and as representative of an ongoing lineage woven closely within the fabric of dance and screen culture. Regardless of the varying co-ordinates of individual pathways, acknowledging the egalitarian origins of "the amateur" has the potential to make fellow twenty-first century travelers of many. ■

Notes

1. Deren, Maya. *Essential Deren*.Ed. Brian McPherson. New York: McPherson & Company, 2005. 158. Print.
2. See Stone, Melinda. "'If It Moves, We'll Shoot It': The San Diego Amateur Movie Club." *Film History* 15.2 (2003): 220–237. Print.
3. Brakhage, Stan. *Essential Deren*.Ed. Brian McPherson. New York: McPherson & Company, 2005. Print.

4. Brakhage, *Essential Deren.* 121.
5. Murch, Walter. *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film*. Ed. Michael Ondaatje. London: Bloomsbury, 2003. Print.
6. Murch, Walter. *Behind The Seen*. Ed. Charles Koppelman. Berkeley: New Riders, 2005. Print.
7. Halter, Ed. "After the Amateur: Notes." *Rhizome News*. 29 April 2009. Web. 10 Feb 2010.
8. Anderson, Chris. "The Long Tail." *Wired.* 12.10 (2004): 2. Print.
9. See Koppelman, *Behind The Seen.* 327–8.