Beyond the Stage: The Construction of Temporality and Spatiality in Screendance

Litong Qin[1,a,*]

[1]University of Roehampton, London, UK
[a]670383037@qq.com
*Corresponding author

Abstract: *Framed explicitly from the choreographer's standpoint, this article examines how screendance reconfigures movement's temporality and spatiality through camera language and technical means. First, it defines the screendance by tracing the historical entanglement of dance and film since the late nineteenth century, showing how the coupling of choreographic intention and filmic grammar yields novel expressive modalities. Within this practice-led framework, the analysis of temporality addresses how choreographers deploy overcranking (slow motion), montage, and other editing strategies to recompose on-screen time, interrupt strictly linear displays of action, and intensify affective and psychological articulation. The discussion of spatiality focuses on choreographic decision-making across scales—from micro to macro—through the selection of sites, framings, and camera perspectives that endow movement with renewed spatial meaning. The study further considers screendance-driven innovations such as anti-gravity choreography and underwater performance to demonstrate how screen-based choreography challenges terrestrial constraints and expands the field of embodied spatial experience. The article concludes by positioning screendance, as conceived and authored by choreographers, as a distinctive modality within contemporary art: camera language, spatial design, and temporal control operate as compositional instruments that advance choreographic innovation. By articulating these techniques from the choreographer's perspective, the study contributes a rigorous practice-led theoretical lens and concrete implications for creative practice, underscoring the expansive possibilities opened by the convergence of dance and film.*

Keywords: Screendance; Choreography

1. Defining Screendance

As a nonverbal art form, dance takes the moving body as its primary medium of expression. Analogously, bodily movement occupies a central position in the cinematic arts, and the close interrelationship between the two was already evident in the earliest phases of film history. A historical glance shows that the conjunction of dance and film is not a modern invention but an artistic tendency visible since the late nineteenth century. In 1866, the premiere of the American musical The Black Crook marked an initial fusion of dance with other arts (such as music and opera), laying the groundwork for the later convergence of dance and cinema. Through carefully crafted narrative design, the production interwove choreographic elements with what would subsequently develop into a cinematic mode of expression, paving the way for the emergence of the Broadway musical. Subsequently, in 1879, the Lumière brothers collaborated with the dancer Loïe Fuller on the pioneering short Serpentine Dance, which centered on the kinetic images of the performer's body and billowing costume and highlighted cinema's capacity to render dance movement. In 1896, early films produced at Edison's studio likewise included performances of Fuller's Serpentine Dance. With the advent of the twentieth century, feature films centered on dance proliferated: works such as Saturday Night Fever (1977), Fame (1980), Flashdance (1983), and later High School Musical, Black Swan, and La La Land progressively shifted dance from mere ornament toward a core engine of narrative development—even as these films remain distinct from the contemporary concept of "screendance."

Conceived from the choreographer's standpoint, screendance may be understood as a deconstruction and re-composition of conventional stage presentation—an art form forged at the nexus of choreographic and cinematic languages and, more broadly, an expanded hybrid practice of the moving image. Screendance is not a mere visual record of dance; rather, it is an inventive mode of creation in which choreographic structuring is articulated through camera work, editing, and related filmic grammars. As

an umbrella term, it encompasses multiple modes of visual manifestation. In China, professor Shuangbai Feng proposes a six-part typology: (1) stage-arts documentaries (e.g., the Bolshoi Theatre's color film "Swan Lake")[2] (2) song-and-dance or musical films (e.g., "The Sound of Music"); (3) dance imagery embedded within narrative cinema (e.g., "Scent of a Woman"); (4) multimedia experimental videodance (e.g., Merce Cunningham's "Variations V"); (5) television dance (e.g., "Thousand-Hand Guanyin"); and (6) creative/authorial screendance (e.g., Maya Deren's "A Study in Choreography for Camera"). Taken together, these categories demonstrate the heterogeneity of screendance and its cross-media convergences with diverse art forms .

In Western discourse, the nomenclature for dance-on-screen is heterogeneous, reflecting differing conceptions of how dance and cinema are coupled. For instance, the UK company DV8 Physical Theatre has employed the label "Dance Video"; Merce Cunningham preferred "Videodance"; Maya Deren favored "Film-Dance"; and scholars such as Douglas Rosenberg and Claudia Kappenberg have advanced the term "screendance." The proliferation of these appellations stems from divergent emphases—whether privileging choreographic or cinematic perspectives and their modes of articulation—which, in turn, registers the field's multidimensional theoretical inquiry and its ongoing development.

Addressing the question "what is screendance," Professor Liz Aggiss of the University of Brighton offers a clear definition: "In short, screendance is dance made specifically for the camera or the screen; in conjunction with the screen, it invents a kinetic language that can exist only on the screen. A more complex answer is that screendance is a hybrid configuration—an intersection of two distinct disciplines, dance and film. Their combination forms a bidirectional interaction, with each process consciously orchestrated to establish innovative relationships among the body, the camera, and editing" [3]. This perspective underscores the distinctiveness of screendance: it is not a simple superimposition of dance and cinema but a profound integration and reciprocal dialogue between the two. Accordingly, screendance is not merely a visual display; rather, through collaboration between choreographer and director and by means of camera language, it conveys movement and ideas in an organic, intellectually coherent form.

Screendance likewise bears historicity and a capacity for spatiotemporal arrest. The affect and force from screen perceived by spectators arise, in fact, from the capture and subsequent recomposition of movements that occurred in the past. As Rosenberg observes, "the viewer is a witness to a reconfigured kinaesthesia and performance within screen space" [7]. Screendance thus provides a traceable record for dance history, enabling earlier works to persist and circulate through new media. For example, Chinese stage-art films such as 'The Red Detachment of Women' and 'The White-Haired Girl'. These materials serve not only as historical testimony to the development of Chinese screendance but also, through their screen presentation, allow audiences to apprehend with greater immediacy the ethos of artistic creation shaped by the political and economic conditions of that period.

2. The Treatment of Time in Screendance

As a visual–kinetic art, dance is constituted by time as a foundational dimension. For the performer, time manifests through modulations of the body and breath; as Laban's movement-analysis theory states, "time is the ordered and sustained duration in which movement occurs; it confers rhythm upon action." Professor Qingyi Liu further explains that time not only determines the rhythm and shaping of movement but also provides the internal logic and affective linkage between successive action[4]. From the choreographer's vantage point, time functions as the rhythmic architecture produced by the concatenation of movements. Canonical choreographic structures often unfold as a linear progression—from exposition through development to climax and conclusion—alternatively, they may proceed through spatiotemporal interlacing, as in works such as Waipo Wan and Huai Shuiqing Lanhua Wan, wherein temporal organization is woven and recomposed in tandem with the characters' shifting psychological states.

The affinities between cinema and dance in their treatment of time are particularly salient. Cinema renders time through the rapid succession of still images—typically twenty-five frames per second or more—mechanically advanced to produce the illusion of motion. Its distinctive capacity lies in organizing events drawn from disparate spatial registers along a single, linearly edited timeline, thereby condensing the natural flow of time, isolating salient incidents, and developing them around a central through-line. Such condensation affords considerable freedom: by means of montage, film filters out the trivial, tightens causal transitions, and achieves an aesthetically purposeful compression of duration. In screendance, the body's kinetic signification is reconstructed through the screen apparatus so as to exceed the constraints of physical time and gravity. Editing interrupts the strictly linear display of movement;

actions can be spliced and recomposed, amplifying metaphor and poetic potential. As Rosenberg notes, "our understanding of the body can be decoupled from its corporeal absolutes; the body is reimagined within and by the screen"[7] Accordingly, when dance enters the camera's purview, its temporality becomes a compositional parameter: under time authorship, choreographic may be cut, stretched, looped, and layered to articulate embodied meaning.

From a choreographic vantage point, the construction of fragments and clues in screendance opens a distinct creative dimension. As Lang Ye observes, "an artistic image must integrate the real and the virtual in order to faithfully reflect a living world"[8]. As a dynamic visual art, dance is itself an interplay of the two. He Yuan further clarifies that when movement functions as dynamic figuration it belongs to the "real," whereas when it operates as an affective sign it is "virtual"[10] Because the screen condenses duration, a discrete dance passage can be treated as a "real image," while dispersed visual cues operate as "virtual images"; through their interweaving and montage, these strata endow movement with expanded symbolic valence and affective resonance, thereby propelling narrative flow. Unlike live performance—where every action and turning point must be enacted in real time—screendance achieves a high degree of temporal and spatial abstraction and refinement through shot construction and editing. For example, in the 2019 screendance "Divided We Scroll", British director Klaas Diersmann employs an ensemble configuration to interrogate technology-mediated collective behavior and to depict the habitual posture of the contemporary "phone-gazer." The camera shifts from individual to group framings; rather than itemizing transitional processes, variation in spatial scale and headcount indexes the broader social milieu. Here, the number of performers is not the focal variable; changes in movement and formal organization become the core drivers of narrative progression. Each dancer handles a mobile phone as a prop, and the work alternates between episodic phrases and freeze-frames; the bowed head functions as a leitmotif threading the piece. As Pina Bausch notes of choreographing for the camera, "I do not think from beginning to end; I expand and combine small parts, which gradually coalesce into a whole"[3]. By extension, when choreographing for the screen, authors must consider how to partition material into segments, using distilled motifs as hinges and connectors, and how to orchestrate these segments to articulate story and discourse.

From a cinematographic standpoint—and specifically from within choreographic authorship—one of the most prevalent techniques for deconstructing and recomposing time in screendance is slow motion achieved by overcranking. Functioning as a "microscope" of duration, overcranking increases the capture frame rate (for example, from the standard 24 frames per second to 50 or 120 frames per second) and then restores playback to a conventional speed (e.g., 24 fps), thereby yielding a slowed temporal effect. This procedure renders the affective and psychological intricacies of movement with greater delicacy. A seminal instance appears in Maya Deren's Ritual in Transfigured Time (1946), where slow motion is deployed to recalibrate the rhythm of action—for example, the swaying of the head renders the flow of hair as a temporally expanded texture. As Deren (2001) writes in "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film," "when a rapid turn is presented in slow motion, it still appears natural, only executed more slowly; however, the hair moves slowly in an elevated, horizontal shape—a quality that only rapid tempo can otherwise produce, one seldom encountered in nature"[6]. In this sense, overcranking not only remaps time but also generates motion qualities that diverge from natural rhythms, conferring a distinctive visual register on choreographic action. For the choreographer, such temporal reconfiguration foregrounds the expressive salience of fine-grained details—especially distal articulations—and invites an inquiry into the internal semantics of bodily language and its visual-kinesthetic effects.

In the creation of screendance, the choreographer's handling of time extends beyond the design of movement per se to a systematic exploration of the temporal latitude and flexibility afforded by the screen medium. Through camera language and editing strategies, choreographers can exceed the temporal constraints of live performance, reconstructing and expanding bodily action across time and space. Moreover, the construction of fragments and cues not only permits nonlinear narration but also allows movement and affective signification to interpenetrate and be recomposed within alternating registers of the "real" and the "virtual." In this process, the choreographer no longer merely presents a continuous dance sequence; rather, by shifting points of view and by fracturing and recombining actions, they fashion a layered, symbolically charged visual language. Accordingly, temporal treatment in screendance is not confined to rhythm and ordering; it becomes a multidimensional vehicle for narrative architecture, affective articulation, and artistic invention, substantially expanding dance's expressive space and capacity.

3. The Construction of Space in Screendance

The spatial field of human movement may be conceptualized as a sphere: the dancer traverses this multidimensional volume along a central axis toward different points and planes. In choreographic creation, thought continually expands in order to stage human traits and spatial experiences that differ from, and are not directly accessible within, everyday reality. One virtue—and concomitant limitation—of live performance is its spatiotemporal co-presence: on stage, the use of space is constrained by gravity and the body's physical limits. By contrast, camera language—through shooting and editing—re-encodes the order of time and space and constructs an alternative spatial regime. As the audience's "eye," the camera guides perception by modulating shot scale (close-up, medium, long shot), angle (low- and high-angle), and movement (dolly/zoom, pan/tilt, tracking), generating strong visual impact that advances narrative development. As Merce Cunningham notes, "the camera space presents a challenge: it has explicit limits, yet it also offers unique opportunities to collaborate with dance"[5] This collaboration between lens and dancing body maximizes dance's sense of mystery and lyricism, enriching the ways in which the dancer explores the world through the screen.

From the vantage of the lens, the camera's mutable points of view enable choreographers to range freely across spatial scales, from the micro to the macro. At the micro level, the close-up magnifies a specific body part so that the part can stand for the whole. In Hands (1995), co-created by director Adam Roberts and choreographer Jonathan Burrows, the performer's hands are filmed almost exclusively in close-up, registering minute actions—tapping, gliding, flicking across the thighs. Though subtle, these gestures, intensified by the close-up, bring rhythm and phrasing to the fore; variations in detail become legible, such that a local fragment conveys aggregate meaning and affect. Here, magnification and fine-grained capture allow spectators to apprehend the overall cadence and emotional tenor through the fragment.At the macro level, the high-angle or bird's-eye view renders the dancer within a broader field. In ANASA, created in Greece by director Maja Zimmerlin and Thomas Delord, drone cinematography frames the interaction between dancer and landscape; seen from above, the figure appears small against nature's expanse, foregrounding the human–environment relation. Through walking, rolling, partnering lifts, and buoyant movement in water, the overhead perspective heightens spatial contrast and articulates a deep interconnection with place. In this register, the choreography communicates not only corporeal rhythm and beauty but also the delicacy and resonance of our bond with the natural world. Such perspectival shifts exceed the spatial limits of conventional stage presentation and open new avenues of choreographic invention.

From the standpoint of editing, choreographers can enrich the spatial articulation of screendance by designing scene perception and the momentum of movement. The spatial field of screendance need not be confined to studios or theatres; a broader range of sites—forests, beaches, factories, and beyond—may be chosen to more precisely embody thematic concerns. For example, in Shunpo the choreographer employs montage to render a professional woman's transformations across disparate locations: the setting shifts rapidly from a monotonous office to a rooftop and then to a Turkish salt flat, demonstrating how the dancer traverses multiple spatiotemporal registers. Here, the recurrence of the same movement motif and kinetic impulse, coupled with swift spatial transitions, intensifies the fluidity of spatiotemporal change and heightens emotional tension, thereby advancing the narrative. Such cross-spatial editing not only multiplies the work's dimensionality but also offers choreographers a means to exceed conventional modes of presentation.

In addition, choreographers may pursue more innovative and demanding spatial configurations, particularly anti-gravity choreographic design. Such configurations depart from the ground-based premise of traditional dance: through cinematic techniques and special effects, the dancer is released from gravitational constraint, generating actions that would be impossible on the floor. As Harmony Bench observes, "what I call anti-gravity dance design adopts a skeptical stance toward the floor and toward weight, replacing the traditional metaphors of ground and root in dance with suspension"[1]. Whereas stage choreography typically relies on the support of the floor, screendance enables composition in the air and in other nontraditional spaces. For example, in Jeff Consiglio's EVE, the performer remains afloat throughout; high-speed cinematography registers subtle modulations between the dancer and the silk apparatus, prompting spectators to question gravity itself and thereby challenging conventional movement vocabularies. Another type is that underwater screendance likewise marks a major breakthrough in spatial treatment. Works such as Luoshen Shuifu and Juan zhu lian capitalize on buoyancy to permit weightless motion, yielding a mode of dance saturated with visual lyricism. Supported by buoyancy, underwater filming enables complex actions unattainable on land, endowing each frame with distinctive beauty and kinetic intensity. As director Jiyong Guo notes, underwater production opens virtually boundless creative latitude: buoyancy renders movement freer and more

expressive, injecting new vitality into choreographic invention[9].

In sum, the spatial treatment of screendance requires choreographers to transcend the spatiotemporal constraints of conventional stage performance and, by mobilizing camera language and allied technical means, to craft forms that are freer, more flexible, and more expressive. Throughout the compositional process, choreographers must continually experiment with new modes of spatial articulation—from the fine-grained capture of detail to the macro-construction of environments—so that every on-screen movement functions as a conduit for renewed spatial meaning and affective transmission.

4. Conclusion

In contemporary China, the prominence of screendance is at once a consequence of technological development and a necessary pathway for artistic innovation. Within the camera's intraframe space, the dancer is the inhabitant of the diegetic world, whereas the choreographer operates as an extra-diegetic eye: positioned "outside," the choreographer must guide those "inside," creating the conditions for performers to command their world. Equally, once that interior world is inscribed within the two-dimensional rectangle of the screen, the choreographer must consider how mise-en-scène, camera angle, and compositional framing establish affective linkages between the figure in the image and the spectator beyond it. The cinematographer, in turn, amplifies and records this parallel world through the lens. These roles are interlocking and mutually constitutive; each is indispensable to the final articulation of screendance.

As contemporary technologies permit transformations of time and space that are no longer bound by physical constraints, dance faces both new opportunities and new challenges. A response adequate to this condition requires an elevated, capacious perspective: sustained innovation, a readiness to seize emergent possibilities, and a willingness to confront the attendant difficulties. From a choreographer's standpoint, this entails ongoing experimentation with camera language, spatial design, and temporal construction so that the vitality of the form can continue to unfold within—and in dialogue with—the evolving screen medium.

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