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Avant-Garde Modern Choreographers and the Transition Towards Film:

A Look at Merce Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer's Influence

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Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) and Yvonne Rainer (1934) were both prominent American modern choreographers of the 20th century that experimented with avant-garde ideas. Cunningham experimented with ideas such as chance procedure, dance independent from music and décor, and non-narrative dance. Rainer experimented with the juxtaposition of radically diverse elements and rejected the development of phrases and climax, character, variety, and the fully extended body (Banes 292). In 1965, she wrote a famous manifesto in which she said "no to spectacle, no to virtuosity, no to transformation and magic and make-believe, no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image" (Banes 292). These ideas did not sit well with several audiences as both of these choreographers were going against the existing expressionism ideas of Martha Graham and other American modern choreographers. However both, Cunningham and Rainer made a transition to film incorporating their avant-garde ways of thinking in dance. Cunningham worked on incorporating dance with film. Rainer, on the other hand, transitioned strictly to film. This paper will compare and contrast Cunningham and Rainer and their transition towards film, primarily focusing on their intent and discoveries in this medium. By reading interviews, journal entries, and articles about their work in film and watching films such as Cunningham's collaborative effort with Charles Atlas in *Westbeth* and Rainer's *Lives of Performers*, I will discuss how they used film as a medium to explore their choreographic ideas and how they influenced film.

Both Cunningham and Rainer started dancing early on in their lives. Cunningham was born in Centralia, Washington on April 16, 1919. He first studied acting at the Cornish School and from 1939 to 1945 he danced with the Martha Graham Dance Company. Eventually, Cunningham formed the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1953. There, he collaborated with a number of renowned composers, visual artists, and filmmakers including John Cage,

Robert Rauschenberg, and Charles Atlas. Yvonne Rainer was born in San Francisco, California on November 24, 1934. She also studied dance at the Martha Graham Dance School from 1958 to 1960. Additionally, she trained at the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, but was never in his company. By 1960, she began choreographing her own work and in 1962, she co-founded the Judson Dance Theater in New York with Steve Paxton. Her idea to become a choreographer was partially to escape the features of modern dance that she considered "moribund" and partially because she doubted her technical ability to become a professional dancer (Reynolds 404).

Cunningham and Rainer both experimented with avant-garde ideas that would later translate to their work in film. Avant-garde, as stated in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, refers to "an intelligentsia that develops new or experimental concepts especially in the arts" (Merriam-Webster). Cunningham experimented with ideas such as chance procedure, derived from John Cage, where he "tossed coins to determine the sequence, duration, and direction for the dancers" (Vaughan Encyclopedia 287). These methods gave his dances more freedom and imagination. Chance procedure was later carried out in his films like *Channels/Inserts* where filmmaker Charles Atlas says that the cuts to different scenes were "determined by chance" (as quoted in Burns). Additionally, Cunningham had other ideas where dance existed independently from music and where movement was performed for movement's sake. Choreographing independently from music was beneficial for Cunningham's films in that he and Atlas would film the dances in silence to record the sounds of their footwork and breathing and then later mix the music in (Macaulay). They did not have to worry about the dance matching a specific rhythm or time in the music. These ideas did not sit well with many audiences and are still considered controversial to this day. Although Cunningham had trained with Graham, he found that modern

dance had "too much concentration on style" and "too much choreography in which every movement had a meaning" (Reynolds 355).

Rainer's avant-garde thinking was greatly influenced by the collaborative work of Merce Cunningham and John Cage. Rainer admits that it was Cunningham's work that:

> Really stimulated [her] intellectually. The work did not deal with stories, with drama, with music. It seemed totally independent and freewheeling. It was difficult. It was ironic. There was something uncompromising in the way…he was not pandering to the audience either through music or high drama or psychological drama" (as quoted in Green 4).

As Rainer began to use John Cage's scores, she began making dances that "incorporated pedestrian movement like running or walking, recitation, use of repetitive chance procedures, task-oriented actions, and a complex use of fragmentation and autobiography" (Green 5). Her refusal to look at the audience during her performances to avoid the narcissism generally associated with performers was imbedded in her choreography in her most famous work, *Trio A*. This ideas later shown in her narrative film in *Kristina Talking Pictures,* where a photo shows her eyes closed and her gaze is directed down towards a blanket (Green 5). She continued to push the limits of avant-garde at a festival at the Billy Rose Theater on Broadway in which she showed a pornographic film that many audiences were not pleased with (Reynolds 405). Dance critics, like Arlene Croce, said her work was "no more interesting than an ant farm, . . . or six-year olds in some inordinately supervised sandbox" (as quoted in Reynolds 405). Rainer's distinct transition to film was seen as a clear demonstration of rebellion to modern dance.

With such a well-established position in the avant-garde dance world, both Cunningham and Rainer were able to bring this thinking to their work and create a strong influence in film.

Many critics attribute the avant-garde movement to Cunningham saying that he "changed the way people at large think about art and *meaning*" (Reynolds 369). The avant-garde movement in the 1950s was very minimal as much of the avant-garde choreographers were dancers that broke away from the Martha Graham Dance Company (Vaughan Encyclopedia 290). However, the 1960s was a "decade of ferment in the arts, society, and politics" where people began to break the rules and stand up against injustices like racism, sexism, and the Vietnam War (Banes *Reinventing* xiii). In response to these attitudes, avant-garde ideas became more common with the addition of the Judson Dance Theatre in 1962. The Judson Dance Theater focused on bringing "anything unconventional" to dance such as everyday gestures and the "democratization of space (a concept pioneered by Cunningham)" (Reynolds 401).

Film offered a number of features that live performances did not. Cunningham and Rainer each had their own intentions for working with film. Cunningham enjoyed the idea that film allowed dance to be available for a wider audience and that he could have more control on what the audience could see (Vaughan 152). Rainer had a number of reasons as to why she made the complete transition to film. For one, film allowed the movement to reach a level of abstraction that live performance could not. Additionally, Rainer began a movement towards narrative as a result from her use of the "separation of performers into character, juxtaposing ideas about scale, and the minimalistic preoccupation with objects" (Green 6). Rainer wanted to focus on autobiographical works in which she would explore her own her feminist attitudes and "emotional issues" (Green 6).

Cunningham's early transition to film can be seen with his experimentation to bring dance out of the proscenium. He held "Events," which were dance works in a nontheatrical space like a basketball court, stadium, gymnasium or the open air. "The Events would use phrases from

previous works, works in progress, or choreography designed specifically for the space" (Vaughan 292). He continued to bring the idea of dance outside the proscenium through his films that were often recorded in his dance studio. Cunningham first started choreographing original pieces for television in Montreal in 1961 and collaborated with television director, Merill Brockway, and filmmaker, Charles Atlas, to produce *A Video Event* on the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) Program *Camera Three* in 1974, which was an Event that included excerpts from *Winterbranch, Second Hand, Sounddance, TV Rerun, Changing Steps, Landrover,* and *Signals* (Vaughan 294). Having his Events featured on television allowed Cunningham to reach a wider audience as the audience as they could just watch the dance on their television screen. However, Cunningham was not able to have as much control over the medium as much as he wanted so he later began to take his work with film more seriously.

Rainer's transition to film is much different than Cunningham in that she completely stopped choreographing. During her choreographic career, Rainer disbanded her company and started a group, Grand Union, which included other postmodern choreographers such as Trisha Brown and David Gordon (Reynolds 406). They worked on improvisation and decentralizing decision-making (Rainer 2). However, Rainer lost interest in this group and wanted to return to more autobiographical works. In previous works on stage, she used films and slide projections as a means of "filling in the crevices with content that dance itself did not supply" (as she wrote in *Work*). Eventually, she gave up dance and choreography completely and made the transition to film to show the same "reductionist aesthetic and contempt for technical illusionism that shaped her early choreography" (Reynolds 406). For Rainer, "film…offered the possibilities of integrating imagery and literature in more complex ways that [she] felt were available to [her] in the theatre" (Banes 293).

With their different intentions and experiences with film, Cunningham and Rainer each had their own discoveries. Cunningham was in an experimental phase with his early works where he discovered different techniques in film to control what appeared on screen. Charles Atlas, the technical director for Cunningham Dance Company, collaborated with Cunningham to produce dance films (Vaughan 152). Cunningham's first serious experimentation with dance and film was *Westbeth* (1974). It was a collaborative effort with Charles Atlas that later sparked more experimentation with dance and film. In this film, both Cunningham and Atlas explored the relationship and problems with dance and video such as determining stage space and the use of close ups, deep focus, and cuts on motion (Copeland 173). *Westbeth* also experimented with montage: "editing together short, disjunct movement phrases, creating entirely new continuities and discontinuities" (Copeland 173). When watching the film, *Westbeth*, it was clear to see how Cunningham and Atlas explored the relationship between dance and film as the use of entrances and exits for the dancers was used much differently than a live performance. Dancers could enter the scene by walking anywhere in frame and could easily be removed from the scene when the camera zooms in. Dance became more intimate in film in that you can really see the dancers up close as opposed to sitting from afar in someplace like a proscenium. In *Westbeth,* Cunningham and Atlas rarely made cuts and the camera was usually stationary, having little or no movement. They also experimented with different angles using frontal views and aerial views of the dancers to give different perspectives (Westbeth). This idea of providing new perspectives was also shown in their film *Fractions* (1977), where there were two screens showing the same choreography at a different angle. These new findings in film helped give a new perspective to the way one views modern dance and can ultimately provide new meanings to the work. Cunningham had choreographed dances specifically for film and later had them performed on

stage like *Westbeth* (1974), *Fractions* (1977), *Channels/Inserts* (1982) (Vaughan 152). He also brought pieces that were performed on stage and reconstructed them for film like *Squaregame Video* (1976) and the *Event for Television* (1961) as discussed earlier.

Rainer's experience with film is different from Cunningham in that her avant-garde ideas made more of an impact on film itself as opposed to dance on film. Her first film was *Lives of Performers* in 1972, in which she included dance material from previous live performances. The film focused on the narrative of a man who cannot decide his love between two women. Narrative, autobiography, and emotional problems are all issues Rainer wanted to focus more on. She encouraged audiences to question the use of narrative and autobiography by setting up rehearsal scenes in the beginning of the film. However, her film shows its avant-garde nature as no dialogue could be heard, music was never used, and the camera work often focused on their feet or torso. Rainer incorporated the images and slides used in her live performance work in the film. Using the ideas she experimented with in her dancing in film push the boundaries of what can be done in film. Rainer was unique in that she used her postmodern and minimalist ideas in film, when others stuck to more conventional forms (Brannigan).

Cunningham and Atlas would continue to change the incorporation of dance in film in a different way by focusing more on the techniques to enhance dance on film rather than the narrative and emotional content of films. In 1981, they filmed *Channels/Inserts,* which was much more complex than *Westbeth,* as the film had more cuts and more dynamic movement of the camera. The film focused on creating the illusion that the dancers were performing in two separate spaces from the Westbeth studio to an actual stage. In *Diary of A Cunningham Dance* (1981), Cunningham writes about his success and struggle with film. On December 27, 1981 he wrote, "The dance is to be shot in both film and video, the film for eventual broadcast

possibilities and the video for instant playback, essential for seeing what it is you've done" (Cunningham 157). Video can record choreography in a way that is less tedious than notation and symbols (Vaughan 152). This is yet another benefit from filming dance as it helps the dancers and Cunningham retain the choreography in a simple and direct manner. In watching *Channels/Inserts*, it is clear to see how difficult it would be for Cunningham and Atlas to shoot the choreography both technically and physically. The staging is very complex as the dancers constantly shift direction and the movement is unpredictable, as you do not know where the dancers will be moving and what they will do next. The teamwork between filmmaker and choreographer was very evident (Channels/Inserts). While Cunningham has the ability to see the results on video immediately, the downfall about dance in film is that the public cannot see the work until the editing is finished (Cunningham 159).

Film helped dance in that it allowed Cunningham to control the space and where his dancers were presented on film. Cunningham directed his dancers in the screen space so that one may look at a number of different things at the same time. This is different in comparison to dance forms like ballet, where there is clear hierarchy of the dancers with the prima ballerina featured and the corps de ballet in backup. Here, Cunningham was going against the ideas that areas of the stage are "weaker" or "stronger" than others as stated in Doris Humphrey's *The Art of Making Dances* (Vaughan 155). Cunningham also went against the rules of filming dance in Hollywood as set by Fred Astaire in the 1930s: "film the dancing from head to toe, include no reaction shots or close-ups, hold the takes for as long as possible" (Macaulay). Cunningham played with different angles on his dancers from close-up to distance shots, experimented with frequent cuts in his later work like *Channels/Inserts,* and made full use of the screen space and placed dancers at the edge of the frame eliminating the idea of a star dancer (Dodds).

While Cunningham and Atlas were challenging the ideas of dance in film, Rainer further explored filmmaking in 1974 with *Film About A Women Who…* as did not incorporate any of her choreography this time. She would only return to dance to reconstruct previous works (Banes 293). Rainer began to touch on her "emotional issues" focusing on politics and her feminist attitudes. Her films are much harder to retrieve than Cunningham, as Cunningham's intention of brining dance to film was to make it more accessible to a wide audience. Rainer, on the other hand was not concerned with her audiences, thus I refer to articles and reviews that discuss Rainer's later work in film. In *MURDER and murder* (1996), she incorporated autobiographical information by focusing on a lesbian couple and breast cancer. What is evident in all of Rainer's work in film is that she presents a "radical way of looking, a radical understanding of personal experience and public event, and the radical juxtaposition of colliding and contradictory ingredients" (Green 9). B. Ruby Rich, an American Film Critic said "Rainer has influenced the course of avant-garde filmmaking in the past decade more thoroughly perhaps than any other one person" (Green 1).

It is clear to see the differences in Merce Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer and their transition towards film. Cunningham wanted to expand dance to a wide audience and have more control on how the audience saw his work. He incorporated his avant-garde ideas of chance procedure, dance independent from music, use of space, and movement for movement's sake to bring a new way of looking at dance on film. Rainer, on the other hand, wanted to move away from dance altogether. She wanted to focus more on personal and emotional issues, which in turn lead to a more narrative form of filmmaking. However, she still kept her avant-garde and postmodern ideas by challenging filmmaking norms. Rainer's films were based on heavy topics, as she wanted to provoke audiences to think in new ways. She wanted to speak up for her

political beliefs and feminist attitudes, and she did this through rebellious filmmaking. Overall, Cunningham and Rainer have both played an important role in filmmaking and the use of film has enhanced their work. Cunningham could experiment with how film could affect the way audiences view his dances by playing with the different angles and the spacing of his dancers. Rainer was able to make her work more abstract by experimenting with the mix of sound and image. Without these avant-garde thinkers, dance and film would only focus on the same issues over and over again using similar techniques. Cunningham and Rainer both challenged the way audiences view and think about dance and film. Even though many people are critical about their work, these artists pushed the envelope and tried something others were not doing, which in turn allowed for the growth and development dance, art, and history.

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