

## **Spectacular (Dis-) Embodiments: The Female Dancer on Film**

**Katharina Lindner, University of Glasgow, UK**

This article is concerned with the ways in which gendered subjectivities are re-constituted within and through contemporary cinematic depictions of dance in films such as *Center Stage* (2000), *Save the Last Dance* (2001), *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* (2004), *Step Up* (2006) and *The Company* (2003). [1] My discussion explores the insightful, but largely unaccounted for, areas of overlap between feminist critiques of dance and cinema, particularly with regard to the significance and function of the "female form" on stage/on screen/in front of the mirror (Daly, 1997: 111). Specifically, I draw on debates around embodiment, subjectivity and looking in order to explore the ways in which depictions of dance as a bodily practice that places contradictory demands on the female body may disrupt cinema's hetero-normative representational conventions. Mainstream cinema in particular has a long tradition of staging the female body as *to-be-looked-at* spectacle, as an object of desire that lacks subjectivity and agency. [2] By definition, the dance film appears to continue this tradition. Dance performances largely epitomise the moments of staged spectacle that are said to disrupt straightforward narrative development, allowing the spectator to gaze at the body on display. However, I want to argue that the display of the female body in the dance film carries ambiguous and at times contradictory significance, that centres on the subject-object tensions 'embodied' by the female dancer.

With the remarkable increase in films about dance within the last decade, the dance film has developed into a recognisable (sub-) genre. Boyd's (2004) account of the visual and stylistic resemblances between (some) recent dance films and music videos – she notes that *Save the Last Dance*, for instance, has been co-produced by MTV – provides a useful conceptual reference point and partially accounts for the presence of a range of different 'popular' dance styles, including most prominently hip-hop and other forms of street dance, in the dance film. McLean links the recent increase of dance films to the "ubiquity of ballet in the late twentieth-century mediascape" (2008: 32) when ballet became available both as popular art and high art. She additionally positions recent dance films within the historical context of *cinematic* representations of ballet (which include the musical), referring to films such as *Save the Last Dance* and *Center Stage* as mere "pastiche of earlier films" (*Ibid.*), particularly in terms of narrative conventions and iconography, while also pointing to the ways in which they might offer new ways of thinking about contemporary issues around identity politics, art and entertainment as well as performativity (of the body).

I also want to emphasise the particular relevance of debates around the musical for a consideration of the dance film. Attempts to define the musical as a genre, especially in terms of its generic differences from films that merely contain musical/dance performances, usefully contextualise the subsequent analysis. Various, these debates point to the realism of dance performances in dance

Lindner

films, to be distinguished from the 'impossible' numbers in the musical. [3] While numbers in the musical are variously set apart from the realist representational framework of the surrounding narrative, the dance film is said to be characterised by the inclusion of dance performances into a realist representational frame, where performances can be explained and rationalised via the narrative context (see Cohan, 2002; Feuer, 1977; Rubin, 1993). Cohan, for instance, suggests that performance numbers in films such as *Save the Last Dance* have "a more realistic plot motivation" (2002: 2) than generic musical numbers. I would also like to point to the generic (narrative, visual and thematic) resemblance between the dance film and the *sports* film here, as well as to the significance of the 'believability' of performance in relation to both genres (Jones, 2005). In the context of the overarching concern with the significance of the female dancing body in this article, this raises important questions regarding the ways in which the realism of performance is played out at the level of the body itself – and a consideration of the corpo-realism of performance, of depictions of bodily effort/labour, as well as articulations of bodily experience, will provide important insights as to the gendered identities and subjectivities articulated and re-constituted via depictions of the female dancing body on film.

### **The Female Dancing Body: Corporeality, Subjectivity, Looking**

Critical accounts of dance, and of ballet in particular, highlight the contradictory bodily existence of women within the dance context. Ballet-like dance is characterised by the paradoxical demand for a denial of the physicality of the highly trained female body, in favour of a bodily ideal that is centred on its aesthetic and ephemeral qualities (see Wolff, 1997) – an ideal, that is, in fact, very much in line with the traditional *cinematic* ideal of woman as abstract, stylised and *to-be-looked-at* object (Mulvey, 1975). Highlighting the significance of looking relations and the hetero-normative active/subject – passive/object binaries associated with it, Brace-Govan asserts that classical ballet is in itself

a visual physical expression of dominant phallogentric culture that valorises the male perspective at the expense of the female [...] there is a link between the 'look' of the dancer, the power position of the gaze, and the way this is replicated in the mirror [that is of central significance to the dancer's training]. (2002: 411)

Similarly, Daly, offering some very obvious parallels with feminist film criticism, suggests that

in ballet, the female form has long been inscribed as a representation of difference: as a spectacle, she is the bearer and object of male desire. The male on stage – the primary term against which the ballerina can only be compared – is not inscribed as form but as active principle. (1997: 111)

What Brace-Govan (2002) and Daly (1997) point to here are the gendered hierarchies variously inscribed in the dance itself. Although both male and female bodies are, in a sense, 'on display' when performing on stage, the different kinds of movements executed by male and female dancers, the

different physiques required to do so, as well as the looking relations between the dancers, tend to reinforce hetero-normative gender binaries.

While women's and girls' engagement in physical, athletic activities such as dance is said to have empowering potential – linked as it is to improved health and notions of body ownership, for instance – the bodily demands of dance as well as the looking relations typical of the dance context add a sense of contradiction, dis-embodiment and alienation. The mirror as an essential element of the dancer's training is significant in this context since "the inherent voyeurism and constant referral to another as judge via the presence of the mirror evokes in the women a recognition of the ephemeral quality of empowerment in their physicality" (Brace-Govan, 2002: 411). The dance context encourages women to see themselves from a dis-embodied perspective – from the perspective of an "anonymous patriarchal Other" (Bartky, 1988: 34).

Foster (1997) provides an extremely useful account of the contradictory significance of the gaze in relation to the bodily experience of dance, including her conceptualisation of the perceived, ideal and demonstrative dancing bodies. The *perceived* body, she explains, "derives primarily from sensory information that is visual, aural, haptic, olfactory, and perhaps most important kinaesthetic," whereas the *ideal* body specifies "size, shape, and proportions of its parts as well as expertise at executing specific movements" (Foster, 1997: 237). The perceived and ideal bodies are linked by a reciprocal relationship, and the acquisition of skills occurs in relation to this reciprocity: the dancer improves through bodily practice and through watching dance, remembering movements and trying to repeat them. The *demonstrative* body is central to this mediating process:

Where the ideal body eludes the dancer with its perfection, the demonstrative body didactically emphasises or even exaggerates actions necessary to improve dancing: it isolates moments in a movement sequence or parts of the body in order to present *an analysis of the ideal*. The demonstrative body presents itself in the body of the teacher, and sometimes in one's own image in the mirror and in the bodies of other students in the class and their mirror images. (*Ibid.*: 238; emphasis added)

What this points to, then, is that the female dancer's existence is ambiguously alienated and disembodied in the sense that the body is subjectively perceived, while at the same time it is vigorously observed, scrutinised and compared to a (virtually unattainable) ideal. The sense of alienation is heightened further as professional dancers in particular "relinquish control over the expression of their movement to the choreographer" (Brace-Govan, 2002: 411). Their movements are, in a sense, *by* and *for* somebody else. Importantly, both the ideal and demonstrative body (even if it is the dancer's own body's mirror image) are only perceived/experienced visually, *from a distance*, as object, as image. The process of 'in-corporating' the ideal body via the demonstrative body through training is thus essentially alienating as it emphasises a perspective *on* (as opposed to *from*) the body (see Butler, 1998), making women spectators of and within their own bodies. The subject-object tension characteristic of female existence in Western societies more generally – encapsulated by Young's

Lindner

suggestion that "for women the body frequently is both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act" (1980: 147) – thus appears magnified, and is 'on display,' within the dance context.

Drawing on Foucault's (1979) notion of the "docile body," Wolff emphasises that the ideal ballet body has a "weightless [and] ethereal presence rather than real corporeality," resulting in the idealisation of "a strangely disembodied female" (1997: 95). The unattainability of this bodily ideal that requires a denial of the mature female body is often linked to the disturbingly high prevalence of eating disorders among female ballet dancers. Alderson, for instance, tries to theorise the link between anorexia and ballet, suggesting that "the ballet environment is compatible with anorexic susceptibilities: competitiveness, discipline, a desire for control and a preoccupation with the body are requisites for ballet training and are also characteristics of the anorexic type" (1997: 129). Both the anorexic and the ballerina seek empowerment through the embodiment of an unattainable image, at the cost of disembodiment themselves.

Generally, then, notions of the female dancer's existence as "strangely disembodied" (Wolff, 1997: 95) are linked to the denial of the materiality and 'substance' of the physically strong female body. They are related to the *bodily* efforts that are, paradoxically, required for the making of a weightless and ethereal body. What the female body is required to *do* stands in ambiguous tension with what this body is required to *look* like. One of the most persistently recurring issues in these debates is women's contradictory relationship to their own and other women's bodies, the oscillation between proximity and distance, embodiment and disembodiment, identification and alienation.

Importantly, Wolff also points out that more modern forms of dance (the major innovators and choreographers of which have been women) have transformed the kinds of movements performed by women on stage, "abandoning the purity of line and denial of weight of the classical ballet and introducing angularity, pelvic movement, emphasis on the body's weight, and its relationship to the ground" (1997: 95). Additionally, while ballet clearly positions the spectator as subject and owner of the gaze, the subject/spectator – object/performer division is less clearly defined in many forms of modern dance (Manning, 1997). Modern dance is therefore often viewed as a potential medium for aesthetic and thus political transgression.

It is the subversive potential of dance that is of particular interest here. On the one hand, dance/ballet appears to be particularly well suited for cinematic representation due to its structural and ideological similarities with cinema: events unfold magically in front of the spectator's eyes; minute and distinct parts (of bodies and movements) create the illusion of a unified whole; traces of the production process are ideally erased; there is a clear separation between the performer and the spectator in the often darkened seating area; the female body is staged as *to-be-looked-at* spectacle/as image/as form. In dance (as in cinema), "any disrupting of dance's flow – any choreographic questioning of dance's identity as a being-in-flow – represents not just a localised disturbance, [...] it performs a critical act of deep ontological impact [...] the betrayal of the bind between dance and movement" (Lepecki, 2006: 1). Dance (like cinema) "aligns itself with an ideal of ongoing motility" and is characterised by its "drive

towards a spectacular display of movement" (*Ibid.*: 3). Dance (like cinema) "intertwines with modernity in a kinetic mode of being-in-the-world" (*Ibid.*: 7) and the perception of the stalling of movement is a threat to its very existence. Movement "must appear 'spontaneous' despite the commanding voices of choreographers, disciplining regimes (anatomical, dietary, gender, racial), and pre-ordained stunts of steps, postures and gestures" (*Ibid.*: 9).

The musical is a particularly interesting case in point and Feuer's (1980) discussion of the ideological significance of the musical is usefully recalled here. The musical, Feuer argues, can be read as a self-reflexive commentary on the very nature of entertainment, and of cinema, itself. The performances *in* the text, emphasising spontaneity, effortlessness, continuity and integration, function to erase the construct, discontinuous and alienated nature of the text as an industrial product. However, cinematic representation also arguably allows for the corporeality, bodily effort and the 'possibilities' of the female body to be foregrounded as well as for the traditional subject/spectator – object/performer binary to be deconstructed (within, and in relation to, the text).

### **Female Dancers on Screen: Physicality and Body-Image Relations**

In order to account for the significance of the female dancing body on screen, I make use of Foster's (1997) previously outlined model that distinguishes between the ideal, perceived and demonstrative body: her conceptualisation allows for an exploration of the kinds of female bodily existences, bodily perspectives and subjectivities articulated. Notions of the ideal body suggest a perspective *on* the body as object, whereas the perceived body implies a perspective *from* the body and an emphasis on its materiality *as perceived* (see Butler, 1998).

Dance films vary considerably with regard to the extent to which the perceived body (that is the activity itself *as experienced* by the character) is explicitly foregrounded. *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights*, for instance – a dance film situated in pre-revolutionary Cuba and evolving around the romance between a white female dancer, Katey (Romola Garai), and a non-white/Cuban male dancer, Javier (Diego Luna) – lacks references to the physical power and strength of the female protagonist's body. Although Katey's dance style evolves and becomes more 'Cuban' and more temperamental throughout the film, this is never visually registered at the level of the body itself. Her body's physicality remains represented in a strangely immaterial and abstract way. There are no visual indicators of bodily strength, such as muscles. Additionally, sweat is hardly ever visible on her skin, and she is never visibly or audibly out of breath. Dance is essentially not depicted as a physically demanding activity in relation to Katey and her white body – although the corporeality of other (non-white) dancing bodies is certainly emphasised.

Films such as *Step Up*, *Center Stage* and *Save the Last Dance* contain more explicit references to the materiality of the female body and the bodily implications of dance. These films are characterised by attempts to remind the viewer that dancing is, indeed, a physically demanding activity. One of the ways in which these films attempt to draw attention to the physicality of the athletic female body is the occasional depiction of injury and bodily damage. For

Lindner

instance, images of bloody feet and toes in *Center Stage* and *Save the Last Dance* provide visceral reminders of the experience of physical pain. In *Center Stage*, the first training sequence is preceded by prolonged depictions of the dancers' preparation for the class. We see the dancers' obsessive and minute attention to their ballet shoes in particular. We see parts of their shoes being ripped and cut off while others are sown back on. We see shoes being forcefully twisted and hit against the floor to increase elasticity. We are also provided with images of deformed, scarred and callused feet, as the dancers wrap their toes with tape to prevent blisters. There is a marked contrast between the visceral register of these depictions and the weightless and disembodied *ideal* of the female dancing body. This preparation sequence foregrounds the dancers' acute awareness of the materiality of their bodies. The preparations are a response to the dancers' accumulated bodily experiences of dance as physically painful, and as such a direct reference to the perceived body that, according to Foster, "derives primarily from sensory information" (1997: 237).

I also want to draw attention at this point to a strongly gendered pattern with regard to depictions of the materiality of the body. The *male* dancing characters' performances tend to be much more directly linked to the active and powerful physicality of their bodies. The male and not the female dancers are depicted as visibly sweaty during dance training sessions in *Center Stage*, for instance. The male dancers' powerful athleticism, bodily energy and muscular physiques are contrasted with the petit and graceful bodies of the female dancers, reflecting the gender differences that are written into dance itself: it seems entirely 'possible' for the male dancers to lift and throw the female dancers into the air, to guide their movements and to execute spectacular jump combinations. The depictions of the male dancers foreground their spectacularly powerful physicalities that confidently reach out into and that are in command of the surrounding space. For the female dancers, this is replaced by an emphasis on the need for bodily restraint and passivity. The female dancer has to be capable of *being moved*. The disavowal of the female dancers' physicality and bodily agency reassures their appropriately feminine *to-be-looked-at-ness*, whereas the emphasis on the male dancers' muscular and powerful physicalities functions, in some ways, to negate the feminising implications of the gaze directed at the spectacularly staged display of the male body. [4]

By drawing attention to the female characters' struggle with their perceived bodies (particularly through references to injury and eating disorders) the initial training/rehearsal numbers articulate the female characters' bodily struggle for the ideal body and ideal movement. This struggle, and the associated alienation from the body, is further underlined through representations of the training/rehearsal contexts as places of voyeurism and surveillance. This includes the presence of overly critical trainers/coaches and perhaps most significantly, the presence of, and references to, mirrors through which the female characters turn their judging and scrutinising gaze onto each others' and their own bodies. Dance films such as *Center Stage* and *Step Up*, place considerable visual emphasis on mirrors. On numerous occasions, the camera frames both the dancers and their mirror image, allowing the spectator to gaze on the characters' self-surveillance. Occasionally, training sequences are framed via mirrors, implicating the spectator more directly in the scrutinising looking

constellations. Even when mirrors are not visible within the frame, the dancers' (in)tense looks beyond the camera carry direct references to their presence.

The alienating implications of the self-surveying gaze are exemplified by an early training sequence in *Step Up*. Nora (Jenna Dewan) hardly takes her eyes off her mirror image as she dances and even when she demonstrates movements for the male lead, Tyler (Channing Tatum), she appears to look at her own rather than Tyler's movements. In fact, Nora's brief glances at Tyler seem to have a surprisingly irritating effect. Her own movements are less smooth and less coordinated as soon as her gaze at her mirror image is disrupted. Lack of visual access to her own body appears to be associated with a lack of bodily control. The sense of distance and alienation from the body experienced by the female dancer is explicitly foregrounded here: it is primarily through visual, as opposed to non-visual, sensory (i.e., haptic, kinaesthetic) information that Nora 'knows' and controls her body. As Marks suggests, the Western privileging of "vision as the sense most separate from the body in its ability to perceive over distance is central to a sense of alienation from the body" (2000: 133). The experience of the perceived body, on the other hand, is arguably more "multisensory," to use Marks' terms.

*Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights*, while lacking references to the physicality of the female dancer's body, articulates the subject-object tension characteristic of feminine bodily existence in similar fashion. The kind of self-conscious and disembodied subjectivity constructed around the female dance character, Katey, is most explicitly articulated in a dance scene that takes place after Katey witnesses Javier's spontaneous 'Cuban' dancing on the streets of Havana. Javier's dancing is depicted as an authentic expression of his character, as having a kind of organic relation to the socio-cultural and historical context from which it emerges and in which it is performed. It is an articulation of his being 'in touch' with his body. Back in her family's hotel, Katey attempts to practice the movements she has witnessed in front of a mirror. She does so very awkwardly and for obvious comic effect as her movements are disjointed and lack smoothness. An additional mirror is placed on the wall behind her so that she can see herself (and be seen by the viewer) from a number of different angles. Javier, who is an employee in the same hotel, notices her dancing as he walks into the room by accident. After watching Katey for a while, and thus adding his gaze to her own self-surveying gaze (as well as the viewer's gaze), he makes his presence known and asks her why she looks in the mirror as she dances. Katey replies that she is trying to remember the steps that she saw, to which Javier replies: "What does looking have to do with it? Just feel the music."

What is explicitly underlined here is the (gendered and raced) opposition of two very different kinds of bodily existences and subjectivities, two very different ways of 'knowing.' The kind of subjectivity embodied by Katey privileges the visual as the primary source of knowledge, while the subjectivity inscribed on Javier's character hints at the interrelated nature of the various (visual, auditory, haptic, kinaesthetic) senses. This notion is further reinforced in a later scene in which Javier and Katey train together for a dance competition. Their movement styles (and, in fact, their bodies) clash as Katey wants to follow the prescribed routine she has written down on a piece of paper that she holds in her hand during the training session, whereas Javier wants to dance what he "feels". In

Lindner

order to solve the problem of their incompatible movement styles and subjectivities, Javier asks Katey to close her eyes to dance. By shutting her eyes, Katey's subjective sensory (non-visual) experience of her body in motion is arguably heightened and intensified – even though the physicality of the perceived body is never directly articulated visually.

As such, this sequence in particular, as well as the film as a whole, also provides an arguably 'self-reflexive' articulation of the tensions around folk/amateur/spontaneous versus popular/professional/choreographed dance that Feuer (1980) identifies as one of the key conflicts addressed and resolved within the musical genre. Predictably, these and other (racial and classed) tensions are resolved, via the integration of initially opposing and incompatible dance styles in the climactic and utopian final performance number, in which Katey and Javier dance in miraculous harmony in a local Cuban club. They are surrounded both by the anonymous mass of dancing Cubans as well as Katey's parents who are initially opposed to, but now accepting of, both her 'Cuban' dancing as well as her choice of non-white, working class romantic partner. An explicit articulation of what Feuer (1977) terms the "myth of spontaneity" and the "myth of integration," this final sequence also underlines the generic and ideological similarities between the musical and the dance film: the alienating labour involved in producing dance performances/cinema is naturalised and replaced by an emphasis on effortless and heterosexual happiness.

*Center Stage* is more overt in its depiction of the alienating implications of dance. The film addresses issues surrounding the female body as they are linked to notions of the gaze and performance in rather complex ways. The film opens with an auditioning sequence through which the female protagonist, Jody (Amanda Schull), gains entrance into a ballet academy. It is in this opening sequence that the film first addresses the tensions between the ideal, perceived and demonstrative body as well as the omnipresence of the gaze. The first shot of the film is a close-up of a number attached to Jody's leotard, introducing her character as a numbered object to be judged and evaluated. Images of Jody dancing overly enthusiastically are contrasted with the barely audible conversation between two members of the auditioning panel, who criticise Jody's "turnout" [5] and her "bad feet." As such, the opening sequence introduces the dancing context very explicitly as a space of bodily surveillance and highlights the discrepancies between Jody's and the ideal dancing body. She is accepted into the academy nonetheless and, at this point, appears unaware of her body's inadequacies. This changes rather quickly, however, in the following training sequence.

The sequence opens with an image of the instructor (who is a former dancer) demonstrating and verbally describing the various movements she wants the dancers to perform. Her verbal description of different parts of the overall motion using ballet terminology (*plié*, *port de bras*) draws attention to notions of the idealised body contained within these particular terms themselves. This sense of regulation and control is underlined by the general sense of conformity articulated, as the dancers, all dressed alike and with similar hairstyles, execute the same prescribed movements in synchrony. The sense of conformity extends to the body itself as the predominantly white female dancers are also characterised by similar thin-but-toned physiques.



As the dancers, lined up along the bars, begin to practice different movement combinations, the instructor walks amongst the dancers, critiquing and correcting minute aspects of their movements. Dancers are told to "relax those fingers," to "pull those ribs in" and to "concentrate on [their] turnout," foregrounding the bodily control and physical effort necessary to accomplish the seemingly effortless execution of dance movements. The instructor embodies the critically surveying and policing gaze characteristic of the ballet context. Her judging voice that remains audible throughout the majority of the training sequences in the opening part of the film (even when the instructor herself is not visible) serves as a reminder of its omnipresence. The initial training sequences more generally serve to underline these notions. Maureen (Susan May Pratt), one of Jody's fellow dance students, personifies the demonstrative body. When the instructor asks her to demonstrate movements for the other dancers, the camera focuses alternately on Maureen's movement and on the other dancers' admiring and/or jealous gaze. Importantly, *Center Stage* is also very explicit in its depiction of Maureen's self-destructive (anorexic and bulimic) behaviours that are necessary, it is suggested, for her to maintain her demonstrative body that approximates the ideal body most closely. Additionally, Maureen's character is depicted as alienated not only from her body but also from the other dance characters, as attempts to embody the virtually unattainable bodily ideal evokes an isolating competition for approval.

Jody's deviance from the ideal body is made explicit in a training sequence following the students' attendance at a staged ballet performance. Jody's posture is physically corrected by the instructor who uses her hands to move Jody's head, neck, arms and torso into the 'right' places. She additionally describes her corrections verbally. The other students are gathered around and look on. The harsh and unforgivingly bright light in the studio during the training sequences adds to the sense of surveillance and relentless intrusion on the female body. The centrality of the mirror to this notion is highlighted in one of the following scenes that shows the company's director, Jonathan (Peter Gallagher), as he observes the dancers' training. He is framed leaning against the dance studio's mirrored wall as he gazes at the dancers who are visible to the viewer via their mirror image on the wall. The immediately following training scene is framed almost entirely via the mirrored wall. This becomes apparent only as the image is disrupted at the points where the different parts of the mirror are joined together – a reminder that what we see is indeed an image, from which we/the dancers are distanced.

Generally, then, *Center Stage* foregrounds the bodily (self) surveillance within the dance context overtly. The constant references to the mirror articulate the dancers' mediated and indirect (visual) access to and alienation from their bodies. The film simultaneously draws attention to the materiality of the female body *and* to the need for the female dancers to deny it. This is most poignantly articulated, when Jonathan criticises one of his dancers: "You make it look like work. I need to see the movement. Not the effort behind it." This (visual) emphasis on alienation and (self) surveillance, as well as on the self-consciousness with which movements are performed, disrupts the gendered representational and spectatorial conventions associated with (mainstream) cinema. The looks at the "strangely disembodied" (Wolff, 1997: 95) dancing bodies are generally devoid of an overtly erotic charge. Neither do these

Lindner

representations allow for straightforward and pleasurable identification, as spectators are implicated in strangely disembodied looking relations that are characterised by a contradictory oscillation between proximity and distance. There are significant parallels, however, between the distanced body-image relations articulated on screen, the spectatorial possibilities (spectator-image relations) on offer in relation to these depictions, and the re-constitution of women's alienated and disembodied subjectivities within the wider socio-cultural context, where "woman lives her body as seen by another" (Bartky, 1988: 34).

In a number of dance films, the rigid and controlled context of ballet(-esque) dance is also contrasted with alternative dance contexts. One sequence in *Center Stage*, for instance, shows the dancers on a night out at a Latin club dancing Salsa; another shows Jody at a Jazz dance class. Mirrors are present in the Jazz dance studio and the dancers look at themselves as they dance. However, the movements they perform are not obsessively regulated. There is room for improvisation when the instructor tells the dancers to "forget the steps and dance the shit out of it". The music accompanying the session adds a sense of dynamism and energy. There is, in effect, no tension between the ideal and perceived body. The perceived body *is* the ideal body. The dancers' look at themselves in the mirror is not alienating – they clearly take pleasure in seeing themselves in motion.

Other examples of contrasting dance contexts include the dance sequence on top of an abandoned harbour building in *Step Up*. Nora and Tyler look, not this time at their mirror image, but *at each other* – an articulation of their developing romance. They dance unselfconsciously, absorbed into each other's loving and desiring gaze. A scene of Katey and Javier dancing on the beach, their bodies partially submerged into the water, dancing to the rhythm of the waves in *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights*, is a further example. These sequences tend to take place in open spaces, often outdoors and thus provide a significant contrast to the enclosed and regulated nature of the dance studio or stage. They are characterised by a sense of spontaneity that recalls the conventions of the integrated musical and that masks the calculated, purposeful and *effortful* engineering of both the dance numbers as well as the films as a whole (Feuer, 1977 & 1980). These sequences constitute an explicit articulation of the "myth of spontaneity," which functions to obscure the (bodily) labour of performance.

### **'Impossible' Embodiments: The Female Body as Image**

The scenes mentioned here are staged performance 'numbers' in the sense that they are staged *as performances* for the film's audience. The top of the abandoned harbour building in *Step Up*, for instance, becomes a stage for Nora and Tyler's dance performance. These sequences foreshadow the performances typically staged for the diegetic (and non-diegetic) audience in the final and climactic number. An important observation in this context is that there is a tendency for a change in framing of dance numbers throughout the course of a film. Gradually, articulations of the female body as (contradictorily) perceived by the dancer are replaced by representations of the female body as stylised and *to-be-looked-at* spectacle. It is through this change in representational frame that the alienating tensions between the perceived and ideal body are miraculously resolved – the initial emphasis on the characters' perceived bodies

is replaced by the spectacular staging of the characters' bodies *as the ideal* – while the materiality of the body itself remains essentially unchanged.

The change in framing is intricately linked to a change in setting, as the numbers shift from depictions of training/rehearsals to depictions of staged performances/competitions – this is essentially a shift from the private to the public sphere. As the body moves from the dance studio onto the stage (filled with audiences and media representatives) images of the body become increasingly stylised. Gradually, depictions of the athletic female body are integrated into a more appropriately gendered representational frame, with diffuse lighting emphasising the body's softness, smoothness and curves, for instance (as opposed to the angular contours and hardness associated with the muscular body). The female body, whose physicality is variously foregrounded in the early numbers, is gradually, and literally, converted from "active principle" to "form" (Daly, 1997: 111), sometimes recalling the conventions of Busby Berkeley style musicals where the female body becomes an abstract shape to be moved around on the depthless surface of the screen. There is a general tendency for numbers to become increasingly 'impossible' and utopian, and literally removed from the "realm of flesh and blood" (Altman, 1987: 63). The denial of the materiality of the female dancer's body is entirely central to the increasingly utopian celebrations of heterosexual romance, the overcoming of seemingly irreconcilable (gender, class, ethnic and cultural) differences and the integration of the couple into the heteronormative community.

This general shift in setting and framing is also linked to a change in looking relations and the visual access to the body we are provided with. Instead of being exposed to various forms of the critical and scrutinising gaze, the dancers are now the objects of an admiring, loving or desiring gaze. For the diegetic audience in front of the stage, as well as for the spectator in front of the screen, the gracefully and effortlessly performing bodies, viewed *from a distance*, have come to stand for the ideal body. Notions of the body as perceived – that is the *bodily experience* of performing on stage/in front of an audience – are notably absent, as the normative perspective from the position of the audience is favoured over the perspective of the performer.

The depictions of dance in *Center Stage*, for instance, are illustrative of such a shift in framing. The initial emphasis on the physicality of the dancing bodies and the disjointed nature of movement is replaced by a sense of smoothness and fluidity in the final number, as we witness the dance spectacle miraculously unfold on stage. Close-ups of the dancers' faces alternate with high-angle long shots from a position in front of the stage. The extreme distance between the camera and the bodies means that the *materiality* of the body is visually marginalised. It should be noted that, generally, the changes in representational conventions outlined here are often necessary since the final performance numbers consist of spectacularly 'successful' and well-executed performances. It is often physically impossible for actors/actresses, who tend not to be professional dancers, to perform the most spectacular moves themselves. The necessary use of body doubles is less obvious when bodies are framed from a distance, for instance, and computer generated images are more convincingly integrated into an already stylised representational frame.

Lindner

### **Sustained Alienation in *The Company***

Robert Altman's *The Company* provides a notable exception to this overall tendency. The film does not conform to mainstream cinematic conventions in that it lacks both a conventional (order – disorder – restoration of order) plot and a character-driven narrative. Instead, it provides a glimpse behind the scenes of a professional dance company. What makes Ry (Neve Campbell) a 'central character' is that she features in most dance numbers and receives more screen time than other characters. We are not necessarily encouraged to identify with her character, however, and her 'actions' are largely dissociated from a sense of (narrative) agency.

Most importantly, *The Company* lacks the previously identified shift in depictions of the female body. The tensions surrounding the alienated bodily existence of the female dancer are certainly foregrounded – but they remain essentially unresolved. The rehearsal and training scenes in particular draw very explicit attention to the physicality and materiality of the dancing female body. The film's documentary-style framing of rehearsal scenes, with its use of unflattering light, the lack of aestheticising music, the clearly audible sounds of cracking joints, colliding bodies, feet pounding on wooden floors and the dancers' heavy breathing and visible sweat all foreground the body's physicality and its functioning.

The female body is most explicitly exposed in a scene in the opening part of the film that takes place in the changing room. The scene is characterised by the same lack of visual and auditory focus that is typical for the film as a whole and that stands in the way of straightforward identification with any one character. The camera remains close to the dancers who are in various stages of undress (they are mostly framed by medium shots). A number of dancers' upper bodies are uncovered and their breasts exposed as they are engaged in conversation with other (dressed and undressed) female dancers. However, the spatial closeness to the dancers in conversation, the movements of their lips clearly visible, is oddly combined with the absence of the dancers' voices in the soundtrack. A certain distance from the image is thus maintained even as the camera remains close, exposing the physical features of the dancers' bodies in minute detail. The alienating distance from the characters created through the film's visual and auditory aesthetics mirror the characters' alienation from their own bodies.

The bodies represented clearly lack the soft curves and roundness usually associated with the female body. They do not conform to the ideal of feminine bodily beauty typically promoted in Hollywood/mainstream cinema. These bodies are almost sickly pale and toned to the extent that bones and muscle strands protrude through the skin. The harshly bright lighting foregrounds the hardness and angularity of their bodies. These bodies tell the story of the dancers' constant and never-ending struggle for the ideal body.

Rehearsal and training scenes often lack music altogether and the dancers' execution of movements is accompanied only by the monotonous counting of the choreographer and the sounds emanating *from the body* and from its contact with the environment. As in *Center Stage*, the dancers are continually

interrupted by one of the choreographers who points out mistakes, corrects the positioning of different body parts and asks for the same minute movements to be repeated over and over again until the dancers' moving bodies correspond as closely as possible to the choreographer's imagined ideal. If individual dancers are unable to do so, the choreographers or the artistic director often ask for the desired movements to be demonstrated by another dancer.

Taking notions of the demonstrative body a step further than, for example, *Center Stage*, one of the choreographers in *The Company* makes use of a television screen in the dance studio. He uses the images of the dancers on the screen (from the tape of a previous performance) to point out non-ideal movements and postures. Depictions of the choreographer pausing, rewinding and replaying parts of the recorded performance reinforce notions of dance as an accumulation of disjointed and manipulated movements. The use of recorded imagery of the dancers also foregrounds the omnipresent judging and scrutinising gaze within the ballet context. As in *Center Stage*, the centrality of the gaze in ballet training is additionally underlined by the entirely mirrored walls of the rehearsal studios. The training and rehearsal sequences function to deconstruct notions of the ideal body and ideal movement through a relentless and unforgiving exposure of the dancers' perceived bodies as well as their alienation from these bodies. The documentary style cinematography adds an explicit, and perhaps self-conscious, sense of voyeurism. It creates an investigative atmosphere where the body and its functioning are examined in minute detail. The ideal (weightless) body performing ideal (effortless) movements is scrutinised, deconstructed and exposed as an illusion.

One of the major differences between *The Company* and the previously discussed films is the sustained lack of aestheticising framing in staged performance numbers. The closeness of the camera to the stage in *The Company* exposes the bodily effort that is necessary to make the performance appear effortless. In addition to the announcements and instructions behind the stage, the sounds emanating from the body (skin against fabric, skin against skin, skin against wooden floor) remain audible over the music. The bodies performing on stage are not represented as ideal (graceful, weightless). Instead, the bodies' concrete materiality, their weight and their relationship to the ground are foregrounded, articulating notions of the body as experienced by the dancer.

While the staged performances are at times framed from the traditional, unified position of the diegetic audience, providing the spectator with a view of the spectacle as it unfolds on stage, the spectator's immersion into the performance is continually disrupted. This disruption is achieved mainly through repeated cuts to views of the performance from the side of the stage. Relatively lengthy shots frame the performance from the position of the dancers as they wait their turn behind the curtain at the side of the stage. This positioning of the camera has a number of alienating effects. For instance, the view from the side of the stage is seriously disrupted by the blindingly bright spot lights that are pointed towards the centre of the stage from the opposite side. At various moments, the white glow of the light takes up almost the entire screen, while at one point, an injured dancer on crutches is visible on the other side of the stage. It should be noted here that the representations of happenings behind the stage takes place *throughout* the performance, as opposed to before (i.e., preparation for the

Lindner

show) or after (i.e., characters celebrating or showing disappointment) as is often the case in dance films such as in *Step Up* or *Center Stage*. The beginning of the final performance number in *Center Stage* does, in fact, provide us with glimpses of the perspective of the performers on stage. However, the sequence gradually moves into the utopian realm of the impossible, providing us with a unified viewing position from the front of the stage.

The takes from the side of the stage in *The Company*, showing the dancers as they face the audience who is positioned at an unusual angle outside the margins of the frame, challenges traditional subject/viewer – object/performer binaries in that the spectator is oddly positioned outside this binary. We have visual access to neither the spectacle on stage as it unfolds for the diegetic audience, nor can we see the diegetic audience from the position of the dancers on stage – which would arguably constitute a traditional reversal of looking relations. Normative looking and thus power relations themselves are deconstructed, creating a certain distance from the image. Together with these formally deconstructive tendencies, the sustained emphasis on the materiality of the very un-spectacular dancing bodies constitutes a disruption of the illusion of continuous and effortless movement. In the context of debates which discuss the musical as a self-reflexive commentary on its own, and cinema's, value as entertainment (Feuer, 1977 & 1980; Dyer, 1992), the sustained emphasis on the effortfully engineered nature of dance performances in *The Company* as well as the lack of utopian celebrations and resolutions (articulated, in part, through the unresolved contradictions and tensions variously inscribed on the female dancing body) can be read as a self-consciously deconstructive commentary not only in relation to dance performances (on and off screen) but in relation to the illusory and constructed nature of cinema itself.

## Conclusion

What I have argued here is that the alienated bodily existence associated with the female dancer is variously articulated on screen. Tensions arising from the incompatibility between the perceived and ideal body tend to be addressed in the films' initial training/rehearsal sequences. With the exception of *The Company* (situated, as it is, at the margins of the representational mainstream), these tensions tend to be resolved within the final performance number(s) that push the boundaries of cinematic realism. Various, they contain 'impossible' elements that break with the films' otherwise realist representational framework. The final numbers constitute the kind of utopian and escapist celebration of all-encompassing joy, integration and social harmony, often in the name of heterosexual romance, that also characterise the musical (Dyer, 1992). The female body and the kinds of identities and subjectivities inscribed on it are entirely central to this. The contradictions and anxieties articulated via the female body, and the ways in which these tensions are (often miraculously) resolved, are illustrative of the larger socio-cultural 'problems' that are addressed and 'worked out' within the dance film. [6] The female body has to be reintegrated into a binary and hetero-normative representational order for racial, ethnic and class differences to be overcome, usually through the integration of initially incompatible dance styles, and for the heterosexual couple to be reunited in the final number.

This generic integration is reflexive of the dance film's considerable parallels to and similarities with the musical. Most dance films follow what Altman terms the "dual-focus narrative" in his discussion of the musical as a "cultural problem solving device" (1987: 50), in which performance numbers function to articulate and then overcome primary (sexual) and secondary (race, class, ethnic, cultural) oppositions. These oppositions are 'embodied' by the characters through their diametrically opposed movement styles, and articulations of what utopia would "feel like" (Dyer, 1992: 20) depend on their effortless integration into a postmodern melange of different dance forms. The climactic celebrations of effortless harmony are made possible as the ambiguous and contradictory nature of female bodily existence is denied through a shift from an explicit emphasis on the "realm of flesh and blood" (Altman, 1987: 63) towards a utopian celebration of the ephemeral and transient female body that has no 'substance' – and thus lacks subjectivity.

In the context of arguments around the self-reflexive nature of the musical, the dance film can thus be read as an instantiation of self-reflexivity at the *bodily* level of performance. Feuer (1980) argues that the self-reflexive qualities of the musical are the result of processes of creation and erasure, where the labour of performance and the engineering of musical numbers as elaborate productions are negated and naturalised. The generic conflicts around spontaneity, effortlessness, abundance, integration and so on are given an explicitly corporeal dimension. The materiality of performance is flagged up only to be ultimately negated as the resolution of conflicts is centred on the utopian staging of the female body as aestheticized and *to-be-looked-at* image.

Overall, the depictions of the female body in the dance films discussed here have contradictory significance. Especially in those films that place an initial (visual) emphasis on alienated and disembodied female existence, the utopian celebrations of heterosexual happiness are riddled with ambiguity. The distance between the female body and its image, as articulated on screen, provides possibilities for a certain critical and perhaps self-conscious distance from the image of the female body on screen (as well as its mirror image on screen). What distinguishes the body from its image is precisely its corporeality and by highlighting its physicality – that is, its materiality and its active functioning – films such as *Center Stage* and *The Company* provide an image of femininity that both flags up and negates the closeness between image and self. It is here that possibilities for active and distanced spectatorship emerge.

In her discussion of femininity as masquerade, Mary Ann Doane writes that "the masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning [lies] in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic" (1982: 81-82). The visual foregrounding of women's bodily (self) surveillance and of the physicality of the female body achieves precisely this. It foregrounds the performative nature of the ideal, weightless femininity associated with dance, and can therefore be read as one of the glitches and gaps within patriarchal signification that allow for resistant spectatorship. The figure of the female dancer as depicted on screen can be read as a bodily instantiation of the masquerade: she embodies a sense of disembodiment; her sense of self is characterised by proximity *and* distance. This is the case despite overall narrative structures that attempt to re-position the female body *as image* in the

Lindner

final and climactic performance number(s). The spectacular staging of the female body can be read as an attempt to 'close the gap' between body and image. However, the tensions between the flagging up and subsequent denial of female physicality are not without contradiction. Notions of gender as a (dis-)embodied performance are put 'on display' in the dance film through an emphasis on the female body and its material substance, its 'possibilities.' The sense of transgressive agency and subjectivity associated with depictions of the female body inscribed with physical capabilities (however contradictorily) is not suitable for the kinds of utopian celebrations of heterosexual romance that characterise the representational conventions of mainstream cinema. The repositioning of the female body as spectacularly feminine object is thus an attempt to re-establish a reassuring (for some) gender hierarchy in which heterosexual romance is, indeed, 'possible.' In the face of the films' initial emphasis on active and (dis)embodied female subjectivity, the final image of a feminine ideal that lacks a sense of corporeality is ambiguous to say the least.

## Notes

[1] This article focuses on the films listed here because they allow for an insightful exploration of those issues and questions around depictions of the female dancing body that arise as centrally important from a conceptual engagement with feminist critiques of dance and of cinema (as further elaborated on in the following sections). I am not claiming for these films to constitute a representative sample and the arguments developed here might not apply to all contemporary dance films. However, the films allow for a useful and hopefully productive discussion of some of the central question arising around the larger significance of the female dancing body on film.

[2] Mulvey's (1975) argument in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (variously re-worked, challenged, developed) is an initial but central reference point here.

[3] Performance sequences in generic musicals tend to be referred to as "numbers" within critical discourses concerned with the musical. The function and significance of musical "numbers," particularly in relation to the larger narrative structures of the musical, has been a central point of interest for a number of film scholars, including Altman (1987) and Dyer (1992).

[4] See Cohan (1993) for an exploration of the tensions surrounding the spectacular (and feminising) display of "the song-and-dance man" in the musical. For instance, he points to the ways in which Gene Kelly's muscular physicality and athletic performance style function to compensate for the feminising implication of his *to-be-looked-at* performances – albeit in contradictory ways, as they also draw attention to the (self-conscious) performativity of gender.

[5] This term refers to the outward rotation of the leg (starting from the hips and knees down to the feet) that is largely determined by the hip's and leg's bone structure. This positioning of the legs and feet is unnatural for most people's physicalities. In a perfect turnout, the feet are turned to the side at a 180° angle.



[6] See Schatz (1981) for a comprehensive discussion of the functional nature of genre as a problem-solving device for larger socio-cultural conflicts and anxieties.

## References

Alderson, Evan (1997) Ballet as Ideology: Giselle, Act 2., in Jane C. Desmond (ed.), *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 121-132.

Altman, Rick (1987) *The American Film Musical*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bartky, Sandra. L. (1988) Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power, in Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (eds.), *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, pp. 61-86.

Boyd, Jade (2004) Dance, Culture and Popular Film: Considering Representations in *Save the Last Dance*, *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (1), pp. 67-83.

Brace-Govan, Jan (2002) Looking at Bodywork: Women and Three Physical Activities, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 26 (4), pp. 403-420.

Butler, Judith (1998) Athletic Genders: Hyperbolic Instance and/or the Overcoming of Sexual Binarism, *Stanford Humanities Review* 6 (2). Available at: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/6-2/html/butler.html> [accessed March 2009]

Cohan, Steven (2002) Introduction: Musicals of the Studio Era, in Steven Cohan (ed.), *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 1-15.

Daly, Ann (1997) Classical Ballet: A Discourse of Difference, in Jane C. Desmond (ed.), *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 111-120.

Doane, Mary Ann (1982) Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator, *Screen* 23 (3-4), pp. 74-88.

Dyer, Richard (1992) Entertainment and Utopia, in Richard Dyer (ed.), *Only Entertainment*. London: Routledge, pp. 17-34.

Feuer, Jane (1977) The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment, *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 2 (3), pp. 313-326.

Feuer, Jane (1980) Hollywood Musicals: Mass Art as Folk Art, *Jump Cut* 23, pp. 23-25.

Foster, Susan Leigh (1997) Dancing Bodies, in Jane C. Desmond (ed.), *Meaning*

Lindner

*in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 235-258.

Foucault, Michel (1979) *Discipline and Punishment*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Jones, Glen (2005) "Down on the floor and give me ten sit-ups": British Sports Feature Film, *Film & History* 35 (2), pp. 29-40.

Lepecki, Andre (2006) *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. London: Routledge.

Manning, Susan (1997) The Female Dancer and the Male Gaze: Feminist Critiques of Early Modern Dance, in Jane C. Desmond (ed.), *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 153-166.

Marks, Laura U. (2000) *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press.

McLean, Adrienne (2008) *Dying Swans and Madmen: Ballet, the Body and Narrative Cinema*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Mulvey, Laura (1975) Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, *Screen* 16 (3), pp. 6-18.

Rubin, Martin (1993/2002) Busby Berkeley and the Backstage Musical, in Steven Cohan (ed.), *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 53-61.

Schatz, Thomas (1981) *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System*. New York: Mc-Graw-Hill.

Wolff, Janet (1997) Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics, in Jane C. Desmond (ed.), *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 81-99.

Young, Iris Marion (1980) Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality, *Human Studies* 3 (2), pp. 137-156.

## **Filmography**

*Center Stage*. 2000. Dir. Nicholas Hytner. Columbia Pictures.

*The Company*. 2003. Dir. Robert Altman. Sony Pictures Classics.

*Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights*. 2004. Dir. Guy Ferland. Miramax Films.

*Save the Last Dance*. 2001. Dir. Thomas Carter. MTV Films.

*Step Up*. 2006. Dir. Anne Fletcher. Touchstone Pictures.