↑ Isadora Duncan.

Gabriel Villota Toyos

Searching for the (filmed) truth of the dancing body

(Four gazes in four dance films)

1. Isadora's fear and Annabelle's smile

Isadora Duncan apparently feared being filmed dancing. We may assume that hers was not that ancestral fear some primitive people are supposed to feel when faced with the anthropologist or explorer's lens, that their souls might be stolen. Nonetheless, we must accept that an equally irrational component of this fear —albeit one grounded on apparently logical arguments— was that her art might be ill-reflected in the pictures and her work consequently misunderstood. It is probably for this reason that despite Duncan's great popularity and the fact that the film-makers of the time were busy shooting all kinds of events and celebrities, no filmed record remains of her dancing (or at least none in which she can be identified beyond any doubt).

In contrast, however, we have large quantities of footage of her contemporary Annabelle Whitford Moore performing the popular *Serpentine* and *Butterfly* dances. Although these choreographies were originally by Loie Fuller, it is the shots of Annabelle taken between 1894 and 1897 by W. K. L. Dickson and others by Edison, Biograph and American Mutoscope that have survived for posterity.

A *vaudeville* dancer and Broadway star, Whitford shared none of Duncan's metaphysical apprehensions as to the possible divide between the movie image and the reality of her dance. As a result, her films were amongst the most popular in the turn-of-the-century *penny arcades* on Coney Island.

Simultaneously aware of and unworried by the workings of the medium, Annabelle smiles straight into the camera as she dances, performing with precision the complex, elegant arm movements required to twirl the cloths bound to her wrists and the various veils, while at the same time raising first one leg and then the other, to the delectation of the (mostly male) audience. Like her dance, Annabelle's stare is light-hearted, candid and direct.

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In complete contrast are the surreptitious «stolen» pictures showing a few moments of Isadora Duncan dancing in a garden with her back to us between two trees that hide some of her moves. She rhythmically raises her arms, also wrapped in cloths and gauze —seemingly meant to evoke classical tunics (one of her favourite references)— as she leans her head back, gazing at the sky before receiving the applause of a seemingly informal gathering of people. Here she is seen from face on, suggesting that the photographer has changed place.

In this brief shot, we see Isadora bowing her head slightly in gratitude for a moment; however, she does not turn to the camera —of whose presence she appears to be unaware— but instead to the gentlemen who are applauding her art: unlike the pictures of Annabelle, her gaze seems to say, indirectly, that the dance is not for us, but for the real live audience we can see in the background.

We might see the dissimilarity between the two scenes as the first example of a differentiation that was to become constant in filmed dance from then on, between films of dances performed specifically for the camera and shots that are simply live recordings of the dance. Despite its essential falsity, this dichotomy marked the beginning of a debate that would rage throughout the movie century and beyond: that of «staging» versus «reality» or «record».

2. Martha panics

Nearly fifty years later, producer Nathan Kroll asked Marta Graham if he could shoot some of her choreographies in her studio and if she would participate in an interview for

a television programme. Graham —the undisputed diva of modern dance at the time— panicked when she remembered Isadora Duncan's fear that the authenticity of her dance language would not be properly reflected and that the audio-visual recording would lose some of the supposed implicit truth in her choreographies. Kroll, a pioneer in the artistic approach to television, had to spend an entire year patiently seducing her into the idea. He finally managed to persuade her in 1957, and they went on to make a series of pieces together in 1958 and 1961.

The first, *A Dancer's World*, deserves particular mention because in principle it is more ambiguous as a cinematographic account, and for this very reason it is more complex to analyse. Seen as a sort of television report on Graham's art, her working methods and her class work, the piece is presented as a series of different fragments with technical demonstrations of Graham's choreographies, performed by her dancers in the studio, coupled with comments by Martha Graham herself in which she speaks about the artistic questions that most interest her.

We know, however, that the shoot was no bed of roses: According to her biographer, Agnes de Mille, when all the scenes with the other dancers had been satisfactorily completed, and it came to Graham herself, she fell into a panic (almost literally: she apparently had to hold on to the bar to stay upright). What is particularly interesting to see here is the solution to the problem—once again a product of Kroll's capacity for persuasion: the film crew came back later and shot her in the dressing room as if she were preparing to go out on stage, talking to camera while her hands were busy with her hair and make-up.

In other words, contrasting with the panic of the live recording, which might show «the raw truth» of the situation (the stage fright), the narrative device, the staged *mis-en-scene* in the form of cinematographic language is used here as a saving resort. Thus, in counterpoint to the (meticulous) dolly work and travelling shots of the dancers in the studio, the pictures of Graham in the dressing room come from the narrative canon of classic cinematographic language, with the one exception of that direct stare at the camera — justified in this case by the fact that it is intended to be a testimonial recording.

The shots of the dance performances in this work are far from spontaneous, however, as everything about them is planned in meticulous detail, and the general impression is not that the camera has stumbled in on a rehearsal, but rather that the entire rehearsal has been conceived to offer the best possible shots, with attention to obvious but essential questions such as lighting, movements through a relatively limited space, and

the search for the necessary effects of continuity of movement, especially in shot changes. Behind all this there is a clear attempt to formally draw a simile between the fluidity of the movements of the bodies in Graham's dance concept with the fluid movements of the dolly and camera in Peter Glushanok's cinematography; everything is full of balance and harmony, both in the movements and in the framing, and there is a constant attempt to make it all as spectacular as possible.

At one point, Martha Graham says that «freedom can only be achieved through discipline», and this is undoubtedly an important feature of the work. We might even say that, with the passing of the years, it is the discipline that prevails, while freedom has lost ground: in this exhaustive film, the white space of the studio, with its mirror and its bar, ends up being a site that we consider to be utterly isolated from the rest of the world, and to that extent somewhat claustrophobic. The proliferation of different frames and points of view, always in search of the optimum image, is ultimately counter-productive; in their insistence on showing the apparent «ease» of movement and its grace and lightness, they end up being an exhausting enumeration of the supposedly infinite possibilities of the cinema to record dance. Trapped in this enumeration, the bodies finally appear stiff, objectualized and lifeless: turned into nothing more than raw material for the exhibition of a higher enterprise —art— that is perfectly represented by Graham's face-on, illuminated stare.

3. Yvonne looks out of shot (and nobody answers)

Yvonne Rainer, one of the best-known participants in the Judson Dance Theater sessions of the 1960s (and as such considered by some writers, including Sally Banes, to be a pioneer of the postmodern conception of dance), also shows this conflict between the different possible records of the body in motion in her audio-visual work. From her first films we can see that the most important thing is to choreograph her actions specifically for the camera. It also soon became apparent that she wanted to «turn herself» into a film-maker and, leaving strictly choreographic concerns aside, dedicate herself to recording the truth of the body from an entirely different perspective that would include the incorporation of narrative strategies that often verged on what is conventionally considered «fiction» (particularly in the feature films she began making in the 1970s).

Trio A (devised as a choreography in 1966 but not made into a film until 1978), is perhaps Rainer's only attempt (or at least one of the few) to record one of her pieces in documentary terms. Here she executes the different steps of the choreography in the

↑ Martha Graham, 1948. [Yousuf Karsh]

neutral space of the studio, in a wide shot without sound. In this case, the minimalist nature of this staging and its formal sobriety highlight the documentary aspect, and to that extent we can assign it to a certain regime of «truth» of the image with which we are undoubtedly familiar. However, despite its undeniable role as «documentary evidence», one notices that the piece is not performed before an audience; rather the choreographer has chosen to perform it for the gaze of the camera: in other words, this type of work combines two different regimes of credibility: on the one hand it is a recording, but at the same time, it is staged. This cross-over became quite common in video performance works made by the conceptual generation of artists from the early 1970s on.

Yet we might ask whether this twin character was not already implicit in Dickson's shots of Annabelle Whitford for the nickelodeon and in the carefully recorded footage of the «rehearsal» by the Martha Graham company, filmed by Peter Glushanok for Nathan Kroll.

While it is true that the same tension can be found in all of them, the same unresolved conflict between two counterposed regimes of credibility, the differences are just as substantial: in the first case what predominates above all is the desire for a direct recording for very immediate consumption. In the second case, however, the desire for «beautiful film» to some extent negatively impacts the spontaneity of the filmed choreography, and also the very credibility (although here again, the makers' main purpose is undoubtedly to place his or her camera at the service of dance, in order to bring sophisticated pieces such as these, via television, to new and larger audiences: in other words, the educational function always predominates over that of documentary cinema).

Paradoxically, Sally Banes' film of *Trio A* for Yvonne Rainer in 1978 ended up being closer to Dickson's footage of Whitford in terms of its dominant austerity, the direct absence of an audience and the naked space in which both were shot, far removed from the studio in which Graham was filmed (transformed by the travelling shots and dollies and the hidden arrangements of the lights into something closer to a television studio than an actual rehearsal room).

Trio A is filmed entirely in one wide shot that remains almost unchanged throughout the piece. It was shot using the sequence shot model, uninterruptedly. The silent black-and-white picture shows an empty studio space with a wooden floor and a grey background. The camera makes gentle movements from side to side to follow the dancer's steps and also pulls gently in and out.

We deduce the position of the lights from the shadows of the moving body undisguisedly crisscrossing the background of the space.

However, there is one major difference with Annabelle Whitford's film: here the dancer avoids gazing directly at the camera; she looks from one side or the other, sometimes up, and in general stares out beyond the narrative field. The movements, performed without music or any other sound, are apparently simple, commonplace, non-virtuoso, and come one after another in simple juxtaposition.

When the piece finishes, a title, *Details*, is displayed. From that point on, we see a linked series of medium shots or detailed shots of the choreography, separated by a type of white flash, an effect produced by the on-camera editing of the raw footage. The general impression conveyed by this second part is of a cinematographic notebook in which the different specific features of a choreography first shown in general terms are noted in a supposedly objective, dispassionate way. However, despite this instrumental appearance of cinema at the service of performance, as a supposed raw document, what we see is really an exercise in the film writing of dance; in other words, a new kind of choreographic recording.

First we see a medium shot of the feet; followed by a medium-close shot of the arms; and further medium shots of the torso and legs; she swings in search of balance, raises a leg and crouches down... although the juxtaposition of shots evades any effect of *raccord* or continuity, and in that sense any attempt to build a syntax between the different segments (with each change of shot there is a cut or jump in the image). It is also true that this succession of movements without any apparent narrative logic offers an enumeration of gestures and parts of the body intended to assume the «objectivity» or indifference of the minimalist aesthetic, in that desire for immanence that brings us nearer to the actual logic of displacement typical of the metaphor.

However, if the images here are strictly documentary in character, turned almost into a supposedly objective proof and therefore free from any narration, we should also note the emergence of a small short-circuit: one caused, precisely, by the dancer's vacant stare.

In her very attempt to avoid confronting her gaze with the spectator's, Yvonne Rainer involuntarily creates expectations (suspended, not satisfied) of narration, insofar as her choreography forms part of another writing, cinematographic

phrasing, whose logic follows other routes. What in the enumerative logic of dance is intended as an objective distance (for example, the neutral gaze out of the shot), in film logic immediately becomes an activation of a virtual space, the *out-of-shot*, brimming with narrative possibilities, charged with expectation, with potential subjectivity, and open to being filled in different ways by the spectator's imagination.

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There is no reverse shot in Rainer's video that allows us to see who is receiving these lost gazes: it is certainly not the virtual spectator hidden behind the lens who catches Annabelle's dance, nor the spectator in the anonymous images showing Isadora Duncan's dances: nor even the television spectator at whom Martha Graham looks in an attempt to illuminate them with her art.

Perhaps, then, a spectator is someone who is invited to stop being a spectator, when what is announced is the negative of the spectacle.

Yvonne's gaze appears to be asking for help, understanding; as if she were using it to announce her desire to stop dancing. And from here on the image of the body in her cinematographic work was to be expressed in another more complex, more subtle and more elliptic way: like her own gaze out of the shot.

↑ Yvonne Rainer, *Trio A*, 1966. [Peter Moore. © Estate of Peter Moore/VAGA, NY, NY]