

Research on the Interactive Relationship Between Lens Language and Body Expression in Dance Film

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ABSTRACT

In the context of digital technology promoting the integration of dance and film, this study explores the interactive logic between lens language and body expression. By analyzing works such as "The Cost of Life" and "Smoke," it examines how techniques like close-ups, editing, and shot transitions affect the spatial-temporal reconstruction, detail enhancement, and imagery generation of body expression. It is found that the two form a symbiotic relationship through momentum bonding and semantic complementarity, breaking the boundaries of traditional dance narratives and providing new pathways for the visual expression of social issues. This has methodological implications for cross-media artistic creation.

KEYWORDS

Dance film; Lens language; Body expression; Spatial-temporal reconstruction; Multiple semantics

1 Introduction

In the era when digital technology is reshaping artistic boundaries, dance film breaks through the constraints of the theater through the collaborative innovation of lens language and body expression. The involvement of the camera is not merely a technical addition but a deconstruction of the essence of dance: close-ups isolate parts of the body, editing reorganizes temporal sequences, and shot transitions guide emotional flow. For instance, in "The Cost of Life," the integration of body movements with shots and the complementary dialogue between movement and language demonstrate their dynamic "conversation" mechanism. Exploring its internal logic is not only a theoretical excavation but also provides innovative paths for cross-media creation.

1.1 Mechanisms of spatial-temporal reconstruction

1.1.1 Lens deconstruction of spatial-temporal continuity

In dance film creation, the camera's "selective viewing" becomes a core tool for spatial-temporal reconstruction: slow-motion lenses elongate the temporal dimension of bodily movement, endowing fleeting postures with the aesthetic tension of sculpture; reverse play subverts the causal logic of actions, imbuing daily behaviors with absurdist poetry; and still frames freeze dynamic bodies into static visual symbols, implanting multiple interpretive possibilities within temporal rifts. For instance, in Maya Deren's *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, lens switching seamlessly connects the dancer's leg movements between forest and room scenes. The once-singular "lift-fall" motion is deconstructed into narrative units spanning space, completely dismantling the traditional dance binding of "action-space-time-narrative," and forming a new narrative logic of "fragmented action + jumpy space-time."

1.1.2 Cross-spatial narrative of body movements

The intervention of lens language allows body movements to transcend the physical boundaries of stage space, constructing a cross-spatial narrative system through the superimposition of real and virtual imagery. With the camera's panning, tilting, and zooming, the dancer's bodily movements can freely traverse between macro scenes and micro close-ups, forming a "body-as-map" spatial narrative strategy. In the UK dance film *Mad Head*, repeated close-ups of the male dancer's head are overlaid on rotating staircases, dim environments, and other multilayered scenes. These body parts become concretized symbols of psychological space—the spiral structure of the staircase metaphorizes chaos in the mental world, while head shaking externalizes the continuous impact of traumatic memories^[1]. This cross-spatial narrative not only expands the performance field of dance but also generates a triple metaphor of "action-space-emotion" through interactions between body and diverse spaces: physical confrontations in real space reveal social contradictions, suspended movements in virtual space suggest spiritual predicaments, and their interweaving makes the body a bridge linking the external world with the inner psyche, realizing a paradigm shift from "dance in space" to "dance as space."

1.2 Pathways of detail enhancement

1.2.1 Semantic magnification through close-ups

In dance film, micro-movements such as fingertip tremors, muscular twitches, and joint rotations are visually intensified through close-up lenses, transcending the distance limitations of traditional theater viewing and directly stimulating the audience's sensory nerves. For instance, in Swedish director Maja Oksanen's *Smoke*, whenever the motif of "smoke" appears, the camera focuses on the dancer's skin folds, transforming abstract concepts like "intimacy and alienation," "warmth and coldness" into perceptible visual symbols through the subtle opening of pores and the dynamic ascent of smoke. This magnification is not merely a physical presentation of details but a technological empowerment that endows bodily parts with symbolic meaning. In *The Cost of Life*, a close-up of a disabled man's blinking, paired with blurred surroundings, turns the minute contraction of eye muscles into a concrete expression of inner struggle. What was once marginal "sub-language" on stage ascends to narrative core status. The semantic magnification mechanism of close-ups essentially liberates the body from the constraints of "holistic signification," making every cell a participant in emotional storytelling.

1.2.2 Compound signification of micro-expressions and gestures

Taking the bar scene from DV8 Physical Theatre's *The Cost of Life* as an example, the dancers' bodies exhibit a high frequency of confrontational movements—pushing and shoving in physical conflict, the externalization of emotions through undressing, and spatial displacement through running—all of which are captured continuously by medium shots to create a visual impact. However, simultaneous close-ups focusing on the dancers' faces reveal contradictory emotional signals: the relaxed state of the orbicularis oculi muscle and the slightly drooping lines at the corners of the mouth outline an almost numb expression of indifference. This binary opposition between "fervent action" and "restrained expression" is transformed into a concrete symbol of internal rupture through the camera's editing, juxtaposition, and rhythm control—the intensity of external behavior becomes a compensatory mechanism for repressed emotions, while the authenticity of micro-expressions exposes the true state of the subconscious. The tension between these two aspects jointly deconstructs the philosophical propositions of "performance" and "authenticity." The British work Room further expands the potential for this kind of complex meaning construction^[2]. The camera establishes a rapid montage rhythm between the static backs and dynamic hands of the dancers: the vertical lines of the back symbolize a defensive closed state, while small actions such as scratching and rubbing hands are magnified through close-ups into material manifestations of anxiety. This "contrast between stillness and motion in body parts" combined with "sharp changes in shot scale" creates double tension, causing "hidden emotions" to repeatedly negotiate between being concealed by static limbs and exposed through dynamic details. The "unfinished nature" of micro-expressions—such as the tremor before the fingertips pause—suggests hesitation and struggle in emotional expression, while the "completeness" of bodily actions (like the closed loop trajectory of leg grabbing) reflects behavioral certainty. The complementarity of these two aspects weaves together a complex psychological map of the character, turning the body into a three-dimensional text carrying multiple meanings.

1.3 Logic of image generation

1.3.1 Multilayered transposition of action signifiers

In dance film creation, the camera's perspective and movement trajectory become key variables for proliferating action-related meanings: the same set of bodily movements, when shot from above, may imply individual diminution or oppression, while a low-angle upward shot can elevate them into a celebration of power. For instance, in the iconic *Singin' in the Rain* scene, the male lead's rain-soaked tapping, captured from a low-angle upward view, exaggerates his leg lines, transforming everyday "walking" into a symbol of "dancing with destiny"; yet when the camera switches to handheld, shaky close-ups, the same motion gains a spontaneous carnivalesque quality. This multiplicity of transposition is particularly pronounced in DV8 Physical Theatre's *The Cost of Life*—the act of cycling oscillates between representing joyful liberation in wide-angle shots and embodying disabled individuals' longing for physical wholeness in close-ups. The semiotic instability of action signs, shifting with cinematic context, forms a semantic network akin to "multiple branches from one tree." Technological interventions further accelerate this process: slow-motion lenses reveal mechanical rhythms in routine movements like kicks or spins, interpretable as industrial civilization's disciplining of bodies; meanwhile, jump cuts disrupt causal chains—as in *Mad Head*, where fragmented head rotations are intercut with crowds, staircases, and ringing ears, stripping the motion of its "physiological reaction" nature and repurposing it as visual metonymy for "traumatic flashbacks" or "psychological violence of social norms."

1.3.2 Emotional projection through virtual-real scenarios

Real-world settings ground bodily actions in physical reality, while virtual imagery (e.g., overlays, animations, CGI) expands psychological expression, their synthesis creating narrative tension where "the body acts in reality, emotions ferment in virtuality." In *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, real forest jumps overlapped with room projections juxtapose "corporeal presence" and "soul flight," metaphorizing humanity's transcendental pursuit beyond material confines; *The Cost of Life* alternates "fly-on-the-wall" documentary footage (realistic) with subjective close-ups (virtual), crystallizing disabled embodiment in reality while using light halos and color distortions to externalize inner turmoil, achieving dual mapping between bodily limitation and spiritual liberation. Fundamentally, this mechanism employs cinematic "spatial montage" to transmute physical motion into emotional geometrics^[3]. The UK work *Hands* stages pure hand movements against monochromatic voids, abstracting gestures into intersecting lines; camera zooms turn palm arcs into "contract-expand" visual rhythms mirroring "oppression-release" emotional surges. Conversely, Gong Zhonghui's *Wall* clashes brick reality with virtual light-hand shadows—real "wall-pushing" contrasts with CGI "wall-penetration," stitching virtual-real fractures to delve into existentialist themes of "captivity and escape."

1.4 Strategies for personalized expression

1.4.1 Technological embodiment of creative style

Distinct stylistic signatures emerge through creators' differential use of camera technology. Maja Dellaporta, advocating "the camera as dancer," simulates bodily breathing rhythms via lens tilts and elevations in *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, integrating technique into narrative to craft a poetic experimental style. Bruce Jonathan isolates hand movements from the body through static shots and macro photography in *Hands*, employing light contrasts and slow-motion to sculpt a contemplative aesthetic that embodies minimalism. Lloyd Newson of DV8 Physical Theatre uses handheld, shaky perspectives and rapid editing in *The Cost of Life* to create an "intrusive" viewing experience, where gritty cinematography resonates with sociopolitical critique, shaping a realist visual idiom. Innovative tool usage further fuels stylistic breakthroughs. Joel Brown's multi-camera synchronization and picture-in-picture techniques in *Room* juxtapose static backgrounds with dynamic hands, establishing a "restraint-exposure" visual syntax that deconstructs bodily narrative. Ben Williams' post-production compositing in *Mad Head* overlays head close-ups with swirling stairwells, crystallizing a "psychological space visualization" paradigm where vertiginous imagery metaphorically aligns with trauma themes.

1.4.2 Detraditionalization and reconceptualization of body language

Traditional dance's bodily lexicon, constrained by theatrical legibility, prioritizes movement normativity and narrative coherence. By contrast, filmic contexts enable lens-driven selective capture, liberating individual idiosyncrasies and improvisational traits. In *The Cost of Life*, disabled bodies eschew conventional dance's "beautification" logic—the lens confronts halting motion and struggle, transmuting "non-normative" postures into raw emotional vehicles. *China's Wall* elevates hand gestures from auxiliary roles through close-up focus, transforming finger tremors and wall collisions into personalized corporeal lexicon that defies classical dance protocols. In *Hands*, detached from balletic "arabesques," isolated hand actions gain philosophical resonance through lens framing—"clench-release" becomes an existential metaphor^[4]. *Smoke* fuses modern dance's contract-release techniques with editing strategies, amplifying localized muscular spasms into a "mechanical twitch" idiom distinct from traditional modern dance vocabulary. This reconceptualization does not reject tradition but "defamiliarizes" it through cinematic intervention. When top-down lenses turn "pirouettes" into metaphors of caged resistance or slow-motion elevates "jumps" into symbols of spiritual ascent, the body sheds cultural codex constraints, evolving from collective motif to individual semiotic unit. The camera acts as an artistic scalpel, precisely excising redundant layers of inherited bodily narrative, allowing purest individual experiences to flourish freely in the temporal landscape of the image.

1.5 Interactive narrative paradigm

1.5.1 Dynamic adhesion through shot transitions

In the 17-minute-40-second dance segment of *The Cost of Life*, the strict adherence to the "unfinished nature" of body movements is evident in the switch between the DV camera's "steal shot" wide shots and close-ups of disabled individuals. When a disabled person turns, the camera naturally transitions from a wide shot of their back to a medium shot of their profile, using the inertia of their body turn as the driving force behind the shot change, making it difficult for the audience to detect any disjointed shift in the visuals. This technique of "dynamic adhesion" is even more pronounced in bar scenes: a full shot of the dancer running quickly gives way to a close-up of their knees, guided by the trajectory of

their leg movements, before the upward momentum of a kick leads to a shot of the empty ceiling, creating a closed-loop logic of "body movement - camera movement - spatial transition" that makes the narrative flow as smoothly as water. The underlying mechanism of dynamic adhesion lies in the visual translation of body mechanics through lens language. Slow-motion shots amplify the tension in muscles when the body leaps, providing a physical basis for switching from wide shots to close-ups; the centrifugal force of rotation becomes the logic for circular shooting, such as in *Mad Head* where the dancer's head rotation synchronously triggers a 360-degree around shot, turning shot changes into a visual extension of body movement. This technique not only serves narrative fluidity but also intensifies emotional expression through the symbiotic resonance of shots and movements. In *Singin' in the Rain*, the power of the male lead's kick is shown in a low-angle wide shot, followed by a close-up of splashing raindrops, with the speed of the shot change matching the rhythm of the action, layering and escalating the joyous emotion to a climax. The narrative paradigm of dynamic adhesion essentially treats the body as the "engine" for camera movement, unifying technical means and artistic expression on both physical and emotional levels.

1.5.2 Complementary dialogue between language and action

The intervention of language does not replace body narration but forms tension through the certainty of semantics and the ambiguity of actions, jointly weaving a multi-layered meaning network. In the triangular relationship segment of *The Cost of Life*, characters' dialogues clearly state the background of emotional conflicts (such as "You never understand my feelings"), while accompanying body language (tightened fists, averted gazes) reveals the true psychology behind the words, creating narrative tension through contrast. This complementarity is even more dramatic in bar scenes: when a disabled man says, "I don't need pity," his body involuntarily leans towards others, juxtaposing the verbal "rejection" and physical "desire" through alternating shots, visualizing the character's self-contradiction as emotional symbols^[5]. Technical means further strengthen the dialogic mechanism between language and action. The use of offscreen voice separates language from the immediacy of the body, combining it with action segments from different times and spaces, such as in *Hands* where a female's monologue ("Growing up is a long farewell") matches a sequence of hand movements from clenched to relaxed, creating a polyphonic narrative through the linearity of language and the spatiality of actions; the visual presentation of subtitles transforms language into visual elements, as in *Room* where the word "hidden" is projected on the dancer's back, forming a visual confrontation with scratching movements of "verbal meaning - physical rebellion." This dialogic logic breaks through the traditional understanding that "dance excels at lyrical expression, while language excels at narrative" — when the sound of a wheelchair crushing the ground in *The Cost of Life* resonates with body tremors, or when the sound of smoke rising in *Smoke* syncs with body twitches, language no longer stands as an independent signifying unit but together with body movements constitutes a "audiovisual symphony" of narrative wholeness. Their complementarity ultimately aims at a complete portrayal of complex human experiences: language reveals the surface structure of consciousness, while actions expose the true surge of the subconscious, with cinematic language acting like a skilled sound engineer, harmonizing both to play out the depth and breadth of humanity.

2 Conclusion

The interaction between cinematic language and physical expression in dance films essentially constitutes a dialogue between technical rationality and artistic sensibility. The camera, through deconstructing time and space, amplifying details, and constructing imagery, endows bodily movements with narrative potentials that transcend the boundaries of the theater; meanwhile, the body, with its individualized expression and multifaceted semantics, invigorates the emotional warmth of cinematic language. Both elements, in reconstructing time and space, surpass physical limitations, and in accentuating details, they deconstruct traditional paradigms, ultimately fostering a symbiotic relationship where "the lens shapes, and the body imbues with meaning." This interaction not only innovates the visual grammar of dance but also expands the profundity with which art engages with society and inquires into human nature, offering a practical model and theoretical reference for contemporary interdisciplinary artistic creation underpinned by "technology empowering expression."

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