"Il n'y a qu'un pas entre la marche et la danse" (Maroussia Vossen):

Dancing the Camera-Body-Eye in the City

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Abstract

This research-creation thesis is articulated around the making process of *step*, the experimental film that is a product of a collaboration with French dancer and choreographer Maroussia Vossen. The epistemological grounds for this project are the *essay film* and *videodance* genres and theorizations. I will explain how the encounter between these two genres allows me to complicate my understanding of the relation between moving bodies and moving camera as put in practice while filming. As a thread and core concept throughout this thesis, I will reflect upon what I call the *camera-body-eye* as an intersubjective relational experience that relies on improvised dance movement practice and reflexive filmmaking. I will similarly reflect upon the editing process as a reflexive choreographic act, thereby reinforcing the relationship between the essay film and videodance through *step*. Both the essay film and videodance genres were necessary influences on the making process of my film. The resulting work qualifies as a hybrid between the two: a *videodance essay*. From videodance, I borrow the desire for filming moving bodies with specific awareness for the way movement composes and is being composed in the space of the frame and screen, and subsequently how the moving images are being choreographed into a rhythmical assemblage. The influence of the essay film on my process relies on the importance I granted to producing a reflexive discourse on the medium and filmmaker's subjectivity within the film. The work of 20th century experimental filmmaker Maya Deren as well as French film essayists Chris Marker and Agnès Varda will help me elaborate my argument.

Acknowledgements

My mind is spinning and my heart is beating fast at the dawn of completing this three years long research-creation process. I experience too many feelings and memories at once as I try to compose these lines. This project emerged out of my larger and long-term inquiry into the relation between embodiment and the image. Three years ago a momentum happened that channelled this enquiry into a media studies research-creation framework. Walking the graduate studies pathway in a neo-liberal context and as an international student often turned out to be a challenge. However, through this experience I was able to flesh out and reinforce my artistic desires and interests. As I am about to step out of this project's clear material and temporal boundaries, I acknowledge its relevance to the present and future development of my artistic work process.

My gratitude, admiration and friendship for Maroussia Vossen cannot be fully expressed in words: maybe in a film or a dance. Most of all, I would like to thank you deeply for trusting my intuitions and ideas since the very first moment I told you about my desire to work with you on this project. The sincere, light and profound transnational connection that we have experienced for almost seven years is an everlasting source of joy for me. I hope some of it shines through the images we recorded together. Thank you, Silvio Matteucci, for your optimism, patience, wit and humour. I always enjoy spending time together with you and Maroussia. Your supportive presence as we were walking and filming in the streets of Paris was always very much appreciated.

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I would like to thank my parents for accepting and supporting my wish to live and study on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, and my mother for her ongoing artistic enthusiasm and caring feedback on my work.

Many thanks to all my friends and unknown faces who attended with their generous presence the screenings of *step* at Elan d'Amérique in Montreal and HZT in Berlin. These first two public presentations of the film and the stimulating public conversations I held with the audience after the screenings helped me reflect upon the film and assemble my thoughts through the thesis. And thank you to Josefine for her subsequent invitation - the first to screen the film at the Cineding cinema in Leipzig.

There are so many people I would like to thank for our shared experiences and ongoing conversations about life and creative processes. These moments of sharing are essential to me; I could not keep on dancing without you, from far and near.

Finally, thank you to all the great artists I know in person as friends and/or through their work for keeping me interested in life day after day.

This research-creation project is dedicated to the feline companions of my childhood, whose friendship and teaching played such an important part in my sensible growth.

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Introduction

<u>Presentation of the project</u>

Close-up on a white and blue street sign: affixed to its surface a sticker with the mysterious words "deask last rue." The camera moves down in a fluid and continuous movement, following the sign's shape. In the background, a repetitive geometric pattern leaning towards abstraction: some will recognize it as the parking stations for the Paris communal bike system. The head of a dandelion flower appears. It grows along the sign, through the sidewalk. Finally, we see dead leaves resting in the gutter and the focus changes until nothing remains to be perceived but the color grey. Cut. Most of the concepts I question through the film are introduced in this opening shot: the relation between the vegetal, animal and mineral in the city, urban semiotics and the subjective presence of the camera-body-eye.

Through this research-creation project I created *step*, an experimental film I consider a videodance essay, in collaboration with French dancer and choreographer Maroussia Vossen. I met Maroussia in Paris in January 2010 at her weekly dance improvisation class. I returned every Wednesday evening for a year and a half until I moved to Montreal in the summer of 2011. Since then, we have met in Paris a few times a year. In the summer of 2014, we spent several weeks filming together in the streets of Paris for this experimental film. The project reveals and fosters our multi-faceted relationship as close friends, artistic collaborators and teacher/student.

During this filmic process, I was able to elaborate both my practice and research on relational camera work. As Maroussia and I filmed together (even though I also found myself filming on my own in the streets of Paris and Montreal), I became firmly convinced that dance movement and choreography happen through but also *beyond* the moving human body. I am interested in thinking about the camera in such practices as a "camera-body-eye" that complicates the understanding of the relationship between the recording device and the moving body - in this case, a human body - holding it while filming. I prefer to think of this relationship as an improvised dance, with its technical specificities and resonant aspects. My conceptualization of the camera-body-eye dwells upon previous understandings and practices such as Dziga Vertov's "kino-eye,"[1] Maya Deren's "camera-eye,"[2] and Valie Export's "camera body" performances and concept of "expanded cinema."[3] From as early as the 1920s, Russian avant-garde filmmaker and film theorist Dziga Vertov developed from the concept of "kino-eye," referring to the film camera as well as his specific approach to cinematic montage and larger politically-engaged cinematic theory. In his "Kino-Eye Manifesto,"[4] Vertov argues for a new way of engaging with filmmaking that both narrative and documentary cinema had failed to achieve. This approach was quite essentialist, as it was something of a life truth that he was aiming at reaching through the camera and cinematic apparatus. I can nevertheless resonate with his observational approach to

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[1] See Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov.*
[2] I will discuss Deren's work further in this text.
[3] See Ulla Jorgensen, "Bodies and real-time interfaces in video performance and interactive digital 3D installation art by VALIE EXPORT and Jette Gejl Kristensen."
[4] See Vertov.

filming in the city. According to him, the three general categories that he refers to as the "film-observers" must look for when filming are: "the observation of a place, observation of a person or object in motion, and observation of a theme irrespective of particular person or place" (amongst others, i.e. Vertov gives the example of water, city and country, and laughter).[5] I was not aware of these specific categories while accumulating footage for my project, but they greatly echo the kind of categories that gradually came to mind as I was engaged in the filming process. The early cinematic experiments occurring in the West during the era of industrialization were mainly interested in the relation between humans and technology as one between two distinct entities, where the human body was metaphorically associated to the machine through editing (i.e. Eisenstein). A paradigmatic shift gradually occurred and stabilized with the invention of video and digital technologies. The relation between the human body and technology started to be understood as more complex: the technology could be considered an extension of the body with blurred boundaries and the two as mutually influencing and informing each other. The notion of embodiment I will expand upon in this thesis affiliates to this later understanding, complicated by the critical feminist theories developed around it; in particular Donna Haraway's cyborg theory. In her 1991 essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto,' Haraway writes that today's machines are "disturbingly lively" and that they "have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and

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[5] Vertov, 70.

many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines.''[6] The work

of Austrian artist Valie Export had already in the early 1970s explored the relation

between "female body, camera, and screen."[7] Export's 1973 live signal video

performance *Adjunct Dislocations II* enacted her concept of "camera body" and

"expanded cinema." With two cameras attached to her body and live transmitted on

four monitors, Export slowly walked to the center of a spiral installation.[8] This work

drew from the two 8 and 16mm films she had made the same year, *Adjunct

Dislocation*, where she similarly hung cameras from her body and walked in back

alleys and streets, thereby creating a dynamic depiction of the cityscape. Haraway's

and Export's understandings of the relation between embodiment and technology

both inform and echo my conceptualization of the camera-body-eye as a relational

experience. To borrow another concept from Haraway, I conceive of the relation

between the camera-body-eye and other bodies in space as a "dance of encounters,"

where "the partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living and not,

are consequent on a subject-and object-shaping dance of encounters."[9] My inquiries

into the performative experience of the interaction between technology and the

moving human body through the camera-body-eye were further pursued in the

process of editing the recorded images together into a more "traditional" filmic

form, which allowed me to investigate the epistemological foundations of camera-

mediated dancing bodies.

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[6] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", quoted in Ulla Jorgensen.
[7] Jorgensen, 2.
[8] Ibid, 3.
[9] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 4.

A subjective chronology of the encounter between dance and film

Through my research-creation process, I have developed affinities with filmic works and filmmakers that bring awareness to the movement of dancing bodies - human and non-human - on screen. I will hereafter compose a selective chronology of the history of dance film according to my own subjective epistemological and artistic interests in relation to *step*. Through the following examples, I aim to raise important aspects of the relationship between human dancing bodies, cameras, film, video, and moving images on screen, in order to suggest an open and integrative approach to this relation. I encountered most of the works I will cite not in academic books or journal articles, but through the images themselves, in museums, galleries, and on YouTube along my virtual wanderings. I acknowledge the importance of situating my project in reference to other artists' works, but I also aim to signify that the scientific and poetic[10] coexist in the context of my research-creation project analysis. I would like to emphasize that I choose to elaborate a "subjective" chronology that is more of a fluid historical narrative of some of my artistic influences than a thorough historicized account, as I wish not to over impose meaning onto my predecessors' works, but rather encourage the reader to let their imagination and memories flow as they encounter the references, and possibly themselves experience the works that I am referring after they watch *step* and read this thesis.

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[10] I understand "poetic" as what exceeds the logics of language, in relation to the concept of "affect" such as elaborated by Brian Massumi and the Aristotelian idea of "experiential knowledge" (what I would rather call "embodied knowledge").

The hybrid artistic form and medium of dance on screen has been in development ever since the film camera was invented. From as early as the late 1890s with American modern dance pioneer Loïe Fuller's *Serpentine Dance*, recorded on film by Lumière Brothers (1896), and Thomas Edison's *Annabelle the Dancer* (1894-95),[11] dancing human bodies have been mediated in a reflexive manner through cameras and screens. In 1945, experimental American filmmaker Maya Deren produced *A Study in Choreography for Camera* featuring dancer Talley Beatty, one of the earliest film experiments where a dance choreography is carefully elaborated in order to be filmed in acknowledgment of cinematic language's specificities. In this 3-minute silent film, the camera pans, tilts, and moves together with the dancer's body, emphasizing certain details - a hand, the movement of feet - combined with a creative editing that decomposes and recomposes the body on screen, connecting different places through this bodily assemblage.[12] The resulting film is not a documentation of a dance performance, but rather one of the first time-based reflexive propositions upon the relation between the moving body and the moving image, which I continued to investigate with *step*. In the late 1960s, postmodern American dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer started making experimental films. *Hand Movie* (1966) is an 8-minute black and white 8mm silent film in which we see a hand and fingers move through a choreographic sequence within a fixed camera frame. Rainer's affinities with filmmaking brought her to continue directing films in parallel with her choreographic career until the mid

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[11] Ibid.

[12] As theorized by Lev Kuleshov with the concept of "creative geography", cited in Krista Lynes, *Prismatic Media,* 29.

1970s, when she left dance entirely to direct her experimental art films –she started

to work again with dance in the early 2000. Rainer is amongst the first women

artists to embrace the dialogue between the moving body and the moving image

through her work in order to express her feminist perspectives on the politics of

filmmaking. I acknowledge the influence of her positioning and practice on my own

work. Indeed, I meant to signify my own feminist perspective on the politics of

filmmaking through *step*, by self-producing the entirety of the project and not

relying on any kind of production hierarchy, but also through the representational

choices I made in filming and editing (i.e. choosing to work with an older woman as

main character, depicting vernacular life experience, and questioning existing filmic

genres). Other American choreographer Trisha Brown shared similar affinities for

the relation between image technology and dance through her work. In 1966,

Brown performed *Homemade* at the Judson Memorial Church in New York. On her

back, a harnessed film projector that screened an experimental film made by Robert

Whitman in which Brown was dancing. Although no live camera was involved, I am

interested in the multiplication of perspectives on the mediated moving dancer's

body that Brown suggested with this work. In 1967, New York underground

filmmakers Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas discussed the concept of "cine-dance"[13]

in a dance journal,[14] referring to Deren's writings on her conceptualization of

cinema. In her essay "Cinema as an Art Form," Deren argued for an art form that

would exist in the realm of cinema production but be freed from cinematic

conventions as well as traditional conceptions of stage-spatialized dance

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[13] I will be discussing the different terminologies for dance films further in this text.
[14] Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas, "On Dance and Film," *Dance Perspectives*, summer 1967.

choreography: "There is a potential filmic dance form, in which the choreography and movements would be designed, precisely, for the mobility and other attributes of the camera but this, too, requires an independence from theatrical dance conceptions."[15] As I will explain later in my text, through videodance and the making of *step* I aimed at composing dance choreography *through* the relation between moving bodies and the moving camera. In 1968, Canadian experimental filmmaker Norman McLaren directed *Pas de deux*, a short film featuring two dancers in white costumes against a black background. The images were created with an optical printer, a machine that duplicates prints of a film to produce and overlay multiple images of dancers' movement. Through playing with multiplication and repetition of the frame, McLaren reflected upon the relation between time and movement in cinema, using the moving bodies of the dancers as revellers of this relation. In the same year, American multidisciplinary artist Joan Jonas directed her first 16mm experimental film, *Wind*, adapting one of her live performances originally presented indoors for an outdoor location. In 1973, she directed her second film, *Song Delay*, also shot outdoors in an abandoned New York City lot with dancers. Jonas was influenced by the early New-York postmodern dance scene, which was articulating around the Judson Dance Theater collective in Greenwich Village. She studied dance with Trisha Brown, one of the collective founding members (as well as Rainer, among others). In 1976, the New York Times published an article[16] entitled "Videodance – It May Be a Whole New Art Form." In 1976-1977, conceptual video

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[15] Maya Deren, "Cinema as an Art Form," cited in Claudia Kappenberg, "Does screendance need to look like dance?," 1.
[16] Wallace White, "Videodance – It May Be a Whole New Art Form," *New York Times*, January 18th 1976.

artist Charles Atlas directed *Blue Studio*, an experimental videotape where we see

another important American postmodern choreographer, Merce Cunningham,

working in the studio and "dancing" with other dancers through an archive

videotape montage.[17] In 1978, American experimental filmmaker Babette Mangolte

documents on 35mm film Trisha Brown's *Water Motor* solo performance,

establishing the beginning of a long-term collaboration between the two artists,

among other choreographers' works, that Mangolte documented with special

awareness for movement and space. In the same year, Korean American conceptual

artist Nam June Paik creates *Merce by Merce*, a video tribute to Cunningham in

resonance with the work of conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp. The choreography

was specifically created by Cunningham to be shot using a video monitor screen.

With this work, Paik questions the blurred line between art and life, vernacular

movement and dance, but also the transformations brought upon by electronic

space, where the possibilities for creating new relations between bodies and space

exponentially increased (antigravitational bodies, dislocation/relocation of virtual

bodies into virtual environments . . .). In the 1990s, different projects where dance

and cinema intertwined emerged out of Europe, most of the time relying on video

technology. German dance-theater choreographer Pina Bausch choreographed and

directed in 1990 what would be her only dance film. *The Complaint of an Empress*

comprises dance-theater scenes shot in different indoor and outdoor locations and

features dancers from Bausch's company performing sequences inspired from her

stage works as well as improvised situations. Born and based in Belgium,

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[17] In Douglas Rosenberg, "Video Space: A Site for Choreography," 275.

experimental filmmaker and composer Thierry de Mey began creating dance films together with his sister, choreographer Michèle Anne de Mey, and the internationally-renowned choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker. Their ongoing long-term collaborations feature rather large-scale cinematographic productions and complex choreographies involving numerous dancers, most of the time created to make the most out of the cinematic and choreographic possibilities offered by the topology of a specific site, such as a sandpit or an industrial building. I do not really resonate with the large-scale production aspect or the kind of spectacular environments that the dancers inhabit in their films. However, I wish to include their work in this subjective chronology as I appreciate the virtuosity of the dance choreographies that were created *for* the camera, as well as the sharp dynamic editing of physical movement that makes their films particularly enjoyable to watch. Around the same period of time British-based choreographer and founder of the DV8 dance company Lloyd Newson started collaborating with filmmakers to adapt some of his live choreographic projects for the screen, often building cinematic sets adapted to shoot dance scenes (i.e. in *Strange Fish*, shot in 1992 with director David Hinton). From the beginning of his artistic career in the late 1980s/early 1990s, Belgian choreographer and filmmaker Wim Vandekeybus has been choreographing live performances at the same time as directing dance films with his company Ultima Vez. His interests are wide-ranging, from dance films based on his live works to narrative feature-films. Through these four previous examples (Bausch, De Mey/Keersmaeker, Newson/Hinton and Vandekeybus), I bring awareness to the intertwinement between dance companies and large-scale

dance film productions that started to manifest in the 1990s and largely contributed to popularizing the genre. Since the early 2000s, the quick evolution of digital technologies has allowed for new ways of experimenting with the moving body and image. In 2002, Canadian company La La La Human Steps, directed by choreographer Edouard Lock, created *Amelia*, a dance film where digital video camera technology enables the viewer to observe the dancing duet from multiple angles and distances. In 2011, German film director Wim Wenders directed *Pina,* a 3D tribute to Bausch largely inspired from Bausch's own dance film in its cinematography, in which he filmed the dancers of the company re-enacting sequences of her repertoire in different public spaces of the city of Wuppertal where the company is based. Finally, since the early 2000s, there has been a prolific number of new independent dance film productions and the growth of what composes itself as the videodance community of filmmakers and dancers.[18] Through this subjective narration of the entangled history of dance and film,[19] I aim to emphasize its importance to my understanding of the relation between bodily movement and the camera-body-eye in my own filmic practice, thereby affiliating *step* to the lineage of experimental cinema works –rather than to the history of dance.

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[18] I will write about the screendance community in more details in a following section.
[19] I would like the reader to be aware that this timeline is an overview of some more renowned/popular artists' works, and that there also exist works by artists that might not be as widely historicized yet -especially female-identified artists- but contribute(d) to developing the discourse around the medium.

Maya Deren: a videodance precursor

I more specifically refer to the work process and ideas of Maya Deren, who, in the 1940s, was one of the first cinematographers to make dance and film encounter each other beyond the simple mediation of a dancing act. Rather, she made dynamic use of the camera and choreographed the images through editing, giving special attention to movement and rhythm. According to videodance scholar Douglas Rosenberg, "*A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (…) is the precursor to contemporary video dance."[20] All of Deren's films were silent, for she did not want sound to interfere with the "pure" experience of movement on screen. Her concern for movement and time in the moving image was such that: "(she) would say that the best study for the embryonic film-maker is one of the time arts –i.e. the dance or music - since, after all, motion pictures are concerned with time and with movement."[21] Following Vertov's idea of the cine-eye, Deren formulated the concept of the "camera-eye," a concept that suggests more of an emphasis on the relation between the body of the camera and the human body-eye holding it.

In her conceptual analysis of Deren's approach to filmmaking as poetic, Claudia Kappenberg refers to Erin Brannigan's accounts on Deren in which she suggests that: "in dance-based films corporeal performance is one filmic movement amongst many . . . spreading out across people and things."[22] Kappenberg continues: "rather than exploring individual experience, Deren choreographs the actor or mover as

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[20] Rosenberg, 275.
[21] Maya Deren, *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film*, 131.
[22] Erin Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 97.

part of a dramatic whole, thus, as Brannigan argues, 'sacrificing individuation.'"[23]

What both Kappenberg and Brannigan emphasize through these lines is the general importance of movement in dance film beyond the presence of human dancing bodies. Thus, individual subjectivity is not foregrounded but rather diluted into movement. Kappenberg further argues:

> As Brannigan points out, Deren perceives the movement of film itself as "stylized" and proceeds by treating movement in the same way. Natural movement is taken from the everyday, formalized, and depersonalized to form a careful choreography of shapes and rhythms. (104)

My conception of dance and dance film is encompassing and transversal. I am interested in thinking of dance as movement, and movement as dance. In this perspective, mundane human actions such as walking, eating, talking, etc. can be reckoned with as dance, on and off screen. The everyday encounters between all kinds of bodies can co-compose a dance. Architectures and objects can dance, on and off screen. I would even suggest that moving images are in themselves always already composing a dance featuring all kinds of human and non-human moving bodies. To some extent a montage of lights, textures, abstract shapes, colors, and possibly sounds can also stand as dance on screen. In this regard, the works of German 'Absolute' filmmakers or the French filmmaker Germaine Dulac in the 1920s, as well as contemporary experimental filmmakers and video artists' works

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[23] Claudia Kappenberg, "Film as Poetry," 103.

such as those of Gary Hill, Bill Viola, Marie Menken or Stan Brakhage could very well be analyzed under the conceptual lens of dance film.

I am standing on the sidewalk. I bend my upper spine over my feet. The camera makes my head heavier and my arms become a fleshy bony steadicam. Together we observe the first snowflakes of the year melting on the concrete and on my boots. I am very patient and careful in our interaction. I try to adapt my ways of perceiving and sensing to its capacities. I am often surprised by what it suggests to my eyes. Sometimes I also indicate a precise focal interest, or a specific movement score for both of us. We get lower on our legs and find ourselves in squat position as we look at the delicate crystallized snow envelope the plants and flowers along the sidewalk. I cannot remember if some other bodies pass by us. But I remember that I slowly moved from one plant to the next, being very careful not to make any abrupt move that would break the stillness of that moment. I am fascinated with how crisp and delicate the snowy flowers look. How of a delicious feeling it is to be given the chance to witness and create this discrete performance in this invisible theater that is being made through the lens and always already vanishes. I imagine fleeting Wunderkammern, miniature worlds within the world, so rich in their fantasies and ornaments that they would lose their bewitched charms as soon as they would be seen.

The pleasure I could experience while mediating the world through the camera - body-eye, and later rediscover and assemble through editing, was immense – despite sore body parts because of too much stiffness while holding the camera, and then sitting countless hours to edit the images. I particularly resonate with the idea

of poetic pleasure in filming movement and one's immediate environment that

Deren speaks about in her writings:

> Like the amateur still-photographer, the amateur film-maker can devote himself
> to capturing the poetry and beauty of places and events and, since he is using a
> motion-picture camera, he can explore the vast world of the beauty of
> movement. (…) Instead of trying to invent a plot that moves, use the movement
> of wind, or water, children, people, elevators, balls, etc. as a poem might
> celebrate these. (…) Don't forget that no tripod has yet been built which is as
> miraculously versatile in movement as the complex system of supports, joints,
> muscles and nerves which is the human body, which, with a bit of practice,
> makes possible the enormous variety of camera angles and visual action. (17-
> 18)

In the last sentence of this passage, it is evident that Deren was already reflecting on

and experiencing the relation between the camera body and the human body as a

blurring of the distinction between human embodiment and technology. This

merging of the body and the camera in the act of filming is, I believe, best felt in the

images of voodoo rituals that she shot in Haiti between 1947 and 1951. Those

images were posthumously edited in 1985 by her ex-husband and his wife into an

experimental documentary called *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods Of Haiti*, after

the book Deren had written on her experience with Haitian voodoo. Although she

did not edit the film herself, one can feel the intensity of her embodied presence

behind and with the camera in a very vivid way through the images. As I look at

them, I clearly feel that she was actively taking part in the rituals, integrating the

camera's body into the process and dancing the camera-body-eye in resonance with

other bodies in presence. Like Deren, my embodied process is perceptible in the images I filmed, independently from how I eventually edited those images into a filmic object. Through this example, I emphasize the importance for my work process of videodance understood as the relational mediating process between camera body and human body, rather than a focus on the resulting filmic work such as suggested by the concept of screendance.

<u>Introduction to the screendance/videodance genre and field</u>

In the last few decades, there has been a growing international community of thinkers-makers further developing the academic and artistic field commonly called "screendance."[24] One of the vivid debates in the field, however, concerns the definition and denomination of this practice and medium. Some speak of "screendance," "dance for the camera," "choreo-cinema" and "cine-dance" (Deren), "dance film" (Brannigan), or "videodance."[25] This debate particularly relies on the historical ontological distinction between film and video and the different possibilities that these mediums offer to the filmmaker –"cine-dance" explicitly refers to film and cinema, while "videodance" connotes the video medium. The way video technologies have become more accessible, easier to use and carry, and are connected to computers and the internet has played an important role in the expansion of the videodance medium and practice, as production costs tend to be

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[24] *The International Journal of Screendance* (http://screendancejournal.org) is the main ongoing academic publication in the field, and there is also an increasing amount of specialized book publications.
[25] See Douglas Rosenberg, *Screendance*, for a comprehensive epistemological introduction to the field and its different denominations.

reduced and works can be easily disseminated internationally through online
streaming and the numerous international screendance festivals organized around
the world. However, as Rosenberg emphasizes: "all (…) terms refer to the art of
creating a choreography for the camera, to be viewed as a fully formed, autonomous
work of art, ultimately, either on a film screen or television."[26] I would add to
Rosenberg's statement that "screendance" concerns the art of creating
choreography *for* but also *together with* the camera. As I make explicit through this
text, I think of the camera as a multi-modal entity: a body with its own agency that
co-composes movement in space together with other human and non-human
bodies, and a part of the techno-body filmic assemblage I refer to as the "camera-
body-eye." I therefore have a preference for the term "videodance," which in my
opinion places the emphasis on the act of mediating moving bodies with a video
camera understood *as* a dance, as well as on the specificities of the digital video
medium. It also emphasizes the process or the act of making rather than the
resulting image and edited work, while the term "screendance" grants more
importance to the space of the screen as a site of choreographic experimentation.
However, a site for consensus amongst the various styles and approaches of
videodance filmmakers is the hybridity of the medium, and the refusal to affiliate it
solely to cinema, video art, experimental film or dance: "Videodance is in practice a
construction of a choreography that lives only within the site and architectural

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[26] In Rosenberg, "Video Space: A Site For Choreography," 276.

space of the camera. Neither the dance nor the medium are in service to each other; both are collaborators in the creation of a hybrid form."[27]

In screendance works, it is quite common for filmmakers to create a different relation between bodies and gravity through the lens and screen - what Harmony Bench calls "anti-gravitational bodies":

> Mediations of dance, from print to film or digital video, offer frequent reformulations of dancing bodies' relationships to gravity and ground. They thus present opportunities for re-examining what cultural assumptions underlie the ways dancing bodies inhabit space— they make visible what familiarity has rendered invisible in choreographies for the concert stage. In screendance, for example, exaggerated suspensions, interrupted falls, and other perturbations disturb the presumed solidity of the surfaces upon which dancers perform.[28]

In *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*, Deren was already experimenting with anti-gravitational physicality, as the movement of dancer Talley Beatty appeared "magically" suspended in time and place through editing: "the entire combination of cinematic manipulations created a leap [in movement] that is impossibly long (30 seconds) and free of the laws of gravity."[29] Although I acknowledge the conceptual interest of such editing manipulations suggesting a different relation between body and space – emancipation from the laws of gravity - I usually do not compose bodies on screen in this manner. The kind of physicality featured in *step* is a very *grounded*

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[27] Rosenberg*,* 280.

[28] Harmony Bench, "Anti-Gravitational Choreographies : Strategies of Mobility in Screendance," 53.

[29] Amy Greenfield, "The Kinaesthetics of Avant-Garde Dance Film: Deren and Harris," 23.

one, where vertical pedestrian embodiment is the main orientation for the camera-body-eye in the act of filming, and I did not attempt at creating an alternate relation to gravity through editing. My interest was to convey through the film a feeling for the actual physical experience of the person (me) holding the camera and my relation to the camera while filming. In this regard, I borrow more from the essay film or *cinema vérité* approaches to physicality on screen than to videodance as I did not play with an alternate sense of gravity in *step*. Another common aspect of videodance works I wished to challenge through dwelling upon the essay film is the use of verbal language in order to reveal the filmmaker's reflexive presence through the assemblage of sound-images. As Laura Rascaroli states[30]:

> The presence–absence of the enunciator is a key point of the essay film. The inscription of the authorial figure can be very direct, for instance by making the filmmaker's body visible and his/her voice audible. Other times, it can be more indirect, for example through the use of a narrator/spokesperson, or of intertitles, or of musical commentary, camera movements, etc. However, one of the key elements of the essay film is the direct address of the receiver, and voice-over is the most simple and successful way of actualizing such address.

Videodance works almost never feature diegetic verbal language, or in other words, a voice-over. When they do, it is most of the time a non-referential relation to the image, unlike the voice-over in the essay film, which is in reflexive conversation with the context, process and content of the visual assemblage. By allowing my voice as well as the voices of other subjects to be heard in *step*, I bring a reflexive concern

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[30] Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," 38.

to the medium and filmmaking process and allow both the viewer and filmmaker to

reflect upon one's embodied and situated[31] subjectivity through the camera-body-

eye. I am thereby close to what Bill Nichols theorizes as the "interactive"

documentary mode, "in which the filmmaker's presence in the film is apparent and

synchronous to the filming, rather than superimposed in postproduction."[32] I wish

for such a questioning of embodied language in the sound-image to be more

developed in the context of screendance works. However, I am very aware of the

possible limitations and ethical issues related to the use of a voice-over

superimposed on moving images, and I am very interested in what the diegetic

sound-image tells by itself. Quoting Rascaroli:

> It is necessary [here] to recall that the pervasive presence of a voice-over, a
> frequent and characterizing marker of the essay film, has often been accused
> within documentary theory of producing an authoritarian discourse and
> superimposing a reading on the pure truthfulness of images. (38)

I therefore borrow from both the essay film and videodance to elaborate on my own

approach to filmmaking. I practice and conceive of the camera-body-eye as an

ontological and performative relation between the moving human body and the

camera body, but I cannot detach this relation from the subjective presence of my

reflexive political self in the experience of filming. This performative relation of the

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[31] I am thinking of Donna Haraway's feminist principle of "situated knowledge," that is an acknowledgment of one's own social, cultural, material and geographic situation within society. See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective".
[32] Rascaroli, 38.

filming subject to her/his own subjectivity as well as to the other subjects s/he observes and mediates through the camera's lens and in editing is one of the main characteristics of the essayistic approach to experimental filmmaking.

After introducing the main epistemological aspects of this project and contextualizing videodance, I would like, in the first part of this thesis, to further develop my thoughts on the relationship between videodance and the essay film by putting *step* in conversation with the works of Chris Marker and Agnès Varda. From this relationship I will then theorize upon *videodance essay* through an account of my own filming and editing process.

I. From Deren to Marker and Varda: connecting videodance and the essay film through *step*

The essay film: brief history and main characteristics

According to Timothy Corrigan in his work on the essay film's history and characteristics: "(...) to adopt Barthes's phrasing about his essayistic writing, the essay film stages film forms, from narrative to documentary, as a way of feeding knowledge 'into the machinery of infinite reflexivity' ("Inaugural Lecture," 463–464)."[33] In his book, Corrigan draws a history of the essay film, inscribing it as a form of reflexive writing in the continuity of literary essay since Michel Montaigne as well as early documentary cinema experimentations. I would emphasize this idea

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[33] Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 51.

of "infinite reflexivity" that characterizes the essay film with Nora Alter's statement

that: ""To essay' means 'to assay', 'to weigh', as well as 'to attempt', suggesting an

open-ended, evaluative search. But this objective search is haunted and constrained

by the presence of individual subjectivity."[34] In other words, the essay is a

proposition that reveals its own state of tension between empirical inquiries and the

impossibility of an objective perspective on life phenomena. I can resonate with this

assumption as I often found myself reflecting upon my own position and authorial

voice throughout the process. German Dadaist Hans Richter wrote in 1931 what

constituted the first essay film manifesto - *The Film Essay: A New Form of

Documentary Film* - suggesting it is "a new genre of film that would enable the

filmmaker to make 'problems, thoughts, even ideas' perceptible – a type of

filmmaking that would 'render visible what is not visible' (197)."[35] Nora Alter

further elaborates: "Unlike the genre of documentary film, which presents facts and

information, the essay film is an in-between genre that, insofar as it is not grounded

in reality but can be contradictory, irrational, playful and fantastic, is thus well

suited to develop complex thought."[36] I believe the assemblage of images in *step*

reveals the complexity of the meandering lines of thought I sometimes followed and

sometimes chose to let go of through filming and editing. In the late 1940s, French

film critic and director Alexandre Astruc began to write about the essay film as a

"filmed philosophy" and he "introduced the notion of a camera-stylo (camera-stylus)

that would 'become a means of writing, just as flexible and subtle as written

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Nora Alter, "Translating the Essay Into Film and Installation," 50.
[36] Ibid.

language, … [rendering] more or less literal 'inscriptions' on images as 'essays' (17)."[37] I similarly perceive the camera-body-eye as a scriptural event through which ideas are being inscribed and fixed in time in a different way than through written language, although no less accurate. Through the camera-body-eye and video editing, I feel I have more possibilities to express what I often fail to express through written or verbal language alone. By doing so, I bring a discursive approach to videodance making that allows for verbal language to be part of the sound-images' dance. According to Alter, certain early films from the 1920s already possessed essayistic tendencies.[38] She refers to Vertov's iconic film *The Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), Joris Iven's *Rain* (1929) -"a poetic meditation on the relationship between nature and modernity"- and Walter Ruttman's *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927), which, according to me, is about conveying a feeling of urban rhythmical dynamism through camera movement and editing. Together with other filmmakers from the kino-eye group (the "kinoks"), Vertov "fought for a decisive cleaning up of film-language, for its complete separation from the language of theater and literature."[39] Speaking of *The Man With a Movie Camera*, Vertov reports that: "some said that (it) was an experiment in visual music, a visual concert."[40] Indeed, *The Man With a Movie Camera* is a silent film where all emphasis is being put on visual movement. The movement of human bodies, machines and other objects in the city is being contrasted and emphasized through the movement of the movie camera.

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[37] Alter, 51.
[38] Alter, 49.
[39] Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, 83.
[40] Ibid, 84.

I filmed and edited the images for my film with a similar concern for visual movement. I think of *step* as a hybrid filmic object that exists between the essay film and videodance. I had, from the very beginning of this process, a desire to film Maroussia and the urban environment *in the most embodied way* by dancing together with the camera-body-eye and then bringing my concern for movement and rhythm into the editing process while developing a reflexive and playful approach to my highly subjective position and gaze as a solo filmmaker, both in the process of filming and in editing.

Like videodance, the essay film has been increasingly developing within the experimental cinema landscape over the last few decades. One of the main reasons for this development is, similarly to videodance, "the broad accessibility of video cameras and digital editing systems" which "has enabled individuals with little or no training in filmmaking to become practitioners of the craft."[41] Both with the essay film and videodance, the production tends to be independent and production costs tend to be cheaper than with narrative cinema or conventional documentary films - however, there has been a recent tendency for screendance to show influence from advertising, music video and fashion industries which are very lucrative creative fields; these kinds of works are not of interest to this project.

Affiliations of *step*

The essay film stance on the independent and mostly solo filmmaker has been historically developed as a politically-engaged gesture through which the

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[41] Alter, 45.

filmmaker makes a shift from mainstream cinema industry to reflect upon their

social and political context. Through the making of *step*, I experienced a similar need

to produce an independent film that would not follow a pre-scripted mainstream

production path and would reflect my self-positioning in the world as a social and

political body. "La poésie est dans la rue," "poetry is in the street," was May 68

slogan. I believe this idea also highly characterizes the filmmaking practices of

French essay film precursors Christ Marker and Agnès Varda, who have partially

informed my conception of experimental filmmaking such as I have expressed and

developed through my film. Alain Resnais, Chris Marker and Agnès Varda formed

the "Rive Gauche" experimental filmmakers movement in France in the 1960s. They

also shared affinities with *Nouvelle Vague* movement led by Jean-Luc Godard as well

as *cinema vérité* – with Jean Rouch as main initiator. Constellations of artistic and

personal kinships[42] are very important to this project, as Maroussia Vossen happens

to be Chris Marker's adoptive daughter and Marker's personality and artistic

approach has had a particular influence on Maroussia's dance work. In her recent

book about her relation to him, she wrote: "Je ne peux évoquer Chris sans parler de

ma danse. Il m'a toujours accompagnée sur ce chemin" and "je sens à quel point il a

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[42] I use the concept of kinship such as theorized within a feminist queer postmodern perspective, undoing the primacy of biological hierarchies and rather acknowledging the complexity of culturally-constructed and chosen genealogical affiliations between people. As Michael Peletz states in "Kinship Studies In Late Twentieth-Century Anthropology": "Contemporary kinship studies tend to be historically grounded; tend to focus on everyday experiences, understandings, and representations of gender, power, and difference; and tend to devote considerable analytic attention to themes of contradiction, paradox, and ambivalence", 13.

marqué mon existence, influencé mon regard sur le monde, sur l'art."[43] From the youngest age, Maroussia was exposed to Marker's practice and approach to mediating the world, and has danced in front of and with cameras through collaborating with experimental filmmakers such as Jacques Dutoit and the duo Etienne Sandrin and Laurence Braunberger. Dutoit's *Indépendanse* is a 70-minute film without a voice-over that seems informed by the observational cinema approach; in it we see Maroussia dancing in public and private spaces as well as meeting and dialoguing with some of her artist friends whom she has collaborated with throughout her dance career. Directed by Braunberger and Sandrin, *Pattes de deux* is a 10-minute dance duet between Maroussia and the cat Djaleng de Paleodia. The original idea for the film was Marker's: he had imagined filming Maroussia with a cat when she was a child, but never managed to. The film was intended as a gift from Maroussia to Chris, two years before his death.[44] For different reasons, both these works have a connection to Marker's experimental cinema. I believe Maroussia's presence, self-narrative and personality played an important role in this referentiality.

I in turn had seen these two works before I started collaborating with Maroussia on our film project. Historical affiliating, cultural self-awareness and referentiality to other filmmakers, artists' and writers' works are common tropes of the essay film. My approach to the camera-body-eye as a situated and reflexive

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[43] Maroussia Vossen, *Chris Marker (le livre impossible),* 57 and 48. My translation: "I cannot mention Chris without talking about my dance. He has always been present with me on that path" and "I can feel how important his imprint on my existence is, how he has influenced my perspective on the world, on art."
[44] Ibid, 58.

phenomenological experience allows me to acknowledge the artistic and epistemological affiliations to other artists' works. Although I do not refer to these works explicitly in my film, my previous knowledge of their existence enabled me to draw the contours of what I desired to do and say with my work. Like in Dutoit's film, one never sees my full body image in *step.* However, it is more of a crossed-portrait of Maroussia and me, and of our relationship through and without the presence of a camera, while Dutoit intentionally made his presence rather discreet in his film. Unlike "classic" essayistic films, reflexivity in *step* is not the result of the filmmaker's subjectivity alone, but is rather shared between the filmmaker and her main subject perceived as a collaborator. My authorial presence through the act of filming is depending on my relation and interaction with Maroussia. The images are the result of an intersubjective approach to dancing with the camera-body-eye in the act of improvised videodance. Together, Maroussia and I made common decisions about when, where and how long to film. Often we formulated these agreements through speech, but sometimes it was more of a non-verbal communication taking place. In the act of improvising videodance together, we would feel what was adequate to our current physical state. The feline presence of the cat in *Pattes de deux* is echoed in Maroussia's dance, known for being equally as gracious, agile and light as her (and my) totem animal, which was also always an object of particular affection for Marker who even made it one of his avatars, "le Chat Guillaume." I sometimes like to think of *step* as another tribute to feline lifestyle and embodiment, as well as to companionship and relations between human and non-human entities in urban worlds. If I remember correctly, it is

through Maroussia that I was introduced to Marker, blurring the line between his public and private persona from the very beginning. Although I found myself in his presence in different events where Maroussia was performing, I was never formally introduced to him. However, through my friendship with Maroussia I somehow had the feeling of knowing him, as he has always been quite present in her self-narrative. Since I started filming and editing moving images, Marker's essayistic authorial approach to filmmaking - together with the one of Agnès Varda - has inspired my understanding and practice of filmmaking. The film we made together with Maroussia is therefore directly and indirectly coloured by Marker's ideas and presence. Through making *step*, I genealogically affiliated myself with experimental film and video makers that investigate the politics of representation and authorship through their works.

Analyzing *step* in relation to three essay films of Chris Marker and Agnès Varda

I think more specifically about my film through three particular works created by Marker and Varda. These are Marker's *Sunless* (*Sans Soleil)* (1983) and *The Case of the Grinning Cat* (*Chats Perchés*) (2006), as well as Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (*Les Glâneurs et la Glâneuse*) (2000). In *Sunless*, Marker reflects upon the historical and conceptual importance of memory in different societies across the world. He includes the recording and archiving capacity of video technology in his reflection, claiming that moving images are substitutes for experiential memory that the video images of a specific event stand in as the memory of this event:

Perdu au bout du monde, sur mon île de sable, en compagnie de mes chiens de Faro, je me souviens de ce mois de janvier à Tokyo; ou plutôt, je me souviens des images que j'ai filmées au mois de janvier à Tokyo. Elles se sont substituées maintenant à ma mémoire, elles sont ma mémoire. (*Sans Soleil*, 1:29:19 – 1:30:00)

Connecting this citation from his film to Marker's larger filmic and life practice makes it quite clear that he was someone who experienced life events mostly through the lens of a camera. In my work between videodance and the essay film, I am interested in a performative state that is not stage/audience-informed nor simply mundane. I am interested in the leap between what we perceive and what we feel. These liminal zones in consciousness, or complete openings in the field of potentials. *I remember quite clearly this moment when I was walking in the Old Port a few years ago and I felt I saw an infinite black hole in the ground. I crumbled inside, my entire body swallowed by the hole. After a few seconds I realized it was actually a reflection in water that gave me this impression. Although the feeling of the infinite black hole lasted for just a few seconds, I can sometimes re-activate the memory of this event and still have a sense of how absurdly infinite it felt.* Although Marker's dynamic approach to the portable video camera as a hand-held bodily feature deeply resonates with me, I have a different relationship to video's mediation of worldly experience in relation to memory. I am interested in the experience of looking at photographic or video images I recorded in the past and feeling what it does to me, but I do not think that techno-generated imagery replaces experiential memory. This idea often keeps me hesitant (or even reluctant) to film while I am experiencing the contours of the city as a talker, thinker, feeler, and mover. I often keep the

camera on my shoulder instead of systematically looking through it and pressing the "record" button, probably because I know too well how hypnotic the medium can be. I believe the multisensory and seductive "tunnel of vision" effect of a camera has to be acknowledged by the person filming. When I am filming another human body, I am fascinated by what I see through the camera-body-eye. Through the act of mediating and recording what is there, it is as if I were re-creating, re-agencing, thus choreographing the different elements around me. The frame is the technological field of possibilities I am playing with. I know my camera-body-eye knows how to switch to "camera mode" when I am filming: the camera channels and transforms my vision and I have to adapt to its different capacities if I want us to collaborate. But we also sometimes resist each other. We don't always see things under the same angle, the same light. Also, carrying the camera with me without necessarily filming puts me in special position regarding what I am observing and experiencing. Instead of filming "everything" all the time, I rather practice observing, listening and feeling what is there through my biological eyes, ears and body. I possibly pay more attention than if I would not have this filmic activity in mind and the camera hanging from my shoulder. Do I look at the world as if I was looking through a camera lens and frame even when I am not filming? There is no clear answer to this question. I thus came to acknowledge that the act of technologically mediating experience and experiencing the world without a camera are two very distinct *yet* similar experiences and practices. Hierarchizing them in terms of which is the most genuine or *authentic* one is of little interest to me. I suggest we think about this as a relation rather than a distinction in order to challenge this epistemological binary. Thus, the

camera-body-eye experience is for me about the attitude or disposition to engage with the world with particular sensorial attentiveness, even beyond the act of filming. How I mediate the world with my eyes and how I mediate it with my eyes through the camera's lens are two intertwined modalities of my embodied experience.[45] I conceive of this tension between semio-political and sensorial awareness in immediate embodiment in a similar way, with or without the camera-body-eye. The camera-body-eye is also about a certain disposition to move together - to dance - with other moving bodies in space, finding flexibility and agility in the interaction. I am interested in how the interaction between human and techno bodies in the camera-body-eye relationship is understood as a complex social and experiential interplay, rather than in re-presenting a dancing body on screen through camera technology. I am thus borrowing both from the essay film and videodance modes, for the first one's reflexive relationship to the act of filming, and the latter's interest for camera and bodily movement.

Through this research-creation project, I was particularly interested in thinking of how, through the practice of videodance making, the camera-body-eye can complicate the distinction and power play between the person filming and the person dancing. Considering the act of filming with the camera-body-eye as a non-hierarchical relational dance between different kinds of bodies allows me to shift the usual objectivist paradigm in the relation between filmmaker and subject(s). However, speaking from a feminist perspective I believe it is important to keep in

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[45] In the context of this thesis, I refer to the concept of "experience" such as reckoned with in a phenomenological paradigm and in relation to concepts of embodiment, immediacy, (added comma) and cultural situatedness.

mind the possibility of oppressive dynamics taking place in the videodance event, and therefore to constantly keep asking oneself whether other bodies can find the space and agency they require. Sensitivity and awareness to the topic, as well as a good communication between all persons involved, are crucial in that context.[46]

Another aspect of the way I worked —and which resonates with the ways of working of Marker and Varda— is the fact that I am the sole maker at all stages of the process. As I filmed and edited the film myself, I had the possibility to shape a very personal discourse through which I could reflexively express and complicate my worldly concerns. Filming and editing a film alone has to do with the practice of writing diaries, in my opinion. It is first and foremost a dialogue with one's selves that takes place, but always remembering that there will be witnesses and that we therefore have a certain rhetorical and political responsibility toward the work. As I question myself while filming and editing, I also ask my future spectators to think together with me and contribute in building a complex signifying object that can be grasped under different light and angles over and over again:

> The "I" of the essay film always clearly and strongly implicates a "you"—and this is a key aspect of the deep structures of the form. "You" is called upon to participate and share the enunciator's reflections. It is important to understand that this "you" is not a generic audience, but an embodied spectator. The essay film constructs such spectatorial position by adopting a certain rhetorical structure: rather than answering all the questions that it raises, and delivering a complete, "closed" argument, the essay's rhetoric is

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[46] I am here particularly thinking of the concept of 'consent' such as developed and practiced within queer communities.

such that it opens up problems, and interrogates the spectator; instead of guiding her through emotional and intellectual response, the essay urges her to engage individually with the film, and reflect on the same subject matter the author is musing about. This structure accounts for the "openness" of the essay film. (Rascaroli 35)

In the context of this thesis, it is interesting to conceive of the essay film spectator as an "embodied spectator" reflecting together with the author throughout the film. I would further argue that in the context of a *videodance essay*, the embodied spectator experiences movement of sound-images in a physical way through the camera-body-eye mediation of dance understood in a broad way. On this matter, recent studies and publications in the field of media studies, cinema studies, screendance, dance and performance studies have been enquiring the idea that spectatorial experience produces a physical effect of touch for the viewer's eyes and body. In her book *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Laura U. Marks qualifies this experience as "haptic perception":

> Haptic perception is usually defined as the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies. In haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch. Haptic visuality, a term contrasted to optical visuality, draws from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics. (2)

As both the person filming and editing in *Sunless* and *The Case of the Grinning Cat*, Marker's subjective presence in the process is made perceptible for the

spectator. Essay filmmaking practices are characterized by a reflexive stance on the filmmaker's position within their own life narrative and the cultural context they depict, as well as on cinematic, temporal, and technical aspects. For example, both Marker and Varda often include photographic and filmic elements, tricks and references to photography and cinema in their films (freezing frames, *mise en abyme* of the screen by filming another screen, filming a photograph, filming their reflection and revealing the camera device, etc.). Oftentimes, the filmmakers refer to the complex and always partial nature of their own subjectivity in an attempt at detouring the stereotypical authoritarian, objectivist gaze of the filmmaker on the world. In *The Gleaners and I*, Varda intends at making her personal experience, history and practice as a filmmaker intertwine with the sociocultural phenomenon of gleaning that she goes on to investigate through a journey across France. She observes and documents the activity of gleaning food in markets, supermarkets or in the fields, but also abandoned objects collected in the streets through the lens of her very mobile low-resolution video camera. It is at the same time a reflection upon the way she gathers and assembles the images that constitute her film as a somehow serendipitous collage of disparate observations and stories around the theme of gleaning:

> The Gleaners and I is a series of sketches, a collage of short films constructed, first, as a meditation on gleaning. Describing the activity of collecting the surplus left after fields have been harvested, the idea of gleaning expands and contracts through the film as it triggers other associations, concepts, and debates. In the heritage of its literary and cinematic predecessors, the film

proceeds digressively, spinning and turning the experience of gleaning as an idea that moves from the agricultural and the psychoanalytic to the aesthetic and political. (…) Here, gleaning, like the essayistic identity, is a parasitically productive activity, a subversion or rejection of the authority and primacy of subjectivity and selfhood, enunciated by a language that fails to offer any stable place or meaning—even for auteurist self-portraits. (Corrigan 70-71)

This self-criticism of her own position as an *auteur* is achieved in *The Gleaners and I* as the images are almost always contextualized by Varda herself. For example, she tells the spectators the names of the people she encounters and politely addresses them from behind the camera; she also keeps the original diegetic sounds together with the images. While I was filming, I was concentrating on trying to merge my body with the camera. I think of what happened as an improvised and complex interplay between many elements. However, I aimed at letting my filmmaker's subjective position and personal sensitivity show through the images, reminding the spectators and myself that the images are also the subjective discursive expression of a culturally situated individual. Verbal language is the first instance of culturally subjective communication. I therefore allowed myself to interact through voice and speech with Maroussia, her husband Silvio and other subjects I was relating to while recording. "Je te filme," "I am filming you": these are the words that I pronounce most of the time as I press the record button on the camera and begin to film Maroussia. In the film, the spectator is invited to witness Maroussia's reaction as I utter those words. By revealing this moment when we establish the situation where she is being observed by my camera-body-eye, I emphasize the constant relational negotiation between the camera-person and the

subject in the act of filming. I film Maroussia with care, making sure that I would work with her and depict her through editing in a way that would leave a lot of space to the expression of her own subjectivity and personality. This intention influenced the way I present her movements and body through editing. I chose to not make too many cuts in between her movements and body parts while she is dancing, in order to respect her physical and artistic integrity on screen.

Marker mostly decontextualizes the images he records and juxtaposes them, forming new geographies and cultural associations of his own invention. One of the emblematic features in his cinema is the free-association of anachronic and dislocated images in editing to create the essay film language that characterizes his work. According to Sarah Cooper, "Marker's editing in *Sunless* functions as a bridge joining one land to another."[47] Indeed, in *Sunless*, images depicting social organization and cultural practices in Guinea-Bissau are in dialogue with images of Japan, Iceland, Paris and San Francisco. The flow of images overlaps and mingles with a reflexive voice-over written by Marker and narrated by a female voice. However, *The Case of the Grinning Cat* is situated more geographically as it mostly gathers images recorded in Paris by Marker within a couple months as he was investigating the mysterious multiplication of the image of a yellow cat in the streets of Paris. His obsessive semiotic quest leads him to encounter different political events such as protests and other cultural phenomena that he assembles and comments on through editing. The transformative potential Marker sees in fictionalizing the personal and political-historical is finally expressed in the

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[47] Sarah Cooper, "Time and the City: Chris Marker," 114.

encounter of his avatar-character "le chat Guillaume" with the eventually uncovered yellow feline protagonist. In *step*, I tried to find an ethical way to re-present the semio-bodies and cultural elements I encountered. Of course this is a very subjective statement, but I nonetheless kept in mind politics of representation and privacy as I was filming and editing the images together. For instance, I did not include close-ups of strangers' faces, which I would have intentionally "stolen" away from them on the streets (an activity that was often practiced by Marker). I also chose to keep most of the time the diegetic sound together with the image, thinking it would convey a more adequate portrait of what I was mediating. In videodance works, there is a general tendency for the ambient diegetic sound to be taken away from the image and replaced with a musical score. It is nothing surprising considering the intertwining of videodance with the medium of dance; however, I was interested in experimenting with editing dance movement by keeping the original images and diegetic soundtracks together. The resulting effect is a distorted immersion into the urban landscape, especially considering the fragmentation of image and sound through the cuts, as well as the experience of hearing sounds that were mediated through a rather low-resolution microphone. Also, I mostly kept the diegetic sounds with the images as I felt it would convey a more accurate feeling of the embodied situated experience during filming. Referring to the way Marker edited the sound in relation to the images, Catherine Russell argues that *Sunless* fails to find an ethical way to engage with the cultural phenomena it desires to expose:

For all its reflexivity, *Sans Soleil* fails to understand its own practice of enhancing ethnographic imagery with a soundtrack of electronic music. Ambient sound is heard only occasionally for rituals and ceremonies; other voices (but the narrator's) are heard only in the form of advertising and public speeches. (304)

Agnès Varda's subjective presence in *The Gleaners and I* is very dynamic and affirmed through the presence of her persona and voice-over that ties the images together. She often films her reflection in mirrors or windows, includes photographs of herself, turns the camera towards her own body, talks to the people in front of the camera, and speaks as the spectator through the images. She repeatedly turns the camera onto her own hands, once commenting on how beautiful aging skin is, then making a lens shape with her fingers and palm that echoes the camera's lens to circle trucks she is passing on the highway as she sits as a passenger on a car. During a discussion of the way Varda represents her hands, Jenny Chamarette[48] makes the point about her highly subjective relational presence within the film:

Rather than attempting to recuperate the hand into a fetishising, demythologising logic of bodily representation, Varda instead allows the marginality of the image to place herself within a relationship of betweenness with regard to her presence within the film, and exterior to it. By marginalising the consistency of her subject-hood, and emphasising the protracted partialness of any attempt for Varda to account even for herself, this relational subjectivity occurs only through the audiovisual possibilities of the cinematic. Resting upon

[48] Jenny Chamarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film. Rethinking Subjectivity beyond French Cinema.*

the unknowability of any subject, Varda opens up a highly subjective relational space for filmmaking. (120)

In *step* I similarly aimed to challenge my own subjectivity and integrated my hands, legs, feet and silhouette in the shots but never my full body image, partly because I wanted Maroussia's body image to shine through the screen without interfering with another dancer's figure. Similarly, my own voice is heard several times throughout the film: when we are walking together with Maroussia and Silvio while I talk to them; when I give her indications about what I see in the frame and subsequently start recording her dance, when talking on the phone and when I sing. However, my discursive interventions when I am behind the camera are usually kept to a minimum, as my desire is to put the emphasis on visual movement language rather than verbal language. Indeed, I chose not to add any voice-over to the diegetic sound, as I desired not to force verbal signification onto the sound-images, but rather let them speak for themselves. I wish for the spectators to find space to project their own experiences, memories, significations and affects onto the film, which, in my perspective, is easier to access through non-verbal experience. Quoting Paul Arthur:

> Since film operates simultaneously on multiple discursive levels—image, speech, titles, music—the literary essay's single, determining voice is dispersed into cinema's multi-channel stew. The manifestation or location of a film author's "voice" can shift from moment to moment or surface expressively via montage, camera movement and so on. (qtd. in Rascaroli 37)

As Arthur formulates here, authorial subjectivity in the essay film can be expressed through other means than a voice-over, for cinematic language involves many other ways of discursive expression besides verbal language (camera movement and montage being the two most important in my contention).

The semiotic associations Marker creates in his editing are poetic, reflexive and political. He documents details of people's lives in different cultures, observes animals, gleans curiosities such as gadgets, graffiti, signs, statues and images and then composes them into a complex subjective montage of images and sounds, giving them new meaning. His semio-poetic associative technique also recalls Surrealist collage and Dadaist Exquisite Corpse techniques, to which I explicitly refer in *step* in a sequence where we hear Maroussia, Silvio and I declaiming our collective poetic creation as the screen remains black, therefore putting the emphasis on voices and letting the spectator's imagination ride the words freely. I edited *step* as a visual collage through which I compose the visions, thoughts and memories I gleaned on my path through the camera-body-eye. The memories I have accumulated that were not captured by the camera-body-eye but were re-activated through looking at the footage have played an important part in assembling the actual techno-images. Together, all these virtual and actual images form the larger film of my existence. I quote Marker's voice-over text at the end of *Sunless*, where I find he formulates quite beautifully his idea of subversive filmmaking poetics:

Enfin je descendais dans la cave où mon copain le maniaque s'active devant ses graffitis électroniques. Au fond son langage me touche, parce qu'il s'adresse à la part de nous qui s'obstine à dessiner des profils sur les

murs des prisons. Une craie, à suivre les contours de ce qui n'est pas, ou plus, ou pas encore. Une écriture dont chacun se servira pour composer sa propre liste des choses qui font battre le coeur, pour l'offrir ou pour l'effacer. A ce moment là la poésie sera faite par tous, et il y aura des émeus dans la zone. (*Sans Soleil*, 1:39:15-1:39:54)

In the first section of this thesis I explained the relation between videodance and the essay film through a discussion of my film, as I see it in dialogue with the works of Chris Marker and Agnès Varda. I will conclude by re-affirming the self-reflexive contributions of essay film practices to my approach to videodance making. Through drawing parallels between Varda and Marker's self-positioning within their films and their approaches to editing, I meant to emphasize the reflexive qualities of the essay film that I think in many videodance works are often lacking and which I consequently tried to convey through my film. On the other hand, in *step* I also intended to find an embodied approach to my subjects and the other bodies I was interacting with through conceiving of this interaction as an immediate relational dance between different types of bodies: human bodies, the camera-body-eye, animals, objects and architectures. This embodied emphasis and dancerly quality in the experience of filming comes rather from videodance than from the essay film. From these affiliations and a critical understanding of *step*, I wish to proceed by elaborating on some specific conceptual aspects of my filmmaking process: my understanding of the camera-body-eye event as improvised dance, the relationship between still and moving images, and the role of improvisation in reflexive editing, thereby refining my reckoning of *step* as a *videodance essay*.

II. A conceptual toolbox for the *videodance essay*: unpacking some aspects of my making process

Quand tu iras dans le jardin il faudra que tu prennes garde à tout, à toi-même comme aux fleurs.
Regarde bien la pluie, la vie.
Regarde l'orage, le froid, le vide, le chat perdu, cette fleur et toi.
-Marguerite Duras[49]

With the utmost love and attention the man who walks must study and observe every smallest living thing, be it a child, a dog, a fly, a butterfly, a sparrow, a worm, a flower, a man, a house, a tree, a hedge, a snail, a mouse, a cloud, a hill, a leaf, or no more than a poor discarded scrap of paper on which, perhaps, a dear good child at school has written his first clumsy letters. The highest and the lowest, the most serious and the most hilarious things are to him equally beloved, beautiful, and valuable.
-Robert Walser, *The Walk*[50]

The camera-body-eye event as improvised dance

In an article on recent trends in dance and cultural studies, Naomi M. Jackson writes: "Dance as a lived, kinaesthetic, communal enterprise can disrupt and subvert dominant modes of representation and repression (…). This potential for liberation is particularly argued in relation to contemporary/postmodern dance, which is seen as most consciously engaging in a critique of repressive practices and ideas

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[49] Marguerite Duras as quoted in Michèle Manceaux, *L'amie* (1997), ed. Albin Michel, 142.
[50] Robert Walser, *The Walk*, 28.

regarding gender, race, class, and physical ability."[51] Postmodern dance choreography questions the conventions and history of classical and modern dance in its relation to music, costume, spectatorship, use of space, performer's agency, and body representation. It attempts at undoing conventions and power structures of representation *through* the moving body. I would argue that videodance works do at times—albeit rarely—share this reflexive stance on bodily representation on stage, and thus, could be criticized for a lack of awareness regarding body politics. I would argue that essay film works tend to be more critical regarding such matters in the way they subjectively reflect upon the representation of bodies on screen. Performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan developed a performative practice of writing through which she undoes and complicates embodied power structures *through* her writing process, the same way essay filmmakers reflect *through* their filming and editing processes[52]. I think of my embodied process of writing/composing *step* in a manner close to Phelan's. Through developing a performative mode of filmmaking and dwelling from the essay film, I aim at increasing awareness of bodily representation in the field of videodance, therefore bringing it in closer conversation with the politics of representation in contemporary dance and performance.

When I began working on this project with Maroussia, I had only just begun to experiment with the videographic medium. My background in dance and black and white analog film photography, together with Maroussia's affinities with the moving image, inspired me to develop a research-creation project with her, through

[51] Naomi M. Jackson, "Recent Trends in Dance and Cultural Studies," 243-248.
[52] See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance.*

which I would question and experiment with filmmaking and the dancing body. I developed a work method based on improvisation, with a desire for fluidity in the relational process. Even though we did not shift roles in terms of who was being observed and who was observing through the lens, I believe we were able to make joint decisions about where and when to record Maroussia dancing. It was a process of going from one improvised camera-dance to another in a very organic way. I have learnt a great deal from Maroussia through the process of walking and dancing together in the city, with and without the camera body. Following her in the streets of Paris made me experience the city in a very unique way. She knows it very well, as she has been engaging with it as a pedestrian everyday for most of her life. She carries an embodied memory of Paris, its events and characters. As we would walk together, she would share anecdotes about her own artistic and life experiences, in relation to a specific place or street. We organically shifted from this pedestrian discursive mode to improvising videodance together. Her mode of being while she dances *with* someone or *for* someone while holding a camera is very consistent. She has a very specific movement vocabulary that she uses to express herself in relation to the environment where the camera-dance is occurring at that moment. Her gestures are clearly on the side of performative dance movement, yet her soft and simple way of embodying herself as she dances gives them a subtle pedestrian aspect. Words fail me here, but the main idea I want to convey is that Maroussia's dance for/with the camera is a dance that successfully flirts with the everyday condition of being a pedestrian in the city, yet staying in the realm of dancerly expression.

The process of making *step* is therefore very much based on the embodied experience of movement in relation with the immediate environment. During the filming and editing phases, one of the important ideas that guided the work was the blurred line between everyday movement and dance. By taking dance performance out of the dance studio and theater stage to expose it on the streets alongside other kinds of non-iconic dance movements - such as pedestrian walking, eating or talking - I suggest that everyday movement is always already part of the larger dance of existence: walking on the street can be considered a dance and dancing on the streets can be seen as a pedestrian gesture. The way I move and breathe together with the camera-body-eye and the other bodies in space when I am filming can also be considered a dance where the involved bodies act in resonance with each other. That is, when I am dancing for/with a camera in the city, I am very aware that I am not dancing as I would be dancing if on my own in the studio without a camera at all/with a camera and without a human presence/with a camera but with a human presence. Rather, when I am filming I also dance with my immediate environment and the bodies in presence in an improvisational manner, experiencing the world through the camera-body-eye. As I do so, I tend to engage with what surrounds me—water, objects, colours, signs—in a playful or functional way, as a kid or an animal could do, at the same time as I let movement emerge from the inside-out of my body. I use my body to test textures and shapes around me, and I am aware of the presence of the camera and the body-person holding/looking through that camera.

I think of the experience of looking at the world through the camera as an opening into a world within the world. What I see and experience through the camera-body-eye is comparable to the excitement one might have while looking for a four-leaf clover in a wide grassy meadow. Also, what I see through the screen of the camera is somewhat different from what I would see if I would look at the exact same spot without the camera. The camera-body-eye creates the world that it observes. The human eye alone does it too, but in a different fashion. For example, I tend to be more attracted to the ground when I interact with the camera, because of the weight of holding it with my hands and arms. I like to play the game of following shapes and colours on the road or sidewalk, my feet running after or pushing them forward. Even though my body is gradually adapting to the physical condition that the interaction with the camera fosters, after a while my body reminds me of its own capacities as the arms, shoulders and neck tend to get stiff and numb, the eyes lose focus and the brain starts feeling dizzy. I therefore feel more comfortable interacting with minimal technological equipment while in the experience of filming. A camera equipped with a microphone, a tripod or monopod are all I need to lead my outdoors explorations. The physical constraint of the recording device should therefore not transform or limit the filming body to the point when it can hardly find a sense of responsive mobility to what is happening.

I remember particularly well this moment when I met this very sleepy, quiet duck in Square Barbara in Paris. It had its head tucked under its wing feathers, composing itself into a curious shape that I could not resist filming. I pressed the record button and looked at it through the camera screen for a few minutes, finding

myself in squat position one meter away from it, with a low metal fence delimiting the

space between us. I remained there, careful to breath very quietly as I did not want the

frame to be shake nor to bother or annoy the duck by my presence. I was mesmerized

by that creature's quiet strength. It was regularly half-opening and closing the one eye

I could see, possibly looking into my camera-eye to assure I would stay at a safe

distance. After a few minutes I stopped recording and slowly unfolded my body, as I felt

I did not want to abuse that animal's space. As I stood up and backed away I silently

thanked it for our mutual experience, as I often do when I make sensible encounters.

I conceive of the camera's frame as an expanding field of experience and

perception. When I am filming, I do not feel that there is a limit to what I see through

the lens, particularly no limitations of geometric lines as the camera's display screen

suggests. In the experience of looking at the display screen while filming, I get

absorbed by what the screen reveals and magnifies at the same time as being aware

of what occurs beyond what the camera-body-eye actually records. I lose a sense of

limit between what I see on the screen and what I see and feel around it. Thus, there

is no conceptual distinction for me between an inside and an outside of the frame.

What the camera-body-eye memorizes from the immediate experience is certainly

specific. However, this specificity does not cancel the moving continuum of

perception that I experience as an embodied techno-being dancing the act of

recording. As both a dancer and filmmaker, the practice of making films with a

specific emphasis on movement has been a way for me to deal with the conventions

of filmmaking in a flexible way, as well as negotiate my desire for reflexive and

dynamic embodiment in relation to technology.

A dialogue between still and moving images

The more I re-watch *step*, the more I realize how much of a dialogue between still and moving images it performs, both in the process of capturing and in editing them. As other essay filmmakers like Babette Mangolte, Chantal Akerman, Agnès Varda or Chris Marker, in my practice I have been interested in moving between photography and video making. To my mind, the video image carries the traces of the filmic image composed of flickering series of stills. Even though this is technically no longer happening with digital video, I like to think and remind the viewer about it as I compose and assemble video images.

Technically, the dSLR camera I used is a digital hybrid between an analog photo camera and a video camera. I sometimes played with this technical fact by taking pictures during the act of video recording. In the film, one hears the sound of the camera's shutter before the image freezes for half-a-second and then catches up on the live action. Through a cut in time and visibility, an image was just removed from the video space to enter the photographic realm of eternal stillness. The photonovel sequence when Maroussia walks through an Asian supermarket depicted in a series of photographs could be reckoned with as the opposite questioning of the relation between still and moving images, as here we cannot see what happens before and after the image that we are given to contemplate.

As I was filming, I often felt carried away by the temporal continuum that the video image involves. While the camera-body-eye is recording, it is the feeling of one infinitely stretchable and sliding frame that I experience, particularly when we (the

camera and I) move together in space. When I film a subject rather static in its/their movement I try to keep my body still in order to be with this stillness: straight spine, steady arms, and soft breath. In this situation I have the feeling that I take a photograph of what I observe; for example, in the close-up of the duck half-sleeping with his neck twisted, or the moment when Maroussia eats at the table in a Chinese restaurant, or when she poses in front of the red fountain-statue, or the piles of cardboard boxes and garbage on the streets.

There is also something similar to the act of photographing in the arbitrarily short duration of many of the video shots I made. What often happened as I filmed is that I would press record and stop when I considered the "picture" I was interested in was "complete." I have a collection of ten-second to one-minute sequences in which we see *this one thing* that I felt like capturing in that moment. Other times I entered into more of a continuous dynamic and went for a long improvised cinematic sequence (for example, when I play with the Risk game or film my feet, when I follow Maroussia and Silvio, or when I film Maroussia dancing).

Finally, I also refer to the photographic medium in the way I cut and intertwine the images in editing. The cuts between scenes are often quite abrupt and emphasized through the use of the black frame with the intention to remind the spectator of the false temporal continuity moving images often suggest. In the beginning of the film, there is a sequence where I follow Maroussia dressed in her red trench coat through the maze of Paris' Chinatown. It starts with a photograph of two high twin towers and finishes with a popping video shot one can only see for a second where Maroussia's body -still dressed in her red trench coat- merges with a

red Paris' street water fountain (the specificity of these public fountains is that they feature a circle of dancing women around the water hole, which I could not resist asking Maroussia if she could interact with it). In the sequence, I alternate between still and moving images of various durations, creating something I would call a "rhythmical photo essay" that I dedicate to the memory of Chris Marker -in reference to his iconic photo essay film *La Jetée* and his fascination for Asian cultures and objects that Maroussia also shared.

Improvisation and intuition in reflexive editing

Through this project, I used an improvisational approach to composing or choreographing the moving camera and the moving images. I am fascinated with how things serendipitously fall into place when I am staying in touch with the immediate experience and unfolding of movement. In the world and vocabulary of dance, some speak of *instant composition* to refer to the way dancers constantly make spontaneous movement choices during improvisation.[53] In a similar way, I did not anticipate the final form of the film. The editing technique I developed along this filmic project borrows from both the essay film and videodance montage techniques. During the filming and editing stages, I did not have a clear idea about how it should be structured. Rather, I chose to edit the audio-visual fragments I had recollected on through filming in a reflexive, associative and intuitive way, thus gradually composing what would become a reflexive filmic collage echoing the essay

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[53] For instance, see Bettina Neuhaus' and Ruth Zaporah's (Action Theater) approaches to composing improvised movement in space:
http://www.bettinaneuhaus.com/english/teacher-instant.html
http://www.actiontheater.com

film editing technique but also choreographic practices. In her recent book entitled *The choreographic*, Jenn Joy argues for a transversal and expanded critical understanding of choreography:

> [Here] the choreographic takes on critical force. Dance extends beyond the limits of performance into the social to "expose both a political specificity and an entire political horizon" (Martin 2008, 14)" (…) My conception of the choreographic follows Martin's call situating the gestures of choreography within a discursive framework that writes against the traps of static history and disappearance. (22-23)

She continues by quoting Una Bauer about her discussion of contemporary choreographer Jérôme Bel's work, who suggests that "choreography is not constructed through the successful stages of particular representations, or through the impossibility of their staging (and thus, through the success at staging abstract movement) but through the movement of embodied thought which refuses to fix itself in particular recognizable types of oppositional discourses, or oppositional response structures (Bauer 2008, 41)."[54] This last idea resonates particularly well with the improvisational work process I followed through this project, for I meant to create a work that would reflect *through the embodied making process* upon different paradigms and categories in a way that would foster hybridity and transformation, rather than mere critical opposition. It was my intention to stay as close as possible to my immediate embodied experience in both activities and phases. I believe the activity of choreographing moving images into a timeline

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[54] Joy, 23.

through a screen requires a bodily sense of rhythm and space. In her book on videodance montage technique *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit*, Karen Pearlman writes:

> Intuition in editing is a mode of thinking that includes creativity, expert judgment, sensitivity, and "unreflective execution of intricate skilled performance". It also includes activation of implicit learning, which is learning acquired through nonconscious means. Intuition in editing is not only acquired through implicit learning, as we can also sensitize ourselves to the rhythms of the world and of the body to expand and enhance our intuitions about cutting rhythms. (32)

How are elements moving through the frame? How and from where are they "entering" and "exiting" the frame? Are the camera and what it records moving slow or fast, in contrast or together? How long should a sequence be? As an example from *step*, I would like to analyze the sequence in which we encounter the two construction workers on the street, Maroussia, Silvio and I. As often in the film, the sequence starts with Maroussia (and Silvio, in this case) walking a few meters ahead of my camera-body-eye. The kind of "camera dance walk" that we perform together has its own implicit codes that developed alongside the process of filming together while walking. In relation to Maroussia's walking body, my camera-body-eye is a rather diligent one that alternates between distance and proximity according to the immediate dynamic between us: when Maroussia says or shows something, the camera-body-eye gets closer and changes angles (from back to profile, but never front as I let Maroussia lead our bodies in space) and levels to reveal what or whom

Maroussia interacts with (in this sequence, the three little porcelain cats in a vitrine as well as the two construction workers). Therefore, my camera-body-eye is quite active as I constantly react to -and most of the time follow- what Maroussia initiates, and also talk to her and Silvio (and the workers in this situation) while I film. Finally, this rather long sequence (about 4-minutes) was not cut at any point in editing. As I selected this specific shot to be featured in the film, it appeared as obvious to me that I should preserve the full integrity of this *plan-séquence* as it is a great example of the embodied reflexive and intersubjective filming that I mean through the camera-body-eye. I think in particular about the last part of the sequence, whenI walk more or less in between Maroussia and Silvio and film them consecutively as we talk until I let them move forward without me; then I internalize my camera-body-eye's gaze by fixing it on the sidewalk while I speak aloud to myself, repeating the words we just exchanged with Silvio.

How are sound and movement composed together? Is the sound occurring with the movement? Is it supporting it or contrasting it? As mentioned previously, I chose to mostly keep the diegetic sound together with the image in *step*, with the idea of creating a reliable filmic account of the urban environment and soundscape. I dissociated and overlapped a sound with another image only once, as a reminder of the performative relation between sound and image in film (when Maroussia climbs a mechanical staircase for the second time, it is the sound of the Paris metro that we hear). Also, in the central scene when Maroussia dances in front of a vivid graffiti wall, we first see the scene with the diegetic sound and then we see it a second time overlapped with a musical score. By doing this, I aimed at reflecting upon the

relationship between dance and music in screendance choreography. In line with the essay film concerns, videodance often questions the relation between sound and movement in the sound-image. Through *step*, I was myself interested in challenging rhythmical conventions of movement and sound matching in dance film, as well as the classic expectation that a dance *requires* a composed musical score.

This improvisational intuitive approach to editing was coupled with an impulse to create various thematic collections of images*.* Throughout the editing phase, I have often wondered how Marker and Varda would organize their footage before starting to edit their video works, and how they would proceed to assemble the fragments they had accumulated into a timeline. I organized the footage into different categories that organically emerged out of the process of filming, and then through studying the material I had accumulated. During filming, it quickly became clear to me that I was interested in recording the movement of my feet and hands, but also in making the environment around me dance through the movement of the camera – for example, the image of the colour-mosaic backstreet walls when I spin on myself and then I spin again, making the aerial electric cables rotate upon the blue sky's background. There is also the central collection of images of Maroussia performing a dance for me and the camera, as well as the animals and abandoned objects categories. I started playing with sequences from these categories in the editing timeline, collaging and refining connections between them in the process. These connections could, for example, concern themselves with contrasting or matching shapes, or playing with (dis)continuity in movement, time and narration.

Sometimes I chose to accumulate images from a same category, like the street garbage, or the final section of the film when we only see Maroussia dance. With regards to the way images were edited together to form *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov explains that:

> The film is only the sum of the facts recorded on film, or, if you like, not merely the sum, but the product, a "higher mathematics" of facts. Each item or each factor is a separate little document. The documents have been joined with one another so that, on the one hand, the film would consist only of those linkages between signifying pieces that coincide with the visual linkages and so that, on the other hand, these linkages would not require intertitles; the final sum of all these linkages represents, therefore, an organic whole." (84)

I believe the way images are assembled in *step* echoes this approach of the filmic assemblage as an "organic whole" linking "separate little documents" or "signifying pieces," for each featured shot or "scene" has its own semio-aesthetic integrity (also reinforced by the radical cuts between shots), yet is connected to the sequence before and after in such a way that a sense of flow and continuity is being conveyed. Through this accumulative, associative and intuitive approach to audiovisual montage with a specific awareness for rhythm and movement, I could compose the *videodance essay* assemblage that constitutes *step*.

Conclusion

<u>Life of the film: screening *step*</u>

I would like to conclude this thesis with an account of what has happened with the film since completion. I edited *step* within a couple weeks in the summer of 2015, approximately one year after I finished recording most of the images that compose the film. I needed that time to digest the experience that had happened, and thus felt the need not to look at the images for some time. I was also feeling challenged in my research-creation making process by the complexities of academic guidelines. In the end, I kept the editing phase separate from theoretical research and writing, for I needed to dive fully into the activity of filmic montage in order to find a dynamic and open approach to it – the same way as I had previously dedicated my time and energy exclusively to the activity of videodance filming in the previous stage of the process. Research and writing always happened *in between* active periods of filmmaking in the context of this research-creation project.

Until now, the film has been distributed to friends and colleagues through private online streaming, and was publicly screened three times in very different contexts. The premiere took place in one of the Montreal Mile End neighbourhood dance studios called Elan d'Amérique, mostly with friends and colleagues. *step* was screened a second time in Berlin, also in a dance studio, but in the context of the student festival of the institution where I have been studying dance choreography over the last year. The audience was composed of a mix of well-known and lesser known faces that time. I think it is very relevant for *step* to be screened in a dance

context, especially a dance studio which contains strong referentiality to embodied moving work processes, and spectators can position and move their bodies more freely in space as they experience the film – sitting on a chair or on a cushion on the floor, lying down or standing. The third screening took place in Leizpig in a small independent cinema, Cineding. I was invited to present the film in the context of a performance festival that was taking place in the city that same weekend. All three screenings were followed by an informal conversation between the audience and me. Unfortunately, Maroussia could not attend any of them – a screening in Paris would be ideal to be able to present the work together. The three conversations involved quite precise questions from the audience about my filming process and editing choices.

As I reflect upon the entire process, I understand that those questions were encouraged and framed by my self-positioning regarding my work in front of an audience. Because this project was developed in the framework of an academic research-creation degree, I somehow felt the urge to *contextualize*, *justify* and *defend* my artistic process and choices. Becoming aware that this very phenomenon was happening between me and the people witnessing the work encouraged me to gradually let go of this attitude along new iterations of the film screening. However, I also realized through screening *step* that as a *videodance essay*, it is actually relevant for the spectators to be in co-presence with my discursive moving body before watching the film. From the feedback I received, it seemed most spectators could find more interest in the experience of watching when they had encountered me in a previous circumstance. I believe my embodied authorial presence in *step* is

strongly felt by the viewer, and that the portrait therefore seems more complete when the author-dancer's physical and discursive body gets revealed.

A *videodance essay*

This understanding reinforces my conceptualizing of *videodance essay* filmmaking as an embodied moving practice where the physical body of the maker is fully involved in the act of filming and editing and is therefore tightly related to the audiovisual filmic object. My friendship with Maroussia combined with my interests and practices in dance improvisation and video making unfolded into a research-creation process through which I refined my conceptual approach to videodance. I qualify the relationship between the human body-person filming (holding the camera) and the camera-body as the *camera-body-eye*. The camera-body-eye is a feminist cyborg theory informed by the merging of technology and the human body where the boundaries between the two bodies cannot be clearly drawn. As I holding the camera, I am uncertain where my body ends and the camera's body begins. I suggest the word "body" to be added to the previously formulated concepts of "cine-eye" or "camera-eye" as I wish to emphasize the importance of embodiment in my approach to videodance making.

Videodance performance happens between the camera-body-eye and other human and non-human bodies in space. Similar to the way I generally conceive of dance as movement, I conceive of videodance as an act of filming that involves a specific awareness for physical movement and visual composition: movement of the camera-body-eye, movement of the other bodies in space and movement of visual

elements in the frame and on screen in the editing phase. I borrow this emphasis on visual movement and the related haptic effect it produces for the viewer from the videodance genre. I combine this relational, embodied and sensorial approach to filmmaking with the essay film reflexive approach to the filmmaker's authorial subjectivity in the act of filming and editing. During filming and editing the sound-images, I consistently interrogated my own subjective authorial position, particularly in relation to Maroussia as the main human subject mediated through the camera-body-eye. Through the making of *step* and my writing process, I gradually fleshed out my relational intersubjective approach with what I call a *videodance essay*: a hybrid work process and filmic object that borrows from both videodance and the essay film genres to compose a new proposition with specific technical features and epistemological enquiries.

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