



University of Brighton

BILLY COWIE AND GABRIELA ALCOFRA

RETRATOS NÚMERO 2

Stillness, motion and the boundaries between
fine art portraiture and filmed dance

RESEARCH OUTPUT



Retratos Número 2

Film available at
<https://youtu.be/lnX9saEFwS4>

'Retratos Número 2' [Portraits Number Two] (2019) is a three-minute black and white dance film made by Billy Cowie in collaboration with the Brazilian artist Gabriela Alcofra. It investigates the possibility of shared territory between fine art portraiture and dance.

The research experiments with time and the effects of incremental head movement, and with the meaning generated by creative distortion and visual interpretation.

Using a fixed camera focused solely on the head of the dancer, Cowie and Alcofra explored the ways in which the face fused with other perceived shapes during barely perceptible movement. The dancer's head was lit by a projected photograph, the image of a face with hand over mouth chosen for the final film from a number of different photographs considered.

The piece is accompanied by a specially made music score using a process of granular synthesis. For this, an existing piece of music is fragmented into tiny parts, 'grains', and the particles are reassembled. The sense of the portrait being a sum of the granular parts is extended through this, while the counterpoint sense of a generic whole is given through the presentation of the film as a single take with no edits.

Retratos Número 2



Retratos Número 2. Film stills

Still taken from beginning, middle and end, showing gradual changes of head position from 45 to 90 degrees and then with elevation

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



Retratos Número 2. Film still 2:58
Detail showing elevated head

In 'Retratos Número 2', Cowie and Alcofra ask where the visual expectations of a portrait tradition might be challenged by the filmed results of a choreographed head movement.

At the same time they consider the relationship and intersection of a number of other potentially related portrait practices across art, dance, photography and film. This specifically includes the link between dance for camera and early cinematographic work, particularly in the meaning attributed to slow movement, incremental change and the sense of distorted time and space when delivered through a two-dimensional screen.

The work helped articulate, and was in turn informed by, three overarching questions:

1. What can we understand about the boundary between the traditions of portraiture and a filmic portrayal of the human face?
2. Do visual references to portraiture offer new ways of conceptualising dance and dance for camera?
3. Can the minimal practices of early experimental film revise and reinvigorate the ways in which dance is recognised as an artwork?

RESEARCH CONTEXT



Internationally recognised as an experimental choreographer for screendance and live performance, Cowie's research interrogates form and traditions, testing its intersections with other art forms through experimental fusion.

In 'Retratos Número 2', Cowie built upon his work in the continued understanding of screendance and the limits to which it can be taken (Aggis and Cowie, 2006). He and Alcofra sought to take the practice of dance to a rarely-considered extreme, with focus upon incremental head movement, challenging the perceived divisions between dance and painted or photographic portraiture as artforms.

A study of the effects, meanings and motivations for distortion in the works of Francis Bacon (Ishizu and Zeki, 2013; Quigley and Elliot, 2014) led to experiments aiming to create a series of dance pieces that had the intensity of fine art painted portraits.



In order to achieve this the movement needed to be extremely spare and unrelated to conventional contemporary dance practice. A series of minimal moves were developed by Cowie and Alcofra, drawing inspiration from film-maker Maya Deren's experimental work, 'Ritual in Transfigured Time' (1946), in particular Deren's use of ritual and the extended concept of dance, together with the focus on the ways that meaning can be generated from the smallest movements: 'the quality of movement is not merely a decorative factor; it is the meaning itself of the movement' (Deren, 1946).

Cowie and Alcofra also returned to very early dance film taken by the Thomas Edison Company, for example 'Carmencita' (1894), which employed fixed camera and had no subsequent editing, capturing directly and in real time routines which had been previously learnt for performance.



The intention was to push the boundaries of screendance to areas outside the canon. Previous films of Alcofra and Cowie, for example their [Tango Brasileiro](#) (2014), share elements of this work - filmed in black and white with minimal movement and a montage with previous visual work, but 'Retratos Número 2' experiments with much more minimal movements of the head while the body remains motionless.

(top) **Self-Portrait (1971)**
Francis Bacon, Centre Pompidou, Paris

(centre) **Still from 'Ritual in Transfigured Time' (1946)**
Maya Deren

(bottom) **Still from 'Carmencita' (1894)**
Thomas Edison Company

RESEARCH PROCESS

Experimenting with ways in which the Bacon portraits achieved their quality of intensity, Cowie and Alcofra sought to limit the dancer's movement, creating pressure on the sense of space and activity through the duration of the work.

The movements of the dancer were limited to only those of the head, keeping the body as close to motionless as possible.

Using the camera frame to mimic the composition of a facial portrait, the limitation of movement was made more minimal by imposing restrictions on the choreographic options. By the stage of making the final film, the experiments had led to a set of only three motions:

1. slight horizontal turn of the head
2. opening of eyes and change of gaze
3. a final vertical raising of the head.

It was a conscious decision in the experiment to eschew conventions of contemporary film-making used throughout screen dance practices, for example, moving camera, editing, zoom, jump cuts. Key to the aim of intensity, and referencing the ways in which Bacon created his portraiture, Cowie and Alcofra investigated the characteristics of earlier filmed dance, including some of the earliest from the Thomas Edison Company: fixed camera in simple lighting conditions on dark backgrounds, a single, unedited take.

Cowie and Alcofra extended this reference to the earliest film, a point in history at which moving image was perceived as an extension of other artistic genres, the still image and the theatrical performance. They experimented towards making the visual body of the work (not including the sound or the title and credit sequences) in such a way that mimicked the techniques used 120 years ago and, as far as possible with digital video and projection, researched and worked within the constraints of early screendance pioneers.

In selecting the images that were to be projected onto the dancer's face, Cowie considered and experimented with a large number of possibilities, recognising visual references that added to the intensity experienced through both the Bacon portraits and the early film examples. He found that

the projection of hands brought the necessary effect, bringing otherwise unseen elements of the whole body into the 'portrait' frame. Fingers also provided the balance of abstraction against recognisability when overlaid across the dancer's face.

The experimentation with projected imagery allowed Cowie and Alcofra to devise sets of movements that complemented the angles of the photographs and produced the necessary distorted features that reflected Bacon's portraits and their origins in paint.

The research also sought to test the ways in which ambiguity in the viewer's mind might add to the intensity associated with abstracted features in expressive portraiture. That ambiguity was introduced at several levels: is this portraiture, is it dance? Which features are the moving face and which are the projected image? Using a visual uncertainty common to optical illusions within a closely framed space, the research tested the boundaries at which portraiture might move towards dance and vice versa.

As the movements were extremely precise and the dancer was unaware of the relationship between their face and the projected images, a detailed method of choreographing with live verbal instructions had to be devised.

The performance was a single take as no editing of the film was undertaken, and the accidents of these techniques were left in the finished work, for example, where visual strobing effects appeared due to the low light levels and interference between the frequencies of the equipment. This introduced both a parallel to the uncertainty associated with application of paint and the light spots that characterise early film.

Cowie and Alcofra worked collaboratively, with Cowie creating the music score and Alcofra performing the actions, but the choreography and direction were jointly devised by both. The collaboration worked by a series of experiments, viewing, evaluation and joint decision-making.

RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Insights were gained as to: the extension of screendance into territories traditionally occupied by static portraiture; the ways in which dance as an art form responds to and engages with static fine art forms; and, in technical and artistic terms, the challenges of fusing visual art with filmed dance.

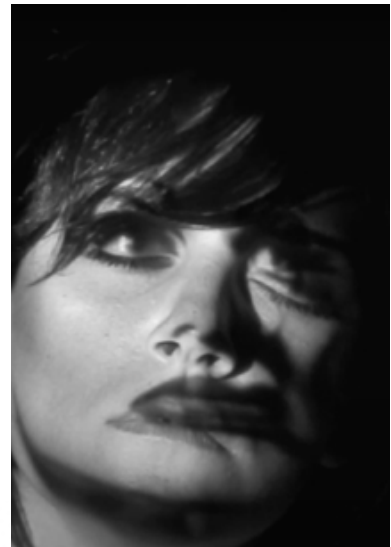
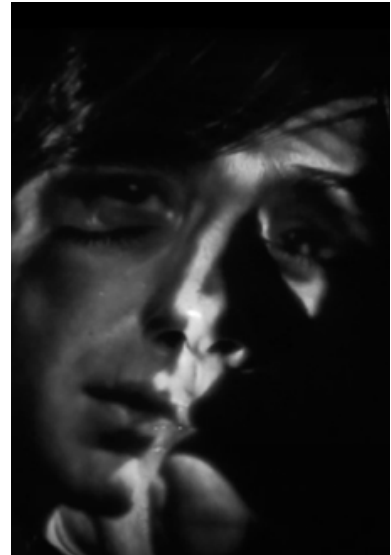
This research reinforces some of Cowie's previous insights into the use of fixed camera in choreographic techniques (Aggiss and Cowie, 2006). These involve the interplay of directorial and choreographic roles and the relationship with the camera in the development of contexts that simulate live dance, as developed here from reflection on the Edison examples. By eschewing conventional filmic techniques, the research emphasised how the visual qualities of the work might be enhanced.

'Retratos Número 2' helps to increase understanding of where there might be synthesis between dance and visual art, breaking with the tendency to approach the issue with comparatively conventional dance movements and, for example, staging within art galleries. By re-imagining dance choreography, and determining its equivalence to a specific style and example of twentieth-century portraiture, Cowie and Alcofra documented the ways in which this experimentally extreme work might offer more widely applicable, alternative perspectives on the fusion of art forms. It was interesting for the researchers to note that the resulting film was more readily accepted at experimental film festival outlets than it was at those for experimental dance, suggesting that a boundary had been transgressed and that the dance community were more cautious as to its validity in positively challenging their practices.

Through this work and their earlier collaboration 'Tango Brasileiro' (2014), Cowie and Alcofra argue that dance should encompass a wide range of structured movement and that the inclusion of very subtle movements enhances and interrogates the medium. In 'Retratos Número 2' for example, the eyes are carefully choreographed, benefiting from the very close camera work.

As an experiment in visual art, the research demonstrates the ability of dance to 'animate' visual work by the application of screendance techniques without inadvertently moving into the territory of film. Presentation possibilities in galleries such as looping installations were discussed as representing a useful bridge between the two worlds.

The practicalities of making dance films with modern equipment in a similar manner to the techniques of early experimental film brought significant advantages to this research method, allowing the inherent simplicity of the film production to enhance other aspects of the investigation, particularly the stylised and abstracted human movement at the heart of the work, but also adding parallels to the long-standing tradition surrounding paint. In view of the preponderance of contemporary, digitally assisted film-making techniques, the research is disseminated in the hope of encouraging further experimentation with early technologies for screendance.



Photographic 'portrait sketches' with projection made during the early experimentation towards Retratos Número 2

DISSEMINATION

The work was premiered on 28 September 2019 at the Darkroom Festival in Deptford Cinema.

It has also been shown at

- Emerge Microcinema, Cleveland, 28 September 2019.
- Fiver Festival, Madrid, 3 October 2019. <http://www.fiverdance.com/proyecciones/>

And was selected for

- Master of Art Film Festival (2020), Bulgaria.
- Golden Ger Film Festival 2020, Mongolia.

Film available at: <https://youtu.be/lnX9saEFwS4>

REFERENCES

Aggiss, L. and Cowie, B. with Bramley, I. (2006) *Anarchic Dance*. London: Routledge.

Deren, M. (1946) 'Ritual in Transfigured Time' <https://expcinema.org/site/en/videos/maya-deren-ritual-transfigured-time-1946> (Accessed November 2020)

Edison, T. (1894) 'Carmencita' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-15jwb1ZTMA> (Accessed November 2020)

Ficacci, L. (2015) *Bacon*. Cologne: Taschen.

Ishizu, T. and Zeki, S. (2013) 'The "Visual Shock" of Francis Bacon: An essay in neuroesthetics'. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00850/full> (Accessed November 2020)

Quigley, S. and Elliot, M. A. (2014) 'Snarling into the Abyss: An analytical account of the psychological meaning of distortion in Francis Bacon's (1909 - 1992) portraiture'. *PsyArt*, 18: 91-96. <http://journal.psyart.org/article/snarling-into-the-abyss-an-analytical-account-of-the-psychological-meaning-of-distortion-in-francis-bacons-1909-1992-portraiture/> (Accessed November 2020)

(overleaf)
Retratos Número 2. Film still 2:41
Detail showing ambiguity of facial
features in the work

Retratos Número 2

