The Mirror of Performance: Kinaesthetics, Subjectivity, and the Body in Film, Television, and Virtual Worlds

by LORI LANDAY

> But I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it.
> —Maurice Merleau-Ponty[1]

O*ur Dancing Daughters* (Harry Beaumont, 1928) opens with a shot of an art-deco gold statuette of a dancing woman frozen midkick, her elbows jutting and her hair swinging. Dissolve to a pair of shoes in front of a three-way mirror. Then, another dissolve adds a woman's feet and legs. They begin to dance, fast, and soon we see that they belong to Diana (Joan Crawford), and she and we watch her dance into her clothes. In the mirror images she shares with the spectator, and in her exuberant dance, which she will not pause even to slip into her modern step-in underwear, Diana embodies a modern kinetic aesthetic—a kinaesthetic—of an active ludic femininity that encourages viewers to imagine and emulate a playful subjectivity based on the lived, bodily experience of the dances and movement shared by both flapper spectators and flapper actresses.[2]

Joan Crawford's performance in the mirror reveals the character's sense of self as a fusion of being visible and kinetic. Diana *is* her body, and it is a moving body; she knows and experiences the world through its movement, even in the private moment of dressing in the mirror. Yet this moment it is not private but, rather, shared by the spectator, who is also herself engaged in the gaze at Diana's performance of herself for herself. The definition of "performance" is contested by Performance

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1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 173.

2 Focusing on the comic and kinetic appeal of silent films with flapper heroines who, through dance and movement, embody and perform a new mode of femininity based on a modern aesthetic of movement illuminates how seeing and being seen and how deliberate uses of the body functioned in Jazz Age culture. This does not negate obvious Lacanian interpretations of Diana's mirror dance as a narcissistic projection of desire to be satisfied by commodification, but it seeks to add other insights. See Lori Landay, "The Flapper Film: Comedy, Dance, and Jazz Age Kinaesthetics," in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 221–248.

Studies scholars, but common ground emerges around the idea that performance, whether on stage, before a camera, or in everyday life, is an action done *for* someone, even if that person is the performer him- or herself. And so there is a doubling, a sense of an Other, either in the actor taking on a character or in the idea of performance for an audience.[3] Vivian Sobchack eloquently catches the doublings of performance and meaning for the film spectator from a phenomenological perspective:

> Watching a film is both a direct and mediated experience of direct experience as mediation. We both perceive a world *within* the immediate experience of an "other" and *without* it, as immediate experience mediated by an "other." Watching a film we can see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as see the moved. As viewers, not only do we spontaneously and invisibly perform these existential acts directly for and as ourselves in relation *to* the film before us, but these same acts are coterminously given to us *as* the film, as mediating acts of perception-cum-expression we take up and *invisibly perform* by appropriating and incorporating them into our own existential performance; we watch them as a *visible performance* distinguishable from, yet included in, our own.[4]

But there is even more to the mirror of Crawford's dance performance; in the brain of the spectator, the actions she sees on the screen are also "mirrored" by mirror neurons, brain cells that activate when a primate does an action but also when a primate observes an action.[5] There is a reason performances of dance, movement, sport, action, kung fu—whether on the screen or live—are so engaging to watch, especially for those who have done that action themselves: "Your mirror neuron system becomes more active the more expert you are at an observed skill. . . . Male ballet dancers have a weaker mirror response when they watch videotapes of moves typically made by female dancers, even though both sexes train together. The same goes for ballerinas watching male ballet movements. The actions you mirror most strongly are the ones you know best."[6] If one has not performed the specific action, mirror neurons still fire, in a general way related to your experience of balance, or running and jumping, but in a less intense way than the mirror neurons of an expert, and there are specific

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3 For good overviews, see Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3–5; and Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 28–51.

4 Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 10–11. Original emphasis.

5 There is a considerable body of research and popular writing about mirror neurons, much of which focuses on how they function in empathy and social interactions. See, for example, Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect with Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008); Dylan D. Wagner, Sonya Dal Cin, James D. Sargent, William M. Kelley, and Todd F. Heatherton, "Spontaneous Action Representation in Smokers When Watching Movie Characters Smoke," *Journal of Neuroscience* 31, no. 3 (January 19, 2011): 894–898; and Ivana Konvalinka, Dimitris Xygalatas, Joseph Bulbulia, Uffe Schjødt, Else-Marie Jegindø, Sebastian Wallot, Guy Van Orden, and Andreas Roepstorff, "Synchronized Arousal between Performers and Related Spectators in a Fire-Walking Ritual," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in the United States of America* 108, no. 20 (May 2, 2011): 8514–8519.

6 Sandra Blakeslee and Matthew Blakeslee, *The Body Has a Mind of Its Own: How Body Maps in Your Brain Help You Do (Almost) Everything Better* (New York: Random House, 2008), 169.

kinds of mirror neurons that prevent you from actually doing the action you see and that distinguish between actions of the self and actions of others. Neuroscientists are also interested in how mirror neurons function in empathy to reflect "an experience-based, pre-reflective, and automatic form of understanding of other minds. . . . The interdependence between self and other that mirror neurons allow shapes the social interactions between people, where the concrete encounter between self and other becomes the shared existential meaning that connects them deeply."[7]

Mirror neuron research can shed light on how subjectivity and intersubjectivity can be created through spectatorship of performance, especially of movement. The intertwined pleasures of glances and dances in the flapper film offered flapper spectators—who had performed the same dances as the actresses, and who refined their dancing, comportment, gesture, and movement by mirroring the actresses' performances—a kinaesthetic of empowered, embodied femininity and a particularly active subjective identification with the flapper actresses. As the flapper spectator gazes at Diana, she is nevertheless in her own body, and as she watches Diana materialize on the screen, dancing, the dance is in the spectator's body, too. As Merleau-Ponty asserted, "Between my consciousness and my body as I experience it, between this phenomenal body of mine and that of another as I see it from the outside, there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as the completion of the system. The other can be evident to me because I am not transparent for myself, and because my subjectivity draws its body in its wake."[8] With the dissemination of the movies at this time in modern American culture, a new aesthetic based on the body is indeed created and reinscribed through movement and dance. The flapper spectator's mirrored kino-body—that interior, neurological, not physical but still embodied reaction, so connected to emotions and empathy—dances along with Diana, with Joan Crawford.

Skip ahead to 1952. In front of another mirror, in a ballet studio, tutu-clad Lucy Ricardo finds herself hilariously out of her element in ballet class. Watching Lucille Ball's brilliant performance in "The Ballet" (*I Love Lucy*; CBS, 1951–1957), we see that the female dancing body as a site of kinaesthetic femininity running counter to tradition is not limited to Jazz Age silent-film flappers. The strict ballet mistress is counting out a *battement tendu* exercise, and Lucy's facial expressions change as her body catches the rhythm. Lucy shifts into the Charleston, a confident smile and look of joy spreading across her face as her knees knock and long legs kick out front and back. The disruption of the classical feminine performance—ballet—by the 1920s dance demonstrates Ball's brilliant physical comedy. To be sure, this is an example of what Patricia Mellencamp identifies as one of Lucy's schemes that "*narratively* failed, with the result that she was held, often gratefully, to domesticity," yet "*performatively* they succeeded."[9] The significance, though, lies not so much in the success or failure

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7 Iacoboni, Mirroring People, 265.

8 Merleau-Ponty, Phenonemology of Perception, 410.

9 Patricia Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy," in Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 88. See also Alexander Doty, "The Cabinet of Lucy Ricardo: Lucille Ball's Star Image," Cinema Journal 29, no. 4 (1990): 3–22.

but in Ball's substitution of the (comic) shadow side of "good" feminine comportment and behavior.

Ball's comedic use of dance subverts 1950s constructs of domesticity and femininity.[10] To bring the Charleston into a comic bisociation with ballet is to reject ballet's defiance of gravity, the impression that the ballerina is lighter than air, and to bring the female body crashing down into the modern world; when Lucy's legs get caught in the ballet barre later in the scene, her body is all angles, caught by gravity. The writer of a *Life* magazine article titled "Beauty into Buffoon" marveled at her willingness to look ugly, move awkwardly, and take a pie in the face for a laugh, and many popular-press articles echoed that sentiment.[11] Ball's use of her body, whether her dancer's body performing counter to expectation throughout the series or her clever use of a nearby coffee table to hoist her actually pregnant body out of a chair to answer a ringing phone in the 1953 *I Love Lucy* episode "Ricky Has Labor Pains,"[12] extends the flapper's performance of dance on the cinema screen into the television in the home. With the use of close-ups on television pioneered by cinematographer Karl Freund (yes, *that* Karl Freund) and editors Dann Cahn and Bud Molin, Ball combined a body-based performance with a comedic mime's facial expressions and witty scripts often based on one of the most successful radio sitcoms of the 1940s, *My Favorite Husband* (CBS, 1948–1951). The immediacy of the new medium, broadcast into the home, representing a marriage and domestic life, a feedback loop of representation and domesticity, no matter how comically distorted, certainly encouraged viewer identification. As hard as it may be to imagine, in light of the crazy situations in which Lucy was placed, the writers based the plots in everyday life: "We were looking for a situation where Lucy's and Ricky's problems and differences of opinion were the same ones that most of our audience had encountered. We called it 'holding up the mirror.'"[13] And that mirror resonated not only with the setup but also with Lucille Ball's embodiment of the woman who would rather do the Charleston than ballet; who used her pregnant body for comedy at a time when saying the word "pregnant" on television was deemed inappropriate; and whose comic performance of a lived, embodied, imperfect femininity performed the cultural work of the female trickster in the most popular story cycle of its time. A dancer who could have tendued until the cows came home, Lucille Ball often performed a kinaesthetic of movement and release that ran counter to Cold War containment, thus displaying a ludic aesthetic that bristled bodily and rhythmically against the dominant hegemonic ideals, comportment, and movement of domestic femininity.

If it is true that we make sense of the world through our bodies, and that what we see performed affects us, then digital and virtual technologies bring us new possibilities

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10 Landay, *I Love Lucy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010); Landay, "*I Love Lucy*, Television, and Gender in Postwar Domestic Ideology," in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*, ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 87–97; Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

11 "Beauty into Buffoon," *Life*, Feburary 18, 1952, 93–97.

12 Landay, *I Love Lucy*, 73.

13 Jess Oppenheimer, with Gregg Oppenheimer, *Laughs, Luck, and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 180.

for the kinaesthetics of performance and spectatorship. Skip ahead into the following century, to the filming of *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009). Actor Sam Worthington is not in costume or makeup, or even on a film set as we would recognize it; he is ensconced in a skintight bodysuit covered in reflective markers, the positions of which will be tracked by more than a hundred digital cameras around the "volume," the motion-capture stage. This is not simply motion capture but, rather, what Cameron calls "performance capture," with a camera mounted on the actor's head to capture the movement of eyes and face.[14] Performance capture calls for a new kind of performance, acting, and filming. The director can be right next to the actors but will not show up as data if he or she is not wearing the sensors, and there are no lighting setups, costumes, or makeup. Once the many cameras are in place, blocking, acting, and minimal props that stand in for what will be created by the computer-generated image (CGI) modelers and world builders are all that is needed. The action is not a dance performance, but footage of action sequences being filmed this way resembles an abstracted performance of movement more than narrative film as we have come to know it. Performance capture takes the *scène* out of mise-en-scène and relocates it to the computer. The actors must perform as if in an imagined mirror, one that will be realized digitally. This transforms acting and directing as profoundly as the development of film studio production challenged stage performance a hundred years ago. Steven Spielberg, who used the technology for *The Adventures of Tintin*, said, "I like to think of it as digital makeup, not augmented animation. . . . Motion capture brings the director back to a kind of intimacy that actors and directors only know when they're working in live theater."[15]

If performance capture takes away so much of the materiality of mise-en-scène, what is left is acting, and even that is augmented significantly by animators. The director minimizes the live-action portion of filmmaking and shunts the rest into an environment less constrained by physics, material cost, building costs, locations, you name it (although costs of the digital process itself are still extremely high). Even in what the spectator does not see, postmodern performance "vacillates between presence and absence, between displacement and reinstatement," to quote the theorist Nick Kaye,[16] but that is a central aspect of the performance of the body in *Avatar*, which mirrors the spectator's experiences of presence and absence in our time of telepresence, telecommunication, teleaction—the huge ten-foot-tall Na'vi bodies perform physical feats that the injured, human Jake cannot. The technology shown in the film, through which characters inhabit their avatars, actualizes what is virtual and imagined for the spectator, whether in games or virtual worlds or in watching the film. When Jake runs as his avatar, when he experiences what his human body cannot, the spectator runs with him, with his Na'vi body, a body that was never actually there.

14 To see the performance-capture rig demonstrated, with commentary by Cameron, see *Discovery News*, "*Avatar*: Motion Capture Mirrors Emotion," December 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wK1Ixr-UmM. On whether performance capture is worthy of Academy Award consideration, and for Screen Actors Guild responses to performance capture, see Rachel Abramowitz, "'*Avatar*'s' Animated Acting," *Los Angeles Times*, February 18, 2010.

15 Abramowitz, "'*Avatar*'s' Animated Acting."

16 Nick Kaye, *Postmodernism and Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 9.

What new relationships between performance and spectatorship, between the visible and invisible, arise from bodies that are not actually there?[17] Spectators are aware of the loss of indexicality (whether they know that term or not) due to the massive publicity around the digital production process; they know that what they are seeing was never actually there, and they probably play video games and have experiences that have something in common both with the performance process of *Avatar* and with the main character Jake's experience of having an avatar. Does it matter that the bodies we see in *Avatar* are not indexical? Consider Vivian Sobchack's comments:

> The pleasures of CGI are not about the gravity of flesh and blood. The same things are not at stake in terms of the illusion, but it goes deeper. There's some indexicality that counts that CGI can't achieve—like a real sense of death, of being hurt, of flesh being torn. So the pleasures of the digital are different. The kind of transcendent effects I think digital simulation can achieve are different from the pleasures and terrors that emerge in the presence of analog/indexical cinema.[18]

What makes that difference, for spectators? The knowledge that what they see is "real"? An aura of the real that somehow reveals itself? What if CGI becomes so photorealistic that you can't tell it's CGI? (And hasn't it already achieved this?) I might not agree with every part of what Sobchack says here, but I concur that the pleasures of the digital are about transcending gravity, about bodies exceeding their limits. That is why filmmakers who want to make whole worlds are so jazzed about performance capture, about shifting material elements of production to the computer but retaining actors for what they are good for: emotion, empathy. They don't want lifeless eyes or mechanical movement in their characters while the world around them vibrates with detail actualized from the imagination. We do not simply want a mirror of verisimilitude; we want the mirror neurons to fire.

Of course, the bodies of today's spectators are not the same as the ones who watched the indexical flapper films. The technology in which we live, in which our bodies are situated, by which we augment them, through which we experience them in all aspects of performance, is changing, and is changing us, just as the film camera, then television and other media changed the spectators of their times. As Ralf Remshardt argues, "Today, even without the element of the digital, the phenomenal body in the act of performance signals its own phenomenality, and so becomes

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17 Many scholars are exploring this question. See Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008); Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance, and Film*, trans. David Williams (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Ralf Remshardt, "Beyond Performance Studies: Mediated Performance and the Posthuman," *Culture, Language and Representation* 6 (2008): 47–64. See also Don Idhe, *Bodies in Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Henrik Smed Nielsen, "The Computer Game as a Somatic Experience," *Eludamos* 4, no. 1 (2010): 25–40; Ingrid Richardson, "Faces, Interfaces, Screens: Relational Ontologies of Framing, Attention and Distraction," *Transformations* 18 (2010), http://www.transformationsjournal.org/journal/issue_18/article_05.shtml.

18 Vivan Sobchack, interview with Scott Bukatman, *Journal of e-Media Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009), http://journals.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/2/xmlpage/4/article/338, accessed June 21, 2011.

mediated; not so much in itself but because it meets the consciousness of an audience whose perceptual frame is now irreducibly one of mediation."[19]

The ramifications of mediatization, the digital, and the virtual for dance and other performance arts are enormous.[20] With the digital, and the virtual, actors as well as "spectators" will engage their mirror neurons in a new virtual kinaesthetics, in which they will see not only with their own eyes but also with the virtual kino-eye of the kinetic in-game or in-world camera and will react with and to the telepresent and teleactive virtual body.[21] When I "choreograph" sequences and then film my avatars "performing" motion capture animations of dances in a virtual world, I experience a virtual kinaesthesia similar to but also distinct both from watching a dance performance by others and from actually dancing.[22]

What new kinaesthetics will arise out of people's experiences with avatar self-representations of their own whose appearance they can modify as they wish and control in dance, sport, action, and other movement in increasingly haptic and kinetic ways with gesture, touch, and whole-body control devices like the iPad, Wii, and Kinect? With increasingly accurate voice-recognition interfaces? In a fully immersive three-dimensional space? When the performance of self in everyday life stretches to encompass what is impossible in real life as well as the ordinary? Will experiences people have virtually trigger mirror neurons as if the people had actually had those experiences? Research from Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab suggests that experiences in virtual environments influence people's behaviors not only in those environments but in the actual world as well.[23] What will it mean to say, "I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it," when we are both performer and spectator, in increasingly mediatized environments? Will we oscillate from being in front of to being in the body? Is that what might be seen in a virtual mirror? Merleau-Ponty called vision a "palpation with a look."[24] What will happen as looking, moving, and touching become more fully intertwined in the interfaces and spaces we use for performance and spectatorship of all kinds? I imagine a kinaesthetics of flux

19 Remshardt, "Beyond Performance Studies," 51.

20 See Helen Bailey, "Ersatz Dancing: Negotiating the Live and Mediated in Digital Performance Practice," *International Journal Performance Arts and Digital Media* 3, nos. 2–3 (December 2007): 151–165. See also Dixon, *Digital Performance*; and Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

21 Landay, "Virtual KinoEye: Kinetic Camera, Machinima, and Virtual Subjectivity in Second Life," *Journal of e-Media Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009), http://journals.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/2/xmlpage/4/article/340. See also Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

22 See "Domestic Technology, or, Never Alone" (Lori Landay, 2010), Machinima digital video: http://rhizome.org/artbase/artwork/53880/.

23 Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson conducted studies on the process they term the "Proteus effect": "an individual's behavior conforms to their digital self-representation independent of how others perceive them." Yee and Bailenson, "The Proteus Effect: The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation on Behavior," *Human Communication Research* 33 (2007): 271–290. See also Sun Joo Ahn and Bailenson, "Embodied Experiences in Immersive Virtual Environments: Effects on Pro-Environmental Self-Efficacy and Behavior," technical report, 2011, http://vhil.stanford.edu/pubs/2011/VHIL-technical-report.pdf.

24 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 135.

and transformation, of gravity defiance and boundary breaking, and an exultation of movement transcending even the very real pleasures and culture makings of the new kinaesthetics of the past as we put on virtual dancing shoes and not only watch but also leap to anywhere our imaginations can take us. It should be interesting to see what experiences performance—on screens and as whatever they evolve into as we create new ways of perceiving the world—will mirror.   ✱

Nonfictional Performance from Portrait Films to the Internet

by Vinicius Navarro

There is a story about documenting personal experiences in the Internet age that goes like this: widespread access to recording technologies and distribution networks has spawned an unprecedented number of personal videos whose circulation overlaps with the rhythms of ordinary life. In these new contexts, playing oneself for the camera, as Thomas Waugh once described documentary performance, becomes a sort of lingua franca.[1] Personal videos, not surprisingly, often focus on the performance itself. Against the backdrop of uneventful situations and unpretentious settings, they have little to show other than the encounter between the player and the camera—the act of self-presentation. Much of this material, it is often assumed, is viewed by only a small number of people and can therefore be dismissed as solipsistic and inconsequential. Similarly, online performances end up appearing as a sort of compromise, a technological imposition that both facilitates and trivializes contact with others.

If we draw on the long history of performance in nonfiction cinema, however, there might be another way to tell the story of online personal videos. Documentaries have traditionally relied on the "contribution" of real-life subjects, and the practice of soliciting a performance from social actors goes back to the silent period. Now, as then, the performances create instances in which the referential world "erupts" onto the screen, or rather is summoned by the subjects in the film. Online personal videos are likely to revisit some of these practices, in particular the presentational modes of address associated with experimental nonfictional works. This is a kind of performance that

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1 Thomas Waugh, "'Acting to Play Oneself': Notes on Performance in Documentary," in *Making Visible the Invisible: An Anthology of Original Essays on Film Acting*, ed. Carole Zucker (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1990).