Embodied Subjectivity from Avant-Garde to Popular Dancefilm:
Vertical Integration and Phenomenological Feminism
in A Study of Choreography for the Camera
and Flashdance

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According to Kate Ince, a chief concern of phenomenological feminist representations is rendering female embodied subjectivity visible through attention to body comportment, motility, and spatiality.1 Whereas Laura Mulvey warns in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” that the presence of women onscreen functions as disruptive erotic spectacle in narrative film which disturbs the narrative flow, phenomenological feminist representations lean into this tendency, reappropriating spectacle as a site of subjective embodied experience through paying attention to the activity, agency, and effort of female screen bodies.2 Whereas Ince has contributed valuable research regarding the visual representations of phenomenological feminist bodies onscreen, my research is interested in how the production of spectacle required for phenomenological feminist representations has resulted in innovations to narrative form. I define one such innovative technique found in narrative cinema as vertical integration. Narrative verticality, mainly developed by avant-garde cinema, is a non-linear, episodic narrative form that visually explores the subjective resonance of an experience or event, often distorting time and space in the pursuit of representing the embodied experience of the screen body.3
Vertical integration occurs in narrative cinema when horizontal or linear film time is manipulated and the film’s presentation of the narrative shifts from horizontal cause-and-effect storytelling to a vertical exploration of the screen body’s subjective embodied experience. Vertical integration in contemporary cinema is significant because it intersects avant-garde film techniques with classical narrative form, challenging the notion that classical narrative cinema is altogether a separate tradition from that of experimental and avant-garde cinema. This paper examines the use of temporal expansions, a film technique where shots of the same action are repeated, usually through varying camera positions, angles, and levels that break linear film time to emphasize the subjective experience or affective resonance of an image, event, or movement. I specifically compare the avant-garde dancefilm *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (dir. Maya Deren, US, 1945), and the contemporary narrative dancefilm, *Flashdance* (dir. Adrian Lyne, US, 1983) to demonstrate how the use of temporal expansions produce vertical integration through the temporal manipulation of the climactic final leaps of both films. Dance scholar, Erin Brannigan, defines dancefilm as a mode that appears across various types of films, such as the musical and avant-garde cinema, that are “characterized by a *filmic performance* dominated by choreographic strategies or effects.”

I am comparing these two films because Deren produced the most work and development onscreen and in writing on vertical narrative form. Adrian Lyne, while working as a contemporary filmmaker within popular culture, incorporates elements of avant-garde cinema—such as vertical integration—into his narrative films. For example, the final leap during Alex’s audition in *Flashdance* is temporally expanded, vertically integrating Alex’s embodied experience into narrative form. The temporal expansion used in this climax reflects a feminist phenomenology of the body through its attention to Alex’s mobility, autonomy, and achievement through her relation to movement, time, and space.

*Flashdance’s* manipulation of temporality to facilitate vertical integration into horizontal, linear narrative structure is not new to contemporary cinema practices. Noël Burch’s *Theory of Film Practice* finds that while temporal discontinuities are not opposed to narrative form because they preserve an “apparent” continuity, there is nonetheless a long tradition of temporal expansions in avant-garde cinema. This comparative analysis finds that *Flashdance’s* narrative form is visually supplemented with avant-garde film practices because the temporally expanded sequence during Alex’s audition is shot and edited similarly to Deren’s temporally expanded leap in
Choreography. However, the avant-garde elements of film verticality in *Flashdance*, have yet to be recognized by film scholarship. *Flashdance* is often denigrated as popular film and, thus, low art. Such dismissals overlook the formal features of *Flashdance*, which are used to celebrate other acclaimed film auteurs who also use stylistic techniques like temporal expansions to mediate and affect film time and style. Thus, this paper compares both instances of temporal expansions to suggest that contemporary popular films borrow not only from classical narrative traditions but also from the avant-garde. Tracing the modularity and repetition of vertical integration techniques across these two films ultimately reveals the innovative way in which *Flashdance* simultaneously modifies the function of the temporal expansion in its contemporary context due to Lyne’s re-gendering of the temporal expansion onto Alex, the female protagonist. An analysis of these two scenes helps conceptualize Alex’s body in terms of Ince’s writings on phenomenological feminism, a feminism Ince argues takes moving and gendered differences relating to space as the starting point for its analysis of embodied experiences of male and female screen bodies. I argue that the avant-garde film practices used to produce these contemporary dance images, stories, and embodied subjectivities effectively disrupts the high/low art divide between narrative and experimental dancefilm.

Maya Deren is an influential figure in dance and film because of the innovative vertical narrative structure she developed in her avant-garde dancefilms of the 1940s and 50s. Rather than using film to simply record movement, Deren looked to film as a form of intellectual expression. Her vertical narratives are alternatives to elements of traditional storytelling structures established by Classical Hollywood, such as tight causality, clarity, and closure. Instead, Deren’s vertical narrative structure has no beginning, middle, or end. There is no cause-and-effect logic and certainly no clarity. Whereas horizontal structure is defined by one circumstance leading to another, vertical film structure—sometimes referred to as poetic structure—“probes the ramifications of a moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have poetry concerned, in a sense, not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means.” Deren’s concept of narrative verticality is different from the conventional concept of visual film verticality, which sees narrative action occurring on a vertical axis, such as action sequences marked by extreme highs and lows. The alternative concept of vertical integration discussed here is less concerned with visual vertical access and more concerned with a feminist vertical impulse that sees
vertical movement as occurring on the level of film-time, manipulating screen time in order to make visible female embodied subjectivity through spectacle-driven dance athleticism.

Film scholars, such as Tom Gunning, are finding that narrative filmmaking is not as tightly bound to rules of causation as David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson’s research on classical Hollywood cinema posited.\textsuperscript{14} Narrative and avant-garde techniques in contemporary cinema are relational rather than paradigmatic, which challenges the status of narrative dancefilm as a low art in contrast to its experimental and avant-garde dancefilm counterparts. Dance in popular narrative films provides textual evidence of cross-pollination between narrative form and avant-garde style, two forms predominately treated by scholarship as binarily opposed.\textsuperscript{15} The reoccurrence of temporal expansions remediated in experimental and narrative cinema, such as \textit{Choreography} and \textit{Flashdance}, softens the dichotomy between experimental (vertical) and linear-narrative (horizontal) film form. After all, no film is produced in a vacuum, and all media representations draw from one another. As Bolter and Grusin write, “Each act of mediation depends on other acts of mediation. Media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other, and this process is integral to media.”\textsuperscript{16} With media drawing from and replacing other media, this quote also suggests that temporal expansions would not necessarily function the same across varying film modes and movements.

The following comparative analysis of \textit{Choreography} and \textit{Flashdance} finds that while Alex experiences great physical autonomy, Deren’s body of avant-garde films represents gender inequality by her female characters exercising less mobility in time and space than the males onscreen. For example, \textit{Meshes of the Afternoon} (dir. Maya Deren, US, 1943) can be read as a phenomenological feminist critique of the association between women and domesticity. Recurring images, such as a key, a knife, a phone, windows, and doors all speak to domestic female spaces. The repetitive vertical narrative, in which Deren keeps returning to the setting of a house, probes deep into a sense of immobilization through repetition and speaks to a female experience where domestic spaces correlate to a lack of social mobility. In \textit{Ritual of Transfigured Time} (dir. Maya Deren, US, 1946), men enjoy greater mobility than women. The women circle room to room as they gather and wrap up wool, a movement that suggests domestic female labour. On the other hand, the men stand atop pedestals, posing like muscular Greek statues before leaping down to chase women through the fields. These men are both
the model and the mover, the ideal and the free. It is not surprising, then, that Deren’s use of temporal expansion—a film technique that privileges mobility and spatiality—is used in *Choreography* on a male body. Deren uses physical movement and temporal manipulation to produce a phenomenology of gendered difference, emphasizing an inequality of the sexes through vertical film form.

*Flashdance*, on the other hand, replaces the male leaping body with a female one, temporally expanding Alex’s final leap, breaking the rules of time and space in the production of female mobility. In comparing the shot sequences of *Choreography* and *Flashdance*, we see that both leaps are shot at low angles and use approximately the same number of shots: seven shots in *Choreography* and five shots in *Flashdance*. As the shots progress in *Choreography*, the shot scale changes, cutting in closer to the male body and fragmenting it with each cut. However, upon landing, the male body is recorded through a long shot, visually whole again. The climactic leap in *Flashdance*, while shot with looser framing than in *Choreography*, similarly consists of a series of medium close-ups, capturing Alex’s pelvis and torso before cutting to a final long shot, similarly restoring the wholeness of Alex’s body. The shot composition of Alex’s temporally expanded leap adheres to Ince’s notion that a feminist phenomenology of the body emphasizes embodied female subjectivity through attention to activity, effort, and movement without fetishistic fragmentation. Alternatively, Alex’s body is made whole through the shot scale not to privilege her embodied subjectivity, but rather the erotic spectacle of her body. Some scholars argue that any attempts of innovation in *Flashdance*, choreographic or filmic, are marginalized in favor of narrative progression and erotic imagery. While there are important conversations to be had about the role and implications of eroticism in *Flashdance*, the sequence is alternatively perceived here as a spectacle of athletic movement and an innovative narrative element of vertical integration. In these scenes, the spectacle of Alex’s body actualizes feminist phenomenological representation as a vertical probing into the subjective experience of Alex achieving the physical feat. The dancing also resumes in full force following the temporal expansion, challenging the idea that Alex is only a passive, erotic spectacle. While the temporal expansion does emphasize, quite literally, Alex’s *to-be-looked-at-ness* by showing her spectacular actions twice, the return to physical movement and intention after the expansion, as well as the emphasis on athletic achievement during the temporally expanded leap, frames Alex as a phenomenological feminist body.
In conclusion, the significance of this comparative analysis of *Choreography* and *Flashdance* is that it reclaims feminist bodies within popular discourse, challenging the status of narrative dancefilm as being a low art in contrast to avant-garde, experimental dancefilm. Rather, *Flashdance* remediates temporal manipulation techniques of avant-garde cinema in a contemporary context, producing phenomenological feminist representations through its attention to female mobility through the manipulation of movement, space, and time. The analysis provided here situates the climax of *Flashdance* as remediating, but also appreciates *Flashdance* as a product of its time. The film comes out of the "body as project" craze, a social movement that located self-agency on the level of the body and its movement and activity, notions also propagated by other dance genre films of the 80s, such as *Dirty Dancing* (dir. Emile Ardolino, US, 1987). One thing to note, however, is that *Flashdance*, while adhering to general codes of realism and narrative form, is still a fictional fantasy of achievement. While the film innovatively produces a feminist phenomenological body through vertical integration, it can still be said to romanticize the possibilities of female mobility. Deren’s work represents, more authentically, the subjective experiences of men and women, despite being avant-garde and not adhering to visual codes of realism. I locate these different levels of female subjectivity between *Choreography* and *Flashdance* as being correlated to their different narrative forms and genres. Deren’s work is a fully vertical exploration of embodied subjectivity. *Flashdance*, on the other hand, employs moments of vertical integration through techniques such as temporal expansions in the dance sequences, representing the freedom, liberation, and power Alex experiences in her body through dancing, as these qualities are largely inaccessible to her outside of performance. The vertical representation of embodied subjectivity is then subsumed into the horizontal progression of the narrative following the dance scene, re-limiting our access to Alex’s interiority and subjectivity. Ultimately, analyzing the specific film styles of dance sequences can help not only to make visible feminist subjectivities tucked away in narrative films but be a methodology to measure how much access a film is providing us to a character’s embodied subjective experience, an analytical pursuit central to feminist phenomenology in visual media studies.
Notes

9. Jennifer Beals’s performance was supplemented by three body doubles, male and female. The scene analyzed in this paper centers on a leap performed by body double Sharon Shapiro, a female gymnast (The Directors).
10. Ince, The Body and the Film, 42.
20. Dodds, Dance on Screen, 37.

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