second edition

Making Video Dance

A Step-by-Step Guide to Creating Dance for the Screen

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CHAPTER 2

Dance and the Camera

Experiencing how the lens works in relation to human movement is fundamental to understanding how to approach making dance for the screen. This next chapter explores the role of the camera in video dance.

The Camera's Role

The camera is a lead performer in your video dance.

It is the eye through which the viewer sees. It connects audience to performer.

The camera frames the world of your video dance.

It can create mood and capture atmosphere.

It can tell stories, present emotion, show context and be part of the action.

It can express an attitude and a present perspective on how the body is perceived.

The camera is a powerful tool. Through the use of different shots and angles, the camera can offer the viewer new and surprising perspectives on the performer. The lens can enter the dancer's kinesphere – the personal space around them that moves with them as they dance – focussing on a detail of movement and allowing a much more intimate experience of the performance than is usually possible in a live situation.

How the camera moves in relation to the performers is also an important aspect of filming dance. As the choreographed camera moves through space – whether hand-held or on a track or jib – it alters the viewer's perception of the dance, rendering it three-dimensional and creating a fluid and lively viewing experience.

Framing Dance

The frame is very important because it represents the screen on which the viewers will watch your work.

The frame is the rectangle created by the camera lens.

The frame always has this rectangle shape, although the exact ratio of the length of the sides and the length of the top and bottom of the rectangle can be different.

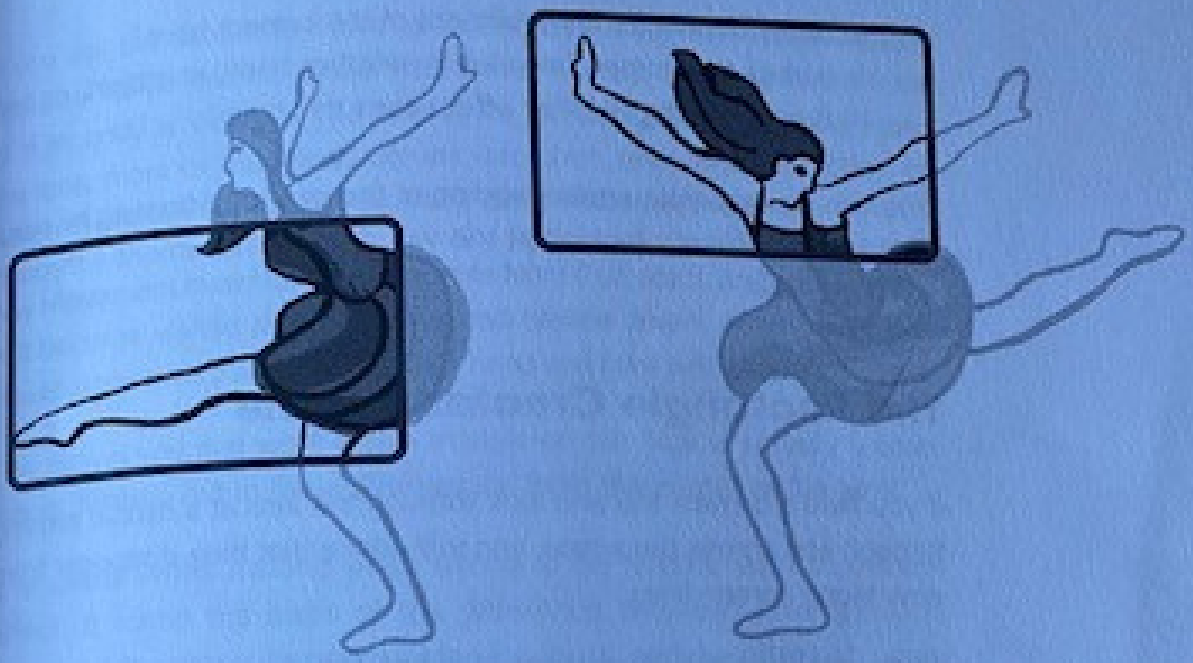


Figure 2.1 **Framing that frustrates the audience's view creates interest and energy in the shot**

The subject of the frame does not have to be placed in the middle; the rectangle can be filled in many different ways and the composition of the frame will encourage the viewer to see things in a certain way.

Framing that frustrates the audiences view of the 'whole', by showing only a small fragment of, for example, the body in motion, encourages the viewer's imagination to come into play.

It is often what is excluded from the frame rather than what is included in the frame that will create interest and energy in the design of a shot.

The kind of questions that you can ask yourself when you are looking at a frame might include:

- To where is my eye drawn first?
- Where does it move to next?
- What creates depth in the frame?
- What effect does the use of light have in the frame?
- What effect does movement of a dancer towards or away from the lens have?
- What effect does the movement of a dancer across and through the frame have?

- What effect does the movement of the camera have?
- Is part of the frame obscured by another body, an object, or part of the architecture? What effect does this have?

You can develop your understanding of the nature of framing by regularly and consciously looking at the world – and movement – through a camera lens.

The Rectangle Creates a Cone

If you hold a camera still and look through the lens at a dancer moving through and across the space, you will notice that they disappear from view along certain lines.

If you mark out the boundaries of when the dancer is in frame, and when they disappear, you will notice that a triangle shape is created on the floor, with the narrowest point starting at the centre of the lens.

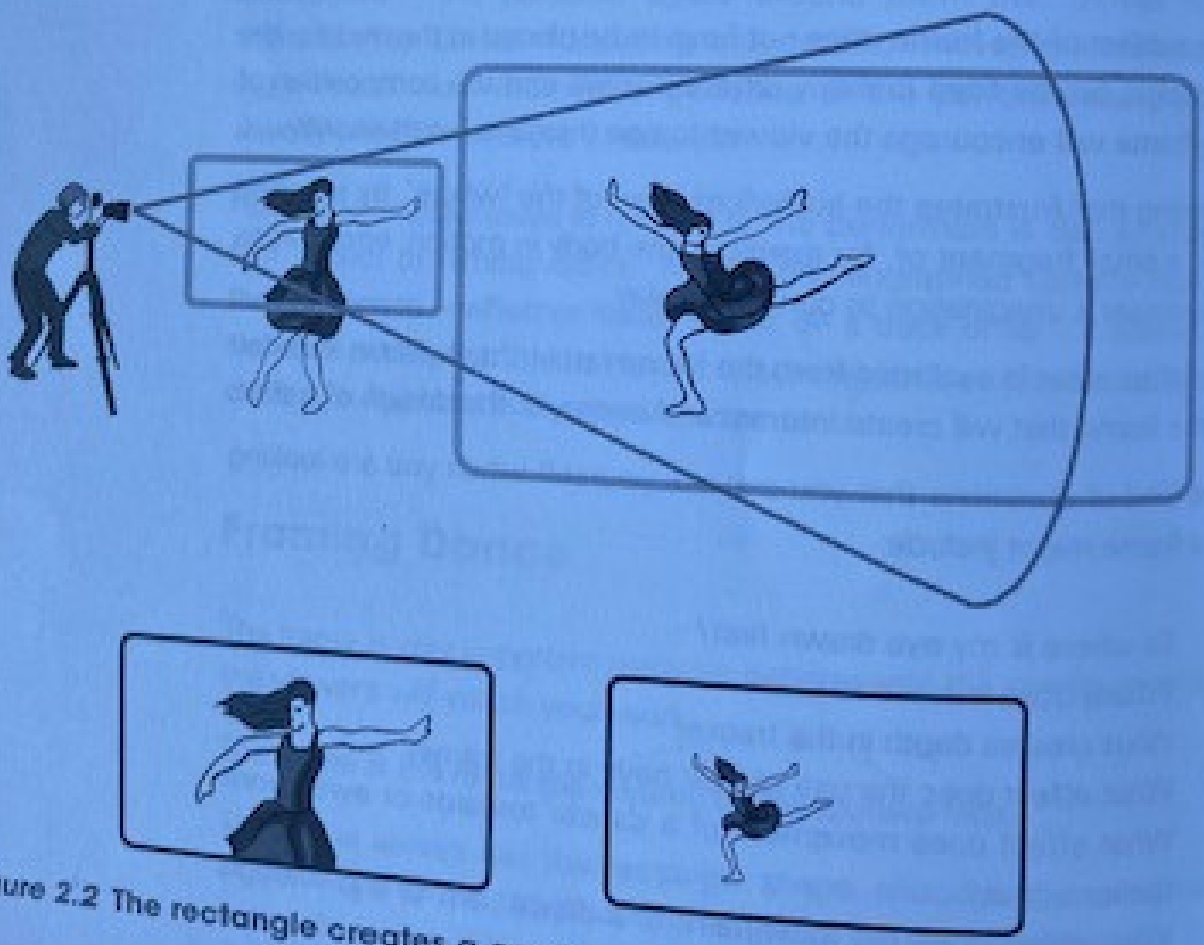


Figure 2.2 The rectangle creates a cone

If you ask the dancer to move towards, then away from the camera, you also notice that the closer the dancer comes to the lens, the less of their body is visible in the frame. As the dancer moves away from the lens, more of their body comes into shot, until there is a point at which the entire height of their body can be seen in the frame.

Any movement away from the camera from that point, and more space will become visible above, below and beside them. Any movement closer in towards the lens, and their head and feet will disappear again.

This shows you that what was a triangle on the floor is actually a cone shape, fanning out in three dimensions from the centre of the lens.

It is useful when making video dance to be familiar with this cone-effect. It forms the basis of the difference between how space is perceived on screen, as opposed to on a stage, and the effect of movement in and through the frame.

An understanding of this characteristic of the lens informs how choreography is created for the camera and how the camera is positioned and moves in relationship to the dance.

Being able to visualise and work with this cone shape is something that develops the more you film. Soon you will also have instinctive sense of what the camera will and will not see at a certain point, without having to look through the lens all the time.

The Frame Becomes a Shot

In the context of describing the framing by the lens of a camera, another important point to consider is that the frame rarely stays the same for more than a fraction of a second. This is because either the camera or the dancing subject of the frame (and most often both) will be in motion, continually reshaping its design and what it communicates. What's more, when we are thinking about the camera and what is seen through the lens, the term frame describes the visual shape of a moment caught in time, whereas a shot has duration. Put another way, a shot is made up of many individual frames that alter as either or both the subject of the frame and the camera move. This is perhaps easiest to understand by looking at the following illustration:

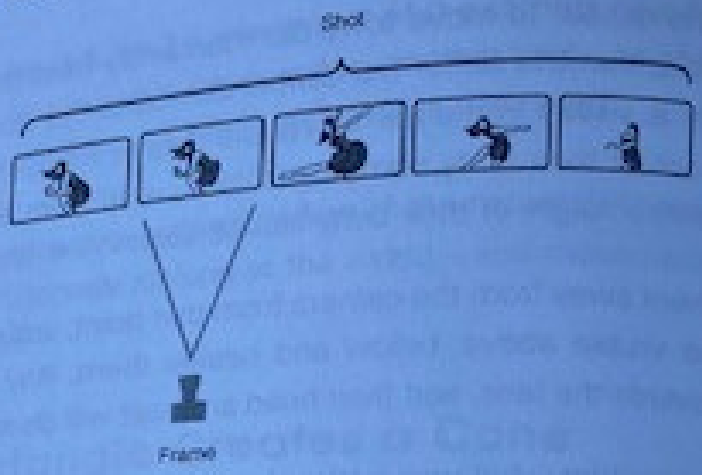


Figure 2.3 **The frame becomes a shot**

How to Describe a Shot

Making video dance very often involves many different people working together and sharing a vision of what is being created. The communication of that vision is essential and therefore it is useful to use vocabulary to describe camera frames or shots that is understood by everyone involved.

The terms most commonly used to describe different shot types define how the camera positions the viewer in relation to the subject of the frame, which is often a human body. For example:

- In a 'wide shot', the body is framed with space around it, which creates the impression that the viewer is standing back from the subject, taking a wide view.
- Whereas a 'close-up' implies that the viewer is positioned close to the subject, with the subject filling the frame.

You can train yourself to understand the impact of framing and therefore the way that different shots work. The most important thing is to regularly look at the world – and dancing bodies – through the viewfinder of your camera.

Below is a list of shot types, and how their names are often shortened. Figure 2.4 shows how these shots may look relative to each other.

Figure 2.4 **Shot types and their descriptions**

Tip!

Shot sizes are relative to each other. What is called a wide shot in one video dance might be a close-up in another, depending on the size of the other shots that make up the vocabulary of that particular work.

Some Characteristics of Shot Sizes

The precise nature of different shot sizes and how they are read by the viewer will depend on their usage within your video dance, that is, what fills the frame and how the shots are edited together.

However, different types of shots do bring with them certain characteristics that are useful to consider:

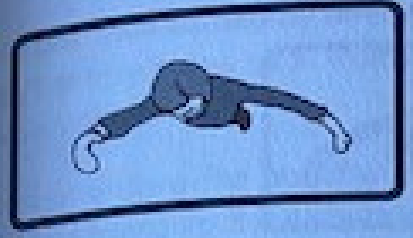
- A wide shot places the subject of your frame – that is, the dancer or dancers – in a context, as it allows you to see where their action is taking place.
- A mid-shot shows the action more clearly by bringing the viewer in closer to the dancer or dancers.
- A close-up conveys effort, emotion, texture and/or effort by focussing on a detail of the face or body.

As we will explore in greater depth when we look at creative editing in Chapter 9, it is important to film a good range and variety of shot sizes, for it is by placing contrasting shots together that you create energy, rhythm and pace in your video dance. Overall, however, favouring closer shots over wider ones when filming accesses the real potential of video dance and opens up compelling opportunities unique to making dance for the screen. The raise of an eyebrow or the twitch of a muscle are details that are easily lost in a live stage performance, but through close-up framing they can become central to what and how your video dance work communicates.

Camera Positions

As well as the size of the shot, the positioning of the camera offers many creative choices. The camera can place the viewer almost anywhere in relation to the dance. Depending on the camera position, the movement can be framed from:

- In front
- Behind
- Below
- Above
- Any diagonal angle



Bird's eye view

High angle

Front view

Back view

Low angle

Worm's eye view

Figure 2.5 **Various viewpoints on the dance**

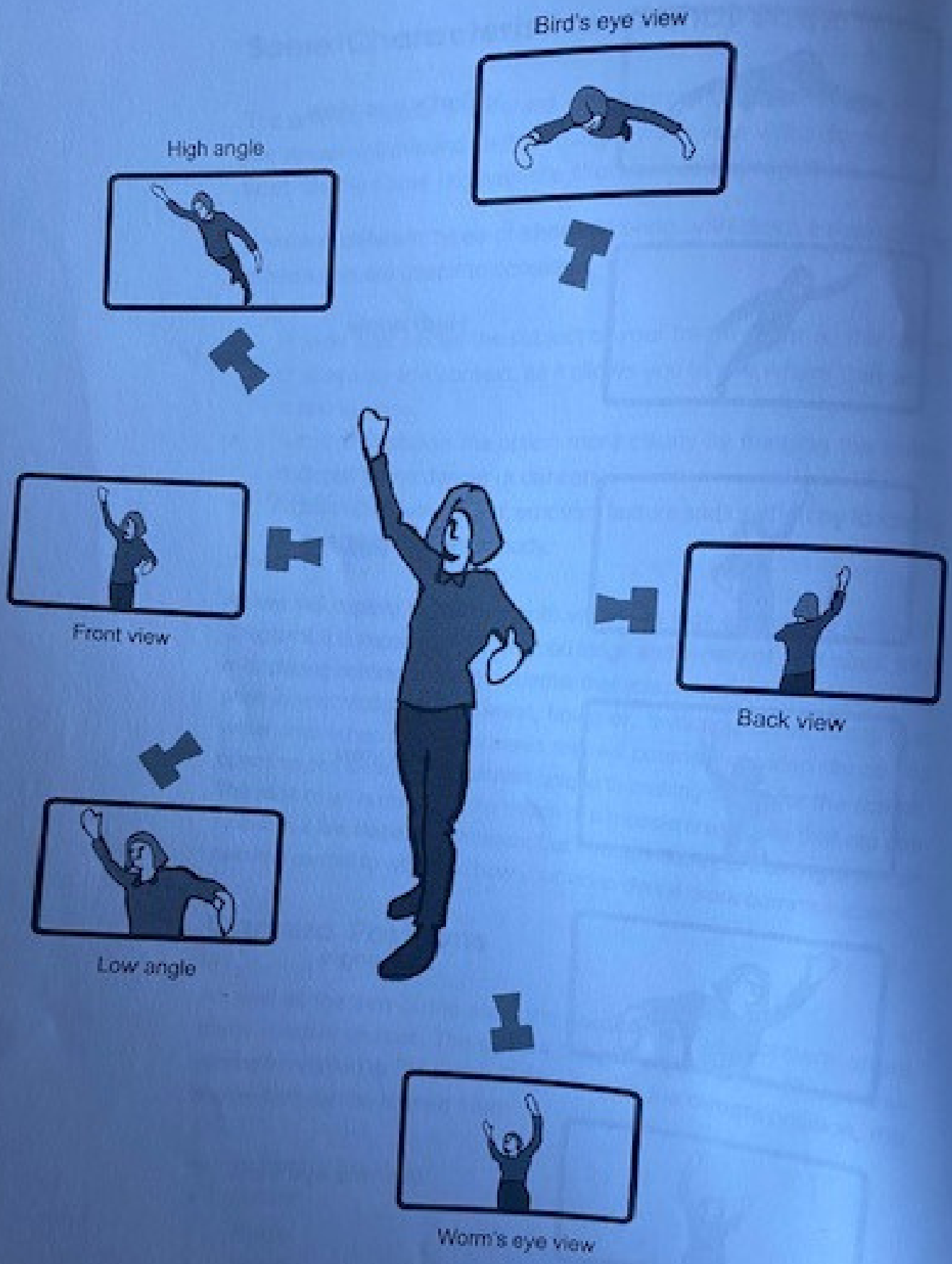


Figure 2.6 **Camera positions in relation to the body**

positions such as directly overhead (sometimes called a 'birds-eye view') or from below (or a 'worm's eye view') offer extreme perspectives on the dance.

You can explore the possibilities yourself by looking through the lens and changing the camera's position on relation to what is in frame. You will notice that even very subtle changes of camera position will significantly alter the image and what it communicates (see Figures 2.5 and 2.6).

Camera Movement

Because the subject of the frame is human movement, video dance invites, even demands, the camera to be in motion. How the camera moves in relation to the dancer or dancers, and the space they are in, has great impact on the viewer's experience of the on-screen movement.

For a start, movement of the camera through space means that what the lens sees will change and as a result, the framing of the shot will continually alter, keeping the material interesting.

One of my priorities when making video dance is to make the viewer feel like they are involved in the dance, and I have found that the best way of doing this is to include plenty of camera movement in the filming.

What's more, the moving camera also creates a sense of someone being behind the camera. Rather than being a static frame through and within which the action of the performer takes place, a moving camera is an embodied camera, giving rise to a situation in which performer and camera are in collaboration.

Particularly when the camera is hand-held, the moving camera creates a sense of empathy with the on-screen performer, in that the person holding the camera can respond in the moment to the actions of the on-screen performer, making space for them and working with, rather than predetermining, what is seen by a fixed frame.

The dancer in the frame is therefore not in the passive role of the observed, restricted by someone else's aesthetic, but rather dancer

and camera operator together create the images in a less hierarchical, non-objectifying way.

This is a perspective that you may have to experience for yourself to understand and is easy to try out. At the end of this chapter and in the next, there are exercises that will help you to explore camera movement in relation to a performer moving in space.

How Does Your Camera Move?

There are essentially two different types of camera movement:

1. The body of the camera itself remains fixed in space (often placed on a tripod), whilst the lens is in motion. For example, the lens can move sideways, left or right, to create a horizontal camera movement called 'panning', or it can move up and down, to create a vertical movement called 'tilting'. The fixed camera can also 'roll', turning everything in its vision upside down and then upright again. This action is easiest tried out holding the camera in your hand, although there are some special pieces of equipment that can enable this kind of movement.
2. Movement can be created by the camera travelling through space:
    - The camera can move towards, or away from an object or person,
    - Or it can move past or around an object or person.

Movement through space of the camera is called 'tracking'. This term derives from the fact that, in order to achieve smooth and constant motion, the camera is often placed on a trolley with wheels, which are then positioned on rails like small train tracks.

Tracking shots work very well as a way of opening up and exploring the view of the environment in which you are filming. This effect is enhanced if the camera passes by, or through, features of the architecture of the space – for example, a pillar or a doorway.

Tracking past a dancer, or anything else in frame, can also create great energy in your shot. The effect of something entering – and/or leaving – the frame through the steady movement of the camera past the subject

creates a sense of the camera having its own trajectory and with it, adds a dynamic tension to the video dance material.

Another type of camera movement is a 'zoom', either in or out. This closing in or opening out of the lens through various different angles is usually used to reframe a shot closer or wider, but the movement itself can also be incorporated into the actual shot.

As with all types of camera movement, the zoom action can be combined with other types of camera movement. For example, you can choose to zoom in as the camera tracks forward, or zoom out as the camera tracks back.

Terms Used to Describe Camera Movement

pan	camera on a fixed point lens moves left or right on the horizontal plane
tilt	camera on a fixed point lens moves up or down on the vertical plane
track	camera moves through space in any direction
crib	camera moves up or down through space on the vertical plane
whip-pan	a very fast pan
zoom	camera on a fixed point, the lens closes in on or widens out from the subject of the frame
crash zoom	a very fast zoom

There are different ways to achieve camera movement in your filming:

- A moving camera can be hand-held.
- You can use some kind of grip equipment such as a track or dolly.
- You can use a piece of more flexible equipment specially designed to facilitate smooth hand-held camera movement, such as a Steadicam or gimbal.

Hand-held

As the term implies, this is when you hold the camera in your hand and move with it as you film.

Filming hand-held has a free, spontaneous feel to it with many benefits when it comes to filming dance:

- When you hand-hold, you can change position quickly and react to what you are seeing in the frame, subtly and instantaneously.
- You can create complex, individualistic camera movements that might be difficult to achieve using grip equipment.
- The hand-held camera often feels very like the point of view of a dancer, taking the viewer to the heart of the movement and with the movement quality of the person operating the camera perceptible in the shot.

Some Tips for Filming Hand-held

Aim for a fluid, yet lively sense of movement, rather than wobbly, chaotic shots. Finding the best way to move with a hand-held camera takes plenty of practice.

If the camera is large enough, you can lean it on your shoulder or hip rather than always hold it in your hands. This can help to keep shots steady. You can also hold the camera at arms length, down towards the ground or up in the air. A flip-out screen on the camera if it has one can make this a much easier option.

When filming hand-held, you don't necessarily need to look at what you are framing all the time, as through experience you will gain a sense of what the lens will see if you have the camera at a particular angle.

Filming hand-held offers much to the creative process and should be a positive choice and not just for ease as you can't be bothered to set up a tripod. Having said that, if you are trying to create shots that require the camera to be completely still or supported when panned or tilted, then do use a tripod or another suitable piece of grip equipment.

The widespread availability of digital SLR cameras and other devices for filming brings with it both possibilities and restrictions. On the

one hand, many more people have access to filming images of an extremely high quality. On the other hand, the design and size of the cameras and devices can prove challenging when filming movement, particularly hand-held, as there are so many more variables to be dealing with than when the camera is on a tripod.

Despite being lightweight, smaller cameras and devices can be harder to use than hand-held, although there are various handles and add-ons that can be attached to make them easier to grip. No matter what sort of camera you are using, one of the greatest challenges of filming hand-held is that you have to find ways of altering the focal length, focus and exposure of shots as you move with the camera. In Chapter 5, we look in further detail at the design of the different types of camera and their various pros and cons, including ease of use when filming hand-held.

Filming for the Edit

Understanding the different ways that the camera can frame the subject and move in relation to the action is fundamental to making video dance, and thinking about what kinds of shots you are going to film for your video dance forms an essential part of the process.

As part of this, however, you must also consider how the work is going to be edited. This is because, ultimately, all filming is about creating material for the edit. The edit is where your video dance will be given the shape that defines it and it is how the audience will experience it.

Unlike in the theatre, where the audience will normally only watch the dance from one position for the duration of a performance, in video dance the perspective on the action is continually altered by cutting between shots that offer different views and framing of the dance.

Therefore, how you plan to place the shots together must inform your approach to filming and guide you in your choice of shot sizes, framing and camera movement. This is important, so that when you reach the edit, you have everything you need to maximise the creative possibilities at that stage.

The detail with which you plan the edit in advance is a matter of choice:

- Some people like to know exactly what shot will be placed next to which before they start filming and they storyboard meticulously.
- Others take a more fluid approach, filming very specific material, conscious of the range of different shots they will need, but with a more open mind as to the exact structure of the final edit.
- And some people mix both approaches, depending on the nature and intention of the different sections of their video dance.

We will look at different ways of developing your video dance material, and storyboarding in later chapters. But first, it is important to look at some fundamental concepts behind editing.

Approaches to Space and Time

When you begin to think about how your video dance will be edited, it is useful to consider that there are two fundamentally different approaches. These are:

1. Filming to maintain the continuity of the live choreography.
2. The 'montage' approach, in which the structure of the live choreography is completely reordered in the edit suite.

Both approaches share almost everything in terms of production processes, use of camera, design, sound and the finer details of editing. The main difference lies in the treatment of time and space.

Continuity

Filming for the continuity of the choreography means that your video dance retains the structure of the choreography as it was performed live. The term 'continuity' refers to the fact that, in the final video dance, the choreography will appear to unfold in sequence, with one movement following the other, as it would if you were watching it in real time and space.

The basic process of filming for the continuity of the live choreography is as follows:

- A section of dance is choreographed and rehearsed.
- This is filmed in its entirety, with a variety of different frame sizes and angles of shots providing different framing of and perspectives on the dancers' movement.
- In the edit, these shots are laid down in the order that recreates exactly the structure of the original choreography.

Cutting between the different shots generates interest and energy on the screen, by allowing the viewer to see certain moments in close-up detail, with wider shots showing the relationship between the dancers, or the spatial context of the dance.

In this approach, it is important that each movement is filmed in at least one shot, in order that the shape of the choreography as it existed live can be translated onto the screen.

In the continuity approach, the music to which the live choreography was performed usually becomes the soundtrack to the video dance, with the relationship between the dancers' movement and the music being retained. Here again, it is important to have shots covering all the choreography, otherwise you may find yourself without the right images to accompany certain bars or phrases of the music.

Filming for the continuity of the choreography is frequently used when the purpose is to make a documentation of a live performance, whether that is in front of an audience, or restaged in a studio at a later date.

Montage

In the 'montage approach' to editing, any sense of what happened 'in real time' is abandoned, as the material that has been filmed is reordered, creating video dance choreography that is unique to the screen.

Watch most feature films and you will see that the montage approach is central to the language of cinema. In scenes in which the logic of a sequence of events needs to be communicated, the action will be

Tip!

A feel for what different types of shots you will need for editing is something that you can develop through practice until it becomes an instinctive knowledge based on experience and judgement.

covered step-by-step, that is, using the continuity approach described earlier. However, in other types of scenes, action, energy and meaning are created through montage.

Picture this, for example: a car drives up and stops in front of a house. Cut to a shot from inside a living room, as a man appears through the door.

The implication is that the man has got out of the car, opened the gate, walked up the front door, opened it and gone into the house, down the hall and into the sitting room. But we don't need to see shots of all this action. As viewers, we make sense of the images we are given by filling in the gaps, and we can imagine the sequence of events in between. In fact, if we were pedantically shown every moment of this action, in real time, it would often make for very dull viewing.

On another level, single shots of apparently unrelated events or objects will create meaning through being 'montaged' together. For example, a shot of an empty plate on a table, followed by a close-up of a dog licking its lips will read as the dog having eaten the dinner.

In video dance, it is through montage editing that you can break away from any concept of choreography as it happened 'live' and think alternatively about time and space, as they are perceived on screen. Moreover, because the specific sequence of a narrative sequence is not usually the focus of video dance, there is the potential for the rhythms of montage editing to be taken onto a whole new level, as we will explore further in a later chapter.

Shots featuring completely different sequences of choreography, in various locations, with contrasting costumes, design and even different dancers can be juxtaposed to create original 'screen choreography'. What links them is the overall theme of the work, the judgement and artistry with which the images are edited together and often the continuity of the soundtrack.

The montage approach can also be used with shots that come from the same source, i.e. a section of choreography, filmed in one location, yet offering a completely reordered and alternative experience of space and time.

Not bound by what is possible in a live context, the repetition of images and sound can take montage in video dance into a new dimension, and completely alter the viewers' perspective on dance.

In the context of making video dance, it is the montage approach that offers a whole new realm of creativity. This is not to deny the value of beautifully directed screen versions of live works using the continuity approach, or the usefulness of sections of video dance filmed and edited in this way. However, for video dance to continue to develop its own unique voice, related to but not defined by live dance performance, the montage approach must be understood, embraced and be at the heart of how we create our screen dance work.

Exercises

The first two exercises in this chapter are done without any technology. I often introduce them at the start of a workshop as I find that they really shift the participants' perception of making video dance and provide a great starting point for understanding and discussion on the issues involved.

The Watching Score

This is an exercise that I learnt from improvising dance artist Kirstie Simson, with whom I worked over a number of years, making the dance documentary film *Force of Nature* (2012) as well as teaching together on a number of workshops. The form and practice of this score, as well as the ideas and issues that it raises, have become central to my approach to filming dance and I am very grateful to Kirstie for introducing me to it.

The Watching Score is a wonderful way to warm up to the idea of filming dance performance, as it tunes us into many important areas, including the thought that at the heart of creating video dance is the relationship between two people, the performer and the cameraperson. Added to this is the fact that there will be a third person involved in that relationship, and that is the viewer, giving rise to the 'triadic relationship' that is sometimes referred to in writing about screen dance.