Issues and Perspectives

The Reclamation of Colonised Spaces Through Screendance Performances

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Humanity, the world with its natural and manmade elements and the universe itself exist on an axis of time and space; this means that from the various epochs of Earth to social and technological advancements, everything is present in its own time and its own physical space. This framework of thinking and relating knowledge together was ingrained in me throughout my primary and secondary school education and has become the backbone of how I understand how the world works. The combination of time and space during various stages of societal development may have contributed to culturally hegemonic events that have taken place. Cultural hegemony is a Marxist philosophical concept coined by Antonio Gramsci that bridges culture with power in our capitalist society. He argues that the natural social order of life has one social group in power that may dominate everyone and everything below it.[1] For example, I believe that hegemonic domination played a fundamental role in the violent success of European colonialism between the 1500s and 1900s. In saying this, I broadly intend that European powers such as but not limited to the British Empire, the Spanish conquistadors, and the French colonial empire forced their cultures and ideologies onto thriving civilizations that in their eyes, were not nearly as worthy as themselves at that time. This Western hegemonic 'trend' led to the colonization of peoples and natural territories. As a white European female, I critically question what the repercussions of colonialism are and how colonised people may use theatre and performance to highlight their histories in an attempt to continue socio-political change in our modern world. Within performance there are a multiplicity of forms that allow artists to represent their ideas and convey their

[1] T. J. Jackson, Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities." *The American Historical Review*, 90:3 (1985), pp. 567–593, (p. 568), *JSTOR* <https://doi.org/10.2307/1860957> [Accessed 05 Dec 2023].

emotions; one such contemporary form is screendance. According to Chapter 5 "Brazilian Videodance: A Possible Mapping", written by Lionel Brum, in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, screendance is an interdisciplinary art form that merges dance with film.[2] Generally, screendance became recognised around the early 1970s with the commercialisation of video cameras and videography.[3] In essence, it involves a movement sequence that is choreographed, filmed, and edited for the screen rather than a live audience. With the rise of screendance in contemporary performance, many choreographers collaborate with directors to cinematically capture their work through film. In this essay centred around space and dance, I intend to investigate how and to what extent artists may use screendance to facilitate the reclamation of colonised spaces in the present. I will analyse two screendance performances both directed by Mark Freeman in collaboration with two different site-local choreographers. The first work is called *BODY WITHOUT A BRAIN* and was produced in 2014 in collaboration with Indonesian choreographer Rianto. The second work is called *CONQUEST and PRISON* and was produced in 2018. I will be focusing on part one of this piece which was in collaboration with South African choreographer Oscar Buthelezi.

To investigate how screendance may serve as a site of liberation for artists, I must first contextualise two key theories. The first of the two is "performance in colonised space". In my opinion, a colonised space is a physical space (which may be a building or geographic territory) that was or is currently controlled by a "non-local" social group. A colonised space may include the natural landscape, the flora and fauna, and the humans inhabiting it. Importantly, those who are in control may perform "enactments of power" in that space.[4] This concept is introduced by the Kenyan performance scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in his article titled "Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space". wa Thiong'o contextualises performance as a "representation of being – the coming to be and

[2] Leonel, Brum, "Brazilian Videodance: A Possible Mapping", in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, ed. Douglas Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.105-124 (p. 105).
[3] Leonel, Brum (p. 107).
[4] Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o, "Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space." *TDR (1988-)*, 41.3 (1997), pp. 11–30, (p. 11), *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1146606> [Accessed 02 Dec 2022].

the ceasing to be of processes in nature, human society and thought".[5] Therefore, in the case of an artist (which may be a choreographer, director, or actor), the performance itself carries the power. Subsequently, wa Thiong'o introduces a fundamental question: "is a performance site ever empty?"[6] He claims that while space may be barren and open, it is never empty as there are ubiquitous histories and memories trapped in that site. I argue this is especially true for post-colonial spaces where in the past, violence, destruction and slavery dominated. As a result, artists who create performances to highlight or reflect on historical power struggles may incorporate the architectural space of the material (physical location) and immaterial (emotional connections) that is present.[7] This is advantageous as it allows spectators to consider their histories and personal knowledge when making sense of a performance piece. Consequently, this brings to light the question of who is entitled to perform, represent, or reclaim those colonised spaces today. As the case studies will exemplify, there needs to be a collaborative process between the choreographer and the director to explore a performance space artistically yet ethically.

This leads to the second theory that needs contextualising, screendance studies. Screendance emerged from an experimental combination of previously established art forms by collaborating artists from different backgrounds. The term screendance itself comes from the interdisciplinary mediums involved in its creation; they are choreography, movement, video, and the screen. As a result of its interdisciplinary properties, screendance has gained several name variations around the world. Etymologically, the word concerns itself with the link between dance and technology, more so dealing with the conflicting notion that technology often overshadows the live presence of a dancing body.[8] In this analysis, the technology I am referring to is filming angles and post-production techniques that may manipulate the original recording to highlight what a director wants to display rather than the raw

[5] Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o, (p. 11).
[6] Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o, (p. 12).
[7] Mark, Freeman, "Conquest and Prison Director Interview", Interview by Giulia Di Bella, YouTube, 07 Dec 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sbbvy0qpw1w> (timestamp: 00:03:13).
[8] Ann, Dils, "Moving Across Time with Words: Toward a Etymology of Screendance" *The International Journal of Screendance,* 2.1 (2012), pp. 24-26. <https://doi.org/10.18061/ijsd.v2i0> [Accessed 05 Dec 2022].

movements and sounds of the dancer. Conversely, the value of screendance lies in its ability to deconstruct and subsequently reconstruct preconceived notions of what dance is. According to an Argentinean researcher Rodrigo Alonso, whom Leonel Brum quotes in his article, screendance allows artists to explore the conflicting emotions and tensions behind a socio-political concern, rather than following a linear narrative in the way that a play or film may do.[9] This suggests that the choreographed movement sequence is not linear and does not follow the techniques of a single dance style. Consequently, as Sophie Walon phrases it in Chapter 16, "Resisting Sociopolitical Constructions of the Body", in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, screendance acts as a resistance to normative bodily movements and functions.[10] As a result, the internal conflict arising in screendance performances is that to defamiliarize the spectator's perception of the human body, the filming and post-production techniques used, play a role in creating the illusion of elastic and versatile dancing bodies.

The unruly and fragmented movement sequence that may come to fruition through a screendance performance allows artists to regain control over their bodies and surroundings. This is exemplified in *BODY WITHOUT A BRAIN*, Mark Freeman's collaborative project with Rianto. As a choreographer, Rianto combines traditional Javanese dance techniques with contemporary concepts to create his unique dance form.[11] *BODY WITHOUT A BRAIN* is a six-minute screendance recorded in Kalimantan, part of the island of Borneo in Indonesia.[12] It is important to note that Borneo is experiencing deforestation and species extinction at an alarming rate to make space for social capitalist gains.[13] The piece takes place in a rainforest clearing where we see lush greenery and a waterfall in the background. Right from the start, Rianto's choreography alternates between slow and smooth, to

[9] Leonel, Brum, (p. 107).
[10] Sophie, Walon, "Corporeal Creations in Experimental Screendance: Resisting Sociopolitical Constructions of the Body", in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, ed. Douglas Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 321-348 (p. 321).
[11] Ronnarong, Khampa, "Creating a Contemporary Dance Based on Traditional Techniques and Spirituality – Fusing Elements from Lanna (Thailand), Indonesia and Japan", *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, 11:1 (2015), pp. 76-89, (p. 79) <https://doi.org/10.14456/jucr.2015.10> [Accessed 12 Dec 2022].
[12] Mark, Freeman, "Body Without A Brain Director Interview", Interview by Giulia Di Bella, YouTube, 07 Dec 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=846KFEwreOg>.
[13] David, Gaveau, Douglas, Sheil, et al., "Rapid conversions and avoided deforestation: examining four decades of industrial plantation expansion in Borneo", *Sci Rep 6, 32017,* (2016) <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep32017> [Accessed 09 Dec 2022].

static and rough. At times, his spasmodic movements imitate those of a seizure. In her writing, Walon claims that screendance is "fluid, plastic, and versatile bodies that resist processes of normalisation and reflection imposed by various political, social and economic norms that often go unnoticed".[14] In *BODY WITHOUT A BRAIN*, Rianto indulges in this notion predominantly with his corporeal interactions with the mud and dirt on the forest floor. His movements are smooth yet aggressive and often impulsive as he lowers his body to the ground. Most of the movement in this moment is focused on his joints specifically his neck, shoulders, and knees. Once he is on the ground, he begins moving with the mud. In saying so, I refer to the fact that he takes his time to tactilely explore the ground beneath him; he is not afraid to get dirty but instead covers himself with the red sandy mud. Throughout the six minutes, he repeats this standing-to-lying routine with increasingly violent and tense bodily movements. This exemplifies an unnormalized and unconventional interaction of the human body with natural earthy elements that are especially controversial in Western modern culture and etiquette. The unruly movements that Rianto performs add to the mise-en-scène of this screendance, as they highlight the animalistic qualities of the human body. A moment in the piece that illustrates this is at 00:01:20 in the video where Rianto beings standing on his toes in the same way that a ballerina on pointe shoes would, only he is doing it barefoot on the muddy ground.[15] The mental and physical endurance necessary to accomplish this choreography pushes the physical limits of the human body to an extreme. This in itself defamiliarizes a spectator's understanding of the conventions of traditional ballet dance techniques. Subsequently, the dancer begins twisting and distorting parts of his torso in a visually uncomfortable way, to imitate the movements of a snake or lizard. This image is emphasised with the added post-production artificial sound score in the background. The combination of the choreography and technological elements in this moment creates the illusion that Rianto is preparing to attack, almost like a predator animal would. Modern social conventions in our real-world act to separate humans

[14] Sophie, Walon, (p. 321).
[15] *BODY WITHOUT A BRAIN*, Directed by Mark Freeman, Performance by Rianto, (2014) Vimeo uploaded by Mark Freeman (06 Jan 2014) <https://vimeo.com/83547502> [Accessed 28 Nov 2022].

from other animal species in such a way that makes us superior, thus, giving humans the power to indulge in activities such as deforestation and mining. However, this piece exhibits screendance's attempt to break that divide as it presupposes that humans are ecological predatory animals too.

Simultaneously, the directorial filming choices made by Freeman allow spectators to consider their personal experiences in their attempt to make sense of this site-specific screendance. In *BODY WITHOUT A BRAIN*, regardless of where a spectator's focus lies, they are constantly made aware of the setting in which this choreography is taking place – the rainforest clearing with the lush greenery and waterfall in the background. While this is partly due to Rianto's continuous interaction with his natural surroundings in his choreography, Freeman uses the camera to capture the natural timely movements of the ecological landscape. For example, the flowing of the waterfall, and the swaying of the leaves in the wind. When considering wa Thiong'o's question of "emptiness in a space" in correlation with the real-world deforestation concern in Borneo, it becomes clear that this chosen performance site has a rich history. Spanning from the flora and fauna that once flourished there, to the violence it endured due to bulldozing activities and its effects on the local tribal communities in the area, they are all memories that inhabit this space. Rianto's spasmodic fast-changing and trance-like choreography invite me to evaluate how this site's trapped memories are embodied by him. As a spectator, I interpret Rianto's position in his relationship with the landscape as perhaps a facilitator in highlighting the violence that the land has endured and liberating it. This is especially evident at the end of this piece when Rianto steps out of the camera frame, and Freeman captures only the natural flow of the waterfall in the background.[16] It is at this moment that one can appreciate the natural performativity of the waterfall, as throughout the rest of the piece our attention lies on Rianto's dancing body rather than his surroundings. This demonstrates that regardless of one's interpretation of the choreography in a piece, the ending image the director chooses to capture may leave a spectator to re-evaluate their overall understanding.

[16] *BODY WITHOUT A BRAIN*.

Consequently, the shared process of creating a screendance performance enables local artists to make evident their histories through the cinematic lens of a director with a global outreach. This is exemplified in *CONQUEST and PRISON*, a two-part screendance performance directed by Freeman in 2018. This essay will look specifically at "Part I: Oscar's Journey", which was performed by a Black South African choreographer Oscar Buthelezi. The eight-minute, 20-second screendance was recorded on Gunfire Hill in Grahamstown, South Africa. The first 20 seconds of the video show written contexual information about the history of colonialism in the local area.[17] Therefore, right from the start, Freeman intends to educate the spectators on the historical violence that local tribal communities endured by the British empire in the 19th and 20th centuries. In his article, wa Thiong'o claims that "the performance space of the artist stands for openness".[18] When considering "Oscar's Journey", this artistically allows Buthelezi to express his emotions and memories of the past while building a relationship with the performance site – Fort Selwyn. In an interview about the process of creating this screendance, Freeman states that much of Buthelezi's choreography "was largely improvised based on his response to the place, […] it's his personal journey that is layered with the history that he shares".[19] The choreography begins with him standing on a stone ledge. In front of him, there is a battle canon, and in the background, there is a view from above of Grahamstown. He positions his body in front of the canon as if to create a barrier to stop the bomb from landing in the town below. His fingers and shoulders move slowly and with meticulous detail. Buthelezi then picks up a stone from the ledge and beings building a physical relationship with it by *moving with the stone* as opposed to *moving the stone*. At 00:02:00 in the film, the scene cuts to a low-angle shot that captures Buthelezi with the stone and a clear blue sky in the background.[20] He moves around the ledge with the stone in his left hand while balancing on one foot. Here an uneasy atmosphere builds up as the strenuous movements of the dancer

[17] CONQUEST and PRISON, Directed by Mark Freeman, Performance by Oscar Buthelezi, Lorin Sookool, and Julia Wilson, (2018) The Routledge Performance Archive: Taylor and Francis, <https://www-routledgeperformancearchive-com.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/video/conquest-and-prison> [Accessed 03 Dec 2022].
[18] Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o, (p.28).
[19] Mark, Freeman, "Conquest and Prison Director Interview" (timestamp: 00:05:44).
[20] CONQUEST and PRISON (timestamp: 00:02:00).

are captured by his tense muscles and facial sweat. This makes me question whether in this moment the stone and Buthelezi's body become a metaphor for the bomb that would come out of the canon. As a result, the choreography acts as an embodiment of a real conflict that may have happened at Gunfire Hill centuries ago. Another moment where this relationship is built further begins at 00:02:30. Here, Freeman frames Buthelezi's dancing shadow as opposed to his dancing body.[21] Because of the filming angle and Buthelezi's position in the sun, his moving shadow is often stretched or magnified in such a way that defamiliarize the human body. Given the context of this screendance, I interpret these moment as ghostly memories coming to life. Consequently, Freeman's cinematic choices build a tense and unruly atmosphere for spectators as they are forced to witness an abundance of material. It may represent the relationship between Buthelezi as a Black South African dancer in the 21st century struggling to deal with the colonial violence that his ancestors endured centuries prior.

While screendance may be advantageous in its ability to capture a memory and reach a wider audience, in order for the artist to be equally represented by the director, there must be a collaborative approach. The consequence of not doing so is that a screendance performance may become a form of cultural and historical extraction. In saying so, I refer to the fact that a director or production team may take the story or memories of the artist and present them on a global platform from their perspective. This becomes especially dangerous when elements of cultural appropriation, colonialism and racism are at play as the voice is taken away from the artist and rewritten. In an interview about the production process for *CONQUEST and PRISON*, Freeman comments that he was invited by Oscar and the other artists into the local community and given the chance to learn about their culture and history.[22] This demonstrates his success in witnessing, learning about and subsequently interpreting Oscar's story cinematically. Thus, suggesting that a culturally or racially external director must approach this experience with a willingness to learn in order to not blend over the boundary of performance ownership. In the same interview, Freeman says "if the works are a successful collaboration, they

[21] CONQUEST and PRISON (timestamp: 00:02:30).
[22] Mark, Freeman, "Conquest and Prison Director Interview".

amplify voices that may not be heard by audiences that are unfamiliar with the culture or the history or the perspective that's represented by the participants in these dances."[23] This implies that the choreographies in *CONQUEST and PRISON* and in *BODY WITHOUT A BRAIN* belong to the artists. Freeman uses his skills to artistically interpret the pieces and then acts almost as a platform for them to be globally accessible. An evident way in which Freeman does this, is that in the performance descriptions on public websites such as the Routledge Performance Archive, he contextualises the dances by providing information about the choreographers and their works, and the history of the specific performance site. In doing so, he presents the performance ownership to the artists whilst recognising the important history of the filming locations.

Fundamentally, the two case studies studied in this investigation illustrate the importance of the relationship between time and space in performance. In saying so, I refer to the fact that a performance space (especially a public and natural space) has a history embedded in it that is set in its own time. In the Bornean rainforests featured in *BODY WITHOUT A BRAIN*, the ecological landscape has been violated and manipulated over the past century to make space for mineral extraction, and agricultural activities. While Grahamstown the performance site for *CONQUEST and PRISON* is a living reminder of the colonial violence endured for centuries by Black African tribes and communities. However, contemporary artists whose cultures and histories are entangled with those of the sites may choose to use those spaces to choreographically embody and represent those memories. This in itself emphasises the idea that the politics of performance spaces are influenced by the context of time within history. Similarly, the choreographies devised by Rianto and Buthelezi respectively, demonstrate that a performance space is filled with what one physically sees, but also with immaterial and emotional ideals. The power of the performance then stands in its ability to bring out the immaterial qualities both from the artist's and the spectator's perspective. As a result, screendance performances allow the audience to consider their own background when attempting to interpret them. As Freeman suggested

[23] Mark, Freeman, "Conquest and Prison Director Interview" (timestamp: 00:08:01).

in a recent interview, dance and cinema are both involved with movement separately; screendance provides a space for the two art mediums to meet.[24] Conclusively, because of the entangled tension and conflict that historically reside in any space, screendance ultimately creates a space for commenting on social concerns in the modem world.

[24] Mark, Freeman, Personal Interview, 07 Dec 2022.

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