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16:9- A Study of Manipulating Perceptions Through Movement

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16:9- A Study of Manipulating Perceptions Through Movement

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Alonzo King LINES Ballet
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superficial (adj)- appearing to be true or real only until examined more closely

Abstract

This thesis explores the concepts of editing and manipulating through the deconstruction and rebuilding of ideas. Inspiration sprung through researching the job of a film editor, and noting how an editing action takes place in everyday life. Using Thelma Schoonmaker's body of work, which includes her film editing on a number of Martin Scorsese's films, I examined this idea of manipulation through choreographing my Senior Dance Project. Titled *16:9*, the dance also shows the power of deconstruction through a thoughtfully constructed short film, which is presented halfway through. A film editor can take documentary footage and make the end result completely different from the series of events that actually happened. We in turn do this in our lives every day. This editing action shows up in simple ways such as us making slight changes in our dialogue based on who we are talking to. We can also exhibit big personality shifts based on changes in our environment. Arguably the most common way we manipulate ourselves in real life is through social media, and the sculpting of an electronic reality which does not mirror our actual lives. In doing this, it changes people's perceptions of us, and of ourselves, in the same way that tools film editors use change the viewer's perception of reality. Deception is incredibly powerful. Using this motif of manipulation to inform my choreographic process, I was able to create a world on stage where the audience was left to distinguish what was real from what was not.

Introduction

In our senior year as dance majors, we get the opportunity to choreograph on the underclassmen, and present our final piece in the Senior Project Dance Performance in February. Transitioning from dancing in Senior Projects for the past three years to being the leader of one is an enriching experience. I was inspired this summer by my feeling manipulated by the media. I noticed how readily I and everyone around me accepted what we see around us as real, without question. I started reprocessing the way I watched television, looked at advertisements, and talked to the people around me. I started to notice how even when we know things aren't necessarily true (i.e. reality television), we don't always care as long as it's for the sake of our entertainment. We become so invested that it starts to not matter if what we are watching isn't authentic. This notion of manipulation is ever-present in our everyday lives.

Curious as to what other people thought of this topic, I opened up the conversation to my dancers on the first day. More pointedly, I asked them questions about times they felt they have manipulated a situation, and times they themselves have felt manipulated. The conversation eventually evolved into this idea of perceptions, and more specifically the idea that how we view people is greatly influenced by how we view the world, and how we view ourselves. We can unfairly judge someone's character through our own misconceptions that are out of his or her control, completely manipulating reality. Manipulation gets very powerful very quickly. Our brains are always trying to make sense of things, and can usually be easy to persuade. We believe

what's in front of us, because that is our instinct. My Senior Dance Project was built off of, and addresses all of these ideas.

My choreographic work *16:9*, spanning just over 11 minutes, takes the viewer on a journey which explores the concept of feeling and being manipulated. With choreography informed by film editor Thelma Schoonmaker's body of work, five dancers paint the stage with stories of their own, along with stories that are created for them. Using two artistic mediums, dance and video, the space is filled with a sense of exposing what is real and what is not, and the internal struggles one faces within that notion. This thesis will draw a parallel between the real life feeling of being manipulated, and the ideologies found in the editing of film. In both life and film, details can be taken out, altered, and misconstrued. The taking out of details can leave us feeling manipulated, or as though we have been given false information.

Thelma Schoonmaker and the Power of Editing

Over summer, our Senior Project advisor Kara Davis bestowed upon us senior dance majors a research project. The task was to get inspired by an artist outside of the realm of dance, the goal being to use this artist as a source in our choreographic processes. I have been fascinated by photography for as long as I can remember. I am attracted to the one split second in time that a picture shows, and the lasting effect it has. Pictures only show a portion of reality, and can sometimes capture more emotion than the event actually taking place. The world of photography spiraled my thought into video making and editing- a realm I am much less familiar with. I started noticing the extent of which video impacts my life when watching *The Bachelor*. Though reality television

may seem like a remedial example, it is something that is very easily and vastly consumed by the public. I noticed how the drama in the show was greatly heightened by the film edits that were made. With an excess of footage, the video editors can make the women say just about anything they want them to say, by only editing clips together. We like to think that everyone is staying as true to the story as possible, but we don't in actuality know unless we ourselves are involved in said story. Now, it can be inferred that everything we see on reality television should be taken with a grain of salt, but we keep watching the shows. For the sake of our entertainment, people will take anything at face value.

In noticing how much power a film editor has, I filled both with excitement and anxiousness. In movies, without a good film editor, the film may as well not make sense. The art of editing is in a sense more powerful than the art of directing, because the edit is the last word in the conversation, so to speak. This all led me to researching film editors for my artist research project. I happened upon Thelma Schoonmaker, and was fascinated by her history and how she spoke about her craft.

Thelma Schoonmaker has been the film editor of all of Martin Scorsese's films since *Raging Bull* in 1980, for which she won an Academy Award for Best Film Editing. She has since won the same Academy Award two other times for *The Aviator* (2004), and *The Departed* (2006). Martin Scorsese is partial to using actors' improvisation in his movies. To this date, the improvised scene in *Raging Bull* between Robert De Niro and Joe Pesci is the hardest scene Schoonmaker has ever edited. For this particular scene, they used one camera, and kept it rolling for two hours on one actor, and two hours on the

other. The actors were given by Scorsese a beginning point and an end point, but could go anywhere with the scene in between. Schoonmaker then had 4 hours of improvised footage, to be edited to make sense in a 5 minute clip. She had to craft her own version of the story, using the stories given to her by other people. The motif of taking stories and breaking them apart to create new stories was one that appeared a lot for me in my research. I was inspired especially since we use improvisation heavily in dance. This motif of deconstruction is also something I wanted to explore on a dramatic level. The way Schoonmaker talked about editing as an art of deconstruction turned to construction is what inspired me to use her as my artist. I knew that I could apply all the same concepts of video to dance. All of this information also drove me to incorporate a video in my project, which would exude all of the principles of editing and manipulating the audience's perception of what is happening.

When asked by an interviewer how it was that such a nice lady could edit Scorsese's violent gangster pictures, Thelma smiled and replied, "Ah, but they aren't violent *until* I've edited them."

Casting

After my summer research project, I was excited to apply everything that Thelma and the power of editing had taught me. I wanted a cast that would be equally as excited and involved as myself. I love sharing thoughts and ideas, so I knew I wanted the process to be incredibly collaborative. In order for my vision to come to fruition, I needed dancers who were willing to share themselves and their stories with myself and each other, but also feel comfortable enough to break them apart and deconstruct them.

The seniors are responsible for conducting the auditions for Senior Projects. We each got designated a section to be in charge of, and choreographed a phrase according to our designation. I was in charge of partnering, so myself and another senior, Amelia, choreographed a short partnering phrase. Getting up to the front of the room for auditions is very intimidating, and is the first taste of what Senior Projects are going to be like.

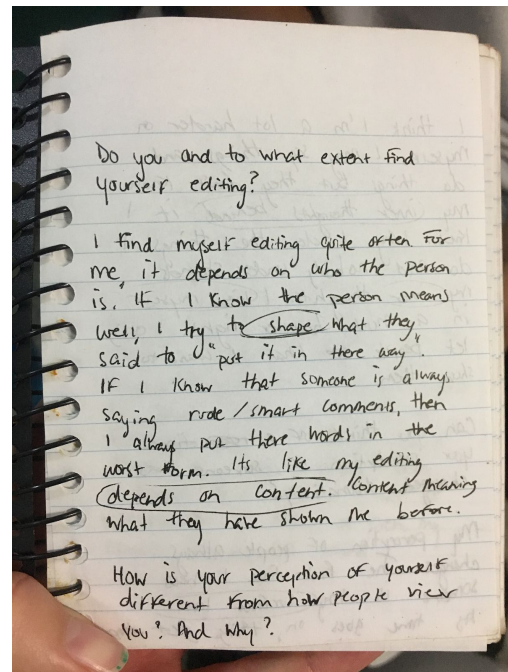
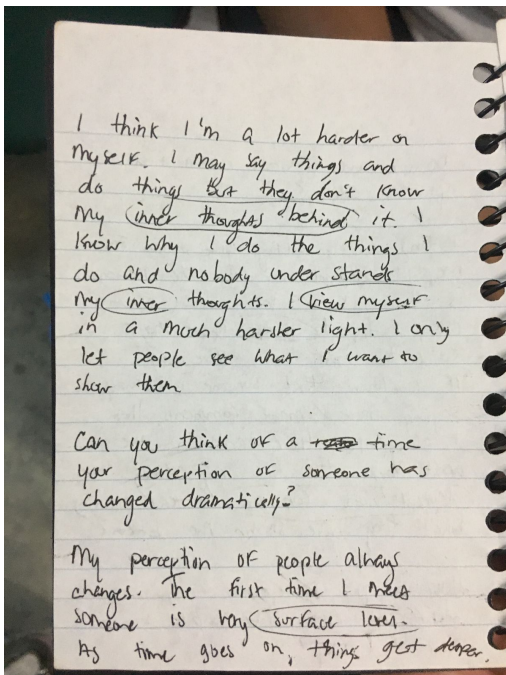
While watching the underclassmen audition, I already had an idea of who I wanted to work with, based on pure openness and willingness to learn. I used the audition mostly just to confirm where my head was at going into it. Coming out of the audition, I cast an eclectic and powerful group of women who I knew would come excitedly with me on this journey: Chloe (junior), Jennifer (sophomore), Amelia (sophomore), Ebony (sophomore), and Maddie (freshman).

Choreographic Process

I knew from the start that I wanted the piece to be incredibly collaborative. I craved for us all to be film editors by manipulating the concepts, the choreography, and their bodies. One of the main sources of generating material came from the dancers' own writing. I had them all free write to questions I asked, including "When is a time that you have felt manipulated?" and "When is a time you remember manipulating a situation?" After having them reflect for some time, I asked them to pass their notebooks to the person next to them. This person was not allowed to read the entries, only to skim, and in doing that find words or phrases that stuck out to them. Once they passed the notebooks back to their original owners, they had their words and phrases chosen for them. The

words were their own, but now they were taken out of context and chosen for them by a third party.

Being able to write from a deep place is not something that dancers are asked to do regularly. The act of passing your notebook on to another set of eyes is a very vulnerable one, and even more vulnerable is that foreign set of eyes marking up the paper you have just poured your heart into. When I first asked the dancers to pass their notebooks, I noticed a strong sense of hesitation. Once I told them that they'd only be skimming and circling for words and phrases that stood out to them, I felt the room lose all tenseness. This intrigued me. They were more anxious at the idea of their words being read than by their words being taken out of context. I also recognized that I would feel the same way about the exercise.



Pages 2-3 from Ebony's notebook, circled by another dancer.

The dancers were then tasked with the challenge of making a phrase inspired only using the words that were circled for them. The result was a beautiful assortment of words translated into their movements. Because this was the first exercise that we did together, I decided that these are the phrases that I would use to open the piece. I constructed this first section by having the dancers walk from the back of the stage to the front, doing gestures I set on them. Once the dancers reached the front of the stage, they all collapsed to the ground into a group cuddle. They then quickly change positions to sit in a circle, like they were when writing, and go in one at a time and share their phrases. Once they got to the fourth woman, Amelia, I decided that the section needed a sense of push and pull between the soloist and the group, to give the effect of group vs. individual in a manipulative setting. When Amelia does her solo, she has a big pushing gesture. It is at this time that all of the women sitting down get up aggressively and run in the direction of the push, as if she is controlling them to do so. They then all turn around slowly and go back to sit down in their spots. Jennifer goes last to share her solo. She does a repetitive motion that looks as if she is trying to get something off of her. As her movement gets bigger and bigger, the dancers sitting down start to crawl backwards, as if they slightly scared of her. Once Jennifer falls to the ground, she lands in the same position as them, and slowly brushes her hand up her leg and onto her chest, to which they copy her. The section then ends with them all coming together in a line, and then Chloe coming to pick up Jennifer and hold her hand to guide her upstage.

The whole section has this motif of the innocent watching of each other, the way a child would watch a cartoon. This soon turns into being controlling, and being

controlled, which depicts how impressionable we are. Three women go into the circle watched without being affected, but once the fourth woman goes, the tension builds and the watchers are pushed. Then with the fifth woman, the watchers are first scared, but also interested, and shortly after try to copy exactly what the soloist is doing. The section is a whole cycle of watching, being controlled, being fearful, and then imitating. Once Chloe saves Jennifer from the cycle, they share a tender duet which is a refreshing contrast to the beginning's lack of contact between the dancers.

The song used in this first section is one that I changed a lot throughout the process. I loved the idea of putting a song onto the choreography that's lyrics had nothing to do with the section, but had the feeling I was trying to evoke. This is a technique that is used heavily in movies and television. The tone and ambience of a song used strongly enhances the way we watch and perceive the scene. The song I landed on was "Between the Bars" by Madeleine Peyroux.

I love the way Madeleine's voice is so tender, yet so pained. Her voice transports me to another world, which is the way I wanted this section to feel. She could be singing any lyric, and the affect would be the same. What she does sing about, however, is pretty heavy. She sings about drinking, and telling her significant other to drink with her. She sings of drinking and forgetting, and kissing "between the bars." I love the way the heavy lyrics contrast the seemingly innocent picture the dancers are painting. It leaves a sort of chilling feeling. The song brings out this notion of watching and doing, or listening and doing, almost as if they are kids at a sleepover listening to this song and being fed these ideas. About halfway through the song, she says, "People you've been

before that you don't want around anymore. They push, shove, won't bend to your will. I'll keep them still." It is during this lyric that Amelia has her big push, to which the group reacts. The two entities, Amelia's push, and the song lyric, were completely separate, and somehow linked up perfectly, without plan. The phrases the dancers created and the song lyrics have nothing to do with each other, yet they somehow tell an intense and seemingly thought out story to the audience. The song both manipulated and added to the perception of what the story was trying to say.

At the end of Chloe and Jennifer's duet, one of them physically molds the other into a shape, or "Vogue pose," and then copies the pose herself. This cycle continues until Chloe gets stuck in one of the poses that Jennifer put her in. She then starts distorting her body, at first small, but then continues into more of a convulsion until she breaks free into her own movement.



Jennifer (left) and Chloe (right) in their "Vogue poses"



Chloe gets stuck in her last pose before solo

This is the only thing happening on stage, so that it's the only thing the audience's eye can focus on. The "Vogue poses" are this statement of willingly allowing oneself to

be physically manipulated into an uncomfortable pose, and then watching as the person who puts you there copies you. This cycle shows the knowing how uncomfortable you felt when the posing was being done to you, but being fascinated about the idea of doing it to someone else. Thus the cycle continues. When Chloe gets stuck in her last pose, and starts twitching, it's an ode to the discomfort that was brought, as well as the struggle one feels when trying to break this sort of cycle. As Chloe is convulsing, Jennifer falls backwards, and crawls off of the stage slowly. Chloe breaks her convulsion by starting a solo that sweeps across the stage.

The song shifts during the "Vogue poses," from the end of "Between the Bars," to a sort of distorted version of the notes. It then fades into "Library of Babel" by Baird, remixed by MANSHN. This remix has a lot of echo, and showcases a voice singing a series of notes over and over again. This repetition parallels the repetition and cycle of the "Vogue poses" that just occurred. Once Chloe starts her solo, her own words begin, which are an introduction to the video that is about to occur:

The endless varieties fascinate me and excites me every time I even think about it.

It definitely makes me feel a certain way that no other thing can. And it holds a special place in my heart. (Ha, C.)

During Chloe's solo, the rest of the cast brings the equipment for the video onto the stage. Once everything was all set up, Ebony hands Chloe the sheet on which the movie will be projected to end her solo.

The video was something I knew that I wanted from the very beginning. My piece was inspired by film, so I wanted to be my own filmmaker. In order for the film to

be successful, the audience had to be misled and manipulated in a big way. The idea I settled on was having all of the dancers talk passionately about their favorite foods, and I would cut it with clips of them dancing to make it look like it was dance they were talking about. I started by asking them to all pick a favorite food, one to stick with throughout the whole process. Once they picked, I asked them all why their favorite food was as such, and most importantly, how it makes them feel when they eat it. The dancers got really involved and passionate, using words like "fulfill" and "satisfied." Once they finalized their scripts, I gave them time to make their food phrase- a short series of movements about what they wrote.

Once I recorded the dancers reciting their scripts, I set up a tripod and made the room feel like an interview. I asked them all the same question: "How does your favorite food make you feel?" and they all gave me one sentence. I then recorded their food phrases, making sure to get lots of different angles to give me as much to work with as possible. After the production was over, it was down to the editing. I first had to find clips in their voice recordings that were ambiguous enough to where they could have been talking about anything. In some cases, I cut together a couple of words from three different sentences to make a new one. Maddie's full uncut script is as follows:

I feel like it's something that literally everyone loves. But, I mean deep down I think that I love it a little bit more than everyone else. I've loved it, honestly like it's been my favorite since I was so young. But my taste has evolved overtime, and now I like more unique flavors, but really anything is so good. It's all the

best. It's just so rich and creamy, and hits the spot at any time, even when I've just had the biggest meal. Like, I could go for a little bit of ice cream. (Friedman, M.)

In the video, I cut her words to say:

I feel like it's something that literally everyone loves, but I mean deep down I think I love it a little bit more than everyone else. I've loved it since I was so young. It's just so rich, and it's my favorite. (Friedman, M.)

Once I had all of the words cut together, all that was left was to overlay it with the clips of them dancing. The end result showed what appeared to be them talking passionately about dance. At the end, they all reveal what they were actually talking about, in short statements "And that's why I like ___ so much." During the film, the dancers were all laying down, as if they were watching a home movie, and turned around to face the audience and do their food phrase when the screen showed them talking on the video.

For both shows, we got lots of laughs from the audience, confirming that they were tricked. People aren't used to hearing people, especially dancers, talk so passionately about "unhealthy" foods, which added to the shock value. When talking to my mom after the show, she mentioned that she found some of the verbiage to be strange, for instance Jennifer's use of the word "full." However, she didn't think to question it while watching, because she wasn't given any reason to believe that they were talking about anything other than dance. This shows how easily we are able to disregard small signals when we are being fed what we think is the truth.

After the video, everything was silent as Ebony took away all of the equipment. Chloe was still holding the sheet, in a way that looked like a photo shoot. Amelia knelt

down on the sheet like a chair, and Maddie sat on top of her as if she were taking professional headshots with a photographer. She took down her hair, and really lived up the moment. While this was all happening, Jennifer was marking the next phrase coming up on the side, directly next to the photo shoot, completely unbothered by what was going on. This was to represent the idea that everyone has his or her own agenda, no matter what anyone else is doing. Each woman on stage was in her own moment, playing her own part. Eventually, Ebony joined Jennifer in marking the next phrase. The dancers felt the moment, and once they were ready, held the pose to start the next phrase. When holding this pose, they finally looked over Maddie mid-photo shoot. Maddie got up, did her hair, and held the pose with them. Amelia went over soon after, and Chloe went off of stage to put the sheet away. Chloe running on the stage was the cue to start the last piece of music, and they all joined each other in unison for the next phrase.

This next phrase was a series of walking patterns. I was really interested in the way we walk, and questioned why some walks were normal, and some were strange. Was there something in media that told us to walk or hold ourselves a certain way? To address this question, I came up with a few different walks that they all executed in unison, including walking sideways and walking on their toes with bent knees. After the walking pattern, all of the women fall to the ground while Ebony strikes a "Vogue pose," and then goes into her solo.

In this last section, I come back to the literal motion of shaping each other's bodies, or the "Vogue poses," as a motif. I was really interested in poses that seem extremely unnatural, but are recognizable through media. This time, instead of just the

two women manipulating each other, all 5 women are involved. The posing started at the end of Ebony's solo, when she falls. Once she falls, the other women rush towards her on the ground, and shape her into a pose. She holds it for a second, and then moves to the next person. They then go down the line, all moving a portion of the person's body they are manipulating. The person holds it for a second, and then onto the next. At the end, Jennifer gets posed. This time, everyone copies the pose, in the same manner that this motif occurs the first time it was presented. The hitting of this pose by the whole cast starts a unison phrase, which is one of the only times that the women are all completely in unison. This made their togetherness all the more powerful, almost as if they have all been taken over at the same moment.



Photo from *16:9* of the last section. Dancers appear in unison for one of the only times.

The music for this last section, starting from when Chloe runs on stage, was a hard-hitting, epic score composed by MANSHN. I worked directly with this musician to

get the exact tone that I wanted. I described to him how the song needed to be heavy and weighted, because this is the first time we see all of the dancers in unison. The subtleties in the track emphasize the feeling of the choreography. The steady base leavens the movement, and makes the feeling thick and warm.

At the very end of the piece, the track fades into Ebony's whole uncut food script as the lyrics, so that the audience could hear what I was working with for the video. I was really moved by the passion in her voice, and how unfaltering and truthful it was.

Ebony's uncut script is as follows:

Chocolate makes me feel so vulnerable at times. When I eat a piece after a long day, I feel loved. It's so beautiful it makes me wanna cry, honestly. Every piece I take in makes me feel warm. And it fulfills me, whether I need bitter or sweet it always comes through. And I always come back for more. (Davies, E.)

I cut her script in the video starting with cutting the first part of "chocolate" out, so it just sounded like "it," to read:

[Chocol] ate makes me feel so vulnerable at times. It makes me feel warm. It's so beautiful it makes me wanna cry, honestly. (Davies, E.)

Ebony's full uncut script being the last thing the audience hears has an extreme twinge of humor. Though humorous, the music done by MANSN brings out the beautiful openness in her voice and words. The words are presented in a way that makes you feel how rich they are, which leaves a lasting impression. While Ebony's words were going, the dancers came full circle by coming to the same cuddle they had at the beginning of

the piece, only facing backwards instead. Her words faded out as the dancers sunk to the ground.

As the final lasting image, I wanted to keep playing with this modeling idea, only have it be more human. So for their bow, the stage went black, and then the lights come up on them posed as if they were taking a family portrait. The stage blacks out again, and the lights come up on them doing a silly picture. The final blackout into lights up is the dancers with their arms raised, preparing for their bow. A series of pictures to end the piece encompasses completely what the piece is about.

Watching the Final Product

When watching the end product, I could only think of how differently my piece turned out from how I planned it. There were many moments of doubt, where I wasn't sure if everything would read to an audience member. Through every moment of doubt, however, there was always more than one solution to the problem. Having five other creative minds in the room was solution enough to any difficulty that was faced. With a different set of dancers, the piece would have turned out not even remotely similar to this one. Watching the piece from the audience, I felt like I wasn't even the one who orchestrated it. Being an audience member was such an out of body experience, that I felt as though I was watching the piece for the first time for both Friday and Saturday's shows. I was able to laugh alongside the audience, feel uncomfortable, sad, and happy all at the same time. The hard part was over. There was nothing left to teach, but everything left to gain. I noticed things while watching that I had never noticed before, for the first time not from a critical eye, but from an observant one. Being the viewer, and not the

choreographer, gave me an entirely different perspective, one that was detached, but also equally as attached, wanting to know what came next.

Reflecting on and writing about my Senior Project, *16:9*, has made me learn more about my thesis than I ever thought I would know. Writing about my work has been incredibly enriching and informative. The unique nature of performing art is such that it only occurs a handful of times, in this case twice, and then it's over. There are recordings of the work, but the affect recorded dance has on you and the impact it leaves is not the same as a live performance. A live performance is about sharing to the audience, and receiving feedback from them through means of laughter and applause. The journey one goes through when watching a live dance performance is unmatched, and is something I am proud to have achieved. This is why being able to write about dance is so special. Writing about dance makes dance more permanent.

Live performances leave little room for reflection, especially for an audience member. A viewer watches the piece, and then drops his or her thoughts, and finishes about the day. Although there might be a strong impact left on the individual, and he or she may talk about it afterwards, it isn't the same as having a physical copy of a poem, or a song that you can listen to again. There is no way to memorize a quote, or a song lyric when watching a dance. Video of dance is a mere shadow of what the performance was. This is why the fleeting nature of performance art makes it so unique. For that reason, writing this thesis has helped to encapsulated every part of my process for me from beginning to end. Writing about dance and my process has been a beautiful signature on my whole process. Through writing my thesis, I have learned more about my

choreography, which is something I never thought would happen. Looking back, I have realized that by fully taking on the roll of an editor, my processes flourished in an organic way. Happy accidents happened every day in rehearsals, ones which reinforced my thesis.

Being able to express myself and my ideas through choreographing has been special. Creating a scholarly work through mediums of dance and video has reinforced for me just how powerful and important art is.

What Next?

Writing this thesis has opened my mind to many new ideas, ones that I hope to see through. I am excited by this idea of mixing art forms, and want to keep pushing this further. Being an editor gives me a sense of freedom that I didn't anticipate finding. I am really interested in all of the places that I could have taken *16:9*. I think the work could have alternate endings, and more choices within it. I see myself in the lighting booth, changing the lighting on the dancers to black out some people and light others in a way that the dancers wouldn't expect. I see asking my dancers what their favorite movement was in their solos, and then taking that movement out. I see myself taking out my favorite sections. I made edits throughout my process, but I wonder what big edits like these would look like. I am realizing now that although I embraced taking on the role of a film editor, I focused more on the side of making sure the audience understands my thesis, and didn't leave myself time to play with big cuts like these. I am so proud of my final result, but am equally as excited by all the places the piece could go from here.

My thesis aside, I hope to keep making art for the rest of my life. Moments like watching your choreography on stage for the first time are moments that cannot be replicated in any other way. Though I am new to video, I hope to become a master one day, using idols akin to Thelma Schoonmaker as my role models. Bringing art forms together creates a harmonious relationship between them, one which accelerates both entities. Watching and writing about my choreography has made me excited about my future in dance, and I wouldn't change any part of this journey.

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