

## Still Moving: Searching for Grace

Melanie Kitchens O'Meara

My interest in making movies originated with an interest in staging photographs. I made my first video essay, "Occident in Motion," which used Vsevolod Meyerhold's actor training system Biomechanics to investigate Eadweard Muybridge's series of photographs "Woman Walking with a Watering Can," for a conference in 2011. The following year, I had to miss a conference for health reasons and made a video essay for presentation in absentia. I continued making movies because shooting and editing still and moving images excited me, but I have never really tried to articulate much of my process beyond that. As I review the movies I have made over the years in response to this special issue, I see several of my favorite concepts at work: Roland Barthes' punctum, Meyerhold's stylization, and John Cage's grace. In this essay, I explain how these concepts influence my creative process. I draw specifically on three movies made for performance panels at the Southern States Communication Association Convention and the National Communication Association Convention. "Finding Annie: A Reenactment of a True Story about an Abandoned Fish" is a movie in which I utilized chance practices to play with the story of how I found my pet fish, Little Orphan Annie. In "Body Buildings: A Vanishing Georgia," I experimented with the memories and histories buried in an archival photograph of a little girl posing with her dolls from the Vanishing Georgia Collection in the Digital Library of Georgia. For the movie "Stylization and Discipline in Yoga," I used Meyerhold's "basic steps toward stylization" to investigate the role of discipline in yoga (Pitches 52).

Much of my process for making movies is based on the search for what John Cage calls grace. In his meditation on modern dance, and more broadly, the time arts like dance, poetry, music, film, and performance, Cage writes about the co-presence of clarity and grace as essential to "a firmly established art prac-

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**Note:** This text accompanies three video essays: *Finding Annie: The True Story of a Fish Called Little Orphan Annie* [[liminalities.net/14-2/annie.html](http://liminalities.net/14-2/annie.html)]; *Stylization and Discipline in Yoga* [[liminalities.net/14-2/yoga.html](http://liminalities.net/14-2/yoga.html)]; and *Body Buildings: A Vanishing Georgia* [[liminalities.net/14-2/body.html](http://liminalities.net/14-2/body.html)].

tice" (131). He defines clarity as basic rhythmic structure—"the cold, mathematical, inhuman . . . earthy" structure against and with which grace exists (133). For Cage, grace is not "prettiness," but grace is "warm, incalculable, human, opposed to clarity, and like the air" (133). When making movies I love to revel in the grace, but before doing so, I establish clarity by setting guidelines and defining my objectives.

I begin by considering the guidelines drawn from panel abstracts or "rules" given by the panel chair(s). For instance, I made "Finding Annie" for a panel that limited performances to a timespan of two minutes or less. Johnny Cash's "I Want to Go Home" set the tone for the short movie about a forlorn goldfish I found one day while leading my students in an outdoor activity on campus. Probably some kind of class experiment, the fish was in a container of water next to a sign that said "take me." What was so remarkable about Annie, besides the way I acquired her, was her friendliness towards people. Anytime a person entered the room she energetically swam at them with a determination and excitement that commanded attention. Whether her friendliness was about food, companionship, or gratitude for a home, I will never really know, but her behavior along with her story of finding a home inspired me. Drawing upon the chance nature of our encounter, I transferred Annie into a pint glass of water, made a "take me" sign, and drove downtown to make the movie. On the way, I noticed an empty bus stop and pulled off to shoot a scene. I continued to search for other desolate settings that I felt could effectively communicate a sense of abandonment and loneliness to the viewer. After collecting these moments, I shot a scene in which we had dinner outside of my favorite downtown taco bar. Prominently placed on the table, Annie excitedly swam from wall to wall of her glass, while I joyfully drank a beer from mine.

Another critical part of the process is working from a performance method. For "Stylization and Discipline in Yoga" I used Meyerhold's basic "steps toward stylization" as outlined by Jonathan Pitches to view discipline in my yoga practice (52). I had recently completed a 200-hour yoga teacher training, during which I often found myself connecting my experiences with Meyerhold's training for his actors. The intense physical stress I put on my body while training, paired with the normal stresses of life, brought my underlying illness of Sjogren's syndrome, an autoimmune disease that affects my joints, to the surface. I was forced to accept my inability to do many of the yoga poses I had learned to love. To tell my story, I used Meyerhold's stylization. I distilled my yoga practice to an essence or potent metaphor, which I articulated as acceptance, then staged the distillation using exaggeration and manipulation, while also "pay[ing] particular attention" to rhythm (Pitches 52). Stylization is particularly noticeable during the stop-action sections, in which I used the yoga pose *malasana II* to convey the essence of acceptance. I felt that photographs would reveal the nuances of the body positions required to perform the pose,

better than video footage. I took 83 photographs of myself getting in and out of the pose while facing five different directions and wearing multiple outfits. During the editing process, which I align with grace below, I exaggerated and manipulated the photographs and the pose by playing with order, rhythm, and repetition.

After establishing some basic clarity, I set out on an adventure to find grace. Shooting footage is very much a “warm, incalculable . . . like the air” process for me. Sure, I may start with a list of ideas and images, but my staging of the scene and capturing of the images often occur organically. For “Body Buildings,” I created a performance genealogy starting with the photograph of Carolyn Nicolson posing with her doll collection. After collecting co-texts which included paper dolls, Hole’s song “Doll Parts,” bits of history about the Nicolson’s and their historic home, photographs of Carolyn and the home from the archive, and photographs of girls with dolls, girls that look like dolls, and doll parts, I shot footage at my home. With the texts, a pair of scissors, a paper cutter, and a glue stick, I made paper dolls in as many ways as I could think to do so. My husband helped me, as he often does, and we had a blast experimenting with the materials at hand. For me, the discovery through play is what I enjoy the most. I did not set out to behead Carolyn with scissors or create an assembly line of creepy paper dolls that dance to the Beatles “Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da,” but it happened, and the grotesque images accurately reflect my initial response to the photograph. For Barthes, the punctum “is the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces” the viewer (26). Incalculable and unpredictable like grace, the punctum is the wound that makes us fall in love with a photograph. The expression of contentment on Carolyn’s face as she sits amongst the dozens of creepy doll eyes and smiling cherub faces is what disturbed and, ultimately, punct me. I was around her age in the photo when a teenage neighbor told me a horrifying tale about a china doll that came to life and murdered a family. Any lifelike doll I had as a child was promptly put in a container and placed on the top shelf of a closet. Such experiences of punctum, or brushes with grace, are what make our stories more interesting to tell, and these are the moments I collect in the still and moving shots I use to make my movies.

Though I did not intend to use Meyerhold’s stylization to create all of these movies, I can see the concept at work in each of them, especially when considering my process of editing. I set out with a story to tell and my aim is to enable the audience to play an active role in the interpretation of my movies. To do so, I depend heavily on isolating and enhancing the fleeting moments of grace contained in the photos and footage. I manipulate and exaggerate these moments by experimenting with sound, music, and special effects. My end goal is to uncover the inherent rhythm within each of the elements I use to make my films, and the editing is where I combine, contrast, and harmonize these rhythms into

a finely polished punctum for the viewer. In my search for grace, I invite viewers to find and create their own moments of grace and punctum. Ultimately, I hope my movies encourage viewers to see the world with a warm, incalculable, and renewed perspective.

### Works Cited

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- Cage, John. "Four Statements on the Dance." *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*. Eds. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts. New York: Routledge, 1996.
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