Fracture Patterns: Communicating the Surreal Through Dance Film

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FRACTURE PATTERNS:
COMMUNICATING THE SURREAL THROUGH DANCE FILM

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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Abstract

This thesis project and its associated dance film were created in a surrealistic time period initiated by the pandemic. The resulting everyday surrealism ignited my interest within dreams, nightmares, and surreality\(^1\), and how these cerebral and psychological experiences translate to physiological responses and movement. My dance film *fracture* is the manifestation of these themes. The film presents surrealistic imagery in an abstracted narrative and connects to personal struggles with surreality brought on by the pandemic. The movement, as well as the rationale for the choreographic, filming, and editing choices are explained. Dance films by Neels Castillon and Fanny Sage are examined to showcase similarities in dance works that evoke surreality through movement and dance.

Living in Surreality

How do we grapple with the people we used to be? The people we are? The people we’re to become? How can we reconcile the different versions of ourselves that exist? How much is absorbed; how much is split; how much is left behind? When we are confronted with ourselves, how much do we break – fracture – splinter? And afterwards, do the pieces of ourselves coalesce?

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an upheaval and disruption of normal life events and routines as well as pervasive fear and anxiety (Simon). From some countries’ poor handling of the pandemic\(^2\) (Viglione) to national toilet paper shortages (Moore) to anti-maskers, there is an utter “surreality” of the current moment in history, as days oscillate between dull monotony and

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\(^1\) Surreal + reality = surreality.

\(^2\) Namely the United States under the Trump administration, which included attempts to discredit science (Viglione) and lack of a cohesive national response to the pandemic (The Lancet).
barrages of tragedy and terror. Nearly every aspect of the pandemic has added a surreal layer to everyday activities.

That which is surreal is “marked by the intense irrational reality of a dream” (“Surreal”). Perhaps the term “surreal” is where the fine line between dream and nightmare blur. Surreal, where impossible things like that in dreams may occur, but with a standing invitation to that which is nightmarish. Indeed, it is an apt and often used descriptor for life in the pandemic (Simon).

The surreal atmosphere of the pandemic bled into my own life. I struggled to remain engaged in my studies as online school lacked real connection. Cancelled job opportunities left me reeling as I questioned my path after graduating. I was terrified the worst might happen to my high-risk family members. I was angry at people who had the privilege and resources to stay home and quarantine but refused to do so. By the time spring semester came knocking, I was burnt out from online school and living through the pandemic, and hadn’t danced regularly in months.

As apprehensive as I was to engage in a remote dance thesis, it became a cathartic act. It was a way to engage in the festered emotions of the pandemic in an experiential and exploratory fashion. The feeling of bittersweet and nostalgia of being in my hometown while attending college felt like a collision of self. It was hard to let go of lost opportunities and impossible futures. Engaging in movement helped me to confront the dreamlike and nightmarish qualities of the moment in a productive way. Dance became the conduit through which I examined the

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3 It is important to recognize that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected communities and individuals of color due to systemic racism, and as a result have suffered from greater rates of infection, hospitalization, and death. (Lopez et al.).

4 For example, high death toll due to COVID 19 – 500,000 Americans as of February 2021 (Soucheray)

5 That being said, I am in an extremely privileged position. I am still able to attend school, have stable housing, and live in a relatively sparsely populated area.
dualities and dichotomies of dream/nightmare, light/dark, and stop/go. The surreality of daily life informed the resulting surreal atmosphere of my thesis project.

**The movement of fracture**

*fracture* is roughly structured as a three-act piece, with vignettes that precede each act.

**Act 1: phase**

Several heartbeats sound out against darkness. The heartbeats continue as flashes of a dancer, sitting and leaning her back against a vertical pane of frosted glass, are contrasted with a completely dark backdrop. The dancer slowly turns her head, then darkness flashes again. A scene with a bright sun, blue sky, puffy clouds, a horizon of trees, and a stretch of water appears. The dancer stands backlit, slowly raising her hands upwards. Flash back to darkness, and then to the dancer, sitting against the door. She raises her arm (Figure 2a) and knocks her hand on the door while music slowly fades in and the frame flashes back to the backlit dancer.

The dancer’s arms slice through the sun, then pull the sun closer, cradling it (Figure 2b). Her hand reaching for the sky, a slight double image forms, as if the dancer is phasing in and out of time. It resembles a glitch, a trick of the light, as if the brain can’t catch up to what the eye is seeing. She settles back to one form as she lowers her arms and stares at the sun, only for the double image to jump back out when she shifts laterally. The dancer moves in and out of the sun, toying with becoming part of an eclipse. She leans to the side and studies the viewer.

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6 www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvDlzecvtYQ
7 While I, the author, am the dancer in the film, I sometimes refer to myself in the third person when describing movement in the piece (“the dancer”).
8 “Music for Tundra Pt. 1” by Tim Hecker. Characterized by “rumbling undercurrents of bass, a continual upper-register buzz, and unsteady synth chords that cut in unpredictably” (Richardson)
quizzically; analyzing, probing. Her ghost follows a split second behind her until they coalesce to stand vertically. She undulates her spine then scoops the sun into her hip with her hand.

The camera shifts; the dancer is cast in a golden light. She leans back to bask in it, then cuts the moment with the swing of her arm and exits the frame. The dancer then rises from the top of the frame, head downwards. The dancer pauses with her hands close to her ear; it seems as though she listens to the staccato buzzes of the music and sharply moves her elbows outward in response. Her hands are filled with tension that contrasts the serene setting. By the viewer’s standards she is still upside down, and as such her arms stretch down the screen, towards her sky but the viewer’s earth.

In a quick turn and a flash of hair, the dancer is gone. Two pairs of cupped sunlit hands enter the frame opposite each other (Figure 2c). One set descends while the other ascends. The wrists rotate, and the fingers unfurl slightly only to furl once again, reaching a sort of tension filled rigor mortis. The opposite hands take turns reaching for each other, as if daring the other to reach across the invisible border that separates them. Before any contact is established the hands of the same side grab their respective partners, causing the reaching arms to spasm.

The heartbeat and darkness return.

Act 2: split

The dancer appears leaned against the glass again, this time crouching in profile. Her hand reaches up to trace and touch the glass with her fingertips, tapping slightly, as though trying to send a signal. The dark backdrop flashes along with the heartbeats. The scene cuts to the dancer, backlit again, but with the viewer peering up at her whilst a warm glow encircles her
head and trees hug the edge of the frame (Figure 2d). The dancer presses her face against the glass and looks behind her; is she trapped?

Against blue light and jutting branches, the viewer looks up at the dancer whose silhouette is illuminated by a streetlamp. Her face in complete shadow, the dancer directs a pause towards the viewer before springing back into movement. Hands and arms filled with tension press up and then forward before the arms are allowed a breath. A ghost overtakes the dancer and propels her nearer to the lamp. Face overridden by shadow once more, she glances back to the viewer again. Her torso drops in a controlled bounce, her shoulders ride high in a breath. Are you a threat to her?

Standing beneath the streetlamp the dancer’s already mechanical movements seem too stilted to be real. When she spreads her hands out the camera shifts and her hands’ shadows are projected on the ground. Her fingers are hauntingly elongated, eliciting visions of monsters and nonhumans. The shadow hands move out of frame; the next scene focuses on her hands. Three semitransparent hands interact while their owner (or owners) remain in the shadows (Figure 2e). The hands wrap around the edge of the building, intersect, and eventually rejoin the body (or bodies) to which they are attached.

The dancer appears in the light in front of the building. She holds her arms as if rocking a baby, at first slowly, then quickly—almost violently. Her ghost springs out as she looks at the viewer and then settles back into herself after an explosive hair flip. It looks as though the dancer is preparing to fight, but drops the movement, like an automaton with stuck gears or a marionette caught on its strings. She holds out her hand with curled fingers with an expression that’s almost sweet, yet unhinged. She repeats this puppet like quality, locking eyes with the viewer while engaging in sharp and violent movement that quick changes into fleeting respites of fluidity. She
slowly walks back to the shadows, as if compelled, only to fall out of the shadows once more, hands vibrating. The dancer briefly touches her head to her hands then sinks into the dark, her hands the last to be seen. The heartbeat fades in and the frame flashes to dark, yanking the viewer from the scene.

**Act 3: fracture**

The heartbeat plays as the dancer’s hand and foot smear against the glass, first the palm and heel, then the back and top. A flash to dark. The next frame reveals a pool of darkness on the ground. A hand emerges from the dark puddle and skims across the surface of it, unveiling the dancer as the hood of her jacket is brushed down. Her eyes look upward, confronting something from above. Another flash to dark. The previous song begins to fade out, and the second begins as the dancer approaches the glass, hair smothering her face (Figure 2f). She aggressively plants both palms against the glass, challenging the viewer.

This challenge continues in “the void,” a rich and inky black background that blurs into the dancer’s costume. The dancer walks toward the viewer, two ghosts appearing, one to either side of her. The center dancer holds out her hands, a command to the others. The ghosts obey, examining the viewer while the center dancer continues to weave her spell (Figure 2g), and then disappears. The ghosts remain for a moment before the center dancer returns, her stop motion movement like the twitching of a dying animal.

As the piece progresses, the appearance of these ghosts, fractures of the dancer, become more frequent. Some lasting all but a few seconds while others haunt her for longer, pursuing

9 “Artic Lover’s Rock Pt. 1” by Tim Hecker. Characterized as “a highly-processed pop song… woven into the sheets of sound” (Richardson).
her, looming over her, before ultimately either colliding into one dancer or taking control with the ghost becoming the primary mover. Adding to the unhinged aura, the dancer continuously shifts between bound movement and sharp outbursts. She unnervingly finds moments to make direct eye contact, which she prolongs as fracture comes to a close.

The piece ends with a splintered moving portrait of the dancer, capturing her from the shoulders up. The ruptured images overlap; she has two faces, four eyes, four hands, all of which blend together and fall apart to the sound of heartbeats. Flashes of darkness further fracture the sequence. The dancer appears without ghosts or fractures for a moment, and shortly after is broken again (Figure 2h). A singular heartbeat played in darkness ends the piece.

**How fracture came to be**

*Synopsis*

Neither overtly dream nor nightmare, fracture oscillates between the two and occupies the surreal. While fracture embodies certain nightmarish and horror elements, it is not intended to scare. Instead the piece is provocative, uncanny, if perhaps a little unsettling. The piece began with a desire to explore dancing at night and the imagery and overlap of nightmares and dreams. It later became a way to contextualize my emotions within the surreal moment in time. It is a piece of choreography that occupies the space between dream and nightmare, contextualized by the surreal quality of the current moment\(^\text{10}\).

fracture is an introspective exploration into the person I was, am, will be, and could have been. Fueled by the nostalgia of being in the same place as home, but not the same time as to feel at home, the work personifies my feelings of fear, anxiety, restlessness, and uncertainty in a sort

\(^{10}\) i.e. the pandemic
of dreamscape. *fracture* captures the collisions and ghosts of myself; how different versions fuse together and break apart.

**Conception of the piece**

Similar to many other dance works, the basis and themes behind *fracture* were not born fully formed. At the start of the choreographic process in January, I was concerned as to what to base my piece on. I felt little inspiration whilst in the dead of the dark Washington winter\textsuperscript{11}. The high degree of burnout I felt after already having spent a semester and a half in online schooling\textsuperscript{12} contributed to my lack of direction and lack of motivation. Additionally, it had been several months since I had danced regularly. I felt I had lost my relationship with my body and my movement practice, and consequently, my sense of self.

The first thing that helped to initiate the thesis ideation process was a discovery I made on Instagram. I came across several Instagram videos and reels made by the co-choreography dance company FLOCK. Headed by Florian Lochner and Alice Klock, the pair “co-create and perform their own work, teach as a team, and produce shows and short films” ("Artists"). I was particularly drawn to the duets they post on their Instagram page that featured Klock and Lochner doing contact work in natural spaces. The backdrops to their dancing, forested horizons along with expanses of water, were all so familiar to me – for good reason. Other posts by them revealed that they were located on Whidbey Island, an island just north of me. Seeing these short movement clips paired with natural spaces that I knew so well I could smell through the screen provided me with my first shred of motivation as well as the seedling to my own piece. I decided

\textsuperscript{11} Which is ironic, considering the fact that darkness became a huge element within my final dance film.

\textsuperscript{12} Burnout, due to the pandemic, was also hastened by the expedited schedule of the previous semester; see The Student Life article chronicling experiences of Claremont Colleges students in Fall 2020 (McMurtry and Gorovitz).
that the Washington landscapes in which I grew up would serve as the backdrop to an exploration in reconnecting with my body.

While affirmed in my desire to create a piece filmed almost exclusively in nature, or at least outside, I still felt aimless. I lacked a driving theme to narrow the focus of my piece. Professor Williamson suggested that while the final project could be abstract and something of a post-modernist dance collage, a more linear narrative could help to drive both the filming and editing processes. In considering a narrative form, I became intrigued with the idea of filming dance at night and specifically how the passage of night and differences of light could drive movement as well as an abstract story. Thinking about the connotations of night plunged me into what became key elements of my piece: dreams and nightmares. These psychological and visceral experiences informed my movement vocabulary as well as the arc of my dance film.

I decided I wanted my piece to be centered in exploring dreams and nightmares—the overlap, the liminal space in between, how one so easily became the other. Looking back, it’s clear how life in the pandemic had influenced my interest in this material. Many of my interests and curiosities already fit into the seemingly macabre or morbid (spiders, insects, forensics, murder mysteries), so it wasn’t out of character for me to be focused on a subject that was associated with eeriness and creepiness, like that of nightmares (and to some degree, dreams). However, my fascination in exploring dreams and nightmares through movement also fit into a larger context: the surreal atmosphere of the pandemic. The pandemic transformed reality into a “surreality” characterized by fear and a complete disruption in daily life for an unforeseeable future. My movement investigation was motivated by both my preexisting inclinations in interests as well as an attempt to process the current moment in time.
Movement Vocabulary

At the beginning of this project my primary movement goal was reestablishing a connection with my body after months of not dancing regularly. I took a suggestion to go outside and experiment, to move without judgement. As the topics and themes surrounding my project solidified, I was able to move more while keeping dreams, nightmares, and surreal qualities in mind. These qualities guided the movement choices I made in the moment; the vast majority of movement I used in the final film is improvised.

Something that remained relatively consistent throughout the piece was the dancer’s focus and gaze. While the quality of focus evolves, the dancer often holds a direct focus with the camera (and as a result, the viewer). In the beginning, the dancer’s gaze is more quizzical and probing, as if viewing a specimen. As the piece goes on, the dancer’s gaze becomes more uncannily focused in moments where her eyes meet with the camera, later shifting to confrontational. Even though the viewer is watching the dancer, the dancer makes it known that she is also watching the viewer.

A large part of the movement vocabulary was engaging in dynamic shifts in movement quality, almost like stop motion animation. These shifts in movement contribute to the surreal atmosphere of the piece, creating contrast between flowing movements and the sharp movements that intercept them. The stop and go nature created a dichotomy of humanlike versus nonhuman-like movement which became progressively skewed towards the nonhuman-like towards the end of the piece, and was later emphasized with editing. The increasing frequency of disjointed movement in the latter half of the piece helps to portray an unhinged progression.

Much of the movement in the piece is not what would be considered big or large movement. Because I was recovering from a knee injury at the time of filming, I couldn’t engage
in a lot of strenuous and intense dancing. My restriction in mobility forced me into subtler dance than I usually do, which is partly how the sudden shifts in movement quality came about. My restricted movement also led me to experiment with gestural work, with a lot of it focused on tension and articulation of the hands.

While the piece progressively becomes more unhinged and eerie, it does not begin with movement that is particularly comforting either. The opening movement section is filmed against a sunny backdrop, providing a setting that looks a dream: cerulean sky, starchy clouds, golden light. However, the direct focus, tension in hands, and cold countenance I embody prevents any derivation of comfort from this dreamlike setting. While dreams are often associated with feelings and images that are purely good in nature, they can be “marked by abstraction or release from reality” (“Dream”). In this way, dreams can be surrealistic. The shifting movement quality throughout the piece as well as the contrast of movement quality and setting in the beginning convey this release from reality. While unsettling and haunting at times, fracture is not totally a nightmare, nor does it hold the traditional qualities of a dream. The piece’s movement especially helps to anchor it in a middle ground that exploits the surreality in both dreams and nightmares.

Costumes

The costume for fracture was initially one of convenience. Hiking shoes (and wool socks) to dance outside on multiple terrains in any weather; leggings for ease of movement; multiple layers (shirt, sweater, jacket) for warmth. Much of the filming took place outside at sunset, evening, or night during the months of February and March in Washington\textsuperscript{13}, requiring a certain degree of practicality.

\footnote{Temperatures in February on average ranged from 35.2–46.2 degrees Fahrenheit, and temperatures in March on average ranged from 37.4–50.5 degrees Fahrenheit (Yu Media Group).}
The fact that most articles of clothing chosen for filming were black was in part due to the fact that black is one of my favorite colors and I had many black clothing items in my existing wardrobe. This choice, while partially unintentional, became an asset to several filming locations that I used. The black costuming provided a point of contrast against the “eclipse” footage as well as a means of camouflage against darker backdrops, allowing for contrasting viewpoints of the dancer’s body in space. In the sunlit and lighter backdrops, the outlines and body’s limits are clear. In darkness, the lines between body and void blur, becoming almost nonexistent. With this, the viewer’s eye is drawn to body parts that are most visible: the feet, hands, the neck, the face, and the hair.

Typically I tie my hair back when I dance; this is true for dance classes as well as dance performances in “normal” times. For fracture I kept my hair loose. This served as a personal and internal juxtaposition, distinguishing my dance practice in an era of normalcy from my dance practice in an era of surreality. Having my hair loose on film also helped to emphasize movement, especially in dark sections of the film, where the movement and the reflected light off of my hair helped to denote my position and direction in space. Additionally, having my hair loose and cascading down my face (Figure 2f) created nightmarish imagery akin to Samara from the 2002 horror film The Ring14 (or perhaps, if one wanted a more comical and comforting interpretation, the flowing hair was reminiscent of Cousin Itt from The Addams Family television and movie series). In any case, the decision to have my hair down influenced my relationship with movement as well as how the movement appeared on film.

14 Samara is characterized by having long hair covering her face.
Filming/Film Locations

The extent of my experience in filming dance before this project was filming videos at the end of rehearsals back in the studio in the pre-COVID days. Armed with an iPhone and a tripod–selfie stick hybrid, I set out to film material for my piece. The process was very much a learning experience in finding spaces, lighting, and angles that worked.

Most of the shots in fracture are filmed at the dancer’s eye level or below. As such, the viewer and the dancer are either on the same plane or the dancer is looking down at the viewer. There are rarely ever moments where the dancer has to look up to the viewer. Having the dancer look down to the viewer adds a menacing edge to the confrontational moments of the piece and a slight power imbalance\(^\text{15}\). Depending on the severity of upward angle of the camera, the dancer can appear scientific and quizzical or haunted and condescending. In moments where the camera is at eye level the dancer often holds direct eye contact with the viewer, witnessing them and challenging them.

I tried to film against backdrops in the outdoors that were evocative as well as able to convey a passage of time with changes of light. My vision was that this change from daylight to darkness would help to communicate a progression from daydream to nightmare. I varied my filming times, including golden hour, sunset, blue hour/twilight, and deep night, as well as my filming locations, which included a bathroom, the beach, under a streetlamp, the edge of a house, and “the void.” The sequences filmed in a bathroom were the only sequences that were filmed indoors. The frosted nature of the bathroom door allowed for a certain lack of clarity surrounding the dancer, separating the viewer from the dancer as if through a veil. The beach film included in

\(^{15}\) The dancer has the advantage in position. For example, in Revenge of the Sith (2005), Obi-Wan Kenobi says, “It’s over Anakin, I have the high ground,” directly after which Anakin Skywalker attempts to jump over Obi-wan who then promptly severs Anakin’s limbs. In essence, the dancer has the high ground.
the piece was poised against the setting sun, creating moments of eclipse and stark contrast when the dancer moved in front of the sun’s rays. I mimicked this eclipse like quality again when filming in blue light under a streetlamp, replicating the eclipse motif with a different light source and different angles.

A large portion of the piece was filmed in deep night, when the sky is a rich black. Filming at night presented issues in finding adequate light sources, limiting the areas in which I could film. Generally in the night footage I relied on streetlights, porch lights, and garage lights. One primary night film location was at the corner of my neighbor’s house. The porch light illuminates the side of the house parallel to the camera while the corner of the house remains shrouded in shadow. This unique lighting allowed for play with the concealment and disappearing of the dancer and the dancer’s limbs. The other night location was behind the garage at my house, mentioned previously as “the void.” The light allowed for the illumination of the dancer provided she was close enough, and the temporal darkness obscured the setting behind her, providing a black backdrop that made it seem as though the dancer was moving in and through a void in space and time. Having the void as the last backdrop of the piece provided an eerie absence of visual noise compared with other parts of the film that have recognizable visual landmarks, like the sun, trees, or the side of a building. The void renders the dancer as the only discernable landmark, providing yet another reality distortion and placing her within a sort of otherworld.

In the end, I had an enormous volume of footage, more than I could include within the final cut of the piece. With the editing process, it came time to pick and choose which moments were most effective in portraying the themes I had been working with.

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Much like how the pandemic has shifted many people’s perceptions of time (Grondin et al.).
At a meeting that dance department faculty had with students to check in with their pieces, I showed an assemblage of raw footage. I received feedback describing it as “a psychological thriller,” “physiological,” “witchy,” “ghostly,” and “beastly,” all of which fit into the general aesthetic that I wanted for the final version of my film. Then came the work of editing the footage in a way that made sense.

When I began the editing process I knew I wanted to incorporate a heartbeat sound and sync it with flashes of footage and darkness. This served as a way to play into the physiological aspect of nightmares and dreams; the body’s response to images and stressors, a reminder of one’s mortality. Heartbeat audio is often used in films as a way to draw focus, such as in battle scenes17, or in horror movies and thrillers as a way to manipulate the audience’s innate fear response. I decided to use the heartbeat footage along with long vertical shots of the bathroom door footage. The vignettes of this footage became the openings to the “three acts” of the piece. In each of these vignettes, flashes of the following section would appear.

The primary effect I used in editing later became the point of inspiration for the title of the piece and a recurring motif. This effect was creating “ghosts” or “fractures” of the dancer using overlaid clips of differing opacities than the main layer. In some cases, the ghosts performed the same movement as the main figure but were staggered in time. When the stagger was close in time, these ghosts looked more like glitches or tricks of the light. As the stagger became larger the ghosts conveyed a certain sense of unraveling; the silhouettes of multiple bodies overlapping and pursuing each other – a fractured sense of self. In other instances, I used

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17 When the two armies meet in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
the completely different clips at varying opacities which resulted in multiple separate semitransparent limbs or bodies dancing at the same time. This created “phantom limbs” and phantoms; copies of the same dancer and the same dancer’s limbs moving in the same screen, further distorting reality.

In certain points of the piece I chose to speed up some of the footage (ranging from 1.25 to 2 times speed). In addition to shortening the piece, the heightened speed introduces a stilted and mechanical quality to the movement, adding upon the aforementioned stop motion movement vocabulary.

I struggled with how to end the piece. My first draft of the film had it ending the same way it began, with the bathroom door footage as a way to mark an end to the dream sequence. However, I wasn’t totally in love with it. It felt too clean, with no loose ends, which did not reflect the lasting repercussions and consequences of the pandemic nor my own struggle and anxiety because of it. A colleague suggested ending it on one of the fractured images, specifically one that focused on my face and hands. Ending with flashes of darkness, the fractured images, and the heartbeat audio emphasizes how the surreality is still ongoing. The pandemic hasn’t ended. My fears haven’t shifted. There isn’t a neat ending. We are still living in a very surreal moment in time; fracture attempts to communicate this.

I chose music at the very end of the film making process. While I entertained the idea of using a few songs that had inspired my movement vocabulary, they overpowered the movement when set against the video. In the end, I decided to use two songs by Tim Hecker

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18 To prevent it from dragging on for too long and risk it becoming too boring. Shortening the piece also kept it in the time limit dictated by the thesis requirements, which was 7-12 minutes. fracture clocks in at 11 minutes.
19 “it’s ok, you’re ok” by bonjr, “Dreams” by nuages, and “Tigerlily” by Angus MacRae are some examples of songs I was inspired by and used for background music during the movement generation portion of my project.
20 I used “Music for Tundra Pt. 1” and “Arctic Lover’s Rock Pt. 1” by Tim Hecker, both from an aptly named album titled “Haunt Me, Haunt Me Do It Again”.

19
that utilized an atmospheric cadence. Buzzes, static, and crackling in the songs contributed to an eerie and unreal quality that supported the movement instead of overpowering it.

Naming the piece

The title fracture was very much inspired by the editing choices, especially how I chose to end the piece. It also captures my own shattered sense of self, struggle to let go of the past, and inability to envision the future. The feeling of being in process and in limbo.

Framing fracture: Surreal Dance

間 MA — The Space between all things is a short film that examines dichotomies and dualities as they coexist. With choreography and dancing by Fanny Sage, direction by Neels Castillon, and music by Awir Leon, the film:

explores the essence of Japanese aesthetic and concept called間 (Ma) — the pure and essential void between all “things.” It has been described as a pause in time, an interval or emptiness in space.間 (Ma) is the fundamental time and space life needs to grow. (Castillon)

Professor Williamson sent me a link to this film the day after I had finished a draft of my own dance film. I was intrigued by some of the similarities I saw in movement qualities, themes, and structure to my piece. The dancer in間 MA — The Space between all things (title shortened to間 MA in later text for ease of reading) uses her hands in heavily articulated gestures, holding her hands close to her face and her mouth; I also use a lot of gestural work in my piece. The film

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21 www.youtube.com/watch?v=59TEEHmE7Lg
22 An in-depth close reading of the movement in間 MA — The Space between all things is available in the appendix.
broaches concepts relating to the void between things and moments in time, accentuated by
dramatic natural backdrops. I also used nature and outside lighting to create surrealistic moments
in time. Structurally the film is separated into five acts; mine is separated into three. While Sage
and Castillon were inspired by somewhat different themes than I was, it is interesting to see the
similarity in manifestation and images and similar ethereal and haunting qualities.

Sage explains that the primary inspiration for the project was “the feeling of loneliness”
(Castillon and Lambo). She also states that, “there is a contrast I love in Japanese culture which
is a great source of inspiration to me— that emptiness and fullness can coexist. This is dance as
it moves me: Fragility and strength” (Castillon and Lambo).Explorations into dualities and
contrasting ideas fuel MA, generating a gripping and immersive film. The backdrops of
mountainsides, ice caves, and ice storms in the middle of Icelandic winter add to the drama and
atmosphere of being singular, alone, and isolated.

Instead of engaging in a codified movement technique Sage utilizes movement that
speaks to emotional expression. She creates a movement vocabulary characterized by articulating
hands, explosive movements that intercept moments of calm, and deeply expressive postures and
facial expressions, which include huddled postures associated with hurt, pain, and cold, as well
as expressions with gaping mouths and furrowed brows that communicate distrust, shock, and
disbelief. Sage’s movements and expressions shift between dualities – fragility and strength,
vulnerability and impermeability, fluid and jagged – and these shifts trigger an emotional
response within Sage herself as well as the viewer. The viewer also feels haunted, lonely, and
breath-taken in the vastness.

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23 Such as classical ballet. Sage’s movement appears fit within the realm of contemporary/post-modern dance:
“Sage’s delphic movements are less about dance and more about how her body describes the void around her”
(Castillon and Lambo).
The haunting and lonely nature of the piece is emphasized by the chilling vocals accompanied by wind and glacier sounds, as well as the incredibly vast scope of the icy backdrop. The dancer and the vocalist appear small in the space. In a way, these images, sounds, and movement feel unreal: the vocalist’s voice heard so clearly by the dancer though for all we know they could be miles apart; the way the camera cuts away from the dancer while she’s still in intense movement; the sudden shifts in movement quality. 间MA provides a moment in time through which to experience the surreal.

Viewing 间MA led me to other works by Castillon and Sage that also interact with surrealistic qualities. They join forces again in dance films for music videos, in F Major\(^{24}\) by Hania Rani and Loom\(^{25}\) by Olafur Arnalds and Bonobo. Each film is directed by Neels Castillon with dance and/or choreography by Fanny Sage, and all three films\(^{26}\) were published on YouTube in 2020. Like 间MA, both F Major and Loom contain expansive landscape shots of Icelandic scenery alongside disjointed and eerie movement. Above all, these films portray people moving through the world in ways not commonly associated with the filming locations. The contrast between movement and setting creates a surreality, which is heightened by the dancers’ movement qualities.

F Major is a piano solo that “unravels yet further nuances of the instrument's intricate nature and offers more glimpses into Hania's sonic imagination” (Gondwana Records). The film is set on a sandy Icelandic beach against snowy mountains that jut into the sky; Castillon describes the landscape as “unreal” (Gondwana Records). The warm glowing light disguises the

\(^{24}\) www.youtube.com/watch?v=bB34_eLCLKo
\(^{25}\) www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMDwqeFQuKg
\(^{26}\) Many of the people on the production teams appear to have worked on all three films, including the cinematographer and the producers.
fact that it was filmed in negative seven degrees Celsius weather. Instead of the solo being played in a disembodied form, a piano has been placed on the beach. As the pianist plays, “her music float[s] in the wind,” giving each dancer a chance to react and interpret Hania’s song (Gondwana Records). The first dancer especially shows a clear reaction to the notes of the song. Her body fragments itself with quick movements which become bouncy or smooth for a moment only to dissolve articulated pieces yet again. She holds tension in her arms, bound to the music that enters her body. The other two dancers also engage in gestural movement and sudden dynamic shifts, though not to the degree of extreme articulation as the first dancer. As the song draws to a close, the latter dancers find more room for pause, contrasting the movement energy from the beginning of the piece and leaving the viewer on edge, wondering when they will explode into quick movements again. The piece ends with the last dancer spinning out of the frame towards the water.

Like *F Major*, *Loom* is a dance film that functions as a music video. Arnalds states that *Loom* is a song that came from a recording session when he and Bonobo “spent a couple of days in the studio, after traveling and camping together in the Icelandic highlands” and that “the serene energy of the song is perfectly encapsulated in Neels’s beautiful video — a true testament to getting lost in the moment” (Arnalds). The film portrays getting lost – in a moment, or perhaps a dream or a thought, and getting sucked into an otherworldly experience to later find a way back. This is achieved through what appears to be a dreamscape of a dancer. She walks into an enormous lake, looking in awe of her surroundings. She sinks into the water, submerging herself as air bubbles tickle past her nose. The frame flashes to her leaning back on the water’s surface, opening her eyes and looking into the viewer. As she floats there, two other bodies float to the surface. The dancers acknowledge each other, making contact, their heads stuck together as if
exchanging thoughts. Standing in the lake the dancers’ bodies are splayed in unnatural positions, arms extended backwards like wings and statuesque stillness. When they move, the dancers undulate in staccato movements with their movements fragmented by quick changes in direction. Thrashing movements are emphasized by the water that clings to their bodies, clothes, and hair. The dancers stand in the water like broken puppets hanging by threads. The original dancer lets go of a scream underwater. Another dancer hovers on the surface of the lake in a deep slumber. The other dancer lets go of a single tear while looking at the viewer. As the song winds down, the viewer sees the original dancer emerge from underwater, as if she had been holding her breath and that the sequence took place in her head. The piece ends with her gasping for air yet looking invigorated as she heads towards shore, alone.

*Nude, MA, F Major, and Loom* all utilize disjointed, fractured movement against spectacular landscapes to create surrealist films. Part of what makes these films haunting and unnerving is bodies in spaces performing movement that is not typically associated with those particular locations. People do not usually dance in ice storms or in lakes, or play piano on the beach. The disjointed and articulated movement evokes feelings of unease and nonhuman-like imagery on its own, but these feelings and images are magnified when set against fantastical backdrops. The films embody that which is unreal and that which exists in a time and space beyond what we know to be reasonably possible.

The films headed by Castillon and Sage deal with a variety of themes: loneliness, void and absence, imagination, being lost in thought. While all very cerebral and psychological experiences, there is no denying the physiological qualities of these feelings. *Fracture* echoes these physical explorations into the psychological, and similarly relies on the combination of contrasting movement, film locations, and lighting to create a sense of surrealism.
Surreality relies on out of place movement that happens in liminal and unreal moments in time and space. Dance films allow for this exploration into the surreal through expansive possibilities in framing, setting, and editing, providing ways to manifest a brief glimpse into the otherworldly.

**Conclusion**

While the process of creating a dance film was challenging, I am grateful for the opportunity to create something that likely would not have come to fruition had the situation been different (i.e., if the project had been in person). I do not think that *fracture* would be as effective if it were a staged live performance as the editing and setting help to create the surrealistic atmosphere of the piece. *fracture* will always serve as a reminder to me of this moment in time; the surreality of it, the ensuing emotions – an example of how movement creates snapshots in time and provides a conduit through which to process the moments we live through.
Appendix

Close reading of 間 MA — The Space between all things

The piece begins with Sage, the dancer, lying with her back on any ice ground, hand to her forehead. Wind lifts strands of her hair where they float, seemingly defying gravity. Her eyes close. The frame cuts to a man swaying in an ice cave, drinking in the cool air. He vocalizes, his voice reverberating off the side of the cave, sending out a haunting call. At the base of a mountainside a far-off figure stands surrounded by microphones. The microphones’ feedback is heard as the figure stares down the camera, coat fluttering in the wind.

The first act, Wind, begins. The dancer stands on an expansive and flat blue-gray plane. Wind sweeps white ice particles across the plane in clear lines. The wind sweeps the dancer’s hair across her face as she hinges at the hip, leaning completely backward until she is overtaken by gravity and collapses on the ground. She finds her feet and explosively hinges backwards again, as if taken by a sudden gust. She spins around lightly, her fingertips trailing in the air, and then grounds herself in tight turn. Another hinge sends the dancer to the ground. She rolls to her feet and stands, arms unfurling, feeling the air current. She spins and spins and spins, hair whipping. She stops and her arms reach outwards, then upwards, articulating her fingers and looking out in the space in awe. She runs away from the camera into icy wind and looks back with her arms stretched wide, as if waiting for the camera to follow her. As the camera closes in, she changes her mind and continues to flee.

The next act, Aether, opens with the dancer joyfully spinning in a windy snow-covered landscape. She tilts her head up while breathing deeply. Her mood shifts as the camera cuts to a close up of her clutching her head. She is more focused and wary, her hands articulating over her
mouth and into the air. They transform from fluid to sharper and bug like, flittering about her face. She furrows her brow and pleads with the sky.

The third act, Earth, begins with the dancer in the same landscape as Wind. She moves with the lines of wind towards the camera before hinging at the back with her mouth open as if to scream. As the camera slowly retreats from her, she casts a worried or confused look over her shoulder. She follows the camera, breaking with the lines of icy wind, but stumbles, and is overtaken by the wind’s direction. She falls to the ground.

With the beginning of the fourth act (Water) the viewer is transported back to the ice cave for a brief glimpse of the vocalist. The frame shifts quickly to the dancer laying on a bed of ice fractals, and back to the vocalist, surrounded by microphones. He moves while singing, reaching upwards before quickly dropping his hands, punctuating his words with movement. Upon singing the word “break” his knees buckle and his torso shifts and sinks in response. The dancer wraps her hands around her head, as if the sound exists there. As she sees the camera her face transforms; she looks shocked. Her expression is cut off by the next act.

Fire begins with the dancer crawling on the ground. She lays on there, ice particles collecting around her. She floats slightly before clutching her torso in pain. She sits up and looks into the camera with eyes that plead and accuse at the same time, looking as if she’s about to cry. Huddled with her arms on her knees, the camera retreats, leaving her sitting alone in the icy wind. The dancer suddenly springs to her feet and sprints towards the camera. Before she can catch up, the frame cuts to black, ending the piece.
Figure 1. Scripps Dances poster. Event description accompanying poster: SCRIPPS DANCES 2021 is the annual spring concert of the Scripps College Dance Department. This year’s live stream features original dance films directed by renowned choreographer Rosanna Tavarez, faculty members Meiver De la Cruz with Sabah, Kevin Williamson and graduating seniors Adrienne Kafka, Chloe Lesh, Lu Ordman, and Aisha Skye. With performances from students across the 5 Claremont Colleges, these 8 films paint a compelling series of portraits for our time.
Figure 2. Images from *fracture*. Images labeled a-h from left to right and top to bottom.
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