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# The Dancing Eyes of the Director

Choreographers, Dance Cultures, and Film  
Genres in British Music Video 1979–2016

**EMILY CASTON**

This article looks at the work of choreographers in British music video from Arlene Phillips (founder of Hot Gossip), to FKA Twigs and Wayne McGregor. The first section presents an overview of the development of genres of dance and choreography in music videos from the late 1970s to the present day, covering genres such as the loosely-choreographed pop act video, to the formal, tightly-choreographed routines of videos drawing on the Hollywood musical tradition, to the street dance video ushered in following Malcolm McLaren's breakthrough 'Buffalo Gals' video (1983). The article argues that British music videos should not be negatively compared to their bigger budget US counterparts but should instead be appreciated on their own merits – and those merits include the greater creative exchange with ballet and contemporary dance, and the use of techniques from experimental film and narrative film; and it argues that these features make dance in British music videos an exciting and critically acclaimed cultural form today. The author draws attention to the importance of 'social realism' within British choreographed music videos, and points out that the recent work of Matthew Bourne and FKA Twigs overrides the traditional distinction between 'dance film' and commercial music dance film.

## Introduction

Dance is celebrated as a core constituent of music video and has attracted considerable critical acclaim and media attention over the decades. From Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' (1983) and 'Beat It' (1983) to the critically acclaimed trilogy 'Elastic Heart' (2014), 'Chandelier' (2014), and 'Big Girls Cry' (2014) for Sia, the form has captured public attention. This current work is reminiscent of the wave of critically acclaimed videos from the 'golden era' of music video production from the mid-late 1990s

inspired by Hollywood musicals, such as Spike Jonze's video for Fatboy Slim's 'Praise You' (1998) and 'Weapon Of Choice' (2001), as well as his video for Björk's 'It's Oh So Quiet' (1995), and Michel Gondry's video for Daft Punk's 'Around The World' (1997).<sup>1</sup>

How does British filmmaking, music and choreography fit into this international matrix? And is there more to choreography in music video than the Hollywood musical? Existing critical work on music video choreography has focused almost exclusively on videos made by American directors with American choreographers for American artists, or on the continuities between music video and the traditions of the Hollywood musicals (e.g. Billman, 2002). However, dance in British music video is currently experiencing a new wave of creativity, evidenced by the international acclaim accredited to current British choreographers in ballet and contemporary dance such as Akram Khan, Wayne McGregor, and Christopher Wheeldon (Anderson, 2008). Greater critical attention to this creative wave can extend how music video is understood, and this article engages with British music video and its creators in order to map a new area of the critical field.

In beginning to research these questions it quickly became apparent that the roots of current creativity in British dance and choreography lie in the exuberant, visually baroque, highly creative years of the late 1970s; it was then that the rule book for dance, fashion, and music in the UK was torn up and an exciting 'DIY' culture created by individuals such as Malcolm McLaren, Vivienne Westwood, and Derek Jarman set the context for a wide array of different dance styles in British music videos of the 1980s.

This article presents the findings of this research. In the first section, I sketch out a history of dance in British music video to give an overview of key developments, types and terminology. In the second, I investigate the question, 'What, if anything, is the difference between British and American dance videos?' In the third, I ask, 'What, if anything, is the difference between a dance film and a music video?'

In Britain, the aesthetics of choreographed music videos have not only emerged from Hollywood musicals, but classical ballet, contemporary dance, British musicals, British cinema social realism, and British popular dance. The history of *popular* dance is just emerging with recent contributions such as Julie Malnig's edited collection on social and popular dance (2009). In Malnig's collection, Tim Lawrence's essay examines the emergence of the 'solo dancer' in disco and club culture of the 1970s, and is absolutely crucial to understanding myriad representations of solo dance in club dance videos of the 1990s and 2000s, such as Dom & Nic's video for The Chemical Brothers' 'Setting Sun' (1996) which

<sup>1</sup> The latter is analysed in Austerlitz (2007).

portrays 'ladette' club culture. Likewise, the flapper tradition of dance also surfaces in music videos, and we suspect that a British Pathé film of 1927 was the reference for Stephane Sednaoui's video for Björk's 'Big Time Sensuality' (1993). Ballroom dancing, which has been big in the UK recently as a result of primetime shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC 2004–), has surfaced in videos such as Ed Sheeran's 'Thinking Out Loud' (2014), directed by Emil Nava.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the emergent critical paradigms for analysing dance and film. As Sherril Dodds, one of the leading scholars in the field, has recently pointed out, '[m]usic [v]ideo is clearly an important site for creative investigation into dance; it has served as a wealth of choreographic innovation during its twenty-five-year existence' (2009a, p.259); yet little academic work on it has been published, bar her own valuable contributions and a small number on the US industry (Billman, 2002). This article builds on work being conducted on dance film (Brannigan, 2011; Dodds, 2004, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2014; Evans & Fogarty, 2016; Mitoma et al., 2002; Mundy, 1999, 2007; Pearlman, 2006; Preston, 2006; Smart, 2001), and the *International Journal of Screendance*, to trace the intricate relationship between film and dance in Great Britain.

A first necessary step in this mission is to break down the binary division of *commercial dance* and *dance film*. Dodds rightly observes that, '[m]usic video is a platform both for the dilution and innovation of popular dance forms' (2009a, p.258). However, she goes on to say that 'it operates through a form of cultural theft as it feeds off existing popular dance traditions as a means to promote its artists and attract commodity views' (p.258). The cultural, political and economic creation and reception of music video does not occur in a separate forum of unoriginal capitalist commercial production which feeds off legitimate, non-commodified cultural forms. The 'authorship' of British music video is exceptionally complex, and both the production and reception of many of the videos discussed here are acutely embedded within a number of specific music and dance cultures (Caston, 2014).

British dance videos are often negatively compared to the USA R&B tradition that is rooted in the 1980s videos of Michael and Janet Jackson, and more recently those of Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Sia. Dance and choreography in UK videos are seen as inferior versions of the bigger budget, more polished, US videos. John Mundy (2007) points out the same has happened to British musicals, which have, until very recently, been regarded a poor imitation of the slick, big budget Hollywood productions. Mundy's ambition was to identify the distinctive characteristics of British musicals. This article has the same intention in respect of dance videos.

The analysis that follows draws on individual interviews conducted between October 2015 and April 2016 with choreographers Litza Bixler,<sup>2</sup> Paul Roberts,<sup>3</sup> Natricia Bernard,<sup>4</sup> Aaron Sillis,<sup>5</sup> choreographer/director Holly Blakey,<sup>6</sup> director Dawn Shadforth,<sup>7</sup> and directing duo Dom & Nic.<sup>8</sup> It is also based on the findings of a research focus group which was held at the British Film Institute in 2015.<sup>9</sup> The rationale behind the focus group was that interactive discussion between leading choreographers, commissioners and directors would facilitate memory recall of historical case studies and highlight areas worthy of further research more effectively than the individual interview alone.

First it is necessary to distinguish between a *dance video* and a *choreographed video*. Within the music video community, a dance video is generally understood to be a video commissioned for a dance track which will have its significant commercial life in dance clubs. Dance videos usually, but not always, incorporate visual representations of the club culture. Examples include Max and Dania's video for So Solid Crew's '21 Seconds' (2001), and Russell Curtis's video for The Prodigy's 'Out Of Space' (1992) which feature multiple 'real' dancers, the former from the hip hop tradition, the latter from the Madchester club scene of the 1990s. Many dance videos of this type do not employ choreographers – instead the director and a casting director will hire street dancers who bring their own dance style and moves to video. The term *choreographed video*, by contrast, denotes the staging of the dance by a choreographer with a director, usually following a process of casting of dancers and a formal rehearsal process in which the choreographer will have been involved. This article presents a preliminary overview and analysis of both types of video.

## Part I: History and Overview

Our focus group felt that the story of British choreographed videos begins in the mid-1970s with Arlene Phillips and the *Kenny Everett Video Show* (ITV, 1978–1981), a weekly British light entertainment series. Arlene Phillips was a leading music video choreographer of the 1980s whose work for Elton John's 'I'm Still Standing' (1983) and Tina Turner's 'Private Dancer' (1984) would later win her MTV nominations for Best Choreography. Phillips formed Hot Gossip in 1974 and, from 1978, she worked with director David Mallet to create one dance video a week for the *Kenny Everett Video Show*. The show entered wider public discourse when there was a debate in the House of Commons about whether Hot Gossip should be allowed to perform before the 7pm watershed because of their sexualisation of dance. However, the first pre-recorded and standalone video that Phillips can recall choreographing for was

<sup>2</sup> Litza Bixler has choreographed videos for artists including All Seeing Eye, Bluetones, Razorlight, Muse, Avalanches, and Sophie Ellis Bextor.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Roberts has choreographed videos for artists including Pixie Lott, All Saints, One Direction, Robbie Williams, Katy Perry, Girls Aloud, Hurts, and Basement Jaxx.

<sup>4</sup> Natricia Bernard has choreographed for Duffy, Sugababes, Katy Perry, Mika, and the Arctic Monkeys.

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Sillis has choreographed for artists including FKA Twigs, Jungle, and Laura Mulva.

<sup>6</sup> Holly Blakey has choreographed videos for artists including Ellie Goulding, Jungle, Florence and the Machine, and Coldplay.

<sup>7</sup> Dawn Shadforth's music video credits include Kylie Minogue's 'Can't Get You Out Of My Head' choreographed by Michael Rooney, Basement Jaxx 'Red Alert' choreographed by Litza Bixler, and Hurts 'Lights' choreographed by Paul Roberts).

<sup>8</sup> Dom & Nic choreographed videos include Chemical Brothers 'Midnight Madness' choreographed by Supple Nam, Chemical Brothers 'Wide Open feat Beck' choreographed by Wayne McGregor.

<sup>9</sup> Focus Group held on 30 October 2015. In attendance were choreographers Arlene Phillips and Holly Blakey, Video Commissioner for Atlantic Records Dan Curwin, Editor of *Promo News TV* and co-curator of BUG and the UK Music Video Awards, David Knight, as well as Emily Caston and Justin Smith.

One Hundred Ton and A Feather's 'It Only Takes A Minute Girl' (1976) (Focus Group, 2015).

Another key step in the formation of styles for choreographed videos in the UK was made by American choreographer Flick Colby (1946–2011) for *Top of the Pops* (BBC, 1964–2006). First broadcast in 1964, *TOTP* used dance troupes when artists were not available to perform live or needed a performance boost, beginning with The Go Gos (1964–1968). Colby went on to put together and choreograph the subsequent dance groups for *TOTP*: Pan's People (1968–1976), Ruby Flipper (1976) (which was distinctive for its diverse gender and ethnic make-up), and Legs & Co (1976–1981), which was superseded by *ZOO* (1981–1983).

From the very start, the 'kick, bollocks, and scramble' production method (see Caston, 2012) was in existence, both in the live staging of these backing dancers for *TOTP* and the early pre-recorded videos. Colby often had no more than six hours to choreograph a routine for her acts. If a single had fallen down the charts during the week it would be dropped from the schedule and a new single (and choreographed dance routine) would have to be rehearsed the day before the live show (Wiegand, 2011).

From its launch in 1981, British music videos made up 70 per cent of the content shown on US MTV until the mid-1980s. As a result, budgets for music video productions in the UK increased. But the 'kick, bollocks, and scramble' production approach continued. Arlene Phillips was generally expected to choreograph and rehearse her dancers on the day of the shoot. This is what happened in her iconic video for Elton John's 'I'm Still Standing' (1983). For a number of reasons related to issues raised by the Musician's Union and BBC regarding payments to musicians, terrestrial broadcasters in the UK were slow to pick up videos, and many of the earliest British videos were produced for the US market, with producer Scott Millaney from production company Millaney, Grant, Mallet, and Mulcahy (MGMM) regularly flying to the USA with tapes for Bob Pitmann's new company MTV to air.

The first choreographed videos tended to have high production values with lavish sets or locations. Adam and the Ants' 'Prince Charming', released in September 1981, one month after the launch of MTV USA, is an example. Phillips choreographed background dancers to complement the conceptual theme and provide additional interest for the main artist's performance. Within a few years, Arlene Phillips started to see a difference in the amount of preparation time given to choreographers. For Duran Duran's 'The Wild Boys' (1984), directed by Russell Mulcahy, Phillips said, 'I actually had time in a studio. I had two days in a studio for 'Wild Boys' and it was so much time I didn't know what to do with it' (Focus Group, 2015).

One of the major developments within dance video in the early 1980s was Malcolm McLaren's introduction of US breakdancing to the UK. Malcolm McLaren's video for 'Buffalo Gals' (1982) comprised imported found footage of US breakdancers. This was the first time most British viewers had seen breakdancing on TV. The use of non-choreographed street dancers established a new style of dance video. 'Buffalo Gals' was later referenced in Neneh Cherry's 'Buffalo Stance' video, directed John Maybury (1989). It was also a reference point for many subsequent British hip hop and R&B videos such as Jake Nava's 1998 video for Beverley Knight, 'Made It Back', showing British dancers performing their individual pieces.

1985 saw the next major breakthrough with Kate Bush's video for 'Running Up That Hill'. In preparation, Kate Bush had worked with Diane Gray, a soloist in Martha Graham's Dance Company and subsequently Director of the Martha Graham Dance School and Associate Artistic Director of the Martha Graham Dance Company. Arlene Phillips had trained with Kate Bush when they were both working with Lindsay Kemp.<sup>10</sup> According to our focus group, 'Running Up That Hill' exposed mainstream British audiences to contemporary dance for the first time. The video was also rare and bold because it contained no lip sync to Kate's vocals. Unlike her 1978 'Wuthering Heights' video, 'Running Up That Hill' directed the viewers' attention wholly towards Bush's dance performance. This was radical for the time, and led to the decision at the BBC not to play the video on *TOTP*.

In 1986, the loose choreographic style that Italian dancer/choreographer Bruno Tonioli had developed with British female band, Bananarama, was crystallised in the release of a highly stylised video for their track 'Venus' (1986). Tonioli used a relatively simple choreography that could be imitated by fans. Like Phillips and Bush, and another leading British music video artist, David Bowie, Tonioli had worked with the Lindsay Kemp Dance Company. The video marked a pivotal shift towards a more glamorous and sexual image for Bananarama which contrasted with the tomboyish style of their earlier work. The video went on heavy rotation on MTV in the USA that year, and is widely held as having broken the band in the USA where the single went to Number One. In a behind-the-scenes documentary about the making of 'Venus', Tonioli explains:

They are not very complicated scenes but it involves using bodies and using stylised movements to create an atmosphere. Choreography doesn't always mean doing seven pirouettes or jettés across the room. It's a very wide art form. It goes from moving an arm to putting bodies in certain shapes [...] and at the same time being aware of how the

<sup>10</sup> Diane Gray is sometimes cited as the choreographer (e.g. Williams, 2014).

camera moves in relation to your moves [...] When you work with artists you have to find movement that suits their personality.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> 'Bananarama, The Making of Venus', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nga9AIOHU>.

Expanding the parameters of choreography still further were two British bands, New Order and The Fall. Formed in 1980 by the remaining members of Joy Division following the death of Ian Curtis, New Order were the flagship band of Manchester-based UK independent label Factory Records. Their experience of the 1980s New York club scene, rejection of conventional marketing and promotional methods, and experimental approach led them to commission an unlikely and now iconic video for 'True Faith' (1987) from choreographer and mime artist Philippe Decouffé (Buckland & Stewart, 1993, pp.72–73). Said to have been inspired by Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadisches Ballett* (1922), the video shows two male performers dressed in surreal costumes leaping about and slapping each other. It was both directed and choreographed by Decouffé. The style of the video is evidence of the UK music industry's enthusiasm for experimental videos and contemporary dance, such that it gained the British Phonographic Industry's (BPI) Brit Award for Best Video in 1988. Decouffé also choreographed the video for Fine Young Cannibals' 'She Drives Me Crazy' (1989).

Although The Fall's 'Copped It' video (1984) was never released as a single, the work functions as a promotional video featuring original choreography by Michael Clark and performance and costumes by Leigh Bowery. The clip was directed by Charles Atlas, frequent collaborator of American choreographer Merce Cunningham, as part of a fictionalised documentary about a day in the life of Michael Clark as he and his Company prepare for a performance of *New Puritans* (1984). Atlas's feature-length film entitled *Hail the New Puritan* was broadcast on Channel 4's *Dance on 4* series on 7 May 1986.

In the 1990s, subcultural dance videos became popular, having emerged from Britain's rave culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These were videos which aspired to represent authentic dance moves from the clubs. They were usually made by directors connected to the club scene and were largely made for existing fans rather than to promote the bands to new audiences. As such, representing the 'authenticity' of the dance culture was paramount. A notable example is The Prodigy's video for 'Out Of Space' (1992), directed by Russell Curtis, Faithless 'We Come 1' (2001) and the videos created by Dom & Nic for The Chemical Brothers, such as 'Setting Sun' (1996) and 'Block Rockin' Beats' (1997).

For director Dawn Shadforth, the style of 'authentic' video was partly facilitated by developments in technology. She recalls that new non-linear Avid editing software offered an opportunity to represent the



hallucinogen, communitarian, sensual, and often tripped out experience of dance club culture. In the UK version for Basement Jaxx's 'Red Alert' (1999) Shadforth collaborated with choreographer Litza Bixler to tell a story about a diner that is hit by a meteor which turns everyone into robot-like people. The robotic movements of the actors are partially created by choreography by Litza Bixler, and partly by frame cutting on Avid by Dawn. It was a technique Shadforth also used for the video for the All Seeing I's 'The Beat Goes On' video (1998). There's a very real sense here that Shadforth is 'choreographing' the dance and movement through her editing:

I'd been editing my own stuff up until that point. I knew how to do them, I knew what I wanted to do, and that video is almost kind of knitted. It's like a piece of tapestry. The amount of cutting in it. There's so many edits, everything is kind of turning the moving images into something that's like animation. So that was like, really, I could never have done that with an editor. Because that was about me working as a craft, it was like a craft project. And working with the footage in a very intricate way. So that was when I got into editing and I started playing with it. That was what I was enjoying doing.

(Shadforth, 2016)

But not all British DJs and indie labels wanted their videos to represent the authentic dance scene. Others were keen to appropriate genres of dance from non-native film and music videos. Boosted by an increase in sales revenue from music consumers restocking their back catalogue on CD, and by demand from *The Chart Show* (Channel 4 & ITV, 1986–1998), *The Box* (1992–), MTV USA (1981–) and MTV Europe (1987–), the music video UK industry entered its 'golden age' of innovation and high budgets. Between the mid-1990s and 2005, more directors hired choreographers in British music video and based their work around foregrounded dance. The trend was fuelled by a rise in electronic music where a DJ replaced the artist or a band. In the videos for these dance tracks, directors were often given greater freedom to create the visuals because there was no need to include performance.

From the mid-1990s onwards, there was a revival of the Hollywood musical genre in British music videos. This began in 1995 with Björk's 'It's Oh So Quiet' (1995), directed by Spike Jonze and choreographed by Michael Rooney and based on the French film musical *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964). The video was commissioned by Paul McKee at One Little Indian, an independent record label in London to which Björk was signed. Jonze worked regularly in London through the UK office of Propaganda/Satellite. The use of dance choreography was given further

stimulus in London by Michel Gondry, a friend and collaborator of Jonze, represented in London by the UK office of Partisan Mini-Miduit in his video for Daft Punk's 'Around The World' (1997), choreographed by Bianca Li from France. Li also choreographed the dance for Don Cameron's video for Blur's 'Music Is My Radar' in 1999 commissioned by Food/Parlophone in the UK. Jonze went on to direct two breakthrough dance videos for British artist Fatboy Slim at British label Skint Records based in Brighton, 'Praise You' (1999) and 'Weapon Of Choice' (2001) both, again, choreographed by Michael Rooney and commissioned by John Hassay. 'Weapon Of Choice' featured Christopher Walken dancing and flying around the empty lobby of the Marriott Hotel (now the LA Hotel) in Los Angeles in a style that imitated the legendary dance solos of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly.

Because budgets were high, it was possible for directors to shoot their musical numbers with a large cast of dancers and extras on lavish locations with lavish sets and costumes. They continued to imitate, parody, and reference dance and film styles not native to the dance communities themselves. Max and Dania directed a period dance video for Jamelia's 'Money' (2001), choreographed by Priscilla Samuels, which referenced the British costume dramas of the 1980s and 1990s as documented by Higson (2003). Sophie Muller directed 'Murder On The Dance Floor' for Sophie Ellis Bextor (2003), choreographed by Litza Bixler, and in 2001 Dawn Shadforth directed the futuristic video for Kylie Minogue's 'Can't Get You Out Of My Head' with US choreographer Michael Rooney. The referencing of Hollywood musicals continued well into subsequent years with Sophie Muller's video for Duffy's 'Rain On Your Parade' (2008), choreographed by Natricia Bernard, inspired by Judy Garland's performance of the 'Get Happy' number in *Summer Stock* (1950), and Phil Griffin's video for Basement Jaxx's 'Hush Boy' (2006) choreographed by Paul Roberts, inspired by *Hello, Dolly!* (1969).

But the Hollywood musical was not the only popular dance genre of the 'golden era' in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Kate Bush had instigated a genre of dance video in which the main vocalist and songwriter choreographed and performed her own original dance. Jay Kay did the same for his iconic video for 'Virtual Insanity' (1996) directed by filmmaker Jonathan Glazer. Choreographer Paul Roberts cites this as an inspiration for his move into dance choreography (2016). 'Virtual Insanity' defines the form of dance in music video, because the dance is integrated within a visual effect, and the video successfully integrates the voice of the artist and the voice of the film director. Commissioned by Mike O'Keefe at Sony Music London, this video saw a brilliant collaboration between a director skilled in SFX (having studied theatre studies at Wimbledon

College) and dancer/singer Jay Kay (and was nominated for an MTV award for Best Choreography in 1997). No choreographer was employed for this video, however: Jay Kay created the dance with Jonathan Glazer.

The late 1990s and early 2000s also saw a trend towards the easy dance routine targeted at teen and family audiences. The videos for Steps' 'Tragedy' (1999) (choreography by Paul Roberts) and S Club 7's 'Don't Stop Movin'' (2001) (choreographed by Priscilla Samuels) were based around simple dance moves that untrained fans of any age could imitate. Having been developed by Bruno Tonioli in the early MTV years for Bananarama, this style of loose, easy, and catchy choreography became increasingly popular with the girl and boy bands of the 1990s such as Blue and All Saints. Paul Roberts explained the commissioning process for 'Tragedy' thus:

I got a call from Jive. They said, 'We've got an afternoon's rehearsal' and the manager, Tim Burnt, had said to me 'I want it to be a routine like the Macarena. I want it for the young kids to be able to follow it'. Simple simple simple [...] in literally twenty minutes we'd done it.

(Roberts, 2016)

For Roberts, one of the most significant things about this choreography is its cultural impact and longevity: 'I can't believe it's still got life. It's pierced a lot of people's lives as far as movement goes. It was conceived in less than an hour' (2016).

The loose choreography style continued well into the 2000s, and those directors specialising in this kind of choreography became employed by labels and managers to work as Directors of Performance or Creative Directors – charged with helping artists to choreograph their movement across all formats for performances – live, TV, and video. Paul Roberts explains:

It's interesting as the years have progressed it's become more about the looseness and looking natural. Gone are the days of those formulated videos in which you bust a move for every word, and in which you as the choreographer are almost not listening to what the song is about, you're creating for creation's sake. Now a lot of bands want to be very honest and very true to themselves [...] All they want is basic staging so they know where the camera needs to go [...] Artists have more say in what it is that they want to be and how they want to be perceived these days. And the label and management allow them to do that, whereas early on it was always sitting down at boardroom meeting and it was the label and management that would tell you what they wanted. Now it seems to have shifted.

(2016)

The update of non-linear editing technologies in the early 1990s saw directors such as Dawn Shadforth push dance in more abstract fantastical formations or to synchronise the dance movements of bands and backing dancers whose recorded performance was out of sync with each other or the music. In the 2000s, the uptake of newer technologies saw the same effect. An example is the video for Futureshock's 'Late At Night' (2003), set in Japan, showing actors body popping to the music, which was conceived and directed by British directing duo Ne-O (Jake and Ryoko) through Academy Films. Other technologies such as motion capture, which allowed the reproduction of multiple dancers, were used increasingly in the 2000s, and notably in the video for Breach's 'Everything You Never Had' (2013), choreographed by Supple Nam, co-commissioned by Dan Curwin, and directed by the Sacred Egg. The video captures the emotional arc of the 'solo dancer' experience of the 1970s discos and clubs described by Tim Lawrence (2009). The vast possibilities offered by technology are also evident in the Coldplay video for 'Adventure Of A Lifetime' (2015), choreographed by Holly Blakey.

In the 00s, dance in music video has taken radical turn with the gender-questioning, emotionally- and politically-charged videos of FKA Twigs. Originally a backing dancer for artists such as Jessie J, Twigs began to co-choreograph, direct and choreograph her videos very soon after beginning her career as a recording artist. She is now represented as a professional film director by production company Academy Films for whom she directed her own videos for 'Pendulum' (2014), 'Glass And Patron' (2015), 'M3LL155X' (2015) and the Soundtrack 7 dance films (2015). Because a significant number of Twigs' choreographed videos are not financed or produced as promotional films for single releases, and because they defy the distinctions, discussed below, between 'dance films' and 'music videos', it is perhaps more reasonable to describe her work as dance film. Although Twigs has collaborated frequently with choreographer Aaron Sillis, she also choreographs her own work. On pieces such as 'Glass And Patron' Twigs is the songwriter, recording artist, dancer, co-choreographer, and director.

Dance music video has also moved closer to the worlds of ballet and contemporary dance. Wayne McGregor has choreographed three critically acclaimed music videos in recent years: The Chemical Brothers 'Wide Open feat. Beck' (2015), Atoms for Peace 'Ingénue' (2013), and Radiohead's 'Lotus Flower' (2011). These works all represent a return to the expressive and 'internally motivated' style of contemporary dance first presented by Kate Bush in the 1970s. In 2013, The Feeling released their video for 'Boy Cried Wolf', a simple video showing Edward Watson (principal dancer at the Royal Ballet) performing in an aircraft hangar in North

London. The dance was choreographed by Arthur Pita, the video directed by Caswell Coggins, and it featured Edward performing some of the lip sync to the lyrics. Pita and Watson had previously collaborated on the critically acclaimed *The Metamorphosis* (2011).

All those interviewed and participating in the focus group felt that choreographed dance is experiencing an exciting creative revival at the moment. Many felt this was attributable to the decline in production budgets for music videos since the mid-2000s, as a result of declining label revenues from conventional music sales and licensing. The British commission for Kasabian's 'Club Foot' video (2004) is widely held as the final big budget, high production value commission from a UK label for a UK artist. For example, Dawn Shadforth offers the following opinion:

The drive down of budgets in music video has really freed people. Because it used to be that there was this kind of standard thing of having a line of dancers and having to do street dance, you know with pop music obviously. But there seems to be a thing that's happened that's to do with YouTube and Vimeo, and things like fashion films and dance films and music videos are kind of blending. And the things now we can do with the dancer and the music are amazing. And so yes, that has led to people taking that and using that in making fantastic music video that doesn't necessarily have to have this huge production around it. It can be really beautiful and meaningful and lovely. So yeah, I think that's the reason why there's been a sort of renaissance.<sup>12</sup>  
(FRAME, 2016)

There has been a trend towards producing videos in which a solo dancer or small group of dancers perform in an unidentifiable location. A single camera tracks around (often Steadicam) within minimal cuts to close-up, trying to keep the wide theatrical perspective of a stage – and with no footage of musical performance. Jungle's 'Julia', directed by Oliver Hadlee Pearch and choreographed by Aaron Sillis (2014), illustrates this, as does the video for Gwilym Gold's 'Triumph' directed and choreographed by Holly Blakey (2015), and the video for 'Wide Open' (2015).

'Movement direction' remains popular in the work of choreographer Supple Nam who shot to fame with his choreography for the VW Golf commercial 'Singing in the Rain' (2005) which won a D&AD award for the innovative choreography. Nam's blurring of the distinction between the stunt choreographer, movement director and dance choreographer is illustrated in the video for Peace's 'Money' (2014), directed by Ninian Doff, where he choreographs the conceptual and emotional interactions between the two characters in intricate, choreographed handshakes. Nam's work bucks the trend towards 'realistic' choreography executed by ordinary people, and adopts a more formal, polished, conceptualised and stylised

<sup>12</sup> Dawn Shadforth was part of a production panel, with DoP Robbie Ryan and editor Dominic Leung, convened by Emily Caston at the London Dance Film Festival (FRAME) on 11 June 2016.

style. An example is his choreography for The XX's 'Islands' (Saam Farahmand, 2009), for which he was asked to create something slick and hypnotic which could be performed on a loop. Also working within this conceptual approach to movement direction is Aletta Collins, who created the choreography for Will Young's 'Losing Myself' (2012) directed by Henry Scholfield.

British choreographer Aaron Sillis has led a dual life in the commercial and contemporary dance worlds. Having taken leading roles with Matthew Bourne's company, and in the Pet Shop Boys' ballet *The Most Incredible Thing* at Sadler's Wells in 2011, he has also danced for Take That, Rihanna, Justin Bieber and Katy Perry. 'I feel like the music video is a really important medium and doesn't have the respect that contemporary dance or ballet has. But this is a real moment in time. There is a movement happening in that world. It's small, but it's happening' (quoted in Winship, 2015).

## Part II: A 'British' Style?

Is there such a thing as a 'British' style in British dance videos? It is very difficult to answer because of the flow of dancers, choreographers and directors between the UK and other countries. I suggest there are three differences.

For Litza Bixler, the US music video industry has specialised in tightly-choreographed, slick routines with professionally trained dancers with roots in the stylised and polished routines of Michael and Janet Jackson. In the UK, perhaps partly because of the preference of bands and labels to prioritise the authentic and DIY ideology of dance, British choreographers have thought in more conceptual terms about the ideas represented in the dance in relation to the brand of the artist and emotions in the music. But this is a generalisation, and for every rule there will be an exception that proves the rule. Choreographers in the UK, largely, have had to be more flexible about workflow, schedule, budgets, casting, and rehearsal dates, with directors and clients prioritising authenticity of 'look' of the extras over their professional dance ability.

It would be difficult to dispute the influence of American dance videos on British artists, directors and choreographers, particularly the influence of Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' (1983) when it was first broadcast on *TOTP* in the UK. Both Natricia Bernard and Paul Roberts acknowledged the influence of that video. However, thereafter the impact of this genre of choreography had a greater influence on black British R&B artists, who struggled to make the polished videos on lower budgets and with less time. Jake Nava, who began his career in the UK directing videos for black

artists such as Mark Morrison, Mis-Teeq, Shola Ama, Glemma Kid, Ms. Dynamite, and Beverley Knight, struggled to achieve the kinds of polished look possible with budgets secured by Hype Williams for R&B dance videos in the USA, and eventually moved to the USA himself. Initially, in the 1980s, British choreographers and directors played a formative role in the polished US dance video. Brian Grant directed the Olivia Newton John video for 'Let's Get Physical' (1981), Steve Barron directed Michael Jackson's 'Billie Jean' (1983), Arlene Phillips choreographed Tina Turner's 'Private Dancer' (1984), and Whitney Houston's 'How Will I Know?' (1985) and 'I Wanna Dance With Somebody' (1987).

However, in 1987 when a new generation of directors from British art schools such as Central St Martins, The Royal College of Art and the London College of Communication entered the field, they brought with them a more critical, experimental approach. This critical approach is evident in the live action cartoon video made by Chris Cunningham for Aphex Twin's 'Windowlicker' (1999), a parody of the polished big budget videos for US R&B artists made by directors such as Hype Williams and Paul Hunter. The dance solo was choreographed by Vincent Paterson. Cunningham says his direction to Paterson was to 'come up with some really immature and perverted takes on Buzz [sic] Berkeley's movies' (quoted in Adams, 2014, p.9). For Adams, 'the end result is more an amalgam of *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and Michael Jackson, perhaps unsurprising given that Paterson has choreographed both Broadway musicals and Jackson tours and videos' (p.9). Cunningham's 'Windowlicker' video represented a perhaps long overdue summary of the British industry's frustration with the American dance video through the 1990s. But as a close-knit and supportive community, that frustration would not be expressed in negative comment, but rather in a comedic and ironic fashion by the director then in a position of greatest creative freedom.

A second difference is that British record companies and musicians have shown more creativity and innovation in commissioning new work and unlikely collaborations (which 'Windowlicker' in itself demonstrates). It is important to remember that many of the recording artists and musicians of the 1990s also went to British art schools where they were encouraged to experiment and break rules. Leading the way have been Fatboy Slim, Björk, and Radiohead. And British labels and artists have been more adventurous in mixing up genres, and in commissioning choreographed videos for artists who do not produce dance music. Important examples of this include the Arctic Monkeys' 'Brianstorm' (2007) which was choreographed by Natricia Bernard, and John Hardwick's video for Blur's 'Crazy Beat' (2003), choreographed by Carol Brown. The UK has had a more innovative commissioning and funding strategy than

the USA, and this perhaps lies more deeply in British approaches to advertising and marketing. In their TV advertising, British agencies have never used the ‘hard sell’ strategy and it is consistent with this that UK artists have not embraced the ‘hard sell’ ethos of the lifestyle-and-money slick polished dance videos of the USA.

A third difference is that UK creatives have been keener to work with real people in their dance and choreographed videos. This preoccupation with real dancers is evident in a video Holly Blakey choreographed for Jungle’s ‘Time’ directed by Oliver Hadlee Pearch (2014), centred on a dance between two middle-aged men – one black and one white. In the UK, says choreographer Litza Bixler, directors and labels often do not want trained dancers in their videos: ‘They don’t want them light and toned. They have this idea that kind of sloppy untuned “real”, what they refer to here as a real body’. She continues:

That’s a very British thing that I very much associate with Britain. Because time and time again that’s what I will be asked to do. They love normal people dancing here. It’s their favourite thing. Not so popular in the US. In the US they like their dance to be slick and well-performed. [...] There is a level of messiness. What I see as messiness. So it’s not only acceptable in Britain. But often desired. And I think because in their view it makes it more authentic. That makes it more real in a way. But because that authenticity in music, for me, is very much originated here. But maybe someone from the US would make a different argument. [...] Most of the time when I am asked to choreograph (in Britain) it’s usually a non-dancer. Or a well-known actor that’s not a dancer. Even when it comes to filling in background dancers. The big thing will be that they can’t look like dancers.

(Bixler, 2016)

What are the origins of this trend for the real? One particular set of landmarks lie in the late 1990s with Spike Jonze’s video for Fatboy Slim’s ‘Praise You’. In 1998, Spike sent Norman Cook (aka Fatboy Slim) a home video he’d shot of himself dancing (badly) to ‘Rockerfeller Skank’ (1998) – a track he’d been unavailable to work on. Although Norman Cook, his label Skint, and the label commissioner John Hassay had already commissioned a video from Doug Aitken for that track, they liked the ironic humour and amateur style. So they commissioned it for ‘Praise You’. Unlike other US directors, Jonze did not seek a polished look but instead favoured a DIY aesthetic for his videos. This style was popular in the UK, and the creativity lay in John Hassay’s decision to commission this, and market it as a work of the dance community group. Shortly afterwards, commissioner John Moule at Moby’s London label, Mute, commissioned Fredrik Bond, a Swedish director based in



London at Harry Nash, to create a video that represented this amateur style with his video for 'Bodyrock' (1999). So popular were the casting tapes with Moby, that he asked for an 'unofficial video' of out of shape, un-rhythmic, British people trying to dance to be released at the same time. The style of dancing was quickly mimicked by Ricky Gervais in his 'David Brent dance routine' for *The Office* (BBC, 2001–2003). The idea of unfit fat white men dancing is also at play in Blue Source's video for 'The Avalanches' 'Since I Left You' (2001) choreographed by Bixler herself.

But it may be that there are historic and broader roots in British social realism in cinema, and in British ballet of the 1930s and 1940s, where Ninette de Valois and Frederick Ashton sought to secure an identity distinct from Russian ballet with new ballets about ordinary British life for British audiences. British video directors have also been keen to use dance to tell a story in their work. This is particularly evident in the work of Dawn Shadforth who, since her breakthrough 'Red Alert' video for Basement Jaxx (1999), has worked with recording artists and choreographers to realise the emotions and concepts of their music in stories involving dance. Her recent videos for Hurts' 'Wonderful Life' (2010) and 'Lights' (2015) poignantly demonstrate this. With its social observations about identities, cliques, and outsiders, 'Lights' harks back to the early British ballets of the 1930s in which choreographers tried to capture the British experience of ordinary people in their stories, and to Lee Hall's *Billy Elliot* for the stage (2005) and cinema (2000). For 'Lights', Dawn collaborated with acclaimed feature film cinematographer Robbie Ryan because of his extraordinary sensitivity and skill in photographing dance.

Nevertheless, the difficulty of identifying a 'British style' and British 'authorship' in choreographed videos is considerable. Beyoncé's 'Single Ladies' (2008), directed by acclaimed British director Jake Nava, illustrates the complex authorship of these works. Winner of three MTV Video Music Awards in 2009 (Best Video, Choreography, and Editing), Beyoncé has said the video was inspired by the YouTube hit 'Mexican Breakfast', a 1969 Bob Fosse dance routine featuring his wife, Gwen Verdon, dancing with two other women.<sup>13</sup> Choreographer, Frank Gatson Jr, admits it is based on a dance performed on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1969: 'Me and Beyoncé saw it, and we thought, "Wouldn't it be great to modernise this?"' (Narins, 2016). The background is also discussed by Jessica Herndon (2010). Since her time in Destiny's Child, Gatson had worked with Beyoncé on her choreography. The artist, choreographer, and commissioning record label were American. The original choreography and film work from which 'Single Ladies' was adapted were American (Fosse / *The Ed Sullivan Show*). But Jake Nava is British. He was not involved in the video merely as a 'jobbing director'. He was an ongoing artistic

<sup>13</sup> 'Beyoncé confirmed that Single Ladies video was indeed inspired by Broadway choreographer Bob Fosse', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-SlfHHd3qI>.

collaborator with Beyoncé and has directed nine videos in total for her. Nava brought to Beyoncé's videos a sensibility towards filming dance based on a long prior career in the UK working with British R&B, pop and dance acts, and towards European styling.

### **Part III: Definitions and Distinctions**

What is the difference between a choreographed music video and a dance film? It is tempting to argue that music video is marked by a greater level of invention and self-conscious exploration of cinematic techniques. Music video directors, especially in the so-called golden era, have been able to photograph and choreograph dance using the latest, often expensive technologies, software and post-production techniques to enhance dance in ways beyond the low-budget realm of dance film directors (camera rigs, high speed cameras, post-production effects, etc.). However, such techniques and self-conscious inventions have also been used by directors of dance films. A dance film is organised around two primary voices: the choreographer and director; their combined efforts focus on articulating the concept underlying the performance of the choreography. In music video, there is a third creative voice: the artist. Funding for the video comes not from a public source (as with most funding for dance film in the UK), with a specific public service brief to advance the art or support particular unrepresented genres or diverse groups, but from a record label.

One of the main differences is that in music video the music inspires the dance. Dom & Nic came up with the idea for 'Wide Open' only after hearing the track on the album. They were so moved by the track that they contacted the band to ask if they would make a video for it; coincidentally it was being planned for a single release, so Dom & Nic were able to access a production budget from the label. For all of her choreographed videos Dawn Shadforth was inspired by the music. In the case of Hurts' 'Lights', both the music and the lyrics inspired her narrative about dancing alone. Often, directors are looking for music with peaks and troughs, and an overall dramatic structure that invites dramaturgy and tension within the choreography. Of Hurts' 'Lights', Shadforth said:

I think that's really true, I was really consciously not trying to impose my sort of film that I want to make onto a track. And being led by the music. And the way that music feels. And that still does lead me into idea. Even now, it's more emotional perhaps and I'm trying to make things that are more filmic now but it's still got to be led by the emotion, by the music. Now I'm tapping into things more like a narrative but an emotional quality. But I don't want to impose a film

onto a track. But yes then it's coming from the inside with the music [...] I look for a feeling. It's got to inspire me and move me.

(2016)

Paul Roberts adds to this:

From a choreographer's point of view, they have to feel it. They have to want to choreograph to it. They have to want to make their moves fit to it and if they are so jilted by it or they don't get moved. Some pitches from directors are wonderful but then you get the track and you think it's terrible.

(2016)

But to say that the music plays a pivotal role doesn't mean it comes before the director's overall vision of the dance choreography. Spike Jonze conceived the choreography for Fatboy Slim's 'Praise You' for a wholly different track from his album. He was able to shoot it and edit it to 'Praise You', however, because the track was within the same genre, and the idea of the choreography fitted so well with the brand and creative voice of Fatboy Slim. That branding was also crucial to Dom & Nic, for whom 'loneliness' is a key feature of all of their videos for The Chemical Brothers. They wanted to capture a private important moment in the life of a woman. Their concept allowed not only the music to breathe, but added to the choreography and the performance.

By contrast, 'dance film' in Britain has been influenced by a choreographic tradition taught at British dance schools such as The Place and Trinity Laban in which dance should be created separately to music, and must be internally motivated by the body in dance, not music. It is not a tradition that all choreographers have embraced. In late 1990s, director/choreographer Matthew Bourne commented: 'I've never been keen ... on the Cunningham-Cage practice of making music and movement so independent of each other that they are only thrown together at the last minute' (Macaulay, 1999, p.29). He continued, 'Dance for me is – more and more – about the relationship between movement and music. I don't mind that modern-dance students are taught how to dance and choreograph without music; I do mind that they are taught little, if anything, about the connections between dance and music, between choreography and music' (p.24).

A second difference is the audience. Within the dance world, music video is part of what is termed 'commercial dance'. Holly Blakey states:

There is a lot of snobbery about music video, especially the dance world. Certainly from the smaller, more normative, contemporary dance circles, who seemingly make work for each other and don't want the

world to see it. Making work for mass public cultures is like the worst thing you can apparently do, so what does that mean we are saying about each other? It's dark. For me everyone is a dancer, and dance is for everyone.

(2016)

The subjectivity represented in music video, the expressive inner logic and emotions of the dance are the projected experience of the fans and music community. Dom & Nic's video for Faithless' 'We Come 1' illustrates this. Because music videos are made for mass audiences, and largely to increase the audience and attract new audiences to the music, the directors and choreographers have to work hard to emotionally involve the viewer in the music through the dance: to seduce the viewer to join in the dance.

A third difference is the role of the choreographer. In dance film, the choreographer is often sovereign and generally has greater creative control than in most music videos. The first sign of the choreographer's lack of creative control is the usual shortage of preparation time. For Paul Roberts 'preparation is king' (2016). But Ben Totty, agent, says that for an average music video his choreographers will 'have one rehearsal day of eight hours. Maybe not even that. Maybe a 16-hour shoot day so the producer wants to do a rehearsal for 2 hours in the corner somewhere before they turn over' (Totty, 2016). Paul Roberts and Aaron Sillis both believe this lack of preparation time is a reason that many choreographers have been reluctant to work on music videos.

The status of choreographers is lower in music video than dance film. Totty observes that on the callsheet crew list his choreographers are often been listed at the bottom along with the runners rather than on a par with other creative heads of department such as the director of photography who are placed at the top of the crew list alongside the director (2016). Choreographers are not invited into the edit and a lot of their choreography often ends up on the cutting room floor (Roberts, 2016). Holly Blakey suggests that sometimes the choreography ends up being cut because the director and cinematographer didn't know how to shoot it in the first place: 'people don't necessarily know how to shoot choreography' and if it's not shot well, she thinks they may end up chopping it (2016).

Natricia Bernard describes it thus:

I have to detach and understand that, well there's a brand, there's an image, and the label has to sign it off. The artist needs to sign it off. The director needs to sign it off. [...] There comes a point where you have to go, 'It's not your project [...] you are just the dancing eyes of the director'. I work under the director. And I am his creative when

it comes to movement. I work under him. And I have to bring his concept to life. I can't come in with 'I don't want this'.

(Bernard, 2016)

But these points notwithstanding, all sectors of the dance world are hanging. Individuals like FKA Twigs, Matthew Bourne, and Akram Khan are breaking down boundaries between genres of music and dance, and between cultures of production in dance. Matthew Bourne's recent event cinema release with Sadler's Wells, *The Car Man* (2015) perhaps represents the culmination of Bourne's enthusiasm for reaching a mass audience with the collaboration between dance and music, and the united vision that can be achieved by a director who is also the choreographer. The work of both Bourne and Twigs challenges the view that there is any simple or steadfast distinction between a 'dance film' and 'music video'.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to venture an overview of choreography and dance in British music videos from the late 1970s to the present day. The historical research and discussion presented here would benefit from being linked to the history of popular dance before 1975 and outside the UK, as well as to developments in dance culture in Britain documented elsewhere, such as Judith Mackrell's work on British New Dance (1992). There is much need here for further analysis, and this article is just a first step. However, it has pinpointed some significant issues. Whilst we cannot speak of a definite British style, we can speak of British trends and tendencies in collaboration and commissioning at British record labels for British genres of music. There has been an extraordinary creative confidence amongst British musicians and British record labels to experiment in dance choreography and collaborate with choreographers to produce authentic, realistic, dramaturgical, surrealist, and expressive modes of choreography, and a dislike for the slick and polished. These findings are consistent with those of John Mundy in his examination of British musicals, and strongly support his recommendation that rather than critical appreciation of 'British dance film' by negative comparison with US work, critical appreciation is conducted on a hermeneutic basis which identifies the different ambitions of British commissions in music video, and judges the work by its different goals and the different expectations and genre preferences of British audiences.



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Emily Caston ♦ The Dancing Eyes of the Director

*The Kenny Everett Video Show*, ITV, UK, 1978–1981.

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‘Murder On The Dance Floor’ [music video], Sophie Ellis Bextor, Sophie Muller, Polydor, UK, 2001.

‘Music Is My Radar’ [music video], Blur, Don Cameron, Food/Parlophone, UK, 1999.

‘Never Ever’ [music video], All Saints, Sean Ellis, London, UK, 1997.

‘Out Of Space’ [music video], The Prodigy, Russell Curtis, XL Recordings, UK, 1992.

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‘Praise You’ [music video], Fatboy Slim, Spike Jonze, Skint, UK, 1999.

‘Prince Charming’ [music video], Adam and the Ants, Mike Mansfield, Columbia, UK, 1981.

‘Private Dancer’ [music video], Tina Turner, Brian Grant, Capitol/EMI, USA, 1984.

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- 'She Drives Me Crazy' [music video], Fine Young Cannibals, Philippe Decouflé, London Records, UK, 1989.
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- Summer Stock*, Charles Walters, USA, 1950.
- 'Thinking Out Loud' [music video], Ed Sheeran, Emil Nava, Asylum, UK, 2014.
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- 'Time' [music video], Jungle, Oliver Hadlee Pearch, XL Recordings, UK, 2014.
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- 'Tragedy' [music video], Steps, David Amphlett, Jive, UK, 1998.
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- 'Virtual Insanity' [music video], Jamiroquai, Jonathan Glazer, Sony, UK, 1996.
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- 'The Wild Boys' [music video], Duran Duran, Russell Mulcahy, EMI/Capitol, UK, 1984.
- 'Windowlicker' [music video], Aphex Twin, Chris Cunningham, Warp, UK, 1999.
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