

DROP: The Feminization of Power Through Dance and Cinema



Figure1 "Bite Down" Taylor King, Britt Ford, Sheridan Bernstein

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Abstract

This paper discusses how film and dance can be manipulated to challenge the traditional male gaze and empower the female body. Women in film and dance are commonly passive objects that are evaluated through the male gaze. The male gaze objectifies women and makes them submissive in a patriarchal society. Women who defy this passive role, particularly virginal maidens who take control of their sexuality, are deemed a threat and in classic literature often face death. By contrast, empowered women, represented by the sirens of mythology, are empowered and control both their environment and those looking at them. This paper discusses the film *DROP*, which explores the layering of the actual image and the image through the camera. Through two contrasting movements, the film first explores the concept of virginal maidens and the traditional male gaze and then a contrasting movement controlled by the sirens themselves. The later movement is a conscious effort to empower women in film and make them come alive on their own terms. The paper discusses and contrasts how symbols, movement, camera placement and editing can be used to create an empowered female who is no longer subject to the male gaze.

Prologue

My practice as a dancer, choreographer and filmmaker is to create work that incorporates both film and dance mediums. Over the years, I crossed disciplines creating multimedia work in live performance as well as inserting movement in films. The many projects I completed are all experiments in this study. I am interested in the layering effect of combining these mediums in the creation, construction and manipulation of my work. The imagery for these works, however, has remained within the same vein of inspiration. All works are lineage referencing the image of the drowning maiden. I was first inspired by this imagery after watching the film *The Piano* directed by Jane Campion. In the final scene, the main character, Ada McGrath, imagines herself at watery depths. She is dead suspended above her beloved piano. This image of death lives in Ada's imagination. In the scene preceding this fantasy death, Ada is pulled overboard as her piano is cast into the sea, tangled in a rope connecting her to her prized possession. As she is pulled under there is a moment of surrender before she actively releases herself; it is her active choice to live. For me, the image of a woman suspended above a symbol of both her freedom and captivity is what resonated in my mind.

Judith M. Bennett defines the maiden as a "malleable identity, but it carries presumption of virginity and, to a lesser extent youthfulness" (270). In a Christian and patriarchal driven society, the virginity of a woman is desired and considered a closer connection to the divine. However, I became more interested in the maiden existing outside this structure, the fallen maiden, the one condemned to death as both her salvation and punishment.

The dance for camera work, *DROP*, is the manifestation of the virgin's fall. I specifically referenced the literary works of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, and the sirens of Greek mythology in creating this work. I constructed an abstract narrative in which the women of literature, who were subject to the views and punishments of patriarchal society, could express agency over their own feminine forms. My intention in the creation of *DROP* is to manipulate the patriarchal driven male gaze of cinema in order to represent the fall of the virginal maiden by drowning and her ascent into sexual power by delivering death.

The Male Gaze

As a choreographer and filmmaker, I am surrounded by the constant questioning, analysis, and interpretation of the female body both on the stage and on the screen. My particular interest in integrating the two art forms resulted in an intensified understanding of the presence of the male gaze through layering. I believe that the effect of integrating these two forms compounds the presence of a male gaze as a result of the combined voyeurism and sexualized look that is present on the screen and on the stage. The sexualized image of a woman dancing is supported through the choices of looking made by the male eye of a camera. In this, the freedom to look is layered: one perspective looks at the female image and the second directs the camera's choice of where to look. My challenge in creating *DROP* was to reclaim both the power of looking at the female body and the underlying power of the dancing female body on film.

Elimination of the male gaze is difficult in practice because of its roots in societal patriarchy. However, in encountering the revolutionary feminist text written by Laura Mulvey, an outline of the presentation of the female body was brought to my attention.

Specifically, I was intrigued by Mulvey's interpretation of the female body as a political body, as well as the concept of "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the woman as image (11). "To-be-looked-at-ness" is a concept where the image of the female body is a canvas onto which patriarchal philosophies and male ego are projected. Meaning, the female form is passive in being observed through the male gaze. However, where some may argue passivity, I see an element of power. Mulvey's text was my guideline to achieve a switch in cinema's gendered power dynamic. Mulvey codified this element as "to-be-looked-at-ness," the sexualized invitation of a male gaze. I see power in "to-be-looked-at-ness" as a result of the female body's ability to manipulate the projection of male ego. Within the narrative construct, the male is generating his fantasy of events, projecting his ego and desire onto the pleasurable viewing of the female body. I wanted to question, similar to Mulvey's feminist push back, what happens when the female body is given freedom and content to manipulate the traditional male gaze. Manipulating the female form can take on different elements through the presentation of different symbolism. The element that I found most powerful was movement.

As a choreographer, I have experience generating narrative structure based in the associations of movement, focus, gesture and many other factors incorporated in creating a dance. Mulvey argues "the presence of woman is an indispensable element in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (12). In a traditional narrative structure, the female body is an interruption to the narrative not a propelling element. However, the female presence can take on a different role in an abstracted narrative structure. Dance is inherently abstract within a narrative flow. The dance is a

story comprised of movement, energetic shifts and spacial relationships. These factors combined with other elements present a constructed canvas onto which the audience can project and interpret meaning. The script of *DROP* is a sequence of movement. With an all female cast, I am aware of the inherent male gaze that is imposed on my female performers. However, similar to Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's collaborative film *Riddles of the Sphinx*, my goal in creating *DROP* was to use film and dance collaboratively to disrupt the pleasure and continuity associated with a narrative dependent male gaze. This manipulation shifts the power dynamic of the patriarchal structure from the active male viewer to an activated female image.

Death to the Maiden

The first section of *DROP* is the physical representation of the maiden's fall. The imagery for this section was inspired by Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Edna from Chopin's *The Awakening*. I was drawn to these maidens because both of these women drown themselves as a result of becoming sexualized. Specifically, the two female characters gain sexual agency over their bodies. In creating this section termed "The Fall," I explored how these women fell from the position of the divine maiden to be met with death.

In *Hamlet*, Ophelia is a characterized representation of the abiding daughter and pure virgin. She is endlessly obedient to her father Polonius and brother Laertes. This ends when she becomes sexualized, losing her virginity to Hamlet under the promise of marriage. Her claims of this sexual act are voiced through song after she has fallen into madness.

Ophelia: *And I a maid at your window,*

To be your Valentine:

Then up he rose, and donn'd his clothes

And dupp'd the chamber door;

Let in the maid, that out a maid

Never departed more"(Ant. 4.5,48-59).

Ophelia falls to madness as a result of becoming sexualized without marriage. She chooses to sleep with Hamlet before marrying him, a demonstration of sexual agency. Within the traditional Christian and patriarchal society, this is seen as a sin as well as an act of defiance against her father.

Patriarchal norms at the time declared that women were not emotionally strong enough to have sex before marriage. "Ophelia's madness is presented as a result of her melancholy, erotomania, or hysteria, all of which were considered to be typical biological and emotional weaknesses of the female sex"(Teker 14). Not only were the women considered too emotionally weak to be sexually active, but they were also considered dangerous to society. A sexually independent woman is not controlled by a man and therefore is not under the control of the patriarchal structure. In order to maintain patriarchal control, women such as Ophelia, are condemned by society. This was the fate of Ophelia, death as a form of retribution.

Consistent with the model of the male gaze, Ophelia's death is described as a passive act:

Queen: When down her weedy trophies and herself

Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide...

Or like a creature native and indu'd
 Unto that element; but long it could not be
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
 Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
 To muddy death"(Ant. 4.7.174-183).

In this description by Queen Gertrude, Ophelia was taken into the water. She did not choose death but was rather returned to a state of divinity that she occupied in maidenhood. This return is also a return to purity. As a result, Ophelia can be buried with her virgin rights rather than continue living a whore. To me, Ophelia's fall was by her choice, a sexual act and her death serves as both punishment and warning for other maidens who follow.

Edna in *The Awakening* exemplifies a similar fall, but her death is active and chosen. "Her arms and legs were growing tired...She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul"(Chopin 156). Edna chooses to give herself to the sea as a result of finding herself unable to survive in her traditional and patriarchal life style. Edna's journey, similar to Ophelia's, becomes one of sexual agency. Edna gains sexual agency through her affair with Robert. Her struggle, however, is not in possessing sexuality but rather in possessing autonomous identity within the confines of patriarchy.

Peter Ramos argues Edna's choice to end her life was a result of her being unable to sustain an identity within the realism of a traditional social construct. "Rather than sustaining or modifying her identities –recently separated wife, artist, mother, lover—or only abandoning the ones that seem to her impossible to realize, Edna abandons all of them

in favor of stark reality itself”(Chopin 152). Ramos claims that Edna realizes in reality she cannot be all the elements of herself with which she identifies. Her lack of identity results from her patriarchal responsibility. Edna cannot have sexual freedom because of her marriage to Léonce. She cannot have autonomy because of her responsibility to her children, and she cannot sustain her life as an artist because she would be viewed as a deviant in society. Edna is therefore struck with the reality that if she is to continue with the life she is living then she will be a slave to her motherly and wifely responsibilities. Under the patriarchal lens, Edna cannot live the life she wishes because, similar to Ophelia, a sexually independent woman that is not under the rule of a man is a threat to society. Patriarchal norms require that Edna must be removed. However, Chopin, unlike Shakespeare, grants Edna power in her death by making it an active choice. Towards the end of the novel, Edna strips away her clothing and swims as far out as she can into the sea. Her nakedness is baptismal in nature as she is able to return to the sea as her true self.

What resonated for me of the fall of Ophelia and Edna in literature was their sexual objectification by men as well as their singular option of death as a result of their gained agency and power. I wanted my maidens to personify these qualities through movement as well as enforce the presence of a sexualized male gaze through the camera angles, and editing structure of the film.

The Fall

Her fingers roll up her dress crinkling in the fabric to reveal her restraints. A chain wrapped to a small bouquet of baby's breath is the representation of the maiden's tie to her virginity.



Figure 2 "Wringing Out" Taylor King, Britt Ford, Sheridan Bernstein

My maidens begin in a line wringing their hair out as if to get rid of every drop of water. This is a cleansing act. In front of them are chains connected to a small bouquet of baby's breath. The chains are a symbol of the maidens' tie to patriarchy, the literal representation of their social constraints. The baby's breath is a symbol of maternity, and the woman's responsibility to both produce and care for children. Both symbols are present in this initial framing as tribute to the struggles of the maidens that came before them. Specifically, the chains are a tribute to Ophelia in her fall from patriarchal subservience and Edna's responsibility to her children. The camera is placed slightly higher than the women, exerting its dominant male eye.

The performers, Britt Ford, Sheridan Bernstein and Taylor King then bow down. Their hands swipe up to hold their uterus as their arms reach up circling around in a grand gesture to show submission. The camera cuts to a high angle, the personification of the male gaze looking down on the women. The voyeuristic quality of the camera holds the power of looking, projecting "to-be-looked-at-ness" onto the female performers. The

dominance of power in the male gaze of the camera is consistent throughout this section. Through the edits and the angle of the camera, the camera exerts a freedom to choose what is being looked at. Close up cut-ins of the women's hands on their bodies, reminiscent of sexual self touch, are inserted to create an eroticized intimacy for the viewer. For the performing female bodies, the look is overbearing and intrusive. The camera throughout this section is choosing where to look, never considering the presence of the female as anything more than her form. As Mulvey describes her, "an image in the frame" (12).

The maidens arch back with a desperate gasp, sequencing into a series of swipes. Hands clasp together sweeping down their skirts. Snap up, one hand lifting up the fabric while the other pulls from the torso into a fist. This repeated gesture is a symbol of their deflowering. Like Ophelia's loss of virginity these maidens are literally stripping themselves of their virginal status. For the maiden, there is "degradation by sexual intercourse"(Bennett 274). This violent gesture triggers a series of superimpositions. The purpose of the layered images is to enact for the male gaze multiple layers of looking. As the maidens lose their divine stature, becoming sexualized, they are also under the greatest subjectivity to the patriarchal male gaze.

The camera cuts to a high side angle as the women bring one hand up to beat their chest. This gesture is a representation of fear inspired by Edna's emotional state before surrendering to the ocean. "She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again"(Chopin 157). I placed this gesture purposefully at this point in the maiden's fall. It is a symbol of fear that society is placing on their actions. Fear that incites the maidens' deaths. They know that their sexual agency and individuality cannot exist within the social construct. The tapping of their hearts signifies both the maidens'

longing for autonomy as well as their fear of being removed from their social environments. An element of fear is also drawn from the lack of autonomy and agency that the maidens have over their own bodies. This is best expressed through a single gesture. The women abruptly fist their hand and slowly move it into their mouth. In this, the women are forced to take in the phallus and swallow. It is a violent act; the tension in the maidens' arms physicalizes the lack of desire that they have to perform the sexual act as well as their inability to prevent it under the sexualization of the male gaze.



Figure3 "My Ophelia" Taylor King

The eye of the camera moves freely over the female bodies. In the final sequence of movement, the women have grasped their skirts up, their bodies expressing violent

convulsions. A superimposed image of the virginal shedding is reintroduced overtop. The combination of the two images is the visual expression of hysteria and madness. The full feminine skirts fall from their waists as they step out, moving back into the water. This is their final shedding of the feminine and their movement into masculine power. Through film this is expressed purposefully as the women move out of the frame and, subsequently, the male gaze for the first time. It is the maidens' choice to move into the water. Like Edna, I wanted my maidens to possess agency in their deaths. They are independent beings not going passively into the water but choosing a death that is their own. As the three women step out of the frame an image comes in of my Ophelia; a maiden suspended in the water. It was important for me to express power in the death of both of these maidens, the active death of Edna as well as the passive death of Ophelia. The rebellion of my Ophelia is shown in the action of her revival. As the body is floating, there is an abrupt arch up. My Ophelia does not go passively to her death as Shakespeare's but instead finds rebirth into a powerful and sexual female body taking in air rather than expelling it.

"The Fall" ends with a series of three quick shots. The first is the gasp of the drowned maiden; it is her rebirth and activation into power. The second is the gasp of one of the maidens; looking up into the camera she is briefly in the final subjective view of the male gaze. The final shot is of three new creature-like women. These women are sirens, looking back into the eye of the camera, commanding the gaze. The sirens are the development of the fallen women; or rather they are the product of the maiden in literature after her fall.

The Maiden of Death

The virginal maiden is commonly accepted as an image of good. These women are subject to the patriarchy, objects under the male gaze. There is, however, a secondary imagery attached to maidenhood. These are the maidens who bring death rather than accept it. Sirens, gorgons, mermaids, harpies, the list goes on of mythological women who bring death to men using their sexuality and in many cases water. They are the fallen women already damned to the depths, all labeled as evil entities. These women are condemned, but they are illustrated in such a way because of their threat to the patriarchal structure. "Figures remarkable untamed, answering to few men and fearing none. And they were dangerously possessed of a sexuality lethal for themselves or others" (Bennett 274). These maidens of mythology are independent from the control of a man; holding agency over their body and using it to bring harm to the men that would look at it.

Through the many renditions of these virginal bringers of death, I was most intrigued by the identity of the siren. They are hypersexualized maidens of the sea. Their appearance varies throughout mythology, some half-human, half-bird, others complete human maidens who take on a demonic form. The consistency, however, lies in their sexual allure. Sirens are said to lure men to their deaths. On the cliffs of their remote island, the men are drawn by their beauty and song (Cheers 192). Traditional thought argues that they are a danger to men because they embody temptation. However, I believe they are illustrated as a danger because in their fall, the siren commands a masculine power. She expresses independence of sexuality, having the ability to sleep with men as she chooses. Actively luring them to their death with her beauty, she is the first manipulator of the male gaze. She is also not defined by marriage, motherhood, nor is she subordinate to a man. She

is an autonomous entity. The siren is the personified ideal both Ophelia and Edna were punished for in their deaths.

In the development of *DROP*, I was interested in these empowered sirens as a development of the virginal maidens of Shakespeare and Chopin. I believe the sirens are what Ophelia and Edna become in their death. They are the maidens challenging their condemned sexualization within their narratives, rather than being punished by it. The siren is the maiden who has the power to look back at the voyeur.

The Attack

There is a musical shift after the three gasps that mark the start of the second movement entitled “The Attack”. The musical shift is a call to the collective, similar to how a native tribe sounds their drums in war. The frame itself is black. For the first time the male gaze is interrupted. In “The Fall” the maidens were an object in the frame onto which the camera could choose what and where to look. The siren, however, takes back the gaze by both disrupting and directing it, despite being hypersexualized.

In the opening shot all three women are shown in the frame. The camera is placed at a distance; it is not invited in close. The women appear sparsely dressed in black trunks with a thin nylon strip over their breasts. Their faces are painted similar to that of a warrior. It is a tribute to the powerful Amazons, an all female warrior tribe. Though their dress covers little of their physical form, it also serves to linearly strip the women of their gender. The linear line of their clothing and makeup brings attention to how little they have on, but it also serves to flatten the curves of their female forms. Rather than accentuating the curve and feminine softness of their bodies as the cream slip and petticoat does in “The Fall,” the sirens express a phallic linearity.

As the threatening virgins begin to move it is apparent that they, similar to the maidens of “The Fall,” are chained. However, rather than being held down by their virginity and deflowering, these women are weighed down by cinder blocks. The cinder blocks are the physical representation of these women’s damnation. “These maidenly sirens were renowned for their good looks and sweet music, but they thrived on murder, surrounding themselves with the rotting bones of men who had sought their beauty and found death instead” (Bennett 280). They are damned because of their threat to men, for this reason they cannot find salvation, even in death. The cinder blocks that they are chained to are present to keep them down at the depths of the Earth.



Figure4 “Both Eyes Open” Taylor King, Britt Ford, Sheridan Bernstein

As the movement continues, the women keep their focus on the camera, always looking forward on the attack. This is the drowned woman taking back the gaze. By looking back she is stripping the voyeurs of their anonymity. This “looking back” rejects Mulvey’s concept of “to-be-looked-at-ness” by making the female image within the frame active rather than passive. The siren’s gaze within the frame also serves to manipulate it. With each cut, the women are directing the shift of the camera. As a result, the masculine camera

is not allowed access to looking anywhere that the siren is not looking. Similarly, the camera is not granted any hierarchy above the siren's gaze, but is instead eye-level with the women throughout this movement. The combined factors of camera angle, direction and an active look back redirects the traditional patriarchal power of looking, empowering the sexual and dangerous sirens.

The final disruption of the male gaze is used to establish the sirens' position of power. The disruption is achieved through the abstracted narrative of movement. Rather than the flowing sequence of events in "The Fall," "The Attack" is broken up by moments of black and must be pieced together. Mulvey argues, "going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is looked at... controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing)... producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire"(15). The editing of the film is manipulated by the desire of the gaze. Therefore, in traditional cinema, it is a continuous sequence representing the manifestation of masculine power. By contrast, in "The Attack," the narrative, is both abstracted through movement and disrupted by the insertion of the black frames. By separating the narrative sequence the male gaze, through the projection of the male ego, cannot identify with the female image because it is being constantly interrupted. As a result, the siren can enforce power over her own sexualized presentation. She is presenting sexuality actively rather than passively acting as a canvas onto which sexuality is projected by the overbearing male gaze.

It was important to me that these women still express the sexuality native to the siren that was my inspiration. It is more common to desexualize the empowered woman, resulting in an androgynous figure. Instead I wanted to present the woman as powerful

within her sexuality. Her sex is not a tool for manipulation, nor an identity, but rather an expression of her true female form.

The women continue to exert control through the narrative of movement. They are more mobile than the virginal maidens taking up space unapologetically. Throughout, motifs of “The Fall” are reintroduced through a new lens. The women’s arms sweep up to their heads as their fingers snap up to form a crown shape over top. In “The Fall” this movement was a reverence to the patriarchy. In “The Attack” the women are in an open legged crouch, a signifier of the castrated female body or “lack” studied by Freud, and hold the crown over their own heads while looking back at their male voyeurs (Greeley 219). In this directed gesture, the women are crowning themselves establishing their power over the patriarchal structure as well as their power over the phallus.



Figure5 “Lack Nothing” Taylor King, Britt Ford, Sheridan Bernstein

The three women surge forward closing the distance between them and the eye of the camera before they pull backwards into their phallic crouch. Their arms trace around their body. Similar to the erotic self-touch of “The Fall,” in this gesture the focus is forward. It is a touch of self-pleasure, but the voyeur’s gaze is not invited in to share the pleasurable

experience. The camera angle shifts as the sirens shift their gaze. Staring into the camera they slowly move their hand into their mouth, biting down instead of swallowing. Slowly and cautiously they move to their chain grabbing it up as they fully stand for the first time. This is a hint to their ascent from the world of the dead to the world of the living. They pull the chain as if breaking it as the screen cuts to black.

Through *DROP*, I created the siren as the empowered progression of the drowned maiden. She is taking her revenge over men who saw her death as a cleansing act for expressing sexuality. The siren holds all the power that the maiden could not express. With the intention of reinstating power for these women I also wished for them the possibility of freedom, to be released from their chains. The frame cuts to black before the viewer can know if the sirens truly break free. It was my intention to place the choice on the viewer. Is the siren granted freedom with her sexuality, or is she still chained to her underworld? That is the choice of the viewer, they must then choose to either support and free the empowered women or view them from the eye of patriarchy.

Resolution

My struggle in creating *DROP* was to hold to an empowering female gaze. The male gaze of “The Fall” was natural to create because it has been engrained in me after a lifetime of being subject to male dominance in a patriarchal society. The delineation and redirection of power in “The Attack,” however, was an active, conscious practice. The conscious work of empowering the female body and unnatural process of challenging the male gaze is the exact reason I needed to create this work. There is a lack of expression of feminine power in performance, both in cinema and on the stage, because the eye of patriarchy reaches deep into our past. In classic literature young maidens are sentenced to death after

combating the patriarchy. Their fate serves as a warning to young women that punishment awaits them if they threaten the patriarchal structure; punishment through death.

Similarly, the women of power in literature and mythology, the sirens, gorgons, and Morgan le Feys are all painted as evil man-killers. They are a promise of loneliness and damnation to any woman who would idolize or practice these women's ideology.

The female body is marginalized by the influence of patriarchal power. If male control of the female form were lost, then the power structure of patriarchy would also fall. My intention in creating *DROP* was to challenge the visual representation of a sexual and independent woman as a powerful female form. I believe that the best medium to transcribe this rebellion is through movement because of its symbolic and visceral transmission of narrative. For this reason, the content of *DROP* can be completely transferred visually. The body consumes the image of female power, viscerally transmitted through movement. In this way, the redistribution of power is already in the body of the voyeur. It is my hope that if enough work is produced with the intention of exposing female power over her image then the codified male gaze can be redefined, reclaiming the active participation of the female image.

By creating *DROP*, I want to start a conversation. It is a conversation between the patriarchal structure and female sexuality. As a completed work I believe that the progression of the piece expresses both the delineation of the male gaze as well as the empowerment of female sexuality. However, the two concepts are still separate. As a future reiteration of this project, I would like to challenge myself as both director and choreographer to express the power and rebellion of the drowned maiden singularly. She is already under the control of the male gaze, but how does she reclaim power from that

control? Furthermore, I am interested in the same visualization of *DROP* as a dance for camera piece in a live dance performance. Through this dance for camera work, I could exert complete control over the lens looking at the female form. With my interest of constantly cross-pollinating film and dance practice, I am interested in the challenge to manipulate Mulvey's cinematic concept of "to-be-looked-at-ness" and transcribe it into the stage space.

DROP is the manifestation of the drowned maiden as subject of the male gaze in reclaiming her power. I am further interested in how I can reiterate the presentation of sexual and autonomous female power in future works. I believe that by consistently introducing works of art to an audience with the intention of expressing an empowered and active female body, that power of the female form will become a norm rather than a conscious practice. The result, hopefully, will be eliminating the prominence and singularity of the male gaze.

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