
The Choreographer as a Witch in Contemporary Dance Documentaries

By Ted Fisher

Two-thirds of the way through Chantal Akerman's 1983 documentary *Un jour Pina a demandé...* Akerman appears in the film. She reveals her personal experience filming German choreographer Pina Bausch:

When I watched one of Pina's performances for the first time a couple of years ago - it was *Bandoneon* - I was overcome by an emotion I can't quite define. But it was very, very strong, and had something to do with happiness. And now we've been following her for two weeks, we've been watching her as she works, we've seen rehearsals, performances and rehearsals, and something else has really happened. There really have been moments during which I felt I had to defend myself from what was being expressed, moments in the performance where I had to close my eyes. And at the same time, I can't understand why.[\[1\]](#)

Akerman's positioning of Bausch as a mysterious, magical, and provocative character - rather than as simply a working creator - is reminiscent of German Expressionist choreographer Mary Wigman's self-description as a "high priestess of dance," a persona Wigman cultivated to promote her "Witch Dance" works. In this paper I will explore the framing of "choreographer as witch" within the complex director/subject relationship in Akerman's film, as well as in Claire Denis's documentary on Mathilde Monnier (*Towards Mathilde*, 2005), Elvira Lind's documentary on Bobbi Jene Smith (*Bobbi Jene*, 2017), and in the fictionalized reimagining of Wigman's "Witch Dance" in Luca Guadagnino's horror remake, *Suspiria* (2018).

Akerman on Bausch

Chantal Akerman first depicted Pina Bausch on film in 1983. She then referred back to that documentary in her self-portrait film *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* in 1997. Although not a single frame has changed, when we watch these two films today the frame through which we view documentary filmmaking has changed significantly, and in ways that lead to a reconsideration of the filmmaker/subject relationship between Akerman and Bausch.

Today, in film programs that include documentary production, students are taught to be aware of the intrinsic challenge of the director/subject relationship that arises when a film makes a claim to telling some form of

truth. In “Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work,” Patricia Aufderheide, Peter Jaszi, and Mridu Chandra’s 2009 report on ethics in documentary production, interviews with 41 directors outlined the characteristics of contemporary documentary filmmaking. Specifically, the report addressed the “ethical tensions” in the director/subject relationship, including concerns regarding “how to maintain a humane working relationship with someone whose story they were telling.”^[2] The report noted that “This perception of the nature of the relationship – a sympathetic one in which a joint responsibility to tell the subject’s story is undertaken, with the filmmaker in charge – demonstrates a major difference between the work of documentary filmmakers and news reporters.”^[3]

A surprise emerged, however. “Filmmakers also recognised limits to the obligation to the subject. One diagnostic was whether the filmmaker found the subject ethically lacking, for instance, because of politically or economically corrupt acts.”^[4]

Our first questions about the relationship between Akerman and Bausch sound exactly like those we might ask while watching the famous horror movie *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1977). Why is one character so troubled by emanations from the mysterious choreographer running the school? In *Suspiria*, that character is Suzy Bannion, a new American student at a German ballet academy; in *Un jour Pina a demandé...* it is the self-revealing Akerman. What is the dangerous feminine power that we fear covers some hidden evil? Finally, why is our narrator, a stand-in for our own curiosity, so drawn to this seductive strength?

It is natural to dismiss this set of questions. Akerman, like all filmmakers, is relying on the usual tricks that are used to make a character interesting—is she not? When Henri-Georges Clouzot directs Pablo Picasso in *Le mystère Picasso* in 1956, he also does his best to make the man into a puzzle. Yet Clouzot really makes Picasso a man-child who, playing with his crayons, demonstrates that he alone has avoided having his creativity cut off, where Akerman charges Bausch with revealing things we should look away from before we are damaged. He is a good boy, ungedled; and she is a bad girl, exposing herself.

Picasso, in Clouzot’s film, is seen making art in ways that creatively reveal his work to the camera: he puts his marks on glass, so we can see the process directly rather than over his shoulder. His collage technique is depicted in time-lapse sequences that make it appear as a flowing fountain of creativity. The only danger arises when Clouzot makes it clear there is limited time left in his reel of film: can Picasso finish his work before the camera must stop?

Bausch, in Akerman's film, is not shown doing the hands-on work of choreographing dance movements. (Lutz Förster, a dancer in Bausch's company for decades, notes in a 2015 article that she originated "all the movements" in her pieces. "A few steps came from the dancers but the basic movements are all from her." [5]) Akerman's film treats her as more provocateur than choreographer. The implication of the film's title is that Pina Bausch asked the company members about the concept of "love," and these answers defined the pieces that the company performs. In this conceptualisation, Bausch has seduced the dancers into performance, rather than explored a creative path that has emerged from her past work and from the lineage of choreographers she has been connected to for decades.

What is it that moves Akerman into this "framing" of Bausch? In part, she is correct that Bausch wades into deep water that hides secrets beneath its surface. Some of these secrets are well-known by 1983. A contemporary review of Bausch's work, written by Alan M. Kriegsman in the *Washington Post*, goes well beyond Akerman's framing, questioning the morality of Bausch's work.

Pina Bausch was 5 years old when the Nazis were defeated and Hitler committed suicide. Her dance mentor was [Kurt] Jooss, whose shatteringly moving antiwar ballet "The Green Table" (1932) was and remains one of the great humanist documents of the art. Nevertheless, each of Bausch's productions at Brooklyn inevitably stirred thoughts of the Holocaust—in the hollow, cadaverous eyes of the victims, the near-naked bodies, the look of a community of the damned, the wallowing in cruelty, the feeling of spiritual asphyxiation. Bausch's obsession with pathology seems all the more insidious for being, in all likelihood, mostly unconscious and unintentional in its implicit glorification of the barbaric—she may well believe she's merely exploring, as honestly as she can, the hidden nether sides of the human condition.

But there is a kind of unholy prurience about it, as there is with the punksters who've used Nazi uniforms, insignia and symbology as a weapon of cultural negation and aggression. In this light, Bausch appears as the Pandora of contemporary art, opening the forbidden lid and loosening, however innocently, noxious elements unfit for mortal breath or sight.[6]

Akerman's 1983 film does not explicitly address anything of this nature. How could it? The production clearly originated as a television program on the arts, with the expectation there would be a focus on the company's performances and a positive tone. (It is difficult to imagine a film that takes the position Kriegsman puts forward. Arts documentaries are inherently pro-arts.)

Akerman's organizing principle is, instead, to consider the depicted dance works within the conceit set forth by the film's title: that the dances arise from the dancers' comments on "love." This claim is probably untrue for most of the dances, and definitely diminishes Bausch's decades of choreographic exploration, but to a general audience each piece easily makes sense in this context. Male and female dancers play expected roles (though this is broadened when male dancers wear costumes generally associated with ballerinas) and a war between the sexes is overlaid on a quest for love. A dancer pleads for someone to come dance with her; embraces turn into collisions; and a battle rages at a school dance.

Yet Akerman's known set of concerns makes it impossible to imagine she missed the transgressive undercurrent Kriegsman focuses on. In the first half of *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* she directly addresses the camera. Early on she is framed in a medium shot (as she was in her appearance in her film about Bausch) and then later in a tighter close up shot. The shift to her close up occurs when she finishes talking about her practice of making cinema and begins to speak about her family history. She describes herself in the film as a "2nd-generation Jew." She tells us of her maternal grandmother.

She painted. I'd like to find her paintings. They disappeared in the turmoil. I like to think she worked in hiding. It may not be true. But I like to think it. In hiding, because in a religious community, images are forbidden. In her diary she wrote—she wasn't 18 yet, she kept it in Polish—that her diary was the only place for her innermost thoughts because she was a woman.[\[7\]](#)

It seems unlikely that Akerman's minimizing of Bausch as a creative force owes to internalised sexism. Rather, her claim that "I had to defend myself from what was being expressed" reveals the filmmaker's conflation of Bausch's power and the dangerous neutrality her seductive force might bring forth. Bausch is using imagery that can be read as referencing the Holocaust, as Kriegsman reads it, and yet the choreographed pieces are about love. Does Akerman perceive Bausch's work as ethically lacking, then, as some of the documentarians interviewed in "Honest Truths" felt of certain subjects? Did she see this as limiting her responsibility to Bausch?

Bausch died in 2009. In her last years she participated in *Tanzträume* (2010), a film by Rainer Hoffmann and Anne Liesel. The film depicts forty teenagers learning and then performing Bausch's work "Kontakthof" with instruction from Bausch's company members. In the 27th minute of the film, we learn that "Pina is coming," and then, in the 29th minute, a woman arrives. With shocking white hair and a severe black dress, this witch-like figure walks in. It is not Pina, however. Pina arrives next, in a

black coat and a simple blue scarf, with her dark hair in a ponytail. She wears glasses. She looks nothing like our fantasy of a witch. In the 30th minute of the film, she smiles at the students, and says: “Don’t worry, I don’t bite.”[\[8\]](#)

Bausch on Bausch

Yet Pina Bausch, the woman who did not bite, somehow provoked Kriegsman through artistic positions he found immoral – even if “unconscious and unintentional” – and seems to have provoked Akerman into a reaction somewhere between terror and desire. Have they misperceived Bausch, or been bewitched? Bausch’s interpretation of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* was notable for its reworking of the expected Pagan sacrifice of one woman into a moment where all women in the story were at risk. This rethinking of the expected was notable enough that it was included in her 2009 obituary: “In Ms. Bausch’s version, the women who might be sacrificed are the centre of the story, allowing an audience to feel more empathy for them.”[\[9\]](#) Whatever sparked offence – her blank affect at mixing 20th century versions of tragedy and love, or her artistic lineage (easily traced backwards through her mentor to Kurt Jooss and to his mentor Rudolf Laban, who trained Mary Wigman) – she offered no apology in either her words or her work. She expressed only curiosity: “What moves people is more interesting than how they move.”[\[10\]](#)

In the popular imagination, what is it that characterises a witch? And why is this characterisation the default position when describing female choreographers? More important to our understanding of the depiction of female choreographers via documentary film: how is it that we so readily embrace the thought that an energised dancer is possessed, has made a dark supernatural deal, or channels energy beyond their own?

Imagine a remake of *All That Jazz* (Bob Fosse, 1978) with a female lead. Roy Schneider’s version of choreographer Joe Gideon could quite easily become Jo Gideon, a promiscuous, pill-popping, chain-smoking choreographer with a great talent and serious health issues. Gideon is driven – perhaps “possessed” – by strong lusts and a willingness toward a deal with the devil. Gideon works through seduction, is centred on the trance-like experience of the body, channels extreme forces, and undermines traditional power. It could work ... are these not the characteristics we ascribe to witches in popular fiction? Yet we cannot dismiss the fact that the actual power structures in the world of dance – where Fosse notoriously used a casting-couch approach with his company, and where George Balanchine focused his romantic life on sixteen-year-old dancers – tend to push women with choreographic merit to seek alternate approaches to power. Dance, the creative field that most

prominently features the female body, has always had an issue with creative women. Citing Fosse as a Warlock-like genius but Bausch as witch-like channeller lets us wink at his depravity but dismiss her obvious brilliance. This serves the existing power structure.

By the time Akerman's film on Bausch arrived on television in December 1983, she had already made three significant documentaries: *News from Home* (1977), *Dis-moi* (1980), and *Les années 80* (1983). Yet producer Alain Plagne's name is more prominent than hers at the beginning of the film, and Plagne seems to have, as writer and producer, approval of the finished production.

If Akerman has placed Bausch into a framing of "choreographer as witch" as a way to make a palatable dance film for television, despite her own complex reaction to Bausch's material, then we have seen only a single expression of a complex director/subject relationship and should draw no universal conclusions. Akerman finds what she sees as the best organisation of the material, uses the minor thrill an audience may experience in the depiction of Bausch as dark and dangerous, and delivers a film that fulfills her contract. (In *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* she emphasises that this businesslike approach is key to her filmmaking practice. It is worth noting this to avoid over-analysis of this film as an expression of the filmmaker's most essential, heartfelt concerns. Akerman completed a contract—a task she struggles with in her 1997 film.)

What should we think, however, when we see other examples where a female choreographer is positioned as not simply creatively engaged, but possessed, even if by positive energy? The framing of "choreographer as witch" is about power, ultimately: an alternate identification addressing creative power and practice. Dark magic, however, is not its only mode.

Denis on Monnier and Lind on Smith

In Claire Denis's documentary on Mathilde Monnier, we are far away from any connections to the Nazi horrors that remain associated with Bausch's expressionist dance lineage in Germany. We have seemingly also escaped the extremities of male behaviour delineated in Bausch's notorious "Bluebeard" dance work and even the sublimated version in "Kontakthof," judged suitable for inclusion in the documentaries on Bausch. This is not to say we have left serious ideas behind: Monnier directs philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy as a performer on her stage, and her dancer I-Fang Lin uses movements derived from a military parade in North Korea. Many of the works read as depicting struggle, both internal and external.

In Denis's film, Monnier is seen as entirely hands-on with her company and with the work they are creating under time pressure. The bulk of the film shows her creating and designing in a manner reminiscent of Clouzot's *Picasso*: she chooses and reworks the music, re-thinks the set design, and creates each movement or the situation that gives rise to the movement. She applies performance psychology and organizational leadership to her company, and yet takes a key role as performer, including a solo performance at the end of the film. And she is seen in warmup exercises several times, claiming her time at the beginning of the day to work through ideas. "Each gesture contains resistance and abandon," Monnier tells us. "In fact, dance is simple when it comes down to it."[\[11\]](#)

All of this would seem to run counter to the strategies Akerman used in her depiction of Bausch. Monnier's practice and creativity is obvious in the film. This is not the dark magic of Bausch, hidden from view. Yet at its most basic level, the frame of "choreographer as witch" arises when creative work is ascribed to secret and mystical sources, or possession by these sources. If creative work comes from intellect and effort when we discuss men, but from magic when we discuss women, we have clearly allowed sexism to corrupt our analysis.

Despite Claire Denis's lighter touch and more open approach, her film still presents a framing that ascribes creative genius to energy from outside forces. In her depiction of Monnier's personal warmup exercises and free exploration sessions, we see the choreographer in a trance-like state. While some of the work is simple, some is transcendent, arising from somewhere unexplainable. It is not from the same place Bausch visits, but it is outside the realm of language and the experience of the everyday. In Denis's depiction, Monnier's genius emerges from a personal magical identity and practice. From this perspective, the director/subject relationship between Denis and Monnier is one of great intimacy.

In part, this is communicated by Denis through the work of her two cinematographers: Agnès Godard and Hélène Louvart. The camera work, once the camera is allowed to move along with the dancers, is flowing. Where Akerman makes non-traditional choices for revealing dance—using medium-to-long focal lengths rather than the expected wider views—Godard and Louvart seem tuned to the dance and improvise as part of the company. It is this feeling of access that Denis builds on. She absorbs the approach of Frederick Wiseman, but is hardly invisible. The choreographer, and the dancers, allow the camera in, rather than forgetting it is there.

This intimacy makes us wonder: is the positioning of Monnier as a sort of "White Witch" – channelling positive energy through her body into

transformative performance - an illusion both documentarian and dancer have agreed upon? Or has Denis, ultimately more powerful as she controls the edit, decided this is the accurate framing? It should be remembered that Monnier chose, and possibly designed, her costume for the final performance: all white clothing and a white wig, bathed in intense light from above. The illusion created is a shared one.

The intimacy seen in *Toward Mathilde* is taken to much higher levels of intensity in Elvira Lind's *Bobbi Jene* (2017). Lind is credited not just as the film's director, but as the film's cinematographer. Her camera goes to dinner with subject Bobbi Jene Smith when she tells Ohad Naharin she is leaving his dance company to become a choreographer. It stays in bed with Smith and her lover Or Schraiber as that relationship transforms. The director/subject relationship between Lind and Smith is remarkable:

Lind and Smith began corresponding, and eventually Lind traveled to Sweden, where the Iowa-born Smith, on hiatus from her longtime gig as a principal with the prestigious Israeli dance company Batsheva, was performing with choreographer Sharon Eyal's troupe. The filmmaker arrived by train, "quite nervous," to ask if Smith would be open to doing a documentary. "This is such a weird thing," Lind remembers. "It's a little bit like: Will you marry me? But like: Will you marry me and my camera?"[\[12\]](#)

Her camera, allowed at every intimate moment, reveals one of the closest director/subject relationships seen on film. (Lind's work is exemplary of an emerging trend toward subjects, having grown up in the era of phone cameras, giving incredible documentary access to filmmakers. Think of the cameraperson in bed with the candidate overnight in Kazuhiro Sôda's *Campaign* (2007), or the omnipresent camera witnessing each personal crisis in *Scheme Birds* (2019).)

Beyond the personal moments, we also see the camera present for a series of choreographic exercises/explorations that seemingly lead Smith to develop her next works. We see Smith - pushing, pulling, lifting, dragging - develop a set of ideas for her "Study On Effort." These sessions echo Monnier's trancelike exercises, but are much more clearly like possession, saintly ecstasy, or a complex channelling that taps into great physical, emotional and magical intensity. Smith practices Monnier's "resistance and abandon," but at a new level. Beginning with repeated gestures, progressing into exhaustion, and eventually including an orgasm in public performance, Smith brings us to what has always been associated with the idea of the choreographer as witch: a dangerous release of energy.

In choreography, this element of dance has traditionally been sublimated.

It has served as a key battleground, however, where a choreographer might push work right up to the line or cross it. In *All That Jazz* (Fosse, 1979), Joe Gideon overwhelms his show backers with “Take Off with Us (Airotica),” a production number meant to shock the taste of a 1970s Broadway dance audience. It seems a bit tame today. Lind’s film starts with Bobbi Jene Smith dancing nude, yet somehow maintains a claim to its art aspirations even as Smith masturbates in performance.

In a 2007 essay, Jonathan Marshall cites an 1894 text that clarifies the perpetual debate between “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” forms of movement. In “Les possédés noires,” Henry Meige’s 1894 essay:

The Maenads were “antique witches of an antique sabbath” who carried out a frenzied dance, with extravagant gesticulations, a debauchery of bizarre postures and attitudes which were convulsive [. . .], where the equilibrium of the body, like the equilibrium of the mind, seemed to defy the laws of nature.[\[13\]](#)

This perception of some movement as primitive, uncontrollable, derived from outside energies, and other movement as sophisticated, rational, and controlled was clearly in the public mind when those who had performed ballet took up “Modern” dance.

Wigman on Wigman

Twenty years after Meige’s essay, Mary Wigman performed her solo work “Witch Dance I.” This was not a sudden improvisation, or possession by some force. Rather, as Wigman explains in her book “The Language of Dance,” it was the culmination of years of dedicated study. Finally, in Wigman’s estimation, this resulted in the balance of Dionysian and Apollonian energies:

Sometimes at night I slipped into the studio and worked myself up into a rhythmic intoxication in order to come closer to the slowly stirring character. I could feel how everything pointed toward a clearly defined dance figure. The richness of rhythmic ideas was overwhelming. But something was opposed to their becoming lucid and orderly, something that forced the body time and again into a sitting or squatting position in which the greedy hands could take possession of the ground.

When, one night, I returned to my room utterly agitated, I looked into the mirror by chance. What it reflected was the image of one possessed, wild and dissolute, repelling and fascinating. The hair unkempt, the eyes deep in their sockets, the nightgown shifted about, which made the body appear almost shapeless: there she was – the witch – the earth-bound creature with her unrestrained, naked instincts, with her insatiable lust

for life, beast and woman at one and the same time.

I shuddered at my own image, at the exposure of this facet of my ego which I had never allowed to emerge in such unashamed nakedness. But, after all, isn't a bit of a witch hidden in every hundred-per-cent female, no matter which form its origin may have?

All that had to be done was to tame this elemental creature, to mold her and to work on one's own body as on a sculpture. It was wonderful to abandon oneself to the craving for evil, to imbibe the powers which usually dared to stir only weakly beneath one's civilized surface. But all this had to be surrendered to the rules of creation, the rules which had to be based on the essence and character of the dance-shape itself to define and reflect it truly once and for all. I had to take this into consideration and to be extremely careful so that the original creative urge was neither weakened nor blocked in the process of molding and shaping.[\[14\]](#)

That the public mind embraced her work in a sensationalised way is no surprise. To understand the mechanism for framing female choreographers as witches, note that the plaudits given to other emerging modernists (for example, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde) were withheld from Wigman despite the popular success of her dance work. It was as if she had actually been possessed or channelled the work rather than engaging in the same exalted aesthetic creation her German Expressionist peers were praised for. Wigman's self-presentation as a priestess channelling Dionysian energies through her body, rather than as an Apollonian intelligence playing with forms and ideas that only incidentally become paint or metal or sound, made the dismissal already present in a sexist culture too easy.

Re-evaluation is possible. A lineage is in place: Wigman studied with Rudolf Laban, as did Kurt Jooss, who trained Pina Bausch. And the work is there. Some exists on film. Wigman can be seen performing, actively looking out at the viewer, suddenly advancing toward the camera. In a diary entry from 1916, Wigman makes clear what she saw as the spiritual dimension of her work:

I am the dance
And I am the priestess of dance
Of the swing of my body
Who speaks to you all
About the movement of all things
The pain of all things striving is my pain.
The joy of all circling movements is my joy.
Lord of the space I am.
The priestess of high dance.

I am the soul of dance.[\[15\]](#)

As Luca Guadagnino's 2018 remake of *Suspiria* was being developed, Wigman's work was seen as an influence in parallel to Bausch's dance.

At the new movie's screening at Fantastic Fest in Austin, Texas, last month, screenwriter David Kajganich told his audience that he drew ideas for the film's dance from the works of German choreographers Mary Wigman and Pina Bausch, as well as Sasha Waltz, whom he shadowed while researching the script.[\[16\]](#)

In a 2018 interview, Tilda Swinton clarified her research for the character of Madame Blanc, a choreographer and, of course, a very powerful witch:

Pina Bausch was, and continues to be, a properly vibrant artist in my consciousness. I first saw her work in the Eighties. I never met her, but she was a close friend of my old sweetheart Christoph Schlingensiefel, so I have always considered her kind of extended family. We looked at a number of influential dance artists of the time, Pina clearly being one of them. However, I would have to say that probably my most radical influence in putting together the Mme Blanc character in our film is that of Mary Wigman, who was a seminal figure in the development of expressionist and 'existential' New Dance in Germany from before the second world war. Perhaps her most iconic creation is the Hexentanz, or Witch Dance, which Damien [Jalet] and I referenced quite literally in gestures we designed for Blanc. Also, a certain mental fragility in tandem with the controversial and distinctly compromising survival of her company under the Nazis make Wigman a vivid early model for Blanc.[\[17\]](#)

Wigman's dances, then, survive. Yet the essential discrediting of her work becomes complete. Madame Blanc is entirely a witch, and the movements of those in her dance company derive from dark energies, endangering everyone who comes near. In the original *Suspiria* (Argento, 1977), Suzy Bannion fears and resists evil, despite an innate and energetic attraction to its power. In the remake, Suzy is now "Susie," and is revealed to be ... well, no spoilers here, but from 1977 to 2018, the theme of "innocence corrupted by evil" has had a hex put on it.

Outside the frame

Pina Bausch, Mathilde Monnier, Bobbi Jene Smith—all are seen through the same frame: a woman who excels at a craft is presumed to have embraced some sort of magic, whereas a man is simply gifted. A choreographer embraces the body, which is sexual, emotional, based in effort and will, subject to exhaustion, and difficult to control. All of these

aspects are challenging to depict in a film, especially in a documentary film, where the basic production task is to simplify complex reality into a manageable story.

A practitioner of craft is easily suspected of practicing darker crafts. In German, "Kraft" can mean force, power, or strength, and can relate to work done by hand. A filmmaker can choose to show this work, or edit it away.

The Director/Subject Relationship Reconsidered

In Erik Barnouw's *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* we meet documentarians representing thirteen modes: Prophet, Explorer, Reporter, Painter, Advocate, Bugler, Prosecutor, Poet, Chronicler, Promoter, Observer, Catalyst, and Guerrilla. By default, when Barnouw writes the first edition of this book, a documentarian is a man. He briefly mentions Esfir Shub, but otherwise only one of his "modes" is primarily represented by a woman, Leni Reifenstahl as "Advocate." Like Akerman's framing of Bausch, Barnouw's framing sets up a shift into a mystical understanding, sublimating the pain of Nazi associations:

According to her own accounts, of then and later, Reifenstahl was at this time dazzled by Hitler, though disliking many around him. And he had put her as a film maker in a position unique in film history. She did not invent the actions captured by her cameras. She saw it as her task to bring them to the screen with maximum impact. During the week of photography she coordinated her forces with almost maniacal drive and discipline, mirroring the atmosphere of the events themselves.[\[18\]](#)

Barnouw's claim that Reifenstahl was in a "dazzled" and maniacal state serves an interesting purpose, intentional or not. It allows him to safely express his position that Reifenstahl was a genius filmmaker, more technically skilled than John Grierson (his other "Advocate" in the book), if less significant to the field. He makes clear that Grierson took on "an assumption of leadership," but we see the implication that Reifenstahl's creativity is derived from a dark energy associated with Hitler. She is freed from moral judgment, yet discredited as a creator.

Ultimately, the key question in understanding the director/subject relationship in these films is: would you do this to a man? No film positions Mick Jagger as an actual devil, despite all the fun that is had with his role-playing as a Satanic force. *Gimme Shelter* (Albert Maysles and David Maysles, 1970) reveals a very dark moment, yet Jagger's genius as performer is never discredited. Robert Johnson sells his soul at the crossroads, perhaps, but it's at the service of his own blues, not the devil's.

For this paper, I have addressed only films by female directors depicting the work of female choreographers. I am surprised to find that my hopes for examples of best-case director/subject relationships are unsatisfied. Cultural constructions around the idea of creative women persist. Structural sexism persists. Our prejudices exist in ways we struggle to see.

Pina Bausch is asked at the end of *Un jour Pina a demandé...*:

“How do you see your future?”

She answers: “I don’t know, because I think there are so many problems in the world. I’m afraid to ask myself what I wish for the future.” Finally, she says: “I hope for strength. A lot of strength.”^[19]

Notes

[1] Chantal Akerman quoted in *Un jour Pina a demandé...* (1983).

[2] Patricia Aufderheide, Peter Jaszi, and Mridu Chandra, “Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work,” *Center for Media & Social Impact*, September 2009.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Lutz Förster quoted in Chris Wiegand, “Let’s Tanz: Pina Bausch’s Wuppertal dancers on her unearthed 80s creations,” *The Guardian*, 7 April 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/apr/07/pina-bausch-wuppertal-dancers-ahnen-gebirge-sadlers-wells>

[6] Alan M. Kriegsman, “Beyond Morality,” *Washington Post*, 24 June 1984.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1984/06/24/beyond-morality/828b8a03-786f-4f8a-8754-11c1cb3283e7/>

[7] Chantal Akerman quoted in *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* (1997).

[8] Pina Bausch quoted in *Tanzträume* (2010).

[9] Halzack, Sarah. “Choreographer Pina Bausch Renowned for Innovative Unconventional Works,” *Washington Post*, 30 June 2009.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp->

[10] Pina Bausch quoted in Ibid.

[11] Mathilde Monnier quoted in *Toward Mathilde* (2005).

[12] Julia Felsenthal, "Using Her Body as She Sees Fit—No Matter What Society Says," *Vogue*, 25 September 2019.
<https://www.vogue.com/article/bobbi-jene-elvira-lind-dance-documentary>

[13] Jonathan Marshall, "The Priestesses of Apollo and the Heirs of Aesculapius: Medical Art-Historical Approaches to Ancient Choreography After Charcot," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 43 No. 4 (2007): 410-411.

[14] Mary Wigman, *The Language of Dance*, trans. Walter Sorell (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1974), 40.

[15] Mary Wigman quoted in Jiyun Song, "Mary Wigman and German Modern Dance: A Modernist Witch?" *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 43 No. 4 (2007): 431.

[16] Monica Castillo, "The Dance Legends Who Inspired Suspiria's Bewitching Movement," *Vanity Fair*, 26 October 2018.
<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/10/suspiria-choreography-modern-dance-tilda-swinton-martha-graham-pina-bausch/amp>

[17] Tilda Swinton quoted in Susannah Frankel, "Tilda Swinton on her Multifaceted Performance and the Nature of Horror," *AnOther*, 12 September 2018.
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About the Author

Ted Fisher is an American director specializing in arts and culture documentaries. His short films have screened at over 30 festivals around the world. He earned an M.F.A. in Photography from Claremont Graduate University in 2003 and an M.F.A. in Film Directing from the University of Edinburgh in 2019, and now works as Assistant Professor of Digital Media Art at Delta State University in Mississippi.

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