

Title: The Problematic Image of the Dancing Body in Early Russian Cinema
Author: Jennifer Zale, Indiana University

Abstract:

Dance is a form of movement that has captured the attention of cinema spectators since the medium's inception. The question of the compatibility between dance, particularly ballet, and the cinema has been fiercely debated since the silent era and continues to be discussed by scholars and practitioners in the 21st century. This topic was of particular interest in the Russian cinema industry of the 1910s in a country where ballet was considered to be among the most prestigious of the art forms. My presentation will explore the rationale behind the argument of several artists of the Imperial Ballet who claimed that it was not possible to film dance for neither notational nor entertainment purposes without distorting the body and delicate nuances of the art form. Ballet artists and cultural critics expressed their opinions in articles and interviews that were published in prerevolutionary journals. These written statements will be analyzed and compared to surviving films, such as *The Dying Swan* (Bauer, 1917), which starred Imperial ballerina, Vera Karalli, in her signature stage role. Karalli's performance in the film does not live up to the critics' high praise of her live performances and has been harshly critiqued by those with balletic knowledge. This example seems to give legitimacy to the argument that film can only preserve a disfigured image of a dancer's body in motion. However, many critics of Karalli's cinematic performance fail to take into consideration the direct influence of the cinematography, editing style, and overall conditions of the Khanzhonkov Studio of 1916-1917 on the finished product. This presentation will explore the relationship between the moving (dancing) body and the cinema spectator, while taking into account the technology responsible for producing the final image.