

to witness, is not one directional (Millar 2019)

Anna Macdonald 29th July 2019

I have been watching Canadian artist and filmmaker Marlene Millar's new work *Witness* (2019), which forms part of a full retrospective of Millar's work curated by Iliyana Nedkova and produced by Horsecross Arts for Threshold artspace, Perth. It is described in the curatorial overview as a 'quiet, yet poignant work inspired by Marlene's own experience as a caregiver and witness to the unfolding of her mother's dementia' (Nedkova, 2019). The film is four minutes long and involves a series of long slow-motion tracking shots that follows a woman doing simple actions such as walking, hanging up washing, and putting on lipstick. At times, she appears to dance, lifting her hands rapturously into the sky. In the middle of the film there is a single shot of an older woman, sitting looking away from the camera, tucking her hair behind her ear.

Iliyana Nedkova, the curator of the exhibition, invited me to respond to Millar's film here because she felt it poses similar questions, about loss, identity and screendance, to my recent body of work, *Acts of Holding*.¹ Millar and I are both mature female artists thinking about mortality (I was told once by a curator that he was so tired of women making work about things like death and motherhood – right before I showed him my portfolio....). *Witness* is part of a longer documentary and so the version I have seen acts both as a trailer for this longer film, and a screendance in its own right. Watching something that you know is an edited version of something longer sets up an interesting tension, particularly, perhaps, when it concerns a state of fragmented presence, of dementia. It also makes me aware of the importance of resisting the urge to speak for a film that is only one film from an entire exhibition, and is itself part of something larger. So these thoughts must be taken as speculations from a restricted view, and it is the act of viewing, or more specifically the different ways Millar and I position the viewer as witness, that interests me here.

The production value in *Witness* is high. It has a cinematic feel and both the colour and lighting are exquisite. The sound is emotive and sparse and feels as if it were made for the work. At first, I wonder if *Witness* is too beautiful for me? Perhaps as a throw-back to my origins in performance art and video, whilst appreciating the skill involved, I tend to be drawn to work that is less produced, less filmic. I associate this quality of filming with a sort of mastery of what is filmed. A transformation of all the contingent possibilities of the event (changes in light, stumbling performers, cameras falling out of focus) where we are allowed to witness only what is designed to be seen. I am always naively surprised (like a middle-aged Dorothy) when I see the lengths that traditional film production methods go to, in order to transform what is already there.

In the first online thesaurus I search for, I find the antonyms of mastery are listed as:

failure
weakness
want
lack

¹ <https://vimeo.com/showcase/6183450>

powerlessness
challenges
hardships
defeat
frustration
amateurishness
clumsiness
incompetence
impotence

.....words that might perhaps be used to describe the experience of dementia, certainly words my mother used at times to express her frustration with terminal illness. So how does the elegant, controlled beauty of *Witness* relate to the difficulties of its subject?

Over repeated viewings, I see something different going on, not mastery so much as careful choices that invite me into the content of the film. The softly focused, and slowly moving, camera brings us towards, and next to the women. Here the camera acts as a benign witness that encourages a protective way of looking and she is wrapped in the viewer's/artist's/daughter's warm gaze. *Witness* seduces us, and it is nurturing. It invites a soft way of thinking. *Witness* reaches forwards, reaching, allowing, testing, touching, and sensing. It feels non-verbal and I am reminded of the tactile cinema of Laura Marks where she invites us to think 'of the skin of the film not as a screen, but as a membrane that brings its audience into contact with the material forms of memory' (Marks 2000:243).

Another way I think Millar manages to employ high production techniques that subvert, rather than assert, a sense of viewing as mastery, is in her merging of subject and environment. *Witness* offers us fingers interlacing with flower stems, feet surrounding by beans, and sun/moonlight through leaves on skin. For me there are echoes here of a feminine cinematic aesthetic, born out of Bracha Ettinger's concept of the matrixial gaze, which allows us to escape the 'notion of the discrete and singular subject formed by the establishment of the boundaries that distinguish it from an oceanic or undifferentiated otherness of the world' (Pollock 2004:6). The people in the film are in the world rather than using it as a backdrop for their journey as the subject/hero of the work. Even the separation between tangible and imagined/remembered worlds become blurred when the list of surfaces upon surfaces that we are offered (hands on walls, shoes on bark, fingers on hair) is broken by sequences where the woman reaches out and touches things that are not there. Touching space. Touching memories.

My screendance's often involve task-based scores designed to produce movement with a sense of precarity and immediacy, and I record these events using single, static shots. If Millar offers a desirous body, moving and reaching through the lens then, in some ways, my work offers the opposite: the amateurish dead eye of the camera sitting un-manned upon a tripod. In comparison to *Witness* (not that I am comparing) my work looks hard edged and unflinching, more like a search light – pinning my subjects to the wall. The camera does not move or follow or give a little, it simply watches and records whatever happens in front of it. It witnesses without intervention. Although my camera work, sometimes lacks the benevolent warmth of Millar's *Witness*, there is, perhaps, a form of protection in this lack of

involvement. For, as I have thought about for some time now, witnessing without desire can also be a form of holding.²

Two of my works from *Acts of Holding* concern (perhaps as Millar's work does) the experience of witnessing my mother's terminal illness. *Witness* makes me question the space I often maintain between camera/viewer and subject. Perhaps I am slightly scared by the immersive quality of *Witness* because when the camera moves in, I feel part of me try to stay back. I realise how much easier boundaries and clarity and a bird's eye view of a situation can be for me to manage. Filming myself (and others) creates a space between my grief and myself. In the act of recording I become my own witness, holding myself, as an act of self-care, within a frame (Macdonald 2019). Perhaps Millar's subjects are being pulled in against their will and there is a darker edge to the invite. It is notable that the only image we are kept away from in this version of *Witness* is the shot of the older lady, who we only see from behind in a static shot. This makes me want to see her more. Her earrings, the blue against the grey/white hair, are so familiar. I want to know what she is witnessing.

References

Marks, L. (2000) *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Pollack, G. (2004) 'Thinking the Feminine: Aesthetic Practice as Introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the Concepts of Matrix and Metramorphosis.' *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21(1) pp. 5–65.

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Anna Macdonald is a screendance artist who uses film to expose the emotional and conceptual resonance of simple movements, such as, moving from 'here to there', 'holding' or 'getting slower'. She specialise in working directly with the public, using film and movement to articulate people's experiences in ways that can be understood by others. Anna's work has been selected for significant international festivals such as; Athens Video Dance Project, Festival Ciné-Corps, Paris, Lightmoves Festival, Ireland, VideodanzBA, Argentina, Riff Festival, Norway, and Movimiento Movimiento, Mexico. It has been exhibited in galleries such as; Art Currents, New York, Somerset House (Utopia Series), Peter Scott Gallery, and Bluecoat Arts Centre. It was nominated for the International videodance awards in Barcelona, and selected as a flagship example of socially engaged practice for an AHRC funded project based at Peckham Platform. Alongside her free-lance work Anna is a Senior Lecturer in Performance at the Manchester School of Art and publishes in leading dance journals. Last year she was awarded an arts fellowship at Keele Uni, using screendance to re-imagine the pathways connected to the experience of chronic pain.

² See 'Holding and Curation', *REPERTÓRIO: Teatro & Dança*, 27 and *Acts of Holding: Dance, Time and Loss*. PhD by publication. Man Met University.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332180525_Acts_of_Holding_Dance_Time_and_Loss