

Transcript: The moving camera-witness

A video essay by Dominique Rivoal

Abstract: The *Moving Camera-Witness* explores how the act of filming can become a somatic and relational practice. Drawing from Authentic Movement and informed by an interview with practitioner Eila Goldhahn, an artist, author and academic (who has researched The Discipline of Authentic Movement and originally coined the term 'camera-witnessing'), the video essay unfolds across six chapters. It begins by exploring the concept of witnessing, invoking different perspectives of the term. The second chapter traces the origins of Authentic Movement, establishing a foundation for understanding how it is practiced. This is followed by a recorded conversation with Eila Goldhahn, in which she shares the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of her 'camera-witnessing'. In the fourth chapter, Rivoal offers personal insights into her practice as a *moving camera witness*. Departing from a static witnessing position, she investigates how the camera might become an extension of the mover's body—responsive, attuned, and alive to the relational field. The essay then moves outdoors to Hackney Marshes, where Rivoal's long-term collaboration with Claire Loussouarn has extended the practice into a site-responsive method of filming.

Text on Screen

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4. An insight
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1. To Witness (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021, online)

- To see something happen, such as an accident or crime.

- To sign your name on an official document.
- To testify in court as a witness.
- 'non-judgmental and empathetic support to facilitate healing' (Carl Rogers 1957)
- 'The witness is the awareness of your own thoughts, feelings, and emotions' (Ram Dass 1971)
- 'Not only to see but acknowledge how the experience has changed you' (David Abram, 1996)
- 'A witness validates events, giving them public recognition and acceptance' (John Weir 2008)
- A freshly participatory, empathic, and engaged way of experiencing a partner's movement (Lizzi Le Quesne 2015)

2. Authentic Movement

Authentic Movement originates with Mary Starks Whitehouse, a pioneer in dance movement therapy inspired by Jungian psychology. Whitehouse moved beyond traditional dance aesthetics, inviting her students to close their eyes and explore movement from within, focusing on the sensorial experience of the movement itself, instead of its external appearance. Whitehouse called this *Movement in Depth*- a way of using the body as a bridge to self-awareness and transformation. Here, the body becomes a vehicle for accessing and expressing inner states without words. She began to draw a distinction between movement driven by conscious intent- 'I am moving'- and movement that arises organically, from a deeper, unconscious place - 'I am being moved'. This subtle shift-from doing to being lies at the root of her process. Whitehouse's legacy was further developed by Janet Adler into what is now known as the *Discipline of Authentic Movement*. At its core, it's a dyadic practice:

'a mover takes on the role of being seen, and a witness takes on the role of seeing (Adler, 2022, p.89).

Adler formalised the role of the witness into a refined discipline - one that cultivates deep presence, relationality, and over time, enhances the mover's capacity to self-witness.

Today, Authentic Movement has evolved into three primary strands: the artistic, which explores creative expression; the therapeutic, which supports psychological integration; and the mystical, which approaches movement as a path to spiritual insight. My practice-as-research is located within an artistic strand, where I draw on therapeutic processes in pursuit of aesthetic and creative goals.

Sound: A bell ring

The mover closes their eyes...and begins to look within. She may follow an impulse to move - or remain in stillness - while developing her internal witness: the capacity to stay present with her own movement. Tuning inward, she may begin to interocept; sensing the shape of her body, observing her breath, and noticing the subtle movements occurring within. What sensations... emotions... thoughts... or images are arising in this moment - however small? The mover's process is supported by the outer witness, who remains at the edge of the space with eyes open; creating a safe container by overseeing the whole and offering their stable, supportive presence. The role of the outer witness is dual. They offer their non-judgemental support to the mover, while also attending to their own experience in relation to the mover. They might ask:

What am I experiencing in the presence of the mover? How is my breathing? How am I affected by their movement?

They are developing the skill of outer witnessing; kinaesthetically empathising with the mover, without losing connection to self.

Text on screen

'The witness practises the art of seeing. The witness does not simply *look at* the mover but attends to their own experience of judgement, interpretation, and projection, in response to the mover as catalyst' (Adler, 1999, p.6).

Through this practice, movers begin to discern between different layers of experience; movement, sensation, emotion, and image, which are usually felt as a continuous, integrated flow. Through this witnessing process, they refine their awareness of each, as distinct, yet interconnected aspects of

experience. After the movement phase, a *speaking circle* follows - where the mover explores their experience through language and receives outer witnessing. This shared reflection deepens the relational aspect of the practice, offering space to articulate and integrate the movement experience.

Sound: A bell ring

Within this Discipline, a ritual container anchored by eye contact, a bell, and self-referencing language, supports the participants in staying open to the unknown. By delaying judgment and meaning making, they focus on the actuality of experience, engaging in precise tracking and recounting of movement. Developing witness consciousness is a lifelong process; one that takes years of practice to cultivate clarity, presence, and non-judgment.

3. Interview with Dr Eila Goldhahn

Thank you for inviting me to give this interview. And, yeah, I'm a practitioner, movement and dance practitioner. That's my background. And I've specialised in Authentic movement over the last 40 years or something—30 years. Yeah. And that's my special field of research, as well as being kind of a starting point for art making, visual art making and film, and performance.

So, the whole thing (kind of) started with wanting to make something public about Authentic Movement, which is also very much also an aesthetic vision - that I experience as a witness. I see moments and situations that I see nowhere else in life, that are extraordinarily moving on an emotional level, beautiful and rare. Camera witnessing, for me, it is a mixture of or rather the artist's eyes and Authentic Movement as an art, as I see it in part, is for me personally, a kind of motivating force.

Yes, there is an educational aspect to it as well, of course. It's a transfer of the witnessing ethics from Authentic Movement—not from a general term of witnessing, but very much, it is born out of the witnessing term of Authentic Movement. There are very clear kinds of ethics and also physical parameters attached to that.

To keep things 'not simple' but useful perhaps, I want to just talk about those. In camera witnessing and in Authentic Movement, one of the first things is that there is a safe space for movers and witnesses to meet in. That is very important and that is also part of camera witnessing—there has to be a safe physical and psychological space for this work to happen.

Another pragmatic point is positioning. Where does a camera witness position herself? Now, the ways that I work is I work as a camera witness, so that means like the other witnesses, I'm on the floor. I'm not standing, I'm not sitting on a chair. I'm not on some ladder in order to get an interesting view. That's not that is, is not of interest to me in camera witnessing. For me in karo interest, uh, witnessing what is interesting is to gain a perspective as if or, and as I am a witness.

I mentioned the kind of earlier experiments of kind of like moving around with a camera, with an improvising mover- dancer. Um, that is different. That's not camera witnessing, not how I understand it.

In camera witnessing, I position myself within the circle of witnesses or with another witness, you know, main witness teacher. And yes, I have a camera in front of me, and that does influence, of course my witnessing and it for me, it requires quite a lot of practice to do that because yeah, it's like, oh my God, I've got this machine in front of me.

So, the still position and that in Authentic Movement is to do with the predictability. Again, it's actually to related to safety, but it's also gotten more profound implications to do this perspective, I believe.

And to have the still position as a witness. So my camera movement only kind of tilts, turns and very occasionally I might zoom, if I'm really interested and called into a moment. But the movements are slow and considerate.... meaning and Yes, of course we have to talk about the witness qualities. Uh, you know, I won't go out of my way in order to see somebody. If somebody is hiding behind somebody else in the circles, then I respect that.

I don't go out of my way to, to follow them around or, you know, or nor do I zoom necessarily into a very vulnerable moment. But you know that vulnerability that a mover may display, I will only know that and feel

that in myself, and by then feeling, yes, this is a vulnerable, intimate moment. Can this be seen? Does this want to be seen? Is it possible to see it? And yes, and we are talking about the very subtle kind of very subtle field between a mover and a witness.

And uh, and again, it boils down to respectfulness, respectfulness - a respectfulness of the witness towards a mover.

Yes, I pay attention to my own body, and I try to become conscious or any kind of somatic or emotional response that I note within myself. And I also allow myself to be drawn to whatever I am drawn to in the circle, there are often several things going on - I am talking about group work here. So - I allow myself to go with where my attention is going

We have talked quite a bit about introducing it, setting it up, doing it, but then what comes afterwards is also important to me

Yeah. And that is vetting the footage. So afterwards, the participants maybe in the evening or the next day, there is a show them the footage, all of it, and they are invited to come and see that.

Or some people stay away. They're not interested to, you know, they will have already signed a form saying that it's fine for me to show and use everything. That's very important, obviously.

Um, but then, you know, most people are interested to see the footage, and they then have the right to say, I don't want this, or I don't want this to be part of your film, Eila. And I will take due notice of that and take that out.

So, all the footage is vetted in advance before it is made public. When I cut, I even the footage is vetted by the participants, by the movers.

Um, I will cut some things out that I feel, I don't know quite how to say this, but that I feel as a witness, a mover. It may be too vulnerable for them.

It may be that I don't, I don't know that that's a difficult one to exactly, um, explain, but, um, perhaps where I feel that material is very unconscious, for example. Maybe it is something that the mover hasn't spoken about,

for example. And that I feel it wouldn't be right to put it out into the public.

Text on screen

- Creating a safe space
- Still Positioning
- Minimal camera movement
- Accept what is given
- Staying with one's own self
- Vetting the footage
- Removing sensitive moments

4. An insight

An insight for my research arose while making this video. As the witness, my attention is drawn to the mover's hands. Perceptually, I can focus on the hand and maintain a certain distance. However, the camera's way of seeing is different from that of the human eye. Surprisingly, I find myself spontaneously taking the camera-phone; and following my impulse to move closer.

Later, when I reviewed the footage, I recognised that this movement brought me into closer proximity with the mover. While this kind of movement would not be appropriate in a traditional Authentic Movement circle, it aligns with the context of my research, which explores the relational dynamic of the dyad through movement...

I have entered the threshold of the moving space, not as an outer witness, but as a *moving camera witness*. We are now two movers, mutually sensing each other. Carrying my phone in my hands, I attune to both the mover's motion and my own. This is where my practice diverges from Eila Goldhahn's approach, which emphasises the still position of the camera witness. While my work retains some of the ethical considerations she highlights, it expands on them; by integrating the mobility of the camera, and the affordances of the lens, into the act of witnessing. The role of the *moving camera witness* aligns more closely with that of a moving witness than an outer one. It's a participatory approach; in which the camera

witness takes on the role of mover, while staying conscious of their own motion.

As I relate to the unfolding phenomena, I'm continuously faced with choices - of framing, of perspective. This process lets me witness my decisions in real time, deepening my awareness of how I move, and, at the same time, how I am moved by the encounter.

'The attentive presence of a witness significantly impact on the quality of engagement for the mover, and enables a level of deep attention that is less accessible without their presence' (Adler, 1999, p.153-154)

5. Camera witnessing outdoor

My method of the *moving camera witness* was developed through a durational outdoor collaboration with mover Claire Loussouarn on Hackney Marshes - an inner-city nature reserve in East London. Over a period of six years, we met monthly to engage in a site-specific movement and filming practice. It's important to say; we are not practising Authentic Movement. Claire moves with her eyes open, while I draw on the principles of witnessing to develop camera witnessing in this context. Camera witnessing outdoors presents a unique challenge. It is no longer held by the four walls of a studio. This required me to stay grounded in self while expanding my perception, attuning not only to the mover, but also to the Marshes and the movement that ripples through them. From the outset, Claire observed that the presence of the camera created a sense of safety while dancing in a public space. Over time, our monthly meetings deepened that trust, forging a bond not just between us, but also with the Marshes, which came to feel like a third partner in our collaboration. In turn, this bond cultivated a feeling of being witnessed by the Marshes themselves transforming them into a place of solace, amid shifting political, social, personal, and environmental landscapes. The initial choice of camera position in the environment is not what matters. What matters is presence. I often begin with a wide angle, one that includes both the mover and part of the Marshes. The following section presents examples of the movement vocabulary and the features that have been developed through the *moving camera witness* method.

Text on screen:

The camera-witness senses with their whole body, not just the eyes.

The camera witness may echo movement.

The camera witness moves within a parallel yet distinct process.

The camera witness resists premature impulses to move.

The camera witness corresponds with multiple enfolding phenomena.

The camera witness remains in dialogical relation without merging.

The camera witness opens to being moved.

At times, mover, marshes, and camera witness arise as one.

6. Concluding thoughts

After several years of moving and witnessing in the Marshes, the footage was collaboratively shaped into an installation retracing our seasonal encounters. The notes and reflections written after each filming session guided this process. The co-editing process was an intensely creative exchange, a more ethical way of working that honoured shared authorship, accountability, and care, enriching the project through the interplay of our perspectives.

Witnessing is often used interchangeably with looking, observing, or perceiving - but it goes beyond visual observation, encompassing the full spectrum of embodied experience. Vision is limited and directional, but sound surrounds us. In audio-visual work sounds hints at what lies beyond the frame. Camera witnessing also includes kinaesthetic awareness - the felt experience of a relational field that emerges between two or more elements. While filming can often draw attention outward, the act of witnessing turns it inward - toward the body's capacity for connection, which in turn can guide the camera's movement and framing. Filming in the emergence of the moment, offers a series of choices. By witnessing these choices as they unfold, the filmmaker learns about the way they are relating to the world. A still camera position can support the mover's own exploration, but it also invites the operator to observe their own impulses

to move, without acting on them, until they are 'moved', activated by something greater than the self. This interplay between stillness and motion has revealed something essential to me that movement signifies a connection - and this is how I want to move my camera from now on. The camera's motion sensor enhances this process - tracking movement on both sides of the lens, supporting an inquiry into motion - both in real time and in reflection. The Discipline of Authentic Movement offers a framework for understanding the evolving relationship between a mover and witness - from merging, to dialogue, to moments of cohesion, where the boundaries between filmmaker the mover, and the environment begins to dissolve.

Moving camera witnessing is a participatory practice grounded in attentiveness. Here, the camera witness is not simply recording but actively engaging in the encounter. This method creates compassionate framing emerging from a relational awareness that honours both self and others.

In order of appearance:

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