

**COMPOSITION AND THE ARTISTIC ICON:  
THE BEAUTY, MYSTERY, AND LEGACY OF GEORGE PLATT LYNES' DANCE PHOTOGRAPHY**

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“MORE THAN ANYTHING BEAUTY IS WHAT MAKES THINGS INTERSTING.”

- GEORGE PLATT LYNES

The early nineteenth century saw the birth of two seemingly contradictory crafts with different aesthetic aims and manifestations. The first was the birth of photography in Paris in 1826, when Nicéphore Niépce succeeded in capturing the world's first permanent photographic image after an eight-hour exposure.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1830s he had unveiled his photo-capturing device to the world. In 1832, however, Paris witnessed the birth of the Romantic ballet with *La Sylphide*, which elevated ballet to a new aesthetic and technical level, providing moments of gravity defying balance that emphasized the ethereality of the ballerina. Throughout the nineteenth century, photographers sought to capture this ephemeral effect, but, as ballet impresario Lincoln Kirstein has stated, these photos reveal “little theatrical magic” with the dancers appearing as nothing more than “pale ghosts.”<sup>2</sup> By the dawn of the twentieth century the relationship between dance and photography began to change, and in 1907, when Vaslav Nijinsky was well on his way to becoming one of the most photographed male ballet dancers of his era, a couple in East Orange, New Jersey, gave birth to one of ballet's most prestigious and revolutionary dance photographers: George Platt Lynes.

The son of a clergyman, Lynes received no formal photographic training and had no “master.” His intention, at least in his early years, was to be a writer. With a “boyish idolatry and infatuation”<sup>3</sup> for a literary career, Lynes embarked on the first of many trips to Europe. There he was exposed to a number of prominent literary and visual artists, art movements, and homosexual relationships. In the trips that followed, his social circle grew to include Gertrude

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<sup>1</sup> Helmut Gernsheim, *A Concise History of Photography*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1986), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Lincoln Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 45.

<sup>3</sup> James Crump, “Photography as Agency: George Platt Lynes and the Avant-Garde,” *George Platt Lynes: Photographs from the Kinsey Institute* (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1993), 137.

Stein, Pavel Tchelitchew, Jean Cocteau, René Crevel, Glenway Wescott, Monroe Wheeler, and his boarding-school companion Lincoln Kirstein. By his mid-twenties he was on his way to becoming a member of one of the most influential artistic circles of the early twentieth century.

Lynes first picked up the camera at the age of twenty, and although he was largely self-taught, his work, stylistically speaking, was strongly echoed Surrealist artists like Man Ray (known for his figure studies of the female nude and collage techniques) and photographers Baron Adolph de Meyer<sup>4</sup> and George Hoyningen-Huené (both of whom documented Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes).<sup>5</sup> These influences, combined with an instinct for capturing light, space, and beauty, allowed Lynes to develop a distinct style that *The Village Voice* art critic Peter Scheldahl described as “solidly modernist with an overlay of Surrealist vogue. It deploys a suavely limned monumentality [...] laced with the Cocteau-ish poisoned sugar of angelic archetypes and blank backgrounds toned to suggest a sky of dreams.”<sup>6</sup> When Lynes died in 1955 at the age of forty-eight, he left behind a body of work that was artistically inventive and revealing, including early experiments with Surrealism, fashion spreads for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, portraits of some of the world's leading creative minds, figure studies of the male nude, and last, but certainly not least, an extensive collection of dance photography.

Lynes' dance photographs largely depended upon his personal relationship with the ballet impresario Lincoln Kirstein (the two were classmates at the Berkshire School in 1923)<sup>7</sup> and, through him, the choreographer George Balanchine. For nearly twenty years, the ballet companies associated with Kirstein and Balanchine (American Ballet [1935-1938], Ballet Caravan [1936-1940], American Ballet Caravan [1941], Ballet Society [1946-1948], and New

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<sup>4</sup> For a rare glimpse of Adolph de Meyer's collaboration with Nijinsky see Lincoln Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing* (New York: Knopf, 1975), and Jennifer Dunning, ed., *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (London, Dance Books, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Crump, *Photography as Agency*, 139, 142.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Scheldahl, “Daylight Moon,” *Village Voice*, 12 October 1993, 25.

<sup>7</sup> David Leddick, *Naked Men: Pioneering Male Nudes 1935-1955* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1997), 23.

York City Ballet [1948-present]) were closely identified with Lynes' photography. His use of dramatic lighting and his uncanny eye for the arrangement of dancers served to document many of the original costumes, dancers, and poses from Balanchine's early ballets in America. Interestingly, there is very little "dancing" in Lynes' photos. Generally the dancers are in repose, almost pedestrian in their stance and focus,<sup>8</sup> in stark contrast to the physical dynamism of Balanchine's choreography. Yet despite this difference, Lynes' photos of dancers and their patrons remain one of the most important photographic archives in twentieth-century dance history.

Tragically, Lynes' dance photos, as well as his portraits and fashion photography, have largely faded into oblivion.<sup>9</sup> The genre that has received much attention in the past twenty-five years is Lynes' figure studies of the male nude: photos that "project their eroticism through the expressivity of the image rather than through overt action."<sup>10</sup> Critics, scholars, and historians – in both art and dance – have written on the visceral impact of these photos, greatly emphasizing their social significance. They are right to do so: these nudes are reflective of an era when censorship and the oppression of gay culture, particularly after the Second World War, resulted in a prohibition against the public display of male nude photography.

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<sup>8</sup> Of course there are some exceptions, including a notable series of Maria Tallchief from Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments* (1946). It is important to remember that it was not until 1931 that the stroboscopic camera was invented, which allowed photographers to capture clear "action shots." While this device was available during Lynes' career, it appears he was not particularly interested in what it provided aesthetically. In his essay "Photographs," (*Dance Index*, ed. Donald Windham, vol. III, no. 2 [December 1944], 216-217) Lynes states, "[The stroboscopic camera] offers us images of exceeding interest and sometimes beauty; but nothing that anyone at a performance, with the naked eyes, has ever seen. My own work with ballet subject-matter has been far simpler than all of this, with the ordinary camera and everyday technique" (216). Regardless of Lynes' perceptions, his "dance action shots" do provide a distinct and unique variation to his otherwise calm and, comparatively, inactive photographs.

<sup>9</sup> The notable exception is Lynes' dance nudes, in particular a series of NYCB dancers Nicholas Magallanes and Francisco Monción performing their duet from Balanchine's *Orpheus* (1948) in the nude.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Prokopoff, "II," *George Platt Lynes: Photographic Visions* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1980), n.p.

Lynes' work is paradoxical because it was simultaneously developing on two different fronts: his own private use (i.e. his nudes) and his commercial work (i.e. fashion, dance, and portraiture). What links these different genres together is Lynes' approach to composition. While this may appear obvious to the viewer, it is often overlooked in contemporary research. Rather than discussing Lynes' work as a whole, the majority of critics focus on the social and sexual significance of the male nudes, and in turn project this significance upon Lynes' commercial work, including his dance photos.

The primary objective of this thesis is to contextualize Lynes' dance photography within this canon of contemporary research. By discussing the various writings on Lynes during his lifetime (and immediately following his death in 1955) and comparing them to the resurgence of interest in Lynes since 1980, I will illustrate how contemporary scholars pigeonhole Lynes by focusing on the social and sexual implications of his dance photos. I then turn my analysis to thirty-one dance photos, located in the appendix. The largest portion of the thesis, this section is divided into three categories: lighting techniques, the relationship between the subject and space, and the predominance of costuming as well as the aesthetic significance when it is absent.

What is revealed is that Lynes poignantly controls how the viewer relates to the subject through compositional techniques. By limiting what the viewer can *not* see Lynes casts his dancers in a shroud of mystery that works to aestheticize<sup>11</sup> the human body. In addition, it becomes evident that Lynes' dance images are not as clean-cut as one might expect. Some photos look like fashion shots, others are merely portraits, and there are several dance nudes. Not only was Lynes able to accentuate the beauty and allure of these dancers, but he indirectly

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<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the term "aestheticize" and its derivatives refer to the process by which the beautiful and alluring quality of the subject is emphasized.

created a body of work that reflects *every* genre in his oeuvre, and it is for these reasons that Lynes' dance photos remain his most diverse and important contribution.

Scholarly writings on Lynes' dance photos are, unfortunately, exceedingly hard to come by. Fortunately, the success of the New York City Ballet (NYCB) has allowed some materials to remain intact, and one resource exists that coalesces the impact of Lynes' dance photography. Compiled two years after his death, the NYCB souvenir program titled *New York City Ballet: Photographs from 1935-1955 taken by George Platt Lynes 1907-1956* remains one of the most revealing and possibly the only catalogue of how Lynes' contemporaries viewed his work. Here George Balanchine, Edwin Denby, John Martin, and Lincoln Kirstein, among others, discuss their impressions of Lynes' photography, focusing a great deal on *how* Lynes photographs were composed.

The essay by George Balanchine, written in 1956, is particularly noteworthy and, although relatively short, presents a keen understanding and heartfelt respect for Lynes' photography.<sup>12</sup> The two collaborated closely, particularly after 1947 when Lynes' started experimenting with the stroboscopic camera.

[...] Lynes made of his pictures works of art which had an importance prompted, it is true, by the dance, but finally, independent of it. His photographs have several lives of their own: as a record, as portraiture, as social-history of the taste of an epoch, and as beauty.

For Lynes' secret was his sense of plasticity, his genius for lighting figures in space so that his bodies seemed to exist in an actual aery ambience, akin to the three-dimensional vitality in sculpture. What it lacked in color or motion it more than made up in a quintessential permanence of characteristic silhouette and massive form. [...] George Lynes' pictures will contain, as far as I am concerned, all that will be remembered of my own repertory in a hundred years. Movement will be lost, particular performances forgotten, and a new quaintness will discolor with the faded prints. But an exact echo, however remote, will still be ringing in

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<sup>12</sup> It must be admitted that I possess some reservations about whether or not George Balanchine was the sole author of this essay; the fluidity of language and mastery of clauses strongly suggests Kirstein. The insight on Lynes' work is such that, whoever the author(s), this passage must be mentioned.

the body of photographs of an admirable craftsman – this great lover of dancing and dancers.<sup>13</sup>

Lynes' dance photos bring out an element of nostalgia in Balanchine, which is particularly rare considering Balanchine's opinion that the repertory and vocabulary of ballet is inherently evanescent and that it should be kept that way. (Balanchine early on states that "I have never considered my own repertory of more than a passing interest [...] I have energy to make new works, not to recall old ones with original accuracy.")<sup>14</sup>

Lynes, in many ways like Balanchine, was not particularly interested in memorializing the past. Whereas Balanchine's interest was in creating new works, Lynes' primary concern was capturing a dancer's individual essence, what Kirstein has described as the dancer's "personal and characteristic elegance." In an essay published in *Dance Index* in December 1944, Lynes admits that he was attempting to capture the true mien of his subjects, and, to accomplish this, staged every shot differently to compliment the dancer's features.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, he sought to capture the splendor and theatricality of the subject's body. "The beauty of the individual dancer," he states, "is a part of one's pleasure, an element of the art; for a portrait-photographer this is an obvious approach; and by the implication or suggestion, something having to do with the dance is arrived at [...] I love dancing, and my idea has been to make prints which will perpetuate what I have seen as an adjunct to my own memory; and for those who have not seen it, a sort of substitute and consolation."<sup>16</sup> Like Balanchine's comments, Lynes' writing is slightly elegiac, not for the past, but for the future, for those individuals who will never see these

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<sup>13</sup> George Balanchine, "Untitled," *New York City Ballet: Photographs from 1935-1955 taken by George Platt Lynes 1907-1956* (The New York City Center of Music and Drama, 1957), n.p.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Lynes, "Photographs," 216. The reader will also find this article in *George Platt Lynes: Ballet*, ed. Jack Woody (Pasadena Twelvetees Press, 1985), n.p. Woody's monographs are valuable for their preservation and the promotion of Lynes' photography and the articles he includes. However, these articles are *never* cited. When possible I have tried to correct this inconvenient oversight in the hopes to give Woody's monographs credibility.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

dancers perform. The desire to harness a dancer's "beauty" was, ultimately, only successful because of Lynes' ability to see the subject as an individual *and*, as Balanchine notes, how his "genius for lighting" allowed him to create an ambiance that stressed this individuality.

Between 1957 and 1980, little was published about Lynes' photography. After his death, Martha Swope became the chief photographer of New York City Ballet, bringing a completely different approach to the company's self-representation in photography. Rather than the highly structured studio shots so characteristic of Lynes, Swope sought to capture dancers on stage and in rehearsal: very real and very active. Lynes' photos were occasionally used in promotional material, but their significance, in both dance and photographic history, slowly faded.

In March-April 1980, Stephen Prokopoff and Glenway Wescott (Lynes' close friend and lover for a time) curated an exhibition entitled "George Platt Lynes – Photographic Visions" at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. The goal of the exhibition was twofold: to revisit the "splendid portraits" that had been lost sight of and present a new body of work, "his studies of the male nude and mythological subjects – which may yet come to be his most important contribution."<sup>17</sup> The exhibition catalogue contains three essays, all of which give equal weight to the different genres of Lynes' work. The nudes are thoroughly discussed as Lynes' most "preferred and always engrossing subject," but Prokopoff and Wescott do *not* do so at the expense of the other genres. On the contrary, the dance photos receive a great deal of attention from Wescott, who theorizes about the influence of Balanchine on Lynes' work.

The luckiest thing in [Lynes'] life was his admiration of George Balanchine, and Balanchine's requital of this [...] no one who has followed and delighted in the

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Prokopoff, "Foreward," *George Platt Lynes – Photographic Visions* (Boston: Exhibition of Institute of Contemporary Art, March 5-April 27, 1980), n.p. This exhibition also included a "mythological series" by Lynes. Originally intended as a book, but never realized, these photos are considered by Prokopoff and Wescott to be Lynes' most unique and inventive series. For examples see *Orpheus and Eros* (Fig. 9) in the appendix or *George Platt Lynes – Photographic Visions* for three photos from this series.

great choreographer's art will be surprised at his favoring a specialist in portraiture and the photography of the nude.<sup>18</sup>

Because the exhibition openly presented the nudes but linked them to Lynes' other genres (as the above quotation suggests), we are given an impartial perspective on Lynes. Both Prokopoff and Wescott analyze Lynes' "photographic art" in terms of composition, lighting, depth, and expressivity, regardless of genre. But, while we are given a critical understanding of Lynes, the essays are unfortunately short. The entire catalogue is only eleven pages long and contains only eight photos. As a result, we may read about Lynes' compositional elements, but the small number of photos reproduced in the catalogue does not allow us fully to grasp *how* they are applied.

In 1991, one of *Architectural Digest's* long-time contributors, Russell Lynes, the photographer's younger brother, passed away at the age of eighty-one, leaving "behind a fascinating memoir of his brother, as well as a number of photographs that had been out of circulation for decades."<sup>19</sup> Suddenly it was revealed that Lynes' had been photographing the male nude throughout his career; it was a project that spanned nearly thirty years despite the fact that he was never allowed to display the images publicly. The result was a major traveling exhibition, curated by James Crump and Thomas Sokolowski in collaboration with the Kinsey Institute,<sup>20</sup> that aimed to bring these photos of Lynes to the public's attention. The photos included an exceedingly large collection of male nudes saturated with homoeroticism.

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<sup>18</sup> Glenway Wescott, "George Platt Lynes and the Ballet," *George Platt Lynes – Photographic Visions* (Boston: Exhibition of Institute of Contemporary Art, March 5-April 27, 1980), n.p.

<sup>19</sup> Ann E. Berman, "George Platt Lynes Reconsidered: The Photographer's Mastery of Psychology and Light," *Architectural Digest* (September 1993), 61. Russell Lynes' memoir of his brother remains, to this date, unpublished, although Lynes "enthusiasts" Jack Woody and David Leddick cite the text constantly in their writing. Furthermore, no current biography exists, although James Polchin, a professor of writing at New York University, is currently working on a book about "the life and afterlife" of Lynes. For more information, see Polchin's article "The Afterlife of George Platt Lynes," *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, May-June 2006, n.p.

<sup>20</sup> The Kinsey Institute (a.k.a. The Kinsey Institute for Sex Research) was founded by Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey in 1947 in Bloomington, Indiana, to study the cultural and social significance of sex, sexual identity, and reproduction.

The Kinsey Institute has one of the largest collections of Lynes' photos (over 600 prints and 1,200 negatives), the majority of which are figure studies of the male nude.<sup>21</sup> Crump's exhibition, which opened in September 1993 at New York University's Grey Gallery, received mixed reviews in both the gay and mainstream press. The *New York Times* reviewer Charles Hagen wrote that the majority of photos were "overtly sexual, with models' genitals presented openly and in some cases spotlighted."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, there was "a serious flaw of this show: it is unclear how Lynes himself regarded many of the pictures here. Some seem to be little more than snapshots, intended for personal use, while others are carefully staged and lit. A few pictures refer explicitly to traditional images of male nudes in art [...] but many others suggest stereotypes of gay pornography."<sup>23</sup> Articles from the *Village Voice*, *Architectural Digest*, and the *New Yorker* all stress the homoerotic connotations in Lynes' work and how blatantly Lynes exposed the male body. Furthermore, the majority of critics, like Hagen, address the range of the male nudes: while some photos appear to be more "academic" in their study of the male form, others border on pornography because of the display of male genitalia and erotic encounters between men. As a result of the exhibition, Lynes was identified as one of the founders of homoerotic photography in America.<sup>24</sup> Since then, the male nudes remain *the* defining element of Lynes' oeuvre.

These nude photos raised a number of social and sexual issues, including the repression of homosexuality, fetishization of the male body, and atypical gender roles. Some scholars, in

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<sup>21</sup> In the last few years of his life, Lynes was in extreme financial debt and was forced to sell many of his photos. Dr. Kinsey, who was extensively researching male sexuality, became one of his greatest benefactors (the two had met through Glenway Wescott in 1949). For more information see James H. Jones, *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Life* (New York: H.H. Norton and Company, 1997) and Crump, "Photography as Agency," 144-145.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Hagen, "Other Side of a Life's Work, Elegantly Revealed" *New York Times*, 24 September 1993, sec. C, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Both Crump and Ellenzeig suggest that Lynes' aesthetic approach to homoerotic photography influenced a number of photographers in the 1970s and 1980s, including Robert Mapplethorpe, Arthur Tress, Duane Michals, and Bruce Weber.

analyzing Lynes, projected these social and sexual issues upon his other genres, particularly his dance photography. In his essay “Substitute and Consolation: The Ballet Photographs of George Platt Lynes” Jonathan Weinberg reminds the reader constantly of Lynes’ intention that these dance photos serve as a substitute and consolation for those who have never seen the dancers themselves. This, Weinberg claims, “put the emphasis on the fetishistic character of his ballet photographs rather than their archival role. They are replacements for love objects, images of devotion and mourning.”<sup>25</sup> While these dance photos do emphasize the grace and musculature of the human body, Weinberg suggests that Lynes took this to an extreme and “imbued his dance subjects with the appeal of models or, better yet, movie stars.”<sup>26</sup> This aura of glamour objectifies the beauty of the dancer’s body; it becomes a sexualized commodity rather than an artistic representation.

A survey of Lynes’ dance photos reveals that Weinberg’s argument is valid. To a large extent, Lynes *does* glamorize his subjects. However, Weinberg stresses the “fetishistic” and “sexualized” qualities of the genre at the expense of mentioning their artistic significance. If these subjects are objectified and sexualized, is it not because of *how* Lynes’ composes his photos?

The significance of objectifying the dancer is also present in Thomas Waugh’s essay “Posing and Performance: Glamour and Desire in Homoerotic Art Photography, 1920-1945.” Waugh traces the careers of nearly a dozen photographers whose artistic and erotic interests resulted in an aesthetic that glamorized and commercialized “homoerotic spectatorship” – the

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Weinberg, “Substitute and Consolation: The Ballet Photographs of George Platt Lynes” in *Dance for a City: Fifty Years of the New York City Ballet*, ed. Lynn Garafola with Eric Foner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 133.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

desire of the spectator to see a “perfectly lit, eroticized body.”<sup>27</sup> Among them was George Platt Lynes, who stood on the edge of the “gay fashion circuit” where homosexual lifestyles and the worlds of fashion and theatre merged in privileged social circles. The ballet, and the male dancers who were a part of it, represented a “glimpse of homoerotic utopia.” Dance photography was simply a vehicle for capturing this utopia.<sup>28</sup>

In his essay, Waugh claims that the dancer’s body serves as an object of desire whose “grace, elegance, and control, had a corresponding presence in the commercial physique iconography of the period.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, Lynes’ dance photography and nude photography are inadvertently linked to commercial iconography. This is true to a certain extent. Cultural representations of the body during the first half of the twentieth century no doubt permeated all of Lynes’ photos. However, the claim that Lynes’ work is defined by his sexuality is misleading. With his nudes this may very well have been the case, but it seems unlikely, given what Balanchine, Kirstein, Wescott, and others have said, that this was the underlying motivation in Lynes’ dance photography.

In the end, the focus on Lynes shifted away from his idiosyncratic compositions. Although Weinberg and Waugh are only two examples, they represent a theme that permeates

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Waugh, “Posing and Performance: Glamour and Desire in Homoerotic Art Photography, 1920-1945,” in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), 58-59.

<sup>28</sup> It is worth mentioning that the “gay fashion circuit” and “homoerotic utopia” – as Waugh describes them – are worlds populated only by males. The female remains largely ignored, not just in Lynes’ nude photography, but also in the criticism. In researching Lynes I was only able to find one article written by a woman: Ann E. Berman’s “George Platt Lynes Reconsidered.” Interestingly, she gives precedence of fashion and dance photos, rather than the nudes. While this may be coincidental (there may certainly be other contemporary articles written by women), it does raise the question: does gender affect how we see? In her book *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), Susan Bordo argues that “representations of the body have a history, but so to do viewers, and they bring that history - both personal and cultural - to their perception and interpretation. Different viewers see different things” (29). We must never forget that, especially in looking at the criticism of Lynes as well as the photos themselves. For my part, I have tried to draw the reader’s attention to the compositional elements I see as pertinent, hoping that my analysis may enhance how we look at Lynes, but also dance photography as a whole.

<sup>29</sup> Waugh, 69.

contemporary scholarship on Lynes: the artistic quality of his work is neglected at the expense of highlighting its social and sexual significance. It is not my intention to negate or ignore the larger implications of these photos. Rather, I propose that we can only understand the consequences of Lynes' photography by analyzing the photography itself.

Lighting remains the most impeccable and sublime aspect in Lynes' photography; it was his chief *modus operandi* in transforming everyday subjects, dancers and non-dancers alike, into works of art. Through light and shadow he was able to intensify their corporeality, but ultimately he created images that were independent of it – an achievement that continues to lure the viewer into his work. This impact is discussed by many of Lynes' contemporaries, including the artist Pavel Tchelitchev,<sup>30</sup> who poignantly states:

George Platt Lynes was one of those rare men who are in love with light. Light, becoming and being life: impalpable, touchable only by one's eye – the eye the organ of desire; the eye, that rules and transforms the world. To bring a form out of darkness, the approaches, the distances, the silence. Black is silence; light is a burst of life. This is the process of becoming – the moment transformed into duration. This George Platt Lynes knew and fixed.<sup>31</sup>

This statement was published in 1957, two years after Lynes' death and the same year that Tchelitchev himself died. He raises an important point: our ability to see is only possible because of the contrast between light and shadow: our eyes are our primary way of accessing the world around us.

Obviously, lighting is how the camera is able to capture an image: light passes through a small opening in the camera (i.e. the lens) and is directed toward a recording device (i.e. the film

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<sup>30</sup> Tchelitchev (1898-1957) was an important figure in modern painting during the 1930s and 1940s and was close friends with Kirstein and Wheeler, both of whom were largely responsible for promoting his work through their connections at the Museum of Modern Art. He also designed the sets and costumes for a number of Balanchine ballets, as well as the opera-ballet *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1936), which had its premiere at the Metropolitan Opera House. For more information, see Lincoln Kirstein, *Pavel Feodorovitch Tchelitchev, 1898-1957* (Santa Fe: TwelveTrees Press, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> Pavel Tchelitchev "Untitled," *New York City Ballet: Photographs from 1935 through 1955 taken by George Platt Lynes 1907-1956* (New York: New York City Center of Music and Drama, 1957), n.p.

negative) that captures variations in the light spectrum. But we cannot say that a photograph is only a record of these variations. As John Berger points out in *Ways of Seeing*, “Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights.”<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, the viewer sees what the photographer wants him/her to see. Lighting, or more specifically the contrast between light and shadow, is a crucial compositional element because it can highlight different parts of a photograph, emphasizing textures of fabric, distorting perspective, or enhancing the solidity of a subject. This is particularly important in black and white photography. Whereas color photographs create contrast by a difference of hue and/or saturation of colors, black and white photography relies solely on the contrast of black, white, and the multiplicity of grays in between. Understanding the contrast created by lighting becomes all the more significant.<sup>33</sup>

For Lynes, this juxtaposition between light and shadow is accentuated in nearly every photograph in every genre. Ballet photographer Martha Swope has described Lynes’ photographs as being “sculpted with light.”<sup>34</sup> This is a fitting description, but warrants some close investigation. In her article “George Platt Lynes Reconsidered” Ann E. Berman refers to this statement by Swope, further elaborating that:

What did obsess [Lynes] was the harnessing of light to create the dramatic effects he desired. He is remembered as a painfully slow worker, rearranging lights many times in an effort to construct his pictures, as he explained in 1949, “in such

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<sup>32</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1972), 10.

<sup>33</sup> James Smith Pierce, *From Abacus to Zeus: A Handbook of Art History – Seventh Edition* (New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2004), 19.

<sup>34</sup> Ann E. Berman, “George Platt Lynes Reconsidered: The Photographer’s Mastery of Psychology and Light,” *Architectural Digest* (September 1993), 68.

a way that when a photograph is looked at, one has the impression of being able to see right around the object depicted.”<sup>35</sup>

Granted, the dramatic effects created by light and shadow are more extreme in some photos than others. But we must never forget that Lynes is controlling, consciously or unconsciously, what the viewer sees and how he/she sees by manipulating the source(s) of light in the photos. How Lynes was able to accomplish this is complicated, but a survey of his photos reveals two distinct lighting techniques that are present in all genres of his photography.

The first application I refer to is “halo-lighting” in which Lynes literally creates a halo of light around the subject. The effect is noteworthy: it draws the viewer’s focus to the subject’s face while at the same time adds an aura of exaltedness to the subject. Such a technique is most prominent in his portraiture, a collection of photographs that Kirstein calls “his great work” where “Lynes fixed the face of nearly every artist and writer and musician of importance in his epoch.”<sup>36</sup> Jack Woody’s monograph *Portraits: George Platt Lynes* contains a large collection, including portraits of Balanchine, Lucia Chase, Jean Cocteau, Mardsen Hartley, Katherine Hepburn, Fidelma Cadmus Kirstein (Fig. 1), Edith Sitwell, and Oliver Smith – all of which use halo-lighting. It also appears quite frequently in his photography of dancers, specifically in photos of Lew Christensen, Marie-Jeanne (Fig. 2), Francisco Monción (Fig. 3), Sono Osato, and Beatrice Tompkins.

Nowhere is this technique more prominent than in Lynes’ portrait of Lincoln Kirstein (Fig. 4). David Leddick in his book *Naked Men: Pioneering Male Nudes (1935-1955)* describes Kirstein as possessing such an “outstanding physique” in his early years that he was the model

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Lincoln Kirstein, “Untitled,” *Portraits: The Photographs of George Platt Lynes (1927-1955)*, ed. Jack Woody (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 1994), n.p.

for many artists, including Tchelitchev and the sculptor Gaston Lachaise.<sup>37</sup> Through his photography, Lynes not only captured Kirstein's physique, he also accentuated it with lighting. In these photos, often used in the ballet souvenir programs, Kirstein sits in a chair at the center of the photo. The viewer sees two general light sources, one illuminating Kirstein from the front and the other illuminating the background. Halo-lighting surrounds the upper part of the figure; the rest is an expansive darkness that matches the dark suit and emphasizes the broadness of Kirstein's torso. The fact that his limbs are in repose and not projected into space draws the viewer's focus toward the center of the photograph.

This counterpoint of light and shadow is a bit more complex in Lynes' photography of dancers. For Lynes, dancers embodied a theatricality that they naturally brought into the studio. Wescott, in the exhibition catalogue for *Photographic Visions*, wrote that "the sensibility to the eloquence of lighting that is fundamental to Lynes' art is manifested in the very early portrait studies [as we have seen in Kirstein] but it was the heightened reality of theatre, beautifully captured in his poetic documentation of the ballet, that seems to have truly formed Lynes' sense of the expressivity of illumination."<sup>38</sup> For it was chiefly through lighting that Lynes was able to create an environment that replicated the stage, sometimes relying upon many sources of light to highlight the subject and his/her surroundings.

This brings us to the second major lighting application: a highly stylized placement of "under-lighting." Often in his dance photos Lynes captured the dancer(s) moving across raised platforms that were lit from behind and/or underneath, creating a contrast that has two noticeable effects. On one hand, the presence of light can alter the viewer's impression of the environment of the photo. To illuminate the backdrop from underneath creates an illusion that the dancer and

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<sup>37</sup> David Leddick, *Naked Men: Pioneering Male Nudes (1935-1955)* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1997), 24.

<sup>38</sup> Glenway Wescott, "II," *George Platt Lynes – Photographic Visions* (Boston: Exhibition of Institute of Contemporary Art, March 5-April 27, 1980), n.p.

the platform are hovering *above* light.<sup>39</sup> The result is an impression of weightlessness that gives the photo a mystical and unearthly appearance. On the other hand, backlighting can accentuate the weight and size of the platforms on which Lynes frequently poses his subjects. Ultimately, it is the position of the dancer in the surrounding light that emphasizes or understates this weight.

One of Lynes earliest dance series is of Lew Christensen in the title role of Balanchine's *Apollo* (1928), crouching between two long and narrow platforms that descend toward the viewer.<sup>40</sup> Jack Woody's monograph *Ballet: George Platt Lynes* presents two photos from this series on adjoining pages. In the first photo Christensen (Fig. 7) is posed on the back edge of the platform, torso crouched over his thighs, arms lengthening out and away into the surrounding space. The only part of his body fully lit is his left arm, which appears small compared to the right arm that dominates the left third of the photograph. And while his hunched back may block the source of lighting overhead, the resulting shadow highlights certain aspects of Christensen's body: we see his make-up and lengthened eyebrow, the texture and curls in his hair, and the transparency of the costume's fabric.

In the second photo (Fig. 8), Christensen has moved down toward the middle of both platforms. His pelvis is back and disappears into shadow, but his torso and head are more erect and therefore exposed to a great deal of light. We may find ourselves noticing different features here: his fair complexion and hair and the small folds of fabric in his tunic. Unlike the portrait of Kirstein, the visual center of the photograph is shadow: the textured fabric and bare legs leading

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<sup>39</sup> For more examples of under-lighting, see Francisco Monción (Fig. 5) and André Eglevsky (Fig. 6).

<sup>40</sup> These platforms also appear in a 1938 portrait of the writer Frederic Prokosch (1908-1989) and most notably in Lynes' nude series *Orpheus and Eros* (Fig. 9) photographed in 1937-1938. In all instances Lynes changes the angle of the camera, and how he lights the subjects, but the technique of under-lighting remains constant. Often, Lynes uses the same set pieces and props in numerous photographs (i.e. ladders, platforms, fabrics, etc.), but their function differs in nearly every series, and through lighting, even their appearance is drastically altered. This is most evident in Lynes' nude studies where the subject is wrapped around or under a wooden ladder. For an intriguing comparison see *George Platt Lynes: Photographic Visions* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1980) and Leddick, *Naked Men: Pioneering Male Nudes (1935-1955)*.

the viewer's eyes away from the black void into the surrounding space. In the end, the viewer's receptivity to Christensen's body and costume is altered by having him move a short distance down the platform.

These two idiosyncratic lighting applications, halo-lighting and under-lighting, are present in all of Lynes' work. Although their exact application may vary from photo to photo, these techniques illustrate how Lynes was able to emphasize what the viewer sees and, more importantly, what the viewer does *not* see. In effect, Lynes' lighting allowed him to transcend the limitations of a small and intimate studio to create photos that glorify the subject while at the same time make their presence heavily dependant upon their surrounding environment.

How we see the body is also dependent on the subject's relationship to the surrounding space. Simply stated, space is a void in which the subject acts. With Lynes' photography, placing the subject exceedingly close or far away from the viewer results in a dramatic effect: it can change which parts of the body the viewer sees and, at the same time, emphasize how space can exert power upon the subject. But there is another factor that, although obvious, demands our attention: whether or not the subject acknowledges the viewer's presence. When the subject looks directly at the camera, the viewer is forced to "confront" the subject. However, when the subject is looking into the surrounding space, the viewer becomes more of a voyeur, rather than an active participant. The subject may be the same, but the distinction of where the subject is looking, when considered in tandem with spatial proximity to the viewer, considerably changes *how* we see the subject.

There are two portraits of Sono Osato, the part-Japanese dancer who performed with Col. De Basil's Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and American Ballet Theatre (or Ballet Theatre as it was

then known).<sup>41</sup> In both photos her head is upright, her eyes staring directly at the camera. What is markedly different is where her body is located in space. By placing her close to the camera, Lynes limits where else the viewer can look. However, in moving her far away, the viewer is given more opportunity to see her in her element. It is, as we shall see, a subtle change that can have a substantial impact.

The first photo of Osato (Fig. 10) is an extreme close-up.<sup>42</sup> She is lit from a sharp angle with a bright light cast only across her face. Her torso is cast in a shadow so intense one cannot see the subtle features of her neck, shoulders, and sides of her face. Instead, we see a black silhouette that, against the white background, appears two-dimensional. This is in high contrast to the brightly lit features of her oval face and the jeweled “tiara” that adorns her forehead. Her youthful complexion and big eyes are stunning in their symmetry, but this lighting makes her face appear disjointed from the rest of her body. The result is a photo that is both eerie and beautiful: an impact emphasized by her proximity to the camera.

The second photo of Osato (Fig. 11) is markedly different. Wearing a black gown with hundreds of thin reflective panels, she is placed further away from the viewer so that her full body is in frame. She faces the viewer, her head nearly in the same position as the previous photo. Here her flawless features are framed not by jewels but by her black hair against the pale background. The light on her arms, elegantly curved above her left shoulder, is so bright that her arms almost blend into the surrounding space.

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<sup>41</sup> *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, e-reference edition, s.v. “Leonard Bernstein,” “Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo,” and “United States of America: Musical Theater.” For more information about Osato, see her memoir, *Distant Dances* (New York: Knopf, 1980). This memoir specifically addresses her dancing experiences during 1930s, “the years between the demise of the Diaghilev ballet and the births of two great American ballet companies, Lucia Chase’s American Ballet Theatre and George Balanchine’s and Lincoln Kirstein’s New York City Ballet.”

<sup>42</sup> Lynes did not produce many close-ups of dancers (or if he did they have not been included in recently published monographs). The ones that do exist are mainly of women. Other examples include Tamara Toumanova (Fig. 12), Tatiana Riabouchinska (both published in *Dance Index*, vol. III, no. 12 [December 1944]), and Heidi Vosseler who is included in Woody’s *Portraits*.

Depth is created not only by distancing her from the viewer, but also by creating an illusion of depth through lighting – a subtle technique often used by Lynes. Osato’s gown is dark, opaque, and wide at the base. This weighs down the foreground and creates a sense of heaviness that dominates the lower half of the photo. The upper half of the photo employs a different application. The only dark elements are the bodice of Osato’s dress, her hair, and eyes. Her neck, face, and extended arms are lit so brightly that they nearly disappear into the backdrop of the photo. Thus, the viewer’s sense of weight is different depending on where he or she is looking in the photo.

Also noteworthy is that Osato is not moving in space, nor is she wearing a costume. Rather, she is meticulously posed and wears extravagant jewelry and evening-wear. Because Lynes’ uses lighting and distance to glamorize Osato, she takes on the persona of a fashion model. In fact, aside from her pose in the second photo, there is nothing to suggest that she is a “dancer” at all. Interestingly, such an approach is not unique to Lynes. There are a number of photos in which he does not emphasize the subject as a dancer, including portraits of Scott Douglas, Tamara Toumonova, Heidi Vosseler, and Herbert Bliss.<sup>43</sup>

When looking at Lynes’ work, or that of any photographer for that matter, we must always remember that there is active space outside the photo frame, and the subject’s engagement with this “unseen” space makes our role as viewers more “passive” in that we are not being confronted by the subject. In Lynes’ dance photography there exists an entire series of photos that capture the dancer (in costume) posed near the bottom corner of the frame (examples to follow). Most of the photo is simply a bare backdrop or wall with the dancer looking toward the vacant space. This style of composition has two distinct effects. On one hand, the

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<sup>43</sup> For a comparison of dance and non-dance portraits see Woody’s *Portraits*, Crump’s *George Platt Lynes*, and New York City Ballet souvenir program, 1951 and 1952 seasons.

relationship between the dancer and their surrounding environment is more pronounced because the dancer is the one acknowledging the space instead of us. On the other, the vastness of the space only accentuates the uniqueness of the subject.

There exist two nearly identical photos of Maria Tallchief as the Siren in Balanchine's *Prodigal Son* (1929) that exemplify this relationship. In both photos, Tallchief is in the exact same pose: sitting on the floor with the left side of her body facing the viewer. Her head is turned toward us; her eyes look over her left shoulder. The long cloak, part of her costume, begins at her shoulders, and flows off her back, lifted out into space beyond the edge of the photo. Lynes' use of a backdrop and under-lighting creates the illusion that she is among the clouds, her torso and head subtly emphasized by a shroud of halo-lighting – all lighting gradually fading into shadow closer to the edge of the photo.

One photo (Fig. 13) has been cropped so that Tallchief is literally in the center of the photograph. We notice her facial features, costume, and the detailed backdrop that surrounds her. She is the focal point of the photo, *not* the space that surrounds her. The other photo (Fig. 14) is significantly different. Here we see the same subject in the same pose with the same lighting, but she is placed as the bottom left corner of the picture frame. The rest of the photo quickly fades to black as we move further away from Tallchief. Suddenly the gaze over her left shoulder takes on a whole new quality. In the initial photo it may not even cross our minds to consider what exactly she is looking at. But in the second photo we cannot help but notice that Tallchief is looking toward previously un-seen space. She suddenly becomes a minute figure, almost fragile, against the abyss closing in around her.

Not all of Lynes' photos that juxtapose the dancer against a larger space create this sense of foreboding. In the photos of Diana Adams (Fig. 15) and Hugh Laing (Fig. 16) the space is *not*

cast in shadow, at least not as dramatically as in the second Tallchief photo. Here the vast space compliments, rather than contrasts, the uniqueness and presence of these dancers. Lynes accomplishes this in another series where he adds freestanding walls or doorways to the environment. Each of these walls hides a single lighting source, remarkably similar to his under-lighting technique, which casts light toward the dancer. In most cases, the dancer is looking toward the lighting source, not the shadow.<sup>44</sup> The subject seems caught between two different spaces, acknowledging the one we can't see, but existing in ours. The dancer thus becomes a vehicle in which the viewer is connected to the unseen: it is a fitting metaphor. Dance, and particularly ballet, has the potential to transcend the physical limitations of our reality and touch something more ethereal and pure. Lynes was able to capture dancers in a manner that is not only beautiful to look at but also represents the very ideal of their craft – to acknowledge and communicate something beyond everyday reality.

Through this analysis it has become evident that Lynes' meticulous staging directly controls how the viewer relates to the subject and, more importantly, how the potential poignancy of the dancer is closely related to the lighting and space that surrounds them. However, there is another element that controls how the viewer relates to the dancer: costume. Arguably, this is different from lighting and space manipulation in that Lynes' does not actively "create" costuming in the same way he "creates" light and space. What Lynes does (quite successfully) is alter the relationship between the dancer and the viewer by accentuating the costume or removing it completely.

Costume – like lighting – can reveal or conceal certain parts of the body. At times, Lynes focuses the camera on the costume itself, while the body its surroundings remain hazy and, in

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<sup>44</sup> See photos of Alexandra Danilova (Fig. 17), Jerome Robbins (Fig. 18), Irina Baronova (Fig. 19), and André Eglevsky (Fig. 20).

effect, incidental. In such photos, the costume is literally and figuratively the subject of the photograph, not the body wearing it. Such a technique is most evident in Lynes' fashion photography where his priority was to showcase the design, construction, and ornamentation of a garment. This sensitivity to dress carries over into Lynes' dance photography but with a slightly different effect: Lynes often varies whether he is highlighting the costume, the body wearing it, or both.

Such an approach is not evident in Lynes' work with the American Ballet and Ballet Caravan in the 1930s when Lynes often photographed ensembles in costume from works such as *Errante*, *Dreams*, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, and *Pocahontas*. In these photos Lynes simply creates a scene from the dance; the costumes, as part of the production, are archived rather than emphasized.

By the late-1940s, after an unsuccessful appointment as chief photographer of *Vogue*, Lynes found himself predominately shooting individual company members of Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet. At this point one notices a subtle change to his approach to the subject and their costume. In some photos, Lynes captures the dancer and the costume as a single unit in which each compliments the other. For example, in one photo Beatrice Tompkins (Fig. 23) is nearly hidden behind an extravagant gown and veil of lace: the costume suggests refinement and elegance, accentuated by Tompkins' studied and sophisticated pose. In another photo (Fig. 24), Lynes' captures Tanaquil Le Clercq ruffling the delectable frou-frou of her skirt from Balanchine's *Western Symphony*. These two photos emphasize how the dancer's character underscores the artistic function of the costume.

But there are other photos that create a stark contrast between the costume and the dancer. Not only do the two appear separate, but costume is given visual priority (an approach

often used by Lynes in his fashion photos).<sup>45</sup> In a photo of Igor Youskevitch (Fig. 25) there is a single light source from above, which casts his face in shadow, while lighting the adornment on his tunic. By contrast, in a photo of Erik Bruhn (Fig. 26), the light catches his face, but so brightly that the features are almost washed out. What remains in focus are the decals on his tunic and tights. In both these photos Youskevitch and Bruhn are resting against a wall and projecting their gaze downward; they are *not* performing for the camera as Tompkins and Le Clercq are. It is because of the passivity of the pose and the use of light that the extravagance of the costume is emphasized.

What connects these few examples is the observation that costuming can affect how the viewer relates to the dancer's character and/or the dancer's body. However, this impact is expanded even further when one considers that costuming can be looked at in terms of its absence. During his career Lynes did several nude series of dancers including, but not limited to, Nicholas Magallanes and Ralph McWilliams, a partnering series of Magallanes and Marie-Jeanne that inspired the cover for a 1944 issue of *Dance Index*, and the breathtaking series of Mallaganes and Francisco Monción in their duet from Balanchine's *Orpheus* (1947). Although most dance photos are ignored by contemporary writers about Lynes, these nude dance photos, specifically the *Orpheus* series, are prominently featured.

Before analyzing these photos, it is important to understand that nudity opens a new realm of theoretical analysis with significant ramifications for the viewer. In his book *The Body: Photographs of the Human Form* William A. Ewing writes that before the advent of photography, the nude was considered "the province of the painter and sculptor" and remained at

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<sup>45</sup> Tragically, Lynes destroyed a substantial number of negatives from his fashion work during the last few years of his life. (The exact motive behind this act remains a mystery and theories vary.) Of the three published monographs (one by Crump and two by Woody) – well over two hundred photos – only seven photos are labeled as "fashion studies." Yet, in all seven photos, there is a distinct emphasis of the texture and construction of these garments rather than the subject wearing them.

the “core of the highly structured ‘academic’ system of training for artists.”<sup>46</sup> However, the emergence of photography changed how the nude body was viewed in society. “Victorians were willing to accept idealized nude figures depicted on canvas and sculpted in marble, they took offence at the fact that a photograph showed a real, identifiable human being.”<sup>47</sup> Nude photography, even at its origins, had the ability to reveal countless sociological and cultural stigmas toward the human body.<sup>48</sup> John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* claims that once a body is portrayed naked<sup>49</sup> viewers automatically think of the body as having a “sexual function” rather than an aesthetical one.<sup>50</sup> Essentially, the clothed body is shrouded in a sense of mystery because of its inherent modesty. When the clothing is removed this mystery is lost because the viewer’s perception shifts from commonly displayed body parts (such as eyes, neck, shoulders, etc.) to the body’s “sexual parts.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, the viewer sees the entire body as a “sexual category” and classifies it as male or female. Berger further suggests that although the naked body reveals everything, the viewer is forced to realize there is nothing extraordinary about the body: it becomes imbued with “an element of banality.”<sup>52</sup> The naked body, in and of itself, is uninteresting and relies heavily on sexual and social constructions to give it meaning.

Berger’s theory is substantiated by the fact that most contemporary scholarship on Lynes extensively discusses the sexual and social function of the nudes rather than their aesthetic significance. One exception is James Crump, the curator and author of *George Platt Lynes:*

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<sup>46</sup> William A. Ewing, *The Body: Photographs of the Human Form* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994), 60.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Many books have been published on the impact of the nude in photography. William A. Ewing, *The Body: Photographs of the Human Form* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994) is particularly insightful, as is Michael Köhler, ed., *The Body Exposed: Views of the Body - 150 Years of the Nude in Photography* (Zurich: Edition Stemmler AG, 1986).

<sup>49</sup> For the purposes of this paper I will use the term “naked” to mean the state of being unclothed, whereas “nudity” refers to the aesthetic quality created from being naked.

<sup>50</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 58.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 59.

*Photographs at the Kinsey Institute*. In an essay on Lynes and gay male visual culture in post-World War II New York, Crump speculates that Lynes was “very concerned” about the limited ways to exhibit his nude photography. Therefore he chose to aestheticize his nudes in the hope they would be more acceptable.<sup>53</sup>

When he indulged in creating explicit photographs himself, Lynes approached the male body aesthetically, utilizing the same techniques of lighting and staging found in his fashion and commercial photographs. There is little distinction that can be made between the construction of Lynes’s aestheticized – one might say “legitimate” – male nude images and the interaction of men having sex together.<sup>54</sup>

While Crump goes on to thoroughly analyze the social and artistic consequences of aestheticizing the nudes, he never addresses *how* this was accomplished. He tells us that Lynes’ idiosyncratic lighting and staging techniques are constant regardless of subject, which seems to imply that all of Lynes’ work is aesthetically based, even photos that are more sexually “explicit.” Given Berger’s theory about the codependent relationship between nudity and banality it would seem nearly impossible for a photographer to consistently reduce the “sexual function” of the naked body. Yet this is exactly what Lynes does for the most part, especially in his dance nudes.

Because of their commercial aspect Lynes would have been forced to approach his dance nudes quite differently from his other nudes: if anything, they would have to be even *more* aestheticized to make them socially acceptable. Lynes never overtly displays the dancer’s naked body: he is always concealing certain parts of the body through lighting, the presence of a partner, or even the use of strategically placed props. Because of this, the potential for Berger’s “sexual and social function” is largely reduced, and the aesthetic quality of the image is emphasized. At the same time, by controlling what the viewer sees and does not see, Lynes

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<sup>53</sup> Crump, *Photography as Agency*, 150.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

imbues his nudes with a sense of mystery: there may be slight traces of banality, but beauty remains the end result of the photograph.

One way of making the dance nudes suitable for commercial use was by showing them in silhouette. For Lynes, this was an ideal way to capture the musculature and delicacy of the naked body without exposing “the sexual parts.” Commercially speaking, nudity in this context was safe because it was *implied*. We have already seen subtle traces of this technique in his close-up portrait of Sono Osato, her silhouetted neck juxtaposed against her brightly lit face and jeweled tiara. But no other Lynes’ photos exemplify the aestheticizing effect of the silhouette from the series more than the partnering series with Nicholas Magallanes and Marie-Jeanne. In two images the subjects are in the same pose, Marie-Jeanne standing perfectly balanced on Magallanes’ hip. What differs is how the subjects are lit. One photo (Fig. 25) we clearly see the subjects’ “sexual parts” and how the light creates color and texture on their skin. In the other (Fig. 26), from the cover of a 1944 issue of *Dance Index*, Lynes does *not* light the subjects, and we see only their silhouettes. Here, the viewer cannot see skin tone, texture, or sexual parts. What is emphasized is the shape made by the bodies and the architecture of the pose, rather than the bodies themselves.

This does not mean that Lynes “hid” the fact that the subjects were naked. On the contrary, Lynes teases the viewer, hinting that the subject is indeed naked (after all, we do see Marie-Jeanne’s exposed nipple near the top of the *Dance Index* image). Another series reveals this as well: dancer Ralph McWilliams standing in various ballet positions in front of a lit background (Fig. 27). In typical silhouette fashion, McWilliams is not lit from the front. But unlike the photo of Magallanes and Marie-Jeanne there are two noticeable lighting sources from the side that subtly highlight the curvature and musculature of McWilliams’ torso, buttocks, and

legs. In effect, the relationship between light and shadow shows the viewer that McWilliams is actually naked, but the silhouette (and the pose) reduces the “sexual function” of the image.

What Crump’s comments suggest and these photos reveal is that Lynes was consciously using compositional elements to aestheticize rather than eroticize his dance nudes. We admire the beauty of the human form because we cannot see it fully. These silhouette photos, which resist Berger’s theories, have never been included in contemporary discussion of Lynes’ nudes. Their covertness might very well be responsible for their unpopularity.

Fortunately, this is not the case with all of Lynes’ dance nudes. In 1948, Balanchine, in collaboration with the composer Igor Stravinsky, choreographed *Orpheus* for Ballet Society.<sup>55</sup> The success of this “uncompromisingly modern” ballet was largely dependant upon Stravinsky’s music and the all-too-provocative costumes and set decor of sculptor Isamu Naguchi. But Balanchine’s choreography and his dancers also played an important role in the ballet’s success. The two leading men, Nicholas Magallanes and Francisco Monción, who performed Orpheus and the Dark Angel respectively, were not virtuosic dancers; rather, they were known for their “stunning theatrical presence.”<sup>56</sup> Balanchine, knowing this, created a ballet that was intimate and intensely focused on precise timings, a work, as critic John Martin wrote, of “the utmost simplicity. He has told the story with complete directness and a minimum of orientation. He has used gesture sparingly but with intuitive invention.”<sup>57</sup>

For this ballet, Lynes photographed an entire series of Magallanes, Monción, Tallchief, and Le Clercq performing various moments from the ballet.<sup>58</sup> These photos are slightly atypical of Lynes in that there is no shadow in his setting. The walls are entirely lit as well as the floor.

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<sup>55</sup> Nancy Reynolds, *Repertory in Review: 40 Years of the New York City Ballet* (New York: Dial Press, 1977), 87.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> John Martin, “Stravinsky Work in World Premiere,” *New York Times*, 29 April 1948, 19.

<sup>58</sup> See William A. Ewing, *Dance and Photography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1987), 148-151 and New York City Ballet souvenir programs, 1951 and 1952 seasons.

Thus, the dancers, wearing the solidly colored unitards of Noguchi, stand out dramatically in the space. These photos appear quite frequently in the New York City Ballet souvenir programs and, as a series, poignantly emphasize the minimalism and simplicity of Balanchine's choreography.

Two years after the premiere, Lynes made an entire series of Magallanes and Monción performing their duet from the ballet. The environment, however, was radically altered. In this series Lynes' stylized lighting is more pronounced, and the backdrop is a dark, speckled wall of varying shades of grey. Most importantly, both dancers are naked. Throughout the series the two men weave around one another, supporting one another in poses that are exceedingly intimate. As Allen Ellenzweig writes in his essay on Lynes,

In this series, two male dancers, fully nude, project their arching, caressing, muscular interlocking the unequivocal homosexual sequel to the Orpheus and Eurydice legend [...] the lyre itself a kind of phallic reference, prudently disguises the occasional frontal nudity. More important, the shimmer and shadow of these pictures makes of this seductive pas de deux a poetic as much as an erotic encounter. Light and dark alternate to model solid, sinewy thighs, calves, shoulders, backs, chests. These images are a perfect marriage of reverie and reality; they document the ballet while dreaming beyond it.<sup>59</sup>

Although Ellenzweig mentions that Lynes created a "poetic" as well as "erotic" aesthetic to his photograph, his description ultimately gives primacy to the erotic. Words like "caressing," "seductive," "phallic," and "sinewy" do more to highlight the erotic connotations of the images, rather than their artistic value. Granted, this text is part of a larger collection entitled *The Homoerotic Photograph*, so Ellenzweig's intentions in highlighting the series' homoerotic undertones, or overtones, are clear. But his ultimate claim that these photos represent a world

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<sup>59</sup> Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 98. Ellenzweig is quick to address the often suppressed theme of homosexuality in the Orpheus myth, which states that Orpheus' sexual desires were satisfied by young boys while his wife Eurydice remained in the Underworld. Although Ellenzweig acknowledges that the photo's subjects are Orpheus and the Dark Angel (and not young boys), he suggests that Lynes intentionally sought to capture this "homosexual sequel" to the Orpheus myth.

where “beauty sweeps all else aside, a world in which the homosexual artist might emerge victorious over the philistines”<sup>60</sup> is more problematic, especially since he fails to say if these photos were for Lynes’ personal edification or made for commercial use.

Theories about this vary. William R. Thompson in his M.A. Thesis, “Sex, Lies, and Photographs: Letters of George Platt Lynes,” suggests that these photos represent one of the few instances where Lynes’ “homoerotic imagery ever caused a scandal.”<sup>61</sup> In correspondence with Dr. Kinsey, Lynes wrote that one particular photo of Nicholas Magallanes was originally included in a NYCB souvenir program but was “withdrawn by the company management, though not until several thousand copies had been sold. On grounds of prudishness, a number of people complained--notably (so I was told) the dancer [x] who, as one-time wife of Balanchine, was in a position of influence.”<sup>62</sup>

In the appendix I have included two different versions of the photo that “caused the scandal” (Fig. 28 and 29). As the viewer progresses from left to right one sees the original photo and a sequentially cropped version. Obviously, the first shows frontal nudity and, as Berger would suggest, the image is thus sexually charged. But as we move to the last photo, all we can see is Monción’s hand gently touching Magallanes’ elbow. It is this image that was included in the souvenir program and withdrawn because of its “prudishness.” For Thompson, even though the nudity is implied and the source of the intimacy is unseen, the photo is still “a sexually charged work.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>61</sup> William R. Thompson, “Sex, Lies, and Photographs: Letters from George Platt Lynes” (M.A. Thesis, Rice University, 1996), 40-41.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., Letter from Lynes to Elenor L. Roehr, 28 October 1954. Thompson states further that “The correspondence between Lynes and the Kinsey Institute cited in this thesis is from the collection of the Kinsey Institute and is used with its permission. For reasons of privacy the Kinsey Institute redacted the name of the dancer, referred to in this passage as X, from the copy of the letter they sent to me.” Considering the date of this correspondence and that the dancer was a former wife of Balanchine, it was probably Maria Tallchief.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 42.

This analysis is not meant to deny that these photos are erotic. All portray an environment that fuses beauty and eroticism. I only question how and why some photos are more sexually charged than others. By showing these photos, it becomes obvious that what the viewer does *not* see can influence their impression of the work. Furthermore, compared to the silhouette photos of Magallanes, Marie-Jeanne, and McWilliams, there is technically *more* costuming in the Orpheus series because Noguchi's lyre, mask, and coiled rope for Monción are still present. In some instances these props prevent the viewer from seeing frontal nudity, while in others they compliment the pose of the dancers. But what if they were absent? In the subsequent photos (Fig. 30 and Fig. 31) consider what would happen if there were no props at all. Lynes' lighting would still enhance the allure of the two subjects, but the homoerotic connotation of the photograph would take precedence.

Thus, it is the presence of Noguchi's props, in addition to Lynes' compositional techniques, that add a distinct aura of theatricality to the photographs. It appears that Lynes was acutely aware of this. Balanchine chose to make these props central to the story of Orpheus, and Lynes chose to have his dancers interacting with them. The presence of these props control how the viewer relates to the dancer, as with the costumes in the photos of Tompkins, Le Clercq, Youskevitch, and Bruhn. In effect, the prop is a compositional element. Because of its presence, the aesthetic quality of the photograph is emphasized, and the homoerotic implications are significantly altered.

In the end, this discussion is only a beginning. A theory that Lynes manipulates the sexual connotations of his dance nudes may have broad implications if applied to his figure studies of the male nude. Contemporary scholars project the social and sexual importance of the male nudes upon Lynes' dance photos. But what if this process were reversed? What if we

could project the aesthetic significance of Lynes' dance photos upon the male nudes? Would our conclusions be centered on homoeroticism and social stigmas? Or rather, would it be on the beauty and allure of the idealized human body?

With a body of work as vast as Lynes', no analysis can be all-encompassing. But it is my hope that this discussion has provided a new perspective on Lynes' dance photography, and that the composition of these photos might inspire a fresh look at the aesthetic significance of Lynes' other genres. As viewers, we must never forget that simple compositional elements control how we view the subject.

Glenway Wescott wrote in 1980 that he remembers Lynes often saying, "More than anything, it is beauty that makes things interesting."<sup>64</sup> Perhaps, Lynes too may have overlooked the very aspect that gave his images such intense beauty: their composition. No matter the genre we choose to analyze, Lynes is always hiding something or playing with the viewer's perspective – his subliminal dissolves always beckoning us to tarry a bit longer. How could a viewer not be drawn into this enigmatic world of beauty and mystery? All we have to do is take the time to look, to really *see* the impeccable craftsmanship George Platt Lynes possessed. His photos are not just an archive of dancers, fashion models, celebrities, and former-lovers; they are evidence of a rare and gifted mind.

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<sup>64</sup> Wescott, "George Platt Lynes and the Ballet," *George Platt Lynes: Photographic Visions* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1980), n.p.

## Appendix

(Images are included in the deposited copy in The Barnard Dance Department Archives.)

- Figure 1. Fidelma Cadmus Kirstein, c. 1940. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Portraits* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 2. Marie-Jeanne, *The Ballet Caravan*, 1937. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 3. Francisco Monción in *Firebird*, New York City Ballet, 1950. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 4. Lincoln Kirstein, 1948. James Crump, *George Platt Lynes: Photographs from The Kinsey Institute* (Boston: Bullfinch Press/Little Brown, 1993), 12.
- Figure 5. Francisco Monción, c. 1949. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Portraits* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 6. André Eglevsky, c. 1943. James Crump, *George Platt Lynes: Photographs from The Kinsey Institute* (Boston: Bullfinch Press/Little Brown, 1993), 54.
- Figure 7. Lew Christensen in *Apollon Musagète*, American Ballet, 1937. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 8. Lew Christensen in *Apollon Musagète*, American Ballet, 1937. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Portraits* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 9. *Orpheus and Eros*, c. 1937-39. Allen Ellenzwieg, *The Homoerotic Photograph* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 100.
- Figure 10. Sono Osato, 1937. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Portraits* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 11. Sono Osato, 1937. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 12. Tamara Toumanova, 1941. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Portraits* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 13. Maria Tallchief in *Prodigal Son*, New York City Ballet, 1950. Lynn Garafola, ed., with Eric Foner, *Dance for a City: Fifty Years of the New York City Ballet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 32.

- Figure 14. Maria Tallchief in *Prodigal Son*, New York City Ballet, 1950. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 15. Diana Adams, The New York City Ballet, 1951. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 16. Hugh Laing in *Prodigal Son*, 1951. James Crump, *George Platt Lynes: Photographs from The Kinsey Institute* (Boston: Bullfinch Press/Little Brown, 1993), 49.
- Figure 17. Alexandra Danilova, c. 1941. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Portraits* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 18. Jerome Robbins in *Prodigal Son*, New York City Ballet, 1950. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 19. Irina Baronova. *Dance Index*, ed. Donald Windham, vol. III, no. 12 (December 1944), n.p.
- Figure 20. André Eglevsky, 1944. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 21. Beatrice Tompkins, New York City Ballet, 1950. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 22. Tanaquil Le Clercq in *Western Symphony*, c. 1954. *New York City Ballet: Photographs from 1935 through 1955 taken by George Platt Lynes* (New York: New York City Center of Music and Drama, 1957), n.p.
- Figure 23. Igor Youskevitch, Ballet Theatre, 1949. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 24. Erik Bruhn, Ballet Theatre, 1949. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 25. Nicholas Magallanes and Marie-Jeanne. Private collection, New York.
- Figure 26. Nicholas Magallanes and Marie-Jeanne. *Dance Index: Photographs by George Platt Lynes*, vol. III, no. 12 (Dec. 1944), cover page.
- Figure 27. Ralph McWilliams, 1950. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.
- Figure 28. *The Kinsey Institute for Research, Sex, and Reproduction* website, [www.kinseyinstitute.org](http://www.kinseyinstitute.org).

Figure 29. James Crump, *George Platt Lynes: Photographs from The Kinsey Institute* (Boston: Bullfinch Press/Little Brown, 1993), 55.

Figure 30. Nicholas Magallanes and Francisco Monción, 1950. James Crump, *George Platt Lynes: Photographs from The Kinsey Institute* (Boston: Bullfinch Press/Little Brown, 1993), 53.

Figure 31. Nicholas Magallanes and Francisco Monción, 1950. Jack Woody, *George Platt Lynes: Ballet* (Pasadena: Twelvetrees Press, 1985), n.p.

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