

## Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image

by Douglas Rosenberg. 2012. New York: Oxford University Press. 234 pp., 21 b/w illus., acknowledgments, preface, notes, bibliography, index, companion Web site with 21 still images (same as text). \$99 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

## Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image

by Erin Brannigan. 2011. New York: Oxford University Press. 240 pp., 32 b/w illus., preface, acknowledgments, filmography bibliography, index, companion Web site with 12 video clips and additional resources. \$99 cloth, \$27.95 paper.

doi:10.1017/S0149767713000053

Over the years, screendance has generated flurries of interest within the scholarly dance community, only to watch that interest wane again and again with shifting academic trends. The past decade, however, has seen a slow-churning energy that may result in a more sustainable conversation around dance onscreen, much of which has been fueled by screendance artists and programmers themselves. A number of volumes of interest to academia have emerged as screendance artists have made homes for themselves in university settings. For makers of dance onscreen, Katrina McPherson's *Making Video Dance: A Step-by-Step Guide to Creating Dance for the Screen* (2006) and Karen Pearlman's *Cutting Rhythms: Shaping the Film Edit* (2009) are especially noteworthy. After Sherril Dodds's important historical and analytical book *Dance on Screen: Genres and Media from Hollywood to Experimental Art* (2001), however, screendance scholarship was not positioned to capitalize and build on Dodds's provocation. Liz Aggiss and Billy Cowie's edited collection *Anarchic Dance* (2006) offers a wonderful model for gathering together the creative work of a team of artists and scholarly writing about their work, but like *Envisioning Dance on Film and Video* (2002), a collection that was pulled together under Judy Mitoma's direction, the tone is somewhat self-congratulatory and the analysis is tepid. Finally, two books have come out that will stand alongside Dodds's to re-ignite conversations in the screendance field and in Dance Studies generally, and will do so in a generative and critical way: Douglas Rosenberg's *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* (2012) and Erin Brannigan's *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (2011).

Both Brannigan and Rosenberg mention that their first books have been a long time coming; each author places the gestation period at over a decade. In the intervening years, Rosenberg has been a vocal advocate for screendance criticism and scholarship, founding the *International Journal of Screendance* with Claudia Kappenberg (full disclosure, I am on the editorial board) while continuing his practices as a maker and curator of screendance. Brannigan likewise continued her curatorial practice while finishing her doctorate and publishing her research. Both authors focus their volumes on the field of artistic production that has gone by the names of dancefilm, videodance, cinedance, dance for camera, and, more recently, screendance, but the books diverge radically from that shared starting point.

Terminology is just the first of the authors' many differences, but it is a telling one. Rosenberg uses the term "screendance" as an umbrella term under which all dance and non-dance choreography created for any size or type of screen can fit. This is in keeping with his influences from video and studio art and his avant-gardist leanings in tracing screendance genealogies. Brannigan utilizes the term "dancefilm" in order to emphasize an aesthetic and technological continuity among screen media, and to recognize the centrality of cinema—from framing and editing in the filmmaking process to the tools and theories of film analysis—for her project generally. Indeed, Brannigan's book demonstrates her facility with both Film and Dance Studies literatures, and she productively

leverages the likes of Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, and Jean-François Lyotard in commenting on the many works of film and video that form the core of her text. In contrast, Rosenberg offers a meta-commentary on the screendance field from his position as a longtime participant in the community. The result is part diagnosis, part manifesto—from which screendance works are largely absent. Although Rosenberg's book came out a little over a year after Brannigan's, it frames and raises the stakes of her contribution. Reading the two books together, one gets a good sense of where screendance scholarship has been, and where it could go.

With the exception of Golden Era Hollywood dance musicals, a smattering of canonical popular films, and a few seminal works of experimental cinema and video art, much of screendance remains unknown to scholarship in any discipline. Yet, the changing role of media in our everyday lives as well as in contemporary artistic practices has more scholars looking to the screen regardless of their home disciplines or analytical orientations. How will screendance makers and scholars respond to this new situation? Will artists welcome increased scholarly attention—if, indeed, it materializes? How will screendance practitioners inform, shape, complicate, and challenge the histories upon which scholars draw as they trace the myriad artistic, technological, and intellectual heritages found in dance onscreen? As participants in an interdisciplinary subfield with many parent disciplines, screendance practitioners and scholars must decide how active and how broad an intellectual community they want to create. They must decide whether they will come to terms with and even embrace dance on the popular screen (as many screendance programmers have), or remain tied to the avant-garde (the preferred location for a majority of university-employed dance artists and theorists). And they must decide if they will limit themselves to dances created for film, video, and television, or if dances created for the Internet, mobile devices, and other installations and applications will find an intellectual and artistic home in screendance.

So far, screendance festivals have proven very receptive to a variety of approaches to dance, provided that pieces are made for the big screen. Festivals conventionally support documentaries of dance companies, ethnographic films, experimental shorts, and animations, as well as adaptations of evening-length stage-based choreographies. It remains to be seen if screendance scholarship will be equally, if not more, expansive, making room for experimental and popular works, professional and amateur dancers and directors, Euro-American and global aesthetics and movement practices, analog and digital technologies, and big and small screens, or if it will define itself too rigidly to demonstrate its relevance beyond a handful of artists and scholars. This internal tension—the need to define a field's boundaries while at the same time ensure their elasticity—is particularly apparent in Rosenberg's book. Though he emphasizes the interdisciplinary inheritances of screendance practitioners, he is very transparent in his desire for screendance to cobble together a disciplinary knowledge-base of its own.

Faced with the difficult task of defining a subfield around an eclectic array of arts practices in an era of post-disciplinary scholarship, Rosenberg steps back to scan the screendance landscape and to inform his readers of what he sees from his zoomed-out perspective. Measured against a disciplinary norm, Rosenberg finds many shortcomings. These can be summarized as follows:

1. Screendance practitioners, programmers, audience members, and scholars lack adequate knowledge of the history and heritage of the myriad arts disciplines from which dance onscreen draws its inspiration.
2. Screendance programmers rarely screen works in formats other than new works showcases, forfeiting the opportunity to build the field by crafting stylistic or other arguments through what Rosenberg calls “curatorial activism,” resulting in a perennially naïve audience to which artists cater if they want their work screened in these festivals.
3. Because screendance practitioners do not know their own history and because programmers do not generally build an educational mission into the festival format, the field lacks “connoisseurship” among its audience members.

4. Screendance makers lack opportunities for substantive self-criticism and feedback, without which the form will not move forward. With his book, Rosenberg sets out to lay a foundation for remedying this situation.

Rosenberg describes his project as an attempt “to create a context for a specific kind of history, to provide starting points for these key areas—the evolution of historical narrative(s), establishing critical paradigms, and drawing practitioners into critical and theoretical inquiry—and to suggest certain directions such work might pursue” (9). Rosenberg is true to his word, but he spends so much time setting the stage for future developments and telling readers how the field could or should be improved that one cannot help but feel somewhat frustrated, wishing that the author would follow through with critical analyses of screendance works, applications of his critical paradigms to test their viability, or demonstrations of how the media histories he traces manifest themselves in contemporary screendance. In spite of its title, however, *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* spends very little time describing or analyzing screendance works; situating screendance makers within aesthetic or historical trajectories; or theorizing the screen, choreography, or movement in terms of inscription, ephemerality, or the visual image. Rosenberg’s project, ultimately, is not one of cultural criticism or even screendance criticism. It is a manifesto for the future of screendance scholarship as part of a larger project of field-building.

Rosenberg is most effective in his advocacy of “curatorial activism.” It is true, as he observes, that in the United States at least, screendance festivals are modeled on the showcase format, in which pieces are screened in an order that balances different dance styles, short and long works, humor and pathos. But screenings rarely connect pieces together for the purposes of intertextual reading and commentary. As a result, audiences are not prompted to see screendance works in relation to each other, let alone in relation to a complex history of arts practices, and they have no sense of an artist’s development of his/her craft over time. Screendance thus becomes an extension of dance-as-entertainment, attracting audiences looking for distraction, spectacle, or technologically assisted virtuosity. This is perhaps to be expected, since, according to Rosenberg, the cinematic technologies that screendance makers bring to bear on dancing bodies lull audiences into escapist complacency, even blinding them to the operations of the media involved: “[S]creendance often overwhelms the viewer via the magic of the technologies with which it is produced, the stellar dancing or the lush landscape in which it occurs, to such an extent that it *resists critique*” (emphasis his, 90). Such thinking—whether stemming primarily from an essentialist attitude toward screendance or a paternalist attitude toward screendance audiences—is patently unhelpful and flies in the face of Rosenberg’s intervention. It is even more of a shock, coming right after a chapter that is notable for its sophisticated analyses of video.

In his fourth chapter, Rosenberg offers readers a glimpse of his wide-ranging knowledge of video art as he argues for the relevance of video history to a consideration of screendance. In particular, he effectively explores the resonances among video technologies, the Vietnam War, 1960s and 1970s experimental performance on- and off-screen, and the “bodies in crisis” (76) they all produced. Of Amy Greenfield’s 1971 video *Transport* and 1973 video *Element*, Rosenberg argues, “The bodies in Greenfield’s work cannot be read as *any* bodies; they are specific and recognizable as bodies of an era politicized by war . . .” (emphasis his, 76). Rosenberg offers disappointingly few analyses of screendance works, but moments such as these, which are attentive to the corporeality of screenic bodies, which link choreography to a sociopolitical milieu as well as to a broader arts scene, and which attend to the specificity of screen media at critical moments of their technological development, are deeply gratifying and accessible to a general readership. One only wishes there were more such moments.

Brannigan’s text is not directed at screendance artists to the extent that Rosenberg’s is, though she by no means excludes them—far from it. Her explorations of the formalist theories of Béla Balázs and Maya Deren are particularly useful for elucidating and expanding aesthetic and compositional

approaches to dancefilm, and she does the careful work of demonstrating where dancefilm differentiates itself from other types of film. Like Rosenberg, Brannigan's theoretical framework allows her to reach in many directions throughout the book, covering a century of dancefilm from the work of Loie Fuller at the turn of the twentieth century, to dancing stars in Hollywood musicals and the films of Maya Deren mid-century, to experimental dance and cinema featuring Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown in the 1970s. It is a productive gathering of individuals and ideas that historically and conceptually supports a fruitful discussion of approximately 30 dancefilms produced since the early 1990s.

Brannigan is able to point readers to such a wide range of dancefilms because she is more concerned with a search for meaningful patterns across films—recurring images, scenes, and approaches to framing movement—than with a probing analysis of a few works or an extended commentary on the state of the field. She grounds her study with written descriptions and occasionally video clips of exemplary scenes to illustrate the cinematic and choreographic concepts at the core of her analysis. Lest dance be so powerful as to overshadow cinema in this hybrid genre, Brannigan emphasizes that dances on film are of a cinematic nature, and that the “dance that is realized in dancefilm . . . needs to be considered entirely in terms of its cinematic manifestation” (viii). She continues, “The variety of movements featured in dancefilm are produced through the cinematic process and can be of any nature: the movement of a body part, crowd, object or graphic detail, and may be animated by outside forces such as natural elements or technological manipulation. It is these movements that create the *cine-choreographies* that constitute filmic performance in dancefilm” (emphasis hers, ix). Brannigan articulates how dancefilms reorient familiar cinematic techniques and challenge filmmakers to render images differently, incorporating such techniques as “slow motion, multiple-exposure, repetition, reverse-motion,” among other approaches, “to produce new forms of choreographic practice . . .” (127). Traditionalists may be suspicious of describing camera and other nonhuman movements as dance or choreography, but Brannigan is in keeping with the branch of Dance Studies that takes “choreographic analysis” as its mantra, and, moreover, she articulates what is a commonplace among screendance makers: namely, that framing, filming, and editing are choreographic processes.

Gilles Deleuze is Brannigan's constant companion in this book, but she does not go so deeply into Deleuzian (or Bergsonian) ideas or language that readers unfamiliar with his work will be confused. She introduces borrowed ideas, but does not belabor them, making her prose accessible to a general audience. Readers of Deleuze may be frustrated that Brannigan does not spend more time unpacking, developing, and challenging his ideas so as to offer spirited and jargon-filled Deleuzian readings of dancefilms. Conversely, those who have had their fill of Deleuze, may find that where Brannigan chooses to direct her attention is over-determined by Deleuze's work on cinema. Such an example can be found in Brannigan's chapter on dancefilm musicals, the approach to which is almost inexplicable without prior knowledge of Deleuze's books on cinema. Brannigan's emphasis suddenly shifts away from cine-choreographic elements, which dominate the rest of the book, to focus on film stars in Hollywood musicals, the dancing star's “idiogest” (a person's unique way of moving), and the way that stars' “capacity for excess motor expenditure” (142) facilitates the transition from everyday movements into dancing. Not only does the chapter feel out of place within the trajectory of the book, Brannigan does not make the case, as she elsewhere insists, that dance in dancefilm musicals is substantively different from dance in stage-based musicals because of specifically cinematic transformations. A lack of differentiation, Brannigan tells us from the outset, is why she avoids a discussion of dance documentation entirely (ix). The dancefilm musical would be an important place to really push the tensions between dance documentation and choreography for the camera, as the genre complicates both the notions of strict documentation and that of film's transformation of the dancing image. Incongruence aside, Brannigan's observations remain important contributions to scholarship on musicals writ large, and the chapter offers an opportunity for the author to rehearse concepts such as Maya Deren's “vertical” film form and Hubert Godard's “gestural anacrusis” introduced earlier in the book.

Overall, Brannigan makes great strides toward developing an analytical vocabulary for dance onscreen, which will no doubt prove influential for future screendance scholarship. She also gives dance scholars generous entrée into some useful dimensions of film theory. Though she does not engage nearly as much film theory as she could have, had that been her primary objective, Brannigan moves the intersection of dance and film scholarship way beyond misappropriations of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) into an open field of possibilities. Similarly, though she does not engage nearly as much dance theory as she could have, she does not render dance exotic or mysterious or inexplicable from the perspective of film. One feels that dance and film are equal (refreshingly ungendered, for the most part) partners throughout this endeavor, constantly engaged in a productive exchange through mutual assimilation.

Even with the substantial contributions of these two authors, screendance awaits its indispensable text—the one students consult and scholars love to hate, the one that finally owns up to a canon that can be railed against, the one that defines the boundaries of a field that can then be challenged and blurred. Until such a book comes along, screendance will remain an area of research without a disciplinary home—a migratory, slippery, eclectic hodgepodge of practices informed by dance, film, experimental media, and popular culture, among others, forming a sensible network of practices, practitioners, and scholars but, for better or worse, never quite congealing as a field.

Two final notes: First, these books are located in a very specific history and trajectory of dance onscreen. Although films playing the festival circuit are increasingly coming from outside European and North American contexts and are utilizing non-Western or intercultural movement vocabularies, neither book really tackles screendance as a global phenomenon. Also, in spite of the fact that dance on the popular screen is almost never oriented toward that narrow aesthetic terrain called "experimental dance," with the exception of Brannigan's chapter on dancefilm musicals, neither author addresses screendance as a popular phenomenon. These are two major gaps begging for additional scholarship. Second, these books share a quirk of style: rather than conclude each chapter with a slow cross-fade that helpfully summarizes one chapter and generously foreshadows or even introduces the next, identifying themes and concepts that will continue on in a changed form or a new context, both authors transition between chapters with a jump-cut—which is to say, a non-transition. Yet, both authors develop their ideas over the course of the books; this is not a situation where stand-alone essays have been artificially repackaged as books. Nevertheless, each chapter comes to such an abrupt end that one can almost hear an unseen director shouting, "And . . . CUT!"

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# Screendance



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Ephemeral  
Image

DOUGLAS ROSENBERG