

The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen edited by Melissa Blanco Borelli. 2014. New York: Oxford UP. 496 pp, 107 b&w screen stills. \$150 hardback.

Hetty Blades, Coventry University

Dance on screen is by no means a new phenomenon, however the analytic consideration of popular dance on screen is a relatively new addition to dance studies.¹ *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, edited by Melissa Blanco Borelli, takes Sherril Dodds' seminal work *Dance on Screen* from 2001 as a point of departure, in order to "establish a body of contemporary readings about dance in a popular screen context."²

In the Introduction Blanco Borelli explains that the book is motivated by an increased interest among students in researching popular dance on screen. Similarly, teachers of dance studies increasingly draw on examples from popular culture to demonstrate theoretical concepts, a method wonderfully articulated by Blanco Borelli's discussion of her use of the music video for George Michael's *Flawless (Go To The City)* to provoke conversation about the body, identity and social inscription.³ Those of us who have adopted similar teaching methodologies know first-hand how the recognition of familiar examples can help students to comprehend otherwise abstract theories. However, despite an active interest from students and teachers, the area is relatively under explored and Blanco Borelli points out that academic consideration of popular examples can be hard to find, suggesting that, "Because dance on the popular screen can be so heavily entangled in the zeitgeist, finding scholarly material on a recent music video, dance film or *YouTube* trend poses a challenge."⁴ The 27 chapters cover an array of familiar examples from film, television, and online contexts, utilizing various perspectives to describe, analyze and theorize the body. Through detailed description and interrogation, the various authorial voices work together to present an implicit, but nevertheless tangible framework for analyzing and reading dance in this form.

The book starts by considering dance on screen through a historical framework. Some chapters in Section One discuss the role of the screen in the evolution of specific dance forms or style, whilst others consider specific case studies from the big and small screen, focusing on examples that occupy a significant place within the history of dance on film, or include a dance that is part of a specific dance history. Cinema is further addressed in Section Two, which focuses on recent commercial films that feature dance

as a central subject, or include movement as central to their meaning. These discussions demonstrate how dance serves a crucial function in the construction of narrative and how analysis enables deeper understanding about issues of race, gender, sexuality and class. These themes are further developed in Section Three, which addresses the role of the dancing body in music videos and the construction of “televisual bodies”⁵ through television talent shows and music videos. The chapters in this section consider how the camera, lighting, costumes, music and movement combine to create visual affects and reveal socio-political narratives. Section Four further examines the politics of the dancing body, this time specifically in relation to the construction of national identities. The discussions demonstrate how the movement of the body in both dance and non-dance contexts provokes discourses regarding race, place and identity. The final section examines the role of the internet in our engagement with dance. The authors address the ways that we interact with cyber worlds through sharing, observing and copying dance. They consider how music videos and video games situate the spectator in the midst of a complex reconfiguration of time, identity and embodiment.

The key themes of the text are summarized in a helpful conclusion by Sherril Dodds. She points out that readings are likely to draw on a range of approaches due to the breadth of dance styles presented on screen. The central role of the camera is reiterated, as Dodds proposes various ways to analyze the behavior of the body through the camera, including through the adoption of structural and intertextual analysis, drawing links to established dance analysis methodologies.

Particular highlights include Mary Fogarty’s examination of the relationship between Gene Kelly’s famous dance from *Singin’ in the Rain* and the “remix”⁶ for a Volkswagen commercial in 2005. Fogarty analyzes the confluence of movement, camera work, and props in relation to contextual information, images, theoretical perspectives and critical reviews, demonstrating to readers how rigorous academic theorizing can arise from a wide range of sources and reference points. Rosemary Candelario provides an important addition to the discussion, asking, what can dance studies methods reveal about ‘non-dance’ events? Candelario’s analysis focuses on the corporeal analysis of documentary film *Dave Chappelle’s Block Party*. Her analysis of the identities, movements, and transportation of bodies reveals the ways in which the film constructs and re-presents notions of community, race, and identity. Thomas DeFrantz’s genealogy of hip-hop in Hollywood film, Chih-Chieh Liu’s discussion of the intercultural construction of sexiness in Mandarin pop, and the examination of dance on TV talent shows from both Laura Robinson and Alexis A. Weisbrod also provide particularly insightful observations regarding the circulation, construction, and commodification of the dancing body.

The organization of the chapters into thematic sections is in some ways arbitrary, as many examples could exist in two or more of the categories. However, it provides a

necessary tool for navigating the extensive text, and the overlap between themes serves to demonstrate the “multi-layered meaning”⁷ of each of the case studies. The consideration of the dancing body in popular screen contexts enables the reader to comprehend the significance of the form on everyday experiences. Removed from the theater, and all of the connotations associated with ‘high’ art forms, dance is foregrounded as an activity through which social, political, and personal commentaries are constructed and revealed. Equally, the reader is led to think through the various value systems at play as the dancing body is presented as a product and agent of both cultural and economic capital.

Blanco Borelli’s introduction encourages readers to analyze the methodologies of the authors. She suggests paying attention to the ways that they identify and examine rhetorical strategies and utilize theoretical ideas.⁸ She encourages the use of key questions, such as “what is the body doing?” and “how is the body doing it?”⁹ thus imbuing in future scholars the necessity to put the form at the center of dance writing. The straightforward way that these ideas are articulated allow the reader to grasp how it is that the complex discussions that follow are constructed and may be stylistically and methodologically mimicked.

The result of this is that commonalities in each author’s approach become evident, allowing the reader to form a clear picture of how one might approach the analysis of dance in this context. For example, the role of rich description is evident throughout. The detailed way that the authors set the scene for the reader and describe specific movements will be particularly useful for students approaching formal writing about dance for the first time. Furthermore, the consideration of the camera, lighting, characterization, costume, narrative, and rhetorical devices are encouraged. The combination of dance studies methodologies with film and media analysis provides an important addition to the field. As students, scholars, and audiences increasingly engage with filmed dance, reliance on methods that focus solely on movement, or require the theorist to pretend they share space with the dancing bodies, do not allow for full or adequate engagement with the object of its study—which, after all, comprises the screen as an essential component. Acknowledging the screen however, makes the project of analysis more complex as the scholar must contend with layers of seeing. This is a theme that runs throughout the anthology, beautifully demonstrated in Mary Simonson’s description of the viewer watching characters secretly watching others, generating a complex form of voyeurism.

The concept of layering and the role of the spectator’s body play recurring roles throughout the book. Many chapters address the circulation and borrowing of dances, demonstrating temporal layering, as technology enables the viewer to reproduce and share their own versions of dances, marking a shift from receiver to performer and enabling constant circulation and reinvention. Furthermore, more subtle modes of bodily engagement are also discussed. The first chapter from Clare Parfitt-Brown

borrowing the notion of “prosthetic memory”¹⁰ to discuss the physical engagement of the spectator’s body and the way this facilitates the ability to remember an experience they did not have through mediated images. Stephanie L. Batiste’s ‘affect-ive’ reading of krump highlights the physical, and emotional impact of watching dance through the screen. These are important additions to the overall project of the book, as they serve to remind the reader that there are at least two bodies involved in the exchange that occurs when we observe dance. This framework places the book alongside discourses in cultural studies, which have shown an increased interest in the affective and kinaesthetic nature of perception. These discussions further demonstrate how in the case of dance such experiences are not limited to conventionally ‘live’ performance. The affective nature of movements serves an integral role in the way we experience dance, and the consideration of this has an important place in the development of new analytic frameworks.

Discussions of context also play a crucial role throughout the text. This seems to be of specific importance due to the circulation and re-contextualization of dance. For example, particularly interesting chapters from Harmony Bench and Philippa Thomas demonstrate how music videos have the potential to transcend geographical, political, and temporal constraints and accrue new significances. This means that the consideration of the relationship between the video and the context of their production, such as Takiyah Nur Amin’s insightful comparison between Beyoncé and the media’s treatment of Michelle Obama, highlights to future readers the initial socio-political relevance, providing a rigorous point of departure for future analyses.

It is hard to find serious ways to critique this work. It is clear, useful, interesting, and rich. One criticism might lie in the relatively narrow geographical spread of the case studies, which arise primarily from western culture. Although there are chapters that address examples from India and China, the collection is relatively western-centric and a wider range of cultural perspectives would have further added to the book. Similarly, I wonder if the consideration of more marginal types of screens might have contributed to the discussion. Blanco Borelli and Derek A. Burrill’s chapter on gaming makes moves towards this and made me think about the role of the dancing body in online art, apps, motion-capture and immersive screen contexts. Having said that, that the use of marginal examples for discussing popular forms might be paradoxical and this point is not really a criticism as much as an acknowledgement of how this book may pave the way for exploration of these areas. Overall, this is a welcome addition to the field. It serves to demonstrate the serious academic worth of popular dance, pose multiple avenues for further enquiry, and put forth an interdisciplinary and detailed framework for analyzing dance on screen, providing a very useful tool for teaching and scholarship.

Biography

Hetty Blades is a final year PhD student at Coventry University. Her research considers the ontology of dance works, and their reconfiguration through technology. She has worked as a visiting lecturer at Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance, Kingston University, Roehampton University and the University of East London. Hetty has published work in multiple contexts and was the 2014 recipient of the Ede and Ravenscroft Award for Academic Excellence.

Notes

¹ Dodds in Blanco Borelli, 446.

² Blanco Borelli, 1.

³ Ibid. 3-4.

⁴ Ibid. 2.

⁵ Ibid. 10.

⁶ Fogarty in Blanco Borelli, 84.

⁷ Blanco Borelli, 1.

⁸ Ibid. 15.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Parfitt-Brown in Blanco Borelli, 23.

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"Singin' in the Rain - Volkswagen TV Commercial (2005)." Perf. David 'Elsewhere' Bernal and Donnie 'Crumbs' Counts. 2005. *YouTube*.

Singin' in the Rain. Dir. Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly. Perf. Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, Debbie Reynolds. MGM. 1952.