

REVIEW ESSAY

Screendance: Yes, And...*Karen Pearlman*

Rosenberg, Douglas. *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image*. Oxford University Press. 232 pp. \$29.95.

"Yes, and..." is a warm up game played in improvisation classes. In it, one is required to say "yes" to every offer and build from it.¹ This game is not commonly played in academic circles or as part of the development of theory mostly because it is, by definition, uncritical, but also, in part, because academia is not that kind of game. It is necessary to block other arguments in order to win promotion or job security, critical authority or authorization as a spokesperson. I have never played "yes, and" with Douglas Rosenberg though (full disclosure) I do know him and have gone a few rounds of "yes, but" with him over the years. So I would like to propose a brief game of "yes, and" herein. Yes, Rosenberg has written a richly researched and considered book. Yes, he has explored a vein of historical and theoretical contextualization of screendance that urgently needed such attention. Yes. *And* there are other veins that also need to be explored before we can come to a comprehensive theoretical understanding of screendance. As long as Rosenberg's book is understood as one of a number of theoretical streams in this "polyvocal" discourse, it is a useful, energetic and informative call to action.

The 2006 "Screendance, State of the Art" conference convened by Douglas Rosenberg engaged in a robust discussion of names and sub-genres of screendance, which produced "a diagram of 3 overlapping disciplines: dance, cinema, and visual art. Unlike the typical result of these models, it was determined that the 'ideal' screendance production was not necessarily a mix of all 3. Rather, each approach and each overlap provided a way of comprehending a given work."² Rosenberg, who is a professor of art and who is trained in performance art and video art, champions this polyvocality in the consideration of screendance, but also seems, at some turns, to curtail it. His particular voice in the mix is one that speaks from the perspective of visual art discourses. He brings a visual art theory perspective to the tasks of: distinguishing between "media as a method for archiving and ... a site for art making" in Chapter One; choosing which "dancing bodies on screen" to contextualize within "significant esthetic and cultural movements" (9) in the *art* world in Chapter Two; and the choice of metaphor for describing his understanding of mediated dance in Chapter Five. It is also the underlying frame of reference for the general project of the book of locating screendance "within the larger frame of the visual arts" (13). The only issue to be taken with this perspective is when claims are made to "signify the richness and diversity of the history and practice of screendance" (13), to seek a hybrid theory arising from all three forms (cinema, dance and visual art). Any such claims are overwhelmed in *Screendance*:

Inscribing the Ephemeral Image by Rosenberg's focus on visual art as the frame through which he will theorize the work.

Given that frame, there are many aspects of Rosenberg's argument in *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* to which one can simply say "yes," others to which it seems important to declare "no." Ultimately, though, it is possible to affirm and endorse the underlying project of the book: to "initiate a theory that defines screendance, to open screendance up to further theorization" (13), *and* at the same time to note some of the key areas requiring this further theoretical exploration so that the understanding of screendance by academics, curators, practitioners, and audiences can develop the connoisseurship that Rosenberg champions.

"Yes"

Yes, "organizers, presenters, institutions and the academy must necessarily be activists, informed and informing consumers and disseminators of cultural product" (152). This statement refers to one of the strongest chapters of the book, Chapter Seven: "Curating the Practice/the Practice of Curating," on which I have scribbled "Yes!" in the margins on page after page. Chapter Seven offers a clear, concise, relevant, and important understanding of curatorial practice and its role and responsibilities to screendance at this moment in history. Chapter Eight follows this up with an argument for connoisseurship, which Rosenberg proposes relies on activist curating, and both of these—active curating and connoisseurship—require coherent theoretical frameworks on which to build expertise, perspective, and creativity. The project of all the preceding chapters is to create that coherent theoretical framework, or at least to incite discussion of it. If *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* does nothing more than catalyze a much-needed revolution in curatorial practice to create connoisseurship—whether by agreement or by opposition to the theoretical framework it proposes—it will have had a seminal influence on the art form, its ongoing development and practice, and its context, culture and ideas.

Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image will, of course, do more than this. It will position Rosenberg as the "site" of theory that engaged practitioners will have to either consciously embrace or refute through their own practices and theories. Even, or perhaps especially, practitioners who don't read the book will be judged and affected by Rosenberg's declared and undeclared frames of reference. The book will be a catalyzing force for arguments for years to come, and alternative theories of screendance will have to position themselves in argument with Rosenberg's. Perhaps this is just what screendance makers and theorists need—an argument to give focus to counter arguments. As such, I salute this project. I pay all due respect to the tremendous effort, erudition and body of knowledge Rosenberg's book represents. And thus I begin my arguments with it.

Many of my arguments with *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* are the result of not sharing a frame of reference with Rosenberg—his is steeped in the discourse of visual art and mine is steeped in the discourses of film and experience of the embodied theory of dance. One consequence of this clash is a reaction to Rosenberg's specific vocabulary, which I have to translate into terms that I would use in order to recognize the gist of his arguments. Chapter Six, "Excavating Genres," is an excellent example. Here Rosenberg describes a series of considerations a curator or critic could apply to analysis of a work (160).

These include consideration of: qualities of the work; contingencies that tether the work to the screen; "histories and theories that belong to the work in the process"; formal qualities of the rendering and the choreographic language; intent of the work; and content. While I have no major argument³ with this useful and coherent list of considerations, I struggle with Rosenberg's use of the term *genre*. Most of the things he calls "genres", e.g. movies, visual art, dance, dance for television, etc. (115), I would either call forms or apparatuses. I am much more comfortable, therefore, with the statement that "Screendance is a master category with numerous genres and sub-genres flowing from it" (117).

Similarly, following as I do cognitive film theory as articulated by David Bordwell, among others, my understanding is that a "narrative" is comprised of a series of events in a cause and effect chain.⁴ So most of what Rosenberg calls narrative I would call juxtaposition. These juxtapositions may provoke associations in the viewer's mind, but the associations described on pages 123–124 do not seem to be intended as a causal chain and therefore are not what I would call narratives.

For the most part these clashes of vocabulary can be overcome, with careful consideration of Rosenberg's intent, but not always.

"No"

As Rosenberg writes, "Critical discourse relies on language" (15). The rhetoric used when engaging in critical discourse is, therefore, significant. *Screendance: Inscripting the Ephemeral Image* is written with a recurring rhetorical device of using metaphor inside assertions. This use of metaphor diverts attention from assertions that cannot be substantiated, possibly making them poetic, but more likely simply making them inaccurate. Rosenberg makes liberal use of slippage into metaphor to ascribe psychology, even agency, to forms or objects that are not, in themselves sentient beings. Can screendance as a form "exhibit a desire" (152)? Curators, audiences, practitioners, and other sentient beings can desire and exhibit desires. Screendance, as a concept or a form, cannot. Rosenberg has a stated interest in positioning screendance inside the history and theory of visual art, and this rhetorical style may be common to visual art theory, but it obfuscates more than it reveals and excuses generalizations that would not otherwise be given credence. This slippage seems to occur most often when Rosenberg is tacitly passing judgment on an aesthetic or approach that falls outside of his own visual art driven interests. For example: "choreography tends to capitulate to the desires of cinema, to the desire to be narrative" (124). But cinema doesn't desire. Screendance makers desire. A desire to make use of narrative strategies (or even to make use of associative juxtapositions, which, as described above, Rosenberg conflates with narrative) is an informed choice, not a capitulation to a desire that is only metaphorically possessed by a material object. But the slippage of the possession of desire from sentient beings, making critically informed choices, to the metaphor that the material or concept of film itself "desires," allows Rosenberg to class people who work with narrative as capitulating, implying lack of informed creative judgment or artistic intent, without directly saying so, thus asserting something which cannot be substantiated but equally cannot be addressed in critical argument because its terms are slippery.

Similarly, film editors do not "hack," "jettison," or even "trash" recorded images. Ascribing such actions to the process of editing and shaping the flow of movement reads as an

accusation of violence and abuse that would, if understood as literal actions, be a source of distress to those practicing the creative art of filmmaking.

Perhaps the most dangerous of these slippages can be found, among other places, at the end of Chapter Nine when Rosenberg states somewhat self-contradictorily that "the camera is a carnivore" (170). This slippage makes an inanimate object bestial. Given that Chapter Nine is a culminating chapter, outlining Rosenberg's proposed theoretical framework and the chapters that have contributed arguments to its structure, it is worth responding to in some detail, particularly as my margin notes, which are scrawled on almost every page of my dog-eared review copy, alternate more rapidly between dispute and affirmation here than perhaps any other chapter.

"Yes, No, Yes, No"

Yes, screendance is simultaneously "conformative and performative" (155).

Yes, it moves beyond the "simple migration of dance from the stage" (155).

No, this is not necessarily, or even "often," "at odds with choreographic logic" (155), given that choreography may be conceptualized in any number of logics, including fragmented, mediated, or non-linear logics.

Yes to the theories of Noël Carroll, Sally Banes, and Arthur Danto and Rosenberg's application of them; his useful critiques of dance theory; and his brief statement about the uses of naming conventions in visual art (156–157).

No, screendance is not necessarily "equal parts moving image production and dance" (158). It may be extremely unequal for all kinds of reasons relating to intention and production circumstances.

Yes, screendance is "often" seen as "a product of dance" (158), particularly in the film or visual art contexts, though it is also often seen as a product of film or visual art when being discussed by dance makers, dance producers, or dance funding bodies, and hence actually occupies a tenuous position that needs strengthening in all three forms and their theoretical frames.

No, Richard James Allen and I do not propose that "screendance can be defined as 'stories told by the body'" (158). "Stories told by the body" is the descriptor we use for our work and our company, The Physical TV Company. It is a phrase that refers to some of the provenance, genre and intentions of our own work. As a descriptor it could be applied elsewhere, if useful, but only makes sense when applied to dancefilms⁵ that intentionally explore narrative form.

Yes, "it is the screendance director's central challenge to grasp Merleau Ponty's ideas about kinesthetic sensation and Martin's metakinesis" (160).

No, I don't see how Rosenberg can possibly have been in enough screendance making scenarios other than his own to substantiate the claim that "the act of making a screendance often becomes ritualistic." Perhaps he means *his* process of making screendance often becomes ritualistic? The series of claims qualified by "often" on pages 160 and 161 perhaps also warrant wider research data.

Yes, the camera may be "a prosthetic for seeing" (162), though Rosenberg could acknowledge his debt to Dziga Vertov's notion of the Kino-Eye for this thought, thus situating his own theories in closer dialogue with film and film theory.⁶

No, to say that a work of screendance "perpetuates Mulvey's notion of the male gaze in its often-sexualized depictions of women" (164) is to misunderstand the point that film theorist Laura Mulvey makes in her controversial 1975 paper. Mulvey's argument, as quoted by Rosenberg, is that in Hollywood narrative films, women's "visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (163). However, it is important to note that screendance does not necessarily use the formal devices of Hollywood storytelling to which Mulvey refers. In fact, screendance is often not narrative and even when it is, it is rarely primarily so—it more often favors moments of contemplation (erotic or otherwise) of the body or image in motion, rather than the development of a causal chain of a narrative, as its primary meaning making experience⁷. Thus Mulvey's concern about contemplation "working against the development of a storyline" is irrelevant, even contradictory to the form.

No, to say that screendance "perpetuates the notion of the male-gaze even in films made by women" (163) is not simply incorrect, it is *wrong*. Yes, women filmmakers may frame women, and men, and water, and mud, and so on and so on erotically, but that does not make their gaze, or that of their female audiences, "male."

Finally, no, "the camera is not a carnivore" (170), it is a recording device or even a prosthetic for seeing. To assert that it is categorically a carnivore denies the potential of Rosenberg's own proposition that screendance is, or could be, "a site for a kind of *liberated* body" (169). If a screendance will necessarily involve a camera and if the carnivorous camera consumes the body, well, how then can the body be liberated? The proposition that screendance may be a site for a liberated body is more useful to the development of creative practice and connoisseurship than the slipped metaphor which suggests that it cannot be.

"Yes. And..."

As noted above, Douglas Rosenberg's stated intention is to locate screendance within the "larger frame of visual arts"(13). Yes. And...there is an equally rich vein of creativity and theorizing in cinema that would strengthen this book's claim for an inclusive theory of screendance. By repeatedly characterizing cinema as "spectacle" and "entertainment" and aligning this characterization with Yvonne Rainer's puritanical manifesto against spectacle (143), Rosenberg limits the potential of his critical discourse on screendance to advance connoisseurship. Equating cinema as a whole with spectacle or entertainment is like equating art as a whole with prettiness or decoration. Where is this framework's reference to the cinema movements that have been so influential both on art and on screendance? Where is the discussion of the influence of Soviet Montage⁸ on kinesthetic filmmaking; of German Expressionism on fantastical spaces and bodies; of Italian Neorealism on the long take, the use of non-professionals and real places; of the poetic, associative and philosophical filmmaking of the French "Left Bank"; of *Cinéma vérité* and the act of observation; of reflexive documentary and documentary hybrids that would have a fascinating intersection with Marcel Duchamp's notion of the "readymade" (95); of the cinematic images of memory, time and space created by artists such as Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Alain Resnais, and Marguerite Duras; of the contemporary developments in "subjective realism" that radically challenge cinematic form;⁹ and so on?

Given these absences, perhaps what is needed is another book, an "and" to *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image*. Rosenberg provides a useful resource for understanding, analyzing, and extending the creative practice of screendance, one that has its provenance in visual art or overlaps with the concerns of visual art more so than with the concerns of cinema. As such, this book is an outstanding contribution to theorizing the form. Each chapter provides some "forensic evidence" (47) of the overlapping frameworks of selected screendance works and the visual arts. In the end, Rosenberg "maps out a new territory for pedagogy inclusive of the histories of the visual arts" (11) and, though he does not do the same for cinema driven screendance,¹⁰ he succeeds for visual art driven screendance in providing a resource for academics, practitioners, and curators to "blend the legacies of the historical and contemporary practice of screendance into the canons of both dance and visual arts" (180).

Notes

1. See Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*.
2. See Pearlman, "A dance of definitions." See also: <http://www.dancefilm.co.uk/about/about-screendance> and <http://movetheframe.wordpress.com/2009/05/20/creating-a-lexicon-for-screendance/> among other citations for this taxonomy.
3. Though I would add "intended affect on audience" under intent, as this is a key determinant in film, of genre, and of formal qualities.
4. See Bordwell and Thompson, "Narrative as a Formal System."
5. "Dancefilm" is the preferred designation for the sub-genre of screendance that draws its lineage from film practices rather than visual art practices, and notably as a designation it is absent from the entire book. This is also notable given that it is used in one of the key existing texts in screendance theory: *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*, by Erin Brannigan.
6. See Vertov, *Kino-Eye*.
7. Further, screendance is not definitively "voyeuristic" cinema, which is the subject of Mulvey's paper. For a discussion of the difference between voyeuristic and exhibitionist cinema and the different ways in which these two types position the spectator's "gaze" see Pearlman, "If a dancer falls."
8. There is a reference to Sergei Eisenstein on page 59 that attributes Eisenstein's extraordinarily prolific insights on the nature of film and cinema to the influence of Cubism, which was influential, but not formatively so, unlike, among other things, Eisenstein's work with the theories of physical theatre practitioner Vsevolod Meyerhold.
9. See Campora, *Subjective Realist Multiform Cinema*.
10. Chapter Two, "Mediated Bodies: From Photography to Cine-dance," is Rosenberg's most substantial nod to cinema and it confines itself to early cinema and Charlie Chaplin before claiming the Surrealists and Maya Deren as visual artists and moving on to video art.

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