

Moving Across Time with Words: Toward An Etymology of Screendance

Ann Dils

One of the analytic strategies that Martin Heidegger uses in his 1954 essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” is etymological investigation. Thinking about the origins of words not only compels us to wonder about the environments in which words arise, but their changing meanings in varied times and places, and the assumptions that underlie our own discourse. Heidegger does this with the Greek root of “technology,” *technē*, reconnecting the word to “the activities and skills of the craftsman [and] for the arts of the mind and the fine arts.”¹ Referencing Aristotle, Heidegger links *technē* to *episteme*—knowing—and distinguishes *technē* as a particular kind of knowing: a “bringing-forth.” Technology, then, “comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment takes place, where *aletheia*, truth, happens.”² This is tremendously affirmative for people involved in screendance, and a useful corrective to writers and other members of the dance community (including myself) who have worried that technology covers over the living presence of the dancing body. In fact, in an essay on the 1999 *Ghostcatching* collaboration between Paul Kaiser, Shelley Eshkar, and Bill T. Jones entitled *Absent/Presence*, I initially resisted the idea that we could effectively “capture” a person’s movement identity through technology. I now think that we need to move past the dichotomy of immediate live presence versus denatured representation and begin to think about how screendance impacts our perceptions of bodies, movement, and space. It is important to note, however, that “screendance” isn’t synonymous with “technology,” and that there are further histories to account for in this compound word. Might an etymological investigation of “screendance” tell us something more?

According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the words “screen” and “dance” come from late Medieval France.³ “Screen” as a noun (*escren*) stems from the late fourteenth century, and was associated with firescreens: flat, protective covers that helped disperse heat and light and shield people from flying sparks and exploding logs. “Screen” as a verb meaning “to shield from punishment, to conceal” is also a late medieval usage. Screen as the wire mesh object that sits in a window or door is from the late nineteenth century. Associations with film—screen as a projection space, and terms like screenplay and screen test—are from the early twentieth century. Although the origin of the word is uncertain, “dance” (*dancier*) as noun and verb came into prominent usage in late 1300s France and spread across Europe. Initially, it suggested the fashionable, early court dances of the period, as opposed to folk dances, which continued to be referred to by older, more place-specific names. The stature of French arts and culture eventually made dance the preferred term across many languages.

Interestingly enough, the words “screen” and “dance” came into common usage as Europeans moved into the Renaissance. Greek and Latin texts were re-discovered and

through the influence of ancient thought, people began to understand themselves differently, moving away from religion and toward humanism with its emphases on secular life and individual thought and discovery. Both words suggest the employment of technologies to facilitate intellectual, social, and artistic experiences and stimulate ideas, or, echoing Heidegger, as means of revealing. Firescreens had to do with safety, but also with moderating the light in a room, helping people to see the books made more broadly available through Gutenberg's new printing process. Court dance was a means of personal refinement and a political tool. Like screendance today, court dance employed the latest technologies (in clothing design and movement training as opposed to digital technologies) and, through the technologies of print and travel, helped disperse new practices in social and art dance.

In the early twenty-first century (for some the beginnings of posthumanism), screen and dance are nested together as "screendance." No longer an adaptation of live dance to the screen, screendance is its own art form with interconnections to many contemporary arts practices, among them feature films, documentaries, art films, computer games, and digital installations. Early well-known works such as *Ghostcatching* and the Cunningham/Kaiser/Eshkar collaboration *Hand-drawn Spaces* (1998), are now joined by Akram Kahn and Rachel Davies's *Loose in Flight*, and projects such as David Michalek's *Slow Dancing* and Ohio State University/William Forsythe *Synchronous Objects*. The etymologies of "screen" and "dance" help me think about this more recent history more richly. While screendance is an art experience created for a particular space, it is also a means of restructuring our experience of screens and our perceptions of dancing.

I return to *Ghostcatching*, watching excerpts of it on the website of the new digital design group that Eshkar and Kaiser formed with Marc Downie, called OpenEnded Group.⁴ What truth is brought forth as I watch *Ghostcatching* in 2011? Am I aware that perceptual concerns have filtered into, or out of, my understanding of the work? Once my primary concern was with virtual space as a representation of real space, with how the hand-drawn, multicolored ghosts of Bill T. Jones echo live experiences of his dancing. Representations of the body's responses to gravity and to "the floor" were special concerns. Now I am more interested in watching the bodies as they inhabit the screen. In an opening sequence, one of the ghosts seems to push the edge of the screen, dancing out of its frame. Then the screen seems to shift, readjusting to reframe the ghost. Then there is a kind of gracious acknowledgement of this accommodation with the ghost pausing to lift its face towards the top of the screen as a hand reaches just to another edge. At other points, the ghost seems to hang from the top of the screen. The designer has created a duet between body and movement, space and frame. What's important? Top, bottom, or edge? The frame as enclosure or as opening to infinite space? The arms and head inscribe the space; the legs and pelvis, once my focus as indicators of the body's fight with gravity, are barely noticed. The absence of the real filters out or at least shifts over, as virtual space—as created by artists; as recreated through perception—filters in and becomes more present.

At several points a large ghost just begins to fade from view as a new ghost appears. I get a sense of depth from this, but it also makes me aware of a perceptual habit that perhaps I've always had, but have not articulated. Ghosts of other performances, and of images and ideas from many mediums and experiences, are perceived in and contribute to the meanings of dances. But dances are also self-referential, and I find myself keeping

aspects of dances in memory, reviewing them even as the dance moves forward. Through this filtering process, the development of a dance takes shape and I begin to understand the implications of its rhythmic and spatial patterns, movement motifs, and performances. By keeping older images present, even as new images emerge, *Ghostcatching* reveals what I've been doing all along: constructing the "truth" of dances out of the previously and the currently seen.

In 1999 I saw the interactive mediation of screens in *Ghostcatching* as an example of how technology covers over the live presence of a dancing body. For me at the time, the screen veiled an important truth—the weightiness of movement. Over a decade later, I see the same technology as a sort of filter (what Heidegger describes as "enframing") that helps me become aware of my own process of seeing movement, both on and off the screen. Reading "The Question Concerning Technology" makes me wonder whether this change in my perception is due to the omnipresence of screens and their role in changing how I see dance, or due to technology's ability to reflect and refract my own habits. This conundrum—am I a slave to technology, or is it liberating?—is the double-edged sword that Heidegger delineates in his essay. At the end of his writing, Heidegger suggests that we can't readily resolve these questions: "Yet the more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes."⁵ In thinking through the implications of technology in screendance, including through etymological investigation and by looking again and again, we can follow Heidegger's path of questioning in order to arrive at better questions and new "truths."

References

- Dils, Ann. "Absent/ Presence." *Moving History/ Dancing Cultures*. Edited by A. Dils and A.C. Albright. Hanover, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001. 462–72.
- Downie, Marc, Shelley Eshkar and Paul Kaiser. *OpenEndedGroup*. <http://openendedgroup.com/>. August 27, 2011.
- Heidegger, Martin. "The Question Concerning Technology." *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translated by W. Lovitt. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977. 3–35.
- Online Etymology Dictionary*. Compiled by Douglas Harper. 2001–2010. <http://www.etymonline.com/>. August 12, 2011.

Notes

1. Heidegger, "The Question," 13.
2. *Ibid.*, 13.
3. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com/>.
4. See <http://openendedgroup.com/>.
5. Heidegger, "The Question," 35.