How Screendance Was Invented While We Were Busy Claiming It Wasn't[1]

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Abstract

Many screendance authors seem to worry about the marginalized state of the practice and its lack of a solid scholarly discourse. This leitmotif goes against my perception of screendance as one of the fastest growing fields in dance, both in practice and theory. This short provocation considers some reasons for this feeling of lack and, by juxtaposing them with reflections on the advent of new institutionalized courses in screendance, invites us to revise our perception of the field. Screendance has finally reached a critical mass of works and research to 'stand by itself.'

Keywords: essence, history, institutionalization, scholarly discourse

While reading about screendance I cannot but notice a constant preoccupation. Many authors deplore the marginalized state of the practice and its lack of a solid scholarly discourse. If in early texts the complaints were vaguely formulated as a lack of outlets, works and artists, in later texts, they become very precise such as the necessity to define genres in moving-picture dance expressed by Nöel Carroll in 2000, to Douglas Rosenberg's 2010 advocacy for excavating screendance genres closely or, also Rosenberg in 2016, the need for more cohesion in a diasporic and globally spread like-minded community.[2] This leitmotif, this feeling of lack, goes against my perception of screendance as one of the fastest growing fields in dance, both in practice and theory. On the practical side, there is a growing artists population, an ever increasing number of screendance festivals with associated competitions, platforms inside dance festivals but also outside the dance field, commissions, and last autumn the first MA solely dedicated to screendance started at the London School for Contemporary Dance.[3] On the theoretical side, there are several publications such as a dedicated journal, several articles in other academic journals and a growing number of conferences. With all of this, how can screendance still be lacking something?

The reply to this question is in fact complex and entails answering the implicit question behind the French film critic André Bazin's argument, exposed in a 1967 article, that "cinema has not been invented yet" concerning the essence of cinema. A variation on the theme ("Screendance has yet to be invented") is also at the origins of a box in a box game with the titles of several screendance articles, alongside IJSD's very first issue that

was explicitly "dedicated to the proposal that Screendance has not yet been invented."[4] In his 1967 article, Bazin tried to trace the ideas that inspired the early initiators of film at the end of the nineteen-century and concluded that cinema's invention was due to their obsession with reproducing reality. Thus, the ideal of cinema, its essence, should be the perfect rendition of reality, or total cinema.[5] Bazin's speculations about early filmmaking have been challenged by, among others, the Latvian film critic Yuri Tsivian. Tsivian's main argument against Bazin is, based on a reflection by Yuri Lotman, that early film was associated, at least for its early viewers, with theatre conventions. The early film enthusiasts might have chased an ideal of realism and of the total event, but the audience's perception was another, namely that of assisting to a new kind of theatre performance.[6] Transposing this discourse to screendance: no one in the field would argue that their works strive for a mimetic reproduction of reality. Thus, questioning screendance's invention, as in the first issue of IJSD, rather indicates the general sensation by those involved that the field has yet to exhaust practical and theoretical possibilities (besides the question relating to its essence and origin). It is possible to argue that up until now screendance needed to reach a critical mass of works and research to 'stand by itself'. My feeling is that a hypothetical confirmation of screendance's invention would mean having found an answer to the question (or rather a host of questions) on screendance's essence and origin, such as "when was screendance earliest instance and how would this knowledge influence our sense of what a dance film is?."[7] Possibly, as Rosenberg argues in "Excavating genres" (2010), authorial intention is an important element in determining the genre of a work, and thereby its historic lineages. So, in this light, doesn't the existence of an MA dedicated to screendance point to the field's independence?[8] But also, that some of these questions about screendance's essence and origin have been at least partially answered?

The MA hosted at the London School of Contemporary Dance and validated by Kent University, advertises to be 'a place' for students to delve into screendance. This course and program is to be celebrated—we are finally able to have such a dedicated space— but it is also invites a slightly uneasy reflection. My intuitive reaction, especially having read so many voices pointing to lacks in the screendance panorama, was: do we finally know enough of what screendance is in order to teach it? Teaching surely does not requires a complete understanding of a field, which is by definition an impossible task, but rather the feeling to have reached Rosenberg's envisioned critical mass of "literature framing screendance as a practice."[9] Has this critical mass been reached? We all have the impression it finally has, at least in the English speaking countries. However, I worry that there is a risk of institutionalizing the field and an aesthetic. In fact, Rosenberg cautions about a premature historicization and institutionalization of screendance as possibly "curtailing its forward motion," that the creative exploration of a field that might be too difficult to do once in an academic setting.[10] What consequences might this have on the economy of screendance as it is known? Will there still be places for

Chirstinn Whyte's 'amateurs'; those artists who despite no professional training in digital media have greatly contributed to the development of experimental films and screendance?[11] Or will people in the far or near future need such a qualification to work in the field (i.e. to participate in festivals and in the theoretical discourse)? Whyte rightly points to the great hybridity of today's "contemporary professional identities" that often are "translated into a mixture of highly specialist professional dance training and experience, combined with self-taught experimentation in the field of digitized moving images," and Rosenberg rightly underlines the fact that screendance is "for many a small part of a larger engagement in the arts."[12]

Today, there is no question about the importance of technologies or of the analysis of the mediated body (or recorporealised body). As Melissa Blanco Borrelli states, media have become so pervasive that for many the screen substitutes the stage as a first encounter with dance.[13] For several artists, media have also become the tool of choice to express what cannot be expressed through movement and choreography on stage. Screendance might no longer be in the uncharted territory of the early days described by Whyte and others, but there are still plenty of possibilities for new research and practices. Bit by bit, screendance has been invented while we were busy claiming it hadn't.

Biography

With a background in modern dance and ballet (Ballet Arts, NYC) and in Literature and Linguistics (MA English Studies, Zurich University), Katja Vaghi is a Swiss dancer, choreographer, dance researcher and somatic technique teacher, who alternates theoretical reflections in written form to practical musing in the rehearsal space. She holds a PhD from the University of Roehampton in dance philosophy with a dissertation on intermedial and intertextual references to the Baroque in Jiří Kylián's works. Her areas of interest are the relation between theories developed for language and dance, with particular attention to the role of embodiment in understanding, and humour in dance. She works as a freelance dancer and choreographer, and is guest lecturer at the Rambert School for Ballet and Contemporary Dance. She was the recipient of the Selma Jeanne Cohen Award 2014 offered by SHDS for the best postgraduate article.

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Notes

[1] This is a shorter version of a provocation given at the Screendance Landscape symposium hold at the Università IUAV of Venice in 16th - 17th April 2018. The title refers to the first issue of The International Screendance Journal—"Screendance has not yet been invented"—published in the spring of 2010 which is a variation on the title of a lecture given by Professor Ian Christie at Brighton University, in September 2009 for the Screendance Network (2009 – 2011). This last variation is an adaptation of a lecture Christie gave 2006 for the Slade Lecture Series at the University of Cambridge. Christie's presentation in turn refers to the French film theorist André Bazin's famous article "The Myth of Total Cinema" published in 1967.

[2] A reprint of Carroll's article can be found in the first edition of The International Screendance Journal, which also contains Rosenberg's article "Excavating genres" on the importance of genres in screendance appreciation, where he describes screendance as a "nascent academic form" (63). The last part is paraphrased from Rosenberg's introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*. However more examples can be found in the editorial comment of the first edition of The International Journal of Screeendance where Rosenberg and Claudia Kappenberg conclude that "This expansion in both exhibition and conference opportunities for screendance has not, however, been matched by an equivalent growth in written theorization, and there has been no dedicated forum for ongoing publication and dissemination of critical texts" (2). Carroll's letter, (also in the first volume), follows in the same tone "Although motion-picture dance is a thriving and exciting art form, it does not garner the respect it deserves. The reasons for this are primarily institutional. […] it has not yet had its great critical voice […]" (5), and Ann Cooper Albright concludes "Ideally, I would be able to point to a recent screendance that realized a vision of falling that was both suspended and grounded. But that screendance has not yet been invented" (26). In his following 2012 publication, *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image*, Rosenberg argues "The twin trends of festival screenings and streaming video sites tend to operate within social spaces that avoid critical analysis, and as such have helped to defer the possibilities of an emergence from prolonged adolescence into 'adulthood,' as well as the kind of deep reflection that comes with such and evolution" (154). He also paints an unfavorable academic situation by saying "In order to consider the place of screendance in the academy, institutions must first clarify their rationale for its inclusion" (172). Lastly, in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies* edited by Rosenberg and published in 2016, Christinn Whyte argues for "the emergence of screendance as a recognised form (63) and Roger Copeland argues "Despite the fact that we live in an age of theory, screendance remains relatively undertheorized" (230). I have found similar arguments previous to 2010—such as Sherill Dodds in the introduction to *Dance on Screen: Genre and Media*

from Hollywood to Experimental Art who claims, "Unfortunately, at the present there is a lack of scholarly writing on the subject" (xi), or Claudia Rosiny, who wishes for a more in depth analysis of screendance works so to develop dance research (184)—but I feel these earlier comments are justified by the historical context.

[3] Other universities in the UK also offer screendance modules in their graduate and postgraduate programmes. These are generally single modules that the students have to complete along other theoretical and/or practical modules. The MA offered by the London School for Contemporary Dance is solely about screendance theory and practice.

[4] Rosenberg and Kappenberg, "Screendance: The Practice in Print," 3.

[5] A similar argument is brought forward by Nicolas Salazar Sutil and Sebastian Melo in their article "Exposed to Time: Cross-histories of human motion visualization from Chrono- to Dynamophotography" in Rosenberg's *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*. They connect the development of photography and film (as we know it today), to ideas about movement expressed in ancient Greece, and more precisely in Zeno of Elea and Aristotle. These ideas have put a framework to the way of thinking about and subsequently capturing movement—where movement is seen as sequences of stills.

[6] The audience found it startling that the background moved rather than the object in the front.

[7] In his article, Christie seems to want to detach the history of film from that of technical inventions when he argues discarding the mechanical and digital eye that Cambodian shadow theatre, as an example of projected entertainment, can be also considered as a precursor to film. Following this logic, the works containing dances such as the Tayungan or Bima's victorius dance, or Cakil's dance before the battle, or punakawan (clown) dances could also be seen as early instances of screendance. I find this argument particularly appealing as pointing to a history of ideas, of a specific way of seeing and perceiving the world. Seeing screendance in this broader light, helps to take distance almost bypassing Ann Dills' question "Am I slave to technology, or is it liberating?" Considering Cambodian shadow theatre as antecedent to screendance would surely include works that now are not necessarily considered screendance.

[8] Single modules at BA and MA level, even if very comprehensive, can only cover a reduced and condensed amount of material and are limited in scope. A PhD, on the other hand, specializes on one aspect of a field, analyzing it in depth and usually does not offer a general bird's eye view. My understanding is that the MA at The Place focuses solely on dance and screens.

[9] Rosenberg, *Screendance*, 176.

[10] Idem, 175.

[11] Two early figures Whyte indicates as 'amateurs' are Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage. Whyte's discourse rotates around the dissolution of the notions of "amateur practice—undertaken as a pastime or hobby, and set apart from notions of commercial gain or career advancement" and that of professional practice "set apart by specialist knowledge, and financially recompensed for labor" (7).

[12] Idem 10, and Rosenberg, *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, 12.

[13] Blanco Borelli, *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*.

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