Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image, by Erin Brannigan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance, by Susan Leigh Foster (New York: Routledge, 2011)

By Amanda Card

If it is possible to liken these two books to each other, beyond their obvious thematic correlation as texts within the broad field of dance studies, one could say they are both about words: their creation, their definition, their history and their meaning-making in relation to our reception and understanding of motion. Both books are by authors interested in a contemporary relationship between dancing (or organised movement), the use and reworking of theories through which to explore those actions, and the exploration and invention of words and terms that help us understand what might be going on when people make, watch and talk about people moving – on and off the screen.

Dr. Erin Brannigan, head of the dance program at the School of Arts and Media at the University of NSW, has made a name for herself as a theoretician, promoter and producer of dance on/for/in film. As a curator/director her eclectic eye ranged across this developing form throughout the first decade of this century. She exposed Australian audiences to the variety that was possible in this form under the umbrella of ReelDance, the organisation and its festival of the same name. Her book *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* continues in this instruction.

Hers is a rigorous, eclectic take on the subject: a technical, historical and aesthetic exploration of the influences, creative actions, interpretation, particularities and legacies of dance on and for the screen. Her temporal reach is wide, the whole of the 20th century and into the 21st, beginning with the collaboration of dance and film in the turn of the centuries' cinematic and movement experimentation, working through the mid 20th century with Maya Deren, the Hollywood musical and the postmodern challenges of Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown, and on into the contemporary film-making of artists that include Cara van Gool, Miranda Pennell and Mahalya Middlemist.

The great strength of Brannigan's scholarship is that she gives no preeminence to the dancerly or the filmic in her analysis. She explores and explains the impact of particularly successful films as a gestalt, represented by her suturing of two words to name her object of study: *dancefilm*. She challenges habits of scholarship wherein 'a false binary setting live dance against filmed dance, participation against observation' is featured (13). Her intention is not to deny the validity of corporeal presence of the live but to consider the special case of presence in dancefilm. In so doing she feels compelled to (re)utilise words and phrases that are 'in keeping with the radical practices found across the generic breadth and historical depth of the field' (8). We are offered the umbrella term *cine-choreographic*, the operations of

which occur 'where we see choreographic elements written through by the cinematic apparatus' (11). Some of these include *micro-choreographies*, where the close-up allows for choreographic action to be 'taken up by small movements diffused across a corporeal surface' (152), or *gestural anacrusis*, Brannigan's term for 'the activity that occurs between stimulus and movement, or one movement and the other' (133). These terms are successfully developed and utilised throughout the book in an accumulative fashion, so by the time we reach Chapter 6, 'The Musical: Moving into the Dance', my favourite chapter, Brannigan can convincingly argue that the whole corporeal repertoire of the musical star, from dance to quotidian action and back again, drives some of the best films in this genre. Consider this analysis of Bob Fosses' work for Liza Minnelli in *Cabaret* (1972) where Brannigan uses another of her terms: *idiogest*.

> Minelli's screen performance in *Cabaret* is not so much engaging our anticipation of dancerly excess as constantly mobilizing this potential. I have argued that the Hollywood dance musical is dominated and characterized by the gestural parameters of the star's idiogest. That idiogest is marked by the star's dancerly capacity to exceed the demands of utility, mobilizing the excess "vigour," "suppleness", and "articular and muscular possibilities" that we as humans possess. This capacity or potential enables the star to negotiate the anacrusis – the often awkward point between performance modalities – and move into action from everyday to the exceptional corporeal behavior of that dancing entails […]; actions carried out in the service of the plot often pulse with a barely contained urge to move into the dance [and] in musicals such as *Cabaret*, this barely contained impulse breaks into almost every scenario in the film through the body of the star". (160)

Liza Minelli, as Sally Bowles – dancing with a chair at the Kit Kat Club, flirting with Michael York's character Brian Roberts, screaming at the top of her lungs under a bridge as a train rattles overhead – are moments used in the service of this analysis and Brannigan's oscillation between description and theorisation works well throughout the book.

Brannigan is also extremely catholic in her choice of theoreticians. Her consummate grasp on the work of philosophers, social theorists and practitioners across diverse areas mean that she can comfortably mix philosopher/theorists such as Béla Baláz, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard, with theoretician/practitioners like François Delsarte, Maya Deren and Yvonne Rainer. She utilises all these in service of her larger task: to create the means of talking/writing/thinking about the impact and significance of what is going on when we watch dancefilms.

Another great plus in this book are the little symbols throughout the text, which indicate moments when the reader can exchange reading for watching. Oxford University Press provides a password-protected site, where some of the dancefilms Brannigan discusses can be seen, or links to other sites are provided.

Occasionally dense, this book does offer the patient reader the tools through which to understand its content. Its best moments, moments worth persevering for, occur when the theoretical tools you have acquired, with the author's help, burst out into the practical examples and make those examples live (again) with a new focus.

Like Brannigan's, Susan Leigh Foster's reach in her book *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* is wide and deep. This University of California (Los Angeles) based scholar is a key academic voice in the world of English-language dance literature. Foster's books and essays have charted the history of analytic influences in the field of dance studies since the 1980s. When you hear that Foster has published a new piece of writing, you can assume that the topic she has turned to is at the zenith of its interest within, and affect on, dance scholarship across continents. This latest book is no exception.

There has been a long interest amongst dance scholars and some dance makers in phenomenology, sometimes with 'existential' added as a prefix. The johnny-come-lately companion (or competitor) to this mode of thinking about the experience of being in the presence of performance has been neuroscience. Branches of both fields are interested in perception and reception. Phenomenology has offered theoretical valorisation for what dancers (and many other professional movers) take for granted: the notion that our world is known to us through embodied habitation and habituation. The discovery of mirror neurons ('monkey-see-monkey-do' neurons) has been an exciting development for some performance theorists, as the burgeoning of funded research, conferences and publications that link performance and neuroscience illustrates. This interest is fuelled to some extent by the validation an association with a science can offer a field of practice and research that suffers from exclusion (real or imagined) from dominance in the academy. But the interest is also pedagogic and dramaturgical: if action stimulates empathy (in our bodies and between our bodies) then watching others doing can stimulate empathy – which is a highly desirable quality to encourage in humans. Theatre, as the penultimate 'seeing place', is the perfect location, so the argument goes, for studying the stimulation of empathy in watchers; and if you find can out what watchers respond to (empathise with) in the theatre, then performance makers can understand how to give the watcher what they want/need in order to feel and enjoy the performance, or to empathise with the work kinesthetically, to use the words investigated in Foster's book. Of course some choreographers find this last notion ludicrous. Gideon Oberzanek's *Wanted: Ballet for a Contemporary Democracy* (2002) offered at least one highly entertaining commentary on where such an interest might lead us: down the choreography-by-numbers path, where dance makers stick as many big leaps (*grand jetes*) and turns (*pirouettes*) in their pieces because these are the actions that people, when surveyed, said they enjoyed.

In *Choreographing Empathy*, Foster takes three key words in this burgeoning relationship between dance and neuroscience – choreography, empathy and kinesthesia – and explores their etymology. In the process she historicises the move

from the science to the social science, from a functional explanation of what is going on to how we engage with these ideas in the world. Foster offers her reading of the way new findings in neuroscience, and the use of them in dance/performance studies, seem to support a belief that there is a 'natural or spontaneous connection between the dancing body and the viewer's body' (2). *Choreographing Empathy* takes, as its point of departure, the assumptions inherent in both a dancer's notion of empathy (often supported by the use of philosophical writings) and the scientist's faith in the revelatory potential of their craft (supported by neurological exploration and explanation). Foster argues that kinaesthesis is 'a designated way of experiencing physicality and movement that […] summons other bodies into a specific way of feeling towards it' (2). In other words, and true to her historian and poststructuralist roots, she ascertains that notions related to the revelatory nature of a relationship between kinesthesia, empathy and choreography are temporal, cultural constructions like any other. Foster makes clear, through her forensic etymology that these three words (and therefore the things/feelings/experiences they describe) have changed over three centuries. For her 'dance practices have been aligned with rather than isolated from other forms of cultural and knowledge production, including anatomy and medicine, cartography, etiquette and social comportment, and physical education' (12,13), and these forms 'function collectively to establish a specific conception of the body and its parts and to organise protocols of shaping and fashioning the body and training its movements' (13). As her book unpacks: 'experience of the body, its movement and its location […] sets the limits and conditions within which an empathetic connection to another can emerge. […] Choreography, kinaesthesia, and empathy function together to construct corporeality in a given historical and cultural moment' (13). She is very wary of universalising claims that there is an empathic kinesthesia made possible by organised motion (choreography) of any kind: everything, well everything that we can know and understand, is in/of culture.

The breadth of Foster's research is astonishing. The bibliography ranges over time and disciplines, and her text offers fascinating temporal hurdles. One of my favourites is in the section 'Kinesthesia' which builds on her exploration of the relationship between changing understandings of geography (through mapping), anatomy and choreography. In a subsection, 'From Hardening to Picturing', Foster begins by highlighting the influence of Galenic models of the body from antiquity, translated into a 1581 text on physical training for children by Richard Mulcaster, moves onto John Locke's explanation of the benefits of exercise (circa 1693), through a reference to Leonardo Da Vinci's drawings, then to *Orthopaedia* (1741) by Nicolas Andry, on to Eramus Darwin (1797) and David Walker's (1830-1860) texts on physical education. This eleven page section ends with a brief summery of the intentions and expectations of Per Henrik Ling's gymnastics exercises – all this in the service of a developing argument about the historical contingency of the idea/the naming of the sensation(s) could be called kinesthesia. Not all of this is primary research, much is gleaned from secondary sources, but the range of Foster's research net is so wide that it boggles the mind.

But this is to be expected. Susan Leigh Foster is, among other things, a historian. She is suspicious, as we all should be, of never-before-thought-of(s) that sometimes accompany contemporary scholarship. In keeping with her interest in historicity, she notes that choreography, for example, 'began its life as the act of reconciling movement, place, and printed symbol'. During the early 1700s authors such as Feuillet and Essex 'saw no opposition between the written and the live, nor did they lament the potential loss of some aspect of movement that might not be documentable. (This sentimental notion of documentation emerges more in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries)' (17). In the early 1800s choreography becomes a word to describe the process of constructing a dance (40). Then it was 'as if the geometry in which the dancer had been located [in the 1700s] was […] absorbed into the body and capable of being reproduced through the correct movement of the limbs' (40).

Foster's final chapter 'Choreographing empathy' roars into being. We skate past San Francisco's multiculturalism (from the Jewish Museum, past the Martin Luther fountain and a pow wow in a park) through concern for our earth in crisis 'disrupted, fractured and probably permanently compromised', the death of the book, to a claim that 'choreography and empathy are very present in discourse constituting the body politic' (174). But we settle on, what for me is a more localised and interesting question (for dance in the very least and perhaps for the burgeoning world of embodied theories more generally): what is it in/about the nature of us that has us 'claiming to feel what another body is feeling?' (175) In the service of this question Foster recounts the temporal and locational specificity of her three terms over her three chapters, and summarises how her book 'excavates the genealogies of meanings associated with choreography, kinesthesias, and empathy in order to show how the histories of classification of difference that such meanings encompass bear down on the present.'

Some of the material that appears in this book has been rehearsed in other essays written by Foster since 2005, but this should not put off the prospective reader. It just confirms the intellectual consistency to which I referred earlier. Foster's new book is a welcomed cautionary text, in what can sometimes feel like a series of pathological rushes toward the intellectual embracing of the latest philosophic, or literary, or scientific discourse that promises validation of the import of movement (and therefore of dancing) in a world that sometimes just does not seem to care.

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