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Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field by
Sarah Bay-Cheng, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, and David Z.
Saltz (review)

Elise Morrison

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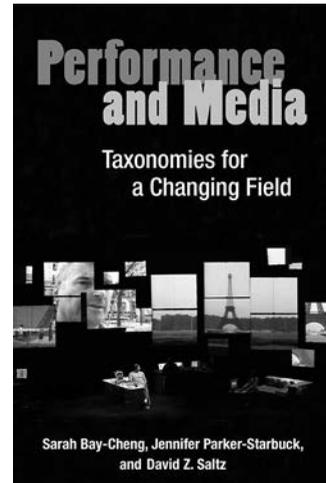
Books

Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field. By Sarah Bay-Cheng, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, and David Z. Saltz. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015; 192 pp.; illustrations. \$75.00 cloth, \$26.95 paper, e-book available.

Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field, written collaboratively by Sarah Bay-Cheng, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, and David Z. Saltz, takes on the timely project of organizing a genre that, due to its emergent, rapidly expanding nature, is frequently described in list form. Intervening in the familiar catechism of terms (“multimedia performance, intermedial performance, cyborg theatre, digital performance, virtual theatre, and new media dramaturgy, among others”), they argue: “we do not require another all-encompassing term or totalizing narrative; rather, we need new tools and methods that embrace and build upon the multiplicity of issues and perspectives inherent in the field” (1). As three of the leading scholars in the field of intermedial performance, Bay-Cheng, Parker-Starbuck, and Saltz are well suited to answer this need. Emerging out of several years of working group meetings that have tracked the proliferating “species” produced by the fertile intersection of media and performance, this book offers three distinct yet complementary taxonomic methods—each one developed independently by one of the authors. These insightful and user-friendly analytical frameworks, which can be used separately or in concert, will provide students, teachers, scholars, and practitioners of intermedial performance with a highly practical, thought-provoking resource for critically and creatively engaging with this growing field.

In keeping with its focus on taxonomic methods, this book is extremely well organized and accessible. The first two (coauthored) chapters provide foundational introductions to intermedial performance and taxonomy respectively. Chapter 1, “Texts and Contexts,” provides a robust overview of major media-based performance artists and detailed summaries of major scholarly contributions over the last several decades. A richly annotated review of the field’s literature, this chapter could stand alone as an invaluable resource for students, teachers, and scholars of intermedial performance. The subsequent chapter on the history of taxonomies, which surveys taxonomic projects from fields such as biology, ecology, anatomy, and sociology, as well as from within performance studies (e.g., Richard Schechner’s “Magnitudes of Performance” [1988]), explores the cultural and ideological labor that taxonomies perform. To best serve the dynamic and subjective field of intermedial performance, the authors have designed their own taxonomies as nonhierarchical, “matrixed” systems (think: periodic table of the elements) that can be used to map and expand with diverse and multimodal forms of media-based performance.

The following chapters introduce the three taxonomic methods, each of which has its own organizing principles, critical concerns, and methods of analysis. In the first, Bay-Cheng grounds her taxonomy in the concept of “distortion,” through which she measures the effects of recording technologies as deviations from the “original,” “undistorted” event. Dodging the



tricky dichotomy of liveness vs. mediatization that this might seem at first to reify, Bay-Cheng smartly maintains that all representation is, in fact, distortion. She establishes a continuum of distortion that has as its poles “material” and “virtual” along which three aspects of performance (space, time, and bodies) can be assessed and graphed. Despite the unavoidably subjective nature of performance analysis, Bay-Cheng’s method produces a satisfyingly concrete and visible “profile” of a given performance, as she illustrates with her analysis of recent productions by artists such as Ivo Van Hove and the company Temporary Distortion. This analytical model is particularly well suited for large-scale comparisons; it could be used to compile and compare a range of spectatorial responses to a given performance or a given artist’s experiments with distortion over the course of time. To further facilitate distributed comparisons such as these, Bay-Cheng is in the process of creating a mobile app through which users can input their taxonomical analyses and share them with others.

Next, Parker-Starbuck details a taxonomic model based on the cyborg matrix introduced in her book *Cyborg Theatre* (2011). Mobilizing the two major components of the cyborg—body and technology—Parker-Starbuck develops three categories of cyborg performance: abject, object, and subject, each of which might interrelate or oppose another in a given performance. By design, the “cyborg” analytical system asks users to make fine distinctions between modes of embodiment (in cases such as robot bodies, holographic bodies, animal bodies, and puppets) and prompts them to consider ways in which cultural constructions of gender, ability, race, and the (non)human are reproduced and/or reimaged through the intersection of bodies and technologies onstage. Grounded in philosophies of embodiment and representation from phenomenology and psychoanalysis to feminism and disability studies, Parker-Starbuck’s model is the most theoretically complex of the three taxonomies. Though it takes concentration to trace Parker-Starbuck’s conceptual strands through the multilayered categories she establishes, the effort will yield sophisticated, nuanced analyses of intermedial performances.

Where the first two taxonomies will tend to produce macro-level profiles of intermedial performances, the third taxonomy, offered by Saltz, illuminates micro-level interactions between performers and media within a given performance. Building on the taxonomy outlined in his 2001 essay “Live Media: Interactive Technology and Theatre,” Saltz charts the various functions that media can perform in theatrical performance—as scenery, as prop, as actor, as costume, and/or as mirror—in order to “highlight media’s potential to occupy a staggering number of different roles in any given production” (125). Saltz’s taxonomy is at once simple and capacious: through six well-organized, visually consistent charts, Saltz maps an almost dizzying range of performance media, which includes telematic representation, real-time video avatars, animatronic robots, virtual costumes, and live composite video, among many others, assessing each performer-media relationship according to consistent categories of dramatic function, space, and time. The categories he employs are deliberately straightforward and adaptable, and provide versatile tools for practical experimentation and analysis: novice students will readily comprehend Saltz’s terms of virtual space, here and now, there and then, and cutting-edge practitioners will be able to apply his matrix to their newest inventions.

Due to the expansive and slippery nature of their subject, the authors encounter occasional difficulties in maintaining clarity of terminology and organization. Saltz runs into a verbal tangle when the category of “here and now” in live performance (as opposed to “there and then” in prerecorded material) is further distinguished with “truly ‘here’” in the case of a kinetic sculpture or a robot (106). Parker-Starbuck’s system creates densely layered, parenthetical relationships between her categories of analysis, as in “Abject Bodies and Abject (Subject) Technologies” (75–76). In most cases, such complexities are clarified through performance examples (Parker-Starbuck explicates that category through the Android-Human Theater Company of Japan’s *Sayonara* [2013], for example). More coordination of terminology across the three taxonomies could strengthen the potential for integrating the three. The authors begin to do this in the final chapter with a grand finale analysis that applies all three models to the same production: The Builders Association’s *Continuous City* (2007).

Nevertheless, a major strength of this book is the diversity of scope, methodologies, and critical perspectives offered by its authors. Dubbing these “incomplete taxonomies,” they emphasize “the general principle that we need not construe taxonomies as mutually exclusive, fixed or immutable structures” (131). The concluding chapter makes this abundantly clear, as the authors proffer several exercises through which readers can apply and expand upon these three taxonomies “in the field,” a field that the authors have plans to extend, fittingly, into a versatile, interactive digital platform. Indeed, this is the greatest contribution of this impressive book: that its methods are designed to be expanded upon and dynamically put to use.

—Elise Morrison

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Elise Morrison is Assistant Professor of Performance Studies at Texas A&M University. She is the author of Discipline and Desire: Surveillance Technologies in Performance (University of Michigan Press, 2016). emorrison@tamu.edu

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Watching Weimar Dance. By Kate Elswit. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014; 288 pp.; illustrations. \$105.00 cloth, \$36.95 paper, e-book available.

In *Watching Weimar Dance*, Kate Elswit deploys a contemporary methodology for considering the turbulent era between 1919 and 1933. She defines dance broadly from the cabaret to the concert stage, examining works by Weimar period mainstays including Anita Berber, Valeska Gert, Oskar Schlemmer, Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss, Bertolt Brecht, and the touring British Tiller Girls.¹

Elswit uses accounts by the viewers of those danced moments to provide a glimpse into what theatregoers were uniquely drawn to during the Weimar years; she prefers the term “commentator” to viewer or spectator, acknowledging agency on the part of those who produced these accounts. She proposes that the act of watching allowed these spectators to work through broader cultural, social, and political issues of the time. Thus, she wed theories of spectatorship with what she terms “archives of watching” (x). Elswit embraces the instability of performance and the mutable reaction to performance as a compelling methodology for cultural historiography. Her source material is expansive, ranging



1. Elswit rightly displaces contemporary usage of the term *Ausdruckstanz* as the collective indicator of Weimar dance. This use of the term—most often applied retrospectively—has at times obscured the multifaceted actuality of the works produced.