



Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field

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reviews

***Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field* by Sarah Bay-Cheng, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, and David Saltz**

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015, 184pp, ISBN 9780472052905 (paperback)

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In a field that is, by the authors' own account, 'rapidly expanding and changing' (p. 1), Sarah Bay-Cheng, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, and David Saltz do not attempt to provide an additional comprehensive survey of the landscape of media and performance in their recent collection. In fact, they remain refreshingly cautious about the possibility of any text doing so. The authors draw on intellectual tendencies to categorise in order to 'provide a useful critical tool for scholars and practitioners' (p. 3) through the structure of taxonomy. They do this in order to examine the intersections of performance and media.

In keeping with their appreciation of the breadth of the field, which they acknowledge is 'inherently dynamic, contradictory, and fluid' (p. 9), the authors chose to illustrate their texts with examples not only from theatre, but also from music, performance art, visual art, and dance, acknowledging the breadth of definitions of 'performance' (p. 11) and taxonomy as a space in which disciplines can be brought together. Their establishing chapters acknowledge the changing approaches to performance and media since the early twentieth century, both in practice and in theory, supporting their selection of illustrative examples in the consequent taxonomic models. Temporary Distortion's *Americana Kamikaze* (2009), Ivo van Hove's *The Misanthrope* (2007), and Kris Verdonck's *Dancer #1* (2003) are all comparatively analysed by Bay-Cheng, while Parker-Starbuck draws on a wide range of theatrical and operatic productions,

such as Opera Erratica's *Toujours et Près de Moi* (2012) and Paper Cinema's *Odyssey* (2012). Saltz refers to contemporary works, such as 1927's production of *The Animals and Children Took to the Streets* (2010), but also notes the relevance of earlier works – such as Lincoln J. Carter's production of *Chattanooga* in 1898 – to his taxonomy. This range of illustrations and examples indicates not only the pervasiveness of the issues they tackle, but also the applicability of their approach. The authors make explicit their aim to 'suggest three distinct examples that may serve as templates for future taxonomies created by readers, scholars, students, artists, and any other interested participants' (p. 9).

Bay-Cheng, Parker-Starbuck, and Saltz make a strong argument for the legitimacy of taxonomy as an analytic strategy, establishing what is meant by a taxonomic approach. Although their explanation begins by tackling the foundation of taxonomy in scientific discovery and analysis, focusing particularly on the use of classifying taxonomies in biology and botany, the authors also provide examples from the performance and media fields. In doing so, they succeed in establishing taxonomy within performance not as something at a remove from scientific enquiry, but as an expansion of this methodology. In light of the extensive debate around the measurability of the arts, particularly around impact and value, it is particularly prescient that they establish that taxonomy need not be hierarchical, but can instead be comparative. They also clarify how and why it can be particularly useful in considering complex artworks, placing emphasis on the subjective possibilities of an apparently objective approach.

It is these comparative taxonomies – the matrix and the faceted taxonomy (pp. 34–35) – that the authors present within their own models. Bay-Cheng's model revolves around the idea of distortion within performance. Although her model is by no means simple in its nature, it is

perhaps the most accessible of those outlined, with its three continua offering a clear approach to the elements of a performance, and the author's assurance of the subjectivity of classification opening a space for the reader to participate without the need for highly specialised knowledge. By contrast, Parker-Starbuck builds on her earlier work around the cyborg, and spends more time thinking around the changing nature of the relation between body and technology, using the conceptual terms abject, subject, and object. Her model, though still as applicable as Bay-Cheng's, involves a linguistic complexity not present in the former. Finally, Saltz offers a table-based model that explores the difference between performance and character perspectives in determining the dramatic function, space, and time of a stage-based technology. Saltz creates a table for each type of media-relation considered (dramatic, coextensive, and non-diegetic), indicating its potential for expansion and wider use, as well as the capacity for multiple readings of the position of media in a single work.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the book is the decision not to stop at presenting these models individually, but to show the potential for their integration. The authors do so by applying each model to The Builder's Association's production *Continuous City* (2007) in the final chapter. Their arguments throughout the text are made all the stronger by this decision, returning to their claim that there is no one absolute taxonomic structure. The strength of the argument comes not in presenting these models as best practice, but in demonstrating the flexibility and fluidity of the taxonomic structure. This is, ultimately, a text which opens up, rather than quantifies, its field of research, and it will be interesting to see how and where these models find practical purpose within this field, and in future writing.

Performance and Media succeeds in its task to be a starting point, as well as in its accessibility and applicability. While histories and theories are established early on, the body of the text revolves around conceptual models, and each author deftly demonstrates the potential of their individual model for exploring and understanding the intersection of performance and media. They acknowledge the limit of printed text, apt given the media-focus of the book, and suggest that a future digital text might offer a space for readers to participate in providing data for the existing models, as well as developing their own.

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Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland: Dissent and Disorientation by Fintan Walsh

Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 189pp, ISBN 9781137534491 (hardcover)

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In his introduction to this erudite monograph, Fintan Walsh notes that 'capitalism and heteronormativity can conspire to notice and value certain cultural expressions over others' (p. 13). Walsh sets out to draw attention to performance works that are often passed over in this hierarchy. While there is attention to works that have landed on the stage of Ireland's national theatre, the Abbey, or have been staged by mainstream performance companies such as Tinderbox in Northern Ireland, the majority of the performances analysed here sit firmly within the more marginal(ised) world of fringe, cabaret, and club performance, or the cultural performances of figures such as drag queen Panti Bliss or political anti-heroine Iris Robinson.

An ability to animate performances on the page relies on Walsh's capacity to render their affective and phenomenological impact in a dazzling prose that places the reader at the performance alongside him – or, at other moments, deep into a Facebook or Twitter conversation with him. The writing is immediately affect-driven, as we are swept along in the opening paragraph on Walsh's weaving transit through London, smartphone in hand, watching Panti's speech on homophobia from the stage of the Abbey Theatre (2014) transmitted globally via social media (p. 1). However, while he refers to affect and phenomenology throughout the book, Walsh does not unpack either term in any detail and there is perhaps an assumption that readers will be familiar with these sets of ideas and how they have been woven into queer theorising in general, and to queer performance in particular. Nevertheless, his knowledge of theory – conveyed with ease and grace – reverberates with force in the rigorous, insightful analysis of the queer performances he takes as his case studies.

'Queer performance' is a notoriously sticky and elusive term. Setting up queer as 'a capacious index for a range of non-normative sexualities, bodies, desires and subject positions', Walsh sees the term as holding the potential to resist or 'exceed' a 'single, knowable and commodifiable identity position' (p. 2). This is crucial in his intersectional approach, governed by the urge to make sense of the relationship between performance and the nation in the context of Ireland in the Celtic Tiger years of economic boom to the displacements and disorientations of austerity. Walsh's formulation of