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Response to Danijela Špirić-Beard Review of *Modernism on Stage: The Ballets Russes and the Parisian Avant-Garde*. Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. xviii + 280 pp. \$119.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 1409409112.

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### Interdisciplinarity and Its Discontents

When reading Danijela Špirić-Beard's review of my book *Modernism on Stage: The Ballets Russes and the Parisian Avant-Garde*, I was reminded of dance historian Ramsay Burt's 2009 essay "The Specter of Interdisciplinarity." Surveying a period of profound change in his field, Burt discusses the impact of the "theoretical turn" on the study of dance. As the field began to shift from studies of dancers, choreographers, companies and works to studies of corporeality, movement, theatricality and performativity, scholars of dance increasingly looked to other disciplines to develop new interpretive tools. Simultaneously, scholars in fields such as art history, literature, and anthropology began to study the body's material, social, and semiotic dimensions; drawing on insights and methods developed by dance historians, these scholars reshaped their home disciplines. Ultimately, Burt finds the interdisciplinarity that came with the "theoretical turn" salutary, insofar as it pushed studies of dance away from the intradisciplinary work of canon-formation--an approach that views the field as constituted by a set of objects to study--to a consideration of dance "as a historical field in which social and political interests are at work." Such investigations of the dancing body are, in his estimation, interdisciplinary by definition. At the same time, Burt does not privilege interdisciplinarity at the exclusion of medium-specific analysis, for, as he notes, "any discussion of dance clearly needs to draw on both."<sup>[1]</sup>

I am grateful both to Špirić-Beard and the editors of H-France for the opportunity to circle back around to these issues--to the question of my book's interdisciplinary aspirations and bona fides. Led by the impresario Serge Diaghilev, the Ballets Russes was formed in 1909 with the express purpose of achieving what its choreographer Michel Fokine called an "alliance of dancing with other arts," a concept adapted from the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) theorized by the nineteenth-century composer Richard Wagner. Any account of the troupe therefore must reckon with its founders' desire to attain "the condition of complete equality" among the arts--and the inevitable problems encountered over the twenty years during which the company tried to realize this utopian goal.<sup>[2]</sup> As Špirić-Beard notes, one of my intentions in writing the book was to invent a cross-disciplinary approach adequate to the complex, varied alliances that were forged between the arts of painting, music and dance in Ballets Russes productions. To that end, my narrative focused on the performing body, which served as a site of literal and metaphoric interchange among these three media. On the Ballets Russes's stage, novel uses of the human instrument reconfigured the relations among artwork, medium and audience--and responded to modernity's new forms of embodiment.

For art historians, the subject of the Ballets Russes also presents discipline-specific and historiographic questions. Though the troupe stands firmly at the center of modernist canons in dance and music, it occupies a distinctly marginal place in histories of the plastic arts--a rather surprising circumstance,

given the stature of the artists who worked with the Ballets Russes. In *Modernism on Stage*, I set out both to address and to correct this disciplinary lacuna. My aim was to determine why so many visual artists responded affirmatively to Diaghilev's invitation, venturing outside the familiar practice of painting to design sets and costumes for Ballets Russes productions. Moving beyond the presumption that these painters simply used the troupe's stage as a makeshift gallery in which to display their wares, I proposed that the Ballets Russes offered visual artists a dynamic forum in which they could engage directly with other media while at the same time intensively investigating their own craft. The visual artists who worked for the Ballets Russes tested painterly modernisms by recontextualizing those styles within a total artwork--thereby initiating a dialectical process of self-definition through a dialogue with dance and music. In joining a growing body of scholarship demonstrating that mixed-media experimentation operated at the core of modernist practice in the visual arts, I hoped to help reorient art history away from its traditionally narrow, medium-specific purview.

*Modernism on Stage*, in other words, is both intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary. Here we may usefully return to Burt, who refuses to make binary distinctions between these modes: "it is necessary," he writes, "to be able to focus on the singularity of dance movement while...being aware of the broader context in which such singularity is situated." He calls for studies of dance that "identif[y] and analyz[e] particular properties and qualities that are specific to dance as an art form" and, at the same time, attend to the wider historical and cultural field in which that form takes shape and constitutes a public.[3] Following Burt, I would characterize *Modernism on Stage* as focusing on the singularity of the pictorial. It looks at the Ballets Russes from an art-historical vantage, a viewpoint sorely lacking in previous scholarship, and one roughly parallel to that of the artists who designed for the troupe. It also situates the pictorial in a range of aesthetic and social contexts. True, this reorientation of the Ballets Russes brings the visual dimensions of its productions to the fore--not at the expense of their aural and kinesthetic registers, but to provide new means of access to those registers.

To put it differently: a disciplinary perspective does not preclude genuinely interdisciplinary scholarship any more than it prevented painters from working with composers and choreographers under the aegis of the Ballets Russes. Indeed, it is arguably only from within a disciplinary framework that we may initiate an interdisciplinary undertaking, since the latter demands that we first recognize, then interrogate, and finally breach disciplinary boundaries. From there, we may initiate the task of "put[ting] the canon and its values in brackets." [4] By this logic, the most interdisciplinary aspect of my study may be its insistence on the value of viewing the Ballets Russes art-historically, that is, from a relatively peripheral, disciplinarily subaltern position.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of what interdisciplinary scholarship is or should be, it bears noting that Špirić-Beard's critique of my book closely mirrors the apparent contradiction she sees in it. In her reading, the book is not interdisciplinary by virtue of the fact that it does not sufficiently address the musical aspects of these productions and, though she demurs on this point, she clearly seeks greater disciplinary competence in her field. She understates my reading in the field of music studies, which includes recent publications by several prominent figures: Richard Taruskin, Jann Pasler, Jane Fulcher, Regina Sweeney and Mary Davis, to name a few. Nevertheless, I share her wish that music played a more robust role in my book. But as Špirić-Beard rightly reminds us, the "highly specific language of music" presents a barrier to entry for non-musicologists--perhaps a higher one than she realizes, given her fluency in that language. After a musicologist colleague of mine generously read through the manuscript prior to its publication, we discussed at length the question of what more I might do with the musical material. We came to the conclusion that much of what could be done--such as engaging in technical analyses of scores--lay beyond my skill set and the scope of the project as I conceived it. The resultant gaps in coverage, as well as errors in terminology and misplaced emphases (as Špirić-Beard sees them)--and Špirić-Beard's admonition, based on an incorrect assumption about my process--all of these together provide potent reminders of the challenges involved and the risks incurred when one forays beyond established disciplinary methods and priorities.

Špirić-Beard points out that the four ballets I explore in depth are “relatively underexplored” in the existing literature on the troupe (*Parade* being an exception in this regard). To take that point one step further, it’s worth remembering that that literature almost exclusively comes from scholars in the fields of music and dance, who evidently found little to say about these ballets. And because the productions addressed in *Modernism on Stage* dropped out of repertory after the dissolution of the Ballets Russes in 1929, some of them present some rather practical problems in terms of their musical and choreographic components. The ballet *Le Bal* is a case in point. Performed only a few times, *Le Bal* had, prior to my study, been essentially ignored in scholarship on the troupe. In part, this may have been due to a paucity of research devoted to the ballet’s composer, Vittorio Rieti; there are no published recordings of Rieti’s score for *Le Bal*. An analogous problem presented itself with George Balanchine’s choreography for the production, long since forgotten. I dealt with these absences by extrapolating from Rieti’s and Balanchine’s other works of the period, and by citing descriptions of the score and the choreography from critics’ reviews. One could argue that the state of this ballet presented me with an insurmountable impasse. I decided to include it, partly on disciplinary grounds: I found de Chirico’s designs, which still are extant, too compelling to overlook. I also believed that, with those designs as a starting-point, I could pry open this essentially lost work to further scrutiny. As this example shows, the visual material can allow us access to an otherwise inaccessible ballet and the intermedial dialogue operative within it—in this case, on the legacy of the classical tradition and the future of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. That my effort to present this dialogue can be construed by Špirić-Beard as a failure indicates that books aiming to address readers in several disciplines need to take special care to spell out exactly what choices have been made and why.

So, Špirić-Beard is right to note that attempts at cross-disciplinary dialogue continually come up against disciplinary limits—the author’s as well as the readers’. Those limits come to the fore in Špirić-Beard’s misunderstanding of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the way it served as a model for the Ballets Russes’s endeavor. She claims that my book is “haunted by the spectre of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the total artwork), which Bellow strictly confines to Wagnerian synthesis, a cohesive fusion of a singular grand vision.” It is not I but Špirić-Beard who confines it thus. Otherwise, she could not claim that “[a]nother related problem is the inherent conflict between Wagner’s totalizing gesture of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and a modernist insistency on the autonomy of the arts.” My contention—which serves as the book’s foundational paradigm—is that synthesis and autonomy function dialectically within the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. [5] Wagner’s theory (as distinct from his operas) posits the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a rather paradoxical form. In his 1849 treatise “Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft” (“The Artwork of the Future”), Wagner argued that when the “three primeval sisters”—poetry, music and dance—come together under the umbrella of lyric drama, they “unite their forces in one collective operation...the highest faculty of each comes to its highest unfolding.” Through union with other arts, each achieves its own unique identity: “by working in common, each one of them attains the power to be and do the very thing which, of her own and inmost essence, she longs to do and be.” [6] In other words, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* does not require a sacrifice of artistic autonomy, but offers the very pathway to its fruition.

*Modernism on Stage* proposes that the Ballets Russes created a form of *Gesamtkunstwerk* truer to the original concept than Wagner himself did—a point that Špirić-Beard evidently missed in her reading of the book. The troupe had the benefit of sixty years’ experimentation with the implementation of Wagner’s ideas by avant-garde groups across Europe. Not only were Diaghilev and his collaborators influenced by Russian adaptations of Wagner’s ideas in artists’ colonies at Abramtsevo and Talashkino, but they also were keenly aware of variants developed by the Nabis in France, the Jugendstil and Secession in Germany, and the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain. Crucially, these latter-day Wagnerisms loosened the strict authority that Wagner tried to exercise over his productions. Diaghilev brought together established practitioners, each with a distinctive style of his or her own, and invited them to work in tandem. This process required empathy and self-assertion in equal measure, and

collaboration did not always come easy to the painters who designed for the Ballets Russes. After all, choreographers and composers depend upon performers to realize their work; visual artists have the illusion, if not the reality, of mastery over their finished product. The artists who designed for Diaghilev temporarily put aside their paintbrushes in favor of the live body and its spatial envelope, ceding some control over their process in order to gain a new range of artistic materials: not just colors, forms, and textures but also sounds, silences, and rhythms, movement, stillness and presence.

I belabor this point because it is not simply one of content; it speaks directly to the necessity for the twofold approach that I take to the Ballets Russes. On the one hand, I highlight the troupe's desire to achieve "the condition of complete equality" among the arts; on the other, I acknowledge the impossibility of attaining that elusive goal. This principle applies, too, to my interpretive strategy, at once cross-disciplinary and medium-specific. Would the co-written book that Špirić-Beard imagines achieve complete equality, guarantee total interdisciplinarity? I'm not so sure. As her proscriptive attitude indicates, disciplinary taboos are not likely to disappear anytime soon. In order for a truly interdisciplinary dialogue to develop, we all—authors and readers alike—must be willing to give up the fantasy of mastery and substitute for it a willingness to unlearn and relearn what we think we already know. We should look to the Ballets Russes as a guide in this process. Over the twenty years of its existence, the troupe didn't just make new ballets. It remade the way ballets were made. More fundamentally, it reshaped spectators' expectations of that art, inculcating new habits of viewing, new patterns of listening, new ways to perceive corporeal expression. What better model of interdisciplinarity could we ask for?

#### NOTES

[1] Ramsay Burt, "The Specter of Interdisciplinarity," *Dance Research Journal* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 3-4.

[2] Michel Fokine, "The New Russian Ballet: Conventions in Dancing. M. Fokine's Principles and Aims," *The Times* [London] (July 6, 1914) in Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, eds., *What Is Dance? Readings in Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 260.

[3] Burt, p. 4.

[4] Norman Bryson, "Cultural Studies and Dance History," in Jane Desmond, ed., *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 68; see Burt, page 7, for a gloss on this passage.

[5] On this subject, see Juliet Koss, *Modernism After Wagner* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Anke Finger and Danielle Follette, *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork: On Borders and Fragments* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Marcella Lista, *L'Oeuvre d'art totale à la naissance des avant-gardes 1908-1914* (Paris: CTHS/Institut national d'histoire d'art, 2006).

[6] Richard Wagner, "The Artwork of the Future" [1849], in *The Artwork of the Future and Other Works*, William Ashton Ellis, trans. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 189.

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