



A Review of "Kate Elswit. Watching Weimar Dance."

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To cite this article: Ana Isabel Keilson (2015) A Review of "Kate Elswit. Watching Weimar Dance.", *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 90:4, 369-372, DOI: [10.1080/00168890.2015.1096179](https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2015.1096179)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2015.1096179>



Published online: 08 Dec 2015.



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critical approaches to the often-hapless debate about contemporaneity and an aesthetics of presence in the arts.

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Kate Elswit. *Watching Weimar Dance*. New York: Oxford, 2014. 252 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-984483-8

What does it mean to watch a dance? As Kate Elswit shows in *Watching Weimar Dance*, it is a deceptively simple question. It is also a question concerning anyone interested in Weimar culture. Research within German studies on topics of spectatorship, attention, and distraction has contributed to a range of debates about the politics of circulation, exchange, and labor, issues of migration, globalization, materiality, visibility, technology, and authorship. Yet *Watching Weimar Dance* returns us to basic questions about what it means to watch, which in many ways lie at the heart of Weimar studies.

Elswit belongs to group of scholars working to create a new historiography of German dance. In Germany, the critical study of dance evolved from two related yet independent strains: journalistic criticism, on the one hand, and, on the other, the writing (expository, historical, confessional, literary) by dance-artists themselves, done as an extension of their performance practice, as well as their pedagogical and professional strategies. New dance forms—as well as new literary and critical approaches, performance spaces, and ways of watching dance—bloomed after the First World War. This growth continued until 1933 and into the early years of National Socialism, during which time a range of aesthetic schools (including expressionist dance) and artists maintained a mutually beneficial alliance with Hitler's regime.

Elswit's book focuses on "the spectatorship of dances in and from Germany between 1916 and 1932—at home, on tour, and later returning from exile after World War II" (xiv). To show what watching dance in Weimar entailed, she pulls from dance, performance, and German studies, dance history, and critical theory to excavate what she labels as "the archives of watching." Dance, so conceived, consists of a layering of multiple, simultaneous viewpoints; it is a field of possibility rather than a definitive account. The task of the scholar is to bring these accounts into conversation "in order to elaborate a culturally situated model of watching, one that allows dance to intervene in Weimar studies through, rather than despite, the instabilities of performance" (xiv).

Watching Weimar Dance is structured as a series of critical investigations, each of which maps onto a trope of embodiment in studies of Weimar culture: "bodies as mortal," "bodies as machines," "bodies as commodities," "bodies as political," and "bodies as enduring history." Drawing attention to the idea that "performance never delivers up an unmediated body" (xxi), Elswit characterizes watching as forms of work, and labor. A continual negotiation between

performer, audience, and critic, watching is active, imaginative, and culturally, socially, and politically situated. Watching dance is a form of knowledge production. Watching dance is made as much by ideas and images creatively misinterpreted as by those that are “fixed” during performance. The archives of watching, Elswit thus argues, exposes the stage as a no-man’s land for practice, representation, and new forms of spectatorial agency.

In this frame, watching dance, as well as the notion of “watched” dance, becomes a dynamic subject of inquiry. Elswit pulls her main examples from the canon of artistic dance during Weimar: dances by ballet reformer Kurt Jooss, solos by grotesque performer Valeska Gert and cabaret artist Anita Berber, work by German modern dance founder Mary Wigman, and Bauhaus artist Oscar Schlemmer. Taken together, the body of work by these dance-makers—along with several others, most notably, Rudolf Laban, who Elswit does not discuss—is often referred to as “Ausdruckstanz,” or German Expressionist Dance. Not limiting herself to established genealogies of German expressive dancing, however, Elswit considers other forms of dance in Weimar consumer culture, such as advertising and performance spectacles by “girl groups,” such as the Tiller Girls; Elswit also includes brief analysis of work by Brecht. Here, Elswit’s critical arsenal works to “incorporate many choreographers and dancers trapped outside the taxonomy of Ausdruckstanz,” a term, she justly notes, “that has come to structure our understanding of early twentieth-century German dance, even though it was not actually in regular usage until after the Second World War” (xv).

The book’s opening chapter, “Impossible Spectacles,” offers a compelling account of watching’s polysemic production. Analyzing work by Jooss, Gert, and Berber, Elswit focuses on danced representations of death and argues that they expose “watching as a kind of labor that mediated between what could and could not physically happen onstage, and in which, accordingly, spectators would co-produce dance’s dramaturgy” (3). Dances about death were not just staged representations of an idea but meaning-making events negotiated by performers, audiences, and critics. Dance, in other words, was not a one-way street. It was a confusing traffic jam. Gert’s *Der Tod* (1922), for example, was a performance of her own death, which blurred a number of formal distinctions central to dance: abstraction versus realism, verisimilitude versus imitation, observation versus participation, feeling versus form. Critics, in turn, were confused. Unable to tell if Gert’s solo was improvised or set, if what she was doing was actually dance, if Gert really had died onstage, some critics were led to question their sense of social, or ethical, responsibility. One, for example, refused to clap for Gert, “since to applaud would be to request an encore, and [. . .] he could not imagine her dying a *second* time” (19).

Gert herself rejected the notion of abstraction, a position that distinguished her from many of her contemporaries, including Wigman, Jooss, and Schlemmer, whose 1922 *Triadic Ballet* is the focal point of chapter two, “Imagining the Dancing Machine.” Elswit reads *Triadic Ballet*, often taken as a model of Weimar-era performance abstraction, to question what embodied abstraction onstage actually meant for performers, as well as spectators. For Elswit, the answer lies in watching. The audience’s apprehension of *Triadic Ballet*’s “failures”—notably, Schlemmer’s unwieldy costumes that his dancers visibly struggled with during performance—enhanced, rather than masked, fractured, or fragmented the idea of the human. Emphasizing the “work” performed on stage, Elswit shows how other performances

of bodily abstraction after World War I (including images of hybridity, mechanization, corporeal fragmentation, and prostheses) led audiences to imagine new types of human bodies. These “dancing machines,” she notes, were not “discursive properties of the dances” but emerged from the dynamic of watching in the context of “pressing social issues that the physical properties of these dances led spectators to confront” (xxxii). These images of bodily “construction and reconstruction” and “progressive desanctification” were politically and culturally significant for postwar audiences and “seen as vital not only to individual bodies but also to the national body for which they were asked to stand” (xxxiii).

In *Watching Weimar Dance*, Elswit never offers a definitive meaning of bodies, and her discussion of Weimar politics remains marginal. Implicit in her analysis, however, is the notion that a body is a sociopolitical entity, built by the work of its metonym: individual bodies that circulate in society (on stage, and in everyday life) are made through a process of collective labor performed by the social body. This idea forms the basis of chapter three, “Three Stories about Private Parts.” Looking at performances by Berber, Gert, and the Tiller Girls, Elswit explains that images of the female dancing body—in particular, the naked and near-naked body—circulated as commodities in Weimar consumer culture after 1919. The reification of images of dancing women arose in concert with literal and metaphoric acts of “unveiling”: the display of “genitals [are] imagined to reveal what is perceived as another private part, her personal self,” which, in turn, exposed “a threshold between public and personal that seems to be mediated by the female performer who grants visual access to her body in relation to a given set of spectators” (62). Watching dance meant to make plastic the borders between women’s insides and outsides; the movement across them turned bodies into a powerful object of exchange.

On the one hand, dance watching as a cultural mode was a way for the social body to turn the individual body into a category of consumption, and it entailed a dialectical movement from quality to quantity. On the other hand, dance watching as a critical mode enabled individual bodies to resist the process of reification as symbols for Kracauer’s “Mass Ornament.” Here Elswit intervenes in the most pervasive visual metaphor for Weimar culture: the kickline as symbol of rationalization under capitalism. The critical equation of dancing bodies with the stranglehold of structure has arguably led to dance’s marginal treatment by generations of scholars of Weimar culture, including members of the Frankfurt School. Employing Walter Benjamin’s notion of the auratic work of art, however, Elswit upends critical readings of dance that confuse metaphors about it for the thing itself. Dancing bodies, she points out, “were not actually mechanically reproducible, and yet they were seen to possess a disconcerting interchangeability,” which necessarily belie “a fixation with the primal scene of reproduction on the factory floor” (80). Although dancing women “were seen to reveal the ‘truth’ of their times” (93), what constituted such “truth” was never entirely clear.

Elswit’s clarity in chapter three achieves a major objective of the book, namely, to create a “methodology resistant to unproductive bifurcations between history, theory, and practice” (xvi). Furthermore, Elswit is precise about dance’s ontological status, a continual source of confusion among scholars of dance and Weimar culture: dances, as objects of commodity exchange, are female bodies. Elsewhere in the book, Elswit is less clear. In some

instances, she suggests that dances are events; in other cases, they are material and historical objects. In still others, dances are social practices, or relationships. This range of possibility is, at times, confusing. Elswit's analyses lose force as they lose specificity, particularly in the book's final chapters, which focus on work from around 1930 by Mary Wigman, and a 1951 legal case surrounding copyright infringement of Kurt Jooss' 1932 ballet, *The Green Table*. Elswit makes a compelling claim that Wigman's *Totenmal* exposes how "viewing [was] itself a form of political activity" (96) and that forms of political identity emerged in its watched misapprehensions and fixations. However, the precise features of those identities and ideologies are unexplained. While Elswit touches on the connection between Wigman's staged depictions of sacrifice during her 1930 tours to the United States and American audiences' anxieties about her "Germanness," Elswit only hints at their connection to national identity formation and political fragmentation in the late Weimar context. Given that she so eloquently explicates dance as a social and economic metaphor, it is all the more frustrating that the implications for watching dance as the articulation of politics and political metaphor are left blank.

If dance has claims to make about Weimar culture, our analyses need to be more specific about what dance tells us about Weimar. This is not limited to social and cultural representation, but includes politics as well. How does dance constitute Weimar subjects as political subjects? How does dance organize individual bodies into discrete, watching publics, which form and enforce ideas about what it means to be a member of such a body? *Watching Weimar Dance* shows us a number of ways in which Weimar was dancing, and watching dance. Now, as Elswit brings into focus the vantage point of dance, we can begin to watch Weimar.

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