Dance Writing and the Fear of Generalization

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Roger Copeland

"...contemporary British and American aestheticians have devoted very little of their time and energies to a discussion of dance as an art form. Music, painting, poetry, and the other arts have been thoroughly analyzed, but the dance remains practically untouched by the aesthetician's hand." — Gertrude Lippincott, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 1949

Anecdotal Evidence

It happens to me quite often. I'll meet some people at a party. They'll ask me what I do for a living. I explain that I'm a college teacher. They ask me what I teach. I then rattle off the names of a number of subjects (all of them related to the performing arts); but I fail to specify whether my areas of expertise are practical or theoretical. I mention "theater." No lull in the conversation. I mention "film." No problem there either. Things proceed swimmingly until I mention "dance." Suddenly a quizzical, even disbelieving look settles upon the faces of my interlocutors.

I used to be puzzled by their puzzlement, but now I think I understand it: I am not the world's most graceful person. (In fact, I can barely walk across the room without tripping over my own or someone else's feet.) And to most people, a "teacher of dance" is invariably a teacher of dance technique or choreography. (It simply doesn't occur to them that one might be a teacher of dance history, dance criticism, or — heaven forbid — dance theory.) Hence their consternation.

Eager to get the conversation back on track, I hasten to reassure them that the only dance-related subject I teach is dance aesthetics. "Dance what?" they invariably want to know. Not an unreasonable question, that. One doesn't expect the average person to be acquainted with so rarified a subject. And even practitioners of the arts are likely to be nonplussed — tending as they do, to agree with Barnett Newman's dictum that "aesthetics is to the artist as ornithology is to the birds."

But significantly — and this is really my point — it doesn't matter greatly whether the person I'm talking to is a doctor, a stockbroker, an architect, or a professor of comparative literature (in other words, someone well aware of the central role played by theory in the study of aesthetic phenomena).
of the other arts). It's simply never occurred to any of them that one might ask the same (or similar) questions of dance that one routinely asks of painting, literature, or film — or that one might pursue those questions by employing similar methodologies. Dance remains for them something one does rather than something one thinks about. And as far as I can tell, dance is the only art that suffers from such prejudices. When I mention that I teach courses in theatre and film, people don't automatically assume that I teach acting, directing, or filmmaking.

So why is it that most people continue to conceive of dance as something one does (rather than something one reflects upon)? I believe that this question is the logical starting place for any serious theory of the dance. (A theory, if you will, to help explain the virtual absence of theory.) If we can illuminate this deep, abiding connection between dance and doing, then we'll have gone a long way toward explaining why, 40 years after Gertrude Lippincott's complaint, dance still remains (virtually) untouched by the aesthetician's — or for that matter, the theoretician's — hand.

Dance, Theater, and Theory

In her classic discussion of the relationship between ritual and theatre in ancient Greece, Jane Harrison refers to Dionysian ritual as a "dromenon" or thing done. It is not (primarily) a "thing seen" — something performed for the pleasure or edification of mortal spectators. Presumably, one doesn't watch a ritual, one actively participates in it. There's no designated viewing space for a passive audience. Our English word "theatre" by contrast derives from the Greek word "theatron" which means literally "seeing place," or place for spectators. According to Harrison, the theatron evolved in ancient Greece as Dionysian rituals became secularized and lost their sense of magical potency. She describes this process as follows: "Some day there will be a bad summer, things will go all wrong, and the chorus will sadly ask, 'Why should I dance my dance?' They will drift away or become mere spectators of a rite established by custom." But at the same time, they will transform the ritual (a dromenon or "thing done") into an act of theater, a spectacle that can only take place in a theatron.

For Harrison, the transformation is symbolized by changes in the physical architecture of the performance space (but it involves a transformation of mental architecture as well): An arena dominated by an orchestra (in Greek, literally "dancing place") is supplanted by a new space whose very name derives from the accommodations it makes for spectators:

We have seen that the orchestra, with its dancing chorus, stands for ritual, for the stage in which all were wor-
shippers, all joined in a rite of practical intent. We further saw that the theatre, the place for the spectators, stood for art. In the orchestra all is life and dancing; (but) the marble seats are the very symbol of rest, aloofness from action, contemplation. The seats for the spectators grow and grow in importance till at last they absorb, as it were, the whole spirit, and give their name theatre to the whole structure; action is swallowed up in contemplation. (Ancient Art and Ritual)

In their current English incarnations, the words theatre and theory seem unlikely companions. But if we chase them back to their etymological roots, it becomes evident that they share a common ancestry. For example, according to Eric Partridge, in his Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English, the root words for "theatre" are said to include not only "theatron" ("a thing compelling the gaze"), but also theorein ("a sight, an object of study, a speculation, hence a theorem"). Turn to the word "theory" on the very next page, and you are referred back to "theatre". At least etymologically, the two words are blood brothers. And in practice, both make similar demands on us: Both require that we detach ourselves from the "thing seen," that we stand apart from it, and examine it from a distance.

The Persistence of Primitivism

Are we any closer now to answering the $64,000 question: why do most people still think of dancing as something one does (a sort of ritualistic "dromenon") as opposed to something one might theorize about? Perhaps. Jane Harrison once predicted that dance would come into its own as an artform as our daily experience begins to feel more and more vicarious, as the perception of distance between ourselves and the "natural" world increases. Dance — for reason that I'll examine in a moment — is thought to function as an antidote for this sort of distance and mediation. Dance is thus burdened with a compensatory function, a primitivizing function if you will. It becomes the last remaining link between the increasingly urbanized present and an idealized past of "connectedness" and unmediated sensory experience. It's important to emphasize that I'm talking about all forms of dance, not just those that are inspired by or based on the rituals of so-called "primitive" peoples.

Note for example, the tendency in much 20th century writing about dance to subtly, but intentionally blur the distinction between ritualistic and theatrical dance, suggesting that the separation between spectator and spectacle (even in the most secular, theatrical contexts) is somehow less distinct in the art of dance than in the other performing arts. John Martin for example, in his book The Dance, argues that "the inherent contagion of bodily movement...makes the onlooker
feel sympathetically in his own musculature the exertions he sees in somebody else’s musculature.” Paul Valery, in his essay, “Philosophy of the Dance,” writes that “part of our pleasure as spectators (of dance) consists in feeling ourselves possessed by the rhythms so that we ourselves are virtually dancing.” Edward Bullough in his classic essay about the concept of aesthetic distance, which he calls “psychical distance,” argues that dance is the art that most effectively minimizes the sensation of distance between perceiver and thing perceived. And quintessentially, in his book The Dance of Life, Havelock Ellis suggests that “Even if we are not ourselves dancers, but merely the spectators of dance, we are still, according to that Lippsian doctrine of Einfühlung or ‘empathy’ feeling ourselves in the dancer who is manifesting and expressing latent impulses of our own being.”

In other words (or so the argument goes), while watching dance — any form of dance — we participate to a greater extent than we do while watching the performance of a play or an opera. Dance is heralded as the most participatory of the arts, even if that participation remains virtual rather than actual. Dance is thereby entrusted with preserving that “participation mystique” which the anthropologist Levy-Bruhl identified as a chief characteristic of “primitive” life. (The term “primitive life” becomes synonymous with a more “immediate,” less mediated, life.)

And the imagined satisfactions of “primitive” life often prove highly seductive to the 20th-Century intellectual. Even as level headed a writer as Eric Bentley can begin to sound like a raving Wilhelm Reich or Norman O. Brown when confronted with the primitive mysteries of Martha Graham:

She is a priestess. A present-day priestess of an ancient cult. Notoriously, she is the dancer of the age of anxiety. But she is not content, like, say, Jerome Robbins in his ballet on this theme, to discourse about anxiety with the resources of top-drawer ingenuity. Nor is it enough to see neurosis from the vantage-point of neurosis as Robbins, in more earnest vein, occasionally may be said to have done. That is no vantage-point at all. We can only express neurosis in art by conquering it, if fragmentarily, if momentarily. The only vantage-point to view sickness from is health. And health is found at the very foundations or nowhere. Down through the cerebral nervousities to the primal energies, that is Martha Graham’s journey. If we accompany her, even part of the way, must we not benefit? (“Martha Graham’s Journey” in In Search of Theater)

Cerebral nervousities? That’s the sort of verbal infelicity one doesn’t expect from a wonderful writer like Bentley. But we need to be tolerant. The man was obviously in love — or at least in heat. And lest one think that such primitive satisfactions are provided only by hot,
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steam, expressive modes of modern dance, listen to what Edwin Denby has to say about the classic ballet:

an educated late Paleolithic magician, if he dropped in on a performance of classic ballet in an air-conditioned theater would find a good deal he was familiar with — the immense, awesome drafty cavern, the watching tribe huddled in the dark, and in a special enclosure the powerful rhythmic spectacle ... As a magic man he would find it proper that the dancers are not allowed to speak, not allowed to make any everyday movement, to show any signs of effort, or even of natural breathing; and equally correct that the musicians are kept hidden in a ritual pit... If a New Yorker were to tell him, “But you're missing the point, ballet is an art, it isn't a ritual,” he might answer, “You no like that word 'ritual.' You say it about our ballet, so I think maybe nice word.” (“Forms in Motion and in Thought” in Dancers, Buildings, and People in the Streets)

Denby may detect vestiges of primitive ritual even at The New York City Ballet; but for the most part, this sort of primitivizing remains latent rather than manifest. Even the most self-deluding spectator remains well aware of the difference between kinesthetic empathy and fullfledged, ritualistic participation. Indeed, in our heart of hearts, we know that we can no more return to ritual than to our innocence. But even if we can't completely erase the distance between subject and object, spectator and spectacle, we can take pains to avoid increasing it. And that's where the bias against theory comes in. Indeed, for many people, dance's very raison d'etre is to defy the theoretical life (by denying us the distance and self-reflexiveness that theory demands). Even virtual participation can help to counter the Socratic assertion that the unexamined life is not worth living. Perhaps by reminding us that the unlived life is not worth examining.

Staying Close to the Surface of the Dance

What then are the implications of these biases for the person who wishes to write about dance? Is this the sort of primitivism that requires one to set sail for Tahiti, renouncing one’s worldly possessions and scholarly professions? Not necessarily. One can indeed still think and write about dance. But this latent primitivism has had a marked effect on the way we do that. It creates a subtle, but compelling pressure to remain as close as possible to the surface of the dance. The critic Marcia Siegel speaks for many people in the dance world when she argues,

Dance is a physical art, and I think the over-intellectualized kind of writing where the writer detaches himself from all
sensory ephemeral qualities and emotional connotations is just about worthless. The one inescapable fact about dance criticism is that you have to be in contact with the real live thing as it is performed. ("Two Views of Dance," *Arts In Society*, VIII, 1971)

Deborah Jowitt is a bit less defensive about theory, but makes no secret of her preferences:

What I've come to believe is that the best dance criticism (at any rate, the dance criticism I admire most) stays intimately connected to the work itself—neither leaping over it into romantic fancies or distant theorizing, nor smothering it in irrelevant ideas, nor making it the pretext for a brilliant display of temperament. ("A Private View of Criticism," *Arts In Society*, Summer/Fall, 1976)

Hence, the descriptive, empirical bias that continues to dominate "serious" dance writing. It derives from a desire (not necessarily a conscious desire) to stay as close as possible to the surface of the work, a desire not to break the peculiar bond of virtual participation that obtains between dance spectator and dance spectacle. It may even derive in part from an uneasiness about the very act of writing about dance in the first place, and a compensatory desire to make the resultant piece of writing literally resemble the dance in question as much as possible.¹

This helps explain why, for the most part, American and British dance writing remains a form of impressionistic connoisseurship—vividly, even lovingly descriptive, but essentially devoid of ideas and fearful of arriving at generalizations (on the assumption that to do so is to vitiate the sensory immediacy of the work). Such writing celebrates what William Blake called "the holiness of particulars." (And appropriately, it was Blake who argued that "To generalize is to be an idiot.") What may appear to be nothing more than good, old-fashioned Anglo-American empiricism turns out to be attributable, at least in part, to latent primitivism.

**Against Interpretation**

Susan Sontag's notorious essay of 1964, "Against Interpretation" never mentions dance, but it has great implications for both dance and dance writing. Consider this central paragraph:

In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hyper­trophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world — in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings.'...The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished...
enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have.

Clearly, for Sontag, it is the peculiar achievement — perhaps even the spiritual mission — of certain art forms to hold interpretation and theory at bay, to impede them or even ward them off. What they offer us (in its stead) is something infinitely rarer and more valuable: sensory immediacy. ("What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.")

Alain Robbe-Grillet makes a closely related argument in For a New Novel:

At every moment, a continuous fringe of culture (psychology, ethics, metaphysics, etc.) is added to things, given them a less alien aspect, one that is more comprehensible, more reassuring. Sometimes the camouflage is complete: a gesture vanishes from our mind, supplanted by the emotions which supposedly produced it, and we remember a landscape as austere or calm without being able to evoke a single outline, a single determining element.

Both Sontag and Robbe-Grillet are prescribing an antidote to what Ortega y Gasset once called "the progressive dis-realization of the world," the cannibalizing of the world by consciousness. "What we decidedly do not need now," wrote Sontag in the same essay, "is to further assimilate Art into Thought." Sontag and Robbe-Grillet both long to reinvest the physical world with a sense of étre-la or sheer "thereness."

But how does one embark upon this arduous, if not utopian, task? For Robbe-Grillet, the answer was a style of excruciatingly detailed description, virtually devoid of anthropomorphizing adjectives. That's what he's getting at when he complains that "We remember a landscape as austere or calm without being able to evoke a single outline, a single determining element." By contrast, his legendary paragraph describing the surface of a tomato (in his novel The Erasers) keeps our attention focused obsessively on the physical characteristics of the object. ("The peripheral flesh, compact and homogeneous, of a fine chemical redness, is uniformly thick between a band of shiny skin and the semicircular area where the seeds are arranged...") Sontag recommends a similar strategy for criticism:

What kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts, is desirable today? For I am not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased. They can be. The question is how. What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place? What is needed first, is more attention to form in art. If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence...Equally valuable would
be acts of criticism which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art. This seems even harder to do than formal analysis... essays which reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it.

Has anyone ever provided a better description of what critics like Denby and Croce and Jowitt do so brilliantly? Contemporary dance criticism may well offer us the single best example of what Sontag is advocating. And there’s no denying that the best descriptive criticism serves an absolutely indispensable function, one necessitated by the fundamental differences between dance and the other arts. To the critic of literature or painting, "mere" description may seem rather pedestrian and even retrograde. But the dance critic is helping to establish the physical reality of the dance, or, at the very least, is lending some degree of permanence to an otherwise fleeting and ephemeral event. (This argument — that today's criticism is tomorrow’s history — was a bit easier to make before the advent of film, video, or adequate notational systems.)

Certainly if one were to generalize about the differences between the best 19th and 20th century dance criticism (the differences between the writing of Gautier on the one hand and that of Denby or Croce on the other), the key distinction would seem to be the latter’s greatly improved capacity for describing the exact contours of the body in motion. When we read Gautier we get a wonderfully vivid sense of the mental images or analogies that the dance evoked in his mind’s eye ("Taglioni reminded you of cool and shaded valleys where a white vision suddenly emerges from the bark of an oak") but alas, very little sense of what the dance itself actually looked like. The best 20th century dance writers haven’t by any means abandoned the evocative phrase or the visual analogy, but their primary ambition is not to describe the effect that the work had on them. Rather they strive to provide the reader with a palpable sense of the work as a thing-in-itself.

Who would fail to applaud this new emphasis on description? And who would underestimate the immense difficulty of the task? The ability to see movement clearly and describe it evocatively is a rare and wonderful gift. Of all the imaginable modes of dance writing, precise description is probably the hardest to do well. As John Ruskin once wrote (In Modern Painters), "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion—all in one."

And yet the dance world pays an undeniable price for this intense emphasis on vivid, loving description. Theory per se (theory as a separate branch of scholarship) is only the first casualty. Criticism
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suffers from it as well. For in the best of all possible worlds, history, criticism, and theory would crossfertilize one another. And indeed, the best criticism of the other arts has always possessed a theoretical dimension. But — with the possible exception of André Levinson — the dance world hasn't produced writers like Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, Lionel Trilling, or R.P. Blackmur — critics whose talent for empirical description is enriched by a capacity to generalize about the significance of the experience. T.S. Eliot could well have been talking about dance critics when he wrote, "They had the experience, but missed the meaning." I'm not suggesting that dance writing will benefit from becoming less descriptive (only that it shouldn't settle for description, that it should regard description as a necessary, but not sufficient component of the critical task.)

Dance Writing In The Age of Theory

It's especially instructive to compare the current state of dance writing with the current state of writing about film. We might begin by noting the privileged place in the aesthetic pantheon that Sontag afforded to film in "Against Interpretation." (Remember, this was 1964, long before the semioticians and the post-structuralists had launched their—now successful—invasion of film studies.)

Ideally it is possible to elude the interpreters... by making works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be...just what it is. Is this possible now? It does happen in films, I believe. This is why cinema is the most alive, the most exciting, the most important of all art forms right now...In good films there is always a directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret.

But now in the Age of Theory — aided and abetted by the availability of video cassettes and the resulting ease with which one can conduct frame by frame analyses — film too has been caught up in the hermeneutical net. And for many intellectuals, this amounts to nothing less than a loss of innocence, a fall from grace. And it may well be that dance is now the only art that still serves the anti-interpretive function formerly assigned to film. As Martin Leonard Pops has put it, "Anatomy presupposes a corpse, but the living body of dance is never still enough for a proper dissection."

Perhaps we in the dance world should consider ourselves lucky that dance studies haven't gone the way of film and literary studies where graduate students are infinitely more conversant with Barthes, Kristeva, and Derrida than with Proust, Joyce, or Dostoevsky. (When Oscar Wilde wrote that critics would become the artists of the future, his tongue was planted in his cheek. But when Paul de Man proclaimed that "Poetry is the foreknowledge of criticism," he wasn't
kidding.) I for one am not eager to see the sensuous surface of the
dancer's body vaporized under the blowtorch of deconstruction
(which typically produces more heat than light). But surely there must
be a middle ground, an alternative to description on the one hand and
obfuscation on the other.

Dance and the Thoroughly Modern Intellectual

In closing, what I've tried to emphasize is that the prevailing indiffer­
ence (or hostility) toward theoretically-inclined writing about dance is
not necessarily the consequence of a widespread indifference toward
dance. The reasons that dance remains (in Lippincott's words) "virtu­
ally untouched by the aesthetcian's hands" is not that the intellectual
is afraid of dirtying his or her hands with so sweaty and bodily an ar­
tform. Dancers and choreographers often think of intellectuals as peo­
ple who are uncomfortable with their own bodies and thus fundamen­
tally unsympathetic to dance as an artform. What a charmingly dated
caricature! It ignores the reality of that peculiarly modern intellectual
who is almost breathlessly eager to establish his or her Dionysian cre­
dentials — the sort of intellectual who, upon hearing the word culture
(as defined by Matthew Arnold) is more likely to reach for his pop­
corn than to brush up his Shakespeare. The choice, for such people, is
not between Milton or Bruce Springsteen. The point is to embrace
both without compromising either one's seriousness or one's funki­
ness. Like the angels in Wim Wender's film "Wings of Desire," this
sort of intellectual has grown weary of the ethereal and hungry for the
material.

Certainly, among the fabled "New York Intellectuals," a passion for
Balanchine (and for Denby's and Croce's writing about Balanchine) is
de rigueur. Granted, their commitment to (and knowledge of) dance
may not extend beyond the obligatory seasonal pilgrimage to the New
York City Ballet; but my point is that such people are by no means
dance-o-phobes (although they may be Balletomanes). In fact, they
would feel incomplete, or at least impoverished, without their peri­
dic dance fix.

A passion for dance — or at least a passion for the idea of dance —
is absolutely essential for the modern intellectual. But is there a com­
parable passion for ideas about dance? That, in my view is the prob­
lem. And here we find something upon which the least intellectual
members of the dance world (those who've never known the life of
the mind) and the hippest, most "advanced" intellectuals (those who
feel that they've outgrown the life of the mind) can agree. When it
comes to writing about dance, these two varieties of anti­
intellectualism merge into a single stream — of unconsciousness. The
result is a critical shortage of genuine dance intellectuals, whom we
might define as dance writers for whom ideas are as palpable as
pirouettes (and who, at their best, can make ideas perform pirouettes—perhaps even fouettes).

Notes

1 Even dance writers often subscribe to the belief that dance is not only non-verbal, but anti-verbal, and that it constitutes a form of natural language—preverbal, transcultural, and utterly resistant to paraphrase. The desire to stay as close as possible to the dance event helps explain some of the dance world's other peculiarities as well. Even the annoying, but persistent critical practice of referring to major choreographers by their first names ("Martha," "Merce," "Twyla") begins to make sense if one thinks of it as still another manifestation of this desire to maintain an intimate, informal relationship with the object of criticism...Significantly, the first philosophical method to exert some influence on dance writing was phenomenology. The "pre-reflective," "pre-objective" nature of phenomenological description is perfectly consistent with the primitivist's emphasis on virtual participation. Maxine Sheets, in her book, The Phenomenology of Dance notes that the phenomenological method "bypasses all question of the subject's objectivity or the object's subjectivity."

2 At a conference in San Francisco in 1981, Susan Sontag was asked to comment on the state of current dance writing. Did she lament its lack of theoretical sophistication, its indifference to ideas or even generalizations? Far from it. She responded as follows: "I don't know what the desirable new ways of thinking or writing about dance might be, or if there are any... My own view is that what is needed is for more people to write well, not for some people to write differently. All this is to suggest that I think dance criticism is in rather good shape; that is, that the prevailing assumptions about dance are more right than wrong." (see New Performance, Vol. 3 No. 3 p. 72)