

THE INTERPRETATION OF DANCES: TEXT, CONTEXT AND THE READER

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1.0 Interpretation

To understand, or to make sense of dances (dance events, dance texts) is one of the most important aspects of dance scholarship, and is central to the area of dance theory and criticism. The term 'interpretation' is commonly used to describe this process of 'reading' or accounting for the dance. Its etymology, and its connotations within critical literature, suggest that this process can be seen to encompass three activities, requiring the reader firstly, to recognise elements of the dance as being of a certain type, secondly, to characterise the event within culturally accepted categories and, thirdly, to attribute meanings. There are many different theories and many different emphases within theory in respect of interpretation and one of my purposes in this text is to explore some of these, looking firstly at the problematic position of the text (2.0), then at the relevance of context (3.0) and finally at the role of the spectator, or reader (4.0).

The driving force behind making, performing and watching dances is the *creation* of meaning which this scholarly activity holds a mirror to. I shall argue that dances, and hence the people who make, perform and watch them together construct meaning. In this process choices are made, by the choreographer or makers of dances and by their performers, but also by the spectators, or readers of the event. These choices determine what is seen to

be important, what is accorded less importance, and ultimately what shades of meaning can be drawn out¹.

This idea of 'meaning' is central to interpretation in both traditional and modern theories but the challenge to traditional views as encapsulated in the post-structuralist approach has changed the relationship between the players. Lodge describes this as the challenge to

the idea of the author as origin of a text's meaning, the possibility of objective interpretation, the validity of empirical historical scholarship and the authority of the literary canon.

1988, p.xi

In the light of this challenge we can consider what happens during interpretation in relation to the work/dance/text, to the person who interprets and to the nature of their interaction with the prevailing cultural context.

2.0 *The problematic position of the text*

The idea of there being a fixed entity, an art object, which can be described without difficulty, is a view which was once taken to be self-evidently true, but which has come under attack in recent years. The philosopher Margolis² articulates the problem thus:

"describing" implies a stable, public, relatively well-defined object...differences in description are to be reconciled by a further examination of the object or the points of view from which it is

¹ Further explanation of these ideas can be found in the text *Dance analysis*, Chapter 4 has an exploration of issues in interpretation (Adshead, ed.1988).

² Margolis is one of many philosophers who are alive to the problems of distinctions between description and interpretation and of the relationship of external factors to individual interpretation. See also Beardsley 1958.

described. "Interpreting", on the other hand, suggests...an element of performance, a shift from a stable object...to an object whose properties pose something of a puzzle or challenge.

1980, p.111

In what sense a dance remains an 'object' is thus debateable. Clearly it is not an object in some empirical, scientific sense except in so far that it is possible to weigh dancers and measure the extent of their reach. However, the ability to describe in a different medium (usually text) that which is seen is still regarded as the baseline for interpretation. This process of description is how we create a text to discuss, to notate, to dance.

Description is sometimes hailed as a means of remaining close to the sensuous surface of the dance. Nothing, it is implied, should then get between the critic and the dance. But description is potentially deceptive in its claims for objectivity. In fact, what does get between the dance and the reader is the interpreter's choice of descriptive terms. The language that the critic employs, the highly personal and variable character of that 'description' and all that this signifies, has implications for the supposed objectivity of description³.

Margolis writes from a tradition of philosophical aesthetics, a rather different approach from the post-structuralists, but his message is much the same. The very language in which the description is made reflects a particular system of analysis of movement, a sense of what is important and what is not in any particular dance, and the perspective, prejudices, feelings and experiences of the observer. The language chosen is already a factor in interpretation.

Since description rarely remains at the level of anatomical action, it can be seen always to reflect a stylistic standpoint. The language of description,

³ An interesting debate on the nature of criticism was initiated by Roger Copeland (1993) in a discussion of the New York school of dance critics. In response I suggest that the claim of critical description not to interfere in the work, *particularly* if it is 'vivid' and 'loving', can be seen to be naive since it is inevitably imbued with both evaluative and interpretative elements (Adshead-Lansdale 1993-94).

perhaps particularly the language of formal technical description that we use in ballet and some modern dance styles, as well as in Asian classical forms, is part of both a specific and a larger discourse of dance style. In recognising movement as being of a certain type, the connection is made with a style or styles to which it may belong through the linguistic framework of which it is a part⁴.

Contained within this genre framework is a set of assumptions about what is suitable subject matter and how it should be treated. While the 'myth' can be seen to be both popular and common subject matter across many dance cultures its character, for example, in classical Indian dance, and in expressionist modern dance, is quite distinct⁵.

This argument follows from a philosophy which states that it is through the acquisition of language that the network of concepts which constitute the limits of intelligibility is formed⁶. All representations of the dancing body and recognitions of dance events and styles, are constructed within the parameters of the language in which they are described.

Doris Humphrey's well-known instruction to young choreographers, that dances should have phrases with a recognisable shape, a beginning and an end, with variety in length (Humphrey 1959) was long taken to be a truism. But the advent of postmodernism has brought new realisation that it would be naïve to assume that the spectator can simply 'discover' the form of a dance, as some previously given truth or fact, which tells us where actions begin and end. The spectator (sometimes referred to as the viewer or reader), like the maker, decides how to see the dance and, as part of this process, how to mark its structure or form.

⁴ An earlier version of this argument was presented in the conference papers of the Hong Kong Dance conference, see Adshead 1990.

⁵ See Jones (ed) 1983 for an interesting collection of articles which contrast versions of the myth and its use in different genre.

⁶ On the subject of description Best's work, Wittgensteinian in character, has been very influential in the philosophy of the arts in the UK and particularly in addressing the nature of rationality in this sphere. The relationship between these writings and some post-structuralist theories is a curious one. Ostensibly they derive from very different traditions but it is interesting how much they share.

It is many years since Yvonne Rainer taught us to be sceptical of structures such as the 'phrase' and to see how relative they are to specific dance styles⁷. She describes *Trio A* thus:

there are no pauses between phrases. The phrases themselves often consist of separate parts...but the end of each phrase merges immediately into the beginning of the next with no observable accent. The limbs are never in a fixed, still relationship and they are stretched to their fullest extension only in transit, creating the impression that the body is constantly engaged in transitions...no-one part of the series is any more important than any other... they are of equal weight and are equally emphasized.

Rainer, 1968, in Copeland and Cohen, 1983 p. 329

Here the form markers that are normally used, pauses, full extension, rhythmic emphasis, are no longer evident. Even in work which is less obviously destructive of the 'phrase' the potential for construction of many 'forms' or structures is evident.

An example illustrates this point. The work is *Strange Fish*, created by Lloyd Newson, a well-known Australian choreographer now resident in England. He made this piece in collaboration with his performers for the stage in 1992 and re-worked it for television in 1993. It is generally thought of as belonging to the genre of 'physical theatre' which explores strong emotions, social issues and political messages. Previous works, such as *My Sex, Our Dance* (1986) and *Deep End* (1987) construct their form through the emotional interactions of dancing beings. Alliances grow in intensity only to be wilfully destroyed (Constanti, 1987). *Strange Fish* shares some of these characteristics but offers a number of different possibilities for the making of form.

⁷ See her article, 'A quasi-survey of some 'minimalist' tendencies', easily obtainable in Copeland and Cohen's text, *What is dance* pp.325-332 and my survey of choreographic practices (Adshead, J. (ed) 1987 p.11-27).

In the second scene, set in a corridor, Wendy Houstoun and Nigel Charnock emerge from different doors and approach each other, they check to see that no-one else is around, and proceed to conduct a 'conversation' in movement, using small bobbing and twisting movements, mimicking chatter and the body language that accompanies friendly meetings. In this short extract the question of structure is relatively straightforward, even though the movement is not drawn from an obvious dance technique, since it is phrased with the music, French café music played on an accordion, with a clear pulse and shaping of phrases. The gestures match these musical phrases in timing and in dynamic emphasis.

In a second corridor scene (the fifth main fragment of the work) there is also music, but its lack of rhythmic definition denies the reader the structuring device of the first example. Now the reader has to find within the movement and the music, the moments of ebb and flow of energy to phrase the dance since it is accompanied by a reflective slow melody, relatively lacking in punctuation. Here the structuring is more likely to be based on surges of emotion between the two dancers, Lauren Potter and Jordi Cortes Molina, who wrap themselves around each other in a sustained, entwining embrace, rolling and stretching towards and away from their shared centre. The punctuation, in a rhythmic sense, emerges from these changes in position.

The possible starting points for description of either of these extracts are many. It could be the action of the body, the movement of trunk, or feet or arms, that is described; it could be the spatial location of movement or the relationships between the main characters; it could be the ideas that are addressed. If facts are fluid, shifting things, then a sense of form or structure must be equally unstable. As Hutcheon says in relation to history,

what actually becomes a fact depends as much as anything else on the social and cultural context of the historian, as feminist theorists have shown with regard to women writers of history over the centuries.

1989, p. 76

The application of some of these ideas to *dance* history can be found in June Layson's introduction to the new version of our jointly edited book *Dance history. An introduction*, where she points to a view of time as interrupted and dislocated rather than seamless and linear. The relevance to *Strange Fish* can be seen in the echoes of one scene in another, otherwise quite distinct, section, for example, in the recurrence of a melody or the repetition of a glance from Wendy Houstoun.

The subtle interplay of ideas and fragments of memory recalled by the text may indeed be more like Roland Barthes 'tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture' (in Lodge 1988 p.170). Once again, an example from *Strange Fish* illustrates this notion. At various points in the work there are references to water. The choreographer's own reference to the Buddhist saying 'Be as ignorant of what you catch, as the fisherman is of what is at the end of his fishing line' is not insignificant.

There are Greek references to Ulysses' journey across the seas and his meeting with the siren who lures men to their deaths by singing seductive songs. These same songs are heard in a scene which has overtones of Christian baptism and absolution when, towards the end, a sick male figure is held by a female 'Christ' or siren figure over a water tank while drops of water are dripped over his forehead.

There are many implications and possibilities for an extensive intertextual reading and in this sense *Strange Fish*, with its multi-layered and fragmentary referencing system, is typical of postmodern works of our time in western Europe. This instability of the text, of description and of the construction of form and meaning also renders the work endlessly capable of further interpretation, both for the spectator and the scholar. This is the source of its fascination.

3.0 The relevance of context

In many current debates in criticism the position of the spectator in constructing meaning is more pertinent than a focus on the individuality of

the person who made the text. In making a reading the spectator's own cultural siting in respect of the text becomes increasingly important. Interpretation is affected and in various ways constrained, or determined, by the context in which the dance is seen. Dances are made, and subsequently seen, through the social and cultural values of a specific time and place, from which neither the makers nor the spectators can remove themselves. Even the question of what we see is challenged. It may or may not be that we see the *same elements*: the process of interpretation has its own logic in so far that *different things* may be perceived, upon which both structure and meaning are constructed.

During the C20 theories of the role of context in interpretation have been gaining ground on a more sophisticated and complex basis than their earlier C19 counterparts. The C19 thrust towards causal explanations of human activity, and the desire to develop criticism as a 'science', led to extensive biographical and historical accounts of literature and the fine arts. Stolnitz (1976) reflects a mid-C20 position, describing a number of competing explanations, separating extrinsic criticism from intrinsic criticism in an attempt to get away from this causal approach. Intrinsic criticism, associated with the modernist art movement, invites the reader to focus on the form and internal considerations of the content of a work irrespective of its origins, the psychological state of its author or the political circumstances of its genesis as in extrinsic criticism⁸.

What both these positions call into question, however, is the nature of the relationship between art and the society from which it emerges. Latterly, a more complex explanation has been constructed which avoids a naïve polarisation between formalist autonomy and Marxist determinism. Wolff summarises the sociologist's approach thus:

Works of art...are not closed self-contained and transcendent entities, but are the product of specific historical practices on the part of identifiable

⁸ Stolnitz (1976 Chapter 16) gives a clear exposition of the nature and value of criticism based on context, on appeal to rules, on impressions of the spectator, and on intrinsic elements.

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social groups in given conditions, and therefore, bear the imprint of the ideas, values and conditions of existence of those groups, and their representatives in particular artists.

1981, p.49

But she does not assume that art can be wholly explained by this realisation or reduced to a study of ideology. Dances cannot be simply equated with psychological or political treatises; dance is not politics, or psychotherapy. We still have to understand the ways in which various dance styles come to have value ascribed to them, how meaning is constructed within them, and this implies the employment of the discourse of art and aesthetics. For instance, Lloyd Newson's political motivation has to be tempered by the need to persuade through the ambiguity of art rather than by direct political action. As Parry (1987) argues, Newson's earlier tendency to 'ram home' ideas on stereo-typing has been replaced by 'a richer, more allusive vocabulary'.

If art and politics cannot simply be equated neither can we conflate 'movement' with 'dance'. 'Movement', it is often said, is universally understood, while 'dance' is a style-specific form of behaviour of a particular group. The fact that neither everyday movement nor dance is universally understood is readily shown by analysis of codified systems of communication. It is only through the codes and conventions of a way of moving or of a dance style and of the cultural positions that we inhabit, that we are able to interpret either everyday movement or dances.

These codes and conventions are most easily seen in dance within the crystallisations of movement, form, subject matter and its treatment that we call genres and styles. Each genre and style embodies a particular way of making and seeing dances.

Genres and styles are characteristic selections and orderings of the basic components of the dance guided by certain conventions and traditions derived from social and cultural life. Those things which have meaning, significance and value for a given society and culture at a particular time,

and for a choreographer and performers, are, in some measure, captured and preserved by selected and specific dance patterns and forms known as genres and styles.

Hodgens in Adshead (ed) 1988, p. 75

This goes some way towards explaining differences in the interpretation of common subject matter. As with many scores written for ballet *The Firebird* has attracted generations of choreographers since its first interpretation by Fokine in 1910⁹. If Fokine's moral tale of good and evil was a response to the conventions of balletic representation, Bejart's social and political statement (1970 version for the Paris Opera Ballet) reflects the democratic concerns of modern dance. Equally, but differently, Tetley's exploration of oppression at the personal level and of the relationship between an individual and the family, draws on a post-Freudian interest at the heart of expressionist modern dance (1981 for the Royal Danish Ballet).

Although these interpretations might seem far removed from the detailed structural analysis which formalism and intrinsic criticism promoted, each relies upon seeing form in a particular way. Structural analysis finds its place as textual criticism informed now by an understanding of the essentially linguistic and cultural position of art and the embodiment of distinctive interests within dance styles.

4.0 *The role of the reader, individual, or subject*

Despite the cultural influences just discussed, the person who sees the dance is not a carbon copy of his/her neighbour. Too much emphasis on the social position ignores the way each one of us, as an individual, makes sense of the world. My twin sister and I, despite identical genetic make up and very similar upbringing, continue to see the world and to respond to it, differently.

⁹ Some 40 versions can readily be identified. The range can be characterised thus: Balanchine, (1949); Cranko (1964); Bejart (1970); Tetley (1981); Taras (1982).

The idea that 'making sense' of a dance is an individual matter is hardly revolutionary, it has existed very strongly in romantic and expressionistic accounts of art and continues to pervade critical literature. In my own work with colleagues in dance analysis, the crucial shift that reveals this position is found in the move between the terms 'description' and 'ascription'. Despite the problems associated with description, with its connotations of objectivity and of verifiable characteristics, it is useful in directing attention to the movement and other elements of the performance, while *ascription* directs attention to the reader/viewer. 'Ascription' carries a sense of assigning, attributing, imputing, which makes clear the role of the person who does it. It emphasises the personal and performative character of the act of reading¹⁰.

The post-structuralist position, revealed, for example, in the frequently quoted remark that the rise of the reader has to be at the expense of the death of the author, reflects this shift from a perception of the choreographer as the originating genius and the reader as passive recipient, to the reader as constructor of meaning in as important a sense as the maker¹¹.

Interpretations, on this account, cannot be handed on as authoritative positions; the dance has to be experienced. If this was not the case interpretation would become 'about the dance' in a propositional sense; thus interpretation logically entails experience. The tolerance for a range of interpretations which inevitably follows is evident in many theories.¹² It is not an original idea, therefore, that art is a complex, multi-layered act which requires the reader to bring it into existence, although the relative investment in the author, the text and the reader as the locus of meaning differs according to the particular theoretical perspective.

¹⁰ This point is pursued further by Hodgins (in Adshead ed 1988 pp.60-65), who subsequently argues that interpretations are 'based on the interest in, and direct experience of, the dance itself'(p.116).

¹¹ This debate, usually attributed to Barthes (1968 in French, trans. 1977), is pursued by Foucault (1969 in French, trans. 1977). Both articles are reprinted in Lodge (1988).

¹² See, for example, Beardsley and Margolis.

5.0 Conclusion

The thrust of post-structuralist commentary on artistic endeavour is that there should be a tolerance of the shifting interpretations of events which derive from different experiences. The interplay of texts, although understood through coded practices that are shared, gives rise to a multiplicity of possible interpretations, a plurality of significance. Interpretation, therefore, is no longer seen simply as the free subjective response to the work on the part of an individual, but a complex act in which the situation of the making and seeing, and the position and active engagement of the reader are crucial.

This does not imply the imposition of a particular interpretive process or that any one interpretation might be definitive. Any sense that there might be an absolute truth or a final interpretation has long disappeared. Hence performances come to be seen as complex, discursive events which license each reader to produce their own meanings; meanings which can, nonetheless, be explained and supported. On these arguments there can be no single, authoritative reading, no comfortable sense of agreement, of right or wrong. What comfort there is, resides in the 'speculative creativity of ambiguity' (Worton (1986 p21).

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Abstract

El entender, o interpretar la danza es uno de los aspectos más importantes del estudio académico de la danza y es central al área de la teoría y crítica de la misma. En este artículo se exploran las posiciones problemáticas del texto, la pertinencia del contexto y, en último lugar, el papel del espectador, o lector. La interacción sutil de ideas y fragmentos de memoria recordados por el texto se ilustra con referencias a *Strange Fish* de Lloyd Newson y DV8, a través de ideas post-estructuralistas de interpretaciones cambiantes, que se derivan de diferentes experiencias.