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WRITING DANCING : THE SCOPE AND LIMITS OF CONTEMPORARY MODERN
DANCE CRITICISM

by

Raewyn Whyte

Dip. Tchg. Victoria University of Wellington 1974

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

by Special Arrangements

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WRITING DANCING : THE SCOPE AND LIMITS OF CONTEMPORARY MODERN DANCE CRITICISM

- Raewyn Whyte

ABSTRACT:

How is it possible for critics to write about dance - an art form which vanishes from sight in the moment of performance, and which leaves behind it only the sensory impressions of the viewer? What is the purpose of dance criticism - a form of writing which always only partially accounts for the viewer's interactive experience with and appreciation of this uniquely bodily form of art? And what effects does this form of writing have on the public and professional understanding of dance as an art form?

This thesis examines the development of dance criticism, in response to changing conditions in the choreography and presentation of modern dance, and in relation to the requirements of journalistic publication. The thesis asserts that the relative uniformity of critical practice in the late 1980s is the result of an aesthetic paradigm which limits the critical appraisal of modern dance to primarily formal issues, and which sets aside considerations of meaning and relationships between the work and its social context. The scope and limits of paradigmatic conceptions of the task and purposes of modern dance criticism are demonstrated through close readings of recently published reviews of dances by Twyla Tharp, Pina Bausch, Bill Irwin and Karole Armitage.

Though this thesis accepts the conventional understanding that new ways of seeing and writing about dance have developed in parallel with new choreographic approaches in American modern dance, it also identifies less

recognized, but no less significant, influences on critical practice imposed by the commentary on criticism within the professional community, by the institutionalized ways of thinking and writing about dance within the academic discourses of dance history and aesthetics, and by the demands of the publication environment.

The thesis concludes by suggesting that the descriptive emphasis which is central to the aesthetic paradigm has always both enabled and constrained critical practice, but that in the late 1980s the paradigm appears to be functioning more to limit than to expand both the public understanding of dance as an art form, and the appreciative and interpretive capacities of critics and audiences:

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Introduction

This thesis considers a series of questions about mass-media modern dance criticism in the late 1980s. It asks how it is possible for critics to write about dance - an art form which vanishes from sight in the moment of performance, and which leaves behind it only the sensory impressions of the viewer. It investigates the purpose of dance criticism - a form of writing which always only partially accounts for the viewer's interactive experience with and appreciation of this uniquely bodily form of art. And it speculates on the effects which this form of writing has on the public and professional understanding of dance as an art form.

These questions are placed within the context of an inquiry into the constraints which the practice of criticism places on the professional and public perception and understanding of modern dance as an art form in contemporary society. When critics discuss the constraints on the practice of criticism, they tend to see these as externally imposed, whereas, as my examination shows, there are forms of constraint which are embedded in the way that criticism responds to dance performance, and which result in a series of limitations on the critical enterprise.

Chapter one of the thesis comprises a brief historical overview which establishes the ground from which modern dance criticism has developed. The chapter traces the development of critical methods in parallel with changing approaches to modern dance choreography, and in response to changing conditions of publication. Chapter two investigates dance criticism as a journalistic practice in the late 1980s and considers how the requirements of publication interact with critics' conceptions of task and purpose to significantly circumscribe the way critics write about dance performance. Chapter three examines the ways in which contemporary criticism conforms to the concerns of the discourses of dance

history and aesthetics, and it illustrates the limits which arise from this conformity with reference to recent reviews of a modern dance performance. Chapter four examines further reviews and contends that the central critical method of contemporary modern dance criticism is currently restricting the appreciative capacities of both critics and audiences.

This thesis takes into account my own experience as a practising critic in both New Zealand and Canada through the 1980s. It investigates the commentary on criticism written by critics, dance educators and aestheticians; the commentary on dance performance provided by dance history and aesthetics; and the reviews written by critics for publication in both mass-circulation newspapers and magazines and specialist journals. It makes use of these various sources to examine the internal constraints of critical practice and to show their sources in dance, in journalism, in the academic discourse, and in the professional community which critics comprise.

My analysis in this thesis of recent reviews of the choreography of Twyla Tharp, Pina Bausch, Karole Armitage and Bill Irwin, leads to a contention that contemporary modern dance criticism is constrained by commonly held critical assumptions and concerns. The shared means by which critics conceptualise, understand and account for their professional observations, I have named, in this thesis, as an aesthetic paradigm. Because this term is one that I have coined for the purposes of this thesis I will elaborate the methodology of the thesis by an examination of each of the words contained within this term, and make clear the context in which I am using them.

My use of the term *paradigm* in this thesis is informed by the analyses undertaken by theorists Thomas Kuhn, Stanley Fish, and Griselda Pollock¹ in their respective fields of the history of science, literary theory, and feminist art history. In the broadest sense a paradigm is the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, goals and purposes, explanations and methods (and so on), shared by the members of a professional community²: it defines the objectives, purposes, and procedures³ of a professional community. In the narrowest sense, it is an exemplary model which governs the the basis of practice within a professional community.⁴ The three theorists named have independently concluded that while paradigms do enable practice within a professional community, that they also come, in time, to constrain professional activity.

In the context of this investigation into the internal constraints of dance criticism, a paradigm is a set of conceptions, values and methods which have become central to critical practice over time, due to their efficacy of application, and which have, with time, come to embody the forms of limitation on that practice in a way which significantly constrains professional understandings. This thesis illustrates the sources of those constraints within contemporary dance criticism, and shows

1. Thomas Kuhn The Structure of Scientific Revolutions 1970; Fish, Stanley Is There A Text In This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1980; Griselda Pollock Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art London and New York: Routledge 1988

2. Kuhn *ibid* p175

3. Pollock *ibid* p2

4. Kuhn *ibid* p175

how a once responsive critical method has become unresponsive to dance performance.

I have named this an *aesthetic* paradigm to indicate the orientation which dance criticism maintains in relation to dances as the objects of appraisal, an orientation which assumes that a dance is above all an aesthetic object which is relatively autonomous from its social context.⁵ Accordingly the formal and structural aspects of the dance under appraisal, and its aesthetic surfaces and effects, are seen to provide the context of critical attention, and the consideration of the social and cognitive import of the dance is correspondingly excluded. Integral to this aesthetic orientation is the assumption that accurate description of the aesthetic object is the primary means to an aesthetically sufficient response.

In this thesis I demonstrate the aesthetic orientation of dance criticism by showing how the terms, concepts and modes of expression which dance critics employ in their characterization and commendation of dance are derived from the academic discourse about dance, and are used to alert readers to those aesthetic aspects of a particular dance which they might otherwise overlook, rather than to alert them to the social and cognitive aspects of dance performance. I also show that dance criticism is governed by the requirements of mass-circulation journalism and that these reinforce the assumption of descriptive adequacy.

⁵. I have been influenced by contrary views of the full nature and meaning of aesthetic concerns contained in the writings of Raymond Williams and Janet Wolff. See Raymond Williams *Culture* Great Britain: Fontana Press 1981; Janet Wolff *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art* London: George Allen and Unwin 1983; Janet Wolff *The Social Production of Art* London: Macmillan 1985

Chapter 1 - An Historical Overview of the Development of Modern Dance Criticism

Modern dance criticism developed only slowly into the blend of vivid reporting, aesthetic evaluation, informed technical discussion, historical research and critical insight which we take for granted today. Indeed, until 1927 there was no such thing as a dance critic - before then the public commentary on dance performance was in the hands of society columnists, theatre, art and music critics, and their columns were placed side-by-side on the society page. This chapter traces the historical development of modern dance criticism in relation to changing conditions in the choreography and presentation of modern dance, and in relation to the changing context of dance commentary.

The earliest commentary on theatrical dance performance in North America appeared in the 1840s when theatre commentators recorded their reactions to touring European dancers such as Fanny Elssler. These dancers were seen as providing theatrical entertainment, as were their counterparts in the first American spectacle-extravaganza to feature dancing, *The Black Crook*, which premiered in 1866. Like later spectacles which toured America through to the turn of the twentieth century, this featured European ballet dancers as the stars of the show, along with scores of local dancers in the corps de ballet, all dressed in gauzy skirts and exotic costumes.¹ The San Francisco Bulletin's reviewer of one such spectacle in the late 1860s observed that "the bountiful display of Amazonian

¹ Elizabeth Kendall Where She Danced - The Birth of American Art-Dance Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1979 p4-7

limbs, and the number of revolving tableaux introduced without any particular reason, pleased the spectators."²

The first commentary on what was later to be named as modern dance performance, in North American newspapers, dates from 1898³, with the first appearances of Isadora Duncan⁴, when, it was reported, her "movements were extremely graceful, and were more of the the body and the arms than the legs. The audience was evidently interested and pleased."⁵ Dance performances in this period were sponsored by wealthy patronesses of the arts, and were often used by these influential women as exclusive entertainment for members of high society. The commentary on these performances was mostly concerned with the prestigious audience gathered for the dance event, with the largest amount of space given to detailed lists of the well-known persons in attendance at dance

2. Kendall *ibid* p6

3. This date is attested to by Vera Jaffe Blaine in her research into the history of modern dance criticism in America. See Blaine Modern Dance Criticism in America Masters Thesis, Ohio State University, 1958 p5

4. On February 15, 1898 Isadora Duncan danced in a presentation titled "The Philosophy of The Dance" at the home of Mrs Arthur Dodge, 72 East Eighty-fourth Street, New York city, accompanied by her sister Elizabeth Duncan who lectured on the topic and explained that "the dance is movement expressive of thought, and that the exercise of dancing increases the support that the mind receives from the body. Dancing", she said, "can be a means of expressing music and poetry and increasing the interest in and appreciation of both. A dance can convey new ideas and new sensations". What Is Doing In Society: The Dance and Philosophy - Music and Poetry Illustrated by the Misses Duncan at the Home of Mrs Dodge The New York Times February 16, 1898 p2

5. *ibid*

performances.⁶ The dance was mentioned only briefly, more-or-less in passing. These reports were included in the society columns of such newspapers as The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, and the Philadelphia Telegraph, or at times were included in commentary on theatrical and musical events.

Modern dance moved into a more public arena from around 1908, when it began to appear in theatres, with tickets on sale to all. Dance performances began to attract serious commentary in newspapers at this time, though the association with high society continued. The dance reviews at this time were standard journalistic reports which included the facts and details of the performance event. They were written by art and theatre critics or, more often, music critics assigned to the task of covering this new art form in their columns. Not surprisingly, the emphasis of the commentary written by music critics was largely on the appropriateness of the dance to the music.

Isadora Duncan's musical choices, for example, were usually roundly condemned by these writers, as they felt that the great symphonies needed no embellishment from her. As critic Carl Van Vechten wrote, of her second season at the Metropolitan Opera House, in The New York Times in 1909:

⁶. In the March 23 1906 report of an "invitation matinee yesterday at the Hudson Theatre, at which well-known women were the hostesses who packed the theatre" to see "Miss Ruth St Dennis, an American girl, who originated the Radha dances". Just over half the commentary was a listing of the names of the hostesses, boxholders and others in attendance. The rest of the commentary was a summary of the items on the program. There was no description of the dancer, nor of the dance, and of the dancer's reception we are told only that "the cobra dance was one of the most applauded". What Is Doing In Society: Theatrical Notes The New York Times March 23, 1906 p9. See also The New York Times April 2, 1898 p9; April 23, 1898 p7; April 11, 1899 p7

Miss Isadora Duncan... made her reappearance in New York last evening at the Metropolitan Opera House, assisted by Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Orchestra. The program stated that Miss Duncan would dance to the ballets and choruses of Gluck's Iphigenie en Aulide. Most of her dances were accomplished to such an aid but at least one of them, a Chorus of Priestesses, was taken from Iphigenie en Tauride, and its original purpose and signification was greatly distorted by the dancer. It is a number which was never designed for dancing, and to any one who has heard it in its proper place in the opera it must seem more or less of a sacrilege to have it put to such purpose.

Dance commentary was also found in magazines and journals of this early period.

At times it was written by fans of individual dancers and emphasized their charms

- commentators writing of Isadora Duncan, for example, said:

Thinking over her performance one scarcely recalls whether she is beautiful or tall; one remembers only that she is a perfect exemplification of human-grace, the embodiment of the poetry of motion.... One cannot put a sunset in words or set down in cold type the emotions aroused by a perfect statue. Miss Duncan's dancing equally defies description. She expresses beauty, simplicity, joy of living and the emotional freshness of that grace carved for all ages on some Attic frieze.⁸

and

Miss Isadora Duncan, without lights, without draperies, with a neutral background, with personality in abeyance, tells us the story of the soul of the music, which is the experience of human life. In her art one feels the creative power of the soul and sees the endless variations of its moods and emotions and its spiritual possibilities.⁹

7. Carl Van Vechten The New York Times November 10, 1909 reprinted in Paul Padgette (ed) The Dance Writings of Carl Van Vechten New York: Dance Horizons 1974, p15-16

8. Anonymous music critic in the Buffalo Express September 1908 quoted in Winthrop Palmer Theatrical Dancing In America New York: Bernard Ackerman Inc 1945 p18

9. Lucia Gale Barber The Significance of the Present Dance Moment New England Magazine No 41 November, 1909 cited in Blaine *ibid* p34, 42

Journal commentary was at times more fully reasoned than that of newspapers, as this assessment of Ruth St Denis's skills as an artist shows:

Miss St. Denis still has a good deal to learn about the meaning of motions and the making of magic... Her dancing lacks sorcery and charm as yet, power to fascinate as well as to astonish; she has the cleverness which arouses interest and makes one admire, but not the touch of rapture which would carry one away, as all competent art should. She has, in other words, an excellent technique, a plastic mobility, but no passion and no adequate mastery of the expressional value of various motions. So that while her dancing may dazzle by its brilliance, it cannot enthrall.¹⁰

Dance essays were also published in books of this period, most notably those written by critic Carl Van Vechten after he left The New York Times in 1910. With an academic background in music theory, and an extensive exposure to European and American dance of the period, Van Vechten was the first to examine dance developments at length for publication. He combined description of the dancer in motion with analysis of the technical prowess and interpretive skills of individual performers, and he appraised choreography, music, set and costume design in relation to the response of the audience. His essays on Vaslav Nijinsky,¹¹ Isadora Duncan,¹² and the Ballets Russes,¹³ appeared in collections of his essays about musical events and artistic trends of the era. In his essays he

¹⁰. Bliss Carman The Making of Personality quoted in *Rehabilitation of Terpsichore* Current Literature No 45 July 1908 and cited in Blaine *ibid* p33-34, 42

¹¹. Carl Van Vechten *Waslav Nijinsky* Interpreters and Interpretations New York: Alfred A Knopf 1917 reprinted in Padgette *ibid* p79-95

¹². Carl Van Vechten *The New Isadora* The Merry-Go-Round New York: Alfred A Knopf 1918 reprinted in Padgette *ibid* p22-28

¹³. Carl Van Vechten *Impressions in the Theatre III Secret of the Russian Ballet* Music After the Great War New York: G Schirmer 1915 reprinted in Padgette *ibid* p59-79

probed the kinesiological basis of the dancer's aesthetic image in a way which foreshadowed later critical approaches to dance.¹⁴

Modern dance criticism in newspapers, magazines and journals began to change in the mid-1920s, with the advent of more formally structured choreographic approaches to dance performance. This new, evaluative criticism was a response to dances which paid new attention to the formal values and qualities of dance, and which were concerned with thematic development and with the design of movements in space. The reviewers responded by noting contrasts in dynamics and rhythms, and by identifying the internal structure of the choreography and the rules for developing that structure.

Doris Humphrey's choreographic debut with the Denishawn Company in 1924 was favorably greeted by The New York Times music critic, Olin Downes in a review which declared:

There was fresh interest in Doris Humphrey's *Tragica*, a test of pure rhythm without sound, as the tense group of dancers flung themselves silently, simultaneously, this way and that, a true motion picture, black and white, breathless, dumb, enthralling.¹⁵

And in the monthly Theatre Arts journal, theatre critic Kenneth McGowan set aside his reservations about the staging of the company's various dances in order to assess the dancing in Humphrey's work:

¹⁴. Van Vechten's essays and reviews are the subject of Linda Johnston Tomko An Analysis of the Dance Criticism of Carl Van Vechten Master's Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles 1980

¹⁵. Olin Downes The New York Times April 4, 1924 p4 cited in Blaine *ibid* p30, 42

There are long passages in this dance which conquer all the rest -- a rush of bodies and then a line of arms and torsos which bring a sharp quickening of the sense of form playing through three dimensions and on into the fourth dimension of time.¹⁶

Two years later, when Agna Enters made her debut, Downes heralded her as presenting a new approach to modern dance. Agna Enters, he wrote, was one of the most gifted and imaginative dancers the American public had seen:

[She] announced last night in the Comedy Theatre a program of Compositions in Pure Dance Form with herself as the performer. There is to be made a sharp distinction between these representations, called by Miss Enters 'compositions', and the so-called 'interpretations' of well-known musical works by other dancers. Miss Enters does not attempt in any slavish or literal way to interpret a piece of music by means of bodily action. Her choreography conceptions are independent of the details of the score; they never attempt mere illustration. They grasp a certain motive or mood, portray it with exceptional suggestiveness and unity of design, and this without either enslaving or distorting the music...

We have not seen a dancer more capable of establishing in an instant an original artistic impression, and of working out her ideas with more freshness or technical certainty... She is to be thanked for new ideas and a technique that projects and visualizes them, creating new forms as it goes; for an art that depends not only on physical lure or personal charm; but upon intelligence, sensibility, imagination.¹⁷

Louis Kalonyme, writing in the journal The Arts identified the presence in Enters' performance of:

a mind working with the tools that make up the human body. Every line, every gesture is the inevitable one, the only aesthetically valid one, an essential unit in an arbitrary design. Nothing superfluous is

¹⁶. Kenneth McGowan *Crying the Bounds of Broadway* Theatre Arts No 8 June 1924 cited in Blaine *ibid* p37, 43

¹⁷. Olin Downes The New York Times May 10, 1926 p18 cited in Blaine *ibid* p30-31, 42

admitted, the lines are individually alive though part of an ensemble.¹⁸

The critics' concern with the formal characteristics of dance performance as more important than the charms of the individual performers was continued in the writings of John Martin, America's first full-time dance critic, who wrote for The New York Times from 1927-62. With him modern dance criticism began in earnest. Martin was the most influential dance critic of his time, though his peers Edwin Denby and Walter Terry also had considerable influence. They wrote between 1936 and 1976 for New York-based newspapers, magazines and journals which were less widely distributed than the Times, so their reviews, unlike Martin's, were not easily available to a coast to coast readership.

Martin's background was academic, and he was well-grounded in the philosophy of art current in his day. His writing about the emerging American modern dance was informed by the aesthetic theories of philosopher/aestheticians R.J. Collingwood and Suzanne Langer, who concerned themselves with visual art and dance, and Martin championed the new modern dance in a way that ensured its acceptance as an art form in its own right.

Martin began writing at a time when a new generation of choreographers, most notably Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, were presenting their work in modern dance concerts. These new choreographers of the thirties believed that modern dance should reflect contemporary attitudes and preoccupations, and that it should provoke, stimulate, and inform its audience rather than simply entertain them. Their interest was in the human condition, and

¹⁸ Louis Kalonyne *Dancing of Agna Enters* The Arts No 9 May 1926 cited in Blaine *ibid* p38, 43

they were determined to examine real human problems through the emotional and physical drama of dancing. Form and craft were as much their concern as the expression of human content. In their radical approaches to the dance they set out to strip away the artificial prettiness and exoticism which had become the norm in dance of the 1920s, and they replaced these with weighted movements which could heighten the communication of emotional states.

Martin's reviews helped to teach his readers how to look at and appreciate this new, sparse and at times shocking, modern dance. He made sparing use of descriptive detail, and he wrote in a dry prose which seldom drew on metaphor or simile. He seldom mentioned the audience reaction to an event, except when it differed from his own, and he seldom listed the musical data of a performance. Instead he examined what he saw as the aesthetic issues of modern dance performance. He focused on the ways dancers used weight, dynamics and flow, and he evaluated the formal structuring of the choreography.

Soon after he began to write about dance, Martin began to teach courses on modern dance, dance history and dance criticism, at New York's New School for Social Research from 1930-34, and at Bennington College's summer schools from 1934-38. These courses were open to anyone who chose to take them, and through them many dancers, dance students, and teachers of dance were exposed to his understanding of dance. Martin's courses in dance criticism were the first to promote the writing of dance criticism as an independent, specialized skill, and his modern dance and dance history courses have been acknowledged

by his contemporaries as the beginning of shaping the thinking and aesthetic judgement of generations of people to come.¹⁹

During the 1940s American modern dance took shape through the codified techniques and personalized movement vocabularies of individual choreographers, always with an emphasis on the expression of emotions through dance. The styles of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey-Charles Weidman, Mary Wigman, Hanya Holm, Helen Tamiris, and Lester Horton, were each based on fundamentally different principles of motion and were recognizably different from each other.

Graham, for example, based her technique on the function of breath and a focus on the dancer's centre of gravity. Contraction of the solar plexus and the expulsion of breath curved the chest inwards and rounded the back, and was used to suggest fear, sorrow, withdrawal, introversion: release of this contraction filled the lungs with air, and signified affirmation, acceptance, ecstasy. Used together these two movements heightened each other's effect, and allowed the communication of a range of subtle emotional expressions. Humphrey's hallmark, by contrast, was the fall and recovery which resulted from the dancer's struggle with gravity and inertia, at one extreme a complete surrender to gravity, at the other the achievement of balance and stability. The contrast between the two was used to signify a wide range of emotional states and social relationships.

Modern dance was not the only theatrical dance form to earn new public attention and support through the 30s and 40s in the United States. Ballet which had grown

¹⁹. Sybil Shearer introduction, and Martha Hill's comments quoted in Clive Barnes et al *John Martin: A Tribute* Ballet Review Spring 1988 p45, 48

out of the Russian classical tradition did also, thanks to tours by Les Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, and the newly formed, New York-based companies American Ballet Caravan and American Ballet Theatre. These were the years when ballet was in the ascendant as a modern American art form, a period when editors gave increasing space to ballet reviews, and a time when American ballet choreographers began to come into their own. Loring, Christensen, Dollar, de Mille and Balanchine became familiar names to the ballet audience, and by 1943, as one critic was to report in a review, balletomania swept the land from coast to coast.²⁰

Edwin Denby is now the most admired and best remembered of the dance critics writing from the late 30s into the 40s, and the one whose writing has provided models for later generations of critics. Denby's formal education was in literature (at Harvard) and dance (at Austria's centre for expressionist dance, the Hellerau-Laxenburg School). He had a brief performing career in dance and theatre in Europe in the early 1930s, and continued to be an occasional performer in dance, theatre and film in America until late in his life. As a writer of poetry and fiction he was well published, and from his twenties he was a successful librettist for theatre and opera. It is, however, his dance writing for which he is most honored, and in particular for his reviews of dance performances in New York city during the late-1930s and the 1940s for the monthly specialist journal Modern Music, and for the daily New York Herald-Tribune.

²⁰. Edwin Denby *Markova's Dance Rhythm; Tudor's "Romeo And Juliet"* Modern Music May-June 1943 reprinted in Cornfield, R and Mackay, A (eds) Edwin Denby : Dance Writings New York: Alfred A Knopf 1986 p106-110

Denby is renowned for his loving description of dance passages, particularly passages from the ballets of George Balanchine. In his reviews and essays he told what he saw and what it meant to him, and what for him gave an individual's performance its power. His analysis was supported by physical examples from the dance to make it clear what gave a dance its impetus and held it together, and in this way he helped his readers to understand why he felt a particular moment in a dance was so remarkable. One of his much-quoted descriptions is this section from a 1945 review of Balanchine's ballet *Concerto Barocco*:

The correspondence of eye and ear is at its most surprising in the poignant adagio movement. At the climax, for instance, against a background of chorus that suggests the look of trees in the wind before a storm breaks, the ballerina, with limbs powerfully outspread, is lifted by her male partner, lifted repeatedly in narrowing arcs higher and higher. Then at the culminating phrase, from her greatest height he very slowly lowers her. You watch her body slowly descend, her foot and leg pointing stiffly downward, till her toe reaches the floor and she rests her full weight at last on this single sharp point and pauses. It is the effect at that moment of a deliberate and powerful plunge into a wound, and the emotion of it answers strangely to the musical stress.²¹

In this way Denby shared his response to a dance which had "power of rhythm and flow", and which "before you know it has absorbed your attention and doesn't let it go."²² At the same time he made clear both the structure of the moment and the relationships between the dance and the music, and he communicated his aesthetic appreciation to his readers in a way which was intended to enhance their dance viewing.

21. Edwin Denby *Concerto Barocco* New York Herald-Tribune September 16, 1945 reprinted in Cornfield and Mackay *ibid* p322

22. *ibid*

Denby's aesthetic criteria were shaped by the new ballets of the late 30s and early 40s, with their emphasis on clarity, dynamic contrast, speed and rhythm, danced emotion and expressiveness. These emphases informed his attention to precision, musical and spatial rhythmicity, to the expressivity of the performers, and to technical skill as revealed in the sensitive dynamic interpretation of individual dance gestures and phrases.²³ He saw no need to deal with a dance 'on its own terms', as critics were later to do, because he saw ballet's terms as applicable to all other forms of dance. He believed, as he wrote in 1943 in a column which outlined his criteria for ballet performance, titled *How To Judge A Dancer*, that his criteria were equally applicable to any dance technique.²⁴

When he applied these standards to the modern dance works presented by Martha Graham, for example, he was able to admire Graham as a performer who exemplified technical intelligence, but not to admire her choreography, since:

Judged by what I look for in ballet, Miss Graham's gesture lacks a way of opening up completely, and her use of dance rhythm seems to me fragmentary. It does not rise in a long, sustained line and come to a conclusion. I find she uses the stage space the way the realistic theater does, as an accidental segment of a place, not the way the poetic theater uses the stage, as a space complete in itself.²⁵

²³. Denby also preferred a particular kind of femininity in his dancers, the highly conventional femininity of the ballerina. He looked for personalized charm and pleasant appearance, for delicacy, gracefulness, and fleetness of foot, for a projected pleasure in dancing and a poetic presence.

²⁴. Edwin Denby *How to Judge A Dancer* Modern Music October 10, 1943 reprinted in Cornfield and Mackay *ibid* p148

²⁵. Edwin Denby *A Ballet Lover's View Of Martha Graham* New York Herald-Tribune May 28, 1944 reprinted in Cornfield and Mackay *ibid* p234

In his review he provided a point by point comparison of certain aspects of ballet and modern dance, as usual supporting his analytic judgements by physical description. Graham's style, he concluded, looked like ballet done intentionally against the grain.

Writing in New York between 1936 and 1965, in both newspapers and journals, Denby is now widely accepted as the exemplar of dance criticism. He has been credited²⁶ with altering the way people think and talk about dance through his attempts to fully capture his viewing experiences, and his reviews and essays are seen as "composing a primer in dance techniques and dance aesthetics for the popular audience."²⁷

Denby also wrote what amounts to a primer of dance criticism in his essays *Dance Criticism* (1949) and *Dancers, Buildings and People in The Streets* (1954). In these essays Denby asserts that there are two quite different aspects to dance criticism, "seeing what is happening on stage [and] describing clearly what it is you saw."²⁸ The first aspect, 'seeing', includes the physical acts of looking at and paying continuous attention to the performance, and such specifics as "seeing what happens when people are dancing, seeing how they look, watching them and appreciating the beauty they show,"²⁹ and seeing "what the dancers did,

26. Robert Cornfield *Introduction* in Cornfield and Mackay *ibid* p9

27. Arlene Croce *DANCING: Writings* The New Yorker April 13, 1987 p90

26. Edwin Denby *Dancers, Buildings, And People In The Streets* Center 1954
reprinted in Cornfield and Mackay *ibid* p548

29. *ibid*

what they communicated, and how remarkable that was."³⁰ This 'seeing' also includes "feel[ing] the emotion that is coming toward you from the performance,"³¹ knowing "the facts [of dancing] so you can recognize them... appreciate how they move, how they keep dancing,"³² and "recognizing on stage and inside yourself an echo of some personal, original excitement you already know."³³

Denby is just as specific about the second aspect of dance criticism, 'describing what you saw.' "Writing criticism ...is a separate process from that of seeing what happens," he says, and "expressing lucidly what happened, is of course what makes criticism criticism."³⁴ Writing lucidly, for Denby, is a matter of writing in terms which even readers who have not seen the dance in question will understand, and constructing "a vivid picture of what actually happens onstage.. which tells the public what is interesting and original in current dancing."³⁵ The critic, he says, is expected to "give a clear picture of the event and to place it in its relation to the art of theatre dancing"³⁶; to "describe the nature of the dancing..."

³⁰. Edwin Denby *Dance Criticism* The Dance Encyclopedia 1949 reprinted in Cornfield and Mackay *ibid* p541

³¹. Edwin Denby *Dancers, Buildings, And People In The Streets* p549

³². *ibid* p551

³³. *ibid*

³⁴. *ibid* p550

³⁵. Edwin Denby *Dance Criticism* p534

³⁶. *ibid* p533

the gifts or developments of the artists, the technical basis of aesthetic effects, and the organizational problems that affect artistic production."³⁷ The questions which he set out to answer for his readers were those which today's editors still require their critics to answer: "did an event of artistic interest take place, and if it did, what particular flavor did it have?"³⁸

Denby's injunctions about what dance critics should do, and his own methods and goals as a writer, were shaped by his experience of covering ballet night after night for the next day's newspaper, with every now and then a modern dance performance, and once in a while Spanish gypsy dancing or Indian classical dance, ice ballets, musicals, striptease or the circus. His dance beat was 90% classical ballet old and new, everything from the classic works *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*, and the modern classics *Les Sylphides* and *Petrouchka*, to the latest inventions from Balanchine and the new American choreographers, which at times bent the classical conventions into new shapes.

In the early 1950s, when Denby's essays on dance criticism were published, a new generation of modern dance choreographers were beginning to present their works. Some who had been dancers in the Graham and Humphrey-Weidman companies continued with methods of these master choreographers: Pearl Lang and May O'Donnell extended the Graham approach with their compositional emphasis on thematic development, and José Limon carried on the Humphrey-Weidman tradition by solidifying and expanding the ideas at the source of the movement.

³⁷. *ibid* p534

³⁸. *ibid*

More interestingly, though, new choreographers in the early 1950s began to challenge the modern dance conventions which had become a ruling aesthetic during the 1940s. They produced dances which were very different from those with which Denby's approach was designed to deal, dances whose terms and values had little in common with the ideals which Denby's writing celebrated. Choreographers of these new modern dances stripped away the theatricality, narrative and character, drama and the expression of emotion, which had become integral to modern dance in the 1940s. Rather than structuring their dances to match the moods and structures of the emotionally colored music preferred by their predecessors, the avant garde choreographers often used electronic music of unpredictable phrasing, and juxtaposed movement and sound to open up new choreographic possibilities.

Denby's concern with the elegance, virtuosity, refinement, and the idealization of the dancer which were integral to ballet had little utility in relation to avant garde dances, particularly those of Merce Cunningham and Alwin Nikolais. These two choreographers were in the vanguard of those who questioned the currently accepted structural conventions of modern dance of the 40s and early 50s. Instead of narrative and expression and representational gestures, they presented movement itself as the only material of their dances, abstract movement, shaped by new approaches to dance construction drawn from avant garde visual art, literature and music of the day. The new choreographers' adoption of these principles took dance into the revolution in materials which was central to modernist art of the period.

The prevailing modern dance aesthetic of the 1940s called for dances in which the choreographer's intended meaning, whether narrative, emotional or intellectual,

was clearly communicated to the spectators through expressive movement. The avant garde choreographers instead made dances in which the communication of meaning was of little importance - their intention was to explore formal concerns, and this resulted in dances which were radically open to interpretation. Alwin Nikolais, for example, emphasized form in a similar way to non-objective artists. He emphasized the visual art aspects of dance - shape, colour, texture, space and time. Using slide projections and electronic music, he created scenic and aural environments for his choreography, and his dances presented bizarre juxtapositions of sound and movement which heightened the feeling of estrangement which his works produced.

One of Nikolais' earliest dances was *Masks, Props, and Mobiles* (1953). In it he used costumes that concealed or transformed the dancer's bodies - sacks of stretchy fabric which completely encased the dancers and which responded to their moves to produce an array of strange shapes which had no literal meaning. His intention was to transcend the personal, and even the human, by use of such costumes, and he later used make-up, props and slide projections towards this same goal.

Merce Cunningham introduced elaborate chance procedures as tools in the structuring of his dances. He would, for example, draw up a chart whose subdivisions described various movements of the body, then he would toss coins to determine which movement to use, or to decide whether a section should be danced as a solo or ensemble passage, or by men or by women. By similar procedures he would select the kinds of movements to be used, the order of movements, the tempi, and any other specific aspect of the dance such as direction and duration of movement. Similarly he would determine which parts of

the body would move in isolation from the rest of the body, and whether dancers would be given the freedom to decide which movements they might use at specific moments in the performance. These methods resulted in highly unpredictable dances which had no fixed meaning. Viewers were left to make whatever they could of them.

Music and movement were dissociated in Cunningham's dances, and the notion of climax was done away with. Dancers could move in any part of the stage, and there was no longer any necessity to have a 'front' which faced the audience. In *Dime A Dance* (1953), audience members paid a dime to take cards from a deck which would then structure the parts of the dance for that performance; in *Field Dances* (1963), each dancer was given a relatively simple series of movements, which he or she could execute in any order and any number of times, entering or exiting at will. Music, set, and costumes could also be subject to chance - in *Story* (1963), dancers selected what they should wear at each performance from a pile of secondhand clothes collected by the designer, Robert Rauschenberg, who used materials found in the theatre to assemble a new stage set for every performance.

Cunningham's use of chance procedures to produce collages of time, space and movement elements was in part a result of his collaboration with avant garde composer John Cage, who used indeterminacy as a means to let sounds be themselves rather than the vehicle for emotions and ideas. The dances which resulted from Cunningham's chance procedures were analogous to abstract expressionist paintings of the day, such as those by Jackson Pollock, whose action method involved dripping colored paints onto the canvas, there to converge and disperse in their own rhythms. The rhythmic flow of movement in

the dances was very similar to the rhythmic flow of color in the paintings, and the patterning of words in texts by writers like Jack Kerouac, Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg. Figurative elements, which were at moments fleetingly apparent to viewers of abstract paintings, had their parallel in momentary incidents within avant garde dances. Neither the apparent incidents nor the apparent figurative elements held any fixed meaning.

Audience reaction to the new dances ranged from outrage and hostility to wild enthusiasm and indifference.³⁹ Similarly, dance reviewers didn't know what to make of these avant garde dances at first. Some simply ignored the rebels - refused to pass comment on their work or even to attend their performances. After all, these new dances were presented in small theatres which were seldom covered by the daily press. Some critics kept half an eye on the new dances, but rarely wrote reviews of them,⁴⁰ while others labelled the new dances obscure, and attributed this obscurity to a poverty of artistic means and "a wilful misdemeanor of hide and seek by the artist".⁴¹ The result, as critic Jill Johnston

39. Selma Jeanne Cohen *Avant Garde Choreography Part 1* Dance Magazine June 1962 p22

40. Walter Terry, for example appreciatively reviewed one of Merce Cunningham's solo performances in 1946 and did not review him again until 1965. Walter Terry I Was There Selected Dance Reviews and Articles 1936-1976 New York: Marcel Dekker Inc 1978 p168-69, 478-81; Edwin Denby reviewed Cunningham's choreographic premiere in 1944, and three solo showings in 1945, then next wrote on Cunningham in 1968, always with appreciation of Cunningham the performer. Cornfield and Mackay *ibid* p207-08, 279-80, 283-84, 317, 406-407

41. Jill Johnston *The Modern Dance - Directions and Criticisms* Dance Observer April 1957 p56

later assessed it, was that "the general public remain[ed] none the wiser" for the critics' commentary.⁴²

The dis-ease the critics felt at the shock of the new in the 50s was intensified in the 60s, when a further new generation of choreographers burst onto the dance scene. The new avant garde first showed their works at Judson Church in New York City in 1962, and continued using the Church as their showcase until the late-60s, though by then they were also presenting their works in other places. The Judson Church choreographers had been taking composition classes with musician Robert Dunn at Merce Cunningham's studios, along with visual artists, composers, film makers, writers and a theater director.⁴³ Collectively this group explored radical notions about what might constitute dance and dancers. They put the emphasis on formal qualities of movement, and reduced dance to the bare essentials - a person (or persons) moving in an area designated as performing space. They made dances which might consist of, among other things:

postures and activities drawn from sports or everyday life, isolated from their usual context, but recreated as accurately as possible; ordinary occurrences like dressing and undressing, given an unusual twist but *performed* as if nothing extraordinary was happening (*Flat*, by Steve Paxton, 1964); highly imaginative "games" played with attentiveness and all the skill that can be mustered (*Rulegame 5*, Trisha Brown, 1964); complicated and demanding

42. *ibid*

43. Sally Banes *Choreographic Methods Of The Judson Dance Theater in Choreography: Principles and Practice Report of the Fourth Study of Dance Conference, Guildford, Surrey (UK) 1986* University of Surrey 1987 p94

sequences of movement, matter-of-factly treated (*Trio A*, Yvonne Rainer, 1966).⁴⁴

These new choreographers, and their associates through the 60s, blended dance with every other art form to produce new intermedia fusions. They set dance in strange spaces, and on non-dancers who performed everyday movements such as walking and sitting. They framed dance in new ways by setting it on rooftops and on the street, in galleries and in parks; and they altered the conventional time frame by making dances which lasted anywhere from a few minutes to several hours.

Critics could not simply ignore this new dance as they had in the 1950s when avant garde dance was on the fringe of the art world, and had only a small following. In 1965 modern dance in the United States had become an official, federally supported art form, thanks to the provision of funds for modern dance training and performance from the National Endowment for the Arts.⁴⁵ The new modern dance was also an integral part of the new intermedia art environment, and was attracting enough public attention that editors were at last ready to give it space in their publications.⁴⁶

44. Deborah Jowitt Time and The Dancing Image New York: William Morrow and Company Inc 1988 p308

45. This funding was increased in 1968 with the establishment of the NEA Dance Touring Council to support the presentation of dance company touring programs into communities large and small.

46. Newspaper and magazine coverage of modern dance began to increase in the late 1960s in the United States, with big city newspapers giving more attention to dance in their feature sections, and beginning to take on freelance critics to review performances. Even national magazines like Time, Newsweek and Saturday Review began to carry dance reviews with increasing frequency.

Dance critics and dance audiences were faced by a tremendous variety of structures and styles in this 'new era of unlicensed activity',⁴⁷ and by dances which took shape outside the normal definitions and expectations of choreographic crafting and dancerly technique and skill. To judge the new dances by the standards of ballet and mainstream modern dance was to misunderstand them, and to review them that way was to misrepresent them. The New York Times critic Clive Barnes did just that when he reviewed Yvonne Rainer's *The Mind Is a Muscle* at Judson Church, in 1966:

To take the best first: there was a slight sense in Yvonne Rainer's work. She had a modest, no, more than modest technique, and she looked as though there was a certain talent infusing her movements. Her collaborators, the sad Mr Paxton and the wry-faced Mr Gordon, also looked trained and ready. Choreography seemed outside their ken, and their results were only amusing in the camp way of the ghastly, the terrible, the totally undistinguished. While this is sickly amusing when unintended, add intention and the results are merely pitiable.⁴⁸

The normal criteria of 'sense, technique, talent and training', as Clive Barnes had inadvertently shown, were no longer appropriate, and Denby's criteria of precision, rhythmicity, technical skill, sensitive dynamic interpretation and expressivity were similarly inappropriate. The critics had to find a way to approach these new dances with sensitivity. They had to find a way of writing which would enable them to comment intelligently on the wide range of dances which they

47. Jill Johnston *The New American Modern Dance* Salmagundi No33/34 Spring/Summer 1976 p174

48. Clive Barnes *Village Disaster* The New York Times January 11 1966 quoted in Michael Kirby *Edited Transcript Of A Lecture* in Anne Livet Contemporary Dance: An anthology of lectures, interviews and essays with many of the most important contemporary American choreographers, scholars and critics New York: Abbeville Press Inc 1978 p158.

faced on the dance beat, and which would let them make sense of these dances in time to meet their deadlines.

The Dance Magazine critic, Jack Anderson, took a leaf from Denby's book, and encapsulated his impressions of Rainer's dance by telling what he had seen and thought about it. Of the dance which Barnes had so vigorously trashed, Anderson wrote:

In her still-in-progress *The Mind Is A Muscle* Yvonne Rainer gave herself, David Gordon, and Steve Paxton bouncy, springy movements reminiscent of calisthenics in some imaginary gymnasium. As they danced, strips of wood fell from the Judson Church balcony. Occurring at the edge of the stage area, and intended to be glimpsed from the corner of one's eye, this device, rather than being a distraction, helped the dancers to evoke the feeling of an always exhilarating, and never wearisome, perpetual motion.⁴⁹

Anderson's review gave a fuller sense of Rainer's dance than Barnes' review had, without judging the dance by the standards of the canonical dance forms. Critic Jill Johnston, writing for the New York weekly newspaper The Village Voice, provided a lucid articulation of what she saw in the trio section of Rainer's dance. Her version of Denby's 'seeing and writing' was placed within the terms of the dance itself - its structure and dynamic qualities. She wrote:

The trio is actually one solo. The three dancers perform the solo simultaneously but are almost never in unison since each performer moves at his own speed. The solo seems to consist of innumerable discrete parts or phrases. The intricacy lies in the sheer quantity of diverse material presented in a short space of time. Yet all this detail is assimilated by a smooth unaccented continuity rendering some

⁴⁹ Jack Anderson *Yvonne Rainer, David Gordon, Steve Paxton Judson Memorial Church January 10, 11, 12, 1966* Dance Magazine March 1966 p30

illusion of sameness to the whole thing. Each phrase receives equal emphasis... One could view the entire solo as a single phrase.⁵⁰

The rationale for Johnston's approach to this dance, as to any other dance, was:

to accept what the immediate presence offers us and not judge the presence by the consideration of possibilities other than what we see in the presence. The judgement which applies to traditional forms, where the progression of one step to the next is understood as inevitable, must be suspended, since there are only facts, no inevitabilities. The facts are interchangeable. There are no laws governing the sequences or juxtapositions. The dances are lawless.⁵¹

Johnson had been an occasional member of Robert Dunn's composition class, and her approach to reviewing was very similar to the method of non-evaluative criticism which Dunn and his students had used in order to provide constructive commentary on each other's choreography. Her approach also closely resembled the new method which radical philosopher and scholar Susan Sontag had argued for in her famous and exceedingly influential 1964 essay, *Against Interpretation*. This new method, Sontag had said, would be one which would show how the work of art *is* what it *is*, rather than what it means; it would be a method which would dissolve considerations of content into those of form and thus "reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it."⁵²

A variant of Johnston's method became central to the new dance criticism which developed through the late 1960s and into the 1970s, and gained momentum as

⁵⁰ Jill Johnston *Rainer's Muscle* The Village Voice April 18, 1968 reprinted in Jill Johnston Marmalade Me EP Dutton & Co Inc 1971 p38

⁵¹ Johnston *The New American Modern Dance* *ibid* p156

⁵² Susan Sontag *Against Interpretation* in Against Interpretation And Other Essays New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux 1966 p13

form-and-movement oriented post-modern dance became the norm. This new method of writing about dance performance set out to be "no more obtrusive than a transparent filter through which the performance could pass on its way to the reader.. [without] interpretation, evaluation, or unconscious distortion."⁵³ It combined description and analysis of the presentational surface and internal structure of the dance, without direct interpretation or judgement, and it paid attention to choreography as the primary element of the dance in view.

Precise, vivid description was essential to this new method as a valuable tool for:

looking analytically at what dance is without making value judgements that this kind of dance is good and that kind of dance is bad, to look at the range of dancing and to look at some of the possibilities (there are others) in how we can distinguish between different kinds of dancing.⁵⁴

This use of descriptive analysis became widely accepted during the 70s as a means by which to consider a dance on its own terms rather than measuring it against some absolute scale of values,⁵⁵ and as a means by which to place the emphasis on description rather than evaluation. Such descriptive analysis was also valuable as a tool which facilitated the identification and reflection of the specific movement qualities which made a particular dance distinctive.⁵⁶ Though

⁵³. Marcia B Siegel *On Encountering the 33rd Fouette* DCA News Spring 1989 p3

⁵⁴. Michael Kirby *ibid* p167

⁵⁵. Deborah Jowitt The Dance In Mind: Profiles and Reviews 1976-83 Boston: David R Godine Publisher 1985 px

⁵⁶. Selma Jeanne Cohen [Reviews of] Coton, A.V. *Writings on Dance 1936-68* (1975); Croce, Arlene *Afterimages* (1977); Jowitt, Deborah *Dance Beat, Selected Views and Reviews 1967-76* (1977); Siegel, Marcia B *Watching*

it was constructed in response to post-modern dance, this method was subsequently applied to every kind of dance which critics encountered on the dance beat, from environmental dances to neo-classical ballet, from Kathakali to reconstructions of early American modern dance works.

The new dance criticism played an important role in the changing dance environment which developed as dance activity accelerated through the 1970s into what we now label 'the dance boom'. The boom began during a period of relative affluence, and at a time when many people had both the time and the money to spend on arts, entertainment, personal growth, and leisure activities. It was also a period when the arts in general were increasingly in the public eye, increasingly accessible, and increasingly drawn to public attention through mass-media exposure.

At the same time there was a rapid increase in the frequency of professional dance performance, and an increasingly diverse range of styles being presented in theaters and non-theatrical spaces. More dance companies than ever before⁵⁷ were performing across the United States and around the world, bringing an expansion in the range of serious artistic dance, and bringing new attitudes about the value of dance as a performing art among dancers, critics, scholars and the general public.

the Dance Go By (1977) The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism Vol 37, Spring 1979 p390-392

⁵⁷. More than 200 professional modern dance companies were active in the United States by 1977 according to J H Mazo *Modern dance* in W M Lowry (ed) The Performing Arts and American Society Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc 1978 p79

The reviews and articles written by dance critics served several purposes in relation to the dance boom. They were the means to educate the new audience of dance viewers - they provided models of informed dance viewing which could enrich the understanding of readers and could help them to develop standards of aesthetic expectation which could inform their future viewing. The reviews also filled a promotional role - they helped to create the conditions under which dance has an audience, and they provided the context in which the presentation and promotion of dance as a popular art form was encouraged. Beyond these functions, the reviews and articles helped to legitimize dance as an art form by framing dance performance in an aesthetic context for readers.

Though there had been a rapid increase in dance degree programs in American colleges and universities through the 60s and 70s,⁵⁸ the professional educational needs of working critics were not met by these programs. Critics at this time, especially those working outside of New York city, were largely working in isolation, and needed contact with their peers. They needed a network of contact, a chance to meet and talk with other critics about matters of professional concern, opportunities to better inform themselves about aspects of dance with which they were unfamiliar, and writing workshops geared to their professional needs.

The first intensive workshop for working critics was offered as part of the American Dance Festival during 1970, with funding from the National Endowment

⁵⁸. Seventy-three new dance degree programs were established in American colleges and universities through the 1960s and 70s, with 23 established in the period 1968-70. Sarah Chapman & Richard Kraus The History of Dance in Art and Education Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc 1981 p294

for the Arts, and it has since become an annual event. This three-week program was first offered at a time when dance audiences were growing fast but when the number of experienced and qualified critics was small. Designed to give working journalists and writers an opportunity to learn more about modern dance, the purpose of the course was "not to create dance critics in three weeks, rather... to provide guidelines which a student can use in the future... to give them directions that they can later explore themselves."⁵⁹ All expenses were covered by scholarships available to twelve participants who would be selected on the basis of the visual and kinetic sensitivity of their writing.

The program developed for the ADF critics program has provided the model for similar, though shorter, courses offered to working dance critics and writers at summer festivals and dance courses across the United States, and in Canada, England, and Hong Kong. The intention of the first professional workshop, as has continued in later workshops, was to strengthen critical methods and so to improve the level of dance criticism produced by participants on return to their normal dance beat. Critics at the ADF workshop worked for fifteen hours each day, on exercises and assignments designed to refine their visual perception of movement, and to help them hone their skills in writing about dance. It was intended that they should become attentive to the actual movement performed, and that they should be inspired to find the exact words which would capture and match the distinctive quality of what they observed,⁶⁰ both at the workshop and beyond it.

⁵⁹. Ellen W Jacobs *Learning To Look* Dance Magazine October 1970 p24

⁶⁰. Jacobs *ibid* p24, 76-78 and Jack Anderson The American Dance Festival Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press 1987 p135-136

The participants observed and took part in a range of dance technique and movement exploration classes conducted by leading modern dancers, attended dance company rehearsals, and talked with choreographers and visiting critics. They received lectures in movement analysis, dance history and aesthetics, from senior critics and academics with specialist knowledge, and they learned something of the problems of dance company administration from a company manager and a publicist. They wrote about the performances they saw each night, and the next day they critiqued each other's writing in round table discussions.

The model of dance criticism provided at the ADF workshops through the 1970s and into the 1980s, was one in which the critical method of descriptive analysis was pursued within a framework provided by the academic discourses of dance history and aesthetics. Thus critical seeing and writing about dance performance were necessarily guided by attention to the stylistic and generic criteria appropriate to the varied works of the contemporary repertoire, rather than by attention to the wider social and political context within which a performance took place. This model will be referred to in subsequent chapters of this thesis as an "aesthetic paradigm" which has become dominant in contemporary modern dance criticism.

By the mid 1970s there were more people than ever before writing about dance, both as critics writing for newspapers and magazines, and as contributors to the new specialist publications directed at dance professionals.⁶¹ In North America

⁶¹ Ballet Review was established in 1965, Dance Scope in 1973 (ceased publication in 1981), Dance Research Journal in 1974; Dance Chronicle in 1977; and Attitudes and Arabesques in 1978.

by 1974 there were enough people writing about dance as a serious undertaking to form their own organization, the New York-based Dance Critics Association, created specifically to meet the needs of critics through education, research, and the exchange of ideas within the professional community.⁶²

Through the 70s and 80s, the conferences and seminars of the DCA have taken up the same emphases as those pursued by the ADF critics workshops. Lectures and panel discussions have sought to better inform critics about dance history and the aesthetic standards of particular styles and periods of dance development, and about the dance works of particular choreographers in relation to the artistic context of their production.⁶³ Writing workshops offered at DCA annual conferences, like those at the ADF workshops, have provided "exercises in seeing, assimilating, and writing...to instill..the methodology and tools to better see, and ultimately, write about dance as an art form"⁶⁴; they have reminded participants that "the most important tools ...are the ability to look, along with the knowledge of what to look for".⁶⁵

Dance criticism in the late 1980s must be understood in relation to this historic process of development. Critical approaches and methods have arisen in

⁶². Max Wyman *Meetings Two: The Critics/Recontres deux: Les critiques Dance In Canada/Danse au Canada* Winter 1975 p16

⁶³. DCA Seminars have focused on *The Rite of Spring, Swan Lake, The Four Temperaments*, and on the way Soviet choreographer Kazan Goleizovsky's work has influenced other choreographers.

⁶⁴. Lisa Traiger *Impressions from the DCA Writer's Workshop; June 17-18, 1988* DCA News Fall 1988 p11

⁶⁵. *ibid*

response to the dances viewed, but have also been a response to the context and requirements of publication. Early in the twentieth century dance commentary was limited to a sentence squeezed in among the list of names of wealthy patronesses attending a performance, part of the society page. Today, in the late twentieth century, dance commentary is almost exclusively concerned with the dance itself, and rarely mentions particular audience members. Dance criticism now has its own allocated space in the arts and entertainment columns of newspapers, and is usually written by specialist critics.⁶⁶

The current critical method of descriptive analysis developed at a time of rapid change in dance practice, and as a response to the needs of critics for a flexible means of viewing and writing about new developments in choreography. It has been an approach to dance writing which has been readily taught and strengthened through workshops, and which has been readily accepted by critics around the world. It has enabled critics to meet the requirements of publication, and has proved to be a useful method for responding to dance diversity through the past two decades, as well as a reasonable means by which to educate new audiences, and by which to legitimate dance as an art form in contemporary society.

A fuller understanding of this method can be achieved by examining its relationship to critics' shared conceptions of the tasks and purposes of their practice, and in relation to the requirements of contemporary publication. These

⁶⁶. According to a recent survey carried out by the Dance Critics Association, 57% of American newspapers employ freelance critics, while 43% assign staff writers, more often music or theatre specialists than dance specialists. Josie Neal *What's Going On Out There* DCA News Winter 1988 p8

will be taken up in the next chapter which considers dance criticism in the late 1980s as a journalistic practice.

Chapter 2 - Dance Criticism as Journalistic Practice

Contemporary critical practice is guided by shared conceptions of the tasks and purposes of criticism, and is also shaped by the requirements of publication and the conventions of journalism. This chapter considers the conceptions shared by critics, the requirements of publication as seen by editors and critics, and the ways the constraints of journalistic practice interact with the norms of contemporary modern dance criticism to limit what critics write.

Critics' shared conceptions of their task are implicit in their critical practice, but they are also spelled out within the critics' own commentary on dance criticism. This commentary on criticism comprises only a small proportion of the published writing of dance critics, and it is generally found only in specialist publications. Such publications range from the proceedings of conferences of scholarly organisations, the pages of dance journals and reference books, and the newsletter of the internationally comprised Dance Critics Association, DCA News, to academic papers, dissertations and theses, and anthologies of the writings of individual critics. Commentary on criticism was infrequent before 1970, and generally took the form of authoritative summary statements of the state of the art by senior practitioners, or brief articles, essays and statements of opinion by critics, aestheticians and dance educators.¹ This commentary began to appear with greater frequency through the late 1960s and into the 1970s, a period when

¹. The prime example is Edwin Denby's authoritative essay *Dance Criticism* originally published in Anatole Chujoy's Dance Encyclopedia in 1949, and reprinted in Cornfield and Mackay *ibid* p532-542; also Arnold L Haskell *On Criticism The Dancing Times* May 1960 p410; Walter Sorell *To Be A Critic Dance Scope* Vol 1, No 1, Winter 1965 p3-9; Arlene Croce *Dancers and Dance Critics Ballet Review* Vol 2, No 2, Fall 1968 reprinted in Arlene Croce Afterimages London: A&C Black Ltd 1978 p331-338

the number of people writing about dance, the space available for published dance commentary, and the number of specialist dance publications, increased as a result of the dance boom.

Though individual writers have examined the works of particular critics² and the history of dance criticism,³ and have carried out methodological and philosophical analyses of the issues raised by critical practice,⁴ most of the published commentary on dance criticism has focussed on the practical issues involved with the reviewing of dance performances. This commentary has shown a high degree of consensus about the purposes and tasks of dance criticism.

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2. John Townsend Barrett The Analysis and Significance of Three American Critics of the Ballet: Van Vechten, Denby, Kirstein Masters Thesis, Columbia University 1964; Laurel Quinlan A Way Of Seeing: Edwin Denby's Ballet Criticism MFA Thesis, York University 1982; June Adler Vail Viewing and Re-Viewing Dance Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Thesis Wesleyan University 1985
 3. Vera Jaffe Blaine Modern Dance Criticism In America Masters Thesis, Ohio State University 1958; John Chapman British Ballet Criticism in London (1785-1850) in Diana T Taplin (ed) Dance Spectrum: Critical and Philosophical Inquiry Toronto: Otium Publications 1982 p28-49; Regine Kunzle Jean Loret: A Pioneer of 17th-Century Criticism Dance Scope Vol 10, No 2, 1976 p45-50; Linda Johnston Tomko An Analysis of the Dance Criticism of Carl Van Vechten Masters Thesis, UCLA 1980
 4. Nancy Diers Johnson Two perceptions of the purposes, Aesthetic Concepts, and Background for Writing Dance Criticism According to Selected Literature and Washington DC Dance Critics EdD Dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro 1981; Caryl Dawn Mackay Suggested Categories for Dance Criticism Masters Thesis, UCLA 1983; Christine Mary Scotillo The Role of Movement Description in Criticism as a Significant Factor in Developing a Dance Literature Masters Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison 1978; Diana T Taplin Towards A Method In Dance Criticism in Taplin (ed) *ibid* p61-81; Julie Charlotte Van Camp Philosophical Problems of Dance Criticism PhD Dissertation, Temple University 1982

There is consensus in the commentary that, as timely, immediate responses to performance, reviews serve a number of purposes. Firstly, they draw public attention to dance as an art form; secondly, but more importantly, they help to develop an informed audience for dance; and thirdly they model a way of seeing dance which may enhance the reader's aesthetic understanding and appreciation of both the dance in focus and the art form in general.⁵ A well-written review can act as a bridge to a work by helping the reader to evoke the image of a dance and to focus on things worth thinking about;⁶ it can offer insight into the critic's viewing experience which may assist the reader in his or her own consideration of the dance; and the understanding gained by the reader through reading a review may heighten the viewer's enjoyment of and sensual response⁷ to dance performance.

The commentators acknowledge that reviews are put to other uses once in print. Reviews become promotional material when excerpted or included in press kits by artists, administrators and publicists for circulation to sponsors presenters and promoters; and they become professional references when appended to resumes, grant and funding applications. As individual accounts which extend "a dance's career beyond the space and time of its kinetic actuality"⁸ reviews are

⁵. Sorell *ibid* p4

⁶. Van Camp *ibid* p15

⁷. Diana T Taplin *On Critics and Criticism of Dance* in Diana T Taplin (ed) Dance Spectrum: Critical and Philosophical Inquiry Toronto: Otium Publications 1982 p77

⁸. George Beiswanger *Rake's Progress or Dances and The Critic* Dance Scope Vol 10, No 2, Spring/Summer 1976 p33

used as resource material by other critics and journalists in their preparation for writing reviews and articles. With the passage of time reviews become historical records which provide dance with a past, and which provide valuable source material for future historians and researchers.

This shared understanding of the purposes of criticism underlies critics' conceptions of the tasks of viewing of and writing about dance, and the process of establishing critical evaluations in relation to the purpose of writing dance reviews.

There is consensus in the commentary that the critic's task as writer-about-dance is to meet the requirements of reviewing art which vanishes from view by the moment, and which appears in a bewildering range of forms. Senior critic Deborah Jowitt has provided perhaps the most concise statement of what critics perceive their task to be. She says:

It all comes down to trying to write about what we've seen in the way that seems most interesting and appropriate at the time, to exercis[ing] our prerogatives as writers and observers of a scene we presumably love and know something about. Many of us concentrate in giving a sense of what we've seen and what we feel about it: analysis, opinion, description in some kind of balance⁹.

'To write about what was seen' requires the critic to see the performance clearly enough, to remember well enough what was seen, to think carefully enough about the perceptions, to write accurately enough to translate visual impressions into verbal imagery,¹⁰ and to capture the essence¹¹ of the dance. Being able to

⁹. Deborah Jowitt *Who Are We When We Write* DCA News Summer 1986 p2

¹⁰. Sorell *ibid* p4

write well involves being able to communicate clearly and succinctly, being able to write to deadline and space requirements, and being able to adapt to varied readership requirements.¹²

The commentary is unanimous that the review must describe the movement in a dance, since movement is the distinctive and essential component which differentiates dance from the other arts. The critic must be able to describe what was seen, directly and observantly, vividly, precisely and accurately, and should use a literal language to express descriptions with unambiguous clarity. As critic and teacher Ernestine Stodelle puts it, "words as representations of thought must be accurate. They must be precise...as minutely explicit as the second-hand on a stop-watch. Shades of meaning must be clear no matter how broad-sweeping the viewpoint."¹³

A dance review must describe not only what was seen - the actual movements and their qualities, the "rhythmic sweep of human bodies in space and time"¹⁴ - but also what was perceived as the choreographic and visual or scenic design, and the relative contributions of choreographer and performers. A review should "give a visual rendering of the dance performance that will recreate or generate in

11. Marcia Siegel The Shapes Of Change: Images of American Dance Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1985 p xv

12. Julie Van Camp The Humanities and Dance Criticism Federation Review Vol IX, No 1, January/February 1986 p15

13. Ernestine Stodelle Towards An Art of Dance Criticism CORD News Vol 2, No 2, 1970 p35

14. Sorell *ibid* p5

the mind of the reader some of its essential qualities... keep[ing] the writing in direct contact with the movement."¹⁵ By writing "with active verbs and pungent adjectives and adverbs,"¹⁶ though not so flashily as to distract the reader from the consideration of the dance which is the subject of the review, the critic is expected to evoke the quality of the movement, to give a vicarious visual and kinesthetic experience to the reader.¹⁷ The review should also in some way indicate the critic's thoughts and feelings along with some identification of the events or aspects of the dance which provoked them.

The commentators acknowledge the complexities of the task of writing about dance performance, for, as critic Marcia Siegel explains:

A very active and complex synthesis is going on as the critic watches a dance...in the watching, immediacy and openness, the sensory system, the emotions, and a rather elemental use of the wits are called for. In the writing we need memory, insight, concentration, logic, verbal inventiveness, and grace.¹⁸

And, as the commentary repeatedly points out, also needed is the professional knowledge which is essential to critical practice. This professional knowledge guides a critic's "seeing", and enables him or her to identify the "facts" of the performance. It helps him or her create a context in which the descriptions and

¹⁵. Curtis L Carter. *Some Notes on Aesthetics and Dance Criticism* Dance Scope Vol 10, No 2, 1976 p35

¹⁶. Deborah Jowitt *A Private View Of Criticism* Arts In Society Vol 13, No 2, 1976 p209

¹⁷. Stodelle *ibid* p32

¹⁸. Marcia B Siegel *Education of a Dance Critic: The Bonsai and the Lumberjack* Dance Scope Vol 15, No 1, 1981 p21

evaluations of the dance can be understood by the reader,¹⁹ and to select appropriate images, events or moments from the dance to tell how the dance was, and to support the evaluations made of the dance's significance.

Critics are seen in the commentary as unusually articulate and very well-informed viewers of dance who constantly seek to improve their professional knowledge of dance, people who have seen considerably more dance than most other people, and who are able to consider a given dance in relation to other dances of a similar style, genre, and historic period. This professional knowledge of dance may be built up through personal experience of dance training, choreography and performance, through the viewing of the wide range of styles and genres within the contemporary repertoire, through reading commentary on dance performance, and through information provided by the various academic disciplines which directly or indirectly contribute to the understanding of dance performance.

While professional knowledge may come from all of these sources, critics themselves place the emphasis on a combination which will provide them with knowledge which can sustain and enlighten their perceptions.²⁰ A wide viewing experience is seen as necessary if the critic is to have "a broad base of comparison and will know what is possible for performers and choreographers,"²¹; some knowledge of dance history, however patchy, is

¹⁹. *ibid* p16-21

²⁰. Clement Crisp *The Nature of Dance Scholarship: The Critic's Task* Dance Research Vol 1, No 1, Spring 1983 p6

²¹. Van Camp *ibid* p15

needed in order to equip the critic with a genealogy of technique, style, and choreographic approaches; an abiding curiosity about dance in all its forms, is desirable; and a commitment to keeping up to date by reading the most recent dance literature is expected. Ideally, the critic should take his or her professional knowledge into the theatre with him or her, and at the same time should try to "leave the imprint of the day with his cloak in the cloakroom, or shove both under the seat,"²² since the imprint of the day is seen as compromising the critic's ability to intently and receptively view dance performance.

The commentators accept that, given the very individual nature of each performance, the approach to writing about a particular dance primarily depends on the nature of the work itself, and on the conditions under which it is seen. There is also agreement that it is almost impossible for any critic to be thoroughly informed about all the wide ranging styles and genres of the contemporary repertoire, and that it is accordingly very difficult to avoid judging a dance in an unfamiliar style by the standards of those in familiar styles.

The critical strategy in which the critic places the emphasis on description of the dance seen in performance rather than on judgement of its success, and seeks to consider a dance on its own terms rather than measuring it against some absolute scale of values,²³ has now been widely accepted by critics. This strategy was developed during the early years of the dance boom by New York critics faced by the challenge of a rapidly changing dance beat, and by dances

²². Sorell *ibid* p6

²³. Deborah Jowitt The Dance In Mind: Profiles and Reviews 1976-83 Boston: David R Godine, Publisher 1985 px

which were increasingly formalist and abstract. Using this strategy, the critic gives a sense of what he or she saw and thought about the dance in clear, vivid prose which captures the immediacy of performance. Particular attention is paid to the identification and reflection of the specific movement qualities which make the dance distinctive,²⁴ and acts, events, images and moments from the dance are cited to establish the basis of critical assessments and opinions.

The commentary on criticism has interactively established consensus within the professional community about the tasks and purposes of critical practice, and about critical strategies which are appropriate to the viewing of and writing about dance performance. The critics' viewing and writing, however, is also shaped by the requirements of publication and the conventions of journalism, and by the editorial requirement that even a reader who did not attend the performance should be able to share the critic's perceptions and understand why the critic reached a particular opinion about the dance in view.

The requirements of publication place significant constraints on the task of criticism and the critic's ability to complete that task to his or her satisfaction. The time and space available for writing, the tone and style of writing which is appropriate to the context of publication, editorial policy about the information to be included, the readership to be held in mind and how this readership is to be addressed, and the journalistic conventions of reviewing, each impose limits on

²⁴. Selma Jeanne Cohen [Reviews of] Coton, A.V. *Writings on Dance 1936-68* (1975); Croce, Arlene *Afterimages* (1977); Jowitt, Deborah *Dance Beat, Selected Views and Reviews 1967-76* (1977); Siegel, Marcia B. *Watching the Dance Go By* (1977). The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism Vol 37, Spring 1979 p390-392

the critic's writing of a pertinent and interesting review which pays attention to a dance performance in aesthetic terms.

Conformity to the conventions of journalism ensures that critics are able to meet editorial requirements, which may vary widely among the different kinds of publications that publish dance writing. These conventions shape the structure of reviews and ensure that appropriate editorial standards are attained by critics. According to these conventions, a review must be clearly written, must be angled so that the greatest number of readers can identify with, and share, the critic's perceptions of the events covered, and must provide adequate descriptive information to enable a reader to assess the basis of critical evaluations and opinions.

The time and space available for writing place particular limits on what the review can say about a performance. The morning newspaper review is usually restricted to 350-500 words written within an hour of the performance, usually with copy to be filed between 10.45 and 11.15pm that evening. For the evening paper word limits may be more generous, from 450-750 words, but overnight deadlines usually apply, with copy to be filed no later than 9.30am on the day of publication. Within these time and space constraints the best a critic can hope to achieve is a rapidly reasoned evaluation of the dance, supported by descriptive analysis which gives the flavour of the dance and some feeling for the quality of performance.

As one freelancer describes it, the short deadline doesn't leave:

much time for reflection and the multiple revisions that the critic for a monthly or even a weekly might have. In a newspaper format with almost the same word count and the same time limit for constructing each review, it's difficult not to fall into easy formulas. But I strive to keep my writing as fresh as possible. Attempting

imaginative description under deadline pressure when the cliché would suffice is a daring act.²⁵

Weekly papers have a slightly longer deadline, with copy usually filed by noon on Monday or Tuesday of the week of publication, but word limits are still usually the same as for the daily review. While this allows the critic longer for consideration of the performance, it still restricts him or her to the limits imposed by space restrictions. The 350-500 word review, for example, can be written in a tone which clearly expresses approval and disapproval, and makes the context of evaluation and the critical focus very clear for the reader. The space available in such a review does not allow the critic systematically to construct a series of arguments which authoritatively establishes the basis of his or her considered aesthetic viewpoint, nor adequately to discuss issues which are in critical contention. Such things can only be done when there is adequate time for writing and enough column space available for the pursuit of issues, as there may be in the monthly or quarterly review column.

Where the daily or weekly review must provide timely comment on a particular performance, the monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly column may take a wider perspective. With a deadline of between a week or two and up to three months after the performance, the critic has time for reflection on the wider consideration of issues and the examination of current trends in performance. Space allocations for review columns are generally considerably more generous than for daily or weekly reviews, generally around 1500-2000 words, though at times may extend further than this. This allows the critic enough space to more adequately develop an examination of critical issues. Rather than having to focus, as the daily reviewer

²⁵ Tullia Limarzi *What We Do* DCA News Summer 1986 p8-9

must, on the immediate aspects of a single performance, the monthly columnist may delve into particular aspects of one or several performances, may consider these in relation to the context of dance as a performing art, or may extend critical consideration beyond dance to a social or historical context.

Arlene Croce's monthly review-columns in The New Yorker, for example, often extend up to 5000 words, a considerable space allocation compared to the daily or weekly review allocation. Writing to a monthly deadline, and with relative freedom to choose what she will write about, Croce has developed four types of column in which she is able to write at length on her chosen topics. In the single company review she considers the repertoire of the current season of a ballet company, comments on the performances of particular principal dancers and soloists, and usually also assesses the relationships between current and former productions of the particular ballets in focus. In the survey-review column she comments on critical issues which she perceives as common to concurrent productions, usually of modern dance companies. From time to time she writes a critical essay which examines themes or aspects of contemporary performance which she is concerned about, and two or three times a year she writes a carefully researched essay which focusses on historical aspects of a canonical ballet in current performance.²⁶

Not only do the time and the space available for the review provide particular constraints on the critic's writing, the context of publication also significantly

²⁶. For examples of Arlene Croce's various types of monthly review columns see: ballet review *Sad Songs, Glad Waltzes* The New Yorker February 22, 1988 p99-101; survey-review *From Ailey To Armitage* The New Yorker December 21, 1987 p102-105; aspects of concern *Postmodern Ballets* The New Yorker February 23, 1987 p118-120; canonical essay *The Magician* The New Yorker January 18, 1988 p77-81

shapes the review. The positioning of the review within a publication determines the tone and style of writing which is appropriate to the context of publication. Reviews written for publication in daily and weekly newspapers are published within a context of news and information in which the normal emphasis is on the reporting of both the everyday and the exceptional events.²⁷ Reviews are usually placed in the leisure, style or arts and entertainment sections of the paper²⁸, sections where the emphasis is on providing consumer information to those who have seen, or are potential audience members of, the events covered, potential purveyors of everything ranging from fashion to mass entertainment.

Reviews published in magazines have a wider range of contexts of publication than newspaper reviews. Magazines are usually directed to particular sectors of the population, such as particular age groups and genders, or special interest groups, and usually have a tighter focus than newspapers. Rather than primarily containing news and consumer information, magazines are often addressing readers who are particularly well-informed about topics such as dance, or may angle their dance coverage to reflect the main focus of the magazine, such as business or politics, fashion or lifestyle trends.

Editorial policy about the events to be covered, the information to be included and the audience to be addressed in a review also imposes constraints on the writing

²⁷. Frands Mortensen and Erik Nordahl Svendsen (translated by Steven Tribe) *Creativity and control: the journalist betwixt his readers and editors* Media, Culture and Society No 2 1980 p172

²⁸. Josie Neal reports that in terms of percentage allocation within these sections of American newspapers surveyed in 1988, dance coverage averages 9% compared to 18% tv and radio, 16% film, 16% theatre, 12% pop music, 10% visual art, 8% books and 1% architecture. Josie Neal *What's Going On Out There* DCA News Winter 1989 p3, 8

of reviews. Such policies are shaped by the need to sell a particular newspaper, magazine or journal, and to attract adequate advertising or sponsorship which will ensure the continued publication of the newspaper or magazine.

Editorial policy decides which events will be reviewed, though the critic's opinion is generally taken into account when the decision is made about an individual event. The critic's advice, however, may well be overruled by editorial considerations, so that an event which in artistic or aesthetic terms seems worthy of coverage receives no coverage. In the newspaper environment, factors specific to a dance event are weighed against factors specific to the section of the paper in which the article will appear, and the decision about what will be covered is made by the arts editor. Such things as the nature and length of the performance, the size and nature of the performance venue, and the status and reputation of the performers, are considered in relation to the readership appeal of the event, the amount of advertising received, the community profile of the event's participants, and the news value of this event by comparison with other events competing for coverage at the time when the decision to allocate space (or not) for a review is made.

The editorial policy of New Zealand's national morning paper The Dominion, for example, was, until 1984, to review only dance productions which were presented for three or more nights in a major, downtown theatre. Occasional exceptions were made for productions that were considered to have news-value due to the theme, production innovations, publicity stunts, corporate sponsorship profile, or the status of production team members. The policy of the Vancouver weekly arts and entertainment newspaper The Georgia Straight, by comparison, when faced with a choice of three major dance events to cover in one week, is firstly to give

consideration to the production perceived to be closest to the interests of the paper's readership, secondly to the advertising support which is present in the dance community and thirdly to the critic's opinion. By comparing the styles, themes, and the response the companies and the works in question have received elsewhere (as seen in reviews and promotional material), and keeping in mind the reputations of the companies involved, and the advertising support received from sectors of the dance community, the decision about which production will be reviewed is made by the editor.

The readership assumed for a publication shapes editorial policy which in turn specifies the sense of audience seen as appropriate for the angling of a review. This sense of readership places particular restrictions on the writing of reviews. In the case of the daily paper, a general readership is assumed for the paper as a whole, but specific readerships may be assumed for each section of the paper. The Dominion, for example, is primarily directed to business readers and working professionals, and sets its tone accordingly. Editorially it assumes a well-educated readership alert to the contemporary social, political and economic contexts. In the arts section of the paper this general sense of readership also prevails, with the particular readership assumed to be 25-45 year olds with discretionary dollars to spend, and who take the arts seriously. This sense of audience, combined with the role of the national morning daily as the journal of record, sets the tone and style required of fine and performing arts critics writing for the paper.

Different again with regard to readership considerations is Agenda magazine, also published in Wellington. This monthly arts and entertainment publication is pitched to a readership of 19-35 year olds with disposable incomes, and for whom the arts are editorially assumed to provide entertainment choices. The magazine

features the writing of its arts and entertainment columnists, though it also includes featured articles on topical issues. The editor's intention is that the magazine's columns should sell the arts in such a way that readers will be encouraged to actively support future events. Columnists are asked to provide opinionated commentary which may help to educate audience members, and which at the same time links art events to life in the city.

No matter what audience a review is directed to, the primary editorial requirement is that reviews should be reader-friendly. This demands that they should be pertinent to both the event covered and the readership addressed, and clearly written. The conventions of journalism help writers to structure their reviews to meet editorial standards for pertinence, clarity and coherence. If a review fails to meet the appropriate editorial standards, or the required space limit, it will be subjected to sub-editing which will remedy the apparent deficiencies before publication. Words may be changed, phrases deleted, even whole paragraphs removed during sub-editing, and if the critic fails to lead with a clear assessment of the production as a whole, the headline appended by the sub-editor may fail to reflect the actual content of the review.²⁹

Critics also keep conventional considerations in mind as they write to ensure reader-friendly writing. Critic Michael Scott's first editor gave him a set of such considerations when he first began writing and he follows them still:

²⁹. Sub-editing requirements in relation to reviewing for daily newspapers are especially stringent since reviews are generally the last copy filed, and time for headline writing is short. Convention demands that there be a clear assertion of overall opinion (the lead) at the start of a review, as sub-editors are likely to read only the first paragraph of the review before constructing the headline, and will cut the remaining paragraphs to fit the space available regardless of the role of such paragraphs in the assertion of critical evaluations.

You have to keep in contact with your audience, and that means you need to give a clear picture of what you saw and what it made you think about. You need to paint pictures of the performance with vivid words, to give concrete images and a very clear context for your comments. You can't be mired in technical details, and you can't indulge in aesthetic snobbery. You should write as if you are explaining what you think about the performance to a friend who doesn't know a vast amount about dance.³⁰

The requirement of reader-friendliness provides a significant constraint on the critic's writing since the reader-friendly angling of the information presented in a review controls the way the critic's perceptions are presented to the readers. The general readership assumed for most publications is one which is relatively uninformed about dance, though specialist dance publications are angled to a relatively better informed readership. In both general and specialist publications, however, it is normally assumed that most readers will not have seen the performances reviewed, and thus even in the specialist publications the critic is restricted by the need to angle his or her commentary to cover issues which are in the public realm rather than issues which are a matter of the critic's particular professional interest.

"The readers" must be kept in mind since it is they who will buy newspapers and magazines, and they who must benefit from the commentary provided by a publications's critics. Editors normally have a very clear set of ideas about what the readers of their publications want to see in print. Weekly arts and entertainment editor Charles Campbell, for example, is very clear about the requirements of his readers:

• Readers don't want to be frustrated by a lot of musings on the state of the universe, or a bunch of observations which are so

³⁰. Interview with Michael Scott, dance and classical music critic for the daily The Vancouver Sun, in Vancouver BC, April 21, 1989

metaphorical that they're left in the dark. I ask our critics to talk about what our readers are likely to be interested in, but also to give the readers an opportunity to be smart by challenging their perceptions as well. I hope that we're helping our readers to develop a better understanding of what the arts are about.³¹

This set of readership assumptions determines what Campbell requires of critics writing for his publication:

The critic must address what they say to as many readers as possible, and when it comes to reviews, this means that the critic must write in terms of a shared experience, something that their readers can relate to even if they weren't at the performance. The critic must be careful not to inject too much of him or herself into the writing, and it is important that he or she should write intelligently but without intellectualizing to the point where hardly anyone could be bothered reading the review.³²

The general mode of address which is integral to reader-friendliness for nearly all publications, limits the critic to asserting opinions and evaluations which are within a publicly shared experience of the dance. In mass-circulation publications, adequate space is seldom made available for the critic to address a well-informed audience of readers who have attended the performance in review, and even in specialist magazines adequate space for reviews in which the discussion or critical examination of issues which may be of professional concern, or of particular interest to the critic due to his or her specialist knowledge, is seldom allocated. Consequently, the publicly shared experience of dance continues to exclude such relatively abstract issues as the possible meanings of a dance, its subversive or transgressive relationships to other works in a similar style or genre, or the relationships between a work and its social context, from consideration and

³¹. Interview with Charles Campbell, managing editor of The Georgia Straight in Vancouver BC, April 21, 1989

³². *ibid*

discussion. These relatively abstract issues are low on the paradigmatic priority list of content for reviews, and are generally not considered to be reader-friendly issues by editors, even in the publications directed to a dance-interested readership.

To be a successful journalist the critic must be able to meet the requirements of publication to deadline, even when the deadline is less than an hour after the performance. The requirements of publication, the conventions of journalism, and the norms of critical practice must be so well understood and internalised that they automatically shape the critic's viewing of and writing about dance, and so enable him or her to meet deadlines in an editorially acceptable manner. If the critic's own self-censorship³³ of the information included, the words used, and the way readers are addressed in the review does not meet with the requirements of a particular publication, then his or her writing will be cut to suit the space available by the sub-editors, or may not be published at all.

When critics discuss the constraints of publication in their own commentary on critical practice, they express concern with the time and space available for writing, the standard of subediting their writing is subjected to, and the uncertainties of a freelance existence. They complain about "limited space, unreasonable deadlines, uninformed copy-editing and limited opportunities for serious criticism and commentary,"³⁴ about "low pay, lack of space, intense competition, and a back seat in the arts bus... a difficult and sometimes meager

³³. Mortensen and Svendsen address the notion of self-censorship in their article *ibid* p169-177

³⁴. Neal *ibid* p8

existence."³⁵ They do not, however, examine the ways in which the constraints imposed by editorial policies, the requirements of publication and the conventions of journalism may substantially circumscribe what they write. Neither do they see the constraints which their shared conceptions of their task and the norms of critical practice impose on their writing about dance.

The constraints imposed by editorial policies, the requirements of publication, the conventions of journalism, the shared conceptions of critical tasks and purposes, and the norms of critical practice, serve to limit the content, audience and purpose addressed by critical practice. These constraints coalesce in a descriptive obligation which is central to contemporary critical practice and which underlies the reviewing of modern dance performance. The descriptive citation of specific images, actions and events from the performance is at once a means to reader-friendliness, a means to vivid descriptions of dance performance, and a method of achieving critical evaluations. Under the normal conditions of reviewing, however, this method is constrained by the general mode of address and the time and space available for writing, even in such specialist dance publications as Dancemagazine, Dance Australia, and VanDance magazine.³⁶

The descriptive obligation has become central to an aesthetic paradigm which can be seen to underly contemporary reviewing of modern dance performance.

³⁵. Wayne Lee *What We Do* DCA News Winter 1988 p14

³⁶. Former Dancemagazine editor William Como's set of editorial guidelines were recently published as *Advice to critics: Do's and Don'ts* DCA News Winter 1987 p3; Dance Australia editor Dally messenger discussed his criteria for reviews in his magazine in an editorial in Dance Australia February-March 1988 p1; VanDance editor Maureen Riches provided similar information in a telephone interview on May 10, 1989.

The terms of this aesthetic paradigm will be demonstrated in the next chapter, with particular reference to the academic discourse about dance performance, and to reviews of *In The Upper Room*, a dance choreographed by Twyla Tharp and which made its New York premiere in March 1988. The relative uniformity of contemporary critical practice will also be demonstrated through these reviews.

"the problematic character of a belief
can be fully recognized only when one no longer believes it"

- Stanley Fish

Chapter 3 - Dance Discourse and the Aesthetic Paradigm : Part 1 - Twyla Tharp

As well as being shaped by the shared conceptions of critics and by journalistic constraints, dance criticism is shaped, and I shall subsequently argue, limited, by the currently dominant paradigm of the critical community, an aesthetic paradigm which has been informed by the discourses of dance history and aesthetics. This chapter will consider the ways in which the aesthetic paradigm which underlies critical practice is informed by the academic discourse about dance, and will demonstrate and endeavour to account for the relative uniformity of critical writing about modern dance performance in relation to this paradigm.

Academicians in the discourses of dance history and aesthetics have provided critics with a framework for critical writing about modern dance. These discourses have institutionalized certain ways of thinking about dance and have examined the stylistic genealogies which are seen to account for the development of dance forms. Aesthetic concerns have become integral to critical practice, along with the analysis of style, essence and value, pertinence and proprieties, and the attribution of stylistic influence, as appropriate to the consideration of modern dance as a self-sufficient art form.

Dance historians have identified a continuing search for new forms, new uses of time, space and the body, new choreographic structures, new issues, new subject matter and new themes for choreographic exploration, as the overriding concern of choreographers in both ballet and modern dance. These new moves have been interpreted as primarily a dialogue with dance's own history, and they have been placed within the context of contemporary artistic development rather than being considered as a response to contemporary social conditions. Through

the analysis of stylistic genealogies, and the attribution of influences which may account for changing conventions and values in dance styles and genres, dance historians have established an understanding of modern dance development as a series of oppositional cycles of revolution and institution which result in stylistic progression.¹

Modern dance of the 1940s and 1950s, for example is seen within the academic discourse as providing the ground for the stylistic developments of the 1960s and 1970s. Dances of the earlier period are now seen to have been highly conventional, dependent on stylized, codified, emotionally expressive movement to present themes based on psychological metaphors. The structures of these dances normally mirrored the moods and compositional form of the music which they were set to, and movement design was supported by expressive lighting and symbolic set and costume design. The necessary elements of dance of this period were considered to include musicality and rhythmic organization, characterisation, mood and atmosphere, narrativity and meaning, dramatic phrasing and sequencing, and virtuosity in crafting and performance. The assessment of these elements provided the basis for critical consideration of a modern dance performance.

In what is now seen as a new wave of oppositional development, choreographers during the 60s and 70s rejected every convention of the previous era as

¹. A typical formulation is provided by Sally Banes, for example, in the introduction to her documentation of the history of Judson Dance Theater, Democracy's Body. There she says: "American modern dance, since its beginnings at the turn of this century, has been a series of avant gardes. Each generation called for a new set of subjects, a new dance technique, a new relationship to musical, literary, visual, and theatrical arts". Sally Banes Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater 1962-1964 Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press 1983 pxvi

motivating concerns for their construction of dances. This new generation of post-modern² choreographers replaced the old conventions with new sequencing structures, such as accumulation and serial repetition, often making structural logic visible in the dance. They made improvisation a performance style as well as a choreographic device, and challenged the belief that dancers needed technical training to present an adequate performance. They took dance out of the theatre, setting it down in parks and on rooftops, in galleries and store windows, and they foregrounded movement itself in dances set in silence. In response to these dances, critics gave their attention to choreographic structure and devices, and to describing what they saw in the process of a performance. They set aside the interpretation of meaning and the evaluation of virtuosity of crafting and performance.

In similar fashion, the choreographic approaches of the 1980s are seen in the academic discourse as a response to the formalist concerns and innovations of the 60s and 70s. Eighties choreographers have shown new interest in values and aspects of dance rejected by their predecessors, and have moved beyond the formalism of the 70s. They have reintroduced content and meaning, expression and narrative literary devices, character and situation, mood and emotion, musicality and an interest in popular entertainment. They have put a new emphasis on virtuosity, have adopted new forms and new formalisms,³ have incorporated into their movement vocabularies movement material lifted from vernacular dance forms and from gesture systems such as American Sign

². I use this term in the sense attributed by Sally Banes to choreographers of the 60s and 70s in her *Introduction to the Wesleyan Paperback Edition Terpsichore in Sneakers* Boston and Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press 1987.

³. Marcia B Siegel *Vanguard Meets The Mainstream* The Hudson Review Vol 35, No 1, Spring 1982 p99

Language, and have embraced new technologies which have at times made dance just one medium among many.

The rebirth of content, both allegorical and explicitly political, in dances of the 80s, is newly acknowledged in the academic discourse as a sign of the times,⁴ as perhaps the most significant development in dances of the 80s. As one commentator has summed it up, "the contemporary dance is returning to movement as an expressive medium. Just dancing is no longer enough...movement scenarios are beginning to merge with other texts again."⁵ Critics, however, have been reluctant to turn to interpretation as a means of critical response to these new dances.

Critics have largely accepted the terms, understandings and emphases of dance history and aesthetics as the basis of their own writing about dance performance. Aesthetic criteria and considerations have provided a ready means of meeting the critic's professional task of developing an informed audience for modern dance - an audience whose viewing and appreciation of modern dance is informed by aesthetic understanding of dance as an art form, and whose consideration of dance is shaped by the professional ways of seeing modelled by critics in their reviews. The emphasis on aspects of style has helped critics to focus their own analysis of dance and to arrive at some assessment of a dance's significance in relation to other dances of a similar style or genre, or by the same choreographer, and has guided the critical evaluation of things worth thinking about in a dance.

4. Sally Banes sees these developments as part of an "urgent search to reopen the question of content in all the arts" in America through the 1980s. Banes *ibid* pxxiv-xxv

5. Marcia Siegel *The Truth About Apples and Oranges* The Drama Review Vol 32, No 4, Winter 1988 p26

These aesthetic criteria and considerations, particularly in relation to style and genre, have been embodied in what has become the dominant way of seeing and writing about dance within the critical community. This 'aesthetic paradigm' is evident in almost all reviews written in English for mass-circulation newspapers and magazines around the world in the late 1980s. The paradigm provides critics with a shared means of conceptualizing, understanding, and accounting for their observations; with an approach to dance viewing which enables them to write about dance performances in a wide range of styles and genres; and with a method which acknowledges the presentational surfaces of dances which are usually highly abstract.

The central method of critical practice embodied in the aesthetic paradigm is that of descriptive analysis, a method which arose in response to the increasingly formalist and abstract dances of the 60s and 70s as a means by which a critic could consider a dance on its own terms. Such critical consideration places a high value on the immediacy and accuracy of the critic's description of what was seen, and forces a focus on the most describable aspects of a formalist modern dance - the presentational surface, formal patterning and organizational structures, the resolution of choreographic and narrative flow, the dynamic qualities of movement which contribute to the kinaesthetic thrill of the viewer, and the virtuoso accomplishment of rhythmic and expressive patterning by performers.

The critics writing for the highly influential and widely read nationally and internationally distributed New York publications have been readily accepted as the reference group for dance critics writing in English around the world. Because they make their professional rounds in the world's dance capital, the New York

critics have seen more dance and with greater frequency than most critics elsewhere. Over the past three decades of the dance boom they have seen both the best and the worst of dance, and they have intimately observed the continuing development of the major choreographers of western theatrical dance in this century. By virtue of living in New York city in the 80s, a time when dance presenters have shown an increased willingness to present a wide range of the styles and genres of the East along with those of the West, the New York critics have also seen the widest range of dance available - everything from Baroque masques to Japanese avant garde Butoh.

Through their commentary on dance the New York critics have established the canons of theatrical dance performance as a twentieth century professional performing art. Their reviews are accepted as authoritative reports on the accomplishments (or lack thereof) of choreographers, performers and dance companies performing in New York city, and influence the opinions of readers across the United States and around the world. When positive, their reviews become the imprimatur of approval, and are appropriated by dance artists, publicists and administrators as free publicity material and grant application support material of the best kind. In this way the reviews come to play an important role in decisions made about cultural production, and not only in the United States - the New York reviews take pride of place in the press and promotion packs of any touring dance company.

While the reviews of the New York critics hold a wealth of information about the dances seen in performance, they also embody the aesthetic paradigm which is widely shared within the professional community in the late 1980s. This paradigm is illustrated here through ten such reviews written after the New York premiere

performance of Twyla Tharp's *In The Upper Room* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music during February 1987. Reviews of recent works by American modern dance choreographers Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, Mark Morris and Karole Armitage, among others, could have as easily been used for illustrative purposes. These reviews of Tharp's new dance employ the method of descriptive analysis and assert the aesthetic concerns which are integral to the academic discourse on dance performance. They are representative of the relatively uniform practice of contemporary modern dance criticism found in mass-circulation newspapers and magazines.

Tharp's dances have been much commented on by critics and dance writers over the past twenty-five years. Extensive reviews of her dances are available in collections of writings by Arlene Croce, Marcia Siegel, Deborah Jowitt, and Jack Anderson. A Tharp biography written by critic Laura Shapiro is currently in preparation; critic Stephen Albert has analyzed the successive stylistic progressions of her oeuvre⁶; and a detailed analysis of Tharp's style and approach to choreography is included in theorist Susan Foster's Reading Dancing (1986).⁷ Tharp's hallmarks have made her works readily identifiable, as much for their complex structuring as for their technically demanding and highly polished, sumptuous movement. Today she is accepted as one of the best contemporary choreographers in the world.

⁶. Steven Albert *Utopia Lost - and Found? A Look at Tharp's Way* Ballet Review Vol 14, No 1, Spring 1986 p17-35

⁷. Susan Foster Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance Berkeley and London: University of California Press 1986 p209-226

Always in the vanguard of new modern dance developments, Tharp has also made ballets for ballet companies - *Sinatra Suite*, *The Little Ballet*, *Push Comes To Shove* and *Bach Partita* for American Ballet Theatre; *Brahms/Handel* for New York City Ballet in collaboration with Jerome Robbins; *Deuce Coupe*, and *As Time Goes By* for the Joffrey. She has made post-modern dances for her own company - everything from the avant garde, slowed-down, spaced out *Medley*, shown on the Great Lawn of New York's Central Park, to the more mainstream, rhythmically vital *The Bix Pieces*, from semi-autobiographical narrative works like *The Catherine Wheel*, to the abstract formalities of *Group Activities*.

Tharp has made solos for ballet's premier danseur Mikhail Baryshnikov and ice dance for virtuoso skater John Curry, has choreographed for television specials, for movies such as *Hair*, *Amadeus* and *White Nights*, and has choreographed and directed *Singing in the Rain* as a Broadway revival. Late in 1988 she became an artistic associate of Baryshnikov's American Ballet Theatre, and to date has added four of her ballets to the four already in the company's repertoire.

Tharp's dances, as Anne Livet points out, "possess a very carefully worked out choreographic structure, in many cases involving repeated or altered complex phrases of movement. The music, the costumes and the subject matter complement what is already an extremely interesting use of choreographic structure, movement phrases and space."⁸ These dances also create what Arlene Croce has named "a hyper-kinaesthesia that takes hold of the audience and

⁸. Anne Livet Contemporary Dance: An anthology of lectures, interviews and essays with many of the most important contemporary American choreographers, scholars and critics New York: Abbeville Press Inc 1978 p24

doesn't let up"⁹ - something which makes viewing Tharp's work a thrilling and usually overwhelming experience.

Critics in New York and elsewhere have heaped acclaim on Tharp's dances, praising her inventiveness and originality, her willingness to take risks and to challenge dance conventions. They have responded to the wit and intelligence displayed in her dances, as well as to their dazzling structural complexities, and they have lauded her ability to not only distill material from an eclectic range of movement idioms, but also to "produce limitless variations...combine them in scandalous configurations...and invent fascinating permutations of the utmost subtlety."¹⁰

The ten critics whose reviews are sampled here are seasoned Tharp-watchers, and they are widely known and respected for their writings on dance performance. Anna Kisselgoff and Jack Anderson (The New York Times), Arlene Croce (The New Yorker), Marcia Siegel (The Christian Science Monitor), Deborah Jowitz (The Village Voice), Mindy Aloff (The Nation), Tobi Tobias (New York magazine), Holly Brubach (Atlantic magazine), Joan Acocella (Dance Magazine), and Clive Barnes (who in New York writes for The Post, but is sampled here from his New York column in the British magazine Dance & Dancers), paid considerable attention to Tharp's new *In The Upper Room* - one of two dances premiered during the inaugural season of her newly constituted company, Twyla Tharp Dance.

⁹. Arlene Croce *A Moment in Time* The New Yorker November 19, 1973
reprinted in Afterimages London: A&C Black 1978 p25

¹⁰. David Michael Levin *The Embodiment of Performance* Salmagundi No 31/32,
Fall 1975-Summer 1976 p133

The critics record their responses to the dance through precise, clear, vivid, dynamic language which captures the immediacy of the performance - how the dance looks, how it feels, and what it suggests to them. The dance is represented as a richly detailed surface, in much the same way that a painting would be described and examined. The critics concern themselves with stylistic and structural analysis, and their descriptions of the patterns of the dance are interwoven with their evaluations of and opinions about the dance's success and significance. The emphasis is on the describable stylistic and generic characteristics, with care taken to identify specific aspects which make the dance distinctive.

Their descriptions catch the flavor of the dance in carefully chosen words, sometimes as a capsule summary, sometimes in short sentences, and more often in paragraph lengths. Anna Kisselgoff, for example, says that *In The Upper Room* is "sexy, phenomenally fast, physical"¹¹; Arlene Croce sums it up as "a dance suite in which aerobics are made cosmic"¹²; Holly Brubach says it is "a full company frontal assault on the audience."¹³ Deborah Jowitt talks about "the blaze of dancing,"¹⁴ and Marcia Siegel tells us that "the adrenalin of Tharp's new dances always pervades [Siegel's] dreams."¹⁵

11. Anna Kisselgoff *Dance View: Twyla Tharp and Ballet - An Uneasy Match* The New York Times March 8, 1987 p112

12. Arlene Croce *Dancing: Postmodern Ballets* The New Yorker February 23, 1987 p120

13. Holly Brubach *Dance: Twyla Tharp's Return* ATLANTIC March 1987 p86

14. Deborah Jowitt *Upper Reaches of Human Emotion* The Village Voice February 17, 1987 p91

15. Marcia Siegel *In The Upper Room: carefully crafted, constantly interesting* The Christian Science Monitor February 10, 1987 p27

The flavour of the dance in view may be carried by two or three succinct sentences. Where Mindy Aloff says:

The drive is superhuman, as if it cruised on a megadose of endorphins, and there are many sections where so many kinds of races are being run that we could be in the Health and Racquet Club, Valhalla branch.¹⁶

Joan Acocella tells us that:

Wave after wave of music broke over the audience, violins like streams of light, horns like Judgement Day, and wave after wave of dancers leapt out of [the] mystic fogbank, flying, preparationless into the air, catching one another by thigh, left shoulder, anything but the waist, veering at angles undreamed of, spinning like screw guns, stopping on a dime again and again.¹⁷

It is usual for the critics to capture particular moments in a dance. Deborah Jowitt, for example, describes the first three of nine sections in *In The Upper Room*. She says that:

At the beginning, there are only two dancers on stage, Shelley Washington and Christine Uchida. They're wearing one of the evening's uniforms - black-and-white striped coveralls, laying out the basic vocabulary. Advancing, running in place, turning, sashaying, swirling arms and body, swatting the air, bowing over, swinging a leg high to the side and letting that pull them into a hop, they make you think of superathletes warming up in a gym as big as the world.¹⁸

Pretty soon they're joined by Erzsebet Foldi and Catherine Oppenheimer. Things begin crackling. As these four work in a line across the back, two couples enter, the women in striped dresses and red pointe shoes. It becomes clear that there are several squads. The sneaker-footed join for several powerful sextets (one almost violent) built on diagonal lines that criss-cross while travelling. Space age Virginia Reels, precise to a fault, but forced

16. Mindy Aloff *Dance: Twyla Tharp Dance* The Nation March 28, 1987 p 412

17. Joan Acocella *Twyla Tharp Dance* Dance Magazine June 1987 p194, 195

18. Jowitt *ibid*

askew. Then there's the ballet crowd [three women, two men, who she names] but although the pointe shoes give a sharp edge to things, and there's a gazelle of spins, leaps, lifts, this isn't like any ballet you ever saw.¹⁹

Marcia Siegel describes the ending:

The dancers all appear for what looks like it's going to be a big windup, but true to her ingenious self, Tharp instead scatters them off into the fog. Just when I think I can't stand the volume of the score another second, Washington and Uchida are alone centerstage. Grabbing the air, they pull their fists down in a gesture of defiance and the curtain falls.²⁰

Critical assessments are made of the relationships between the primary element, choreography, which is a central focus of evaluation, and the secondary or supporting elements - music, costume, stage and lighting design. Attention is paid to the way these elements contribute to the work as a whole. In each review choreography is seen as the primary element of the dance, and is described through the formal and structural aspects of the dance. The structural integrity of the choreography is evaluated, keeping in mind the work as a whole, and the possible intentions of the choreographer are deduced.

There is a wide range of opinion about Tharp's new dance expressed in these reviews, and little agreement about its success or significance, and even though each critic chooses particular aspects to highlight in support of his or her opinions, all the critics consider the same evidence in reaching their opinions. The external form, internal choreographic structure, and formal qualities of the dance are given emphasis; the formal and structural aspects of the dance provide the

¹⁹. Jowitt *ibid*

²⁰. Siegel *ibid*

context of critical attention; and the dance is described in terms of the movement conventions of stylistic traditions.

Tobi Tobias and Marcia Siegel, for example, have opposing views. Siegel admires the dance, and tells us that it:

is carefully crafted and constantly interesting in form. Maintaining a formal, presentational relationship to the audience, the dancers slip into asymmetrical vs symmetrical arrangements in space, overlappings, and regroupings of the two cadres, as well as surprising entrances and exits, and bits of patterns keep appearing like familiar landmarks. It's not a particularly optimistic piece, but it proclaims a joyous investment in a dancing existence, for however long existence may continue. Thinking about it later I saw the dance as being about the end of the world.²¹

Tobias clearly dislikes the dance intensely. She tells us that:

Tharp still hasn't overcome the modern dancer's grudge against classical dance. She's set up this piece so that her dancers look handsome and confident only when they're in sneakers. Put [them] in pointe shoes and - instead of growing lighter, fleeter, their range extended - they become awkward and ponderous. In terms of pattern the dance is defiantly stark and symmetrical. It's all short, taut lines, the bodies focussed forward in confrontation with the viewer. The energy is unmitigatedly furious. There isn't a moment of ease, refreshment, human sympathy, not a single yielding gesture, in the piece.²²

The critics acknowledge the essentially multi-media character of this dance in their consideration of the roles and relationships of the work's secondary elements (music, costume design, stage and lighting design). Particular attention is paid to the relative importance of each of these elements, and to the appropriateness of choices for the work as a whole. In general more attention is given to the

²¹. Siegel *ibid*

²². Tobi Tobias *Fighting Mad* New York February 23, 1987 p123

relationship between the music and the choreography than is given to the respective relationships between dance and stage design or costume.

Tobi Tobias introduces these secondary elements as:

The sleek accoutrements which nowadays characterize a Tharp production. Philip Glass's harsh, propulsive music sets the stage for excitement; it makes you think of a train rushing at great speed, boldly hooting. Jennifer Tipton's lighting creates a fog calibrated to great density at the back of the stage so that the dancers surge forward out of nowhere, like thugs in the night. Thanks to Norma Kamali the dancers have full wardrobes ranging from glossy pajama outfits in convict stripes to screaming-red skimpiers, the women's accessorized with red pointe shoes over matching socks.²³

Individual dancers receive less attention than the music, costume, stage and lighting designs, perhaps because this is a full ensemble work in which individuals do not stand out. When individuals are named, however, it is usually for their movement identities or as a way of identifying moments in the dance which the critic wishes to highlight. Washington and Uchida, for example, are named for their identities as opening and closing the work; and the two groups are named by their footwear, as the ballet group and the besneakered.

Six of these ten critics comment on the fact that Tharp's company has almost all new members, and that the new dancers are ballet trained²⁴. This background is seen as important in considering the new choreography. Arlene Croce, for example, links these factors when she says:

²³. Tobias *ibid*

²⁴. In fact, Tharp has always used ballet-trained dancers, and her dancers have always begun each day with a ballet class, even during the 70s when they were not dancing ballet. What is different about her newly reconstituted company is that all but four of her dancers have at some time performed in classical ballet companies. (This is documented by Susan Reiter *Saratoga Springs: Works in Progress by Twyla Tharp Ballet International* Dec 1986 p168)

All the girls are ballet-trained, and the two new pieces that Tharp has choreographed for the season include parts for women on pointe....the pointes are only a means of advertising the newly constituted company and what it can do. (Just to make sure you get the message the girls wear red socks and red [pointe] shoes).²⁵

Each critic has structured his or her description and analysis to support their evaluation of the work, and each has created a context which sets the boundaries and significantly narrows the focus of their discussion and evaluation. Though each has relative freedom to decide on the context for discussion created within their commentary, that decision determines what is appropriate for their identification, description, analysis and evaluation of the dance. Some focus on the work itself and strictly limit their discussion to what they perceive to be its own terms; others place their consideration of the dance within the dual practices of ballet and modern dance which are referenced by Tharp's choices of movement material.

Jack Anderson's review considers *In The Upper Room* as a single dance, on its own terms, and in relation to implications which he perceives in its title. He reads the title as relating to the New Testament incident where Jesus and his disciples gathered 'in the upper room', and there experienced the Holy Spirit as "a rushing mighty wind and cloven tongues like as of fire". Anderson's description and analysis vividly trace such whirlwinds and images of fire through the dance, capturing their impact on him, and he uses these images to support his evaluation that this dance "is a work of substance".²⁶

²⁵. Croce *ibid* p118

²⁶. Jack Anderson *The Dance : Twyla Tharp Troupe in Brooklyn* The New York Times February 5, 1987 pC23

Deborah Jowitt, Marcia Siegel and Tobi Tobias also consider the success and significance of this dance within what they perceive as its own terms. Jowitt decides that Tharp is "redefining virtuosity, getting back to the Latin root of the word *virtus* - the sum of all the corporeal and mental excellences of man."²⁷

Jowitt's review makes evident the virtuosity of both the crafting and performance of the dance, the complexities of phrasing in the blaze of dancing, the intricacy of the movement design, and the "furious power and glory" of the dancing.

Siegel lays her opinion on the line right from the start:

Twyla Tharp dance is the most admired, envied, maligned, imitated, and sought-after product in today's competitive dance market. As the opening night of its Brooklyn Academy of Music season proved, it is also - still - the most original, accomplished, and exciting work we've been offered in ages.²⁸

High praise. In her review she systematically lays out the evidence for her assessment - the integrity of the work's structuring, the virtuoso crafting and the ingenuity of the constantly changing variations in patterning.

Tobias reaches a rather different conclusion, and finds nothing in the dance to praise. She sees Tharp as taking on the ballet world, and she cites the use of pointe shoes in the dance to support her assertion that Tharp has:

cast herself as an inconsolably embattled figure, has lately transferred that role to her whole company, (and) still hasn't overcome the modern dancer's grudge against classical dance.²⁹

²⁷. Jowitt *ibid*

²⁸. Siegel *ibid*

²⁹. Tobias *ibid*

Tobias does not specify what she takes this grudge to be, nor why a modern dancer would have a grudge against classical dance, though her review implies the grudge has something to do with ballet dancers normally appearing fleeter and finer than modern dancers. She sees Tharp as reversing this presumably normal state of affairs in this dance, since, as she observes, it's the modern dancers who look fleeter and finer this time.

The other critics set a wider context of evaluation than the terms of this dance alone. In particular, they consider it within the context of American ballet after the death of master choreographer George Balanchine, the choreographer who has largely set the standards of American ballet. They comment on the influences which they see Balanchine as having had on Tharp's new dance.

Joan Acocella considers *In The Upper Room* alongside the other dances shown in the four week season. These dances collectively comprise a retrospective of Tharp's oeuvre, and Acocella examines the new dance in relation to Tharp's development and possible future directions as a choreographer. Holly Brubach also does this, but she does so against a backdrop of Balanchine's absence from the dance scene. Both see the new ballet-trained members of the company, and Tharp's extended use of pointework in the two new works of the season (*In The Upper Room* and *Ballare*) as signalling a permanent turn to ballet as the new direction in Tharp's work.

Acocella sees *In The Upper Room* as an announcement of Tharp's new commitment to ballet as much as it is a showcase for the dancers' balletic virtuosity. She examines the dance within this context, as if it were ballet rather than modern dance, and she finds it less than satisfactory by ballet's standards.

She looks for the line and architecture of motion created by ballet positions, and the development seen in ballet composition, but does not find them, other than in occasional parody. Rather than considering that such absences may indicate that Tharp's rationale lies outside the terms of ballet, and that Tharp's less-than-proper balleticisms may suggest the kind of subversive purpose which has been present in her earlier works for ballet companies, Acocella concludes that the dance:

is not so much a dance as it is a poster, an advertisement for the new Twyla Tharp Dance (company)...an announcement [of Tharp's intention to bring ballet home]..as well as a showcase for the dancer's virtuosity.³⁰

Holly Brubach accounts for Tharp's apparent switch to ballet by saying that:

It is out of (her) affection for George Balanchine's work and a sense of responsibility to it; out of the need to set herself some new, ongoing challenge, having done almost everything else so early (in her career); and out of her ravenous ambition.³¹

Brubach sees some problems for Tharp if she is to maintain her choreographic identity in a classical mode, and suggests that the major problem is that classical technique is not yet the language of Tharp's imagination. For Brubach the value of this dance is that it may help Tharp on her path to becoming Balanchine's successor. "*In The Upper Room*" she says, "is busy, rather empty, but looks as if it may have helped Tharp to get her bearings, her way clear to *Ballare*, a bona fide, symmetrical, sincerely classical ballet."³²

Mindy Aloff also sets *In The Upper Room* alongside the other dances in the season, but rather than discussing the interconnections between these dances,

³⁰. Acocella *ibid* p195

³¹. Brubach *ibid*

³². Brubach *ibid*

or the ongoing development of Tharp's choreography, she instead examines the objections which other critics have raised to Tharp's use of pointework. She uses the issues they have raised as a context for her own analysis. To their objections that Tharp's pointework is improper, awkward and does not make the dancing lighter, fleeter, finer in the approved manner, Aloff replies that Tharp is using pointework expressionistically, and she goes on to affirm the results she describes. Tharp, she concludes, has two choices - "to redefine ease, authority, calm, and fleetness without urgency, or to change herself to accommodate them."³³ The critics, Aloff says, can only wait and watch to see what Tharp decides to do.

Clive Barnes, Anna Kisselgoff and Arlene Croce use the premiere of *In The Upper Room* as the pretext for examinations of the state of ballet choreography in the years after Balanchine's death. Barnes says that ballet is now transforming modern dance, and he chooses Tharp's dances which use ballet idioms as representative of this new, transformed "modern classicism." He says that "*In The Upper Room* is one of her best ballets ever, a work that, for all its superficial glitz, shows in its structure and cogency, a solidity sometimes missing in her choreography."³⁴ He suggests that classicism will discipline Tharp's invention.

"Modern classicism" for Barnes is a matter of modern dance being shaped and disciplined (and improved as a result) by ballet, but for Arlene Croce and Anna Kisselgoff it is a matter of ballet being weakened and devalued (and imperilled) by modern dance choreographers moving into the ballet world. Croce accordingly

³³. Aloff *ibid*

³⁴. Clive Barnes *Twyla Tharp and the Modern Classicism* Dance and Dancers September 1987 p27

describes *In The Upper Room* as "narcissistic and lacking continuity," as "designer choreography given a megalomaniacal production," and she variously describes Tharp's pointework as crude, artificial, inorganic and unexpressive. When Croce sets Tharp's work in context with new ballets by choreographers Karole Armitage, Paul Meija and Peter Martins, she concludes (quoting ballet patron Lincoln Kirstein) that there is a void in American dance which has led to a rush to ballet - and that this could be dangerous. Her fear seems to be that classical ballet in America cannot survive the death of Balanchine.

Kisselgoff is similarly concerned for ballet's future, worried that "ballet may not survive in the hands of those whose mind-set is outside the codified system that defines the classical dance."³⁵ Tharp is clearly one such person in Kisselgoff's terms, and she examines Tharp's vocabulary, structures and phrasing in relation to that concern. She measures them against the codified standards of classicism and finds them wanting.

The critics who feel that Tharp's dance is just not good enough ballet, also question its status as art. They acknowledge the dance's popularity with audiences, and its popular acclaim, but in doing so they imply that popularity and aesthetic status are mutually exclusive attributes, that this acclaim in some way denigrates the value of Tharp's work.

Barnes finds it amazing that "Trendy Manhattan" poured over the Brooklyn Bridge in hot pursuit of "culture a la mode" at BAM, that they embraced Tharp's new work. Croce sneers about "the aerobics generation" with whom the dance is a hit. Kisselgoff names "the youth culture that fills rock arenas throughout the country"

³⁵. Kisselgoff *ibid*

in a way that suggests that the acclaim of this generation has no significance. She concludes that *In The Upper Room* "has been a hollow success - a case of an important talent less confident about an artistic imperative than about her ability to widen an audience."³⁶

They attribute the popularity of the dance to its Broadway likeness and its glossy packaging. Croce mentions the sources of the movement material - "aerobics, karate, jogging, breakdancing, and of course ballet" - its supercharged atmosphere and "properly frenetic pace." Barnes mutters about its gloss, its fashion-show consciousness and rock-video appearance; and Acocella adds up its components as if they are a formula for success - *In The Upper Room* is "big, glamorous, and aggressively modern, with a brassy score by Philip Glass, a swell lighting design by Jennifer Tipton, costumes by Norma Kamali, publicity photos by Richard Avedon, and a thank-you roster including two government agencies and five foundations."³⁷ Tobias complains that "as the productions and their surrounding publicity become increasingly glamorized, the company's performance style looks more and more like Broadway. Given Tharp's brilliant choreographic intelligence, this development is dismaying."³⁸

These ten reviews reveal a range of individual opinions about the success and significance of Tharp's new dance, but, more strikingly, they also reveal a relative uniformity in the evidence considered appropriate in critical appraisal, and a relative uniformity of critical method. Critical assessments are made of the relationships between the primary element, choreography, which is a central

36. *ibid*

37. Acocella *ibid* p194

38. Tobias *ibid*

focus of evaluation, and the secondary or supporting elements - music, costume, stage and lighting design. Attention is paid to the way these elements contribute to the work as a whole, and the work is set beside other dances by the same choreographer, or other dances within a similar style or genre for comparison.

The stylistic and aesthetic issues perceived by the critics to be active in Tharp's dance are asserted through evocatively descriptive analysis, but there is little discussion about these aspects of the dance in their commentary. While the critics descriptively label the two groups of dancers, and encapsulate a perceived relationship between the two with pertinent adjectives (Siegel talks about two camps, and two cadres, and about contests, for example: and Jowitt calls them squads), they don't actually examine the relationship between ballet and modern dance which is referenced by the emblemization of the two styles within the dance.

Several of the reviews give a feeling of the stylistic and technical contrasts which give the dance its richness, and Siegel says Tharp is using the two styles to "create the variety that's often lacking in contemporary pure-dance ensemble works." Siegel also reminds us that Tharp has made dances about modern dance encountering ballet before, for ballet companies - a fact which Croce, Acocella, Kisselgoff and Barnes also mention, and yet none of them extend this observation into a consideration that Tharp might, in *In The Upper Room*, be doing more than attempting to emulate Balanchine, and in the process making bad ballet.

Tharp has juxtaposed ballet and modern dance as distinctly different styles within *In The Upper Room*. The dancers are readily identifiable as representatives of the two dance styles, thanks to their footwear, and thanks to the distinctive

vocabulary, phrasing, structuring, gender differentiation, support and interaction patterns of their idioms. Recognizably balletic partnering, lexicon and line are set against a typically Tharpian hybrid modern dance, and this is done in a way which highlights the limited and restrictive nature of the balletic proprieties, and the conventionality of classical pointework and partnering, by comparison with the non-conventional vocabulary and phrasing of the modern dance hybrid, with its non-gender differentiated partnering and movement possibilities.

Tharp mixes and matches, combines and offsets these two styles, and explores the seemingly endless permutations which the respective movement vocabularies, phrasing and interaction structures make available. In the process she offers clear contrasts between the two, and enables a comparison of the variety which the respective vocabularies and conventions allow. When the pace accelerates, as the dance proceeds, it is clear that these same vocabularies and conventions respond differently to the ever-increasing challenges to the speed, agility and precision of the dancers. While the modern dancers respond with ever more brilliant phrasing and scarcely a wrinkle in the fabric of their dancing, the balletic proprieties are progressively transgressed by a gradual and ever-increasing extension of line, placement, and positioning, beyond their proper limits. The result, as several of these critics intimated, is that ballet comes off second best, a result which would seem to suggest that Tharp is at the very least suggesting that a once cherished public notion that ballet is superior to modern dance, in terms of its virtuoso demands and the variety of positioning possible within its lexicon, is no longer tenable.

Given the normal concern of both the academic and critical discourses about dance with the attribution of influences which lead to stylistic progression, and the

recognition within such discourses that there has been a significant return to content in the dances of the 80s, it is surprising that the critics have not considered that Tharp may be doing more than making a dance which is rich in virtuosity. Given Tharp's clearly recognized propensity to question the terms of dance styles through her choreography, it seems strange that the critics have not considered that, in this dance, she might be questioning the terms of ballet itself, that they have not discussed the possibility that Tharp may be subverting Balanchine's canonical ballet standards.

The absence of discussion about Tharp's questioning of Balanchinian standards, in the commentary can, in part, be accounted for in terms of the constraints placed on such commentary by the requirements of publication. Critical commentary is required to be reader-friendly and to be within a publicly shared experience of dance, two factors which significantly limit any discussion of the subversive or transgressive relationships between one dance and others in a similar style or genre. But this is only a partial explanation. I suggest that the terms of the aesthetic paradigm also provide a significant constraint on the writing of dance reviews, since these terms limit the critical appraisal of dance to primarily formal issues, and thus shape both critical seeing and writing about dance in ways that constrain critical consideration.

The terms of the aesthetic paradigm are integral to the various discourses about dance, and are reinforced in the commentary on modern dance criticism which has interactively defined the concerns, tasks and standards of critical practice. They are also reinforced in the reviews written by the New York critics who provide the reference group for the critical community, and in combination with the critics' shared conceptions of the purposes and tasks of criticism, and the

requirements of publication, they largely explain the relative uniformity of critical practice.

While the terms of the aesthetic paradigm limit the critical consideration of the subversive or transgressive relationships between dances in similar styles or genres, they also set aside the consideration of a work's possible meanings, and the consideration of the relationships between the work and its social context, and in this way limit both the critical and public appraisal and appreciation of dance. I will turn to these effects of the aesthetic paradigm in my next chapter, with particular reference to dances by German choreographer Pina Bausch, and Americans Bill Irwin and Karole Armitage.

**Chapter 4 - Dance Discourse and the Aesthetic Paradigm :
Part 2 - Pina Bausch, Bill Irwin, Karole Armitage**

I have suggested, in chapter 2, that modern dance criticism is limited by the requirements of publication, in particular by the requirement that the critic should write in a reader-friendly way and within a publicly shared experience of the dance in review. And I have suggested, in chapter 3, that criticism is constrained by the terms of the aesthetic paradigm which limit the critical appraisal of dance to primarily formal issues. In this chapter I will consider additional limits imposed on the appreciative capacities of critics and audiences when the "seeing clearly" and "writing accurately" that critics do are guided by the terms of the aesthetic paradigm. I will also suggest that in the late 1980s, the aesthetic paradigm appears to be functioning to limit rather than to expand the public understanding of dance as an art form.

At the heart of the aesthetic paradigm is the injunction that critics must accurately describe the movement seen in a dance, since movement is the distinctive and essential component which differentiates dance from the other arts. To see that movement clearly, as I showed in chapter 2, is not only a matter of seeing, and remembering what is seen - the critic must also be able to recognize the stylistic attributes of what is seen, and must be able to identify and assess the choreographic structuring of the movement in relationship to those stylistic attributes. These critical understandings must then be translated into vivid, precise, dynamic language which describes both the movement and its structuring, supported by evidence from the dance. The purpose of this descriptive analysis is to provide readers with information which will offer insight into the dance and enhance their response to and appreciation of dance in general.

"Writing accurately", also addressed in chapter 2, is a matter of writing informatively, descriptively and analytically about the dance seen in performance, and in order to write in this way dance critics must be professionally informed. They must have knowledge of the aesthetic concerns and the stylistic and generic criteria and considerations which are specific to the various dance forms of the contemporary repertoire. That knowledge is both the source of their authority and a source of validation for critical observations, and a means to guard against personal idiosyncrasies and allegiances. It is also the basis of the professional way of seeing dance which is modelled in reviews, and which guides the public experience and understanding of dance as an art form.

As I showed in chapter 3, in their reviews the critics attempt to capture the immediacy of the dance - how it looks, how it feels, and what it suggests to them. They do so through evocatively descriptive analysis which asserts the stylistic and aesthetic issues which they perceive to be pertinent to the dance in view, and which describes the formal and structural aspects of the dance in terms of the movement conventions of particular dance forms. They structure their reviews to persuasively support their critical opinions and evaluations of the success and significance of the dance in its own terms, and, at times, with reference to other dances of a similar style or genre.

The "seeing and writing" that critics do is thus both informed and guided by professional knowledge of how to see and what it is appropriate to look for in particular dance forms, according to the aesthetic criteria and considerations specific to particular styles and genres of the contemporary repertoire. While this professional knowledge both validates and gives authority to the critic's observations, it also imposes a grid of aesthetic concerns and expectations which

may interfere with the all-important business of perceiving the dance in view, particularly when the dance in view is one which does not have conventional formal, stylistic or generic concerns as its central motivation, or whose purpose is to bend the accepted choreographic conventions in new directions.

In the late 1980s a number of choreographers are making dances which do not take accepted choreographic concerns and conventions as their central motivation. They are making dances which take their structures from theater and film and visual art, dances which question the sexual politics and gender distinctions of contemporary society, dances which subvert, transgress, and otherwise contravene the canonical conventions of classical and neoclassical ballet. Three such dancemakers encountered regularly on the dance beat are German choreographer Pina Bausch, whose evening-length *tanztheater* works have raised a storm of critical commentary; American ballet choreographer Karole Armitage, whose works have provoked both strenuous disapproval and great admiration; and American clown/choreographer Bill Irwin, who makes central use of dance in his works in a crossover form which has been labelled as new vaudeville and new comedy. Through reference to the American critics' responses to the works of these three choreographers, I will illustrate my contention that critical seeing and writing are constrained by professionally informed expectations, and I will endeavour to show that critical considerations are restricted when the subject and content of a dance are filtered through the concerns of form and structure.

The choreography of Pina Bausch was first presented in the United States in 1984, when four of her works were shown in New York at the Next Wave Festival of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and at the Summer Olympics Arts Festival in

Los Angeles. Three more of her works were shown in New York in 1985 and a further two in 1988. Her choreography has defined the German style *tanztheater*, one which blurs the boundaries of dance and theatre, and which makes the most of the acting abilities of dancers and their intense stage presence to sustain performances which are often three to four hours in duration. Though the moving body provides the medium for theatrical effects, there is a limited range of movement present in these works. Virtuoso solo sequences are offset by ensemble and small group interactions, and though events move at a rapid pace, they are parenthesized by the lengthy repetition of certain sequences.

These works are set on wide stages, open to the back wall. The stage surface is often made of real material - earth (*The Rite Of Spring. On the Mountain a Cry Was Heard*), water (*Arien*), a grass lawn (1980), or material which suggests the real, such as pink silk carnations (*Carnations*). The sound environment is usually provided by a sound collage made up from recorded music, the dancer's own voices speaking a number of different languages, the sounds of their moving bodies, and silence. Theatrical techniques borrowed from Stanislavski and Brecht are combined with Method principles to intensify the interactions between individuals, and alienation techniques are used to undercut the spectator's sympathetic identification with images and situations.¹ This melding of techniques results in "a push and pull which leaves many spectators exhausted by the end of the evening, overwhelmed by the emotional complexity of the experience."²

1. Susan Allene Manning *An American Perspective on Tanztheater* The Drama Review Vol 30, No 2, Summer 1986 p61

2. *ibid*

Pina Bausch's dances have other than formal concerns and issues as their *raison d'être* - her attention is not directed to showing *how* people move, but is instead directed to examining *what* moves them. Her works focus on the dynamics and emotions of human relationships, and make reference to everyday reality - her concern is "to try to understand how it happens, after all, that people behave in a certain way."³ Her works examine the intertwining of love and fear, loving and loneliness, pain and pleasure, joy and shame, frustration and terror. They show "the violence men and women inflict upon another, the fears and happiness that everyone experiences,"⁴ as well as the quest for tenderness and intimacy which takes place inside the confines of a world in which men are dominant over women. Her works highlight the difficulties and fears which arise for individuals in the process of getting really close to each other: they examine "the matter of our sexuality and the roles we adopt because of it,"⁵ and "all the things we do to make somebody love us."⁶

Her themes range over the efforts made by individuals in their search for safety in unsafe surroundings, the stereotyped behaviour and everyday nastiness which arise from doubt and insecurity, and social ills defined through personal traumas. Her explorations of these themes offer "a constant reminder of our own inadequacy, a constant annoyance, forever calling upon us to abandon routine

³. Pina Bausch quoted in Raimund Hoghe (translated by Stephen Tree) *The Theatre of Pina Bausch* The Drama Review Vol 24, No 1, March 1980 p71

⁴. Anna Kisselgoff *Dance That Startles and Challenges Is Coming From Abroad* The New York Times October 13, 1985 p14

⁵. Hilton Als *Pina und Kinder* Ballet Review Vol 13, No 4, Winter 1985 p79

⁶. Hoghe *ibid* p67

and dullness, to throw off our coldness and to start trusting one another"⁷. And they provoke strong reactions - as German critic and Bausch-afficionado Jochen Schmidt puts it: "Bausch's work permits no half-heartedness. One either loves it or hates it, praises it or opposes it, but one cannot possibly remain untouched by it or simply shrug one's shoulders at it. Pina Bausch forces one to take a stand; one is either for them or against them."⁸

When the American critics approach Bausch's dances according to the normal expectations of the aesthetic paradigm they look for form, for choreographic structure, for rhythmic patterning, for the significant development of the material through the duration of the work, and for structural integrity. At a symposium after the 1985 New York showings of Bausch's works, critic George Jackson drew together his thoughts on form in a way that crystallizes the paradigmatic conceptions of the notion: "Form means significant change. An organic structure that makes emotional sense. Emotion not as the expression of a literal, realistic feeling but a formal implementation or diminution."⁹

The critics don't find the form they're looking for in Bausch's works, and they find it difficult to appreciate them. They perceive this lack of form as a weakness in the works, though they admit that the materials, and the methods used to present them, are "interesting." Like the critics who responded to the avant garde works of the 1950s with allegations of choreographic wilfulness, the critics of the 80s imply

⁷. Jochen Schmidt *Pina Bausch - A Constant Annoyance* in Norbert Servos and Gert Weigelt (translated by Patricia Stadie) Pina Bausch Wuppertal Dance Theater or The Art Of Training A Goldfish. Excursions Into Dance Cologne, FRG: Ballett-Buhnen-Verlag Koln 1984 p13

⁸. Schmidt *ibid*

⁹. George Jackson quoted in *Tanztheater The Thrill of the Lynch Mob or the Rage of a Woman* The Drama Review Vol 30, No2, Summer 1986 p52

that Bausch is deliberately frustrating their desire for development and resonance. They see the construction of her works as "patchy", and as critic Deborah Jowitt explains, as "the assemblage approach to form. Seeing several Bausch works, you get the impression that a moment from any dance could fit into any other."¹⁰

They see her images as undeveloped, and her scenes as dwindling away instead of ending, and they complain that she "lets almost every episode run until it's dead. The images and scenes are all given equal value, and the more spectacular inevitably have greater weight. But not because Bausch shapes them; she only delivers them"¹¹. They expect the work to make some coherent sense, to make an integrated whole, but instead they are presented by work whose structures differ radically from their expectations, and they seek explanations for their sense of frustration with what they see:

The pieces proceed, not by causality but by accretion. An image is gradually, laboriously built, then abandoned. It is partly this structural disconnectedness among intensely lived events that creates the pervasive sense of alienation and angst. In Bausch's world, life seems both plodding and obdurate, despite intermittent flashes of wonder and lightness, on the one hand, and nearly non-stop histrionics, on the other.¹²

While the critics acknowledge that Bausch does use formal devices to organize the action in her works, they complain that these devices are used to express literal emotion, rather than being used in the approved formalist manner to structure the work. They find that:

¹⁰ Deborah Jowitt *The Stage Is A Battleground* The Village Voice December 17, 1985 p112

¹¹ Burt Supree *Hit Me With Your Best Shot* The Village Voice November 5, 1986 p93

¹² Sally Banes (review of Pina Bausch) Eye International March 1986 quoted in *What The Critics say About Tanztheater* The Drama Review Vol 30, No 2, Summer 1986 p83

Nothing happens, and it happens over and over again. Anything follows anything. The tone of confident directionlessness is carefully designed... The rhythm of a Pina Bausch piece is obsessively regular. Bursts of violence are followed by long stillnesses. Bits of business are systematically repeated, sometimes with increasing urgency but more often with no variation at all. At every repetition less is revealed, and action that looked gratuitous to begin with dissolves into meaningless frenzy.¹³

Repetition is a structural device which was central to American post-modern dance of the 1960s and 70s, and which is still widely used. But the critics dislike the way Bausch makes use of it - they see it as "repetition without development, variation, exploration."¹⁴ The critics complain that "repetition, whether of ordinary or extraordinary actions, robs life of substance", that "the characters struggle in obsessive episodes to control their recalcitrant, almost foreign bodies"¹⁵

The critics complain, variously, about particular aspects of the perceived formal lacks; and their effects on the work as a whole. They say that there is "no mediating dramatic rationale, no technique to transfigure and validate raw emotion"¹⁶; that there is a "slackness of timing which made any sort of suspense, or theater, impossible" and an "indulgent attitude toward rhythm."¹⁷ They say that:

She hits us on the head with a statement or an image and reinforces it, repeats it until the bludgeoning erases the impact. Eventually it becomes tedious and empty. I don't believe it is truly her intention to

¹³. Arlene Croce *DANCING: Bad Smells* The New Yorker July 16, 1984 p81,82

¹⁴. Joan Acocella quoted in *Tanztheater The Thrill of the Lynch Mob or the Rage of a Woman* The Drama Review Vol 30, No2, Summer 1986 p54

¹⁵. Banes *ibid*

¹⁶. Croce *ibid* p82

¹⁷. Mindy Aloff *DANCE* The Nation September 1, 1984 p156

squeeze the value out of everything and leave us only with eggshells and orange rinds and shrivelling debris.¹⁸

With these formal lacks in mind, the critics by and large dismiss Bausch's tanztheater as not being "dance" - as Arlene Croce puts it "*dance* is something it hardly ever shows us."¹⁹ Several critics try to find the roots of Bausch's approach in German dance and theater. Knowing that Bausch studied dance in New York in the late 1960s, they also look for American influences, and they make comparisons between her work and the radical dance and theater works seen in New York in the late 60s. Critic Marcia Siegel finds little to praise in Bausch's work:

This isn't really dancing and it certainly isn't choreography, but it's physical beyond anything dancers ever have to do. The performer must be totally present and totally willing to go as far as the task demands. What makes this different from the sixties theatre of Grotowski, Schechner, Schneemann and Halprin, is that Bausch's performers often have to pretend. They mime sexiness, embarrassment, sadomasochistic excitation, lobotomized submissiveness. They do it to arouse the audience, and their physicality is not only directed outward but depersonalized by the collective, cumulative circumstances in which they employ it. You don't care for them as characters, you react to what they're going through.²⁰

Bausch's works not only frustrate the critics' expectations in relation to form, but also in relation to content - both her perceived failure to develop the content in the approved ways, and her inclusion of scenes and actions which offend their sensibilities. They respond with bewilderment, rage, incomprehension, anger. Not only do they object to what they feel is self-indulgence in Bausch's long and repetitive performances and her wallowing in pain and angst, they are also

18. Supree *ibid*

19. Croce *ibid*

20. Marcia B Siegel *Carabosse In A Cocktail Dress* The Hudson Review Vol 39, No 1, Spring 1986 p109

outraged by the violence they see portrayed in her performances, and appalled at the vision of painfully distorted bodies and victimized individuals.

The critics acknowledge the force of her work, but complain about her "capacity to show unglamorized emotions, habitual cruelty, mindlessness,"²¹ and about her themes and elements of "abuse and abasement... unjust victimization, grotesque obsession with anguish, humour at the expense of the protagonist, a belittling of the body"²². They strenuously object to her portrayal of the relationships between men and women as a continuing battle for dominance, in particular because they feel that her portrayal shows that women have no power to change men's behaviour. But they object more to the means she uses to present this material, and to what they see as an addiction to pain:

Bausch's power lies in having calculated audience voyeurism to a nicety, and those sad smiles have a way of curling up contemptuously when it comes to her favorite theme of men and women. In Bausch theatre, men brutalize women and women humiliate men; the savage round goes on endlessly. The content of these bruising encounters is always minimal. Bausch doesn't build psychodrama in which people come to understand something about themselves and their pain. She keeps referring us to the act of brutalization and humiliation - to the pornography of pain. It's what we came for, isn't it?²³

The critics' disapproval of what they perceive in Bausch's work is evident in the tone of their commentary and their choices of adjectives. They say that her performers "assault the intellectual sympathies and endurance capacities of the

²¹. Supree *ibid*

²². Aloff *ibid*

²³. Croce *ibid*

audience"²⁴, that dancers become "weak and lost, working on will alone"²⁵; that Bausch's aesthetic is "bleak and ugly"²⁶, that her works are full of the "dramatization of sexual despair."²⁷ Though her images "make intriguing comments on the dark side of human relations"²⁸, and succeed in giving at times "some of the most extraordinary statements about the awfulness of the human condition ever rendered in contemporary theater,"²⁹ her work, "despite its originality and mastery...leaves one unsure of where she stands in the moral spectrum."³⁰

Their normal critical expectations are not satisfied by Bausch's choreography, and one result is that what the critics see most clearly are the formal lacks they perceive in her work. They seem unable to look past the surface of the work to consider the role of Bausch's structural choices within her works. They are offended by the repetitive way she presents violent relationships between men and women in her dances, for example, but they do not read the structure of these interactions as having meaning, as offering metaphors or analogies which link the actions depicted within the dances to the reality of sexual politics in the

24. Martin Bernheimer Los Angeles Times October 8, 1985 quoted in *What The Critics say About Tanztheater* The Drama Review Vol 30, No 2, Summer 1986 p83

25. Supree *ibid*

26. Bernheimer *ibid*

27. Siegel *ibid* p110

28. Bernheimer *ibid*

29. Janice Ross The Oakland Tribune June 4, 1985 quoted in *What The Critics say About Tanztheater* The Drama Review Vol 30, No 2, Summer 1986 p83

30. Alan M Kriegsman The Washington Post June 24, 1984 quoted in *What The Critics say About Tanztheater* The Drama Review Vol 30, No 2, Summer 1986 p84

world beyond the dances. Though images and actions are repeated within the dance, for example, the situations in which the repeated actions appear are often different - costumes change, actions first done by women are next done by men, the action of a single person is enlarged when a group of people do it together or in an overlapping pattern. In addition to making particular interactions and situations vividly evident, these repetitions offer viewers the opportunity to consider the same interaction from several different viewpoints, to become aware of the impact of context on human behaviour, and to become aware of their own ways of seeing and responding to the issues which Bausch is raising in her works.

While the critics seldom read the meanings of Bausch's structural choices, similarly, they don't recognize the ironies of the images and interactions she presents, nor the tender and comic aspects which the German critics assure us exist in her works.³¹ They do not see that her work is intended as an intervention, that the social and political implications of the situations she presents are intended as a confrontation of men's violence against women, and as a questioning of sexual politics. As German theatre theorist Johannes Birringer observes, this refusal to see the content "deprives the work of any emotionally and intellectually significant meaning"³² - in failing to consider the social meanings of Bausch's dances the critics devalue them, and leave their readers with a very limited impression of what is happening in these works.

³¹. Jochen Schmidt and Lutz Forster quoted in *Tanztheater The Thrill of the Lynch Mob or the Rage of a Woman* The Drama Review Vol 30, No2, Summer 1986 p52 and p53

³². Johannes Birringer *Pina Bausch Dancing Across Borders* The Drama Review Vol 30, No2, Summer 1986 p97

While the critics object to the level of violence in Bausch's dances, they don't examine their own responses to it, and, though several critics suggest that Bausch may be reflecting a level of violence which is present in German society, they do not consider that Bausch's representations may be similarly valid within American society. German choreographer Reinhild Hoffmann, the artistic director of the Tanztheater Bremen, suggests that these critical responses are due to what she perceives as an American fear of dealing with human problems, and an American unwillingness to confront the level of violence in everyday life in such places as New York city.³³

American feminist dance critic Ann Daly, in her commentary on the symposium which accompanied Bausch's 1985 season in New York city, does provide a reading of the structural metaphors of Bausch's dances. She observes that the violence in these dances comes in bursts of dense repetition, and that, though the repetition intensifies the dramatic force, it also reveals that the interactions between individuals are representations - are overtly theatrical, repeatable and therefore acted, make-believe behaviours.³⁴ Daly observes that the way Bausch presents the violation of women's bodies and women's autonomy reveals women's complicity in their victimization, their passivity in the face of violence, their acquiescent powerlessness in the face of the depicted physical and emotional oppression which is an analogue for their social, political and economic oppression. For Daly, Bausch vividly presents the frustration and desperation which are central to the female victim's experience of violence, and she sees the critics' failure to deal with "the unheard rage of a woman" which Bausch's work

³³. Reinhild Hoffman quoted in *Tanztheater The Thrill of the Lynch Mob or the Rage of a Woman* The Drama Review Vol 30, No2, Summer 1986 p52

³⁴. Ann Daly *Postscript to Tanztheater The Thrill of the Lynch Mob or the Rage of a Woman* The Drama Review Vol 30, No2, Summer 1986 p54

shows so vividly, as an habitual response in contemporary criticism, for, as she observes, "the dominant male/submissive female stereotype is mutely upheld in practically all American dance criticism".³⁵

I agree with both Daly and Hoffmann in seeing this failure to read the structural metaphors and social content of Bausch's dances as a cultural response, inasmuch as the critics are articulating culturally constructed and shared ways of describing the social reality of what they perceive to be happening in Bausch's dances. But I also suggest that it is, perhaps more importantly for dance criticism, a critical response which is paradigmatically constructed, and which is reinforced by the requirements of publication which emphasize that critics must write within a publicly shared experience of dance.

I suggest that the failure of the American critics to read Bausch's structural choices as having meaning, is built into the aesthetic paradigm through its grounding in the academic discourses of dance history and aesthetics. Within these discourses, formalist, stylistic and generic criteria and considerations are seen to be relatively autonomous from the social context within which the dance is produced. This paradigmatic approach sets aside the recognition that certain forms of social relationships are deeply embodied in dance, and that art in general is more than a set of formalist, aesthetic precepts. Accordingly, the relationships between a dance and its social context, and the meanings of the dance in relation to that context, are excluded from the critical consideration of a dance in performance, and critical consideration of a dance becomes a matter of describing and analyzing what the dance looks like, rather than a consideration of dance production as a social practice in contemporary society.

³⁵. *ibid*

The influential American dance critics whose responses I have examined here are working within the confines of the aesthetic paradigm whose terms define their tasks and purposes as critics, and they are writing for mass-circulation publications. Their relative unconcern with the meanings of Bausch's dances is, I suggest, a reflection of the constraints under which they work. The counter-readings I have provided here, from a German choreographer, a German critic, and from an American feminist critic, have been asserted from outside the confines of the aesthetic paradigm, and are thus not bound by its terms. These counter-readings remind us that the representational and symbolic potential of movement and action is such, that, as Bausch's works show, movement patterns and interactions have the capacity to express as much about relationships as about emotional states, and that dance movement can effectively articulate and examine significant meanings and social relationships.

Contemporary modern dance is persistently described and analysed in reviews in almost solely aesthetic, formal and structural terms. This sets aside the acknowledgement that dance, no less than art in general, is part of a social reality which is structured by representations, and it also sets aside the recognition that dance can function critically as art. When dance criticism is asserted according to the terms of the aesthetic paradigm, the potential of that criticism to challenge established notions is also set aside, as is any substantive social function for such criticism. The potential for critical commentary on dance to provide a means of interpreting the products of culture, and to put critical ideas and issues into circulation, is thus ignored.

The critical consideration of Pina Bausch's dances has been restricted by the filtering of subject and content according to the formal and structural concerns of

the aesthetic paradigm. Her works, whose concerns are other than formal and aesthetic, have in the process been devalued by these critics through the negation of the social critique which is integral to her choreography, and have in turn been misrepresented to the readers of reviews who are potential audience members for dance. Not only are the critics' appreciative capacities limited by the terms of the aesthetic paradigm, but, in turn, the appreciative capacities of dance audiences are also potentially limited by critical commentary.

While this devaluing of Bausch's dances is relatively explainable as the critics being unfamiliar with the cultural content of her work, I would suggest that a similar devaluation has occurred in relation to the work of American clown/choreographer Bill Irwin, particularly in relation to the reviews of his choreographically and dramaturgically complex *Largely New York - the Further Adventures of a Postmodern Hooper*.

Irwin's work crosses over the boundaries between dance, theater and comedy, and in terms of its structure it can be as readily reviewed as dance or as theater. During its 1988-1989 cross-America touring season *Largely New York* has been appreciatively reviewed by both dance and theater critics, and it is to two such reviews, written by the dance and theater critics of the New York weekly, The Village Voice, that I turn to illustrate my contention that the dance critics' method of descriptive analysis devalues Irwin's work because it strips away the social content of his images and interactions.

Largely New York makes use of quintessentially American performance forms - modern dance, breakdancing, mime, and clowning. It mixes these with rap music, video, remote control technology, and a number of stage props. These

components of Irwin's work collectively frame and animate the wordless interactions of a cast of characters whose individual concerns and relationships to one another construct the substance of the action. The whole is ostensibly the story of a Postmodern Hooper who apparently wants only to perform his favorite routines on his own stage.

The Hooper has two major problems to surmount, however. One problem is that his remote-control technology is not entirely reliable, and thus at times frustrates his ambitions to get things right and his ability to control his own performance. The other is that he keeps being interrupted by a series of other performers - two breakdancers rehearsing their moves, a Cunninghamesque modern dancer trying to master her dance technique, a video director with his assistant, trying to record everything they see, and by two sizeable flocks of dancers, cast respectively as post-modern performers in the process of being documented on video, and as academics in search of the latest hot idea. The collective peregrinations and interactions of these various characters center around a video camera and monitor, and around their respective endless, restless, searches for the unattainable.

Dance critic Deborah Jowitt, reviewing Irwin's work in The Village Voice, says *Largely New York* is the most endearing and profoundly funny show she's seen, and that the work "is not only [about] the struggle between [a] divinely hapless clown and an aberrant technology. It's also about the performer, his insecurities, and his hangups."³⁶ All the people in the work, to her, seem to be visions who descend on the Hooper in his lonely act, and she sees the work as blending visions and reality in "agreeably puzzling ways." She employs descriptive analysis

³⁶ Deborah Jowitt *Filling A Vacuum* The Village Voice May 16, 1989 p93

to vividly describe what she sees in the work - she notes the movement identities of the various characters and gives the flavor of events in terms of their relationships to the Hooper. She tells us that he wants only to perform his *Tea for Two* routine, "eager for the understanding and approval of the audience," and she tells us that he's gleeful about his remote control device which "can cause him to be bathed in light or back him with red velvet drapes."³⁷

The fun comes, she tells us, when the Hooper's remote control misfires, so that curtains crash down and lights go out, and when his cherished stage is invaded by the other characters. The largest space in her review is given over to identifying those other characters, and she tells us:

There's a somber modern dance being videoed by Dennis Diamond who stalks about pushing his camera into blank faces or crouching over the collapsed bodies that often get left behind (to Irwin's dismay). There's a beautiful, stony-faced, school-of-Merce dancer (Margaret Eginton) whose leggy pace and backless leotard make his heart beat faster; there are two affable poppers (Leon Chesney and Steve Clemente) who want only to set down their boombox and turn themselves into twitching electrical wizards; there's a nerdy but menacing hoard (*sic*) of scholars in caps and gowns who will copy almost everything Irwin shows them, but will not leave; there's their dean (Jeff Gordon) who accidentally falls into the orchestra pit and thereafter is addicted to it - he'll clamber out, start to walk away, and rush back for one more, increasingly virtuosic, dive.³⁸

Theater critic Michael Feingold, reviewing the same production, adds a layer of interpretation to his vivid description of the work. For him, *Largely New York* is "virtually a vaudeville version of *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, updated to reflect the incursions of technology on our consciousness."³⁹ The theme of the work, for

³⁷. *ibid*

³⁸. *ibid*

³⁹. Michael Feingold *Controlling Remoteness* The Village Voice May 16, 1989 p99

Feingold, is the numbing of the human spirit through technology, and what he sees as our fascination with death and our increasing apathy toward life. He characterises the cast and events somewhat differently from Jowitt, for he sees them not as some dream-like vision of the Hooper, but as characters who are Irwin's means to aesthetic parody and allusion:

The hooper's austerely aloof heart-throb (Margaret Egington) is a Cunningham dancer; his pals, truculent but always willing to lend a hand, are a Mutt-and-Jeff pair of breakdancers (Leon Chesney and Steve Clemente); the blank-faced, regimented street-crowd they occasionally get lost in descends from Kurt Joos by way of Paul Taylor and Twyla Tharp; both the crowd and the soloists are pursued or at times hypnotized by an array of video equipment, run by a "videographer" and his assistant, whose results encompass everything from live news coverage through *Dance In America* to minimalist vid-art.⁴⁰

What Irwin has created, he says, is a tragic vision of technology:

Largely New York depicts life, tenderly and comically, as a sterile but dangerous electronic jungle where art, in the bland, non-committal form of random images on a video screen, is available, but pointless, to all, an endless vacuum sucking up human impulses and events, and endlessly replaying them with their meaning and spirit removed.⁴¹

As Jowitt's writing shows, descriptive analysis does indeed provide a vivid account of the characters and actions in Irwin's mixed-media production, but it also restricts critical consideration to aspects of performance which can be vividly described, and in doing so strips away the social content of the images and interactions, and neglects the important connections between them and their social context. In *Largely New York* Irwin has constructed not only the story of a Postmodern Hooper and his ambivalent encounters with technology, but also a microcosmic representation of late-80s urban life, and has set in motion a debate

40. *ibid*

41. *ibid*

about the various modes of art and performance and the role which theatrical technology plays in them. The Hooper and the others who people the world in which he finds himself, metaphorically present us with the conflicts, tensions and anxieties which individuals face in trying to keep some control over their own lives, particularly in the face of the seductive illusion of control offered by technology.

These multiple levels of Irwin's work are not revealed through descriptive analysis because the insistence on descriptive accuracy represses a consideration of meaning and leads to losing sight of the cumulative significance of the work. The interpretive capacities of critics are restricted by their efforts to write accurately about what they see, and in turn their reviews do not offer interpretive insights to their readers who are potential audience members for dance performance.

Dances may also be devalued when they are critically considered, and described, in the terms of the canonical criteria and concerns of established dance styles which comprise the professional knowledge of critics. This is especially acute when the dances in question seek to deconstruct or to extend, rather than to conform to, the terms of those established styles. I have suggested that Twyla Tharp's work needs to be considered beyond the canonical confines of stylistic criteria if her questioning of dance styles and her potential to break the canonical bounds are to be more fully valued, and I suggest that Karole Armitage's work could also benefit from a wider basis of consideration.

Like Tharp, Armitage is a modern dance choreographer turned recently to making ballets, though unlike Tharp, Armitage's own professional dance experience included a stint as a ballet dancer performing the Balanchine repertoire before turning to modern dance and subsequently joining Merce Cunningham's

company. Out on her own after five years with Cunningham, Armitage turned back to ballet with a vengeance, launching her choreographic career in 1981 with the much-acclaimed *Drastic Classicism*. Since then she has knocked every conventional ballet gesture off-kilter and has turned classical expectations inside out, presenting her works everywhere from nightclubs to opera houses, with the dancing always surrounded by visual spectacle, provided in turn by designer Charles Atlas, couturier Christian Lacroix and visual artist David Salle, and with an aural din provided most often by torrents of exceedingly loud punk/rock music.

Armitage is one of the few contemporary American choreographers who have consistently incorporated literary and pictorial themes into her work, along with appropriated poses from Balanchine ballets of the 1950s and early 1960s. Her fans triumphantly claim her as a contemporary classicist - one who is "aesthetically and, perhaps more importantly, temperamentally classical. [One who] perpetuates everything true and pure of the classicist - a stress on formal beauties, simple order, and central solidity."⁴² Her detractors, by comparison, find her "retroclassical fervor" to be unappealing, and to be "a violent misappropriation of essential aspects" of classicism.⁴³

Critics have commented on the rawness of her pointework, and her determination to "test, try and also go against the grain of the normally calm center that traditionally corresponds to and reinforces the dynamics and mechanics of pointework"⁴⁴. They've picked at her vocabulary which "tends to be Balanchine-

⁴². Robert Greskovic *Armitagean Physics, or The Shoes of the Ballerina* Ballet Review Vol 13, No 2, Summer 1985 p74

⁴³. Otis Stuart *The Neoclassical Phrasing of the Now Karole Armitage* Ballet Review Vol 15, No 4, Winter 1988 p55

⁴⁴. Greskovic *ibid* p80

style modern classicism deranged"⁴⁵, at her appropriations of the Master's moves in works in which "great Balanchinian inventions [recur] as casual Armitage mannerisms"⁴⁶; and at the newly fashionable status of her company which has made her an "artistic commodity"⁴⁷.

Her earliest work, *Drastic Classicism*, made in 1981 with its "huge, jagged, dancing plunging through blasting rock noise" is remembered as a significant event in recent dance history, as a "perfectly timed statement of the tenacious, evolving power of classical dance values; académic dance somehow weathering the latest Dark Age"⁴⁸. Her most recent dances, by contrast, have been described as "trivial and depressing"⁴⁹ and as "dumb spectacles... ill-fitting, stilted and sad".⁵⁰

Feminist dance critic Marianne Goldberg has taken a close look at Armitage's recent choreography, in particular her late-1987 works *The Tarnished Angels* and *The Elizabethan Phrasing of the Late Albert Ayler*. Goldberg has reached a rather different conclusion from the other critics, a conclusion only possible, I suggest, because she stands outside the aesthetic paradigm. Goldberg identifies ballet as

45. Deborah Jowitt *Post-Everything Classicism* The Village Voice June 14 1988 p99

46. Alastair Macaulay *DANCING : Acid Rain* The New Yorker July 25, 1988 p79

47. Sasha Anwalt *Karole Armitage Readies A Fresh Duality* The New York Times November 15, 1987 p16

48. Macaulay *ibid*

49. Macaulay *ibid*

50. Hilton Als *Who Does She Think She Is?* The Village Voice December 20 1988 p114

a patriarchal medium under attack by Armitage, "a female prodigal son"⁵¹ who has appropriated Balanchine's work and turned it to her own purposes, in the process finding "outrageous ways... to entertain herself while staking out the Master's territory."⁵² For Goldberg the significance of Armitage's work is that, as do feminist endeavours in a number of contemporary artistic fields, it shatters the balletic frame of reference, and "puts the whole genre of ballet performance under quotation."⁵³ Goldberg's insight into this work would seem to offer valuable information to audience members who seek to understand what Armitage is doing in her dances.

In the light of the analysis I have presented both here and in Chapter 3, of recently written reviews of modern dance performance, I suggest that the terms of the aesthetic paradigm, which have in the past enabled critics to write informatively, descriptively and analytically about modern dance performance are, in the late 1980s, constraining the appreciative and interpretive abilities of critics, and limiting the critical understanding of modern dance as an art form in contemporary society. While the modern dances of the 60s and 70s were motivated by primarily formal and structural concerns, and were thus appropriately seen and described according to the terms of the aesthetic paradigm, the dances of the late 80s are increasingly motivated by other than formal and structural concerns, and, in particular, are placing new emphasis on social and cognitive content. This new concern with content would seem to demand critical consideration of the possible meanings and social relationships suggested by the dance seen in performance if

51. Marianne Goldberg *The Tarnished Angels and The Elizabethan Phrasing of the Late Albert Ayler* Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory Vol.4, No 1, 1988/1989 p157

52. *ibid* p160

53. *ibid* p158

readers are to be offered insightful commentary which can enhance their dance viewing.

Criticism does have an impact on the public perception and reception of modern dance. In their reviews the critics construct the values by which modern dance is evaluated and understood, and the ways of seeing and understanding dance which they model for readers influence the expectations and the appreciative and interpretive capacities of audiences. Critics and dance viewers alike need to find ways of seeing these new dances which will enable their viewing to be open to the new directions which choreographers take in their works, and this would seem to require the acknowledgement that dance is a social practice which has important relationships to its social context.

If professional knowledge is to adequately inform the "seeing clearly" and "writing accurately" that critics do in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, it will need to incorporate new understandings about the relationships between art and society which are present in contemporary academic discourse about dance performance.⁵⁴ This new dance discourse takes these understandings into account and it recognizes that dance performance can serve as a fruitful realm for critical and theoretical activity. It has begun to challenge the conventional aesthetic framing of dance in order to show that a dance is more than a set of formal and structural devices and relationships, more than the resulting aesthetic surfaces and effects.

⁵⁴ Susan Foster Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance Berkeley: University of California Press 1986; Deborah Jowitt Time and the Dancing Image New York: William Morrow and Company Inc 1988; Cynthia Novack Sharing The Dance: An Ethnography Of Contact Improvisation PhD dissertation, Columbia University 1986; The Body as Discourse Women & Performance Vol 3, No 2, Summer 1988

It considers dance performances as events which take place within a social context as well as within an aesthetic context, and accordingly pays attention to the meanings which accrue to dance from both contexts. It shows that while dancing bodies are given meaning within the context of the dance through the codes and conventions which organise the dance⁵⁵, that they are also social bodies, holding meaning in the world beyond the dance, both through the representational and symbolic power of dance images, and through the codes of recognition shared by choreographers, critics and audience members in contemporary society.⁵⁶

If critics are to see contemporary modern dances clearly, they will need to look beyond the presentational surface and the formal and structural integrity of choreographic structuring to also see the invisible, yet no-less-comprehensible aspects of the dance, such as the meanings and relationships which are referenced by the dancing bodies which pass in front of their eyes. If critics are to write accurately about these dances, they will need to describe and analyse the actions and interactions of the dancing bodies according to criteria and concerns of not only the stylistic and generic contexts of the dance, but also of the social contexts.

⁵⁵. This is particularly addressed by Susan Foster Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance Berkeley: University of California Press 1986

⁵⁶. Evan Alderson Ballet as Ideology: Giselle Act II Dance Chronicle Vol 10, No 3, 1987 p290-304 and Dance and the Spectator: Body and Word typescript, presented at Trent University March 9, 1989; Ann Daly Classical Ballet: A Discourse of Difference Women & Performance Vol 3, No 2, Summer 1988 p57-66; Ann Daly The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers in The Drama Review Vol 31, No 1, 1987 p8-21; Judith Lynne Hanna Dance, Sex and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 1988

While critics can expand their professional appreciation and understanding in these ways, they must also find ways to reduce the constraints imposed on their writing about dance by the requirements of mass-circulation publication, particularly if they are to contribute to a similarly expanded public appreciation and understanding of dance as a social art form in contemporary society. This reduction of constraints I suggest, can be achieved in part by individual renegotiation of the requirements of publication imposed by editors on dance reviewing; in part by finding ways to write articles and other such purpose-constructed forms of writing which speak to this expanded understanding of dance, within the mass-circulation publications; and in part by similar kinds of writing outside the mass circulation publications. To develop an expanded sense of dance we need to develop an expanded sense of criticism.

It has not been my intention in this thesis to specify what forms that expanded sense of criticism might take, nor has it been my intention to propose an alternative paradigm for critical practice. While I have been able to step outside the confines of the aesthetic paradigm in this thesis, and able to draw attention to the limitations which that paradigm embodies, I am unable to stand completely outside it in order to see the multiple possibilities which exist for new forms of dance criticism. These new forms will arise in response to new approaches to dance production and presentation, in response to the changing requirements of publication, in response to the new academic discourse about dance, and in response to the questioning of critical practice in dance as in other fields.

The aesthetic paradigm has enabled critics to conceptualise, understand and account for their observations of modern dance performance, and has guided their professional writing about performance in a way which has resulted in the

public acceptance of modern dance as an art form, and in the development of an aesthetically informed audience for dance. But, as I have endeavoured to show through my analysis of recent reviews, the terms of the aesthetic paradigm do not allow for a full appreciation and understanding of the modern dance of the late 1980s, since they preclude a consideration of the structural metaphors and social content of dances which do not take the conventional aesthetic concerns as their central motivation, and they fail to acknowledge the critical potential of dance as a socially engaged art form in contemporary society.

Turning to alternative paradigms is a useful critical strategy in the search for new insights into dance as a social art form. The paradigms which guide feminist, Marxist and cultural criticism, for example, acknowledge the social connections of art practices, and make available methods of analysis which can provide access to the invisible aspects of dance performance. Those alternative critical practices, however, are most often pursued outside of dance criticism, and do little to transform conventional critical practice, even though they offer a means to challenge conventional critical methods and understandings, and a means to reveal the constraints which are internal to dance criticism guided by the aesthetic paradigm.

If we are to arrive at a new critical mode which can move us toward a fuller understanding of the critical potential of dance, and toward the acknowledgement of dance production as a social practice, we must critically examine and reconstruct our critical practice in the light of its conditions of production.

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