Dance Analysis in Performance
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DANCE ANALYSIS IN PERFORMANCE

Janet Adshead-Lansdale

The chance to reflect, with the perspective of time, on work in Dance Analysis which was completed some eight years ago is not to be missed. I am grateful to Naomi Jackson\(^1\) for bringing this work into relationship with that of the American writer, Susan Foster.

One caveat is necessary. Although the comments which follow are my own I was the editor of the text, *Dance Analysis: theory and practice* which germinated from lengthy discussions with Valerie Briginshaw, Pauline Hodgens and Michael Huxley in the period 1980–81.\(^2\) Each chapter acquired the individual perspective of its author. At that time there was little work in print on dance analysis although some existed on movement analysis, a distinction that is of some significance here. The authors have not continued to meet for the same purpose since. Pauline Hodgens death prior to publication was untimely. She and I had by then devised and taught the first course in the UK in dance analysis developing both the theory and the practice of teaching dance analysis.

Jackson’s summary of this history and other writing is sound, however her proposals for new work fail to recognise how far interpretation as a performative act has become established in both theory and practice in dance analysis. She is, indeed, correct that in *Dance analysis* there is an emphasis on the character of the text of the dance but this does not mean that the reader’s role is excluded.

The first points in response cohere around issues of description. It would, as she says, be naïve, to assume that the observer can ‘discover’ where actions begin and end. The individual (sometimes referred to as the viewer, reader, observer) as well as the maker, decides how to see the dance, and as part of this process, how to mark its structure or form.\(^3\)

As Hutcheon says in relation to history, ‘what actually becomes a fact depends as much as anything else on the social and cultural context of the historian, as feminist theorists have shown with regard to women writers of history over the centuries’ (1989, p. 76). Analysis is no different from history in this respect.

I would go further than Jackson when she says that ‘the same
web of choreographic relations can be perceived in a variety of ways’ to say that it may or may not be the same web: the process of interpretation has its own logic in so far that different things are perceived, upon which meaning is constructed, it is not necessarily that the same things are perceived differently. This view is more radical in being less reliant on the notion of a fixed text.

On the subject of description I acknowledge a debt to Best whose work has been very influential in addressing the nature of rationality in this sphere. The relationship between these writings and some post-structuralist theories is a curious one. Ostensibly they derive from very different traditions but it is interesting how much they share. The languages are disconcertingly different, much of the French post-structuralist theory can be densely inaccessible, but the insights which are recognised in both these fields have similar potency.

Namely, that it is in the acquisition of language that the network of concepts which constitute the limits of intelligibility is formed. Understanding of the representation of the dancing body, and dance events and styles is constructed in the language in which they are described. Both traditions make problematic the question of objective description and underline the inseparability of description from the construction of meaning. From this, follow my reservations about conflating the terms ‘movement’ analysis and ‘dance’ analysis. The one has claims to universality, the other recognises the style-specific and cultural situation of dances. To the extent that neither everyday movement nor dance is universally understood there can be no universal system of description.

Thus, notated scores may not be the solution to problems of description, i.e. that the creation of a text of the dance would be solved if we consistently used notation. The choice of language in which to write about dances, and the construction of symbols in which to enshrine them, are both matters of interpretation. The choice of descriptors used in the writing of a score determine the terms of the account, while the writing in any one instance relies upon an interpretive act on the part of the notator. Its relationship to the dance is already more problematic than that of the score to music.

The idea that ‘making sense’ of a dance is an individual matter is hardly revolutionary. The shift that reveals this position in Dance
DANCE ANALYSIS IN PERFORMANCE

*Analysis* is found in the move between the terms ‘description’ and ‘ascription’. Despite the problems associated with description, with its connotations of objectivity and of verifiable characteristics, it is useful in directing attention to the movement and other elements of the performance, while *ascription* directs attention to the reader/viewer. ‘Ascription’ carries a sense of assigning, attributing, imputing, which makes clear the role of the person who does it (pp. 60–5). It emphasises the personal and performative character of the act of reading. The meanings perceived will depend on the position and concerns of the observer, her/his ideological stance, the type of engagement with the event etc. etc. The tolerance for a range of interpretations which inevitably follows is evident in many theories. Directly relevant is Shusterman’s account which offers several characterisations of interpretative practices in terms of either descriptions, recommendations to view (prescriptions) or *performances* on the part of the reader (1978). He likens critical interpretations to interpretative performance in the sense that they help ‘to create and determine the qualities and meanings of the work of art rather than merely revealing them’. In other words they are dependent upon the reader.

It is not an original (or particularly post-structuralist) idea, therefore, that art is a complex, multi-layered act which requires the reader to bring it into existence, although the relative investment in the author, the text and the reader as the locus of meaning differs according to the particular theoretical perspective. Frequently quoted remarks that the rise of the reader has to be at the expense of the death of the author reflect the shift from a perception of the choreographer as the originating genius with the reader as passive recipient of her/his message, to the reader as constructor of meaning in much the same sense as the maker.

The urge for ‘readibility’ that Jackson attributes to me (although not a term I use) is prompted by a desire to understand what goes on when people enjoy and comment on dances. ‘Reading’, in that sense, is as applicable to ordinary talk as to the academic and professional discourse that surrounds the making of dances. Of itself the concept of ‘readibility’ does not carry the necessity to reach agreement, there is no assumption that everyone will do it in the same way, far from it.

Plausibility can be argued for, and objectivity in making
interpretations supported, in the sense of the rationality of interpretive processes (not the imposition of a particular interpretive process), but any sense that there might be an absolute truth or a definitive interpretation was eschewed in Dance analysis. It has become commonplace that there should be a tolerance of the shifting interpretations of events which derive from different experience, although the debate continues.¹¹

This approach, however, now bypasses the ‘text’. The idea that dance can be conceived of as an event, or object, that can be described, is challenged in the more extreme form of argument. Whether such a thing can exist other than as a ‘tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture’ is a matter of debate (Barthes in Lodge, 1988, p. 170). There is only space here for an assertion, following Hutcheon on history, that ‘past events are given meaning, not existence, by their representation’ (1989, p. 82).

Although the formalist position which ascribed autonomy to the work has long been shattered in the recognition of the ambiguity and the cultural position of art, the subtle play of texts is well encapsulated in Worton’s writing on intertextuality. He argues that it

denies the authoritative validity of genetic readings which seek to fix the text, like a spiked butterfly which the entomologist will dissect scientifically. Intertextual analysis is possible only if the reader accepts that such an analysis must be founded on the speculative creativity of ambiguity. There is no knowing, but there are different modes of understanding, of responding, of reading. (1986, p. 21)

Jackson’s summary of our work, that dances are seen as literary texts and interpretations are imposed upon unsuspecting readers, is not borne out by close reading of Dance Analysis: theory and practice. For example in a discussion of the ascription of qualities and meanings we say that they are ‘based on the interest in, and direct experience of, the dance itself’ (p. 116). Interpretations, in this sense, cannot be handed on as authoritative positions, the dance has to be experienced. Otherwise interpretation becomes ‘about the dance’ in a propositional sense, not an experience of it. Interpretation logically entails experience. The practice of analysis which has built on this principle over the last 10 years demonstrates the potential of dance to generate multiple, even conflicting interpretations.¹²
DANCE ANALYSIS IN PERFORMANCE

Lodge offers a neat summary of the challenge encapsulated in the post-structuralist approach, to

the idea of the author as origin of a text’s meaning, the possibility of objective interpretation, the validity of empirical historical scholarship and the authority of the literary canon. (1988, p. xi)

In 1988 the text, Dance Analysis, entered theoretical debates within this frame. The ideas articulated then, albeit in embryonic form, have since been supported by extensive theoretical and practical work, taking account of thinking in postmodernism and post-structuralism as it has become part of the dialogue of dance scholarship. Perhaps this first foray in the Society’s journal, Dance Research, will be the start of a more substantial response to a growing area of dance research.

NOTES

1 MA student at the University of Surrey, 1986–87, in Dance Research, 12:1, pp. 3–11.
2 We shared authorship of the central chapter which summarised the methodology proposed, while Valerie Briginshaw and Michael Huxley wrote a further chapter together and one each separately. Pauline Hodgens and I wrote the final chapter, and two and three chapters respectively, separately.
3 In her writing in 1968 on structuring dances Yvonne Rainer deconstructed notions of the dance ‘phrase’ through her description of a dance which is constantly in transition, unaccented and of equal weight. See my article on this in Adshead, J. (ed.), Choreography: Principles and Practice, University of Surrey: NRCD, 1987, pp. 11–27.
4 Particularly in The rationality of feeling, a new version of an older text, Feeling and reason in the arts, 1985.
5 Paraphrased from Best (1993, p. 37). Norris (1982) is one of the few writers on deconstruction to suggest that a false epistemology supports these sceptical views of language i.e. the desire to find some logical correspondence between language and the world. He says ‘if our ways of talking about the world are a matter of tacit convention, then scepticism is simply beside the point, a misplaced scruple. (p. 130)
6 I am enthusiastic about notation as a tool, all undergraduate students at the University of Surrey learn two systems, but it does not solve the analytical problems.
7 An earlier version of this argument was presented in the conference papers of the Hong Kong conference, Adshead, 1990.
8 Beardsley and Margolis, for example, are alive to the problems of distinctions between description and interpretation and of the relationship of external factors to individual interpretation.
9 See particularly (pp. 316–18). The significance of this text may have escaped Jackson.
10 This famous debate is reprinted in Lodge, 1988.
11 See, for example, Annette Barnes on interpretation where she argues for a propositional view.
12 Evidence can be found in approximately 150 essays on interpretation of dances written by some 100 students in the 10 years of postgraduate courses at the University of Surrey. They already do what Jackson suggests might be innovative, e.g. place the emphasis on the reader’s role.

19
DANCE RESEARCH

REFERENCES