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Some Notes on Aesthetics and Dance Criticism

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SOME NOTES ON AESTHETICS AND DANCE CRITICISM

CURTIS L. CARTER

The Approach to Criticism

Criticism is what I call the first level of literacy in writing about the dance, because it comes the closest of all writing on dance to the actual dance performance. Critics, like the choreographers and dancers they write about, exhibit many different styles and approaches to writing on dance. My own "minimalist" oriented approach has been to base criticism on the perceived "facts" of movement patterns and qualities of particular performances. Using essentially descriptive language, I try to give a visual rendering of the dance performance, that will recreate or generate in the mind of the reader some of its essential qualities. This approach recognizes the importance of a critic's learning to see, and to describe in appropriate language the essential dance movement; it keeps the writing in direct contact with the movement.

The approach to criticism that I am describing is subject to certain qualifications, of course, because there is no innocent eye and no *tabula rasa* mind. The knowledge that we get from criticism is always a mixing of the critic's knowledge from past experiences with his immediate perceptions. Different people, moreover, select and organize what they see with varying degrees of sensitivity and according to differences in the organs of the perceptual system. These factors no doubt alter the descriptions that critics of dance can provide.

Lately I have come to question the adequacy of this minimalist approach to dance criticism on aesthetic and philosophical grounds. I still

believe that the descriptive approach is very useful to all dance criticism because movement is the distinctive and essential fact that differentiates dance from other arts. And describing movement is very well suited for abstract choreographic styles where the main focus is on formal rather than referential or emotive values. But I have always felt uneasy about limiting dance criticism to an approach that would confine the critic's discussion to a description of physical movement. Now I think I see more clearly why.

Dance is not just physical movement, any more than a painting is merely canvas and pigment, or than a poem is the physical marks on a page. Dance is myths, ideas, feelings, as well as movement, and it has to be these things in order to be art. The minimalist approach to dance criticism has made it unfashionable to talk about the ideas, meanings, even the feelings associated with the dance, but I must challenge this minimalist view on the ground that it operates on too narrow a view of the dance as a form of art. Critics must continue to discuss movement, but they should not hesitate to broaden their scope to include the myths, ideas, and feelings that these movements convey. There is always the danger that a critic who finds the task of describing movement difficult might seek to escape the task by discussing the ideas, feelings, myths in lieu of describing movement, but the opposite is equally possible. The movements and the ideas in dance are so interrelated however, that a critic must be able to perceive and describe the movement in order to discuss well the ideas. Some critics will, of course, be better at describing movement than are others, and some can handle the ideas with greater awareness and clarity. Both approaches serve the interests of clarifying and interpreting dance experiences.

Criticism that is based solely on the description of movement, moreover, reflects only the point of view of the dancer, and, in particular, it does not consider the question of whether the non-dancer sees dance from the same general point of view. The movement based criticism that I have been discussing here *assumes* that the dancer and the non dance viewer do share a common point of view. At first glance it seems that they do, and, if there is a divergency, it seems equally obvious that the dancer's point of view is likely to give us the more reliable picture of dance. My suspicion, however, is that non-dancers who lack movement training actually experience dance in broader terms that include ideas, myths, and feelings, together with the kinesthetic experience of movement. I further conclude that the dancer's point of view does not necessarily identify the complete range of issues that are appropriate to a full critical discussion of the art of dance. If I am correct in these observations, dance critics should reexamine and expand their approaches to include the point of view of the non-dancer. Such reexamination will contribute to a more complete critical account of dance experience, and will undoubtedly provide welcome options to the present minimalist approaches to dance criticism.

*Abstract Aesthetic Concepts and the Approaching
an Individual Performance*

When I approach a particular performance, I have no preconceived concepts, formulas, or methods as to what the dance must be, or how a performance should be done. The approach to writing about a performance depends primarily on the nature of the work itself and on the conditions under which it is seen. I do not use abstract aesthetic concepts in any conscious way in observing or writing about a particular performance. An artist does not ordinarily begin with a set aesthetic concept, and then produce works of art. Instead, the aesthetic concepts emerge out of the creative process as the artist observes and develops the skills to make significant images. So too the aesthetic concepts that apply to criticism emerge in the process of doing criticism, and in analyzing the writings of critics.

Concepts that a writer has previously stored in experience affect to some extent what he sees and how he interprets a particular performance, but the aesthetic ideas relevant to the performance will emerge in the experience of the dance itself, or in the critic's reflections on the dance as he thinks about it later. Such concepts, together with the patterns and qualities of movement in which they are disclosed, form the basis for the statements that a critic makes concerning a particular performance.

Particularly Useful Aesthetic Concepts

By nature I am an analytical person. I want to have experiences to see, to feel, to enjoy, and to be able to describe what I see. But I want to be able to interpret, examine, relate, what I see, feel, enjoy, and to understand the processes that I undergo when seeing, etc. Aesthetic concepts provide the tools to interpret our experience of art, and the tools to begin to understand the processes that we undergo in making and responding to art works. Training in aesthetics makes me aware of particular aesthetic concepts that are implicit in the works of a choreographer, or of a particular performance. The concept of *style* for example helps to delineate the "language" of one choreographer from another and to identify and describe particular dances. And within a style the concepts of effortlessness, grace, and verticality are especially suited to a discussion of a romantic ballet, whereas a discussion of the Oriental principle of chance will be useful in a discussion of certain collaborative works of Merce Cunningham and John Cage.

Other more general aesthetic concepts: form, expression, symbolic meaning point to significant features to look for in a particular performance. *Form* suggests structure or pattern and designates the systems that the artists use to order experience. *Expression* points the critic to the dynamic-felt qualities: feelings, mood, atmosphere that characterized the expressive qualities of a dance. *Symbolic meaning* designates the representational character that we find in some works. As a critic I look for order in

art works, and these concepts of form, expression, and symbolic meaning act as general guides for organizing the particular details that I experience in relation to a particular performance. Every dance will have formal structure in one or another mode, and most will have expressive qualities. Many dances have obvious or subtle suggestions of symbolic meaning. A critic who can perceive and write about these elements will undoubtedly find something significant to say about a dance.

Aesthetics provides concepts to interpret the process of criticism itself. The concept that best describes my approach to criticism is *perceptual discrimination*. Perceptual discrimination is a skill of developing sensitivity to the formal, expressive, and symbolic features (structural characteristics, expressive qualities, symbolic meanings) that can be found in works of art. Perceptual discrimination is a skill of awareness that enables the critic to identify common and distinctive features of performances, and to write about them in interesting and insightful ways. The critic's developed perceptual skills merge with the artist's statement to produce criticism. His training and practice in observing and writing on dance directs these skills toward criticism that is also a form of art.



The Danger of Oversimplification

Oversimplification of aesthetic concepts that are used in criticism is both a temptation and a danger. When the writer is pressed for time and space he cannot take the time to explain fully all of the aesthetic concepts that he employs or relies upon. But I think that a writer should take care to avoid a patronizing attitude toward so called "lay audiences." The critic should assume that he is writing for intelligent, reasonably well informed

readers who can often digest a great deal more than the critic offers. The danger is that if the critic oversimplifies, the writing will be devoid of significant content, and will not inform or provide the reader enough to make it worth his time to read what is written. Why not take another approach? Clarity of expression and the avoidance of technical jargon, except when it is appropriate and necessary to the point that is being made, allows a writer to cover the essential aspects of most aesthetic concepts without violating the integrity of the concepts, and without insulting the reader's intelligence.

Dance Criticism and Philosophy

First I am not sure what it would mean for dance writing to *have* a philosophical orientation in the popular sense of that term. Does it mean that dance writing should be ideological, e.g. Marxist oriented? I do not personally think that criticism should be ideological in nature, in the sense that it is dedicated to the promotion of a particular political ideology. Criticism of this type is generally more interesting for what it says about the ideology than for the insight that it gives into the dance. Or would "philosophically oriented" criticism reflect a commitment to a particular aesthetic ideal of canon? Again, I do not think that a critic who must write about dances that reflect many styles and views of individual choreographers can afford to limit his philosophical perspective to a single aesthetic point of view: where, say, a work to be appreciated must be "traditional" as opposed to "avant-garde;" "expressive" instead of "formalist;" "abstract" rather than "representational;" "Graham" over "Monk," etc.

But there is a sense in which I think a critic's work can be "philosophically oriented."

The writer can engage in reflection about his role as critic and about the nature of criticism.

He might consider such questions as these:

Who am I as a writer?

What is the nature of the activity that I engage in as a writer-critic?

What is my purpose in writing about the dance? Selling newsprint? Selling myself? Education of the readers? Presenting dance as an art, in an "artful" way?

What are the values that my writing reflect?

What are the grounds for aesthetic judgements that I make? Are these grounds defensible?

In dealing with these questions I believe that writers will find a knowledge of aesthetic concepts helpful in formulating and testing answers, and in revising their answers toward approaches that are more effective in realizing the art of criticism. 