

illustrated publications were sold independently of performances. With the emergence of the ballet consumer, the props, programmes, costumes, designs, and even performances of the Ballets Russes were transformed from objets d'art to articles whose value was determined by their scarcity in the marketplace.

With its high-sounding titles and unexpected connections, Diaghilev's French public certainly makes for lively reading. But antiquarian interest aside, it has an importance that far transcends historical chit-chat. The cultivated audience coaxed into being from 1906 to 1914 elucidates two long-standing puzzles. It explains the speed with which the Ballets Russes put down roots in Western Europe and the obsession with exoticism and luxury that became Diaghilev trademarks. That ballet re-entered the cultural consciousness of the West via the French upper class is equally a matter of import. The idea of privilege synonymous with the Ballets Russes in its most legendary era remains, even today, branded into the identity of classical dancing.

## NOTES

- 1 'Feuilles de location', AJ13/1292, Archives Nationales.
- 2 Valentin Serov, Letter to the Editor, *Rech'*, 22 Sept. 1910. Serov's letter is an attack on the position articulated by Telyakovsky in an interview published in *Birzhovye vedomosti* (Stock Exchange Gazette) a short time before. I am grateful to the late Professor Ilya Zilbershtein for providing me with a copy of Serov's letter.

## WOMEN WRITING THE BODY: LET'S WATCH A LITTLE HOW SHE DANCES

*Elizabeth Dempster*

Major innovation in dance has occurred largely outside the ballet academy. The radical redefinition of concert dance which began at the turn of the century was a movement initiated by women artists working independently of traditional structures to develop new languages of physical expression. The early modern dance was a repudiation of the tenets of nineteenth-century ballet, including its emphasis on spectacle and virtuoso display. It was an avowedly female-centred movement, both with respect to the manner in which the body was deployed and represented and in the imagery and subject matter employed. The early modern dancers were asking that the body and its movement, along with the place and context of dance, be looked at in new ways. They inherited no practice; the techniques and the choreographic forms they developed were maps and reflections of the possibilities and propensities of their own originating bodies.

In the early 1900s dancers such as Isadora Duncan, Loie Fuller, Maud Allen and Ruth St Denis constructed images and created dances through their own unballetic bodies, producing a writing of the female body which strongly contrasted with classical inscriptions. These dancers, creating new vocabularies of movement and new styles of presentation, made a decisive and liberating break with the principles and forms of the European ballet. The modern dance genre is now most closely identified with the choreographic output of the second generation of modern dancers – Mary Wigman, Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham – and the training systems they developed. It is to this body of work that the following discussion refers.

Modern dance is not a uniform system, but a corpus of related though differentiated vocabularies and techniques of movement which have evolved in response to the choreographic projects of individual artists. Common to these contrasting styles of dance – and it is this that allows us to group otherwise disparate works under the banner of 'modern dance' – is a

conception of the body as a medium and vehicle for the expression of inner forces. The spatial and temporal structure of these dances is based on emotional and psychological imperatives. The governing logic of modern dance is not pictorial, as in the ballet, but affective.

For the modern dancer, dance is an expression of interiority: interior feeling guiding the movement of the body into external forms. Doris Humphrey described her dance as 'moving from the inside out' (Cohen 1972); for Graham it was a process of 'making visible the interior landscape' (Graham 1950: 21-2). This articulation of interior (maternal) spaces creates forms which are not, however, ideal or perfected ones. The modern dancer's body registers the play of opposing forces, falling and recovering, contracting and releasing. It is a body defined through a series of dynamic alternations subject both to moments of surrender and moments of resistance.

In modern dance the body acts in a dynamic relationship with gravity. For Humphrey the body was at its most interesting when in transition and at a moment of gravitational loss, that is, when it was falling. Modern dance has often been termed 'terrestrial', that is, floor-bound and inward-looking. As such it has been negatively compared to the ballet and the aerial verticality and openness of that form. But as Graham has stressed, 'the dancers fall so that they may rise'. It is in the *falling*, not in being down, that the modern body is at its most expressive.

The modern body and the dance which shapes it are a site of struggle where social and psychological, spatial and rhythmic conflicts are played out and sometimes reconciled. This body – and it is specifically a female body – is not passive but dynamic, even convulsive, as Deborah Jowitt sees it:

In many of [Graham's] important works of the forties and fifties, you felt the dancing shuddering along in huge jerks, propelled by the violently contracting and expanding bodies. When I first saw Graham in 1955, I was stunned by the whiplash of her spine; by the way, as Medea in *Cave of the Heart* she writhed sideways on her knees – simultaneously devouring and vomiting a length of red yarn.

(Jowitt 1977: 72)

Jowitt concludes that Graham's dancing was like no other she had witnessed, 'a body language consisting solely of epithets'.

Modern dance posits a natural body in which feeling and form are organically connected. Graham, for example, conceived the body as a conduit, a responsive channel through which inner truths are revealed. The body has a revelatory potential and technique is the means by which the outer manifestations of the body are brought into alignment with the inner world of the psyche.

Through all times the acquiring of technique in dance has been for one purpose – so to train the body as to make possible any demand made upon it by that inner self which has the vision of what needs to be said. No one invents movement; movement is discovered. What is possible and necessary to the body under the impulse of the emotional self is the result of this discovery.

(Graham in Cohen 1974: 139)

The function of technique in modern dance is, as Graham has described it, to free the socialized body and clear it of any impediment which might obscure its capacity for 'true speech'. Ironically, perhaps, this concept of the 'natural' body was expounded in support of highly systemized and codified dance languages and training programmes which inscribe relationships – necessarily conventional and arbitrary – between the body, movement and meaning.

Modern dance's valorization of the 'natural' and its positing of an individualized presymbolic subject are not features of the classical system of training. Ballet training shapes, controls, improves upon and perfects the body's given physical structure; in this process both the natural body and the individualized subject are erased. As the principles of modern dance have become progressively codified into systematic techniques, the concept of a 'natural' body, pre-existing discourse, can no longer be sustained. Modern dance, now distant from its creators' originating ideas, is passed on through highly formalized training programmes; and like the classical system, this training involves erasure of naturally given physical traits and processes of reinscription.

How are the body and 'the feminine' inscribed by the female-devised languages of modern dance? Graham's dances sacralize and mythologize the female body, a body shown to be subject to forceful emotional, unconscious and libidinal impulses. In Foster's reading it is the body of the hysteric:

The action begins in the abdomen, codified as the site of libidinal and primitive desires. The symbolic contents of the abdomen radiate through the body, twisting and empowering the body with their message. Graham's characters seem to be subject to the psychological mechanism of repression. The powerful message from the unconscious makes its way only with difficulty through the emotional and intellectual centers of the person and into the world. Graham depicts the tense conflict between corporeal and psychological elements.

(Foster 1986: 81)

Graham's location of 'the feminine' may seem uncomfortably close to the space traditionally ascribed to the body, women and dance within

patriarchy. Her choreographies, however, represent the inner world as a dynamic, outward-flowing, conflictual force; 'the feminine' is not passive but voluptuously and sometimes violently active. It is a force which shapes the outer world. Graham's work reflects the psychoanalytic preoccupations of her time, but the public and performative nature of Graham's articulation of these concerns, and the power she ascribes to the female body, significantly distinguish her representation of the feminine from that associated with clinical practice.

As early as the 1930s Graham and her fellow artists were presenting a newly defined dance practice in the public arena and in so doing they created spaces for dance and for women which had not existed before. But this form of dance, once an oppositional practice, is now offered as a second language supplementing classical ballet in the training of the professional dancer. In my judgement modern dance's gradual codification, its identity as a formalized technique, has rendered it susceptible to colonization; and it is this codification rather than any inherent ideological complicity which permits elements of modern dance to be subsumed into the ballet.

Lincoln Kirstein, the founding father of the New York City Ballet, has cursorily dismissed modern dance as the 'minor verse' of theatre. He considers it timebound, nostalgic and lacking the 'clear speech acts' and universal legibility of the ballet. He is one of a number of critics who have argued that ballet is the only enduring Western concert dance form (Kirstein 1935). In Kirstein's view, ballet's pre-eminence is assured because modern dance has failed to produce a stable lexicon and is therefore lacking in consequence.

But modern dance has clearly developed vocabularies and syntactical conventions; and Kirstein's perceptions are misplaced. He would be less inaccurate if his subject had been postmodern dance. The postmodern is not a newly defined dance language but a strategy and a method of inquiry which challenge and interrogate the process of representation itself. Once the relation between movement and its referent is questioned, the representational codes and conventions of dance are opened to investigation. Analysis, questioning and manipulation of the codes and conventions which inscribe the body in dance are distinguishing features of the postmodern mode.

In the 1940s Merce Cunningham had already begun to demonstrate that dance could be primarily about movement. In contrast to the expressionism of modern dance, in which movement is presumed to have intrinsic meaning, Cunningham choreographies emphasize the arbitrary nature of the correlation between signifier and signified. In his deconstruction of existing choreographic codes Cunningham challenged the rhetoric of 'the natural' which surrounded modern dance. The political dimensions of this deconstructive project have been addressed more directly in the work of some of the later postmodern choreographers.

Susan Foster defines two stages/modes of postmodern dance practice: objectivist and reflexive. The first is the precondition for the second, but the two modes were coextensive in the 1960s and 1970s and together constitute the genre. Foster differentiates the two stages of postmodern dance as follows:

Objectivist dance focuses on the body's movement, allowing any references to the world to accrue alongside the dance as a byproduct of the body's motion. The reflexive choreography [. . .] assumes that the body will inevitably refer to other events, and because of this asks how those references are made. Whereas objectivist dance has laid bare the conventions governing representations to allow the body to speak its own language, reflexive choreography works with these same conventions to show the body's capacity to both speak and be spoken through in many different languages.

(Foster 1986: 188)

Like Cunningham, the postmodern choreographers emerging in the 1960s distinguished themselves from both the classical tradition and the then firmly established modern dance in that their focus was on the fundamental material and medium of dance, the moving body itself. The body was no longer to be trained to the task of interpreting or illustrating something other than its own material reality. Postmodern dance does not present perfected, ideal or unified forms, nor bodies driven by inner imperatives, but bodies of bone, muscle and flesh speaking of and for themselves.

The dances are about what they look like. Because [objectivist dances] simply present individual people in motion, the dancers clearly do not presume to represent idealized experience or experience that might be common to all people.

(Foster 1986: 185)

In *Work 1961-1973* (1974) Yvonne Rainer writes of her 'chunky' body not conforming to the traditional image of the female dancer. Elsewhere she recalls a Boston reviewer, writing in the 1960s, disdainfully commenting on the 'slack' bodies of (the later-termed) postmodern dancers (Brown and Rainer 1979). A democratization of the body and of dance was heralded in the postmodern work of the 1960s and 1970s. Whilst Cunningham pursued a deconstruction of choreographic conventions through technically trained bodies – bodies which maintained the 'look' of the dancer – postmodern works of this period featured both trained and untrained performers, in short 'any-old-body'. Widely used choreographic devices such as rule games, task-based and improvisational structures provided a frame for the

perception and enjoyment of bodies in action – trained or untrained, old or young, thick or thin, male or female.

The play of oppositions and the gender stereotyping embodied in the ballet and perpetuated in modern dance traditions were systematically de-emphasized in the postmodern work of this era. Within the selection, structuring and performance of movement strong contrasts and oppositions were reduced or eliminated. Rainer speaks here of *The Mind is a Muscle, Trio A* (1966):

The limbs are never in a fixed, still relationship and they are stretched to the fullest extension only in transit, creating the impression that the body is constantly engaged in transitions. Another factor contributing to the smoothness of the continuity is that no one part of the series is made any more important than any other. For four and half minutes a great variety of movement shapes occur, but they are of equal weight and are equally emphasized.

(Rainer 1974: 67)

The postmodern dancer's range and style of movement were not determined by gender, and sex-specific roles were rare – notable exceptions being a number of works by Yvonne Rainer in which issues of gender, sexual identity and seduction in performance were addressed directly (see Rainer 1974). The early postmodern focus on non-hierarchical and non-genderized use and organization of the body and its movement continues in current postmodern dance.

Postmodern dance, as Foster has indicated, also involves the reworking and reassessment of earlier forms of bodily inscription – drawing from, quoting, subverting and manipulating classical and other lexicons. Referring to Rainer's *Trio A* (1966) and Trisha Brown's *Accumulation* (1971), *With Talking* (1973) and *Plus Watermotor* (1977), Foster has noted the tensions which arise when (at least) two disparate modes of representation are juxtaposed or brought into dialogue (Foster 1986: 186). In these works the body is present as an instrument concerned simply with physical articulation, but at the same time it also alludes to other discourses: Rainer's *Trio A* contains references to earlier dance forms and Brown's dance presents speaking and dancing as simultaneous but independent texts. The play of contrasting discourses and the use of quotation in postmodern compositional process produce layered and complex dance works open to multiple readings. Yvonne Rainer, in conversation with Trisha Brown, discusses this effect in Brown's *Glacial Decoy* (1979):

The costumes bring in another dimension [...] of, not exactly a persona, but an association with personae created elsewhere and earlier, somewhere between *Les Sylphides* and *Primitive Mysteries*,

maybe even *Antic Meet*, which has that take-off on *Primitive Mysteries*. And it is the dress that produces this association. There's a recurring, fleeting transformation from a body moving to a flickering female image. I think that because the dress stands away from the body the image is never totally integrated or unified, so one goes back and forth in seeing movement-as-movement, body-inside-dress, dress-outside-body, and image-of-woman/dancer, which is not the same thing as seeing or not seeing your work in terms of your being a woman. Femaleness in *Glacial Decoy* is both a given, as in your previous work, and a superimposition.

(Brown and Rainer 1979: 32)

The process of deconstruction and bricolage commonly associated with postmodern dance also describe an attitude to physical training. The development of what might be termed the postmodern body is in some senses a deconstructive process, involving a period of de-training of the dancer's habitual structures and patterns of movement. The dancer brings intelligence to bear on the physical structure of her/his body, focusing close attention upon the interaction of skeletal alignment and physiological and perceptual processes. Through this process the dancer reconstructs a physical articulation based on an understanding of what is common to all bodies and what is unique to her/his own. Our bodies evolve in dialogue with a complex physical and social world, so training systems which have informed postmodern dance are based on a conceptualization of the body as an organism in flux. The postmodern body is not a fixed, immutable entity, but a living structure which continually adapts and transforms itself. It is body available to the play of many discourses. Postmodern dance directs attention away from any specific image of the body and towards the process of constructing all bodies.

If postmodern dance is a 'writing' of the body, it is a writing which is conditional, circumstantial and above all transitory; it is a writing which erases itself in the act of being written. The body, and by extension 'the feminine', in postmodern dance is unstable, fleeting, flickering, transient – a subject of multiple representations.