On Your Fingertips: Writing Dance Criticism

Paraphrasing Goethe on theater criticism, Edwin Denby once wrote that "a writer is interesting if he can tell what the dancers did, what they communicated, and how remarkable that was." This statement sounds almost banal, if not obvious. But in fact it sums up several different, often complex operations that a critic can perform. These are: description (what the dancers did — what does the work look and feel like?); interpretation (what they communicated — what does the dance mean?); and evaluation (how remarkable it was — is the work good?). To Denby’s list I would add another critical operation: contextual explanation (where does the work come from aesthetically and/or historically?). For the critic’s job is to complete the work in the reader’s understanding, to unfold the work in an extended time and space after the performance, and to enrich the experience of the work. This may be done, of course, even for those who have not seen the work.

Not all critics perform all these operations, for reasons ranging from ideological commitments to the practical constraints of their jobs. It goes without saying that these are not the explicit rules of our profession; many critics perform some or all of these operations intuitively. The purpose of this essay is to bring these critical activities to light and to begin an analysis of their role in dance criticism.

Evaluation pure and simple is the function often forced on the daily critic. This is criticism at its crudest — the critic as consumer guide. Here, for instance, is Théophile Gautier’s review of Le Lutin de la Vallée. Gautier explains that what is key to this ballet is the dancing. “The work,” Gautier writes, “does not exist by itself and could be described in four lines; but it furnishes the dance with an auspicious frame and that is all that is necessary.” He does give a plot summary (more than four lines long), but adds that he considers this information quite perfunctory: “Now that we’ve done away with the plot, and we must give it this credit that it is neither long nor complicated, let us immediately get to what is important — to the dance.” And then he goes on to treat the dance, in terms that are primarily evaluative:

Mme Guy-Stéphan exhibits as natural talent an extraordinary lightness; she bounds up like a rubber ball and comes down like a feather or a snowflake. Her foot strikes the floor noiselessly, like the foot of a shadow or a sigh, and each jump is not echoed by a dull sound of the dancer landing which recalls the marble heels of the statue of the Commander [in Molière’s Don Juan]. Study has given her the stature of a cleanness, a precision, a finish that are rare nowadays when real dancing is neglected for voluptuous attitudes and precarious poses for which the partner is the pivot or the springboard. Her jeté-battus are extremely clean; her pointes, which are rigid and clear, never waver; and she has remarkable elevation.

The pas that she dances in the moonlight with the elf of the valley, who skips on the silvery spray of the waterfall, is delightfully poetic. No one could imagine anything lighter, fresher, nor more nocturnally vaporous, nor more endearingly chaste.

Absolute terms like “extraordinary,” “remarkable,” and “delightfully” signal Gautier’s approval of Mme Guy-Stéphan’s dancing. So, too, for those
who know the style of the Romantic ballet, do words like "lightness," "feather," "snowflake," "noiselessly," and "vaporous." But also Gautier uses comparison and contrast to make clear his judgment that this was an excellent performance. The dancer's foot is compared to that of a shadow or a sylphide (the template for the Romantic ballet ideal); her cleanliness and precision are praised as qualities "rare nowadays when real dancing is neglected for voluptuous attitudes and precariously posed."

About the choreography, Gautier gives us only this much description, then quickly returns to his evaluative mode:

While the girl balances in a pose of innocence and love, the elf bounds about, hovers, and traces around her circles of benevolent magic. It is charming. To be able to compose such a dance and to execute it, one has to be Saint-Léon, an exquisite intelligence served by hamstrings of steel; one has to have both mind and legs, rare attributes, even when separated.

To be sure, Gautier couches his evaluation of Guy-Stéphan's dancing in metaphors that supply some description—at least of the feeling qualities, energy, and texture of the dancing. It is light, resilient, and delicate. But of the choreography—the movements, phrasing, floor patterns, and overall structure of the ballet—we learn very little.

It may be that ballet—because it is founded on a conservative, academic tradition that foregrounds the dancer over movement invention—prompts an evaluation of the performance and the performer herself. After all, the choreography of classical ballet no longer needs to be described, interpreted, or evaluated in our day, since both the ballets in the repertory and the general vocabulary of steps are so familiar. It is presumed that the choreography is a known (and perhaps already evaluated) quantity—even if it isn't. So what seems to remain to be evaluated is the performance—which usually comes down to the dancers' dancing. Even in Gautier's day, as he notes, the plot of the ballet—and, he implies, even the choreography itself—was just an excuse for pure dancing. That was what the interested spectator came to see and the critic to judge. But, in fact, dance history, criticism, and theory have suffered from this propensity—carried to an extreme by balletomane critics—to render verdicts simply on the dancer's performance.

Clearly, evaluation may be applied to choreography as well as to performance. Historically, the emergence of modern dance and modern ballet raised new issues to be approached in evaluating choreography, bringing dance criticism into the twentieth century. Yet even choreographic evaluation may become too exclusive a preoccupation. Here, for instance, is an even more radical example of pure evaluation in Clive Barnes's rave review of Paul Taylor's Arden Court:

Someone once described a critic as [a] person who stood in front of a work of genius and made noises. Last night at the City Center I myself had the privilege of standing—in fairness they gave me a seat—in front of a work of genius...

My one problem is how I'm going to take dance all that seriously after Paul Taylor's Arden Court. I am convinced that this is one of the seminal works of our time. Dancers leap—and my God how they leap—twirl, and oddly enough coquette, before your very eyes. Taylor has created many good, even great ballets, but Arden Court represents something new, not simply in Taylor's career, but something extraordinary in the history of dance.

The superlatives are piled on: "a work of genius," "one of the seminal works of our time," surpassing Taylor's previous "great ballets," "something extraordinary in the history of dance." In fact, the critic himself is moved to remark on his inability to express himself adequately, giving the reader the impression that even these superlatives are not lavish enough. (By contrast, but in the same vein, Louis Horst's notorious "blank" review of Paul Taylor's 1957 minimalist concert seemed to carry a purely negative evaluative message.) In terms of the four critical operations, both Gautier and Barnes exemplify an extreme position. Both these reviews are primarily evaluative. They are so meager in the way of description, interpretation, and contextualization that I believe they may be counted as purely evaluative reviews.

Now evaluation—making judgments—is a crucial responsibility of any critic. But if that is all there is, a review is bound to fail. What's wrong with pure evaluation? It doesn't contribute to an understanding of the work because it supplies no grounds to support the evaluative argument. Unless the reader has already seen the dance, she must rely on the critic's pronouncement. She never sees the work in the review, and therefore has no way of knowing whether or not she agrees with the critic's judgment. While this method is often employed by the daily critic, it in fact conflicts with one of the basic functions of a daily paper. For most of the paper's readers will not have seen the dance performance in question and will find pure evaluation simply incomprehensible. Moreover, dance—unlike theater with its long runs—usually has a short box-office life. A particular work has either a one-night or a one- or two-weekend run, or it is shown only a few times during a season. Since dance disappears relatively quickly in the culture business, on the most practical level the aspiration to serve as a consumer guide is thus rarely the most fruitful one for dance criticism.

Let us turn now to a "pure" example of another critical operation: interpretation. By this process the critic tells what she thinks the dance means, performing a hermeneutic procedure that plumbs the connotations and denotations of the movements and their designs. In the following review of several new ballets, Jack Anderson seems above all concerned to allot the short space he has for each piece to a reading of the dance's significance:
Jennifer Banks, of the New Jersey Ballet, and Albert Evans, of the New York City Ballet, seldom touched during much of their pas de deux. When they did, they soon broke apart, as if happy to be free. Even when complex lifts and balances required them to cooperate closely, they still appeared ready to assert their independence.  

Patrick Corbin, of the Paul Taylor Dance Company, surely had serious ideas in mind when he created "Psychedelic Six Pack," to recordings by the Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, Donovan, Pink Floyd and Jimi Hendrix. A scrapbook of images of the 1960's, the choreography included intentionally disconnected movements that presumably symbolized the effects of drugs. A scene in which a chained figure was freed may have referred to civil rights struggles and an all-male sequence was a reminder that the 60's saw the beginning of the gay liberation movement. But these vignettes remained snapshots in an old scrapbook, for Mr. Corbin never revealed what personal significance they had for him.4

Interpretation is often difficult in dance, since movements, unlike words, have few combinatory rules that guarantee a clear, unambiguous communication of ideas. Dance is unlike verbal language, for it usually creates meaning only vaguely. When it becomes more specific, it tends to move into the realm of pantomime or sign language, or even to introduce verbal language. Therefore the hermeneutic task the critic fulfills is an important one. One can see, as well, why in a concert by young choreographers a sympathetic critic might be more concerned with understanding the dances than with passing judgment on them. However, interpretation alone is as baffling as evaluation alone. In Anderson's review, description only comes as part of a decoding operation. We know, for instance, that the dancers in the pas de deux broke apart, lifted and were lifted, and balanced. But we don't know exactly what movements they did or what movement qualities they used—in other words, how they did these general things differently than in any other pas de deux. Context here, too, is kept to a minimum, primarily surfacing in the identification of dancers and choreographers according to the dance companies they work for. As well, Anderson avoids evaluation. Except for the opening paragraph, in which he notes that "whereas the evening's ballets always had polished surfaces, they sometimes lacked choreographic depth," and the very last sentence quoted above, we know very little about his opinion of these dances and dancers.

An opposite approach to both pure evaluation and pure interpretation in criticism is pure description. In arts criticism generally, description was often used in the 1960s as an antidote to what was seen as an overemphasis by previous generations on evaluation and literary interpretation. In dance, this approach to criticism fit well with certain dominant and emerging choreographic practices. For instance, although they were unlike in other respects, both Cunningham and the generation of early postmodern dancers that followed and rebelled against Cunningham refused to pinpoint meaning in their dances. Yvonne Rainer, for instance, aimed at making dance that was factual, "objective," nonstylized, and nonillusionistic.5 The postmodern dancers deliberately undercut evaluation—of dancers, for instance, by using untrained performers. And, faced with new aesthetic ground that broke previous standards of taste, critics were willing to suspend judgment. This approach in criticism was akin to the artistic practice in film of cinema vérité—the notion of a noninterpretive, non-evaluative, objective camera that simply records reality without imposing a point of view. And this domestic approach to culture, so to speak, also fit with a post-World War II, relativistic, anthropological approach to comparative cultures that eschewed judgment regarding alien cultural practices. For the most part, artists were not literally likened to the makers of cultural artifacts in distant cultures, but the same values of nonintervention and nonjudgmental appreciation of the world's variety of art held forth in the avant-garde and its critical discourse.6

Susan Sontag dispatched her famous rallying cry for descriptive criticism in her 1964 essay "Against Interpretation."

Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities.

... Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art [at the expense of energy and sensual capability].

Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world.7

Sontag calls for descriptive criticism in order to "reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it." Critics must stop searching for content in art, she argues, in order to be able to see the work at all. Indeed, she complains, the critic's search for content perpetuates the myth that artworks have content. Both interpretation and evaluation, it was felt during this period, were hierarchical and authoritarian, closing off alternative meanings and values, but above all, as Sontag suggests, denying the physical, sensory pleasures of art. Description was meant to recreate the work by representing it in all its physical detail.8

In the 1970s, The Drama Review under the editorship of Michael Kirby was particularly active in promoting this "objective" type of descriptive criticism. It also vigorously documented the analytic, gallery-connected phase of postmodern dance. Burt Barr's 1979 review of David Gordon's dance What Happened? is an exemplary piece of the type of descriptive dance criticism TDR offered. I quote this review at length to give the reader a sense of how full and fine-grained Barr's description is:

David Gordon's dance piece, What Happened?, opened at the American Theatre Lab, in September, 1978. The stage is well-lighted when seven women enter. Some of the women are wearing white walking shorts with kneesocks, others are in
white pants, and all are wearing white tops. Across the width and depth of
the stage dancers take random positions, paces away from one another.
They face the audience, looking straight ahead, arms at their sides—a
group of women simply being themselves.

A car being started is heard; the car moves away, then there is a crash,
followed by police and ambulance sirens. When the sound of sirens dies
in the distance, the women begin speaking and moving, the stage is
awash in words and gestures.

Over the sweeping view of the stage the dancers turn and pivot, some
take steps, all of them talk, gesture, but none leave the given spheres
in which they began. Each dancer is performing full-out, the movements
crisp and short, the words loud and distinct. Singing out one performer,
then others, certain words are heard: an old man a baby an old
friend not an old man but a grandfather.

What Happened is composed of seven different but similar stories. In
each story there are words and passages common to all of them, thus
certain words are heard many times and the same movements, depend-
ent on the words, are seen repeatedly. When a dancer utters the words
the old man, she bends forward, places her hands on the small of her
back, then points to herself. For the word baby another common word,
a dancer links her arms together as if cradling a baby and rocks them back
and forth. The word friend is shown by a performer who extends her
arm as if to drape it around someone’s shoulder, then her hand droops
and swoops downward into the gesture for a handshake. Also there are
movements related to the sound of a word and not its meaning. “Avail”
is depicted by a dancer drawing her hands downward over her face. The
word way is shown by two cupped hands, palms up, going up and down
as if weighing something. The word would is shown by a dancer
touching the wood floor.9

Again, this review is helpful as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go far
enough. What’s wrong with pure description? It doesn’t provide a structure
for thinking about the work or for understanding it. Certainly it is useful
to future dance historians or reconstructors to pile on the descriptive detail.
But, in terms of helping the contemporary reader understand the work, it
leaves one in suspense. What do we do with the work after we are able,
thanks to a detailed description, to see it clearly? In fact, contra Sontag, it
seems to me that often, the more description, the harder it becomes
actually to see the work. That is, the more trees, the more elusive the shape
of the forest becomes.10 It’s useful—indeed, I would argue necessary—to
have some description. But a description needs to be shaped by conceptual
categories in order to have meaning. It needs to be hooked at least to
interpretive machinery, if not to evaluative and contextual frameworks as
well.

As with evaluation, there are different aspects of a performance that
may be described. And again, these aspects seem to be distributed logically
according to genre. In modern and postmodern dance, the critic must often
describe not only the design of the choreography, but the movements
themselves, since the vocabulary may not be a given. Ballet critics use
description, too. But often they focus on the dancers, and even on the
dancers’ bodies, since ballet is built on a bodily canon that demands
homogeneous standards of perfection. This review by Arlene Croce of the
Bolshoi Ballet certainly includes the other critical operations. In this ex-
ccerpt her description is interwoven with interpretation and evaluation. But
her characterization of Nadezhda Pavlova’s dancing is particularly interest-
ing here because of the close attention she pays to the dancer’s body—and
to how the ballerina’s body itself creates meaning. Her description is
extremely rich, and, like Barr, she has the space to go into full detail:

Physically, Pavlova is a well-shaped, small girl with abnormal leg exten-
sions and feet. Maybe it’s the abnormality that gives her stage personality
its “dark” intonation; even when the steps are light and zestful, she almost
terrifies you. Like many phenomenal dancers when they first appear, she
exaggerates elements of the classical style, so that they appear to carry new
meanings, but nothing in the exaggeration violates the implicit sense of
the style. Her leg in full extension is precisely that series of subtle S curves
which is drawn in dotted lines in the dancing manuals. Although the leg
is held perfectly straight, the eye can follow one large S (from the back of
the knee along the long arch of the foot to its point). This is how all ballet
legs look in theory, but it is strange to see the principle enunciated so fully
on the stage, and it is doubly strange to see these paradigmatic legs
sweeping the air in their high-voltage arcs. The energy of the gesture
seems to pulsate from hip to point as steadily as a beam from a lighthouse.
The hip joint operates so freely that in the leg’s release no part of the force
that belongs to the leg is kept back. In the Nutcracker pas de deux, she
completes each of a series of supported pirouettes by opening smoothly to
the highest of développés—a hundred and eighty degrees—and
without tipping from the vertical axis to do it. That leg just seems to go
home by itself.11

Croce assumes the reader knows ballet movements like pirouette and
développé, and the choreography for a standard pas de deux like The
Nutcracker. Similarly, Gus Solomons assumes that readers know basic
ballroom steps like the waltz when he reviews the American Ballroom
Theater. So in his description he concentrates, not on the choreography,
nor on the bodies themselves (for the ballroom dancing genre doesn’t
enforce canons of body shape and structure as rigorously as ballet), but on
the distinctive performance style:

To open Two Hearts in ¾ Time, the finale tribute to that grandest of
ballroom dances, the waltz, noted authority on nineteenth-century social
dances Elizabeth Aldrich has staged Salon Waltzes. The dancers’ minu-
ing, stiff-backed tiptoeing to the staccato strains of a brass ensemble adds a
refreshing bit of historical authenticity to ABRT's otherwise frothy entertainment. . . .

Then, who could resist the ultimate waltzing extravaganza: six lovely ladies in miles of swirling white chiffon in the arms of handsome swains in white tie and tails, gliding around the floor to the three-quarter lil of "The Blue Danube"? Champagne!12

The fourth critical category is contextualization. It is possible to find reviews that focus almost entirely on explaining the dance or the choreographer's work, either in biographical, historical, political, or artistic terms. Take this example, a review by Allen Robertson of Lucinda Childs's Dance, presented at the New Dance Festival in Minneapolis in 1981:

Boos and shouts of disapproval boomed in Northrop Auditorium Saturday as many people in the audience viewing the Lucinda Childs Dance Company's performance of the highly repetitious "Dance" stamped out of the hall in disgust.

Choreographed by Childs in 1979, enhanced with visual design and film by Sol LeWitt and performed to a commissioned score by Philip Glass, "Dance" is a milestone in minimalist art. . . .

Granted, "Dance" may not be everyone's cup of tea, but it is not a hoax. No one is compelled to like minimalist art, but to deny there is either deep thought or the most stringent craft involved in its creation is unfair. . . .

The dance boom of the last decade has weighed down dance with an overriding burden of glamour. It has become, like rock, one of the 20th century's instant-gratification art forms. Most audiences want their dance hot, and this performance doesn't allow that kind of response. Childs' work is cool, controlled, yes, even contrived art—but it is art.

In fact, it is art older than Western civilization, it is art whose roots can be clearly seen and heard in Bali, Java, Korea, Africa—almost in any culture where time is allowed to exist on more than our own moment-to-moment level.

Childs and Glass compress their art, like angels, onto the head of a pin. The concentrated result is either something so tiny it can't be seen or it is a microcosm capable of expanding to the edges of the universe. Take your pick.13

As with interpretation, this focus on contextualization can serve to explain the dance to the reader. In Robertson's case, it seems that the audience's negative reaction prompted him to defend the dance by setting it in an aesthetic context that is centered on the minimalist art movement of the 1970s but that has a relationship to world dance and music. Admittedly, Robertson makes clear his positive evaluation of the piece in the vigor of his defense. But nearly all the work of the review is devoted to explicating the dance, not in terms of its meaning but in regard to the situation of its making. Neither description nor interpretation plays a role here.

I have been citing critical writing that focuses on only one critical activity, in order to isolate the four operations. But most critics mix several of these key critical operations. I would like now to analyze a few different approaches that use these activities in combination. Here, for example, is an excerpt from a long essay by John Mueller on Doris Humphrey's Passacaglia:

The lead man moves to the top of the risers for the tenth entrance. As with the ninth, all other movement suddenly stops, and he is given the entire burden of expressing the powerful fugal entrance with a development of the teetering pose of Figure 6 [a "five-point star" balancing on one leg with the other leg and arms outstretched]. He moves again among the seated dancers and, in a most beautiful sequence, seems to rouse them, group by group, into canonic waves of rises and falls.14

This very useful and detailed formal description of the tenth entrance in the Fugue section of the dance includes evaluative terms like "beautiful." The description-cum-evaluation follows a section of the essay in which the dance is contextualized, partly in terms of Humphrey's own shifting interpretations of the work. Yet Mueller himself never essays his own interpretation, nor does he choose to favor one of Humphrey's. Thus his essay combines contextualization, description, and evaluation, but shies away from interpretation.

Here, in contrast, are some excerpts from a review, by Jean Nuchtern, of an Antony Tudor ballet. The review is long on interpretation. Yet it also includes strong evaluations and quite a bit of contextualization:

While Antony Tudor's The Tiller in the Fields (New York City premiere) will never be my favorite Tudor ballet, it's a sweet and simple fantasy in which a gawky, ugly duckling (Gelsey Kirkland—if you can believe she's awkward) wins the object of her affections, Patrick Bissell. . . .

Cinderella/Kirkland never takes her eyes off Bissell. From the intensity of her looks, it's obvious that this waltz has been hankering after her hero for a long time. When Kirkland approaches him, it's apparent that he doesn't know her and isn't interested in such a pathetic girl. Out of shyness, Kirkland rushes off like the sylph in La Sylphide. The three couples resume their dance, which reminds me of the grape harvest peasant dances from Giselle. . . .

I like the way Tudor delineates characters' emotions as well as the stages of their love relationship through movement. I know Kirkland's shy because she steps with pigeon-toed feet. I also know that she's transformed and becomes direct in Bissell's presence. To communicate her adoration she kneels at his feet. . . .

The ballet lacks density and depends not upon interesting choreographic ideas—as well as a good story—but only upon identifying with the shy girl's predicament through the ballerina's performance. . . .

Bissell is exceptionally appealing as the farmer/lover. His dancing and
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his personality gain dimension as he begins to fall in love. Kirkland's role is not a new one for her. In several ballets she excels as the shy adolescent experiencing love for the first time. In Tiller, she's not only a technical whiz-kid but is soft and vulnerable. I'd compare her dancing with a Chopin composition. The content and feelings are romantic, but the composition and performing techniques are classical.15

In terms of context, we are told how this role compares with Kirkland's other roles, and in a section not quoted we learn something about how this ballet fits into Tudor's oeuvre. There is a great deal of interpretation, for every movement is assigned its codified meaning. And terms like "exceptionally appealing," "a technical whiz-kid," and "lacks density... and... interesting choreographic ideas" supply artistic evaluation, both for the dancing and for the choreography. The one operation that is missing here is description. Of course, in order to decode some of the poses and gestures, a minimal amount of description is introduced. But often comparisons or similes—"Kirkland rushes off like the sylph in La Sylphide"—substitute for movement description. Perhaps Nuchtern's refusal to describe the choreography stems from her judgment that it is inadequate. That is, her lack of description may itself be a form of evaluation.

A different combination of critical functions appears in Nool Carroll's review of a dance by Kenneth King. Carroll's review stresses interpretation as well, but it also includes contextualization and description:

In much post-Cunningham dance, for example Yvonne Rainer's classic Trio A, the idea that dance is essentially movement is taken quite literally, producing strings of ceaseless changing bursts of movement without reference to a pre-existing system of gestures or to an easily discernible choreographic design. But in Kenneth King's latest piece, a work-in-progress called Word(d T)raid, the emphasis is less on movement as such and more on gesture and choreography. He handles these equally basic aspects of dance in a very painterly way, stressing gesture in terms of line and shape, and choreography as composition in space... .

The conclusion includes the trio walking as a group at a hearty pace. They are virtually marching. They set out in one direction and then suddenly make sharp, forty-five-degree turns along another vector of movement. With each turn, two of the dancers will exchange positions in the group. The spectacle is engrossing; its emphasis is less on the movements of the individuals and more on the qualities of the movement of the whole group. At times it appears as a machine; with some turns, it reminds you of a snake. But above all, its stress is on directionality. The space around the trio seems to disappear and an exhilarating feeling of propulsion evolves. Whereas the previous dancing underscored space as such, this phrasing promotes an intensified experience of a trajectory through space. Corresponding with the earlier sections, King's preoccupation is still with the formal qualities of choreography. He enables the spectator to papably feel the dancing as a veritable line of movement.

Whereas many contemporary performers strive to make the audience aware of the concrete dimensions of dance, King wants us to feel its abstract qualities.16

Carroll's review sets King's work into the context of the work of other postmodern dancers of his generation. Although he doesn't try to describe every movement in the dance, he balances enough selected movement descriptions, together with structural and stylistic descriptions, to give the reader a strong sense of the look and feel of the dance. And even though this is an abstract dance that has no story line to tease out of the movement, Carroll is always concerned with interpretation. He seems to see as his primary task the explication of what King is doing in the dance and what this means, in dance terms. The one critical operation that Carroll refuses to perform here, however, is evaluation. There are two words in the above excerpt that seem at first to be evaluative: "engrossing" and "exhilarating." However, in this context, both these words are used as descriptive indicators, not as matters of opinion or aesthetic judgment.

There are various combinations and permutations of these critical operations—fifteen, to be exact. For instance, Mueller's essay is contextual, descriptive, noninterpretive, and evaluative. Nuchtern's review is contextual, descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative. Carroll's review is contextual, descriptive, interpretive, and nonevaluative.

The grid showing the fifteen possibilities of combining these four operations is as follows:

1. contextual, descriptive, interpretive, evaluative
2. contextual, nondescriptive, interpretive, evaluative
3. contextual, descriptive, noninterpretive, evaluative
4. contextual, descriptive, interpretive, nonevaluative
5. contextual, nondescriptive, noninterpretive, evaluative
6. contextual, descriptive, noninterpretive, nonevaluative
7. contextual, nondescriptive, interpretive, nonevaluative
8. contextual, nondescriptive, noninterpretive, nonevaluative
9. noncontextual, descriptive, interpretive, evaluative
10. noncontextual, descriptive, noninterpretive, evaluative
11. noncontextual, descriptive, interpretive, nonevaluative
12. noncontextual, descriptive, noninterpretive, nonevaluative
13. noncontextual, nondescriptive, interpretive, evaluative
14. noncontextual, nondescriptive, interpretive, nonevaluative
15. noncontextual, nondescriptive, noninterpretive, evaluative

It would undoubtedly be too tiresome to demonstrate the entire gamut of possibilities. Rather, having demonstrated seven already (2, 3, 4, 8, 12, 14, and 15), I will now give several examples of what seems to me to be the fullest kind of dance criticism—number 1, the rich balance of all four operations—and then return to the subject of critical evaluation.
Here is the conclusion of Marcia B. Siegel's essay on Kurt Jooss's ballet *The Green Table*:

The opening and closing scenes, with the Gentlemen in Black around the Green Table, have a tremendous pictorial and pantomimic effect, but even here the movement qualities contribute to the overall atmosphere. The diplomats, in their rusty black tailcoats, spats, white gloves, and smite masks, palaver back and forth in a continual discord that ranges from amiable to tense. They are devious, with weaving heads and wagging fingers, or aggressive, as they lean forward across the table. Their groupings are constantly shifting; one side of the table will work in a unit against the other, they scatter off into huddles, relax and shake hands with their opposite numbers, return to the table to argue as individuals in stiff, angular postures. The only time the ten men do anything in unison is when they line up facing the audience, draw their pistols, and fire into the air, thus by common consent precipitating the next war.

*The Green Table* works as a profound human statement because Kurt Jooss consistently selected the particular dynamic and spatial qualities that would best strengthen his narrative. I think most ballet and modern dance has become bottled up in its own movement conventions, it has nowhere to go but to repeat itself. Choreographers who use movement more fluently, for what it is, may have found one way out, and *The Green Table*, as a pioneer work in this genre, not only survives but surpasses a lot of later choreography in its vitality. 17

Siegel gives a visual sense of what is seen on the stage, in her description of the politicians' costumes, as well as a kinetic sense, in her movement descriptions that incorporate postures, gestures, groupings, specific movements, and movement sequences, and the deployment of varied energies. Other descriptions (not quoted here) also treat the ordering of time and space in the dance, and at one point she gives a summary of the dance's overall choreographic structure. Earlier in the essay Siegel has contextualized the dance in several ways: the situation leading to its revival by the Joffrey Ballet (the occasion for the present essay); the genre— antiwar dance— of which she sees it as an outstanding example; the larger genre— expressive dance-theater, specifically of the Central European variety— within which Jooss made the dance. She returns to the contextual mode in the last two sentences of her review, when she contrasts *The Green Table* with current ballet and modern dance. Since the explicit point of her essay is to show how Jooss's movements create narrative and symbolic meaning, Siegel interweaves interpretation throughout. One example in the extract above is the sentence describing the motions she interprets on two levels: not only may they be read pantomimically as a pistol shot, but also the group pistol shot itself has symbolic long-range implications, signaling the beginning of the next war. Finally, that Siegel finds this work excellent is clear, starting with the essay's title— "The Green Table: Movement Masterpiece"— continuing with such words (before the section quoted here) as "stunning," "radiant," and "immortal." The ending reaffirms Siegel's view of the dance's excellence: "a profound human statement... surpasses a lot of later choreography in its vitality."

Another good example of dance-critical writing that interweaves all four operations is Deborah Jowitt's review of Merce Cunningham's Sounddance (two paragraphs in a long review of the choreographer's season):

*Sounddance* too, acknowledges the fact—without paying special attention to it—that Cunningham is no longer working with a company of near peers, that he is a man in his late fifties surrounded by the splendid young dancers he has trained. (Meg Harper has been with him since 1967, but the rest from between five years and a matter of months.) *Sounddance*, like *Rebus*, begins with a solo for Cunningham. I can't remember it clearly, except that I found no peace in it either. The other dancers enter with great vigor—not all at once—from behind a fold in the heavy, poured-looking white curtain that Mark Lancaster has draped over a partially lowered light pipe. Lancaster's costumes are pale cream and beige; his lighting dazzlingly white. David Tudor's brilliant score, *Tonemust*, shakes and quivers from speaker to speaker—over our heads, behind us, back to the stage speakers. The highest vibrations sound like a gaggles of raucous birds. Sometimes, in the distance, you hear the quiet echo of a pattern; but most of the time the volume and the energy made me feel like a cat in an electric storm—frightened and exhilarated.

Maybe the music causes the dance to seem wilder than it is. And the lights. I see the dancers as playing with fierce energy on an empty shore at high noon. Here's the moment I remember seeing in Cunningham Events when Morgan Ensminger parallels his body to the ceiling, holding his weight on hands and feet (a backward crab-walk, would you say?), and two of the other men swing Ellen Cornfield into the air over him and let her down on her knees on his groin, while he folds up under her weight. Something reckless looking about a game like that no matter how much the dancers smile. *Sounddance* has a lot of couple work—men and women fastening onto each other, falling under each others' weight. Cunningham with Meg Harper sometimes makes me think of a sentinel. Does he see things they don't? They dash off the way they came, and after a moment in which we have time to wonder, Merce spins after them and disappears through the flap in the curtain. 18

 Appropriately for a review of a major choreographer's season, the contextualization of this particular dance is brief and is mainly concerned with relating this dance to other works in the choreographer's oeuvre. Jowitt uses occasional, specific movement description together with atmospheric metaphors to flesh out a concise, vivid picture of the work. Her descriptions are very complete, not in the sense of a moment-by-moment reckoning, but in that they include the various theatrical elements that surround the
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dancing as well: music, lighting, costumes, decor. Jowitt's interpretations, too, often take the form of metaphors and, again, appropriately enough for a choreographer who shrinks from overinterpretation, are offered most unaggressively, couched as personal opinions with which the reader might or might not concur. "I see the dancers as playing with fierce energy on an empty shore at high noon." Or "Cunningham ... sometimes makes me think of a sentinel." Similarly, Jowitt's evaluation is understated but explicit. A word here and there—"splendid ... brilliant ... exhilarated ... wonder"—together with the pronouncement of Cunningham's "persistent genius" in the final sentence of the entire review make clear her commitment.

Excerpts from Joan Acocella's long essay on Mark Morris's 1990 season in New York show a different style that still combines all four elements. First she supplies a contextual introduction, which begins:

When Mark Morris, won over by a generous offer from Belgium's national opera house, moved his modern-dance company from New York to Brussels in 1988, he left behind him a reputation as a dark-souled character full of "edge" and irony ... The other main aspect of his reputation—that he was the world's most musical choreographer... in no way offset his angry-young-man image.

Even within her long contextual introduction, Acocella supplies descriptions and interpretations of Morris's early work to point up the basis for the American controversy over his work. She fills the reader in on the circumstances of Morris's return to tour the U.S. and the transformation of his image—"the artist who was formerly a bad boy is now being taken very seriously"—then moves on to analyze—through description and interpretation—and to evaluate the work she credits with changing the choreographer's reputation.

L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato (1988) was the first piece Morris created in Brussels, and he made it match the scale of his new opera-house home and the hopes that had brought him there. Everything about it is expansive—big, burgeoning, bursting ... Not only did Morris embrace (Handel's and Milton's) Renaissance-like program, he fulfilled it with amazing, unstrained inventiveness. For two hours his stage bloomed with nymphs and goddesses, birds and bees, shepherds and plowmen, variously moving in line dances, circle dances, arcs and Xs and wedges and rosettes, solos and duets and full-cast, 24-person ensembles. ...

In [Morris's] conjunction of classicism and grief there is no paradox ... To the classical mind, nothing is singular, and everything is knowable; it is just that not everything is bearable.

Mark Morris has such a mind. That, in fact, is probably what allowed him to imagine the golden world of L'Allegro and at the same time the dark terror of his other recent work. To envision each takes nerves of steel, for each carries the other buried in its heart.19

I want to return now to the question of evaluation. In performing the evaluative function, the critic asks whether the work is good according to certain standards. However, there are several different dimensions along which these standards might be applied. One is the moral dimension. Surely, for instance, part (but not all) of Siegel's positive assessment of The Green Table comes from her appreciation of the antiwar sentiment of the dance. The moral dimension includes political judgment. In the following review of a work presented in New York by the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, written by Rob Baker, the political aspects of the dance include class, race, and gender, and are, the critic argues, crucial elements in the work.

[Alberto Mendez's] Dolls ... takes the rather hackneyed ballet staple of dancing dolls and puts it into a sociopolitical context that is rather astounding for such a short, simple work. The male doll is a typical prerevolutionary aristocrat and soldier. He takes a decidedly sexist and elitist attitude toward his homespun partner, and this is apparent from every stiff-jointed move he makes, as well as from his stuffy, old-fashioned uniform. Besides that, in the New York casting ... the partnering is notably (and I think intentionally) interracial. Her rag doll was black to his white, tatterdemalion to his fastidious, thoughtful to his proper, sexy to his stuffy, civilian to his military, womanly to his macho, populist to his elitist. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the way she moves, her flexibility contrasting perfectly with his jerky stiffness.

Indeed, Baker insists, even the apparently "apolitical" works in the Cuban company's repertoire—like Giselle—may be read as political. Baker takes issue with the "liberal" New York critics who "were all too quick (as usual) to praise the company for what they considered the apolitical nature of its repertoire."

Putting art above politics is a typical ploy of well-meaning liberals, but in this case somebody's missing the boat ... Cuban dance exists at least partly (if not primarily) as an arm for spreading the prerevolutionary message—the party line, if you will. This doesn't make it bad dance ... and it doesn't necessarily make it all that different from the kind of probourgeois, procapitalist dance ... that we've been reared on and, in our own way, brainwashed with here in the United States.

Curiously enough, [Alicia] Alonso's Giselle in a way remains the consummate statement of the company, both in terms of its brilliantly precise dancing style and its revolutionary message ... Surely no classic ballet contains a clearer statement about the temptations of bourgeois corruption than does Giselle. Albrecht's deception of Giselle; the way the peasants bow and curtsey to the aristocracy, putting on a little show for them; Bathilde's condescending liberal gesture to Giselle in offering the cute little peasant dancer a doodad. And, after Giselle's death, Albrecht, for all his money and social prestige, cannot right the wrongs that he and his class have committed.
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while Giselle, ironically, is able to dance until dawn to keep him alive—a true, forgiving populist heroine.

The fact that Alonzo has made Giselle relevant to Cuba today is proof positive that art has "survived" the revolution. . . .

Baker not only finds a political interpretation in the dance, but also judges the dance good on the basis of its political message.

In her essay "The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers," Ann Daly takes a feminist stance, criticizing what she sees as the sexism underpinning Balanchine's choreography—as well as the silence with which dance history has treated this bias. She writes:

When people say that "Balanchine glorified Woman," it is generally considered a laudable accomplishment. But in an age of backlash against feminism, when women's efforts toward progressive social change are losing ground to blithe conservatism, "glorification" smacks of regressive sexual politics....

If the ballerina has been only a passing subject of critical feminist thinking, the Balanchine ballerina has been strictly off-limits. During his life, Balanchine was enveloped by a mythology that ascribed to him near-mystical inspiration, and now, four years after his death, Balanchine's legacy is generally considered sacrosanct. Yet Balanchine's statements about his idealized "Woman" openly declared their patriarchal foundations....

Daly supports her assertions with specific examples from The Four Temperaments, analyzing the movement in terms of gender-specific qualities in our culture. For instance:

The erotic undercurrent in the [third] theme surfaces when the ballerina's arabesques shoot between her partner's legs. In another sequence, the ballerina ends up in an elegant sitting position, with bent knees properly together and on her toes. Before repeating the phrase, she briefly looks at him, then coyly lowers her gaze and cocks her head as she frames the sinuous curve of her face with an open palm. Like the Romantic image of the female and the image of a geisha girl in Japanese prints, she is revealing her feminine charms in a demure yet provocative way.

Thus Daly evaluates Balanchine's choreography negatively on the moral/political dimension, for dichotomizing genders and subordinating women.

I predict that, for two reasons, political evaluation will come increasingly to the fore (as it has already begun to do, most noticeably, in American and British academic dance criticism). One reason for this is that, as Daly suggests about her own feminist project, a generation of younger critics is responding to a world ever more sharply polarized along dimensions of political identity: "race," ethnicity, class, gender, sexual preference, religion, age, disability, and others. The other reason is that younger choreographers themselves tend to opt now for political or cultural-political themes.

Thus even those critics who may not bring politics to their criticism find themselves willy-nilly confronting more political issues in the theater.

A second dimension that may serve as an evaluative standard is the cognitive. The philosopher Susanne Langer supplies an underpinning for this approach when she writes that dance can display the ethos of a culture and gives objective shape to the subjective "inner life." More recently, writers on dance who have been influenced by or trained in ethnographic methods have turned to analyzing and judging dance in these terms. The folklorist Elizabeth C. Fine, for instance, writes about African-American stepdancing in terms of the form's cultural meaning. Step dancing, or stepping, is a form of competitive exhibition dancing, derived from African-American folk traditions, performed by black college fraternities and sororities. Fine writes about this form as a "social drama" and is concerned with its links to the African-American tradition; the "vitality" of the dance form as a signifier of identity is the evaluative term that she stresses in her essay:

Fundamentally, stepping is a ritual performance of group identity. It expresses an organization's spirit, style, icons, and unity.

One can't hope to comprehend the complexity and richness of the stepping tradition by surveying only a few groups or routines.... All....draw on such African-American folk traditions and communication patterns as call-response, rappin', the dozees, signifying, marking, spirituals, handclap games, and military jodies....

Stepping performances have become a key venue for displaying and asserting group identity, as well as for negotiating the status of each group within the social order....

[The] agonistic nature of step shows makes them a performance tradition charged with high energy and life.

In her analysis, Fine emphasizes the cognitive dimension of stepdancing. She finds the stepdancing performances to be good because they teach us about African-American culture. They have cognitive value as a key to African-American identity, and therein lies their vitality. The cognitive contribution is linked to a positive evaluation.

Similarly, Sondra Rafeleigh, writing from a phenomenological perspective, often evaluates dances and choreographers in terms of what we learn from them:

Martha Graham's dramatic works, for instance, speak their psychic truth through sharp angular movement.... Her works take on a fuller meaning when we understand that they reveal familiar inner landscapes through archetypal figures. Likewise, Merce Cunningham's works reveal truths beyond their cleanly etched motion, as they engage us in mystical worlds and meditation on the accidental moment. Twyla Tharp's dance... sheds light on our tensional body of action, allowing us to see and experience the dancing body in new terms.
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Thus Fraleigh judges as "good" dances with cognitive value—dances that provide knowledge, not only about the "outside" material world and the inner life of the psychic landscape, but also about the dancing body itself.

The third dimension along which a work may be evaluated is the aesthetic. This is the arena that Jill Johnston works in when she writes about Yvonne Rainer's Trio A:

I've seen Trio A a number of times and still think I haven't really seen it . . . 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 illusion of sameness to the whole thing. . . . Here's the crux of a departure from conventional phrasing . . . [undermining] the whole hierarchical structure of traditional dance. 26

Johnston argues that Rainer's dance, though it may to some seem boring by virtue of its overall consistency, nonetheless pleases because of its intricacy and condensed quality. Here Johnston seems to agree with the philosopher Monroe Beardsley, who claims that there are objective standards—general canons, as he calls them—by which we can judge the aesthetic value of an artwork. They are unity, complexity, and intensity. Thus Rainer's Trio A, while refusing one of the canons—unity—supplies plenty of complexity and intensity.

The aesthetic dimension seems to be both the most important and the most difficult to judge. After all, the feminist or Afrocentric critic, for example, will have a ready-made set of standards by which to judge any work, and in the case of writing about explicitly political art even those critics who have no particular political program will usually be able to decode the political commitments of the artist. But even if we agree—or disagree—with the artist's political message, we will still want to say whether the work is good or not. We may be pleased with the antiracist message or the celebration of gay life or the prochoice commitment of a dance and still find it boring or lacking organization. Or we may find ourselves disagreeing strongly with the hierarchical, imperial politics of a dance—say The Sleeping Beauty—and nevertheless find it brilliant. Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will is a case in point.

Yet this is not to say that the moral or cognitive dimensions of the work are outside of the critic's domain of judgment. Nor is it to insist that these three realms are entirely separable. Both artists and critics bring to their work aesthetic values that are culturally specific. To ignore or avoid what some might see as the extra-aesthetic dimensions of the work—especially where those elements are evident in the work—is to be ahistori-

Power and the Dancing Body

Dancing Bodies Change the World

Dance historians often start from the premise that dance reflects society. For instance, in Time and the Dancing Image, Deborah Jowitt writes:

Western theatrical dancing . . . has always been responsive to current trends. At its most profound, like the other arts, it reflects aspects of the current world picture; at its most superficial, it acknowledges the current fashions . . . The dancer's image has been subject to many alterations since the beginning of the nineteenth century in response to the immense social, political, scientific, and technological upheavals that have characterized the period . . . Trying to view the dancers of the past as products of their age . . . is a challenge [italics added]. 1

For Jowitt, dancing and dancers do not produce culture, but are products of it. Dancing and dancers reflect intellectual and material trends in other spheres of human activity; they do not catalyze trends.

Choreographing History Conference, Riverside, California, 1992.
7. Some of these problems are examined in Noel Carroll’s “Post-Modern Dance and Expression,” a paper delivered at the American Dance Festival at Duke University in July 1979, published in Gordon Fencher and Gerald Myers, eds., *Philosophical Essays in Dance* (Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1981), pp. 93–104.
8. We are indebted to Paul Ziff for the suggestion that concepts like omission, forbearance, and refraining, as used in both legal theory and action theory, would be useful in the description of avant-garde dance.

3. Criticism as Ethnography (pp. 16–24)
10. The dissertation has since been published as *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

4. On Your Fingertips (pp. 24–43)


8. Indeed, the special postmodern dance issue of The Drama Review 19 (T-65; March 1975) spread the critical label "postmodern" in regard to dance and set forth a definition.


20. See Monroe C. Beardsley, "Critical Evaluation," Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988; second edition), pp. 454–99, for a fuller discussion of these three evaluative dimensions and the three general canons, to which I refer below, under which aesthetic judgments may be subsumed.


5. Power and the Dancing Body (43–50)


2. Panel on "American Dances, American Bodies, American Culture," organized by Cynthia Novack, Dance in American Culture series, The Center for American Culture Studies, Columbia University, 1986. Susan Manning's question to me at that panel regarding my use of the term "reflect" to characterize the relationship between dance and society has in part prompted the present essay.


4. Anthropologist Cynthia Novack, for instance, writes (in Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990], p. 8) that "culture is embodied... We perform movement, invent it, interpret it, and reinterpret it, on conscious and unconscious levels. In these actions, we participate in and reinforce culture, and we also create it."