

Review Essay

Dance, Gender and Culture. Helen Thomas, editor. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1993. xvi + 219 pp. including introduction, index and 15 plates. Hardback Edition \$39.95. ISBN 0-312-08881-7.

This collection of thirteen papers plus an introduction brings together the work of writers in sociology, film studies, dance criticism, journalism, dance performance and dance anthropology. In addition to the diversity provided by the wide range of areas of expertise, individual contributors often straddle disciplines, or the boundaries between theory and practice, offering another avenue into inter-, and intra-disciplinarity.

The editor wisely does not seek to impose a unity on these papers, outside of their common concerns with the themes in the volume's title, and even admits to some playful juggling of the papers within the subsections of "Cultural Studies", "Ethnography" and "Theory/Criticism" in order to challenge the categories themselves. This is useful; at the same time, the disciplinary frameworks which shape and bound most writers' reading, thinking and ways of approaching the dance have been by no means abandoned in these papers.

Opening the section on "Cultural Studies", the anthropologist Ted Polhemus, a pioneer in the study of social aspects of the human body, offers a general discussion of the terms 'dance, gender and culture' from an anthropological perspective. His plain language and clarity render these terms accessible to non-specialists, and his discussion helpfully provides a framework for the cross-cultural range of the volume. However, the anthropological theory used here is somewhat outdated. Working in media rather than academe, he appears unaware of the important debates about culture and ethnographic writing which have been raging over the past decade, as well as of a now significant body of anthropological research on dances and dancing.

Andrew Ward examines assumptions about 'dance' within the sociological literature through a focus on the awkward case of British dance, a highly popular activity rather than marginalised, as rationalist and implicitly evolutionist theories would predict. Ward rightly criticizes the functionalism inherent in much dance analysis, and calls for attention to dance as "an end in itself". His paper raises intriguing issues concerning the meanings of subcultural forms for those from *outside* its native subcultural context, and about their meanings when the forms are transposed to other, not just geographical, contexts.

The final two papers in this section consider two genres of performance, as opposed to primarily recreational, dances. Cynthia Novack adroitly dons and doffs her two 'hats' – as anthropologist and ballet dancer – in an exploration of the experience of ballet dancing, particularly for a woman. Her "case study approach" enables her fruitfully to interrogate her own memories of and

responses to ballet, and through texts, those of others. Novack's concern with the ways this experience is refracted through race, class, gender and region is salutary, if predictable. Things get more interesting when she turns to more vexed issues. Among them, how to understand and regard her own enjoyment of an aesthetic form that expresses various hegemonic (classicist, racist, sexist) notions which she finds abhorrent. Novack refers to the sociologist Janet Wolff's argument that a spectator can 'separate' formal qualities of skill and choreography from the ideologically unsound content of a performance. This facilitates a more nuanced approach to 'reading' ballet, although it hardly resolves the matter, as one could not assume that all spectators are equally discriminating.

Coming from a film studies perspective, Richard Dyer's analysis of the depiction of different versions of the heterosexual relationship in film musicals focusses on text rather than 'reader'. Charting shifts between versions from the 1930s to the 1980s, it attempts to relate these shifts to wider social changes concerning women's status. Dyer confirms Haskell's assertion that the heyday for film images of strong, independent women was the 1930s and '40s, and notes the paradox that a more passive, dependent image emerged in the 1950s, just as actual opportunities for female autonomy increased. Had Dyer gone further down this road, providing a fuller and more complex account of gender relations in the early post-war period in the United States, he might have connected such images with the national propaganda drive to force women to relinquish their jobs and return back home. Dyer is right that we need to attend to musicals as sites of fantasy and utopian visions, rather than through a reductionist theory of "art reflecting society". Yet more work on the social and economic realities of a particular historical moment would enrich and complicate his argument about why and how certain film images of heterosexuality were constructed.

Helen Thomas opens the 'Ethnography' section with a study of a London community dance project, focussing on young women's dancing and talk about dances and 'the dance'. The paper begins with a clear and useful theoretical discussion on the sociology of dance and feminist methodologies, then moves to a description of the project, the voices of the young dancers and the issues they raise. Thomas's sensitive and vivid account traces how the dancers' goals, perceptions and preoccupations express gender ideas pervasive within British society (e.g., concerns with female thinness) but are also marked by the dancer's gender, race and class locations.

Adopting a similarly reflexive stance, Andrée Grau considers gender interchangeability among the Tiwi of Australia, exploring how a dancer can "become the Other [gender]" in the context of certain dance performances. Grau provides a fascinating glimpse of a very different way of organising gender difference; Indeed, she might have spelled out more intricately the implications of this different logic upon what it means to "be a father" or "mother", and thus link this material to recent anthropological/feminist debates on the ways gender and kinship notions are mutually defining.

David Walsh's short paper on gay disco-dancing in the West is sharp and entertaining. His primary focus on the disco as a site for "mating strategies", however, leaves him vulnerable to the charge of 'functionalism' which Dyer earlier criticized. Judith Lynne Hanna's overview of Indian classical dance and women's status contains interesting material on such topics as the appropriation of classical dance by Indian nationalists, and contemporary feminist dancers' reinterpretations of female mythological figures. However, it is undermined by its over-ambitious scope (an enormous subcontinent with its multiple religious traditions over two millennia) and by a tendency to throw out ideas rather than undertake a sustained analysis from a particular, coherent position. Hanna seems to want to say all the right things about women's resistance, but these follow awkwardly from her initial, simplistic formulation of Hinduism as a male-designed religion.

Opening the "Theory/Criticism" section, Roger Copeland's fluent and sophisticated analysis considers the influence of the feminist critique of vision upon certain post-modern choreographies. He cogently summarizes historical material to identify shifts in the strategies of both feminist and non-feminist choreographers. He also astutely assesses the usefulness of theories of vision and sexuality with respect to other media (e.g., Laura Mulvey's work on the cinematic gaze) for understanding the operations of vision in modern dance. Ana Sanchez-Colberg contributes a riveting case-study of female choreographer Pina Bausch and her work with the Wuppertal Tanztheater. Identifying Bausch as "feminist", a designation Bausch disputes, Sanchez-Colberg explores how this choreographer subverts the binary fixity of gender through manipulations of time, space, and the body, as well as of audience expectations.

Lesley-Anne Sayers draws the focus back toward a broader account of 19th and 20th century images of femininity within descriptive writing on [Western] 'dance', arguing that these are "of a piece" with more general social ideologies of gender. Sayers amply documents the sexist views of various male critics writing in both 'high art' and 'popular' genres of dance appreciation. However, she insists on the need to "complicate" crude top-down understandings of male domination, by asking why and how women are attracted to and collude with such images.

Zagba Oyortey's account of 'African dance' imperiously dismisses the work of anthropologists, Africanists and non-African choreographers as lacking any theoretical insights into 'African dance'. While his complaints about the functionalism of much of this work are justified, his sweeping condemnation ignores (or shows ignorance of) work by non-African scholars over the past 10-15 years which recognizes those dimensions of individual creativity which Oyortey rightly emphasizes. Despite Oyortey's acknowledgement of cultural complexity, his postulation of something called 'African dance' and his attempt to interpret it in terms of 'African philosophy' results in generalization and reification. It would have been more useful to identify the *specificity* of cultural meanings within particular traditions; a specificity which not only native voices, but also anthropologists, have always been concerned to

document. 'African dance' might then have been clarified as a contemporary category born of the multi-cultural orientations of a post-modern world.

The volume concludes with Valerie Rimmer's paper on the relevance of Lacanian theory for highlighting questions regarding the difficulties of spectatorship [of ballet] for women. It begins with a detailed account of Lacan's theory of subjectivity which is exemplary in its lucidity until Rimmer moves toward applying this theory to the situation of dance spectatorship. Here, terminological ambiguity arises, e.g., to whom or what does the term 'subject' refer? The dancer? The spectator? The 'dance performance'? In what sense is the "phallus" (rather than the 'penis') "the physical term" Lacanian phraseology also confuses, e.g., what does it mean to claim that "the legitimated phallic term . . . offers a definition of woman as a symptom of itself, the phallus occasioning femininity as masquerade" (p. 207)? The promise to explore female spectatorship is not kept, or if it is, it is so cloaked in arcane psychoanalytic jargon and syntax that only readers fluent in Lacanian theory can decipher it. The importance of Lacan's (and thus Rimmer's) work is not in dispute, but an opportunity to communicate how and why to the uninitiated has been lost.

Thomas has done a good job of gathering together scholars and practitioners from many disciplines and contexts, and the volume indicates the wide range of work now being undertaken on dancing, dances and the dance. However, the quality of the papers is uneven. While some very fine, nuanced analyses appear here, others are less satisfactory. The lament made by several writers that 'dance' is neglected in their discipline, while true, is in a few cases weakened by critiques which show an insufficient mastery of that disciplinary literature, as well as by a failure to acknowledge the existence of -- not to say, engage with -- recent works which address this scholarly *lacunae*, including my own book, *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece* (1990), in which all of the volume's themes -- dancing, gender and culture -- are central concerns.

It is time for analysts of social and cultural aspects of dances to move beyond the well-rehearsed complaint of marginalisation, and to spell out more explicitly and forcefully the implications of their dance material for major debates in their own and related disciplines and in feminist scholarship generally.

Jane Cowan