The Evolution of the Modern Movement: Some Recent German Dance Scholarship

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REVIEW ARTICLE

The Evolution of the Modern Movement: Some Recent German Dance Scholarship

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Inge Baxmann, *Mythos: Gemeinschaft. Körper- und Tanzkulturen in der Moderne.* Wilhelm Fink Verlag München 2000. ISBN 3-7705-3366-6. 279 pages.

Sabine Huschka, *Moderner Tanz*. Konzepte Stile Utopien. rowohlts enzyklopädie. Rowohlt Verlag Reinbek bei Hamburg 2002. ISBN 3-499-55637-5. 380 pages.

Klaus Kieser and Katja Schneider, *Reclams Ballettführer.* Verlag Philipp Reclam Jr. Stuttgart 2002. ISBN 3-15-010507-2. 616 pages.

Several books by German dance scholars have appeared over the past years that re-examine the concepts of modernity and movement. The first two reviewed here look back at the evolution of new perceptions of the body and its reflection in dance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The third, a ballet guide, is also strongly influenced by twentieth-century concepts of performance, rethinking the definition of ballet and the selection of stage works to be included.

Mythos: Gemeinschaft by Inge Baxmann is a fascinating study of the myth of the community and its links to body concepts and dance cultures of modernity. The author considers the emergence of the idea of community itself as much as its subsequent transformation into a legendary philosophical device. The notion of a lack of 'community' inspired theorists, practitioners of body theories and dance artists to develop completely new attitudes that were then declared to be 'modern', a claim that has been widely accepted. Through 'communities', cultural and artistic practices acquired modern status. In the name of community, the 'modern' movements destroyed old values, traditions and structures. Not satisfied with the abbreviated statement that modern dance liberated the body, Baxmann goes into detailed research to understand who felt liberated, when and why, what drove these people and what philosophies they developed.

Baxmann focuses on the first third of the twentieth century but traces the mythical concept of community as cultural-historical trope back to Richard Wagner's and Friedrich Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophies. Wagner's and Nietzsche's contributions proved vital in the 'Community' versus 'Society' debate in the late nineteenth century. Wagner understood the history of modern

culture as progressing more and more towards a loss of the body and the senses. In order to battle against such loss he imagined a new totality in the art of drama; his *Gesamtkunstwerk* became the project of making a modern sensual art that would emanate the image of an ideal 'community' by dissociating itself from society. For Nietzsche, Wagner initially provided a model of a new synthesis of music and myth. He too, like Wagner, reflected on the loss of sensuality and the loss of bodily presence and he too, like Wagner retold the history of modern culture as the history of sensual decadence. But unlike Wagner he did not envisage grand solutions and went far beyond Wagner's romantic idealisations. Rather, he pointed out 'loss' as the ambivalent relationship between nature and culture with which modern society had to live, for a solution was impossible. Nietzsche counteracted Wagner's moral interpretation of the world by developing aesthetic models.

This discourse turned into a heated debate that juxtaposed fundamental positions concerning the value and function of communal or social structure; it became one of the tropes in itself in understanding the intellectual streams of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Germany. Indeed, the terms belong together for they determine one another; each indicates what the other lacks. 'Society' stood – and stands – for the losses modernity brought about. 'Society' signals the results of urban developments, the ensuing anonymity, isolation and individualisation. On the other hand, 'community' stood – and stands – for the utopian project of a new cultural integration of the individual into some kind of wholeness or togetherness. The projects of 'community' are dreams, utopian projects; they initiate and activate the individual to adopt collective social behaviour and to join an often cultish community.

Baxmann chooses a cultural-anthropological approach, suggested by Benedict Anderson among others, to analyse and understand the symbolic structures of communal desires. She is interested in the constitution of emotional identifications, the creation and acceptance of affective ties that make people move towards certain goals. These identification structures become 'real' as soon as the self-declared communities proclaim their founding myths and their utopian future by celebrating ritual forms of communication. All of these characteristics comprise collective styles of behaviour and set values for the members of their 'communities'.

From the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1930s, the phenomenon of the 'masses' hovers over the terms and concepts of 'society' and 'community'. The 'masses' (they are feared or welcomed, hated and rejected or deliberately brought into action) also become the vehicles through which the projective goals are carried out. Baxmann stresses at the beginning of her book how important notions concerning 'the body' (the individual as well as the collective body) and 'movement' become in this process of modernisation and anti-modernisation. She argues that dance is the sphere in which contradictory discourses and cultural practices crystallise and form configurations that allow both the making of communities and the cultivation of a modern sensual reception of social organisational forms.

Dance and the 'masses' form the themes of Baxmann's book. Through them she investigates the various aspects of the 'community'-'society' construct. Her eleven chapters offer a comprehensive and perceptive analysis of the many phenomena of modernisation. They begin with discussions of Wagner's and Nietzsche's concepts and move to the transformation of the mimetic to the naturalisation of the national and examination of the myth of community.

Every one of the chapters uncovers a particular aspect in the wider debate. The different views, combined in one book, give an intriguing insight into the complicated net of relationships and sub-structures of the modernisation process. One has to be familiar, however, with other studies by Baxmann to follow her very interesting thesis that the 'community-society' debate is closely linked to, and could also be argued through, the dichotomy of the natural and the technical body. This polarity illuminates the greater debate, as it is one of the results that eventually gains its own momentum and agency. As a subtext, the body juxtaposition is ever present throughout the study; but it has to be known in order to be appreciated.

Baxmann's arguments are strong and perceptive; they are the result of a deep knowledge of primary material, original literary texts as well as images, paintings, graphic art and film. Oddly enough, music, although the starting point, fades away. Some of the relationships are 'underplayed', some of the aesthetic visions only placed vaguely in their time and other dialectics within Wagner's aesthetic concept are underdeveloped. How, for instance, did Wagner actually realise his own elaborate idea of integrating all the arts into the monumental 'total work of art'? How 'communal' was the enterprise? What kind of community did it generate? Nietzsche became the most aggressive and disillusioned critic of Wagner and his mythical and megalomaniac undertaking. Wagner as much as Nietzsche projected a future by creating its aesthetic model; in fact Nietzsche's model of aesthetics never became art as directly as Wagner's did.

Baxmann claims that music and dance emerged as the means to move beyond the theory. But Wagner never even managed to articulate his ideas concerning dance, let alone turn them into practice. It would be more accurate to say that he was annoyed with the French practices in and of the Grand Opera; for that reason dance dropped out of his sights and was merely an appendix in his compositions. Dance was by no means the vehicle through which he developed myth into musical practice, it turned into an art form far too insignificant for him. If anyone tried to find a practical interpretation of Nietzschean philosophy in movement then it was Isadora Duncan and not Wagner. After all, she considered Nietzsche's writings her 'bible'.

Other conclusions seem odd and appear to contradict the entire analysis. If 'the cultural relevance' of dance in the 1920s and 1930s lay in its ability to shed the necessity of meaning by becoming 'pure play of form and rhythmical patterns' (p. 129), then how does that relate to earlier statements in previous chapters about abstraction becoming the meaning and representation of myth in modern art – in the nineteenth century? The limits of the theoretical approach

are evident here and in many other places: time frames are weak, arguments often circular and occasionally redundant.

A serious draw-back of the book is the lack of indices, not even a name register is included. Any attempt to cross reference or follow one particular thought or argument is made impossible. In such a complex study this is more than an irritating shortcoming for it actually excludes the reader from an intelligent debate.

On the whole, though, the book is one of the most fascinating and original studies on the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century notion of 'modernity' in European culture; it engages and provokes the reader.

Sabine Huschka's book, simply titled *Modern Dance*, looks at the concepts, styles and utopian ideas involved in twentieth-century modernity in dance. This study is exclusively focused on dance itself and takes the cultural implications that Baxmann examines for granted. Hence, it offers a detailed argument as to of what modernity looked like in the dance of the twentieth century. Huschka's study rests on observations, analyses of life and video performances, on reviews and essays by scholars as well as on notes and other material of choreographers and dancers.

Though she calls her material many-layered, in the end, it is two-dimensional: written by others and observed by herself. She discusses the contradiction involved in writing about dance. It can only approximate to a reality expressed through and experienced in the body. Dance can only exist in dancing. Written language is alien to dance; written discourse, in particular, can only produce barriers to understanding the essence of the dance. In order, nevertheless, to write about movement, Huschka seeks help in theory. She uses the cultural philosopher Roland Barthes and dance scholar Susan L. Foster as her guides and follows their theoretical approach. Her goal is to deconstruct the construction of the modern in dance: how did it choreograph aesthetic conceptions? How did it make expressive movement with fascinating images? All this she wants to achieve despite the conflict between the perception and materiality of dance that escapes the intellectual attempt to write it down in a process that alienates and destroys what it wishes to capture. It is a wonderful historical irony that exactly this image – catching and immediately destroying the unattainable – was portrayed in *La Sylphide*, also once a modern ballet but not mentioned in this book, not least because ballet is the outdated medium that post-modernist scholars prefer to replace by modern dance.

The self-perception of modern dance of the twentieth century is tempting. It has made many of its followers and thinkers narrow their own understanding of the phenomenon of the modern and it has forced them to omit what does not fit into that self-prescribed definition of modernity. It is a vicious circle and few have managed to escape it. Huschka, despite her very interesting portraits and analyses, falls right into that trap of modernity, though often enough she seems well aware of it. She gives us the history of modern dance as one that progresses from pioneer (someone venturing into the unknown realm of aesthetic constructions) to pioneer. The liberation claim is never really challenged; the

old preconceived notions of ballet as 'aristocratic' and 'courtly-academic', as 'outdated', as 'ethereal' are repeated. Tradition has to be overcome; by overcoming it the path is open to the acceptance of modernity itself, as well as modernity as opening to non-Western traditions of dance. The generalisations in the first two chapters on aesthetic tendencies in twentieth century dance and the historiography of dance are annoyingly simplified and contradict her otherwise very careful examination.

The contradictions in the evolution of modern dance appear, if at all, in the individual sketches of performers. These portraits are more interesting, though, as mentioned, Huschka's genealogy of dance and dancers emphasises an exclusivity that is problematic. She justifies her 'canon' – Fuller, Duncan, St Denis; Diaghilev, Nijinsky and Balanchine; Laban and Wigman; Humphrey, Graham and Cunningham; Judson Dance Theatre, Rainer, Childs, Brown, Paxton; Bausch, Forsythe and Keersmaker; Xavier, Bel and Stuart – by claiming that her choices rest on dancers who emblematically stand for concepts that show the dancer as dancing figure. The dancing figure performing the materiality of dance allows Huschka to look into the inherent processes so characteristic of dance. The dancing figure in turn is the metaphor of modernity; it is the phenomenon through which the phenomenology of movement is examined. If this sounds a little circular and self-referential – well, it is.

Frederick Ashton and Maurice Béjart obviously do not belong to the modern canon, neither does Roland Petit. They, as ballet in general, obviously cannot form part of the modern canon because it does not fulfil the canonical criteria of aesthetic independence and exceptionality, imposed by the modernists themselves over and over again. This is particularly odd because ballet is constantly accused of proving itself incapable of escaping its own canon. For Huschka, the narrow strand of modern ballet emerges from the Ballets Russes and quickly settles down with Balanchine. Modern ballet appears simply as a small island in the great sea of modern dance that in itself consists mainly of German dancers in the beginning, followed by the achievements of their American cousins.

The survey is certainly worth-while reading, the portraits contain apt and competent descriptions that make the dancers and their works accessible and come alive. But on the whole the book does not venture into unknown territory. It does not question but solidifies the understanding of modernity as liberation of the body, as the great beginning, that has become the signature tune of the majority of studies on modern dance.

The last book examined here is an extremely useful little volume – the revised *Reclam's Ballettführer*, a ballet guide. Now in its thirteenth edition, it has new editors – Katja Schneider and Klaus Kieser, theatre and dance historians, publishers and also editors of a dance magazine. The ballet guide has been given a new lay-out for its 180 works, many of them completely new – new on the stage and newly compiled in the book.

The book is divided into two sections: ballets from A to Z, choreographers from A to Z. In the first section, the ballet collection, it follows the old, well-worn

principle of the ballet guide – a description of the content of the piece followed by interesting and thoroughly researched information and short analyses of historical context, perception and stylistic evolutions. The second section on choreographers offers short biographies together with an overview of their most important works, some of them, of course, to be found in the first section. Extensive indices of works and persons make a search very easy. The solidly made book is handsomely designed and has thirty-two colour photographs.

The selection of the works is based on the requirement that the pieces had to be 'popular', meaning that it must be possible to see the ballets on stage now or in the near future. Such a criterion shifts the international repertoire presented in the book towards the twentieth century. Thus the volume is not a history book, but rather a guide to be used today. The ballets of the mid and late twentieth-century have pushed out many of the eighteenth or early nineteenth century that are known only by their name, or only to the more experienced scholar. Logically, the *Ballet Comique de la Reine* of 1581 is not listed as a ballet but simply mentioned in the introduction. Only seven choreographers are listed for the 18th century of whom Noverre is the oldest, followed in age by his adversary Angiolini; about half of the seventeen artists who nominally belong to the nineteenth century only do so by their birth date and not as far as the impact of their work is concerned, as for instance Martha Graham, Mary Wigman or Doris Humphrey. That leaves fifty one choreographers for the twentieth century – the youngest are Amanda Miller and Sasha Waltz.

In the introduction the editors explain the main features of theatrical dance. Above all they stress plurality and variety as the most important aspects of dance today. Dance – and ballet – is above all understood as a term that has to extend far beyond the Romantic notion of the narrative structure performed on point. In reality this book is not a ballet guide but a guide to today's 'theatrical performances'. Modern dance works, pieces from *Tanztheater*, and most other contemporary genres are well represented, from Pina Bausch's products to William Forsythe's, from Anne Teresa de Keersmaker's to Christopher Bruce's. 'Modernity' – as defined in the two books described above – has a lasting impact here too. There is a streamlined historical development from ballet to German *Ausdruckstanz* to American Modern Dance to *Tanztheater* which in its approach very much follows Sabine Huschka's arguments. Liberation from bodily constraints, emancipation from an outmoded and rigid ballet tradition, a move towards democratisation in ensemble structures are understood as vital aspects of modernity and post-modernity which in turn informs the choice of works and choreographers.

With the three books discussed we have a nuanced insight into the evolution of modern movement. What is modern dance? If the editors of the ballet guide are correct, then the short answer has to be: anything multicultural, historically sensitive and constantly changing.