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DANCE AND GENDER: FORMALISM AND SEMIOTICS RECONSIDERED

Stephanie Jordan and Helen Thomas

The following paper was specifically intended as a collaboration between two writers whose work on dance incorporates different disciplinary frameworks: dance practice/history/criticism (Jordan), and sociology of dance/culture (Thomas). Thus, our interest in and our observations on dance are coloured by the theoretical and methodological positions we inhabit in our respective disciplines.¹ We have sought to use these differences, as well as points of overlap, to our advantage. Through the process of writing and re-writing the other's writing, we have attempted to generate a more kaleidoscopic view of the topics and themes under discussion in this paper than we would have been able to do individually.

The two starting points for our paper might hardly seem compatible, Ann Daly's analysis of the third Theme from Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments* (1946) in her article 'The Balanchine Woman', and the work of the choreographer Siobhan Davies.² The latter is a leading British contemporary dance choreographer, one of the first generation of contemporary choreographers to emerge in Britain in the 1970s. But Daly's feminist analysis of *The Four Temperaments*, we found, suggested an interesting additional perspective for viewing Davies' work, and a consideration of that perspective reminded us of some fundamental issues inherent in reading art.

Daly reads the third Theme of *The Four Temperaments* as an example of a man manipulating a powerless and vulnerable woman. It is a duet based on doublework, lifts and supports. Daly's view is that the goal of this joint venture is the display of the line of the woman's body, but that there are also violent, sado-masochistic undertones. The duet is an instance of ballet representing an ideology that denies women their own agency. Of course, it goes without saying that many other writers have seen very different things in this duet, and some have not seen any of what Daly saw.

A few years ago, Jordan described Davies' duet form as

democratic, two people equally active, often presenting two distinct lines of dance in counterpoint, and with the woman motivating the man as much as vice versa.³ Davies' duet form seemed democratic in relation to most ballet and other established styles of contemporary dance. A closer examination revealed that most of the contact ideas introduced in Davies' duets use the man once again as the physically stronger and more powerful of the two. Even some moves which the woman could quite easily have achieved are given to the man. (We say easily because there is a view now that women are quite capable of lifting and supporting men, although they have to develop skills in order to do so.) The woman lightly pushes the man's arm or foot or just touches him as a signal for him to move on. The man uses his strength to lift her or pull her up from the ground, but also acts as her support, which may not necessarily require much strength at all.

Is Davies' duet behaviour a mere token gesture towards the women's movement, giving the woman some agency, 'democratic', but really only superficially so? Perhaps we need now to see what else her duets contain, information that emerged from the early viewings of Davies' work.

Our example is a series of related duets from *Rushes*, a piece that Davies made for Second Stride in 1982. These duets, performed by the grey couple in the piece, have been selected because they are in many ways typical of Davies' duet style of the mid and late 1980s. They can also be compared with *The Four Temperaments* duet, being likewise part of a non-narrative piece. Seen as a whole, *Rushes* progresses towards a violent rush of activity. The six dancers move slowly at the beginning, later dash from one spot to another, until at the end, in a state of tension, it is as if they *have* to leave the stage. A mob develops: solos and duets give way to quartets and sextets as the piece progresses. There is tension, even violence, but nothing as specific as character or story.

An important image that emerges in these duets is that of the body being pulled or pushed onwards, 'rushed', not stopping and being placed, but always going somewhere. Sometimes the dancers, each in turn, give the impetus or signal to move on to their partner and, as we have seen, the man more forcibly than the woman. But that is only one way in which this image arises: the dancers often carry it within their own bodies, as if they propel themselves or are propelled by an external imaginary force.

Another feature is the imaginary lines that seem to pull out from the dancers, as gestures, for instance, project beyond the body. Often there is counterpull, forces pulling in different directions to create spatial tension. This can occur within one body: in the second duet in the series, the woman arches and throws one arm way back, but her weight pulls her forward to become the force that wins. At other times there are pulls in opposing directions between the dancers who function independently: back to back (the moment occurs in both duets 2 and 3), the woman stretches one arm out to pull directly upwards, while the man pulls away horizontally. There are instances too when the spatial pull involves contact: in duet 1, the man pulls the woman back in an arch, while both take their hips forwards until they eventually fall and release the spatial tension into a run. This last example also emphasises an important line within the structure of this duet, the diagonal line which is the territory of the duet. Physical manipulation of a partner to move him or her on or to hold the person back is therefore part of the general force-field of the series of duets, and indeed of the piece as a whole, a powerful expression of tension, but nevertheless an ingredient in the general style of the work, one that complements and is complemented by other ingredients. It has implications well beyond those of the relationship between man and woman.

Lifts too take their place within the formal logic of the duets, expressing climax in more than one sense. There is the climax of level – there are no major jumps to compete as elevation. There is also a peak of dynamic excitement – lifts look especially energetic as lifts combined with turns, and the second lift in duets 2 and 3 raises the dynamic level one stage higher, each turning further than the last. These lifts can also be seen as climaxes of resolution, after counterpoint and spatial tensions between the couple. But they are temporary resolutions, as the dancers return immediately afterwards to expressing the tensions that are so characteristic of this piece.

So far, we have looked at the *Rushes* duets from a formalist perspective, which is what early viewings suggested. Many of the concerns behind such a perspective have a parallel in the analysis of music, but perhaps the most significant parallel lies in the linguistic analysis of literature which emerged from the Russian formalist school of literary criticism in the 1920s. The formalists

were concerned to analyse how words were used and combined in a particular manner to generate a desired aesthetic effect, in much the same way as we have illustrated here. One of the problems with this kind of analysis, however, is that it is somewhat one-sided, and we would want to maintain that the words themselves or, in this case, the movements themselves, cannot be studied without any reference to meaning or in isolation from the whole work. When we say then that, despite the absence of a specific story or plot in *Rushes*, the work conveys tension and even violence, the concern becomes to ask how the work manages to achieve this. To that extent, we see ourselves as moving from a strict formalist perspective towards what might be more appropriately termed a structuralist analysis of *Rushes*.

It is important to note that structuralism does not embody a single theoretical framework, but, rather, it can be best described as a method of inquiry.⁴ As a mode of analysis, structuralism seeks to explain surface events, in this case a dance, in terms of the structures that lie below the surface level and that underscore it. Moreover, from this viewpoint, the art work is treated as a structure that functions as an emerging coherent whole, constantly in the process of structuration through its own determinate internal rules. The art work is not simply an aggregate of individual parts, rather, the parts conform to the same set of internal rules that determine the whole. The parts, then, have no existence outside the structure in which they are brought into being and through which they are ordered. But the structure is not static, because it is able to use transformational rules that provide for the possibility of new material being brought into existence to effect change and movement. So the concern becomes to look at the art work in terms of its specificity, dynamics, form, content and so forth in order to draw out the complex sets of interrelationships at work in it, which, combined together, help to create the aesthetic effect and give rise to the emerging integrated whole. Thus, individual movements in a dance have no meaning in and of themselves. Rather, meaning is determined by the relationship of the movement to all other aspects that are involved in the dance work. Consequently, although we are separating out certain sections of *Rushes*, to illustrate particular points, the concern is always to integrate these back into the emerging whole.

Our analysis, in general, privileges what Jakobson terms the

'poetic function' of language.⁵ Jakobson sets out six linguistic functions of communication which can be applied fruitfully to other modes of communication apart from verbal language: the referential, the emotive, the cognitive, the phatic, the meta-linguistic, and the poetic function. The various functions run together and, in the same message, they can be seen to exist in various proportions. The dominant function is reliant upon the type of communicational expression. If, for example, the aim is to prevent confusion between the sign and the object or the message and the reality it refers to, then the referential or cognitive function will predominate. However, if the message ceases to be the instrument of communication and becomes the object of communication, as in works of art, then the poetic function will predominate. There are two major forms of semiotic expression, the referential (objective, cognitive) function on the one hand, and on the other, the emotive (subjective, expressive) function. These two functions are closely related and yet antithetical to each other. They combine what Jakobson calls 'the double function of language'.⁶ Each function involves different modes of perception, one with understanding, the other with feeling and, as a result, they embrace two different modes of meaning. The logical and the expressive signs have different and opposing characteristics and comprise two forms of signification that coincide with the polarity between the sciences and the arts. Where the referential function predominates, the concern will be with denotation or signing and conversely, where the poetic function is the determining function, then the focus will be on connotation or symbolising.

Daly's semiotic analysis of *The Four Temperaments* is largely denotative in character. That is, she looks at the work to demonstrate how it reflects existing gender relations in the 'real world' outside the dance. The analysis points to, in a somewhat literal manner, a symmetry between the dancers' movements and the ways in which women are subordinated by the 'male gaze' or look, in a society seen to be organised on the basis of patriarchal relations.⁷ This type of semiotic analysis is largely *extrinsic* in orientation as opposed to ours which seeks to focus on the *intrinsic*, structural and connotative features of a dance work where the poetic function is treated as primary.⁸ Of course, this does not mean that the referential function is absent, but rather that it is subservient to the aesthetic dimension where the focus is on the

symbol which is self-referring, as opposed to the sign which is concerned with denotation.

If we wished to read the first example we gave of the duet form in *Rushes* in a denotative manner, we might begin by considering the symmetrical and asymmetrical relations between the male and female dancers. As we suggested earlier, there is a symmetry between the man and woman in terms of physical activity, in the two distinct lines of counterpoint and in the reciprocity of movement motivation. However, when the contact element of the work is taken into account, these relations of symmetry are counterposed by other asymmetrical relations, with the male dancer taking on the traditional role of being physically stronger and more powerful than the female. In other words, 'democracy's body' in dance co-exists with its opposite, the traditional use of men and women's bodies within dance and without in the 'real world'. We could suggest that these relations of symmetry and asymmetry speak to and of the changes and continuities in contemporary gender relations in our culture. While there has been a movement towards women's liberation and equality of the sexes at least in certain aspects of social life, these have been underpinned by the continuation of the status quo insofar as the traditional power bases in society remain male dominated.

This kind of analysis privileges the referential function of communication as opposed to the poetic function. Sometimes, or at least, at some points during a piece, as we suggested before, one reading might conflict with or even cancel out another. Indeed, this is likely to happen in work, like that of Davies, where there is a good deal of analytical interest other than the gender relations. We consider that when other formal relationships come into play along with the man/woman relation, then analysis should be directed towards the interrelation of the parts to the whole work.

On reflection, perhaps it is significant that gender aspects of the piece seemed so quiet at early viewings (Jordan's). Conventional behaviour can so easily become invisible behaviour. Often, it is only when the rules of behaviour have been broken that we come to understand that indeed, they constitute conventions of behaviour which are rule bound and subject to sanctions. As we pointed out earlier, it is important to get underneath the surface of appearances to reveal the hidden structural interrelations. However, it is interesting to speculate that, if Davies had shifted from

the physical conventions between man and woman more than she did, the duet could well have developed into a statement about gender, and obscured her formal issues (and the poetic function) in the process. If she had taken this idea to the extreme, the dance could have been reduced to a piece of agitprop with the concomitant loss of what Marcuse calls art's 'otherness'.⁹ By using the conventions of male/female behaviour in dance, Davies might be seen not to have put gender on the agenda.

So far, we have deliberately avoided talking about Davies' intentions as a choreographer, primarily because we have been focusing on the dance as an entity in itself, rather like a text, which is viewed as not being reducible to its creator and/or its viewers. Nevertheless, there is a tripartite relation at work here (author/text/reader(s), choreographer/dance/viewer(s)) that we feel requires consideration. So, it might be pertinent to introduce Davies' claim that she sees her dancers first and foremost as people, with dance personalities, not as men and women. Lifts, she describes as fulfilling 'a visual and dynamic need as much as anything else', like 'the rise and fall of a melody . . . I don't want to restrict myself to not using that'.¹⁰

Davies then seems to have been touched by the consciousness of the women's movement – the relative democracy of her duet style demonstrates this – but only insofar as this does not reduce the richness of her formal content, which celebrates the poetic function of dance.

From what he said and accounts of his behaviour, Balanchine was certainly not touched by the women's movement, and it is crystal-clear that women and men in his ballets are used as contrasting elements. In *The Four Temperaments*, this continues to be the case. However, we use the word 'elements', because it is possible to see the opposition of men and women as one part of the formal content of the piece. Other writers have read the ballet as a whole in formalist terms: as an essay about scale, the expansion and contraction of vision,¹¹ or as a piece about the construction of a ballet body.¹² When we looked at the ballet as a whole (Daly does not do this – she generalises from an examination of one section of the ballet, the one that can be most easily read in terms of man manipulating woman), we saw fragmentation and small-scale activity leading to a mass assertion of power in geometrical configurations, modernist architectural solidity after early

waywardness, uncertainty and even occasional absurdity. Choleric, the last and the most powerful, self-sufficient of the four temperaments is a woman! She becomes the leader of the mass into the final, highly formal, highly architectural, machine-imaged, aeroplanes-taking-off-from-a-runway apotheosis.

Given this analysis, which privileges the abstract, we see that lifts and supports can be read primarily in terms of increasing the effect of power. Two bodies combine to extend and dramatise the line of verticality, the pull between sky and earth, to create counter-tensions in a horizontal plane, to enlarge a movement idea, to use the off-vertical (of the woman's body) as a metaphor for danger and the assertion to overcome that danger.

At the same time, however, if we probe underneath the surface of the final Theme a little more, we suggest that this abstract relation of woman to the mass and to modernist forms can also be read analytically as a counterpoint to the historically perceived role of women as producers and consumers of denigrated cultural forms.

During the 19th century, women became increasingly associated with 'mass' culture, while real 'high' culture remained the privilege of men. Women were excluded from authentic high culture before the 19th century but, during the industrial revolution and cultural modernisation, this exclusion took on new overtones. As Hall indicates, the hidden theme in mass culture was the masses with their newly held ideals of freedom, equality and social justice.¹³ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the idea of the threat of the masses 'rattling at the gate' led to cries of the loss of civilisation and culture and the underlying view that it was the rise of mass culture (the masses) which had caused this decline. But there was yet another hidden subject underneath this – woman. Women were also rattling at the gate, but their battle was with a male-dominated society.

As artistic realism gave way to aesthetic modernism, so the identification of woman with mass culture came to take on new dimensions. Time and time again in the political and artistic discourses of the turn of the century, woman is associated with mass culture, while 'high' modernist culture remains firmly in the privileged realm of the male. Ultimately, according to Huyssen, mass culture as woman comes to stand as modernism's other.¹⁴ So, it is interesting that Choleric in Balanchine's work becomes

the leader of the mass, a symbol of danger, which forms into strong, abstract, modernist-like configurations. In this instance, the mass, with woman at its head, actively advances into the shape of modernism rather than adopting its prescribed role as modernism's denigrated other. We suggest that woman, here, as a metaphor for danger, is active, not passive, and not merely being supported.

Even in Theme 3, one can see these features and effects: the colossal circlings of the legs one after the other taking the woman into the shape of a ship's prow, enlarged movement and shape enabled by the man's support. Or there are the high lifts with pointes pulling together underneath the woman, then shooting out arrow-sharp to the floor, a movement that contributes to the geometrical content of the apotheosis. Then, in the 'drag step', with the man reaching out and upwards, the effect of energy and work is increased by the woman clinging aggressively to his back. We do not read this as Daly does: 'the man literally carries the ballerina on his back.' Nor do we see her stretched legs and points pushing into the floor as 'lifeless, following after her like limp paws'.¹⁵

In the context of the whole ballet and the expressiveness derived from abstract features, we begin to read gender relations differently from Daly and we would rather agree with Edwin Denby's observation of 'girls dancing hard and boys soft' in *The Four Temperaments*.¹⁶ Even in Theme 3, the woman shows her own work: she is not simply the manipulated, passive woman. Elsewhere, women show rather than mask the power of pushing themselves upwards, as well as being supported into huge lifts. True, there are instances of women being manipulated blatantly like marionettes, turned and strummed like a cello in Theme 3, for instance, but these are just brief touches of humour, not used to build a character, or to be fixed like a label to a dancer, and, in the same ballet, it is just as easy to find examples of men being mocked, played with, again as brief touches of expression. Just as often too, women and men work *together* to produce image and effect.

Yet, still, like Davies, we do not feel that Balanchine is making any major point about gender, at least in *The Four Temperaments*. Gender is not really on his agenda either. He uses ballet's gender conventions as invisible conventions, fascinated by the particular content of ballet language, its emphasis on line, stretch and

verticality and the extension of these features in doublework, and wanting to use that content for every expressive purpose other than to comment on gender relations.

Balanchine's comments, often chauvinistic comments, about women are famous. Several of his dancers have spoken in support of them. The ballet culture as a whole supports them. In one sense, he said too much. In another, he said far too little, but then, he was not given to talking much at all, and certainly not to the sophisticated analysis of his work that would have placed his comments on women in a very different perspective. However, it is clear that many of his dancers have invested their roles with quite different and wide-ranging representations of women, like Merrill Ashley, Kyra Nichols, Suzanne Farrell and Darci Kistler, and possibly these dancers in the light of changing representations of women in life around them. 'In spite of the choreography,' Daly suggests,¹⁷ referring to Ashley's autonomy in the *Symphony in C* adagio. We would suggest that the choreography has the formal richness and potential that have encouraged these interpretations, that it was a text created in dialogue with its original cast, and that is now a text that has an independent life from that of its creators. We refer again to the tripartite structure here, choreographer/dance/viewer, and bring the performer into the picture as well. We believe too that Balanchine dancers today might also do well to research their own image, beyond the immediacy of their own roles and in relation to the whole poetic context of a ballet.

We are not denying that Balanchine can be read as Daly reads him – only that there are many other possibilities, many yet to be discovered as new interpretations emerge, if we admit the poetic function of art. The picture becomes far more complex and, we think, more intriguing. We suggest that the same ideas can be readily applied to other ballet choreographers.

A richness emerges when we consider the interplay of both the poetic and semiotic perspectives. So often, work is examined from one or other of these two perspectives, and analysis is only the poorer for this. We are open to the possibility of multiple readings on the basis of intertextuality (author(s)/text(s)/reader(s)) which poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches celebrate. However, we do not wish to suggest that *any* account will do, as is often the case in postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches which

place stress on the relativisation of accounts and a seemingly endless play of signifiers.¹⁸ Ultimately, both perspectives are structuralist in orientation, because they maintain that the world is made up of relationships between objects rather than the things themselves. Semiotic analysis, for example, is founded on the notion that there is an arbitrary relation between the sign and its referent, between the elements that comprise the sign, the signifier and signified, and an arbitrary relation between the signs which, by virtue of their difference from each other, make up the system of signs in question.¹⁹ Both perspectives together can now enhance our understanding of all kinds of dance, work that we feel questions traditional male/female roles as well as work that does not seem to do this.

NOTES

¹ A. Daly, 'The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers', *The Drama Review*, 31/1 (1987), pp. 8–21. Daly's work draws on developments in feminist film theory, which incorporates semiotics and psychoanalysis. One of the reasons why the authors have chosen to focus on Daly's writing is that it has often been used rather uncritically by dance writers who adopt a feminist stance, e.g. Christy Adair, *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), C. Novak, 'Ballet, Gender and Cultural Power', in H. Thomas, ed., *Dance, Gender and Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

² There is a chapter on Davies' work in Jordan's *Striding Out: Aspects of Contemporary and New Dance in Britain* (London: Dance Books, 1992).

³ S. Jordan, *Rushes (Davies): Analysis of Three Duets* (video) (University of Surrey: National Resource Centre for Dance, 1987).

⁴ For examples of two different structural analyses of dance, see: H. Thomas, *Movement, Modernism and Contemporary Culture: Critical Issues for a Sociology of Dance*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1986; S. Jordan, *Music as Structural Basis in the Choreography of Doris Humphrey*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1986.

⁵ See R. Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics', in R. & F. De George (eds), *The Structuralists: From Marx to Levi-Strauss* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 85–122.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The idea of the male gaze, which has had a great deal of influence in feminist film theory, came out of L. Mulvey's paper 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen Magazine*, 16/3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6–18.

⁸ For a discussion of intrinsic/extrinsic approaches to dance and art, see H. Thomas, 'Dance, Body Symbolism, and the Context of Culture: Methodological Issues for a Sociology of Dance', in *Dance: The Study of Dance and the Place of Dance in Society*, Proceedings of the VIII Commonwealth and International Conference on Sport, Physical Education, Dance, Recreation and Health (London: E. & F. N. Spon, 1986), pp. 84–92.

⁹ See H. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

¹⁰ Interview with Siobhan Davies, *Dance Theatre Journal*, 7/2 (Autumn 1989), p. 8.

¹¹ A. Croce, *Afterimages* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 185–90.

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¹² R. Copeland, 'In Defence of Formalism', *Dance Theatre Journal*, 7/4 (Feb. 1990), p. 38.

¹³ S. Hall, cited in A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 47.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 45–7.

¹⁵ Daly, p. 14.

¹⁶ E. Denby, *Dance Writings* (London: Dance Books, 1986), p. 417.

¹⁷ Daly, p. 17.

¹⁸ We do not have space to develop this critique of postmodernism and post-structuralism. For a concise and clear critical appraisal of these positions see B. Smart, *Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁹ See F. De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1974).