**Dance and Writing**

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**Summary**

The relationship of dance to writing in modernism is multi-faceted and multi-generic. The centrality of dance to aesthetic modernism led to dance becoming a major preoccupation of modernist literature and a model for the generation of the literary text. Concurrently, given the emergence of dance modernism as a performance field, other forms of writing – critical, philosophical, anthropological, and psychoanalytic – emerged to explore the phenomenon of dance as an important part of the contemporary world of art and culture. A significant amount of writing and theorization was also accomplished by dance artists themselves.

Because dance is a human and cultural activity as well as a theatrical and ritual practice, it is both deeply embedded within and yet also oddly tangential to any hierarchy of the arts. The early twentieth century generated a rich mine of textual reflections on dance from across the disciplines. Dance has been taken up not only by philosophical aesthetics, but also by anthropology and in metaphorical applications to many forms of cultural analysis. As we recognize this fundamentally interdisciplinary characteristic of dance as reflected in the textual and visual documents of modernism, we also realize that dance is present in texts that do not appear to address it directly, such as Marcel Mauss’s “The Notion of Body Techniques (1935).”[[1]](#endnote-1) To write *of* dance is not always to write *about* dance. Dance writing is consequently not a genre.[[2]](#endnote-2) Similarly, danced movement played an important role in modernist visual practices of abstraction.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Nevertheless, what we might call dance writing or writing on dance partakes of a variety of genres: dance criticism, history, theory, anthropological studies, philosophic and literary reflections and inquiries, manifestos, scenarios or libretti, autobiographies, biographies, and memoirs of dancers and choreographers as well as choreographic notes and treatises. As Gabriele Bandstetter shows, modernism abounds in ekphrastic literary texts that mediate between performance, visual iconography of dancing going back to antiquity, and philosophical notions about dance.[[4]](#endnote-4) And, as Susan Jones points out, a literary text can even be a direct medium for choreographic invention.[[5]](#endnote-5) On the other hand, dance was conceived in modernist literature not only as a potential theme but also as a model for the poetic procedures of modernist writing, a trope for the generation of poetry.[[6]](#endnote-6) Danced movement was thus deployed not only as a topic, but also as a structuring principle of literary texts just as literary texts could provide structural principles for choreography.[[7]](#endnote-7) One can perceive dance *in* the text and a dance *of* the text so that – and we must attribute this idea initially to Stéphane Mallarmé -- dance itself became a potential act of writing in itself, just as writing became an act of dancing.[[8]](#endnote-8) The visual evocation of movement enabled visual artists to suggest the presence of corporeality in abstract art in the absence of figuration.[[9]](#endnote-9) In anthropology, dance and trance were privileged terms of ritual analysis. In psychology, the notion of the psychosomatic and the symptom (particularly with respect to hysteria) gained traction as examples of expressive movement that were also present in, if not directly associated with, dance.

Dance modernism also gave rise to an increasing need for research and archives, the most ambitious example of which was les Archives Internationales de la danse established in 1932 by Rolf de Maré to support the study of dance of all cultures and nations.[[10]](#endnote-10) Lincoln Kirstein established a Dance Archive in the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1940-1949).[[11]](#endnote-11) Both of these initiatives stimulated publications and exhibitions. Dance criticism came into being. In Germany, Hans Brandenburg wrote extensively on the modern dance scene while director Georg Fuchs envisaged dance as crucial to the re-theatricalization of the stage.[[12]](#endnote-12) In the United States, John Martin became the first dance critic of the *New York Times,* in 1927; Martin published a number of books of dance theory introducing the concept of metakinesis.[[13]](#endnote-13) Lincoln Kirstein published pamphlets, criticism, and histories of ballet, and founded the journal *Dance Index*; Edna Ocko covered dance from a left-wing perspective. In France, André Levinson, Fernand Divoire, and Léandre Vaillant chronicled and wrote theoretically on dance[[14]](#endnote-14); Serge Lifar – a dancer and choreographer – also published historical studies, dance criticism and books on neo-classical technique.[[15]](#endnote-15) Venues specialized in dance writing were launched in the US and Germany such as *Dance Observer* in the US and *Schrifttanz* in Germany while in France dance was often discussed in the pages of *La Revue Musicale* *Commaedia*, and *La Revue Blanche*. Other dancers – although certainly not all – wrote influentially on choreographic poetics, among them Isadora Duncan, Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman, Valentine de Saint-Point, Martha Graham, Katherine Dunham, and Merce Cunningham. Laban was a highly published theorist of movement analysis thereby drawing dance and writing into a renewal of the idea of dance notation. The larger point here is not merely the plethora of literary activity on the part of dancer-choreographers but the necessity for theory in dance modernism as it relates not only to interpretation and critical evaluation but also to the creative process itself and to theories of reception.

Despite the fact that there was an animus against language in dance modernism and a generally shared conviction about the non-verbal nature of dance, the role played by the written word in dance modernism was both formidable and significant. It set the groundwork for the development of the field of dance studies in the latter part of the twentieth century. The traditional silence of dance was in part responsible for its alignment with the written in opposition to voice. But, modernist dance also prefigured the de-disciplining of writing as trace and the defection of writing from Literature.[[16]](#endnote-16) The relation of dance to writing is, and continues to be, complex and multi-faceted as well as generative for dance, literature, and visual culture. Motion capture, for example, is an extension of dance notation into a visual-scriptural realm, which iterates a situation of modernity within which dance gestures to the visual, textual and theoretical dimensions of movement.[[17]](#endnote-17)

References and Further Reading

Brandstetter, Gabriele, *Poetics of Dance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

A study of the body-image and figurations of space in avant-garde dance of the early part of the twentieth century using the theory of pathos formula of Aby Warburg to explain the interdisciplinary web of associations between visual art, dance and literature.

Franko, Mark. “Writing for the Body: Notation, Reconstruction and Reinvention in Dance”, in Common Knowledge 17/2 (2011): 321-334.

A review of the history of dance notation with respect to the historical relationship between dance and writing.

Jones, Susan, *Literature, Dance, and Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

An investigation of dance's influence on a critique of language and form in works by Mallarmé, Nietzsche, Yeats, Woolf, Lawrence, Pound, Eliot, and Beckett, this book shows the importance to these writers of choreographic innovations by dancers of the *fin de siècle*, of the Ballets Russes, and of European and American experimentalists in non-balletic forms of modern dance.

Louppe, Laurence, editor. *Traces of Dance: Drawings and Notations of Choreographers*, translated by Brian Holmes. Paris: Editions DisVoir, 1994.

A collection of essays that explores the relation of dance practitioners to writing and forms of notation.

Noland, Carrie and Sally Ann Ness, editors, *Migrations of Gesture*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

A collection of essays that explore the interconnectivity between dancing, writing, and inscription at a theoretical level and in an interdisciplinary context.

Notes

1. Marcel Mauss, “The Notion of Body Techniques” in *Sociology and Psychology. Essays by Marcel Mauss* translated by Ben Brewster (London, Boston & Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 97-123. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. From this perspective, the first modernist dance text is most likely Heinrich Von Kleist, “On the Marionette Theater” translated by Christian-Albrecht Gollub in *German Romantic Criticism* edited by Leslie Willson (New York: Continuum, 1982), 238-244. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. # See Mark Franko, “Danced Abstraction,” in *October* 143 (Winter 2013): 34-37.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gabriele Brandstetter, *Poetics of Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) [*Tanz-Lektüren. Körperbilder und Raumfiguren der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999).] [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See her ““At the still point”: T. S. Eliot, Dance, and Modernism,” in *Dance Research Journal* 41/2 (Winter 2009), 31-51; and, Susan Jones, *Literature, Dance, and Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For a discussion of how other arts cause literature to reconsider itself, see Françoise Meltzer, *Salome and the Dance of Writing. Portraits of Mimesis in Literature* (Chicago & London: the University of Chicago Press, 1987). For a discussion of the relationship of the literary and visual to the danced in modernism, see Gabriele Brandstetter, *Tanz-Lektüren. Körperbilder und Raumfiguren der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999). See also: Terri A. Mester, *Movement and Modernism. Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, Williams, and Early Twentieth-Century Dance* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1997); Véronique Fabbri, *Danse et philosophie. Une pensée en construction* (Paris: l’Harmatton, 2007); Frédéric Pouillaude, *Le désoeuvrement chorégraphique. Etude sur la notion d’oeuvre en danse* (Paris: Vrin, 2009); Felicia McCarren, *Dance Pathologies. Performance, Poetics, Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography. Ideology as Peformance in Dance and Everyday* Movement (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006); Sarah Davies Cordova, *Paris Dances. Textual Choreographies in the Nineteenth Century French* Novel (San Francisco, London, Bethesda: International Scholars Publications, 1999); Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star. Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de* Siècle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness, editors, *Migrations of Gesture* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); and the special number of *Littérature* 112 (December 1998) on “La Littérature et la Danse”. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Major modernist authors concerning themselves with dance included William Butler Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, Antonin Artaud, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Hugo von Hoffmansthal, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jean Cocteau, and Ernst Bloch. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Stéphane Mallarmé, “Ballets” in “Crayonné au Théâtre,” *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: editions de la Pléiade, 1974), 304; *What is Dance?* edited by Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 112. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Gabrielle Brandstetter’s discussion of the role of dance in the fiction of Lafcadio Hearn around the turn of the century and the relation of literary to visual expression. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See Inge Baxmann and Patrizia Veroli, *Les Archives Internationales de la danse, 1931-*1952 (Paris: Centre national de la danse, 2006), and Sanja Andus L’Hotellier*, Les Archives Internationales de la Danse. Un projet inachevé 1931-1952* (Paris: Pas à pas, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In 2009 Michelle Elligott curated an exhibition on this department of the Museum of Modern Art – *Another Modern Art: Dance and Theater*.

    (<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2009/anothermodernart/>) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For a study of precursors to German dance writing in the nineteenth century, see Lucia Ruprecht, *Dances of the Self in Heinrich von Kleist, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Heinrich Heine* (London: Ashgate, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Lynne Conner, *Spreading the Gospel of the Modern Dance. Newspaper Dance Criticism in the United States, 1850-1934* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For a discussion of early twentieth-century dance criticism, see Franz Anton Cramer, *In Aller Freiheit*. *Tanzkultur in Frankreich zwischen 1930 und 1950* (Berlin: Parodos Verlag, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Lifar’s books, however, were authored by Modeste Hoffman. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Jacques Derrida seized upon this idea in the 1960s when he discussed the movement of the signifier (the trace) in the context of what he called grammatology. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), esp. 6-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See Mark Franko, “Writing for the Body: Notation, Reconstruction and Reinvention in Dance”, in *Common Knowledge* 17/2 (2011), 321-334. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)