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DANCING STILL

Interpreting visual archives in dance

There have been many attempts to define dance but none of these has been able to produce the necessary and sufficient conditions which cover all practices in all contexts. Nevertheless, it can (fairly) safely be said that one essential common characteristic is that it is movement of the body. As such, it always exists at its own 'vanishing point' (Siegel 1972). Despite the dance world's bemoaning of this fact and the problems it causes for retrieveability, dance is not actually so different from any other cultural activity which exists in the moment of action or 'performance'. Our histories comprise not the events themselves, logically impossible, but evidence of the event as interpreted in other forms: written, visual, aural, spoken. This evidence is what Manning (1993) and others call the 'traces' of events. Each of these 'traces' she argues, 'marks, indeed distorts, the event of performance, and so the scholar pursues what remains elusive as if moving through an endless series of distorting reflections' (p.12). However, I would argue that the notion that the evidence or source material which comprises these traces, somehow 'distorts' the 'original' event can be contested when dealing with historical research of any kind. As Postlewait (1992, p.356) argues, 'the historian redescribes and reinterprets what the traces of the past delineated, illustrated, exhibited, described and interpreted.' Therefore, 'even "primary" evidence expresses ... a historical set of values, assumptions, beliefs and viewpoints' (p.366). As such, any historical project which tries to somehow see 'through' the sources, tries to trace back through them to a 'true' event, is misconceived.

It is on this premise, that is, I am not trying to 'get behind' the traces of dances of the past to a pure, uncontested, 'original' form, that I ascribe meaning to the visual ephemera from two early twentieth century dance forms for what they tell us, in very general terms, about their context and choreography. The aim, therefore, is to interpret static visual archives for how they might contribute to an historical memory of a moving cultural activity bearing in mind that, though primary sources or 'traces', they too are 'constructed' by those who created them. That is, my aim is not to see how things

'really were' or to rectify distortion, but to speculate on how the people who produced these traces wanted them to be. Similarly, these ephemera are not seen just as instrumental, as a 'way in' to a lost field, but, having languages and traditions in their own right, they contribute to the re-production of a far broader cultural memory.

In 2007, the AHRC funded a project on *Pioneer Women: early British modern dancers*, which aimed to preserve, catalogue and produce research outcomes from archives held at the National Resource Centre for Dance at the University of Surrey. The two largest collections are on Natural Movement and Revived (later Classical) Greek Dance and it is these that are my focus today.

Natural Movement and Revived Greek Dance were primarily theatre forms presented in a wide variety of venues from 1910s to the 1930s. NM was developed by Madge Atkinson, initially in Manchester, later in London. It was based on everyday activities such as walking, running, skipping and jumping, but these evolved into a sophisticated, expressive and technically demanding vocabulary. Revived Greek Dance, devised by Ruby Ginner, was a contemporaneous form which 'did not attempt to recreate the ancient dance' but 'inspired by the literature and visual arts of Greece' th aim was 'to evolve a form of movement suitable to modern theatre' (Ginner 1960: 19). Both of these dance genres embrace the cultural ethos of the first quarter of the twentieth century which saw, in many fields, a return to nature; a new-found interest in the corporeal and its contribution to health and education, and a desire to return to more harmonious, balanced ways of living inspired by an idealised perception of 5th BCE Hellenic Greece. The most renowned practitioner in what was generically known, amongst other terms, as 'classical dancing' was Isadora Duncan with whom the British artists shared much in common, but who remedied Duncan's lack of systematic training by devising rigorous, developmental syllabi. This ensured their longevity and, although the theatre work lost popularity from the 1930s onwards, these forms survived and still do in the private sector of dance education. There is, therefore, still a living history of these forms, in syllabi and reconstructions, and in the memories of those who worked with the prime movers and whose reminiscences comprise the oral

history component of the Pioneer Women project. The visual archives from which examples are presented here do not comprise the only traces, therefore, but they are central in reviving a lost memory of a key period in British dance and cultural history.

I can only offer a few examples from a mass of material; the NM collection alone includes approx. 2000 photographs and costumes for 35 dances. I will not, therefore, be 'over-reading' single images for these exemplify many others.

Let's start with some photos from the NM archive. First, what Alter (1994) called the 'signature pose' of the period. **SLIDE 1** Although a development of a basic skip step, the impressively arched back, the suppleness of the dancer, her balance and technical mastery immediately calls into question any notion of 'the natural' both in movement vocabulary and in dancing skill. This claim is central to all the archive material and to the very forms themselves; they significantly contest the concept of the natural in the sense of the 'everyday' and firmly establish that these were technically trained dancers working not in the realm of self expression but in a developed theatrical genre. The photographer's skill in capturing this moment of movement is similarly impressive but a closer look reveals that the fingers and toes have been touched in, giving definition to what might have been a blurred image as the body extremities moved through space. This exemplifies another important aspect of the visual material; the great majority of the photographs taken in the photographer's or Atkinson's own studio were posed, and the image itself was composed. The art of dance serves the art of photography.

The art of the photographer is dominant in these images from *Spirit of the Bush Fire* (1927) **SLIDE 2 & 3**. Note the compositional structure and the careful use of lighting. These images, like others from the 1920s, emerge, I suggest, out of Pictorialism, an early 20th attempt to enhance the status of photography and move it in to the domain of 'art'. The obituary of Longworth Cooper, who took many of these images, describes him as 'being widely known for his artistic photography' (*Sale and Stretford Guardian*, date unknown, died 4.5.1945). Pictorialism 'stressed formal concerns and atmospheric effects rather than subject matter' (Ewing 1987: 19). Formal concerns are here

enhanced by lighting as it is used to accentuate limb and muscle definition, thus producing, through clarity of form, an aesthetically pleasing design in space. Lighting is also used for atmosphere for the photographs also capture a strong sense of the theatrical.

There are two further significant features of these photographs. First, the play between the horizontal and the vertical, between gravity and upper space. Here, NM contests the dominant theatre dance form of ballet by exploiting the human inclination to fall as well as to rise. Second, the fabric is an integral part of the pictorial composition as it was of the dance. This is evident in *Soaring* (1933) **SLIDE 4 and 5** where we see the theatricality of costume as it extends the dancer's body into non-human shapes. Here, one might cross-reference to the work of Loie Fuller who explored similar modes of presentation, and the Art Nouveau movement wherein the female body was transformed into natural phenomena. These photos are, again, studio posed and signify how NM privileged, in the visual image, clarity of design, shape and the pictorial organisation of the body in space. They also evidence how Atkinson wanted her dance form to be seen; many of these were used for press and publicity. Therefore, although much can be discerned about the choreographic and production values of the dances, they demonstrate how the protagonists wanted to construct their own image. This does not render them less 'authentic', for they offer equally important evidence about public image and perception.

Group photographs from Atkinson's studio reveal the expressivity of spatial design. In *Sigh of Autumn* (1928) and *Toil* (1934) (**SLIDES 6 & 7**) we see an aesthetic concern shared with early British ballet and, significantly, with the Central European Dance of the 1930s. In its unison, levels, blocks of bodies and their inter-relationships, the group is eloquent not only of the subject matter of the dances, of female dominance of participation, but also in the expressivity of its abstraction. What it is not eloquent of is the full visual experience of the audience.

All of the photographs in both collections are black and white; but what did the stage picture look like? Boxes of costumes bring colour to the monochrome of the photographs. **SLIDES 8 & 9** Here are the men's costumes for *Toil*; earth brown trousers and burnt orange tops. A simple scheme, a simple design but we can imagine their efficacy as a total stage picture. A closer look reveals their amateur construction (**SLIDE 10**); the dancers generally made their own. Significantly, the costumes facilitate movement. Unlike the Ballets Russes who for all their innovations still corseted and constrained the dancer, the classical dancing of the same period freed the female body for the full range of movement. The costumes flesh out in every sense, the static, monochrome images of the photographs. They also bring them 'down to earth', conjuring up real moving people, in malleable, moving fabric. Such a juxtaposition further reveals the artifice of the photography.

In terms of the static visual image, those that conjure up movement itself are, understandably, not the studio-based pictures but the informal ones taken in the open air. Here, space was more plentiful and the shots were not taken for press or publicity; they were possibly not even taken by professionals. They demonstrate the ways in which the amateurs, now with access to small, transportable cameras such as the 'Brownie', challenged the over-composed, quasi-fictional nature of Pictorialism. As with vernacular photography generally, the pictures tell us more about the dance in movement; the dance as was, rather than as artistically imagined.

SLIDE 11 Here is an image of the pyrrhic dance from Revived Greek Dance. It reveals the origins of the form in research on Greek artefacts, and depicts the flat two-dimensionality of *bas reliefs* and friezes. Used as a press photograph, it signifies the source and inspiration of the form with compositional clarity and theatricality. Contrast this with another photograph from the same collection, . (**SLIDE:12**) This image reveals the aerial nature of the form; the dynamic effort required to access the space; the dexterity needed to handle the spear (we know that props such as these were an essential part of sound and spatial design.)

SLIDE 13 Lastly, we see a group of NM dancers mid-jump: arms raised, head back, fabric flying behind them. I am wary of over-conflating the two genres of NM and RGD but their commonalities are clear: here, the dancers perform in the most natural environment of the open air; wear tunics which liberate the female body and facilitate ease of movement; perform the highly sophisticated development of a natural skip into a jump. Fabric is used as part of the overall picture; the expressivity of abstract design is revealed. We do not know if this image comes from repertoire or was class practice, but the principles it embodies inform our understanding of the dance in its time.

I finish with one last image that reflects a different kind of memory. Burke (1997) discusses the concept of social memory, the constructs (or traditions, practices) through which personal memory is facilitated and filtered. In theatre dance, as all art forms, social memory tends to comprise the sympathetic constructs of 'high' art: art is remembered through discourses of art. We attend less to popular, or vernacular, conceptions.

SLIDE 14

Here, however, is a series of cartoons, circa 1910, the end of the Edwardian period, most probably from the *Daily Mirror*. The caption attributes the craze for classical dancing to 'the graceful gambols of certain four footed creatures which they are now trying to imitate in their own way'. It is an affectionate dig at the form. It captures the inspiration from the natural world, though not in the way intended, and the two-dimensionality and angular design of the body shape. The little figure with the cloak is in the basic floor-bound skip position with diagonal arms and turned head. She also suggests a range of body types which we do not see in any of the photographs. What these sketches do reveal, however, is the sense of movement and of expression. The caption itself, that the 'recent mania' to wear 'nothing round the knees and call it dancing (though' belied by dress length in the actual drawings) indicates the popularity of the classical dance and how it contested traditional perceptions of women's bodies and what could, and could not, be revealed.

These static images of dance respond to questions about its place in an historical and contemporaneous context. They indicate subject matter; possible narrative; use of space; groupings and relationships; theatrical presentation. They do not tell us about movement itself, qualities of movement, moments between movement, choreographic structure and rel. to sound. In this sense, they are part of a much bigger picture. They are also, as suggested, artefacts in their own right, not just conduits of information. They tell us about photography and (although I have only skimmed this aspect) would be of interest to textile and theatre costume historians. They also offer the opportunity to explore, if fleetingly, one of the greatly under-researched facets of dance history: what was it like for the dancer? As Ann Cooper Albright positioned herself as scholar/dancer by exploring the work of Loie Fuller by dancing herself, in near-replica costume and lighting (2010), so I sit in the archive, in much more amateur mode, waving my arms in the air. What would it feel like, bodily, to achieve this position? What must be done, bodily, in order to do so? How wonderful if we could take the large fabric scarves and squares from the archive boxes, out of their special tissue, and move freely with them, feeling their weight and mass, placing them in dialogue with the dancer; using the static artefact to evoke a vibrant, moving memory. That is, establish a tension between our reverence for the preservation of the traces of the past and our need, as dance historians, to experience that past in bodily imaginations.

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