The Anxiety of Dance Performance

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The concern of this paper is to address the ways in which dance performance as an ideological, representational vehicle derives its power and transforms ideology into actions and beliefs. In addition, the aim is to address the ways in which the nature of subjectivity is challenged by psychoanalytic theory leading to a further understanding of the constitution of female subjectivity and the impossibility of imposing a sexually differentiated schemata as a fully rounded acquisition. By taking a brief analysis of Swan Lake I will demonstrate the relevance of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, showing the ways in which it highlights questions regarding the difficulties of spectatorship for women – questions that are particularly apt when asked in relation to the content, structure and style of Swan Lake.

Any critical writing that expresses its intention to examine dance performance from the perspective of reading as a woman, without challenging the construction of the category ‘woman’, can only attempt a continuity between the women’s experience of herself and her experience as reader. This is because, however that concern is articulated, it will necessarily lead to the reduction of meaning to a version of experience – a reduction that will focus on the narrative content of a work, offering woman as theme, i.e. as the expression of attitudes to women, images of women or the psychological motivation of female characters, etc. The construction of the work and its sustaining concepts can then be placed in a secondary position to the concerns of female-represented experience which is privileged as the ‘proper’ matter of the female reader and which can be validated and reinstated against further readings of the text. As understanding or reading the performance text is attempted via learnt codes and conventions relating to reference and rhetoric, meaning can be located, in a non-problematic way, as whatever is present to the experience of reading. However it is essential for any study relating to female spectatorship/readership, that the structure of an experi-
ence that is defined as belonging to 'woman' is explored as a way of intervening in what is given as an unproblematic version of a fixed and residual textual meaning. Otherwise the achieved result from this position will be, at its best, an attempt to place a male-dominated, critical tradition, whose focus has been on male themes, characters and fantasies, etc., within a more equalising framework. To develop a category of female reading places as unproblematic the relation between woman's experience of herself and her experience as reader. In order to address this relation it is necessary to challenge the construction of subjectivity, particularly the constitution of the condition 'woman'. Without doing this the experience of reading as a woman can be offered as achievable – provided one possesses the 'right' knowledge – and as an experience that can be differentiated from the male condition. Thus reading as a sex-coded, gender-inflected strategy of interpretation, continues to privilege male experience as human and total and defines woman's as secondary and derived in relation to it. From within this position therefore women can only be shown to be working against their own experiences and interests.

Using psychoanalytic theory, particularly the writings of Jacques Lacan, a space can be designated in which the constitution and maintenance of a sexually differentiated identity can be described and understood in such a way that neither category can be defined or fixed in a fantasy relation. Psychoanalytic theory offers an explanation of the way in which women's experience is constructed foregrounding sexuality as the site of conflict and fantasy. In his reworking of Freud's concept of the unconscious, Lacan shows that woman's experience of herself is neither complete nor simply achieved, and that sexual difference as a structuring device is constantly in conflict with this experience. Lacan offers an explanation of subjectivity that is in conflict with itself and as such places sexuality in a problematic position. By linking the concepts of sexuality and the unconscious, Lacan not only challenges as meaningful differentiated images of sexual difference that privilege male and exclude female, but he shows that the actual construction of meaning is potentially threatened.

Subjectivity as a logocentric category of thought is sustained at the level of metaphysical law by phallocentrism. The fantasy of sexual difference is dependent on a binary opposition that by its nature prevents a free play of meaning, defining woman as the underprivileged secondary term that provides the conditional