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Postmodern Dance Strategies on Television

Dance, television and postmodernism

In contrast to Chapter 3, which examines how the televisual apparatus acts upon dance, Chapter 4 focuses on the implications of dance in the television context. The evolution of video dance can partly be attributed to developments in film and television, and the significance of the image and technology in late twentieth-century society. Yet the dance context out of which video dance and its practitioners have arisen has also had an impact. The emergence of video dance in the United Kingdom in the 1980s coincides with the beginnings of British postmodern stage dance (Banes, 1987; Mackrell, 1991). The dance artists who became involved in creating video dance works were, and continue to be, primarily located in this particular dance scene. Hence Chapter 4 sets out to examine the significance and implications of dance, and specifically postmodern dance practices, within the television context. Although the evolution, developments and ambiguities of a postmodern stage dance aesthetic are well documented within dance scholarship (Copeland, 1986; Banes, 1987; Briginshaw, 1988; Manning, 1988; Mackrell, 1991; Daly, 1992), the relationship between postmodern dance and postmodernism within other art forms is far from clear. This is highlighted by the plethora of texts that expose the multifarious, and often contradictory, conceptualizations of a postmodern aesthetic within different art practices and cultural formations (Appignanesi, 1986; Kaplan, 1988a; Collins, 1989; Connor, 1989; Hutcheon, 1989; Boyne and Rattansi, 1990; Jameson, 1991; Docherty, 1993).

The implications of postmodern stage dance practices within a television context are dependent on the extent to which television is conceptualized as a postmodern phenomenon. This in itself is a contentious
matter. Some of the positions of this argument are revealed in Wyver’s (1986) article ‘Television and Postmodernism’ which attempts to locate a postmodern aesthetic within television. Wyver argues that although television has neither a discernible modernist tradition against which there has been a reaction, nor a recognisable avant-garde, it is possible to identify a type of postmodernist television that is characterized by its challenge to the ‘primacy of sight’. This notion is based on the idea that ‘seeing is believing’ and that, culturally, sight is privileged as ‘the truth’. Drawing on the seminal work of McCabe,1 Wyver suggests that in classic realism there is a hierarchy of discourses in which narrative discourse is dominant. Within film, the narrative is relayed through the camera and, as a result, the camera takes on a position of ‘truth’. It could therefore be argued that mainstream narrative cinema supports and perpetuates the primacy of sight (Wyver, 1986). Wyver goes on to suggest that this practice has been echoed in television. Television was originally conceived to be a ‘window on the world’ that unproblematically relayed real objects and events through to the television screen. In fact, the making of television is very much a technical and political process in that the images are selected, taken out of context and reordered. Yet the belief remains that the television camera neutrally records the events of everyday life. This notion of an unmediated ‘truth’ has continued with the classic realist conventions of the television drama series. The use of strategies such as realist devices, narrative and character within television, which seek to construct an illusion of truth, has been well documented by Fiske (1989).

In order to differentiate this mode of television, which deals with established literary and dramatic conventions such as narrative and character, from the discussion of a possible postmodern television that follows, the former is conceptualized as a ‘classic television framework’. Although this is a somewhat crude division, in that the theoretical parameters of ‘classic’ and ‘postmodern’ television are far from discrete, these terms usefully indicate the existence of two distinct theoretical positions. The term ‘classic’ is employed because, first, it alludes to McCabe’s notion of the ‘classic realist text’;2 and second, it avoids the complex debate of whether a modernist form of television has existed against which there has been a postmodern reaction.3 Wyver (1986), along with several other scholars (Connor, 1989; Fiske, 1989; Jameson, 1991; Kellner, 1995; Harris, 1996), has identified examples of television that may be characterized as postmodern. He suggests that a type of postmodern television has emerged that challenges the primacy of sight in that it no longer purports to relay the real. Wyver notes that