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Reshaping Dance Through Time: A critical view of historical periodisation in relation to pedagogy and research

Alexandra Carter

ABSTRACT: Western history is organised into more-or-less distinct “periods” which give shape to our conception of the past. I offer an alternative way of conceptualising dance history which retains the long view but disturbs conventional periodisation. This is based on Corfield’s (2007) premise that time can be organised not only by distinguishing radical disjunctures, but also by “continuity” and “micro” change. If these concepts are applied to dance, many of the difficulties of time frame, hierarchy and value might be eroded. Furthermore, they expand the opportunities for pedagogy and research to address works or people who have been elided by traditional periodisation.

The situation is a classroom in a British university. Second year undergraduates are working on a dance history module. In a previous session we have distinguished some general characteristics of modern dance and now I am describing the general social upheavals which produced the conditions of post-modernity and the relationship of these to the genre of post-modern dance. I have to make it very clear that although “post” strictly means “after” it is not a question that one set of attitudes or aesthetic imperatives replaced the other, but many manifestations of modern and post-modern dance ran – and still run - parallel. Furthermore, despite no intentional value-judgements, the notion that the post-modern is somehow “better” than the modern – an improvement - creeps into student consciousness from the reading they have done.

On another day, a group of dance students tackle “classicism” as historical period and aesthetic practice. It is the period(s) which cause the problem; the early classicism of social dance, Petipa’s classicism, Duncan’s and the Greek revivalists, Balanchine’s – where to put the “neo”? Yet another classroom and the topic is Romanticism. Here, again, a cautionary note must be sounded for although there seems to be a clear delineation of a Romantic era in dance, manifest in the ballets of the 1830s and 1840s, this cannot be mapped neatly on to the Romantic period in other arts. For, as John Tosh says, “different things turn at different times” (2007). The difficulties which are characterised here arise from the labelling of Western social and dance history. These labels are common; they give shape

to our conception of time. They are the main structuring principles for the construction and transmission of knowledge, in texts and teaching syllabi, as frames for historical research. And yet, as indicated by classroom practice, they can be troublesome. Motivated by these complexities, the purpose of this paper is to further characterise the concept of periodisation; identify the ways in which dance history is shaped by acceptance of dominant periods, and to point to ways in which the shape of dance history might be reconceptualised.

There have, of course, been significant scholarly challenges to how we organise time. Seminal examples include those of Foucault, who was persuaded by “systems of simultaneity” (1997, xxiii) and argued for a synchronic approach as well as a diachronic one, and Lyotard (1984) who heralded the post-modern suspicion of meta-narratives, of which Western periodisation is one. Hayden White (1978) pointed more specifically to the uses and abuses of the narrative-type structures which underpin the shapes of time in historiography. In dance specifically, Franko (1996) offers an example of one way in which the canon, instrumental in forming and being formed by traditional periods in time, can be disrupted by exploring non-canonical work in parallel. Early challenges came not from historians but from anthropologists such as Joann Kealiinohomoku (1969-70) and Drid Williams (1991).ⁱ Despite these challenges, however, the idea of shaping time based on canons of work and communicated through narrative structures which shape periods is still fundamental to how we think about the past.

Theories of periodisation

As I have summarised elsewhere, “the writing of history is the writing of stories about the past ... which imply a traditional narrative structure of beginning, middle and end” (Carter 2004, 11). These stories “give shape to experiences as a way of understanding them” (Husbands 1996, 46) and we “choose the chronological parameters or boundaries of our narrative in order to construct a meaningful account of what has happened” (Southgate 1996, 114). As such, “almost every product of historical

scholarship includes a statement on periodisation, at least implicitly” (Reinhard in Bentley 1997, 281). These periods may take the sweeping general form of Ancient, Medieval and Modern, or be subdivided into stages such as Early Modern and late Modern (though one rarely meets a Middle Modern). They might be more ethnically specific in terms of reigning monarchs such as “Elizabethan” or “Victorian” or might privilege certain artistic traits such as the Baroque or the Classical. Furthermore, there are “numerous subdivisions that are conveniently accepted for ease of teaching and communication” (Corfield 2007, 202). Conceptualised and transmitted in many different modes, from classic written texts to artefacts to human memory, all world histories are shaped through time. These organising principles are not neutral, however, for they give rise to meaning as phenomena are interpreted within the critical frames of reference which belong to each period. Now, however, these are “tending to become hazy, as the established categories have been overstretched” (Corfield 2007, 202). Reinhard affirms, “we no longer believe in periods with clear cut temporal limits. . . However, communication among scholars cannot do without some recognizable subdivision of history” (1997, 282). Furthermore, although constructed by human beings and in that sense artificial, Reinhold argues that “this is not to say that they are the creations of complete arbitrariness” but they depend on “a critical mass of new knowledge” which conforms to “the dominant ideology, especially with a consistent idea of national history” (1997, 282).

It is, perhaps, a postmodern wariness not only of the fallibility of these grand narratives but also a wariness of causality and resultant suspicion of any chronological categories at all, that has given rise to a blurring of disciplinary boundaries, as history – which looks back through time - merges with cultural studies, which tends to look across time. This, however, has resulted in history being “salami sliced”, a strategy which misses the wider view of how patterns are created and how they relate (Corfield 2007). This trend is reflected in the more recently published dance history texts, as I will go on to illustrate. However, as John Tosh hinted, the “temporal turn” in the humanities which has paid

more attention to a deeper analysis of the small moments in time, the “thick descriptions”, is now possibly turning back to the “long view” (2007).

The shape of time in dance

How has dance organised its “long view” of Western theatre history? I undertook a qualitative analysis of the organisation of time in a selection of twenty-five dance history books published mainly in the twentieth/early twenty-first century. These largely comprised English language texts which recorded “popular” history, written in the main, not by academics but by dance lovers and critics. Nevertheless they were, and still are, influential in sustaining periodic constructs. I explored how information was organised into chapters which clustered around specific time periods or themes. Although a close reading might reveal some deep continuities this tends not to be the case, for each “period” is usually addressed quite discretely. This analysis, although rudimentary, revealed some discernible trends. Not surprisingly, until recently, most texts offer the long view, and the earlier the publication, the longer the view. Three early texts (Vuillier 1898, Umlin 1911, Kinney & Kinney 1914) all follow a similar pattern and tell an on-going narrative which embraces social, folk, national and theatre dance. They start with “primitive” (a term we are now somewhat more sensitive to) or ancient dance and move on to the “antique” forms of Egypt, Greece and Rome. Then there are sections on national dances followed by chapters on ballet and modern dancing. In these early texts, the term “modern” refers to both ballroom and social dance (Vuillier) and also to the temporal “modern” in relation to the time the books were published.ⁱⁱ It is not until the 1940s, particularly in the United States, when “modern” is firmly used to describe a genre. (In Britain, the term “contemporary” evolved as a way of avoiding the genre-based association with ballroom and modern theatrical dance.)ⁱⁱⁱ

The dance history books of the early twentieth century prefigure a trend which continues throughout the corpus of later writing. That is, they trace the history of dance as a social or ritual

activity and then move seamlessly into the history of ballet from the sixteenth century. The social history tends to stop as theatre dance takes over.^{iv} In these texts, the all-encompassing titles of the books hide the fact that dance genres become bifurcated. The branch of social/popular forms is rendered invisible as the history of theatre dance is privileged. The history of social dance is then recorded through a different corpus of texts with different organising principles. Thus, although time is shaped chronologically, the different functions of dance have different shapes.

In the main, the history of theatre dance is clustered into what have become solidified key periods and places. Precursors are traced to the Italian Renaissance and the English masques, then the French *ballets de cours*. Ballet history “proper” continues on from the mid seventeenth century. The next chunks of history are organised in to the Romantic era in London and Paris of the 1830-1840s, the classical period emerging from Imperial Russia in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the Ballets Russes in Western Europe during the first two decades of the twentieth. Depending on authorial perspective, the focus then turns to the development of ballet in the United States (Kirstein 1935, Martin 1946, Anderson 1992) or in Britain (Brinson and Crisp 1980), thus conforming to Reinhold’s idea of an ideological national history (1997, 282). The history of theatre dance forms tends to bifurcate at the beginning of the twentieth century into ballet and modern. Modern dance as an accepted genre settles in the United States, as does the postmodernism of the 1960s and 1970s. There is only brief mention of indigenous activity in Central Europe. After that, with no nomenclature to describe the varied phenomena of broader international developments, there tends to be a more fragmented approach by recording the activities of individual artists rather than “movements” or “periods” (for example, Au 1988, Anderson 1992).^v

This is, of course, a generalised description of how dance writers of popular texts shape time and privilege place. Recent research on the content of dance history syllabi in British universities

revealed the same shape to dance time (Carter 2007) thus confirming how reified the major periods and geographic epicentres of dance have become.

Re-shaping time

In order to, if not overturn this reification, at least to render our teaching syllabi and research paradigms a little more flexible, I offer some concepts taken from Penelope Corfield's book on *Time and the shape of history* (2007). Corfield argues that the radical disjunctures which mark the key stages through time have been over-emphasized. It is these disjunctures which shape the recording of dance history: the evolution of theatre dance marks a key turning point away from social dance; the (neo-) classicism of the late nineteenth century is set against ballet's Romantic period;^{vi} the works produced for the Ballets Russes embody a conscious rebellion against this neo-classicism; postmodern dance marks a radical turning point away from the modern.

To exemplify the problematic nature of dominant modes of categorisation, Corfield explores the concepts of modernity and postmodernity and their related 'isms, arguing that "none of these categories remain historically stable. The contradictory usages stem from the fact that the rival pulls of continuity and of the different sorts of change are not analysed together" (2007, 124) this is a useful argument for dance wherein the continuity of modernism is rarely addressed alongside the radical changes of postmodernism or, it must be said, the varying national contexts for the development of postmodernism in dance.^{vii}

A further consequence of shaping late-twentieth century dance history into these two overarching categories of modernism and post-modernism is the question of value judgements which binaries entail. There is "often a subtle disparagement within the "aftermath" terminology, or at least a downplaying of what has gone before. In particular, 'postmodern' attitudes to 'modernity' were often hostile ones of rejection" (Corfield 2007, 127). Manning describes how in many dance departments in

the U.S. “the values of postmodern dance” have “replaced the values of modern dance” (2008, 5). And yet, claims Martin (2008, 11), in similar “historical succession . . . postmodern dance comments and innovates on what had come before in a manner that would render it indistinguishable from the process of linear stylistic progression in modernism itself”. The claimed polarity between “modernity/postmodernity”, says Corfield, “greatly underestimates diversity within the former concept and equally overestimates novelty within the latter” (2007, 130). The same argument can be applied to other periods in dance history: the Romantic era put back the heart that had been lost in ballet, and, one of dance history’s most “radical disjunctions,” Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes “revolutionised” dance by deploying unity of production in order to put back the expressiveness that had been lost in the preceding neo-classical era. In dance literature, periods such as these are seen to emerge afresh, with “the shock of the new,” from stages of decline. We must be wary, however, for history “resists being simply explained by a binary change from state A to state B” (2007, 130).

Corfield’s solution to this emphasis on radical change as the shaping principle of time is that there is not just this one but “three central and interlocking dimensions of history . . . continuity (persistence, tradition), gradual change (evolution) and all forms of rapid, frictional and discontinuous change (turbulence; upheaval; revolution)” (2007, xx). The first of these, continuity, is an under-rated and under-theorised phenomenon. It also, Corfield argues, attracts value judgements, being seen not as a continuous moving on but as an historical state of stasis. In the arts particularly, continuity of practice is not “value added”, and we lose the sense of shared practices, lasting aesthetic concerns and common audience tastes over time.

Corfield further argues that the different types of change have not been distinguished. As well as radical or macro change, she argues for the notion of gradual or “micro change.” It is the micro changes which tend to produce trends and it enables cultural commentators to take a short-term view. The notion of micro change might also help our understanding not only of dance’s past but also of

recent developments. This conceptual category allows for speculation and might also soften or blur the hard edges of what have been seen as key turning points in dance history.

In summary, dance history as organised in formal modes of transmission such as history books and teaching syllabi, is characterised by rebellion against what went before, with the privileging of what came “after.” However, “while stage theories do well at highlighting fundamental transformations, they consistently underplay both deep continuities and the micro-changes that bridge turning points” (Corfield 2007, 184). In dance, the work of Merce Cunningham might exemplify the point. Using Corfield’s model, we need not fret as to whether Cunningham was a modernist, a postmodernist or (latterly) a neo-classicist, nor even posit that he was in-between or on the cusp of any of these. What might be more helpful and less constraining would be a reflection on Cunningham’s work which revealed the intersections between the continuities, the micro-changes and the radical departures both within his own practice and in relation to the practice of others.

As Southgate argues, the categorisation of stages, the “imposition of frameworks . . . enables us to live and to do history . . . what we are calling our history is something that is imposed upon a far more complex reality than we could ever otherwise deal with, and that by accepting one history (or version of history) we are inevitably excluding many others” (1996, 64).^{viii} New critical frameworks have enabled new histories to be written (Banes 1998, Burt 1998, Stoneley 2007). The trend for self-reflexivity has resulted in books which not only present the narratives but which also tackle the methodological nature of their construction (Adshead and Layson 1983; Carter 2004; Dils and Albright 2001). Although presented in “reader” type form with discrete chapters, the former two also adopt a roughly chronological stance. In Dils and Albright, however, the intersections between dance history and cultural studies is most fully demonstrated, as the free-standing chapters range across genre, time and place with large section headings which are organised geographically rather than chronologically. Thus, the problems of periodisation are avoided. It is in this trend for the fragmented, with

contributions from many different writers in edited collections, that the postmodern suspicion both of causality and of the authorial “one view” reaches fruition. It is noticeable that no-one writes general theatre dance history texts, spanning the breadth of time or even linking times, any more.

It is a challenge to those who research and write, to teachers who communicate that knowledge, to organise the past into ways that have coherence, that can be transmitted to students with some logic but that allows for the discernment of continuities, trends and radical changes. As Corfield argues, “we learn . . . from happenings that are rare and strange as well as from those that are habitual and routine” (2007, 194). Nevertheless, I would argue, if “the past forms and informs us, as we are in time and time is in our very bones” (2007, 194), the long view of time – perhaps more flexibly organised - is still essential if we are to make sense of our dances, ourselves and our present.

Notes

ⁱ I am grateful to the anonymous reader of this paper in an earlier form for these references.

ⁱⁱ What constitutes the “modern” time is variable; for example, for Perugini (1915 and 1935) the Modern Era starts in the early nineteenth century.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although the term contemporary had been used before, it was consolidated with the founding of London Contemporary Dance School and Theatre in London in the mid 1960s.

^{iv} This is apparent in, for example, Martin (1946), Sorell (1967), Kraus (1969), Cohen (1974), Sorell (1981) and Clarke and Crisp (1981). Interestingly, some texts such as Martin and Clarke and Crisp return to the popular, if not the social, in terms of dance for stage and screen.

^v Even though some book chapters are organised thematically, they still evolve into a chronological perspective. For example, in Martin (1946), “Dance for the sake of the dancer” offers an overview of folk and ballroom, “Dance as spectacle” is on the court ballet through to the American roots of ballet and “Dance as a means of communication” focuses on the early modern, modern and “Negro” dance. What seems to be thematic is still, therefore, chronological and periodical. A rare example of how dance history is genuinely treated thematically is in Fonteyn’s *The Magic of Dance* (1980). Chapters given titles such “Dance magical”, “Dance universal” and “Dance experimental” do embrace a wide ranging and chronologically overlapping content. It is highly likely that such a structure evolved from the origins of the book as a television series (BBC2, 1980), for a purely chronological account might not have had the same viewer appeal as a more visually diverse thematic one. The Martin and Fonteyn texts tend to be exceptions to the general overt chronological organisation of dance history.

^{vi} I use upper case for Romantic here as this is a commonly recognised era across the arts, whereas although there was a re-emergence of classicism in the late 19th c. lower case classicism tends to refer to the aesthetic principles of the works. However, this typographical strategy is arguable.

vii Most of the literature on this period emanated from American writers. Although happening within the same time frame, the British New Dance movement was equally “postmodern” and although recorded by writers such as Jordan (1992) and Mackrell (1992) it is noticeable how this aspect of postmodern dance has lacked the same visibility. In fact, an analysis of the history teaching syllabi in British universities revealed that it is decidedly invisible (Carter 2007). Activity which contested the norms of modernism in mainland Europe during this period are even more rarely recorded in the English language long view of Western theatre dance history, though this is now receiving far more critical and historiographic attention.

viii Recently, dance historians have explored these exclusions by focussing on the ‘gaps’ between periods, claiming the case for marginalised practitioners (for example, Clark and Johnson 2005) and widening the net for what constitutes the generic history of dance in the West (O’Shea 2007).

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Alexandra Carter is Professor of Dance Studies at Middlesex University. She edited *Rethinking Dance History* (2004), published on the music hall ballet (2005) and is now co-editing a 2nd edition of the *Routledge Dance Studies Reader*. She is also Co-investigator on the Pioneer Women project at the University of Surrey.