

The Structure of the Dance Criticism of Edwin Denby . [1](#)

by

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Perhaps it would be appropriate and meaningful to say in a few words concerning my first conscious encounter with dancing, this form of human movement in time and space, which has held me in wonderment and enthrallment ever since. This occurred while I was studying film directing at the Polish Academy of Film In Lodz. It was while watching the great film *Sanatorium Pod Klepsydra* by the Polish film director, Wojciech Has, that the parallelism and similarity of movement, and naturally also their contrasts, between film and dance, dawned on me. In this film, concerning Jewish culture in Poland between the two World Wars and is adapted from the short stories of Bruno Schulz, the Polish Kafka , the camera is continuously and unrelentlessly in the state of movement, making lateral movements, vertical movements and diagonal movements. It is their constant interweaving into each other, that is these movements, that the watching of this film is truly an exhilarating experience. It was this choreography of camera movements that made me intensely curious and interested in the nature and structure of dancing as realized in choreography. I was interested in, if one could say so, the comparison, taking into account their similarities and distinctions, between choreographic form (structure) in dance movement and the choreographic form in the movement of images, shapes and forms within filmic structure.

This search for identities in the movement of shapes and structures within these two artistic forms, led me to the conviction that great film directors possess unlimited *und unbegrenzt* talent for choreographic realization, and equally, great dance choreographers are potentially outstanding film directors. The films of the Russian director, Andrei Tarkovsky, and those of the Hungarian film director, Miklos Jansco, are unsurpassable orchestrations of choreographic forms. It was with gratification that I recently read an essay by Arlene Croce in support of this view: I mean the view of the relationship between choreographic form in dancing and in film. The opinion of Arlene Croce is significant, for this dance critic of the New Yorker magazine, is probably the most important dance critic in America today since the death of Edwin Denby in late 1983. In An essay, "Dance in Film", collected in her book of dance essays and reviews, **Afterimages** , Arlene Croce argues that not all film directors who have been interested in movement were great, but few have been great who are not. The films of, among many others, Eisenstein, Kurosawa, Ford, Satyajit Ray, not only move but have dancelike movement which are among the greatest scenes ever recorded

(p.445). Edwin Denby, in an essay of 1943, on the choreographic work of Tudor, states that the visual rhythm evident in dance movement is comparable to that present in the cinema. For me it is the visual rhythms in the films of Wojciech Has, that their viewing recalls the experience of watching dancing, whether modern classical ballet or modern dance.

The dance criticism of Edwin Denby written between 1943 and 1965 has been collected in two volumes: **Looking at the Dance** published in 1949 and **Dancers Buildings and People in the Streets** published in 1965. These two books not only constitute the classical moment of dance criticism in the twentieth century, but they have had a profound and lasting effect on the dance criticism that has been written since their appearance. The dance criticism of Arlene Croce assembled in the form of essays and reviews in two books, **Afterimages** (1978) and **Going to the Dance** (1982), are replete with references to the legacy of Edwin Denby and in their own way they are monuments of homage to this great dance critic. The exemplary nature and form of the dance criticism of Edwin Denby is constantly referred to and warmly recalled. These two books of Denby are undoubtedly the reference points of our dance culture, whether this reference point be located within the context of my own African culture or in the context of European culture.

The central point of the dance criticism of Edwin Denby is the universal perspective of its references and arguments for the relativity of dance cultures and dance forms, whether be that of African-Americans or that of Russians. This dance criticism is deeply informed of the humanism similar and comparable to that that has made **The Leaves of Grass** by Walt Whitman the possession of all national cultures. The influence of Edwin Denby can also be felt in contemporary scholarly work on dance cultures. In one of the best books written recently on the images of American dance, **The Shape of Change** (1979) by Marcia B. Siegel, is not only dedicated to Edwin Denby, but its approach in describing the historicity of dance form in American choreography, in its modern classical ballet (Balanchine) through modern dance (Graham and Cunningham) to the new modern dance or postmodern dance (Tharp), could not have been possible without **Looking at the Dance**. The excessive formalism of **The Shape of Change** would not have been too pleasing to Edwin Denby, especially the Denby of **Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets**, for in this book he analyses the formalistic structure of dance into the social processes of American culture. In this endeavour, it could be said that Edwin Denby following Norbert Elias (whether Denby knew his works is not important, especially **The Civilizing Process**) in attempting to develop the "emotive structure" of dance. In many ways, the descriptivism of Arlene Croce and the formalism of Marcia B. Siegel are foreign to the analyticalism of Edwin Denby.

The dance criticism of Edwin Denby is characterised by what could be called "the easy flow of his sentences", which are the very words with which he appended to the ballet reviews of the French Romantic poet, Theophile Gautier, whom he considered to have been the greatest of all ballet critics, surpassing Noverre (the founder of ballet aesthetics in the eighteenth-century) and proving unsurpassable to Levinson (the great critic of dance in the early part of our century). It is within this pleiad of critics, this lineage, that Edwin Denby should be placed. For Edwin Denby, not only should dance criticism be lively, coherent and lucid, it should first and foremost be lyrical and poetical. The poeticism that Edwin Denby demanded, or more appropriately requested of dance criticism should not surprise us, for he was passionately immersed in the Romantic poetry of Shelley and Keats. The poeticism informing Denby's work contrasts markedly with the cumbersomeness and excitability of Arlene Croce's reflections on dance and the stoicism of Marcia B. Siegel's scholarly texts.

Edwin Denby would have been in agreement with the following definition of dance by Paul Valery. For Valery, the fundamentalism of dance as an art lies not so much only in its universalism and its immemorial antiquity, but lies also on the fact that dance derives its beingness from life itself and is a form of action transposed into a world within the space-time coordinates. This definition of dance articulated by Valery in his essay, "Philosophy of the Dance", is similar to what Denby argued forth, that dance is an expressive human movement in musical time and architectural space. But for a dance critic to be able to capture and understand this human movement within linguistic categories (i.e. through language), Denby believed that the dance critic must be in possession of the following qualities: he or she must have a boundless fund of knowledge of the techniques and historical achievements of dancing; must be aware of the gymnastic and rhythmic technique which constitute the very coherency of dance in order to deduct the fundamental principles of dance logic; and lastly, he or she should have an intense imaginative structure in order to give illuminating descriptions of dance movement. In the essay, "The Critic", where Denby was postulating these points, he goes on to state that only when a dance critic is in possession of these qualities can he or she give an accurate picture of ballet history, and formulate a workable theory of dance form and dance meaning. Only then can a critic be able to distinguish the multiple components that constitute the complex total effect of a performance: ". . . the relationships between dance effect and story effect, between expressive individualized rhythm, . . . dance illusion and dance fun, . . ." According to Edwin Denby, it is only when a dance critic is in possession of these synthetic structures of dance knowledge, that he or she not only can convey to the audience the immediate sense of the sensuous fluidity and physical presence of ballet and modern dance, which he he felt to be qualities possessed by Theophile Gautier in ample richness, the dance critic can also render possible in the imagination of the audience the nature of dancing as a

form of poetic theater.

The structure of the dance criticism of Edwin Denby is composed of a triadic system of elements: the complex and inseparable relationship between dancer, critic and audience. It is the historicity of this relationship which is the central determinant of Denby's dance criticism and makes it the unique enterprise it is in our century. In fact, if we take a long historical perspective towards the dance criticism of Edwin Denby within a comparative structure, we see that what constitutes its uncompromising revolutionariness and novelty in contrast to what went before, is that while Noverre's **Letters** were addressed only to the aristocratic court circle of the eighteenth-century, maybe as they could only historically do, while the ballet reviews of Theophile Gautier were confined to the boheme quarter of the Romantic poets, where art for art's sake was the code word, and while the ballet essays of Andre Levinson were written with his face turned away from the Russian Revolution, the dance criticism of Edwin Denby is informed by a conscious attempt to break down the class and social distinctions. Its aim is to integrate ballet and modern dance into the structure of everyday life of the common people. Perhaps this accounts for its apparent poetic simplicity, yet profound social and cultural philosophy. It moves in the opposite direction away from postmodernism, the cultural dominant of our time according to Fredric Jameson. It finds a point of agreement with the criticism of postmodernism recently formulated by Giulio Carlo Argan (*Flash Art* , January 1986).

In an essay, "Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets", which gives entitlement to one of his books, Edwin Denby formulates a methodological structure by which a dance critic can capture and convey the complex movement of dance. The essence of dance is continuous movement. What is crucial in dance, as Rudolf von Laban never tires of repeating and restating, is learning to think in terms of movement (Preface in **The Mastery of Movement**). In the aforementioned essay, Edwin Denby states that there are two interlocked and intertwined processes involved in dance criticism: one, is being able to see clearly what is happening on the stage; the other, is being able to describe what took place as concise and lucid as is possible. What is involved in this double seemingly easy process, is the ability of the dance critic to specify clearly technical dance details, the moral implications involved, and the musicological and/or iconographic finesses displayed or indicated. This involves the ability to draw facts from social reality or social experience. Seeing is a fundamental component of dance criticism, which can only be learned from social life: the way, for example, in the streets of Rome, young Italian men and women occupy and fill space through their normal walking and movement; or, the way Americans occupy a much larger space than their actual bodies would allow or permit. Edwin Denby is interested in indicating the harmony of movement in

daily life as a living experience. Then Edwin Denby brilliantly and remarkably writes: "Dancing in daily life is also seeing the pretty movements and gestures people make. In the Caribbean, for instance, the walk of Negroes is often, well, miraculous. Both the feminine stroll and the masculine one, each entirely different." Denby's perception of other cultures than his own, was deep and profound. It is in such instances that his humanism indicates itself, a humanism that continues the tradition of Walt Whitman. One thing which can not be lost sight of, is that Edwin Denby is a great poet of dance. For Denby, daily life was wonderfully full of things to see.

It would seem that Edwin Denby thought that Theophile Gautier had, of all the outstanding dance critics, come nearest to resolving what he Denby thought to be the fundamental conundrum of ballet criticism, perhaps also including modern dance criticism: mainly, the more clearly a dance critic formulates a theory of the technique of expression, in other words of how dance communicates, the further he or she fails in conveying the human sensibility and human vivacity of dancing, which is the central construct of dancing. Edwin Denby believed that Gautier had overcome this vexing paradox by simply ignoring the choreographic structure of dance and gliding over its technical component by writing from the perspective of a civilized entertainment seeker, that is the audience. Noverre and Levinson, according to Denby, never fully achieved the supremacy which supposedly was realized by Gautier, because they both attempted to write about dancing simultaneously from the perspective of both the audience and of the dancer. This critical judgement of Edwin Denby on the history of ballet criticism and on its effectiveness, is rendered problematic by his actual critical practice for it tended to be closer to that of Noverre and Levinson rather than that of Gautier. The position of Gautier is untenable for he was writing against meaning in ballet. Though this position maybe legitimate today given the modern classicism of Balanchine, then it would seem to have lacked historical justification. In fact, for Gautier a particular ballet piece is good or bad according to the personal taste of the critic, not necessarily in relation to the historical assessment and critical evaluation of it within a comparative perspective which a critic may situate it. But meaning and technique in ballet and modern dance have to be examined in their intricate relationship to sensibility and consciousness as Edwin Denby attempted to do.

Though the above formulations were to a large measure postulated in relation to traditional classic ballet and modern classic ballet, it would be a mistake to minimize their relevance for modern dance or to think that Edwin Denby had nothing original to say about the latter, or to assume that he had no sensibility for modern dance. For him, the question of style, meaning and technique in modern dance were of primary importance also. The analytical terms of Edwin Denby's dance criticism display their brilliance in this very area of the modernity of

dancing, in its artistic forms. To Edwin Denby, the importance of the distinction between classical ballet and modern dance is not so much that whereas the former was founded in the era of the Baroque and the latter came into being in the era of Modernism, though these founding moments have their importance and relevance, the real consequences for the aesthetics of dance is that whereas classic ballet was founded on the basis of lightness, elevation and ease, modern dance was founded on the basis of the oddity of heaviness. In modern dance, according to Edwin Denby, ease and lightness are not essential and fundamental structures of movement, but rather, have their value as contrasts. This is because in modern dance, from Isadora Duncan and Mary Wigman to Martha Graham, it is the dynamics of movement and dynamic control which are crucial constants. Hence modern dance attempts to construct a realistic theater by utilizing stage space as the accidental segmentation of place, whereas classical ballet strives to build a poetic theater by using the stage as a space complete in itself. In both dance theaters, which are wordless dramas, ideas are interwoven into them for intellectual conceptualizations which construct their very movement. Here perhaps it is essential to make clear that the analytical distinctions which inform the dance criticism of Edwin Denby is not only limited within the relationship between classic ballet and modern dance, but also informs the particularity of each dance mode. For instance, within classic ballet, he makes the analytical differences between Fokine's *Scheherazade* and Tudor's *Pillar of Fire* : while the former is bright and luscious, the latter is gloomy and hot, because, and here Edwin Denby attains a poetic brilliance of the first order, Fokine hacked at his subject with a cleaver and Tudor dissects his with a scalpel. While Tudor's ballet is a pantomime ballet and Fokine's is not, nevertheless they both belong to the stylized drama while DElibes's *Coppelia* is in the tradition of dance entertainment. According to him, stylized movement defines pantomime ballet, and a suite of dances gives significance to dance ballet. The extraordinary perceptiveness of Edwin Denby here evidences itself.

The extraordinariness of Edwin Denby's perception of classical ballet and modern dance announces itself with tremendous force when one deconstructs the last component of his triadic structure, that of the dancer. In relation to this component, Denby examines the actual structure of dance itself, its meaning and significance, and naturally its stylistics. The point of departure of Denby here is in indicating that the quality of the dancer is determined to a large extent by the ability of the dancer to interrelate steps and make them cohere in significant ways. The intelligibility of steps must be related to the music accompanying them and to the narrative structure of the story-line. It is within this context that the steps may constitute themselves into dance phrases. These dance phrases could be held together by their rhythm in time or by the arrangements in space. The ability and intelligence of the dancer is evidenced in the way she or he makes dance phrases cohere in relation to dynamic sequences, to their volubility

in space, and to their rhythmicity in time. Only when this is achieved, Edwin Denby believes, can the dancer be able to achieve and show the spontaneity of her or his projected emotions.

The expressive power of dancing and its poetic suggestibility are achieved when the dancer in an excellent choreography projects the coherence and continuity of dance phrases. Edwin Denby thought that in the 1920s and in the 1930s only Nijinski and Alicia Markova had attained this supreme level of expressivity and projection. What they displayed was the supreme role of technique in classical ballet, whether in its traditional or modern forms. Modern dance also projects its own particular forms of techniques. According to Edwin Denby, technique in ballet is the refinement and extension of the technique which governs the movements in social dancing and folk dancing. This is a natural and cultural development, for the principal task of technique is to assist the dancer retain his or her balance while in the process of movement. Edwin Denby writes: "The problem might be described as that of a variable force (the dance impulses) applied to a constant weight (the body)." Hence the aim of technique in ballet, Denby elaborates, is to locate as variable means as possible to change the impetus and velocity of the movement without losing control of the momentum of the body. THE limbs of the body are utilized to distribute energy throughout it and find the central poise of the body when there is tension between the movement of the body and its central gravity. Though the plastic principles of ballet technique were fundamentally in place before the introduction of toe dancing in ballet in approximately in 1830, their introduction by the great French ballerina Marie Taglioni altered the structural form of ballet system. These 'pointes' today form the central component of classical ballet.

The appraisal of Edwin Denby's dance criticism inevitably leads to the conclusion that one of its unclearly defined undertakings was to establish the international semantic system of classic ballet, in its traditional and modern forms. This is what also centrally informs Denby's evaluation of modern dance. In both instances, he was attempting to formulate the conceptual structure of classicism in contemporary dance forms, especially those felt to be pertinent in the choreographic modes of Balanchine and Graham. Edwin Denby thought these two great artists embodied what was vital, living and profound in twentieth-century dance forms. Denby had blindspots, for instance, his inexplicable and unmitigated hostility to the choreographic creations of Kurt Jooss.

To conclude, Edwin Denby was striving to cartograph the nature of Modernism realized in contemporary dance forms. Expression and intelligibility, he felt, were essential concepts in understanding the differential nature of European and American ballet forms. Since for Denby ballet was first and foremost a wordless theater, he argued that the differences between them lay in the contrastive effects

striven for, especially dramatically and imaginatively. On the other hand, Edwin Denby speculated that the only dance critic who could have appreciated George Balanchine in his full complexity would have been the poet Stephane Mallarme. The purism of the French poet would have been symbiotically inseparable from the formalism of the American choreographer, as much as only the analyticalism of the American dance critic would have understood the complexity of this interaction.

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