



On Interpreting Dance: Stuart Pimsler's "Sentry"

Terry Barrett

Journal of Aesthetic Education, Vol. 22, No. 3. (Autumn, 1988), pp. 100-107.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8510%28198823%2922%3A3%3C100%3AOIDSP%22%3E2.0.CO%3B2-8>

Journal of Aesthetic Education is currently published by University of Illinois Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/illinois.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

and it tends to assume the absence of philosophical ambiguity. Its weakness is that it is a text of "Communications." Its strength is good sense.

The book is among other things a display-case of media vanities. It provides us with huge amounts of information on the way that the industry thinks. For example, that truly "meaningful" art on a Chrysler commercial means driving the car "into the camera with the nameplate on the screen." Or that *Laverne and Shirley* has higher intentions than low comedy—it sees itself as having a social duty and will try to tie together sex and energy conservation so that "viewers will listen" to its message of hope. Or that when General Motors donated a number of automobiles to one detective show it stipulated two conditions: that none of them ever be driven by a villain; nor would any of them ever "be the car that gets totaled." Out of such things comes cultural history.

I ought to say something more about that matter of philosophical interpretation. The moral authorities for this book tend to be other texts in the field of communications. Matters are adjudicated according to "social science," much of it behavioristic. There is not much reference to Plato and Aristotle—although they contain, actually, a great deal on staged representation. What this means is that if some foundation has supported a study on TV violence, that study tends to have authenticity. If someone has counted scenes, then that becomes the standard for interpretation. The author is not critical about definitions.

He is, however, amply remedial about this. The book is very descriptive. And it has no shame whatsoever in applying conventional moral standards to what it sees. That is, particularly now, a kind of intellectual strength. The very good chapter on TV sex reads very much as we might want a high-school text to read: it observes that we rarely see teen-age confusion about sex, only its attractions; that sex "is presented as an equal to love"; that human relationships on the medium are reduced to sex; that sexuality is often political or "manipulative." The tone is calm but inexorable: by the time we have read about love or news or commercials on TV we see all these things in the strong light of conventional moral discourse. It may be that as literary criticism grows bored with issues of meaning or truthfulness, they will be discovered by other fields, even "Communications."

Ronald Berman

University of California, San Diego

On Interpreting Dance: Stuart Pimsler's *Sentry*

Criticism is a complex concept, but it has been analyzed as involving one or more of the procedures of describing, interpreting, judging, and theorizing.¹ Most of the talk I hear about dance, however, is judgmental: this choreographer is great; that company is declining; her performance was brilliant; that piece was shallow. Most of what I read of dance in newspapers is also primarily evaluative: "Mr. Bocca danced like a champion—gracious and assured, amazingly mature." "Every dance crackled with high speed, coruscatingly embellished by intricate footwork and dynamics."

These statements are from *The New York Times's* best dance of 1987 review² and epitomize judgmental criticism. Writing about the New York premiere of Stuart Pimsler's *Sentry*, *Times* critic Jennifer Dunning deemed it "a work that must stand as one of the most powerful antiwar dances that have been seen in a long time. . . . a remarkable piece of work."³ Critics writing in newspapers are often asked by their editors and expected by their readers to make clear statements of judgment and render unequivocal decisions of value. They guide consumer choices.

It's easy to get casual responses of evaluation. We know what we like. Statements of preference and judgments of worth, or lack of it, are usually stated quite confidently and with finality. Those in the dance community, especially dancers and choreographers, offer the quickest judgments. They have seen a lot of dance, danced a lot of dance, know its history, and live it. They are able quickly to assimilate and assess what they see. They also are quite severe in their judgments and are certainly more harsh and considerably less tolerant than the critics I read in the papers.

Although clear statements of judgment, either heard or read, sometimes with supporting reasons, sometimes without, and sometimes based on stated criteria and sometimes not, are easy to obtain, they are not always particularly informative. Judgments tell me that the critic valued a dance or didn't. So I know that someone thinks it good or bad, and I can measure my own response accordingly. I think *Sentry* is very powerful, and I am glad to be bolstered in my opinion by a *Times* critic. I wish Dunning had more space to tell me more about why she thought it so remarkable, or compared it to other recent war pieces which I have not seen, or stated her criteria for judging such dances. If critics stated their criteria, I would have more notions of what to attend to in a dance.

Published dance criticism is also very descriptive. Roger Copeland thinks one of the dance critic's main tasks is to see, to remember, to describe.⁴ And most critics maintain that description is important to the artwork, especially in the case of dance because dance is temporal and perishable and thus needs good empirical description for the purpose of historical preservation. Descriptive criticism is also informative for today: dance criticism is frequently written for readers who have not seen the performance, and the critic's descriptions relate what it was that the readers have missed seeing themselves. Descriptions also point out what the critic deems to be important, central, not to be overlooked lest the piece be misunderstood.

Although it is easy to find judgments about dance and to read descriptions, it is difficult to find sustained interpretive writing about dance. It is even more difficult to hear interpretive talk about dance. By interpretive talk I mean talk about what a dance is about, what it expresses, what it means, how it means what it means. Interpretive thought and talk are perhaps what Edwin Denby, a pioneer critic of modern dance, was calling for back in 1947 when he asked that the dance community consider "dance meaning."⁵ After an engaging performance I would like to hear from others what they thought the pieces were *about* as well as whether they thought

them good or not. I guess I want to see if I stand with or apart from others in my understanding and appreciation, especially if they know more about dance than I do. I want to bring my own inchoate responses to a place more fully developed and more firmly grounded through thoughtful conversation with others, especially knowledgeable others.

I am not alone in this, not overly quirky about it. Those who consciously seek to understand a piece or a concert know the value of the process of attempting to put that direct experience into words. Marcia Siegel talks of the value of the process of writing dance criticism: "Very often it turns out that as I write about something, it gets better. It's not that I'm so enthusiastic that I make it better, but that in writing, because the words are an instrument of thinking, I can often get deeper into a choreographer's thoughts or processes and see more logic, more reason."⁶

But I sense a strong bias against interpretation in the dance community. I have learned that it is only with some nervousness and an apologetic introduction that I can ask a dancer or choreographer about what a piece means. Interpretive questions seem almost tabu, certainly inappropriate. I don't know why this is. It may in part be a negative reaction to the storytelling of ballet. It may be in part the general influence of the formalist aesthetic which promoted an art autonomous from the world, an art with references only to itself or to other art. In considering representational art, the formalist critic was to ignore subject matter as distracting and irrelevant to form—form was paramount. Formalist art criticism and the "new criticism" of literature of the 1940s and 1950s insisted on paying critical attention only to the object and denied the relevance and importance of artistic intent, biography, psychology, and historical circumstance. But these theories and critical persuasions still allowed interpretation; the objects of interpretation changed, not the possibility of interpretation.

Susan Leigh Foster, in a recent effort toward formulating a theory of dance meaning, explains that in the beginning of the century and continuing today, there was a quest for a natural way of moving with a natural body and an organic choreography. Dance was seen as an expression of primal feeling. (I imagine Martha Graham.) While holding this belief, however, Foster thinks dancers have cultivated a "sanctimonious mutism," denying the verbal in favor of the physical and sensate.⁷ Perhaps if audiences needed to talk about such a natural thing as dance, they were thought to be too emotionally constricted to be able to appreciate such dance. Perhaps dancers feared that if they were verbal about intuitive dance, their sensuously expressive bodies would turn into pillars of salt.

Moving dance in a different direction, Cunningham taught us to accept chance procedures for composing and sequencing movement and arbitrary relationships between music, movement, and set. Cunningham himself refuses to talk about his work. In response, however, critics espouse some strange notions. An author of a book on contemporary dance maintains: "With Merce Cunningham dance became an abstract art, which could no longer be interpreted, because movement itself was the meaning."⁸ This statement is self-contradictory and nonsensical. The author first tells us

that Cunningham's dance cannot be interpreted and then tells us that its meaning is movement itself. To say that Cunningham's dance is about movement is certainly to offer an interpretation of it, and a sensible one. To interpret a dance does not mean to find stories where there are none, or references to the world when none are in the work, or to engage in rampant and unrestricted associative thinking.

Perhaps it is strange notions of interpretation that frighten the dance community away from talk about meaning in dance. There are principles of interpretation that are generally agreed upon by aestheticians which, if stated, might make the interpretation of dance more appealing and less suspect than it apparently is.

"Surely there are many literary works of art of which it can be said that they are understood better by some than by others: this fact makes interpretation possible and (sometimes) desirable."⁹ This principle of interpretation was formulated about literature by Monroe Beardsley, an aesthete. It is quite simple and straightforward, and it is directly applicable to dance or any other art form. If there are others who understand *Sentry* better than I do, and surely there are, and if I want to understand it better, I would like to hear or read their interpretations to better my understanding.

Beardsley goes on to explain that interpretation is a telling to another of what one understands about the meaning of a work. Others add that interpretations attempt to discover and reveal what is most important about a piece, how its parts fit together. Interpretations seek to inform about the overriding point or theme or sense or tone of a work. Interpretations are formulations of the meaning of the work as a whole, rather than just the meaning of a word in a text, or a shape on a canvas, or a gesture in a dance. The parts form the whole and need to be examined as parts, but their meaning is dependent on the whole: interpreters work back and forth from part to whole and whole to part.

Interpretations are not arbitrary. An interpretation of a dance attempts to show which way of understanding the dance reveals it as the best work of art it can be, not by remaking it into something that fits the interpreter's fancy, but by showing what the work is regardless of whether the work is abstract, representational, narrative, or whatever. Interpretations are understood to be arguments that are based on evidence apparent in the work and around the work. Because they are arguments interpretations are always open to counterarguments. Thus, "neither artist nor viewer can afford to be dogmatic, for he can always be corrected."¹⁰

Beardsley argues that interpretations are correct or incorrect, right or wrong, true or false. Many other aestheticians, Stuart Hampshire in particular, are more tolerant of diverse interpretations, and they praise worthy interpretations as original or illuminating or interesting rather than as "right" and demean weak interpretations as impossible or absurd or strained or far-fetched.¹¹ Most also recognize the enriching value of diverse interpretations from various points of view. Even if I understand *Sentry* well, there are others who also understand it well but differently, and I would

also like to hear or read their understandings—expressionist, formalist, semiotic, feminist, Marxist, and so forth—to broaden and enrich my own.

Sentry is an approximately fifteen-minute narrative piece with five dancers. Three are female, and all the dancers wear black pants and shirts. Piles of pink and blue sandbags sit under lighting which suggests nighttime. As the piece begins the dancers rearrange the sandbags with quiet deliberation. The commander calls out numerals in French, and the group practices saluting movements under her discerning eye. She raises her voice, and the soldiers energetically assume a series of defensive and offensive combat postures to a sound collage which includes a female chorus singing “Alleluia!” and Joan Baez’s rendition of “We Shall Overcome.” The pace quickens, and bodies jerk in the air and fall flat as Baez plaintively wails “We are not afraid” over sounds of explosions. Large, white block letters projected behind the scene spell out, one at a time, eleven orders of a sentry: “5. To quit my post only when properly relieved.” As the lights eventually fade to black and the sounds dim to silence, the soldiers are peering out at the audience from behind a low bunker of sandbags.

In her review of a Stuart Pimsler Dance & Theater concert in New York which included *Sentry*, Dunning called it a remarkable antiwar piece, as quoted above, and in the course of her review she also offered descriptive facts about the piece’s designers and performers and interpretive thoughts about its meaning: “It can be seen on a number of levels, from a conceptualist exploration of task-oriented movement for four dancers and piles of sandbags to an evocation of the loneliness and fear of the soldier on night watch that summoned up chilling memories of war.”¹² Thus she presents two directions for interpretation: this work, as most dance, can be understood to be about movement and about dance and the possibilities of dance. She also sees it as a dance about aspects of the real world—war, soldiers, loneliness, and fear.

One who dances *Sentry* will likely understand it differently from one who sees it. After a performance of *Sentry* at Denison University, I commented to Linda Yoder, who danced the piece’s leading character, that I was particularly moved that night, more so than in seeing past performances. She told me that she changed her focus for this performance. “Focus,” as she used the term, referred to aspects of the commanding officer she chose to think about and emphasize as she danced the role. In abstract work her focus might be on the idea of virtuosity. Focus was her motivation, what kept her mentally and emotionally involved in a dance. Her movements, even in nonobjective work, “have to mean something” to her. In prior performances of *Sentry* she focused on being one who gave orders, a stereotypically strong, authoritarian, militaristic commander. In the Denison performance, however, she focused on her wisdom as a leader, her knowledge of consequences for the soldiers under her command if they were to disregard military procedure, and her awareness of her soldiers’ impending deaths. She focused on being strong but compassionate; tough but nurturing.

In another discussion with Linda she told me that when rehearsing

Sentry Stuart brought to the group a magazine photograph of sandbags, that he read to the group and talked of specific images he had in mind for the piece. He routinely attempts to explain clearly to his dancers his motivations as maker. (Other choreographers with whom Linda has worked do not; "Do these movements this way. . . . Be here on the beat.") Stuart has definite understandings of what he wants expressed in his dances and articulates them to his company and encourages their responses and ideas in building his works.

While writing this essay, I asked Stuart about his motivations for *Sentry*. He told me that Ron Kajiwaru, the company's designer, originally brought the sandbag photograph to him. It was a *Life* photograph taken during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut. It showed two men wounded and naked on hospital beds. The room's window was filled with sandbags, but the sandbags were luminous pink and blue. Ron and Stuart were struck by the tension between the horror of the reality and the beauty of the bags, and Stuart began thinking of a piece with sandbags. He also had on hand, from a friend who had sent them from the U.S. Army, "The Orders of a Sentry," official procedures for guard duty that are to be memorized by soldiers. Stuart found them to be "quietly fascistic." They eventually became projected slides and were the basis for the commander's dialogue in French. Stuart chose to use a language other than English to universalize the piece. For insight into their characters and to motivate their performances, he read the dancers a short story about a sentry's thoughts of home, family, and everyday affairs as he patrolled his post.

Thus we have interpretive perceptions about *Sentry* gathered from three perspectives: that of a critic from a published review of the dance, the dancer of the piece's major part, and its choreographer. *Sentry* is a relatively simple work to grasp; it is considerably shorter and has fewer components than Pimsler's full-length work, *House/Home*, for example, and it is more straightforward in its content and presentation than *Poems by Field and Stream*. Although it is direct, I find that the insights of these three expand my sense of the work. But it deserves more interpretive thought than it has received. Its movement in itself and in relation to its references to the world deserves analysis. The impact of having a woman as the commanding officer has not been discussed, nor the effect of its use of French rather than English or another language. The effect of the designer's contribution to the piece has not been mentioned. The work could be compared to other dances and other art forms that have treated war. With this retrospective exhibition, a new *Sentry* has also been produced in the medium of videotape. It is not *Sentry* the dance recorded on videotape, it is *Sentry* conceived and produced as a video dance work. It is like *Sentry* as danced on stage, but it is also very different and very interesting, and it deserves an interpretive analysis of its own. A comparison of the two pieces could yield valuable insights into the dance and the effects of the video medium on a dance.

The critic's task is to write, the dancer's to dance, and the choreographer's to create, and neither dancers nor choreographers need explain

their work to audiences, but they surely have insights about their work that would be valuable for audiences to hear. I suspect that as *Sentry's* choreographer Stuart may fear pinning its meaning down, reducing its richness, or squashing its multiple layers by his own defining and delimiting words. He probably would like it to live a life of its own and accrue what meanings it will. But if the community of interpreters were more experienced in interpretation, the maker's voice would be less able to determine understanding and delimit discussion.

Interpretations are social constructs, even though formulated by individual viewers: "The interpretation of a painting is a social creation and can exist only in a community of viewers, just as words can have meaning only in a linguistic community."¹³ The choreographer doesn't own the dance because he or she made it: once made and performed, it has a public life of its own. The artist or choreographer is only one voice in the community of interpreters, as is the dancer or the critic. Some members of the interpretive community are better informed than others about a particular piece or about contemporary dance and the history of dance, and their voices carry more weight. But their voices ought not silence other voices. We need more discussion than pronouncements of judgment. Interpretive discussion increases understanding and thus deepens appreciation, whether that appreciation is ultimately of a negative or a positive sort. A thorough understanding of a work implies a judgment; a judgment rendered without an understanding, however, is irresponsible and irresponsible.

Terry Barrett

The Ohio State University

NOTES

1. Morris Weitz, *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).
2. Anna Kisselgoff, "Diversity Was Partnered by New Talent," *New York Times*, section 2, Arts and Leisure, Sunday, 27 December 1987, p. 6.
3. Jennifer Dunning, "Dance: By Stuart Pimsler, Antiwar Work, *Sentry*," *New York Times*, 5 November 1984.
4. Roger Copeland, a lecture on dance criticism delivered at The Ohio State University, Department of Dance, 22 January 1987.
5. Edwin Danby, quoted by Irene Ruth Meltzer "The Critical Eye: An Analysis of the Process of Dance Criticism as Practiced by Clive Barnes, Arlene Croce, Deborah Jowitt, Elizabeth Kendall, Marcia Siegel, and David Vaughn" (M.A. thesis, The Ohio State University, 1979), p. 11.
6. Marcia Siegel, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 55.
7. Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. xiv.
8. Ann Livet, *Contemporary Dance* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1978), introduction.
9. Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Testability of an Interpretation," in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. Joseph Margolis, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), p. 466.
10. Michael Parsons, "Talk about a Painting," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21, no. 1 (1987), 54.

11. See, e.g., Stuart Hampshire, in *Art and Philosophy*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1966).
12. Dunning, "Dance: By Stuart Pimsler."
13. Parsons, "Talk about a Painting."

Museums and Visual Literacy for Adults

Works of art are the most fundamental tools of learning in an art museum setting. Yet all too often the museum visitor may feel inadequately equipped to understand the messages that the objects encode. By availing himself of the written materials and lectures that museums offer, the visitor can, of course, gain further understanding of a particular painting or sculpture. What he gains, however, is a sort of second-hand discovery which is not his own, will not therefore be readily retained, and is somewhat removed from the object itself. The visitor who spends more time reading about objects than looking at them has missed part of the aesthetic experience for which art is created. Further, if we as museum educators cultivate dependence on the opinion of the "experts," we virtually insure that the average museum visitor will continue to experience objects only in a passive way. This is the equivalent of reading to an individual and never teaching him how to read.

We know that learning is enhanced through active participation. By teaching the visitor to interact mentally with works in addition to learning *about* them, we promote an important aspect of learning that is too often neglected. In order to prepare the viewer for independent mental interaction with works of art, we must teach him their language. Knowing this language, the visitor is empowered to "read" any work he encounters with at least some degree of understanding beyond a subjective response. Teaching the language of objects prepares the visitor "to develop the ability to synthesize ideas and form opinions, shape an esthetic and cultural sensibility." This is the definition of learning in a museum put forth in *Museums for a New Century*.¹

Articles and studies published in recent years have established the "whys" of teaching visual literacy. Now it is time for us to develop and perfect the methods of "how to." This can best be begun by developing methods consistent with current theories of adult learning and testing them for effectiveness.

One such model has been developed and put into practice with considerable success at the Columbus Museum of Art on ten occasions over the last year. The basic strategy is to show participants how to organize their thinking and to analyze works of art through a questioning process.

A staff member or art educator from a local university is selected to be a discussion leader. That person selects for analysis a work of art from the museum's permanent collection or a special exhibition. The day of the discussion, chairs are set up in the gallery in front of the work in question, thus eliminating the distraction of fatigue. Anyone may walk in and sit down. Participants are told that this is above all a discussion, that the group will be analyzing the work of art together, and that the purpose of