

Writing Nostalgia:
Dance Criticism at the *New York Times* in the Age of Internet Journalism
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"TO ARTICULATE THE PAST HISTORICALLY [...] MEANS TO SEIZE HOLD OF A MEMORY AS IT
FLASHES UP AT A MOMENT OF DANGER." – WALTER BENJAMIN

New York has long been an international dance capital. It is therefore no surprise that the dance section of the *New York Times* wields significant influence on the international dance scene. Clive Barnes, chief dance critic of the *Times* from 1965-1977, wrote in 2005, “In the New York performing arts, particularly in classical music, opera, and dance, The New York Times reigns supreme...the influence of its dance reviews, inside and outside the city, is enormous, and the particular tone it takes with dance and dance matters is crucial nowadays.”¹ To retain its far-reaching influence as an important contemporary publication, the *Times* began a significant transformation of its dance department in 2005. John Rockwell, a classical music and rock critic and European cultural correspondent for the *Times*, was hired as the transitional chief dance critic to replace Anna Kisselgoff, whose tenure as chief critic at the *Times* had lasted twenty-seven years. Significant changes occurred during Rockwell’s term, including the hiring of a new and younger group of freelance critics, and increasing the number of dance reviews assigned and published on a daily basis. Rockwell was replaced in 2007 by Alastair Macaulay, former drama critic for London’s *Financial Times*, who kept many of Rockwell’s innovations intact. Although the particulars of Macaulay’s contract have not been made public, it seems likely that he will remain on staff for the next several years, ushering in a new era of stability at the *Times*.

While this new group of writers, led first by Rockwell and subsequently by Macaulay, maintain individual voices, nostalgia and anxiety for the future permeates their

¹ Clive Barnes, “Attitudes,” *Dance Magazine*, February 2005, 170.

criticism. In this, they mirror the anxiety and nostalgia of today's dance community, which is eager to find a new generation of choreographers to carry dance into the twenty-first century. This pressure to make sense of the current period, which to many seems trendless and transitional, is represented in critical treatment of different dance genres. In their writings about "classical" and contemporary ballet, historical and contemporary modern dance, as well as dance styles that defy easy categorization, the *Times* writers apply to each a distinctive critical lens, making genre-specific claims and projections about the future. The division into categories that are often outmoded and irrelevant acts as an attempt to synthesize the proliferation of contemporary dance idioms and performance styles. This replication of old categories is filled with nostalgia, a yearning for order in the increasingly chaotic landscape of print journalism transformed by internet reporting, online dance communities, and blogging. In their writings, critics offer a bleak and anxious picture of the future of dance and dance journalism, as well as a nostalgic view of a more unified, stable golden era in both the dance-making and critical community. This nostalgia has social as well as cultural implications at a time when professional critics, who honed their skills in newspapers and magazines in New York, are rapidly becoming obsolete.

John Martin was appointed the first chief critic of the *New York Times* in 1927 during a unique moment in the institutionalization of both modern dance and dance journalism in the United States. As theater scholar Lynne Conner argues, "The institutionalization of newspaper dance criticism in the United States coincided with that of the modern dance—establishing a point of intersection between artistic and journalistic development that has been a primary influence on the particular shape of twentieth-

century American concert dance and its critical discourse.”² Conner explains that the emerging fields of modern concert dance and dance criticism developed a unique reciprocal dialogue. She writes, “Between the pioneer dance critics and the pioneer modern dancers—the exchange of ideas, philosophies, and criticism—is central to the way in which advocacy as a guiding critical construct influenced early columnists.”³ Early dance criticism began an advocacy project fighting to legitimize the dance it developed in tandem with. To promote modern dance, newspaper critics constructed categories to describe and demystify the dances they viewed. Martin, in long Sunday pieces for the *Times*, lectures at the New School for Social Research, and particularly in his book *The Modern Dance*, sought to explain and categorize different dance forms in order to “spread the gospel of modern dance” to new audiences and ensure its future vitality.⁴ As a result, newspaper dance criticism in the United States developed in a unique conversation with dance, with newspaper critics often acting as exploiters and label makers.

This function of the dance critic quickly began to change. As early as 1934, Martin was accused of bias, of reviewing only a fraction of the era’s dance activity, and for his advocacy approach to criticism.⁵ However, Martin had already established the model of dance critic as explicator and advocate, which would prevail in dance writing for decades to come. While contemporary critics may no longer see themselves primarily as advocates for dance, the impulse to categorize and explain, which grew partially out of Martin’s legacy, has remained. Today, outmoded categories are often employed by

² Lynne Conner, *Spreading the Gospel of the Modern Dance: A History of Newspaper Dance Criticism, 1850-1934* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 1.

³ Conner, 109.

⁴ Conner, 1.

⁵ Conner, 137.

critics in their nostalgic rendering of the past to mediate anxiety for the future of an art form seemingly in crisis.

The changes initiated at the *Times* in 2005 began transforming the model that had ruled at the dance department since the mid-1950s. This model maintained a hierarchy of critics, with one voice featured most prominently (the chief critic), a second-in-command staff critic/reporter and a group of freelance writers. In a 2005 interview with Nancy Dalva at Barnard College, Rockwell intimated that the model of chief and second-in-command staff critics was outdated and noted that many successful European publications did not adhere to this structure.⁶ In the interview Rockwell acknowledged his role at the *Times*, “Clearly the dance department [at the *New York Times*] is in a transition and I am a transitional figure.”⁷ In fact, Rockwell was brought in to shake up the department, initiating many concurrent changes. Not only did he replace Anna Kisselgoff, but he also began replacing the old guard of critics. Jack Anderson, who was in his late sixties and had been writing for the *Times* since the 1980s, ceased writing reviews. Since then, Jennifer Dunning, staff critic/reporter under Kisselgoff, Rockwell, and briefly Macaulay, has retired. Rockwell also brought in several new freelance critics, including Gia Kourlas, Roslyn Sulcas, and Claudia La Rocca.⁸ These younger writers were meant to revitalize a paper where, as Clive Barnes wrote, “serious, informed comment on the dance scene has virtually disappeared from the pages of the paper.”⁹

⁶ John Rockwell, interview by Nancy Dalva, *On Dance: An Ongoing Series of Conversations, Films, and Lectures*, Held Auditorium, Barnard College, 17 October 2007.

⁷ Rockwell, *On Dance*.

⁸ Apollinaire Scherr, “Former Times Head Critic John Rockwell Responds to Apollinaire’s Grumblings,” *Foot in Mouth: Apollinaire Scherr Talks About Dance*, an *ArtsJournal* Weblog, 22 February 2007 <http://www.artsjournal.com/foot/2007/02/former_times_head_dance_critic.html> (15 November 2008).

⁹ Barnes.

Many believed the *Times* had “begun to sound like a broken-record,” and that the newspaper was simply reporting on performances without any critical edge.¹⁰

The diminishing of critical journalism at the *Times* coincided with artistic despondency in the dance world. According to Rockwell, “Everybody’s...fretful about the lack of an obvious new generation of ballet choreographers, and for that matter modern choreographers.”¹¹ Many felt that a new generation of choreographers had not arisen to lead the field. Even choreographers who once offered fresh perspectives, such as William Forsythe, seemed to fall short of the public’s long-term expectations. Critic Marcia B. Siegel explains the lull in choreographic innovation, claiming that by 1990, “Ballet and modern dance...were hurting for leadership as a wave of premature deaths swept across the active ranks of choreographers, at the same time that a senior generation was ending.”¹² While the dance world appeared stalled and anxious to find new leaders, the *Times* seemed to offer new possibilities for critical writing by integrating fresh voices. Countless blogs expressed the relief felt by the dance community as Kisselgoff stepped aside for a younger generation to breathe fresh life into the dance pages of the *Times*.

Rockwell represented a new perspective on dance, believing that the “fusion” of different dance genres as well as the blending of dance with the visual arts could bring welcome innovation into the dance field. He actively spoke out against balletomanes who felt that ballet was sullied by incorporating movement ideas originating in other dance genres and other media. He explained that whether or not one likes it, dance fusion

¹⁰Barnes.

¹¹Rockwell, *On Dance*.

¹²Marcia B. Siegel, “Virtual Criticism and the Death of Dance,” *The Drama Review* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 64. The impact of the AIDs crisis on the arts was devastating in the late 1980s and 1990s. Twenty years later, the dance world still has not fully recovered from the premature deaths of numerous dancers, choreographers, and dance writers.

is happening, and the critic, who is partially a reporter, has an obligation to write about it.¹³ Rockwell also felt that many fusion works produced in Europe might offer a new direction for dance in America. Rockwell wrote of the English group DV8 Physical Theater's show "The Cost of Living," "So hold on to your knickers, American dance devotees. You may think you hate "Eurotrash," but you ain't seen nothing yet. In the meantime, for the broader cultural public not in thrall to dance orthodoxies, *The Cost of Living*...almost demands to be seen."¹⁴ Rockwell was fighting strong opposition from critics who hastily categorized all forms of contemporary European dance as "Eurotrash." Arlene Croce was largely responsible for this mentality, writing highly critical reviews at the *New Yorker* in the 1970s and 1980s that influenced a generation of classically minded dance critics.¹⁵ To counter the Eurotrash ideology, Rockwell claimed that everything moves in waves, and "everything is a reaction to everything else," explaining that contemporary European dance is simply an outgrowth of older dance forms.¹⁶ Rockwell believed that the stagnant dance community had nothing to lose by opening its mind to possibilities from overseas. Furthermore, Rockwell thought the *Times*' critical outlook could benefit from integrating voices from abroad. Rockwell advocated that when the *Times* began looking for a critic to replace him, it should cast a wider geographic net.¹⁷ The *Times* heeded his advice, appointing Alastair Macaulay as chief dance critic in 2007.

One important change initiated during the Rockwell years was an increase in the number of dance pieces published each day. In the fall of 2005, the culture pages of the

¹³ Rockwell, *On Dance*.

¹⁴ John Rockwell, "No Pretenses from a Provocative Band of Circus Performers," *New York Times*, 25 January 2005, sec. E, 1.

¹⁵ Lynn Garafola "Looking at Dance; Writing in the Dark, Dancing in the *New Yorker* by Arlene Croce," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 November 2000, 1.

¹⁶ Rockwell, *On Dance*.

¹⁷ Rockwell, *On Dance*.

New York Times began to expand. Additionally, the *New York Times* online began publishing many reviews that the paper chose not to publish in print form. Rockwell claimed that in 2005, twice as many reviews were published than during the previous year.¹⁸ Furthermore, the Sunday “Arts and Leisure” dance column was expanded from a half-page to a full page, which allowed for more serious dance writing and returned dance to a position of equality alongside the other media.¹⁹ This expansion went against trends around the country, as newspapers downsized in response to the boom of internet journalism. This, however, offered little comfort to *Times* writers who saw the New York critical community splintering as their peers lost jobs after years of relative security.

Another trend that emerged at the *Times* under Rockwell was a renewed impulse to cover everything. With the advent of multiculturalism in the late 1980s and 1990s and the growing plurality of dance genres,²⁰ critics began to review a wider range of dance styles and turned increasingly to debates about the value of “world dance.” Rockwell states that the role of the critic is to “Unite these disparate things. You may be a ballet critic, but you may not know anything about experimental dance, or you may be a downtown dance maven, but rarely get to see the ballet, let alone ethnic dance, and let alone Eurotrash.”²¹ According to Rockwell, the specialist critic has lost his place in mainstream dance journalism. A critic of the twenty-first century must develop a critical

¹⁸ Rockwell, *On Dance*.

¹⁹ However, dance remains the only “Arts” section in the *Times* that is not directly accessible from the *New York Times Online* homepage.

²⁰ I refer to dance genre here in the Bakhtinian sense of “speech genre” where, “Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*.” Likewise, one may think of dance genres as relatively stable groupings of individual dance styles that reflect common conditions, goals, content, movement style, or compositional structure. M.M. Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genres,” *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986), 60.

²¹ Rockwell, *On Dance*.

perspective that transcends his/her specialty and offers value to the art form as a whole.²² Rockwell was clear that in 2005 we were “not exactly in a golden age of fabulous creativity.”²³ Yet the growing number of concerts being produced at a growing number of venues suggested a desire for creative reinvigoration. Under Rockwell, the *Times* critics began seeking out creativity, covering a broader range of dance styles and reviewing dance beyond the confines of Manhattan. However, as critic Ann Daly has pointed out, “Dance is a discipline that has been so busy trying to recapture its past that it often overlooks the challenges of the present.”²⁴ Thus, despite their effort to make sense of this prolific, decentralized dance scene, critics were haunted by images of the past and a desire to pigeonhole dance according to genre.

The question of genre gained particular attention in January 2005 as Rockwell was set to take the position of chief critic. In an important article for the *Times* titled “The Intimate, Unified Universe of Dance,” which sparked a lively debate among internet critics, Rockwell wrote, “We live in tribal times. Everywhere we look, proud unities have splintered into warring clans...there are ballet fans who disdain modern dance as dated or amateurish. Loft-dance devotees who regard ballet as impossibly mannered...But there are some of us...who peer obsessively beyond boundaries.”²⁵ After outlining the many ways that dance genres are demarcated, Rockwell advocated for “peering beyond” borders to discover what unites dance styles, audiences, critics, and dancers. He continued, “Dance critics can still cover any and all forms of dance” since

²² Rockwell, *On Dance*.

²³ Rockwell, *On Dance*.

²⁴ Ann Daly, “Writing about Dance: An Urgent, High-Profile Opportunity,” *The Drama Review* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 5.

²⁵ John Rockwell, “The Intimate, Unified Universe of Dance,” *New York Times*, 9 January 2005, sec. 2, 33.

“life in dance today comes from the blurring of traditions and techniques.”²⁶ For example, Rockwell noted that ballet companies are often looking for new ideas and find inspiration in modern dance choreographers. He explained that even the promising, and highly praised contemporary ballet choreographer “Christopher Wheeldon can’t do everything,” to urge critics to be less obsessed with the future so that new choreographic voices can mature in the present.²⁷ In conclusion, Rockwell wrote:

Just how “scenes” evolve—a whole group of artists producing similar but individual work, reinforcing one another and building momentum that transcends any one of them—remains a tantalizing mystery... Even if such a scene evolves in dance, or already exists, that shouldn’t lessen our faith in the unity of dance. Ballet will thrive, thrilling audiences with fresh young dancers and the 19th-century classics. The established modern companies, with or without their founders, will carry on. Companies of all kinds will visit us... And one day, maybe emerging from some obscure new scene...choreographers will emerge who will bring us new modern dance companies and grand new ballets.²⁸

This thought provoking article was written as Rockwell took up his new position, perhaps to begin his controversial tenure with his ambitions clearly stated.

In this and subsequent articles Rockwell advocated for a blurring of boundaries and a fusion of different dance genres. He fought for a demystification of the dance “scene,” and proposed that discovering new trends was not the most important task of the critic. Rockwell argued that the critic must be a unifier, an articulate voice who can draw an integrated, multifaceted face for contemporary dance. However, this call for unification belies nostalgia and hope for a future that will recreate the idealized “dance scenes” of the past. Even more important than the specifics of Rockwell’s argument, is

²⁶ Rockwell, “The Intimate, Unified Universe.”

²⁷ Rockwell, “The Intimate, Unified Universe.”

²⁸ Rockwell, “The Intimate, Unified Universe.”

his motivation for writing this article. On the verge of becoming chief critic, Rockwell may have decided it was important to address the issue of trends, scenes, and the divide between ballet and modern dance choreographers and critics. However, rather than unifying the dance community, his article only highlighted the genre-specific divisions permeating all aspects of the dance field.

Rockwell's article hit a nerve in the dance community and numerous responses were posted online to dance blogs. These responses highlight an important divide within the ballet community that Rockwell and his new group of critics increasingly confronted in their writing. Alexandra Tomalonis, editor of the *Dance View Times*, wrote in response, "One of the things that concerns me about the trend to crossover dance as a repertory staple in ballet, and the idea that there are no distinctions among genres worth making, is that many ballets created between "Sleeping Beauty" and last week are being lost, tossed out to make room for works that own no style or vocabulary."²⁹ Against the fusion craze, classically-minded ballet critics voiced their concerns with Rockwell's claims. As Tomalonis explained, one contingent of the dance world felt that classical ballet choreographers were being actively discouraged from making dances. These critics believed that fusion ballet had lost the powerful support of tradition which stood behind classical ballet.³⁰

Fusion ballet divides not only the ballet community along the lines of "classical" and contemporary, but also newspaper critics and editors. Tomalonis believes that newspaper editors are partially to blame for the decline of classical ballet. These editors,

²⁹ Alexandra Tomalonis, e-mail to John Rockwell, 11 January 2005, <<http://archives.danceviewtimes.com/2005/Winter/04/rockwell.htm>> (10 November 2008)

³⁰ Tomalonis, e-mail to John Rockwell.

Tomalonis claims, think that ballet criticism is “a hangover from the bad old days of elitism. To bring in new readers, especially the cherished young, editors think that they must cover popular culture.”³¹ These ballet critics feel discriminated against and forced online by mainstream publications such as the *Times*, which they feel caters to a mass audience that editors wrongly assume wants to read nothing but brief popular culture pieces. Many felt that Rockwell’s tenure as chief critic meant the end of serious ballet criticism and saw his endorsement of fusion as the death of classical ballet.³²

Alastair Macaulay’s appointment as chief critic after Rockwell helped alleviate many of these fears since Macaulay is a self-identified classicist, trained in Shakespearean drama. While the modern dance community was up in arms over Macaulay’s writing, balletomanes felt more certain that ballet would be equally represented in the *Times*. They also felt that because Macaulay was deeply knowledgeable about ballet, he would be able to write more critically about it. Macaulay wrote some of the toughest criticism ever to appear in the *Times* of New York City Ballet and its Ballet Master in Chief, Peter Martins. Describing City Ballet’s performances of Balanchine’s *Serenade*, a repertory staple, Macaulay wrote:

There is no sense in saying all ballerinas should dance this piece as Ms. Farrell did. But the heroic off-balance quality in which Ms. Farrell specialized, and which was the culmination of the impetus Balanchine had been developing since "Serenade," is now missing from all City Ballet accounts of the roles he created for her. This loss cuts a major dimension out of the whole repertory. Today's performances of such works render them safe, undisturbing, unchallenging.³³

³¹ Tomalonis, e-mail to John Rockwell.

³² Mindy Aloff, interview by author, Barnard Annex, 29 October 2008.

³³ Alastair Macaulay, “Off to London, But Not Packing Their Best,” *New York Times*, 9 March 2008, sec. AR, 9.

He continued by calling such performances “virtually anti-Balanchine.”³⁴ Such biting criticism of one of America’s leading ballet institutions put into print the unspoken anxiety in the ballet community about the future of ballet repertory companies. With these reviews, Macaulay proved that ballet companies could no longer slide by on reputation alone. However, while Macaulay is a great advocate for ballet, his writings express widespread anxiety about its future, as well as nostalgia for the great ballet choreographers of the past.

In many reviews for the *Times*, Macaulay expresses fear for the future of ballet as no great choreographers seem to be leading the field in a clear direction. He writes:

By the end of the last century ballet was looking more like a museum art than it had in more than 400 years. With the deaths of George Balanchine, Antony Tudor, Frederick Ashton, Kenneth MacMillan and Jerome Robbins, the ranks of world-class choreographers specializing in ballet looked thin or just empty. The three biggest names creating new ballets were Twyla Tharp, William Forsythe and Mark Morris: each, by ballet standards, in some way controversial and offbeat.³⁵

This article, which predicts the death of ballet, gives a concise history of the form from its beginnings four hundred years ago, through the ballet moderns, to the late twentieth century. No doubt, many important ballet choreographers between Balanchine and Morris have been left out of this successional model. Macaulay’s review follows Ann Daly’s model of “canon criticism” where criticism “becomes the enforcement of a set of standards regarded as universal and eternal, and, hence, objective...[that] articulate, defend, and (possibly) expand an established canon of masters and their masterpieces.”³⁶

³⁴ Macaulay, “Off to London.”

³⁵ Alastair Macaulay, “Master Builders of Ballet’s Future,” *New York Times*, 17 February 2008, sec. AR, 1.

³⁶ Ann Daly, “The Interested Act of Dance Criticism,” *Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), xxxiii.

Macaulay writes nostalgia for great choreographers into his neatly arranged generations. The museum model he uses is particularly poignant as one can imagine walls of dance masterpieces catalogued by style, decade, and choreographer.

The nostalgia that runs through Macaulay's review is to a certain extent a necessary part of writing the past. As anthropologist Kathleen Stewart writes, "Nostalgia is an essential, narrative function of language that orders events temporally and dramatizes them in the mode of "things that happened," that "could happen," that "threaten to erupt at any moment."³⁷ In this account, nostalgia is a necessary byproduct of language. It places the subject within the history he constructs through his recollection. Nostalgia schematizes ordinary events, engaging them with the present, and endowing them with the dramatic power of the threat of change and loss. Furthermore, nostalgia promotes the long-term memory necessary for the critic to make informed opinions about the present as it emerges out of history.

Nostalgia historically grounds the author and becomes increasingly important in periods of rapid change. Thus, while Macaulay is concerned with the future of ballet, he values new choreographers who, while innovative, have a solid traditional foundation. He praises choreographers who he believes will keep the ballet tradition alive, retaining the integrity of classical ballet while choreographing works that he sees as relevant to the twenty-first century. In an article titled "Master Builders of Ballet's Future," Macaulay writes, that after a period of stagnation, "The new millennium has brought to the fore two young men who are full-time exponents of ballet as an art both traditional and new."³⁸ He names Christopher Wheeldon, who was then poised to leave his position as resident

³⁷ Kathleen Stewart, "Nostalgia—A Polemic," *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 3 (August 1988): 227.

³⁸ Macaulay, "Master Builders."

choreographer at New York City Ballet, and Alexei Ratmansky, who had just announced he would be leaving his post as artistic director of the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow, as the two leading exponents of ballet tradition and innovation. According to Macaulay, these two men were about to set out on their own to change the face of contemporary ballet. Macaulay's praise for Wheeldon and Ratmansky is largely because they "build ballets that find accents and life within the traditional vocabulary of ballet."³⁹ Macaulay applauds these men who "choreograph from a broad and unclouded command of the classical-ballet lexicon."⁴⁰ This gives a clear picture of the value Macaulay places on tradition to articulate the future of an art form he views as undirected and in crisis.

Balanchine's death left the ballet world directionless and unprepared for the future as no new choreographers were set to inherit his position. Siegel writes, "For devotees of classical ballet...Balanchine's death was a shattering loss. Not only was there no choreographer alive comparable to him, no repertory to match what he created for the New York City Ballet, there was no real line of succession to preserve the craft he conquered."⁴¹ Indeed, Macaulay relies so heavily on Balanchine to articulate the past, he cannot envision a future without him. He writes, "While Balanchine was alive, modernity took precedence over tradition in City Ballet repertory; his choreography was the living epitome of New York modern. Now Balanchine is tradition, and it has been hard for anybody to know how to be modern in his (still radical) wake."⁴² Macaulay views Balanchine as the embodiment of modernity and twenty-five years after his death sees the future of ballet as bleak. Yet he continues to search anxiously for freshness,

³⁹ Macaulay, "Master Builders."

⁴⁰ Macaulay, "Master Builders."

⁴¹ Siegel, 65.

⁴² Macaulay, "Master Builders."

modernity, and innovation in ballet. He finds hope in Ratmansky, a choreographer whom he views as deeply connected to the Balanchine legacy and the traditional ballet vocabulary. Macaulay locates the future of ballet in the past, in neat categories such as “modern,” “classical,” or “traditional.” He writes for ballet’s future using a carefully bounded generational model that offers readers order in an anxious, chaotic era.

Macaulay keeps a close eye on tradition and uses the ideology of great generations of choreographers to construct a dominant master narrative in dance. While disappointed with American Ballet Theatre’s (ABT) productions of the ballet “classics,” Macaulay writes, “When performing works like “Company B,” however, it [ABT] does its nation proud. Since the 1970s and (especially) the '80s, this troupe has maintained the world's best record for transcending ballet by including works from America's foremost modern-dance choreographers.”⁴³ In this article Macaulay refers to the modern dance works that American Ballet Theatre presents as coming from “the greatest generation” of choreographers. In his writing, he recreates a model of generations of great modern dance choreographers whom he believes produced classics worthy of revival by leading ballet companies. He writes with nostalgia for a past when great choreographers, both ballet and modern, were still alive, and locates “historic” works as a source of strength for current companies.

Many, however, might take issue with Macaulay’s review, believing that ballet companies do not have the dancers to perform modern dance works as they deserve to be performed. The divide between modern dance and ballet runs deep, even in this age of fusion. Critics such as Macaulay are faced with the daunting task of categorizing

⁴³ Alastair Macaulay, “A Season Opener Equipped with the Greatest Generation,” *New York Times*, 23 October 2008, sec. C, 10.

amorphous dance genres, and therefore often revert to older models irrelevant to the contemporary dance world. Thus when Macaulay writes that American Ballet Theatre represents our nation when performing modern dance works by choreographer Paul Taylor, who still directs his own company of modern dancers, one could read his statement as claiming that ballet dancers dance Taylor works as well as modern dancers, that Taylor works are classics and should be danced by our nation's top companies, or perhaps that only a ballet company could represent America and "do our nation proud." Each of these claims pigeonholes dance according to genres and the subjective canon of dance masterpieces and master companies.

Macaulay's discussion of nationalism embodied by "classic" works of modern dance reads as a passé idea of the history of American dance. Macaulay's sense of "American dance" as rooted in historic modern dance is both colored by his perspective as a foreigner and also by older ideas of American dance as constituted by the "Big Four" choreographers,⁴⁴ of which Paul Taylor is a descendant. Macaulay repeatedly locates Americanism in choreographers emerging out of the "classical" modern dance canon. He writes of Merce Cunningham, a former dancer with Martha Graham, "American dance currently has no finer or more constantly rewarding export."⁴⁵ In this, Macaulay writes American nationalism into a particular and exclusive lineage of modern dance. Instead of reimagining the modern dance canon according to the present, Macaulay clings to older

⁴⁴ The "Big Four," Hanya Holm, Charles Weidman, Doris Humphrey, and Martha Graham, is a category that crystallized during the inaugural summer festival at Bennington College and in the subsequent writing of John Martin during the early 1930s. Martin promoted this group of choreographers almost exclusively, hailing them as the pioneers of American modern dance. Martin wrote that these four choreographers embodied "impulses of the modern spirit...Animated by the necessity for new methods along functional lines [they] were compelled to break away from the inertia of the aesthetic dance that opposed them." John Martin, "Introduction to the Dance," *The Modern Dance* (Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, Inc., 1968), 243.

⁴⁵ Alastair Macaulay, "Paris Flocks to a Cunningham Revival: Works that Remain Fresh," *New York Times*, 11 December 2007, sec. E, 1.

models. The ambiguous nature of old categories to signify in a new world leads to ruptures and critical divides. However, it is perhaps easier to cling to outmoded categories and to rely on an idealized past then to leap into the uncharted future.

The debate that runs through contemporary and “classical” ballet criticism is echoed in the critical debate over contemporary and “historic” modern dance. Contemporary modern dance is alternately called (post)postmodern dance, experimental dance, and downtown dance. The plurality of names for the genre alone indicates the unsuccessful struggle to categorize a style defined by difference, change, and individuality. In a controversial article for the *New Yorker*, critic Joan Acocella wrote, “Right now, New York’s “downtown” dance shows no engulfing trends, as it did in the nineteen-sixties and seventies (conceptualism and politics), or in the eighties and nineties (irony and politics).”⁴⁶ Just as ballet critics express anxiety about the trendless present, so the modern dance community is struggling to find “engulfing trends” to categorize the current era and shed light on a field in disarray.

Critics reviewing modern dance worry that historic works look dated and should therefore not be performed, which consequently means they might become lost from public memory. However, the current modern dance world seems to lack a new generation of choreographers with an overarching style to replace the “historic” generation. Acocella tries to label what she sees as a new generation, “The Downtown Surrealists,” since these labels help alleviate the confusion of plurality and lack of obvious unifiers in contemporary dance. Of course, labeling genres and noting current trends is to a certain extent an inescapable part of journalism, as dance critic Mindy Aloff

⁴⁶ Joan Acocella, “Mystery Theatre: Downtown Surrealists,” *New Yorker*, 8 August 2005, 94.

has pointed out.⁴⁷ Journalism in general puts things into categories because people read in a hurry and because of the conventions that operate in magazines and daily newspapers. However, caught in the trend to categorize, Acocella comes up with clever, quick-fix labels such as the “Downtown Surrealists.”

Acocella’s insistence on the uptown versus downtown dichotomy upset Tere O’Connor, whom Acocella dubbed the leader of the Downtown Surrealists. O’Connor echoed the modern dance community in feeling that this uptown/downtown divide is dated and no longer applicable to the New York dance scene. However, O’Connor, in his letter-to-the-editor response to Acocella, plays into the uptown/downtown slip by expressing that critics who review uptown ballet cannot understand or enjoy downtown dance.⁴⁸ O’Connor implies that there is an impassable rift between ballet and modern dance critics. This feeling overwhelmed the modern dance world when Macaulay was hired by the *Times* in 2007. The uptown/downtown split of critics and choreographers alike, which arose out of a physical divide between the styles of dance being created in New York’s uptown and downtown dance venues, has long ceased to exist in its original geographic sense. Yet the persistence of such an ideology speaks to the power of old dance categories that are continually employed in contemporary dance discourse, even as they no longer convey the same meaning. The frustration on the part of the critic who retains old categories in order to understand current trends speaks to the present anxiety of the unknown in the dance world.

⁴⁷ Aloff interview.

⁴⁸ Tere O’Connor, letter to the editor, 26 August 2005 <http://www.danceinsider.com/f2005/f1014_2.html> (15 November, 2008).

The world of contemporary dance has become increasingly fragmented, as even the phrase “contemporary dance” signifies a plurality of meanings. The problems of equating contemporary, downtown, and modern dance are articulated in the opening line of a recent review by Roslyn Sulcas, “There may be no better way to form a quick acquaintance with the New York contemporary dance scene than to spend an evening at the DanceNOW (NYC) festival.”⁴⁹ At this geographically and ideologically downtown dance festival, Sulcas indicates that there is something that constitutes both the downtown and the contemporary dance scene. Furthermore, she points out that in one evening the reader can form a general understanding of this category, by viewing a selection of artists that present, “many genres of work, creating an inclusive portrayal of a New York City that is bustling with dance makers at varying stages of artistic development: including young innovators just entering the scene, emerging and mid-career artists experimenting with new direction, and maturing artists bringing historical reference and significance to the art.”⁵⁰ In this mission statement for the festival, one finds an obsession with presenting dances that fit categories such as experimental, emerging, innovative, young, or historical, all grouped within the broader ideology of the postmodern or downtown dance scene. Such categories remain important to the critic who tends to “seek the fresh and the challenging” and who wants to “engage with art that bushes the horizon line in some way, either within a certain genre or against generic boundaries altogether.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Roslyn Sulcas, “At Festival, Quick Bites of Movements and Styles from 12 Troupes,” *New York Times*, 30 October 2008, sec. C, 4.

⁵⁰ “The Festival Produced by DanceNOW [NYC] in Partnership with Dance Theater Workshop,” <www.dancenownyc.org/festival.htm> (4 December 2008).

⁵¹ Daly, “The Interested Act,” xxix.

Just as questions of ballet's viability plague critics, so critics remain unsure of how modern dance's historic roots fit into the contemporary picture. Reviews abound announcing that historic modern dance is dated, and unable to retain its former power, while simultaneously recognizing its historical importance. Alastair Macaulay writes:

Its still easy to see that Graham was courageous, innovative, important. To say that she ranks with Isadora Duncan, Sergei Diaghilev, George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham as one of the five primary figures of 20th-century dance seems obvious, and I hope I can understand those who believe that she is the greatest of the five. But while it's easy to hail her historical importance, it's harder to feel her greatness as something still present.⁵²

Passages such as these show the critics' discomfort reviewing revivals, which are historically important but not necessarily relevant today. As critics acknowledge the influence of past generations on contemporary artists, they are confronted with the fact that no new generation has arisen today to take their place.

Reviews that rewrite the same categories time and again without offering new possibilities keep dance criticism tied to old concerns instead of advancing the field. In Claudia La Rocca's recent review of the Limón Dance Company she echoes Macaulay's review almost identically, "Any student of dance knows the historical importance of José Limón...But proving an artist's relevance on paper is a very different thing from proving it onstage."⁵³ La Rocca continues by giving a brief biography of Limón and asks, "How does a company built to serve an individual voice continue to evolve once that individual is gone?" While this is certainly an important question, it can only be asked so many times while retaining its value. Throughout the article La Rocca is concerned that the

⁵² Alastair Macaulay, "A Past that is Forever Reinvented," *New York Times*, 15 September 2007, sec. B, 10.

⁵³ Claudia La Rocca, "Keeping a Choreographer's Legacy Alive With History Lessons and Handstands," *New York Times*, 3 December 2008, sec. C, 3.

Limón repertory “reinforces the sense of watching old-fashioned” choreography and does not add up to anything innovative, “necessary or urgently felt.”⁵⁴ Despite this concern with innovation, La Rocca seems unable to find a fresh way to discuss this repertory and reverts to cliché questions about the validity of historic works in contemporary times.

In reviews such as these, La Rocca’s writing lacks the historical perspective that grounds dance criticism in the cultural aesthetics developed overtime. Larry Lavender, Professor of Dance at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, writes, “We need a dance criticism with a strong enough sense of history to tell us, in its aesthetic analysis and evaluation of a work, how the work borrows, adapts, appropriates, amplifies, or merely alludes to stylistic, expressive, and formal features, ideas and devices from past art.”⁵⁵ While the critic should also have the self-awareness to know when historical references are unnecessary, it is important that he retains a long-term viewing memory in order to integrate the historical perspective that adds additional layers of meaning to contemporary work.

Yet the historically grounded critic can often become trapped inside his own nostalgia. Reviewing Doug Elkins’ return to the stage after a nearly ten-year absence, Roslyn Sulcas wrote a review that points to the importance of generations and the tendency to group work in critical writing. In the 1990s, Elkins received critical praise and was lauded as potentially the next big choreographer to follow Mark Morris. By locating Elkins within a master narrative that moves through Morris to the present, clarity is imposed on an ambiguous dance world. Furthermore, Sulcas enjoys Elkins’ work for

⁵⁴ La Rocca, “Keeping a Choreographer’s Legacy Alive.”

⁵⁵ Larry Lavender, “Post-Historical Dance Criticism,” *Dance Research Journal* 32, no. 2 (Winter 2000-2001): 100.

its “fabulous capacity for movement invention; his fun-house way of collapsing together, then teasing out different movement traditions; and his clever, funny physical references to choreographers from Martha Graham to Trisha Brown.”⁵⁶ Sulcas is nostalgic for a choreographer who in his heyday in the 1990s brought together many of today’s well-known downtown choreographers, including David Neumann, Richard Siegel, Jennifer Nugent, David Parker, and Nicole Wolcott, effectively continuing the generational model of choreographic inheritance. However, she also enjoys his movement because it refers to even older modern dance traditions and collapses different movement vocabularies together, inventing something fresh while referring to something tried and true. Like Macaulay, who admires Wheeldon and Ratmansky for their blend of ballet tradition with innovation, so Sulcas locates the future of modern dance with choreographers who blend historical references with invention.

Despite this impulse to categorize, many dance works presented throughout New York today defy placement in any particular category. One such company is Jawole Willa Jo Zollar’s Urban Bush Women. On its homepage, the company has posted a review that reads, “There have been dance troupes built around anthropological investigations; there have been dance troupes that grew out of political movements. But Urban Bush Women are in a category of themselves. In fact, given the breadth and freedom of their art, they defy categorization.”⁵⁷ This company is alternately written about as a feminist dance troupe, a (post)modern dance company, and an African-American/black dance company. “Multicultural” dance companies, a label frequently

⁵⁶ Sulcas, “The Hills.”

⁵⁷ Quotation from *New York Newsday* < <http://www.urbanbushwomen.org/home.html> > (25 November 2008).

applied to companies using ethnic “world dance” traditions and pastiche layering techniques, are examples of companies that defy easy categorization, and present problems for critics who have trouble grouping them into standard dance genres. In this review of Urban Bush Women, the critic was at a loss for words to describe the company. Nonetheless, the critic felt compelled to make sense of the pluralistic influences in Zollar’s style of contemporary dance.

According to a recent interview with Zollar by Claudia La Rocca, cross-cultural collaborations “between American and African artists are rare and getting rarer.”⁵⁸ La Rocca expresses nostalgia for an idea of artistic collaboration and cross-cultural possibilities that are in danger of fading away. The article offers hope that the Obama administration will renew possibilities for artistic collaboration across cultural borders, expressing anticipation for a new category of dance-collaboration that could offer fresh meaning and direction to the dance community. Yet La Rocca’s claim is troubling since several contemporary choreographers are working on similar collaborations. For example, Reggie Wilson and his Fist & Heel Performance Group are currently engaged in a collaboration with Congolese choreographer Andréya Ouamba and his Company 1^{er} Temps based in Dakar, Senegal. The collaboration, tentatively titled “The Good Dance,” will have its New York premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival in 2009; just one year after Zollar’s collaborative work with another Senegal-based company was presented at the Festival.⁵⁹ That La Rocca, an active critic for the *Times*, seems unaware of such a similar collaboration shows how fragmented and

⁵⁸ La Rocca, “Brooklyn and Senegal, Talking Across Cultures,” *New York Times*, 16 November 2008, sec. AR, 34.

⁵⁹ Reggie Wilson/Fist & Heel Performance Group
<http://www.pentacle.org/Artist_Roster_Reggie_Wilson.htm> (25 November 2008).

pluralistic the contemporary dance world has become. Furthermore, that she is so quick to reflect on the present as something quickly passing away, speaks to the power of nostalgia to dramatize the present.

Such nostalgia, and the critical categories it endows, has important cultural implications in this unsteady and transitional phase of contemporary dance. Referencing the literary criticism of Mikhail Bakhtin, Kathleen Stewart writes of revolutions and renaissances, “These are moments of disruption and displacement that gave rise to a wild cultural proliferation...these are moments of dramatized, embodied spectacle, moments of the mimetic excess that comes of watching to see what happens in a world subject to eruptions.”⁶⁰ Moments of transition and rapid change lead to a piling of cultural fragments and an excess of material that signifies a multiplicity of meaning in a world where meaning is constantly in flux. This excess results in a wild cultural proliferation as memories of things pile on top of one another creating scattered new meanings that no longer refer to the categories that once contained them. Watching the dance world to see what will happen next, the critic writes this excess into reviews in the form of nostalgia for a time when categories and explanations signified only one meaning; when modern dance meant only the “Heroic Generation”⁶¹ and did not have to be qualified by myriad dulling explanations. Of course there was never a time when a category held only one

⁶⁰ Kathleen Stewart, *A Space at the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 63.

⁶¹ The decade of the 1930s when the “Big Four” were first creating their signature styles is “often called the heroic age of modern dance because so much was accomplished in so short a time, against considerable odds, through the commitment and personal sacrifice of a small group of extraordinarily talented individuals.” Since the field was still new and consisted of only a small group it is often retrospectively seen as a more unified period in the history of American modern dance, despite the highly individual voices of these choreographers. Nancy Reynolds, and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 142.

meaning. However, nostalgia frequently has the effect of retrospectively recreating a unified, idyllic reimagining of the past.

Reflective of her own ethnographic writing, Stewart asks, “What if, following [Walter] Benjamin, I imagined my writings as a series of citations on collected fragments that, in my very search for an echo of the original, remain always charged with my own concerns and marked by the fleeting recognition of the myriad dimly known encounters buried in its scaffolding.”⁶² In the same way the critic imagines the choreographer as someone who cites a whole collection of dance fragments amassed through years of practice, bridging tradition with innovation, so the critic mediates fragments of information built upon years of dance viewing and critical discourse. Boggled down by nostalgia for rapidly disintegrating images of dance, the critic refers to the past and perpetuates old categories, often losing site of the original referent. However, if the critic could begin to inhabit the reflective space Stewart asks us to create, he might move beyond the nostalgic categories that weigh on his writing. Wading through dense piles of old words, the critic might free himself from categorical fragments to create something completely new.

Critical nostalgia is amplified by the transitional state of newspaper journalism in the United States. Both Acocella’s controversial “Mystery Theatre” review as well as Rockwell’s “The Intimate, Unified Universe of Dance” received immediate response online, in the form of letters, blogs, and articles for online publications that questioned the categories and trends outlined by these journalists. Rockwell’s article became the month-long subject of an online dance community forum, *Ballet Talk*, where anyone

⁶² Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road*, 72.

desiring to talk about ballet over the age of sixteen can join in the conversation.⁶³ In the current age of internet journalism, critics no longer have to wait for a publication to go to print and instead can post immediate responses to any review. The internet has also allowed the dance community at large to voice its opinions quickly to the public with unprecedented, far-reaching effect. Furthermore, as websites such as *Ballet Talk* include younger members into their community, many young people living outside of New York receive their first images of the New York dance world via the amateur musings of online critics.

The move to internet journalism and downsizing of daily newspapers is an overwhelming trend in contemporary journalism. Mike Gasher, associate professor in the department of journalism at Concordia University in Montreal, has said, “If the medium of a different generation of journalism students was the newspaper or the six o’clock newscast, for this generation it’s online.”⁶⁴ With the rise of internet journalism has come a proliferation of amateur journalists writing sporadically, for no pay, and to a limited, “niche” audience. Critics who worked steadily for years are now receiving buyouts or pink slips from their publications, as newspapers decrease the number of reviews and words allotted to each critic. In New York City alone the *New York Sun* recently went out of business, there is now only one dance critic at the *New York Press*, one writing sporadically at the *New Yorker*, and the *Village Voice* went from having a substantial

⁶³ “Psst! Want to Talk About Dance. Welcome to Ballet Talk!” <www.ballettalk.com> (25 November 2008).

⁶⁴ Eva Salinas, “Medium of the New Journalist,” *Financial Post*, 4 June 2008.

dance section to publishing a single review every three or four weeks. After long careers, dance critics are now watching their profession disappear.⁶⁵

The proliferation of amateur journalists is yet another anxiety that today's professional critics must face. As Elizabeth Zimmer, a *Village Voice* critic and editor for fourteen years, explained in an interview, a professional critic is someone who is experienced, edited, fact-checked, and also someone who writes on a daily or weekly basis, whose taste and opinions the reader becomes familiar with, and whom the reader makes a space for in their life, expecting to find reviews at regular intervals when they open the paper or magazine. Without this constancy, the reader cannot be assured of the quality of the journalism they read. Amateur critics abound online, and professional critics are finding it increasingly difficult to find paying jobs. Without ties to any particular publication, the critical dance community has splintered across the country. The critical base centered in New York has further fragmented due to the academization of the dance community as many dance writers have opted for academic careers at universities instead of unsteady careers in journalism.

In the 1980s one could identify a community of established, reputable New York journalists actively writing on and following the New York dance scene, which included Deborah Jowitz at the *Village Voice*, Arlene Croce at the *New Yorker*, Anna Kisselgoff at the *New York Times*, Marcia B. Siegel writing for several publications and teaching at New York University, and Tobi Tobias at *New York Magazine*, among others. Dance historian Diana Theodore even outlined a New York School of Dance Criticism centered around Siegel, Croce, Jowitz, and Nancy Goldner in her book *First We Take Manhattan*:

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Zimmer, phone interview by author, 4 November 2008.

Four American Women and the New York School of Dance Criticism. While grouping these four women together into a New York School is contestable, the very fact that Theodores could choose from so many powerful critics, writing regularly both in newspapers and magazines, and teaching dance criticism, speaks to the active critical dance community in New York in the 1980s. Today as many of these critics have retired, lost their jobs because of downsizing, or left the field for universities around the country, a new generation of critics to lead the field has yet to appear. With the rise of internet journalism the field has become so fragmented that it is unclear whether such a close knit community will ever emerge again. This is a huge loss to the dance community since an active community of dance critics working in New York allows for a unique dialogue between critics and choreographers.

Part of maintaining a dialogue with the dance community is knowing which performances the critic should attend and which the critic should review for publication. Thus, while Zimmer felt that the journalist certainly does not need to cover all performances at all times, she expressed great upset that with current downsizing the critic is not able to review the three to four major performances taking place each week. Furthermore, as less and less space is allotted to dance, newspaper editors are forced to rely on the “news you can use” motto.⁶⁶ Papers do not want the precious few words on dance to be wasted on a performance with a short run that no one reading the review will be able to see. The journalist is therefore forced to review “the one big thing at the Joyce” that will run for two-weeks instead of being able write about a one-night only

⁶⁶ Zimmer interview.

performance at the Kitchen that may be more experimental, innovative, or interesting than a well publicized performance on the same evening at a larger venue.⁶⁷

Yet another problem in print journalism is the lack of funding for dance companies. If dance companies cannot afford to buy newspaper advertisements then the editor, who often must make decisions based on the newspaper's most important advertisers, is not able to allot as much space to dance. When Elizabeth Zimmer was asked about current trends in contemporary print journalism, she reiterated the diminishing amount of space allotted to dance in newspapers, the inability of journalists to make careers out of writing as they once could, the fact that most reviews of performances end up online, and the amateurism of the internet.⁶⁸ The mission statement of the Dance Critics Association founded in 1973 reads, "The Dance Critics Association...seeks to further the identity of dance criticism as a profession; to offer its members solidarity; and to provide the means for exchanging information and exploring fresh approaches to critical writing."⁶⁹ This mission statement emphasizes that the critical community must be a professional, career-oriented, and unified profession if critics are to thrive, grow, and offer creative new approaches to dance writing. The function and professionalism of dance criticism has been deeply questioned since the dawning of the internet age. This anxiety among even the most prominent dance critics and editors about the future vitality of their field has become an increasing concern since the late 1980s.⁷⁰

Nostalgia and anxiety for the future of the dance world, and the often dated critical categories this nostalgia engenders, is amplified by the transitional state of

⁶⁷ Zimmer interview.

⁶⁸ Zimmer interview.

⁶⁹ "About DCA: General Information" <<http://dancecritics.org/aboutdca.html>> (25 November 2008).

⁷⁰ Siegel, "Virtual Criticism," 66.

newspaper journalism in the United States. As critics who honed their skills writing in newspapers and magazines across the country are becoming obsolete, losing jobs, and turning to universities for security, the critical dance community that used to exist in New York has fractured. As contemporary critics are forced online, they find themselves becoming forerunners of an emergent field, much as John Martin became a pioneer of newspaper dance criticism in America eight decades ago. Some critics are beginning to embrace the internet, attempting to professionalize the field and explore the new possibilities it offers. For example, Movement Research's online *Performance Journal* devoted an entire issue to problems and questions in contemporary dance writing. In 2002 Gia Kourlas and Sarah Michelson, editors of the journal, wrote, "Obviously there is dissatisfaction with the state of dance writing in New York City. While the purpose of this journal isn't to offer any concrete solution, we believe that the material covered—which includes essays by dancers and choreographers as well as interviews with three major critics—will encourage further discussion on the topic within the dance community. And not just behind closed doors."⁷¹ Michelson and Kourlas confronted the problems of dance writing in New York and used the online community as a forum where problems could be openly discussed with the hope of finding new options.

As of 2006 the *Performance Journal* expanded its pages to include a blog that would allow for greater community involvement. Referencing *Performance Journal* and the ballet blog spot *The Winger*, Kourlas wrote for *Time Out New York*, "Not every dance blog makes for good reading, but in the immense universe of the Internet, two can be wholeheartedly recommended for the way in which they provide insight into the

⁷¹ Gia Kourlas, and Sarah Michelson, "From the Editors," *Movement Research Performance Journal*, Fall 2002 <<http://movementresearch.org/performancejournal/pj25/25index.html>> (4 December 2008).

distinctly different worlds of ballet and experimental dance.”⁷² Kourlas’ article explores the richness that can come from nontraditional, informal writing on dance. Critics such as Kourlas who maintain active careers in print journalism while keeping abreast of developments online offer a bridge between these two worlds during this transitional period.

Watching as the dance world abounds with movement styles and small-scale performances, critics pile meaning on top of meaning, category upon outmoded category, in an attempt to synthesize what they see. Stewart writes, “Nostalgia rises to importance as a cultural practice as culture becomes more and more diffuse...as culture takes on the power of “distance” that comes of displacing speakers—the power to flatten distinctions, to blur genres.”⁷³ The critic, whose field is in the process of rapid change, finds the critical community becoming constantly more diffuse as writers are displaced from their publications. In this situation where critics must reflect upon their ability to create meaning in a field that is quickly disappearing, nostalgia inhabits its full power. Nostalgia becomes a dramatic tool for the critic who can either use it to create or to blur genre distinctions.

Returning to Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” we remember, “To articulate the past historically...means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”⁷⁴ In moments of danger, of rapid change which threatens to uproot the past, we hold onto our memories. This is all the more poignant given the fleeting nature of dance performance which can never be recreated exactly as it was. The critic

⁷² Gia Kourlas, “Two Websites Invigorate the Dance Experience,” *Time Out New York* 545 (March 9-15, 2006).

⁷³ Stewart, “Nostalgia,” 227.

⁷⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.

reimagines history in the present, and gives memories order in contemporary life.

However, perhaps it is with a new generation of amateur dance critics writing online that a fresh perspective will emerge in dance journalism. These young critics, who are not personally linked to the dance categories that have permeated print journalism for decades, might breathe fresh life into the field and offer the dance community new possibilities applicable to the twenty-first century.

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