

2017

Appreciating Dance: The View from the Audience

Aili W. Bresnahan

University of Dayton, abresnahan1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Bresnahan, Aili W., "Appreciating Dance: The View from the Audience" (2017). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 174.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub/174

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlange1@udayton.edu.

Dance Appreciation: The View From the Audience¹

By Aili Bresnahan

Dance can be appreciated from all sorts of perspectives: For instance, by the dancer while dancing, by the choreographer while watching in the wings, by the musician in the orchestra pit who accompanies the dance, or by the loved-one of a dancer who watches while hoping that the dancer performs well and avoids injury. This essay will consider what it takes to appreciate dance from the perspective of a seated, non-moving audience member. A dance appreciator in this position is typically someone who can hear and see, who can feel vibrations of sound through their skin, and who can have other human, kinaesthetic responses and perceptions as well as the cognitive ability to process them. This appreciator is also someone who is a person with a history that may or may not include experiences of dance that have conditioned his or her responses to watching dance. Based on both this experience, and the skill and capacity to focus, pay attention, make judgments, and convey those judgments, there are different types and levels of audience appreciation. Let us consider three:

1. Innocent Eye Appreciation
2. Dance-Trained Appreciation
3. Critical Appreciation

Innocent Eye Appreciation is inspired by both Arthur C. Danto's chapter in *Beyond the Brillo Box* (1992), "Animals as Art Historians," and his essay, "The Pigeon within Us All." The first essay uses painter Mark Tansey's 1981 painting, *The Innocent Eye Test*, to demonstrate the absurdity of asking a cow to identify art-historically relevant features or properties in paintings of cows and bulls. The second uses the analogy of a pigeon that can "see" certain pictures in painting but that can identify only those things that belong "to The World of the Pigeon, which only partially overlaps Our World." To put this in seated, non-moving, human audience-member terms, Innocent Eye Appreciation is the most basic level of appreciation. The appreciator is a human being who has all the responsive and perceptual capacities of someone with *homo sapien* biology. In addition he or she is also a person in something like Joseph Margolis' usage of the term person: someone with a self that has learned how to perceive the work by being part of a particular culture with certain practices, modes of viewing, and traditions. This person's capacity to perceive and understand will depend on the education, environmental influences, and interactions with others he or she has had. In most cases a child will have had less enculturation than has an adult but virtue of having less time in the world in which to experience and learn. And yet at The Innocent Eye level the World of the Appreciator is one that is innocent of substantial prior concert dance experience, either as a dancer or as a dance spectator. This does not mean that the person is innocent of all artistic or other relevant experience – just that they are substantially innocent of the experience of watching dance that is performed for artistic appreciation. At this level the audience member is similar to the first-time attendee of a baseball

¹ This essay is a development of Section 7 of my earlier piece, "The Philosophy of Dance," that appears in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/dance/>>.

game – he or she may not understand much of the game visually and need the rules explained in order to have some idea of what to look for. But even if the Innocent Eye appreciator does not receive any guidance at all there are some things that he or she will be able to “get” just by virtue of watching, hearing, sensing, and being in the presence of a moving body that is at least in some aspects not unlike his or her own. Thus there is a certain amount of neuromuscular, kinaesthetic response available to this appreciator, as well as things that he or she may notice that touch on cultural themes or forms that appear in his or her non-dance areas of life experience. Thus he or she may experience similar (although lesser) vibrations through the floor that the dancer jumps on or from the music by virtue of their common biology. He or she may also feel a lifting sensation while watching a dancer’s soaring leap, which may be due to previous experiences of being lifted off the ground (such as being carried by a parent, for example) even if the person has never done a grand jeté.

The second category, Dance-Trained Appreciation, is the sort of appreciation that people who have substantial dance training have. In her article, “Practice Makes Perfect: The Effect of Dance Training on the Aesthetic Judge,” Barbara Montero shows how trained dancers are able to feel and experience nuanced kinaesthetic responses to dance that the non-dance-trained appreciator cannot, creating an enhanced, bodily appreciative experience that is not available to those without dance training. Montero points out how a trained dancer, for example, may feel certain aesthetic properties such as power, precision, or grace, kinaesthetically. How, precisely, this kinaesthetic process works is the subject of debate. Is a sort of “metakinetic transfer” or neuromuscular “mirroring” taking place, either via mirror neurons or via some other instinctual, imitative process? Does the trained dancer experience emotional empathy along with a memory of how it feels to dance those same steps? Is there a somatic awareness in the trained dancer, in which the dancer is subjectively aware of interior processes such as proprioceptive feedback of where his or her limbs are positioned in space, that connects with the appreciator’s engagement with dance as an artform? Is something else involved, and if so, what? The causal processes are debated, but the fact that something like this occurs is undeniable and, indeed, is specifically mentioned by such dance scholars as Montero (mirror neurons), John Martin (metakinetic transfer due to “muscular sympathy” or “inner mimicry”), Noël Carroll with Margaret Moore and with William Seeley (on how cognitive science and neuroscience might bolster the idea of some sort of metakinetic transfer), Susan Foster (kinaesthetic empathy), Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (Merleau-Pontyan bodily engagement with the world), and Richard Shusterman (the sort of somatic awareness that he has coined “somaesthetics”). To go back to the baseball analogy, if one knows intimately the heft of a bat in one’s hands, how it feels to swing, and what it is like to see the ball coming towards you, the baseball spectator is likely to get more satisfaction from the “thwack” of a solid connection between bat and ball and to experience bodily sensations like an accelerated heartbeat or more rapid breathing that responds to it. The baseball observer may also already know, both intuitively and experientially, just how far that ball is likely to go. The same is true of a trained dancer who watches dance. One can “feel” – with all the physical and cognitive abilities involved in that “feeling” – dynamics such as energy, tension, and release. One also knows, as a trained dancer, which of these feelings result in what he or she is seeing: he can more fully anticipate and appreciate certain experiential qualities of movements that are then perceived as grand, exquisite, clean, and the like. Something similar may occur in those arts that involve an embodied person in the presence of another embodied

person in the act of performing a known movement, whether that be in performance art, music, theatre, or another art form.

Some philosophers, however (such as Renee Conroy and David Davies), do not think that the sort of additional experience dance training provides aids dance appreciation to a significant degree. Others (such as Graham McFee) hold that they are not relevant to dance appreciation at all. Those who deny that dance-trained kinaesthetic awareness aids dance appreciation usually hold this position because of how they construe “dance appreciation,” which for them means to appreciate dance with the sort of perspective on dance as an artform that takes place in dance-critical practice. These philosophers therefore see “dance appreciation” as falling within something like the Critical Appreciation framework below.

Critical Appreciation in dance involves the sort of reflective interpretation that is used in critical analysis. This sort of interpretation has as a precondition the ability to appreciate dance but it includes the further exercise of determining what such appreciation means in terms that can be conveyed to others. A critical appreciator who writes dance criticism, for example, will consider what the appreciation means in terms that are relevant to dance audiences. He or she may consider, for example, what the piece means in terms of one or more of the following (in no particular order): 1) the choreographer’s intention, 2) the contributions of the performers (dancers and musicians, if any), 3) the quality and contributions of other collaborators to the production (including music, sets, lighting, etc.), 4) the fitness of the venue for the performance, 5) audience response, 6) relation of the dance or performance to dance historical and/or socio-cultural context, and 7) the artistic and/or aesthetic quality of the performance. Ideally, dance critics are those who are both able to make judgments about considerations such as those above and to convey them in intelligible form. Such interpretation and criticism may be the outcome of dance appreciation, but this is just one of the many uses to which dance appreciation can be put. One might, for example, appreciate dance, and do so to a high, experiential level that includes both bodily and cognitive awareness, but that does not put such experience in relational context with other dance performances. To appreciate dance, then, is not necessarily to interpret it for critical purposes, although it may result in such an outcome.

Both Dance-Trained Appreciation and Critical Appreciation are at a higher level than Innocent Eye Appreciation in the sense that they involve capacities, abilities, and additional experience and knowledge that the Innocent Eye observer lacks that would enable her to have a richer, more complex, and more nuanced appreciation of dance. The Innocent Eye observer can, however, lose her innocence through repeated exposure to dance as an audience member, a participator, or both. Critical Appreciation, as set forth here, includes a desire, intention, and ability to make relational connections to other dance experiences and to convey them to others. Between Innocent Eye Appreciation and Critical Appreciation, then, will be a continuum of appreciative practices that lie somewhere between the two but is neither one nor the other fully. At some point along this continuum, for example, there may be an Innocent Eye Appreciator who has witnessed enough dance to make certain rudimentary relational connections, but may not intend to either convey them to others or is not able to formulate them clearly enough to do so.

Is Dance-Trained Appreciation ever helpful for Critical Appreciation? Montero says “yes,” Conroy and Davies seem to say “not significantly,” and McFee says “no.” Monroe C. Beardsley

and Julie Van Camp hold that criticism is deeply connected with both aesthetics and the cultural context in which dance-appreciative practice takes place. Thus it seems that they, too, might agree that the categories of dance-trained appreciation and critical appreciation cannot be distinct.

This essay sides with Montero on this point. If it is true that awareness of audience response is part of Critical Appreciation (feature 5) provided earlier, then there seems to be no reason why the response considered could not include that of trained dancers. The fact that dance criticism need not include insights from these responses does not mean that to include them would be irrelevant to appreciating all that dance can be and do.

A related question is whether Dance-Trained Appreciation is *necessary* for the sort of Critical Appreciation that leads to competent dance criticism. Here the answer seems to be no, at least in practice. Arlene Croce, for example, esteemed dance critic for *The New Yorker* from 1973-1998, considers herself a “dance illiterate” since she has never studied dance formally or been on stage. Dance criticism illiterate, however, she is not. She has attended numerous dance performances per week and has become what we might call an Expert Eye for what is there to be seen and interpreted from the non-trained dance but dance-cognizant perspective. Indeed, since the purpose of most dance criticism is to include audiences and potential audiences that may or may not have dance training, critics tend to focus on the features of the performance reviewed that can enhance the experience for any viewer. Intimate acquaintance with dance performances, styles, techniques, and practices may be necessary in order to do this but the overriding purpose is often to give the prospective audience member some idea of what to expect if he or she attends future performances, and enough information to gauge whether or not to see this production or something else competing for his or her time and resources instead.

In conclusion, then, audience appreciation in dance is never the passive experience of streams of images upon one’s retinas, accompanied by sound waves that penetrate the ear canals, and vibrations that affect one’s neuromuscular system. An audience member who is appreciating dance is a self who knows, at a minimum, and as Danto would point out, that he or she is watching a dance performance, with whatever background knowledge that might entail. At the very least an appreciator can also make inferences and analogies to his or her non-dance experiences. In addition, he or she might have further knowledge, background, and experiences that are dance-specific in nature, as someone with either substantial or extensive experience watching and/or participating in dance. The causal processes involved and the extent to which this additional experience results in additional knowledge and understanding of the nature of dance is currently being studied through a number of different methodologies and fields of inquiry; from dance and performance studies, dance philosophy, and epistemology, to such fields as cognitive science, neuroscience, the biological sciences, psychology and others. In short, the mechanisms and the meaning involved in audience appreciation of dance is a fruitful area for further research.