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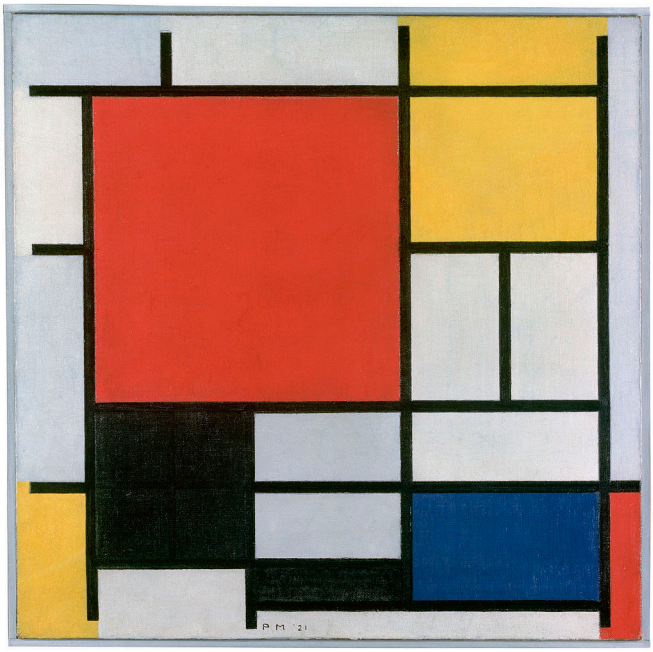
Against Orthodoxies



Piet Mondrian, Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue, and Black, 1921, oil on canvas, 59.5 cm x 59.5 cm.[1]

I DISCOVERED George Orwell's post-Hiroshima, early Cold War essay "Politics and the English Language" as I prepared to enter a doctoral program in dance.[2] It taught me that original thinking was going to have to be hard won, independent—my own choreography rather than learned repertory. Throughout my teaching career, I have often recommended this essay to students as an antidote to scholarly writing steeped in what Orwell calls "ready-made phrases"—jargon, orthodoxy, phrases that automatically spring to mind (as one tries to replicate certain postures), easy ways of tagging notions to spell one's brand. Chez Orwell, such convenient phrases save us the trouble of actually thinking through ideas, that is, picturing the concrete circum-

stances of the words or playing out their implications. "Every such phrase," says Orwell, "anaesthetizes a portion of one's brain."[3]

Imagine advising doctoral students, "Never use a long word where a short one will do," or "Never use. . . a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent"—two of Orwell's six thumb rules for subverting insidious words that practically think themselves (as he characterizes the phenomenon).[4] In sum: "If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy."[5] In our age of political orthodoxies—right and left—Orwell's apology for independent, original thinking seems as relevant as ever.

Today, at every turn one encounters demagogues short-circuiting the thought process with slogans, advertisements intended to stir visceral response rather than rational thinking, claims that the other party is politicizing what was never intended to be politicized, and polarized, unbridled certainty. What ever happened to scientific skepticism or self-doubt as values?

Recently, I attended a panel at a dance studies conference. The buzzwords were so thick, and the presenter breezily buzzed through them at such a rapid pace, that I could not follow her argument. A second panelist presented her ethnographic study of a conservative popular-culture venue with such humor at her subjects' expense—and commanded such regular laughter from the audience—that it was clear she counted on the near-complete homogeneity of the crowd. Had the sponsoring organization so successfully indoctrinated us with the party line that not a wisp of outrage, excepting my own, was stirred?

"I hate academies," wrote Anna Sokolow, famously. "I hate fixed ideas of what a thing should be, of how it should be done."[6] Was this what she meant?

The fun-loving presenter had chosen for her object of study a culture diametrically opposed to her own. Her habitus, by the way, is the elite university, where the salaries and benefits are excellent. (As a member of the academy, I know.) And she recited its orthodoxies like a catechism. Significantly, she did not reveal the aims of her study to her interviewees or unmask her own political orientation because, she stated, she would not have felt safe in the environment she was studying.

It was not just the ethics of deception that disturbed me here. I suppose one could make a (tenuous) case for that. It was the utter lack

of empathy, the inner sneering, and the intent to capitalize, literally, on other people whose education and class were presumably beneath one's own. Quietly, after the panel, I asked the researcher, how could she have a (fair) conversation with someone for whom she had no respect.

I thought ethnography was all about challenging one's own preconceptions, exposing the uncontested in received knowledge, and turning assumptions on their head. Yet the mode of inquiry at hand seemed more like the smug affirmation of one's political position. Is not the root of contemporary ethnography self-interrogation? It saddens me to see academia caught up in the political frenzy of the moment, when I believe at heart it should be the crucible for clear thinking. We seem to have lost track of the idea that critical thinking applies first to our own conceptual regimens and practices.

Today's mantra: I think politically, therefore I am. Worse, the contrapositive: if I do not think politically, I am not. You're either with us or against us. Is there no middle ground? Moreover, not every research paradigm is political; nor should it be.

Let me explain. Most people would agree with the notion that people self-define. According to existential thinkers, to acquiesce to other people's definitions of our selves would be to demonstrate bad faith. In other words, identity is not something tacked onto someone, but rather something that one chooses, espouses, or cultivates. What if a researcher does not see power relations as central to her research question, that is, if she chooses not to self-identify as a political theorist?

Phenomenologists argue that research benefits from grounding in lived experience. Research originates in the fields, values, orientations, and interests of individual researchers. It emerges from people invested in particular points of view and situated in particular circumstances, just as knowledge depends on particular knowers. Would we go so far as to say that all lived experience is political—that is, situated in power relations? (This, of course, is different from saying that any lived experience could be framed in terms of power relations.)

The real problem is, if we assert that every paradigm must privilege politics, are we not one step away from insisting that every paradigm address our politics—the issues that we consider important? That is, every research question must be framed in such a way as to address *our* concerns? But what if one wishes to study dance and spirituality,

or choreo-musical relationships, or the eusociality of honeybees and its application to the behavior of *corps de ballet*?[7] While the political *implications* of any study might be drawn out, this may not be where the researcher's primary interest lies. Do we really want to establish a compulsory and coercive research environment?

Older models suggest tolerance as an abiding value. Today, the ferocity of our political beliefs seems to enshrine intolerance: some positions are so wrong as to require stamping out. Are we moving toward censorship and thought control? Is not this the totalitarian world Orwell critiqued in his futuristic, visionary thriller *1984* and his ironic political allegory *Animal Farm*?



Fast forward to 2020. After years of doctoral advising, I am now editor-in-chief of *Dance Chronicle: Studies in Dance and the Related Arts*. Orwell's cautionary essay about good, clear writing and the development of original ideas rings truer than ever to this editor.

Recently, *Dance Chronicle* received a manuscript analyzing a ballet that contains a rape scene. One reviewer dismissed the article out of hand because the author's analysis did not refer to recent debates about representations of rape in ballet. After the #MeToo movement and flash mobs protesting rape, asked the reviewer, how relevant is a positivist analysis focusing on aesthetic and historical concerns of such a ballet? Still relevant, I would argue, if the analysis has historical and aesthetic insight to offer. The author had grounded the analysis in the class issues and social ferment of its period, scaffolding it with texture and nuance obscured by the present.

Let me give another example of our tendency to read narrowly, in terms of our own immediate political concerns or agendas. Mark Franko's essay "What Is a Classic?," published by the *Massachusetts Review*, initially sparked responses musing upon its sidebar reference to the rape scene in Jerome Robbins' *New York Export: Opus Jazz*. Franko focuses his critical analysis on what he reads as the work's implication that African American culture, specifically jazz, was integral to American concert dance. He sees the 1958 ballet as "explosive" because it linked black culture, youth culture of the 1950s, and social action—an intriguing claim.[8] The immediate responses to Franko's argument zeroed in only on the rape scene, raising a question for the editors: As dance scholars, critics, company directors, and performers, how should

we treat works that depict violence against women, such as Robbins' *Opus Jazz*? Thus, the editors sensed the importance of opening a forum to explore the issues involved.

First, to grapple with the question head on. Should we invite dramaturges into the process to illuminate the issues at stake for performers, reconstructors, and spectators? Of course. Should we invite scholars to unpack and critique the ballet as a whole and the rape scene in particular? By all means. Should we expect that critics should consider the contemporary relevance of the issues brought forward? Definitely. As a dance historian, I happen to believe that reconstructions of choreographies from the past should receive a lot more contextual framing, historicizing, and unpacking than they currently do. However, what we should not do is to advocate that a ballet with a rape scene either be expunged from the repertory or be adapted to suit current tastes and interpretations. That, in my opinion, would be attacking the problem with a sledgehammer. Crucially, the legality of the latter course of action would be questionable, as copyright owners and other rights-holders certainly exist—as do stakeholders with competing interests.

Should we then *insist* that such ballets be subjected to contemporary feminist analysis? That, too, in my opinion, would go too far. Now one might say that *Opus Jazz* begs for feminist critique, or posit that Robbins used male-female rape as a way to narrate other ills in society—including male-male rape or brutal persecution of homosexuality—but to *demand* any particular mode of inquiry seems unwarranted and undesirable. Moreover, does anyone actually doubt that Robbins' purpose was to denounce rape and other forms of violence against persecuted others? I suspect the real problem, the social rift or open wound that the unchanging showcasing of works such as *Opus Jazz* exposes, is the long-term lack of representation of women's voices as choreographers at the New York City Ballet.[10]

To cite a hypothetical example, Cristina de Lucas brilliantly analyzes Kenneth MacMillan's 1960 ballet *The Invitation*—which contains a rape scene—in the context of the Angry Young Man movement, postwar British drama, and particularly John Osborne's plays.[9] Such an argument deserves to be evaluated on its own terms. If one were to misconstrue the author's intentions, that is, to read the analysis as a dismissal or repudiation of #MeToo, that would seem to be excessive.

Historians have frequently critiqued *presentism*—a tendency to

make blanket judgments extrapolating from the present rather than to plumb the layered complexity of the past. As Lynn Hunt, then president of the American Historical Association, said in 2002: "Presentism, at its worst, encourages a kind of moral complacency and self-congratulation. Interpreting the past in terms of present concerns usually leads us to find ourselves morally superior . . ." She advised historians to seek a productive tension between querying the past and re-envisioning the present. Attitudes of humility, wonder, and respect for people of the past (as well as the present) should inform our research.[11] As an editor, I have found that just as many essays suffer from *presentism* as suffer from insufficient theoretical critique centered in present-day discourses.

Perhaps I see the matter differently because *Dance Chronicle* has also published an article about the One Billion Rising flash mob performances that decry rape—an essay argued in well-grounded theoretical terms—in addition to featuring several articles on the special theme of dance and trauma.[12] (And I, too, find the recent viral video of a flash mob performing "Un violador en tu camino" [A Rapist in Your Path] profoundly moving.[13]) It is not an either-or question for me. As an editor for the past thirteen years, I have come to value diversity of perspective and a wide range of treatment of subject matter. They enrich me and broaden my understanding—benefits I think they offer to readers as well. To me, the idea of rejecting an article because it does not give sufficient emphasis to, or share, my political stance—or, a fortiori, because it takes a dissenting position—would be anathema. Should reviewers as well as editors be accountable to a scholarly community for, if not their impartiality, at least their ability to weigh research by its stated aims? I find it narrow-minded when a reviewer judges a manuscript by how she would approach the research topic. I would much rather see good mentorship—the kind that encourages the independence of mind of the author.

I am an ardent feminist, and feminism is deeply embedded in my own writings. For example, I've grappled with the literary roots of violence against women in the French Romantic ballet.[14] And violence against women is not just an abstract concept for me. However, I truly believe that my job as an editor is to provide a forum for a broad spectrum of perspectives. Not only can strong historical-contextual analysis and well-grounded theoretical critique co-exist, but also, when used appropriately, they can enhance one another. Positivism

and post-positivism complement one another; to oppose them creates a false dichotomy.[15]

Shall we continue on the path of self-righteous insularity, reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's Big-Endians and Little-Endians, thus trivializing the matters of which we speak? Or shall we forge a new path forward?

As academics, do we want to reinforce or disrupt narrow, partisan polarization—a phenomenon that is truly frightening in American society today? I speak of the tendency to position and stereotype another speaker and then argue against that positionality. Open-mindedness is essential to the development of a true scholarly discourse and a healthy academic environment. A "conversation" is just that—not a monologue or a harangue. Prerequisites are empathy and, as Judith Butler proposes of an international feminist coalition, the recognition that we are not "fixed and frozen in our various locations and 'subject positions.'"[16] Moreover, as educators we must realize that, in order to facilitate growth in our students' perspectives on a subject, we need to establish a culture of listening, so that voices can be heard in dialogue and honest exchange. Most people's perspectives evolve over time, given the opportunity to express viewpoints openly.

Big Brother is still watching. One way to subvert the political monster's stranglehold is really to listen to one another. We ought to develop our insight and empathetic (embodied) understanding in equal proportion to our skills of critical thinking. Further, dance is full of the "pre-linguistic experience" that forms the metaphoric substratum of language,[17] so we dancers, of all people, should never find ourselves at a loss when we seek our *own words* to think through ideas.

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Notes

[1]This contemplative painting reveals Mondrian's aesthetic of Neo-plasticism, which originated in the search for simplicity, harmony, and sanctum after the chaos and devastation of World War I. Mondrian desired to purify and pare down the aesthetic experience to its elemental components: color (ultimately, primary color), line, square, grid, and geometric abstraction.

[2]George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in ed. Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa, Virginia Clare, *Language Awareness*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin's

Press, 1982): 41–52.

[3]Ibid., 50.

[4]Ibid., 51. Ready-made phrases will "even think your thoughts for you," says Orwell (48).

[5]Ibid., 52.

[6]Anna Sokolow, "The Rebel and the Bourgeois" (1966), in ed. Jean Morrison Brown, Naomi Mindlin, and Charles H. Woodford, *The Vision of Modern Dance: In the Words of Its Creators*, 2nd ed. (Hightstown, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1998), 108.

[7]Kate Mattingly and Laura Kay Young, "Cooperation, Communication, and Collaboration: The Sociality of a *Corps de Ballet*," Dance Chronicle, 43, no. 2 (2020), 132–44.

[8]Mark Franko, "What Is a Classic?" *The Massachusetts Review: A Quarterly of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs*, April 19, 2019, https://www.massreview.org/node/7419

[9]Joellen A. Meglin, *Ruth Page: The Woman in the Work* (New York: Oxford University press, forthcoming).

[10]Cristina de Lucas, "Kenneth MacMillan and the Subject Matter of Ballet," *Dance Chronicle* 42, no. 2 (2019): 170–94.

[11]Lynn Hunt, "Against Presentism," May 1, 2002, *Perspectives on History: The newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2002/against-presentism

[12]Chuyun Oh, "The One Billion Rising Flash Mob: From Unspeakable Trauma to Danceable Pleasure," *Dances of Loss, Grief, and Endurance in the Face of Trauma, Dance Chronicle* 42, no. 3 (2019): 296–321.

[13]"Feminist Flash Mob Performs Viral Chilean Anti-Rape Anthem NYC," Jan. 10, 2020, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=czOQ5ARFFHI&fbclid=IwAR095f_t8XLfaWRPBa9twdt4flPqpHvgPXWzqU8QA-qq6sO6-3AOUVRIEHPs

[14]Joellen A. Meglin, "Behind the Veil of Translucence: An Intertextual Reading of the *Ballet Fantastique* in France, 1831–1841. Part One: Ancestors of the Sylphide in the *Conte Fantastique*" and "Part Two: The Body Dismembered, Diseased, and Damned: The *Conte Brun*," *Dance Chronicle* 27, nos. 1 and 3 (2004): 67–129 and 313–71.

[15]For a glimpse of the debate between positivist and post-positivist approaches to dance history, see Richard Ralph, "On the Light Fantastic Toe: Dance Scholarship and Academic Fashion," *Aspects of Dance: Essays in Honor of Selma Jeanne Cohen*, *Dance Chronicle* 18, no. 2 (1995): 249–60; and Janet Adshead Lansdale and Richard Allen Cave, "The 'Congealed Residues' of Dance History: A Response to Richard Ralph's 'Dance Scholarship and Academic Fashion'—One Path to a Pre-determined Enlightenment?," *Dance Chronicle* 20, no. 1 (1997): 63–80.

[16]Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 47.

[17]Susan Jones, citing George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in *Literature, Modernism, and Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196.