

Rarely does a dance evoke those political ideas floating around the scene so that they actually take you somewhere worthwhile in the dance itself, but that's where I found myself while watching Neil Greenberg's evening at P. S. 122. Greenberg revived *MacGuffin or How Meanings Get Lost* (1987) and presented a new work, *Destiny Dance*. This young choreographer can always be trusted to confront ideation with dance (sometimes he uses verbal texts printed on Brechtian placards or projected à la Godard), but this is the first time I've followed a line of his thought that I could characterize as political. Using such information, I was able to orient myself to certain features of his work, elements that might have seemed unremarkable. Perhaps that's how ideas should occur in dance, especially in dance as comic as Greenberg's—as devices for framing and highlighting, pointing up what might otherwise pass unobserved.

Greenberg's dances have been interesting for some time for their tightness of rhythmic architecture, a firm fit that is achieved without raw repetition or diminution of the dance values. Greenberg's rhythmic sense has a flexibility in the relation of large and small rhythms, so he does not have to depend on insistent accumulation or scattershot effects. In this concert for the first time I noticed how much that "tightness" of fit is both various and substantive. Greenberg can make his elastic rhythms read as comic reflex and mental agility. They mean something.

This time around, *MacGuffin* made me think of Siegfried Kracauer's discussion of *The Detective Story* (1921-5). For Kracauer, the stylizations of Conan Doyle and Maurice Leblanc were accurate descriptions of a contemporary reality—capitalism's unreal, reified world of commodity-defined rationality. On the fictional detective's generic triumph over the criminal Kracauer wrote: "It is not the force of the event that takes one's breath away but the opacity of the causal chain which determines the fact." Greenberg's comic point is similar: opaque clue becomes transparent fetish becomes bare evidential datum.

As a gloss, *MacGuffin* is interesting as a type of fantastical critique of the detective story form (the title comes from Hitchcock). Kracauer's solemn analogies between literary genre and social reality (his leaps of comparison are always breathtaking) are not quite as witty as equivalent points made by G. K. Chesterton in his *The Club of Queer Trades* (1905; Kracauer lacks Chesterton's narrative trapdoors), and today's readers have to be



Neil Greenberg's *Destiny Dance*. (Photo: Dona Ann McAdams)

over-sensitive to the connection between the stylistic traits Kracauer describes and their post-modern appropriation in the French New Novel. Over thirty years and across two cultures, studied tropism passed from fashionably oppressive to chiefly liberating meaningfulness.

Greenberg doesn't pause over socio-political and literary ideology. His impulses are closer to those of Jorge Luis Borges (for example, Borges' derivation of his story "Death and the Compass" from Chesterton's "The Loyal Traitor"). As for dance analogies, Greenberg was once a member of Merce Cunningham's company, so his Baudelairean taste for *le transitoire*, *le fugitif*, and *le contingent* is earned. The younger choreographer's comic spirit allows us, if we choose, to read *MacGuffin* more conventionally as a satire on the failure of the ordinary analytical intelligence in the face of normative, multi-dimensional reality (rather as Kracauer shifted his position on the cause of capitalist society's ills in his essay "Girls and Crisis" in 1931; by then it was a dreary undersupply of true rationality that was the villain).

Greenberg's new *Destiny Dance* fascinates in the way it accomplishes what feels like a dialectical argument while dispensing with the theatrical props of *MacGuffin*. The four dancers (Ellen Barnaby, Christopher Batenhorst, Kristy Santimyer, and the choreographer, all costumed in scarlet) appear and disappear through the openings between gray

moveable flats, panels which themselves are eventually moved forward and to the side, framing the dance in new ways. The initial emphasis is on the sudden appearance or unpredictable disappearance of the individual, an impulsive, centrifugal rhythm that can remind one of Cunningham's *Sounddance*.

A dialectical argument necessitates terms or propositions. Greenberg can now posit his immediate dance ideas with such clarity, his variations—qualifications, contradictions, alternatives—create discreet, local layerings of movement information. He has invented a weighted, loping legato movement for *Destiny Dance*, pressured, lingering, curvilinear. In Greenberg's longest solo, there are pendulum swings of the legs and lunging recoveries that emphasize tests of balance and reach—passing discoveries that do not interfere with the big, breathing pulse of the work. How can pulse and dance architecture constitute an argument?

There are four large contrasting parts or movements in *Destiny Dance*: 1) an expository introduction of the four dancers as they appear and disappear through the openings and sides of the flats; 2) a "shadowplay" for the quartet as front lighting throws their outlines upon those flats, which are eventually moved forward; 3) a transitional section with sound effects (wind) and fragments of music (Zeena Parkins' plaintive strings) in "one" downstage; and 4) an opening into space as center flats are removed to the wing area and the

dancers invade the depths upstage, unencumbered at last by walls and doorways. The dance progresses from dance apparitions summarily posited and effaced, to imageries of fatal consequence (those looming shadows designed by Michael Stiller), to proximate evocations of change and adaptation, to some last dispersal into new possibility and opening out. The tight quartet has become a loose federation through the dance spectacle's unpredictability, inevitability, and flux. In the final moments of the work, the expanded scale of the dance movement has a suggestion of new dignity and strength achieved.

Greenberg makes the viewer sense dance rhythm as freshly entissued in time. It's as though the choreographer had found a way to demonstrate simultaneously the lure of what leftist choreographers term "reification" and a possible reply to its seduction. The argument is worked out in the deliberately "naïve" terms of concert dance and in terms of overall structure. Greenberg's achievement is in the integration of dance detail and larger gesture. Such an architecture is rarer on today's dance scene than you might think. In much "advanced" theater and dance there is an assumption that the adventurous audience appreciates the precipitate leap from evoked topic to exquisite detail, from general point of view to privileged moment in performance, happy to find itself free of the formulaic connections and shaping coercions of conventional theater. Greenberg provides all that – and the mediating architectonics. His movement ligatures extend the rhythmic idea and challenge perceptual forms of immediate nostalgia and anticipation, shifting tone from shivery recognition to comic irony.

In the opening movement of *Destiny*, the dance materials are traded between the dancers, who keep appearing, disappearing, replacing one another and reforming in new combinations. The constant change in rhythmic emphasis (sudden impertinent allegro crossings, long-held sculpturesque groupings) allow the choreographer a true unpredictability but, underneath, the steady pulse maintains itself. In the second, front-lit movement, the dancing space is reformed and the refracted crossings continue, but Greenberg's own long solo (almost three minutes of virtuoso directional switches and big shifts in gravitational center) also indicates continuity. In the third large section, the vaudeville of entrances and exits is pressed to the very lip of the playing area and comes under close inspection. And then the tension is resolved in the spatially expanded dance details of the final movement. In each case, something endures. We find a context for creation and destruction, a through-line despite fatality, a close-up on temporal distances, and then,

with the final open spaces, redefined time and locus.

The classic study of reification in György Lukács *History and Class Consciousness* (1922) held that such mental commodification involves our perception of time. Reification turns time (flow, process) into space. Through the first three movements of *Destiny Dance* the viewer's fearful awareness of pressured temporality is no little source of the pleasure he takes in the dance. (This would be the equivalent of the dialectical thesis.) But Greenberg weans the viewer from that easy appetite and teaches him another use for time in space. (The steadying element in each case – pulse, solo, close-up – would serve as antithesis.) The demonstration (and the eventual destination) would be impossible were it not for the skill with which the choreographer turns our awareness of his rhythmic elements into tools for perception. The audience watches in rapt concentration. That, after all, was Lukács' point: the mind rejects reified reality through consciousness of the very chaos of reality and eventually achieves awareness of itself. The terms of opposition (change/constancy, effectuality/mediation, distance/close-up) are held in paradoxical suspension, one against the other, throughout the first three movements of *Destiny Dance*, and then the terms are synthesized in the fourth section of the work.

Such was the allegory I was able to make of a dance under certain categories of socio-political analysis. That allegory may have nothing to do with Greenberg's aims. Dialectic may be the last thing on his mind. But such a category of interpretation throws into relief areas of his dance that I feel more comfortable with under its rubric. For example, how else explain the effect of "extra-territoriality" that Greenberg's solos often possess: the sense that their terms arrive from a distant place, become familiar against a contrasting background from whose "laws" they are exempt? (Think of Madame de Villeparisis at Balbec in Proust.) Also, continuing the formal analysis, I am able to note that the opening movement of *Destiny Dance* itself contains four sections, like a miniature version of the entire piece. A formalist always makes his fans work hard, and I have the satisfaction of a night's work as I watch. How does he do it? The strophic grip and real variety of Greenberg's frames may be his secret, combined with a judicious epistemological emphasis: how we see what we know.

Whereas much post-modern dance seems struck by the forcefulness of the virtuoso dancer's image on stage, Greenberg is able to make the dance worthy of the striking performer. I sometimes think that for much of the avant-garde, the dancer's image is too sentimentally "real," like Kracauer's fascination

with the Lumières' "ripple of leaves" in photographed reality or with the Tiller Girls dance troupe. Reading Kracauer and Lukács on the weaker susceptibilities of the mind always reminds me of the passage in *The Captive* where Proust's narrator watches the sleeping Albertine: "I felt at such moments that I had possessed her more completely, like an unconscious and unresisting object of dumb nature." Similarly, watching much new "advanced" dance is like watching an attempt to chasten the full appeal of the performer not by making his or her dance material as rich as that appeal but by rendering it simpler, un-prescriptive, uncontesting. Greenberg takes another tactic: full responsibility for the performer's image and beyond. Achieving the mind's self-consciousness may be more difficult than we think, and reification's snares may be numerous, insidious, and demand the most personal of confrontations. Reification may work its wiles differently in dance and may require another kind of stratagem.

Dance is not only the art form that shows how silly the form-and-content distinction can be. Good dance is rich enough to prevent the senses' easiest itemization or quantification of its data. That's possible only in degraded or ideological dance. In a work like *Destiny* the prodigal wealth of dance information is indeed the best opportunity for the mind to confront and overcome artful chaos. Here, the concept of fatality comes to seem either a booming generality or perhaps another kind of mystery than we had thought, perhaps one utterly free of what we know of the mind's stratagems. We are granted the comedy of the demystified fetish and the glimpse of mystery through the veritable roominess of the material. Greenberg finds many ways to integrate his own performance effects into the group style; his big solo is twice invaded by other dancers. Kristy Santmyer shows a percussive range in addition to her beauty of plastique. Christopher Batenhorst, always a whirlwind of an allegro technician, has several fine adagio moments, including a passage where he partners (in the sense of supports) Ellen Barnaby.

By placing the processes of reification beneath an epistemological lens, Greenberg renders the operations of the mind a means of objective criticism, the sensuously perceived glory of dance turned back on itself to become probe. Abstract concept confronts immediate contingency, the concrete performance datum collaborating with inherited modes of perception. Some strength is found here, and something is also relinquished. As C. M. Cioran put it in *The Fall of Time*: "Anyone who is carried away by his reasoning forgets that he is using reason, and this forgetting is the condition of all creative thought."