무용예술학연구 제21집 여름

Dancing on the Page

Deborah Jowitt
Dance Critic, *Village Voice*

I. The History of Dance Criticism in America

As Americans are frequently reminded, ours is a young country. Unlike Asian nations, we have no ancient traditions of dance that were honored by poets or painters. The rituals of the indigenous tribes were mocked, degraded, and suppressed by colonizers from Europe, and those who wrote about Native American dances, beginning in the early 20th century, were primarily anthropologists or perceptive travelers.

The story of dance criticism in the United States is inextricably linked with the status of dance in American society. It's important to bear in mind that a powerful strain of Puritanism shaped how dancing of all kinds was perceived from the nation's earliest days. Certainly, during the 18th century, the well-to-do inhabitants in cosmopolitan cities, such as Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and Charleston, attended balls and hired French dancing masters to teach them the latest steps and coach their children in grace and decorum. By the 19th

century, America was producing accomplished ballet dancers, like Augusta Maywood, who charmed the French critic, novelist, and bon vivant Théophile Gautier when she bounded across the stage of the Paris Opera.

But from America's earliest days, clergymen inveighed against dance during their sermons and wrote pamphlets condemning it: Men and women dancing together on social occasions were courting damnation, and those who performed on stage were already damned. When Fanny Elssler, the toast of the Paris Opera, arrived in New York in 1840 for a tour of east-coast cities, the public went wild over her, but some ministers told their congregations that she was a tool of Satan. Newspapers reported her every move, Fanny Elssler souvenirs were sold, and men named horses after her. But serious, informed critical appraisals were lacking.

When Carl Van Vechten, who became a noted photographer and critic of the arts, first saw ballet during the 1910 New York performances of Anna Pavlova and Miikhail Mordkin and their small company, he had no experience in explaining what obviously enchanted him and resorted to sentences that strike us today as awkward: "Pavlova twirled on her toes. With her left toe pointed out behind her, maintaining her body poised to form a straight line with it, she leapt backward step by step on her toes." He also identifies the ballets he reviews by their composers, rather than naming their original choreographers ("Adolphe Adam's *Giselle*," "Delibes' ballet *Coppelia*") and complimenting Mordkin on how well he had "arranged the steps for all the dances."

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, one writer, H.T. Parker, the music critic of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, was a beacon of intelligence and sensitivity. He saw dance with keen eyes and recorded his observations in evocative prose. Of Isadora Duncan in 1908, he wrote that "As she moves, her body is steadily and delicately undulating. One motion flows or ripples, or sweeps, into another, and the two are edgeless. No deliberate crescendo and

climax ordered her movements, rather they come and go in endless flow as though each were creating the next."

But most of those who wrote about dance in daily newspapers in those years made no distinction between dancing in the music halls and that performed on concert stages by artists like Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. Often, their smart-alecky prose focused on peppy chorines displaying well-shaped legs as they kicked high, and they judged dancers on the basis of vivacity and sex appeal; spirituality, the seemed to think, belonged in church, not on the stage. John Martin, who became the first full-time dance critic of the *New York Times* in 1927, once recalled that, before he took up that job, someone on the paper's staff would come into the city room where all the writers sat, waving a pair of theater tickets and calling out, "Who wants to review the kickers tonight?" The person who called out, "I do!" might be a sportswriter, a music critic, a theater critic, or any staff writer who wanted to take his girlfriend out on the town.

Occasionally, in the United States, as elsewhere, a dance critic has become an advocate for a form that he or she senses the public misunderstands or is puzzled by. Martin is one of several notable examples of advocacy criticism. He championed the emerging modern dance in New York - writing knowledgeably about major innovators such as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman. His criticism countered the uncomprehending sarcasm that oozed from the writing of many of his colleagues. One critic described Graham classic 1935 solo, *Frontier* as "High priestess Martha Graham's surrealistic fence act."

During the 1940s, Edwin Denby, the *New York Herald Tribune's* dance critic, wrote as a brilliant advocate for ballet. His articles and reviews delighted those who were already ballet fans. But they also occasionally addressed people who thought that every arabesque or *bourrée* might carry a specific

meaning, and worried that they were not "getting it." "Susceptibility to ballet," wrote Denby encouragingly, "is a way of being susceptible to the animal grace of movement." In other words, if someone one enjoyed watching dolphins leaping or young people dancing at a party, he or she could easily come to understand that ballet, however unnatural it might seem, is a way of organizing and heightening our natural responses to movement and how we attribute to it feelings that we can't always put into words. Many people, I'm sure, came to understand and love the plotless works of George Balanchine because of the ways in which Denby helped them to see those ballets.

One can find a parallel to Martin's championing of early modern dance in Jill Johnston's writings in the 1960s about what became known as postmodern dance. The radical experiments of New York's Judson Dance Theater often induced hostile reactions from audiences and critics alike. Johnston's reviews in the *Village Voice* were a striking corrective to the view that performances by the group of artists that included Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, and Robert Rauschenberg "weren't dance," or seemed unplanned, mindless, and self-indulgent. Through smart insights and lively, slangy prose, Johnston helped readers to understand the ideas, formal structures, and queries about the nature of art that shaped the new dances.

Advocacy criticism is not always necessary or desirable, and for a critic to publicize a single artist for personal reasons is unethical. But to help the public to see deeply into a work - even though the writer's response is inevitably filtered through his or her own sensibility - is one of the critic's responsibilities. And that responsibility is best approached not by preaching or lecturing on the page but by making a dance sound vivid and interesting. And this is where my own view of criticism will begin to color what I am expressing in this paper.

II. The Practice of Dance Criticism

1. Why description matters in dance criticism?

In her essay, "On Your Fingertips: Writing Dance Criticism," the critic and historian Sally Banes mentioned four primary elements that, in her view, constituted the building blocks of a dance review: description, interpretation, evaluation, context. Banes didn't advocate that a given review should balance equally - or even contain - all those elements, merely that, in varying combinations, most were present in critical writing. Earlier in the twentieth century, writers tended place most of the emphasis on evaluation and interpretation with very little description, whereas many of us who began writing in the 1960s felt that a kind of evocative description was necessary, both to support opinion and to convey the flavor of a dance. The practice involved developing our skills in observation and improving our ability to use words in a way that would illuminate what we had seen.

There are two reasons for this emphasis on description (and later, I will try to deconstruct this word in order to enlarge its meaning); one is the noted ephemerality of dance. Last year, when preparing a lecture on criticism, I decided that the practice was akin to standing in a river watching fish swim by and trying to grasp them with my hands. (Pleased with this analogy, I mentioned it to my husband. He said, "Does that mean a bear would be a good dance critic?") The fishing image came to me because we have to catch dancing as it swims by us. We can't contemplate a live performance the way we would stand before a painting - getting its impact, backing up a bit, looking at it from another perspective, thinking, analyzing. We can buy a reproduction of a painting, but videos of dance are still scarce. A piece of choreography may spend much of its life as a virtual object: glimpsed in photographs, the

subject of discussion, memory, and critical writing. So it seems to me crucial for the reviewer's to evoke the feeling-tone, style, structure, and imagery of a dance -- and do it with passion. Criticism becomes a handmaid to recorded history.

Edwin Denby was a primary influence on critics of my generation, and that influence may have been transferred to a younger generation as well. Denby was a poet as well as a critic, and he could make readers see a dance, or a moment in a dance. He could pinpoint what was remarkable about a particular dancer, speaking for example of Tamara Toumanova's "large, handsome, and deadly face, her sword-like toesteps, her firm positions, her vigorous and record-high leg gestures - and. . .her bold and large style of dancing." If there is such a thing as a "New York School of Criticism," as Diana Theodores proposed in her 1998 book *First We Take Manhattan* - an examination of the writings of four New York critics (Arlene Croce, Nancy Goldner, Marcia B. Siegel, and me) - it owes a great deal to Edwin's example.

The other possible reason that those who began writing in the 1960s cultivated their powers of observation and description can be traced to the art being written about. Much of what we were seeing in New York then - Balanchine's ballets, contemporary dances by Merce Cunningham, or the experimental work by younger choreographers - avoided narrative and emphasized movement and form, or, in Balanchine's case, movement and form in relation to music. Whether we wrote for daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, magazines, or more scholarly quarterlies, we felt the need to convey what Susan Sontag, in her influential essay "Against Interpretation" referred to as the "sensuous surface" of a work, rather than exploring the choreographer's psyche or interpreting every gesture. Even when writing about a choreographer like Martha Graham, it became important not just to recount the archetypal story she was relating, but to analyze how she was

relating it. Sontag's use of the word "sensuous" strikes me as crucial in terms of writing about dance, since it is a physical art and, to varying degrees, kinaesthesia plays a role in how we perceive it.

At a 2005 conference of The Congress on Research in Dance (CORD), on a panel honoring Marcia B. Siegel, the art and dance critic Gay Morris presented a paper titled "The Institutes for Dance Criticism and the Emergence of an Alternative Critical Writing." In the 1970s Morris had attended two three-week summer workshops for dance critics - one that Siegel directed in California and one that I directed at the American Dance Festival. In contesting the label of "formalist" - often applied pejoratively to criticism that emphasizes analysis and description - Morris spoke of the daily movement sessions that began the day in both programs. These were not dance classes, but sessions in which the participants experienced aspects of movement - rhythm, dynamics, space - through simple tasks that even a non-dancer could accomplish in his or her own way. Morris credited Siegel's teaching and the bodily experience of those classes with enlarging her own understanding of dance by heightening her sensitivity to what she observed while sitting in a theater (Morris also set those classes in the context of the political volatility of the 1970s, the art work of the time, and the theoretical writings focusing on the body that were published in that decade by Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault).

Even in the writing of history, a mysterious process of kinaesthesia and retrospective vision can bring dancers long dead to partial life. In doing research for her forthcoming book about Loie Fuller, Ann Cooper Albright reproduced the many yards of fabric and the wands that Fuller used to manipulate them and tried to move as Fuller had to move. She did this not to imitate Fuller, but in order to understand in her own body the tremendous muscle power and timing it took to transform the enveloping silk into

apparently weightless flowers and flame

In that 2005 panel, after quoting from Siegel's reviews of the 1970s, Morris ended: "This is a criticism that draws on a rich language of metaphor and attention to the body in movement, not simply to paraphrase what is seen on stage, but to evoke the viewer's own sensuous and, through it, emotional response. I am not sure what we should call such a criticism - perhaps 'sensuous,' perhaps 'corporeal' - but we certainly need something that more adequately mirrors its aims than 'formalism' or the even more impoverished word, 'description'."

"Description" doesn't mean describing a dance the way a police officer would report a crime scene. A blow-by-blow account of which leg lifted and which arm bent and when a dancer fell to the floor wouldn't be interesting to read, and would misrepresent the truth of the experience. In any case, our responses to what we see on stage are inevitably personal, and our writing reflects that fact. The critic interposes himself or herself between the reader and the subject written about - offering not: "the thing in itself" but "the thing as I see it." That act of seeing refers not just to the lens of the eye but to the lens of the soul, of the whole physical, spiritual being. We bring to the act of writing not just our experience of dance but our experiences of the world. We cannot be truly "objective;" we can only take into account our prejudices and our cultural conditioning.

On some level, then, description involves interpretation. Of course, there are certain incontrovertible facts to be perceived and noted while watching a dance: either there were two people on stage when the curtain opened, or there were three. Obviously, a critic has to get those facts right. A man and a woman are dancing together; she is on pointe, and he is supporting her some of the time. We recognize that many of the steps are from the ballet lexicon. However, not everyone will interpret these "facts" in the same way. The

feeling of the duet may not seem exactly the same to one viewer as it does to another, although both may correctly notice that it is slow and smooth. One person might focus on the fact that the man is manipulating the woman, and that she is passive; the other might see primarily the woman and the way she is unfolding her limbs with the man's support. Both views may be true; on that particular night, watching those particular dancers, these two hypothetical critics "see" the scene accurately but differently. Both may use metaphors to enliven and clarify our vision. Perhaps one speaks of a teacher and a pupil; perhaps the other speaks of a blossoming flower. They could take their interpretations to another, and riskier, level, assigning characters and motivations to the two dancers. But at every stage of analysis, both need to anchor their interpretations in what happened. If one critic, having made up his mind about beauty, blocked out the moment when the man wrenched his partner around and turned her upside down; or if the other critic, having decided the man was in total control, discounted the moment when the woman left him and danced on her own, both writers are in danger of misrepresenting the choreography. The point for us critics is to avoid falling so in love with our own first impressions that we eliminate from our minds everything that does not support those impressions.

Whether in contemporary scholarly criticism or newspaper reviews, the writing that I find most persuasive evokes through words and through the rhythms and shapes of sentences what the writer has seen and felt. A highly skilled critic like Siegel or Croce, or Joan Acocella can recreate with enviable flair what she experienced while in the theater. Here is a passage from an article that Acocella wrote in The New Yorker (in January 2004) about the great tap dancer Savion Glover:

> As he's singing, his feet start moving in place. The tapping here is like lace, complicated but still ingratiating. Then, having convinced us that he's just a

nice little hoofer, Glover stuffs his microphone in his back pocket and starts laying down the business. This is not like lace anymore. It's like those eighty-step equations which math professors need three blackboards to write out. The rhythms declare themselves, then change, then take flight, then zoom off in a different direction, then circle back, then take off again. You try to keep track; you manage for a while. When at last he slows down to a steady clomping, you're grateful. He's giving you a breather.

2. Why Dance Criticism changes?

Critics, like artists, are products of their environment and the times in which they live. Our very words and language structure reflect the usage of our day as indelibly as our ideas reflect current taste. Dance writing changes in response to developments in the art itself. In America, during the1960s and 70's, it seemed important for critics to focus on the movement discoveries, innovative structures, and radical ideas about art that choreographers were investigating. They weren't telling us the stories of their lives; they were telling us what mattered to them in life and art in very ingenious ways.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, it has become less useful to view a work with the same focus we adopted in the two previous decades. Postmodernism - in the sense that the term has been used in relation to architecture, design, literature, and the visual arts - seeped into contemporary dance and even, in some cases, into ballet. Just as the figurative element returned to painting, narrative and emotion - albeit presented in new ways - returned to choreography. The strategies of postmodernism began to engage many dancemakers: pastiche, historical reference, appropriations from popular culture and other cultures, the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated "texts" to produce new meanings, and queries about the nature of meaning within a work. In many performances these days, objects, texts, videos, and digital

manipulations create layers of significance. Many compositional strategies of the 1960s (such as collage) are enlisted in the service of drama. If a dancer bathed onstage during that earlier decade, it might be to question what could be a dance and what (if anything) couldn't; if a choreographer were to bathe onstage today, it would probably be to suggest getting rid of an impurity or washing away memories or recollecting a childhood scene. Critics have to scramble to keep up - to search for significant relationships (or purposeful lack of them) between seemingly disparate texts.

For instance, Matthew Bourne's revision of *Swan Lake* (currently touring Australia with its all-male swans) conflates a 19th-century ballet classic with a cynical and irreverent vision of Britain's royal family. Bill T. Jones, in his 1990 *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*, merged elements of Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous novel about slavery in 19th-century America, Leonardo da Vinci's fresco, personal stories of male oppression by several women in his company, the biblical tale of Job, a scene from a play about racism, and an unscripted onstage debate with a Christian minister, in which he disputed the benevolence of a God who could allow (create?) the AIDS epidemic.

In addition, the field of dance has grown and broadened its scope. New sorts of inquiries into race and gender need to be taken note of. With the globalization of contemporary dance, critics have opportunities to see not only, say, "classical" Indian dance forms like Bharata Natyam but contemporary experiments based on traditional styles. Movement experimentation flourishes in unexpected places, like large state-run ballet companies; William Forsythe deconstructs the dancerly body not in shabby lofts but in huge, light-filled studios with salaried performers.

When it becomes important for a critic to consider context, history, and meaning, the process alters. I now often find myself employing strategies I've

applied to reviewing works from other cultures. In discussing traditional dances from Bali or India or Korea, for instance, I've always needed to balance what I saw and felt with what I learned about these styles through reading and other methods. When I attend a performance of Korean masked dance, for instance, it helps to have read a translation of the plays, or at least to know the stories, even though the performers' body language and tone of voice can still tell me a great deal. Similarly, some contemporary works in my own country can send me to my bookshelves or the Internet.

Critics often assume certain roles, or are asked to assume them by the publications they write for. The role can be that of a consumer guide, who advises people what performances are worth spending money on. Some critics seen themselves as judges, determining whether a particular work of art is "great" and treating others as if they were viruses threatening the health of the field (I've often felt like reminding people that bad art has never, to my knowledge, killed anyone). At times, a critic, especially one who writes for a dance publication, assumes the perspective of a teacher - suggesting, perhaps, that a choreographer would do well to change the ending of a dance or cut a movement that she or he finds unlovely. And dance presenters and companies often wish that a critic wrote more like a press agent.

In my experience, wholeheartedly assuming one of these roles can lead to unimaginative, clichéd prose. While press agents may quote from my reviews, I do not view myself as a press agent, and I try not to write like one. While a choreographer may learn something from a review of mine, I don't write as a teacher for artists. While my opinion may have some influence on readers, I don't write as a judge who determines which works deserve to succeed and which to disappear. The best critics, it seems to me, write from the perspective of knowledgeable people, who simply want to share their perceptions and opinions about the art form that they love, hoping to stimulate readers to think

about events that they too have seen or may see.

III. The Current Issues in Dance Criticism

I began to write regularly about dance in 1967. At that time, there were only two types of dance criticism: long and short, the former for quarterlies and weekly magazines, the latter for the daily newspapers. Some people made a distinction between "reviews" and "criticism," but I have read profound criticism in reviews for daily papers, and shallow ones in scholarly journals. In the last couple of decades, the field of dance scholarship has developed amazingly. In journals, in anthologies, and books, in the conference proceedings of organizations like the Congress on Research in Dance (CORD) and the Society of Dance History Scholars (SDHS), dance and the dancer's body are presented within new - often controversial - critical, cultural, and epistemological parameters, scrutinized through the lenses of Feminist Theory, Queer Theory, Literary Theory and so on. The new scholarly writing can be exhilarating, and it has helped dance to gain credibility (long denied) in the intellectual establishment. A vocabulary has proliferated in the Performance Studies departments of universities to cope with new perspectives - sometimes, ironically, producing prose impenetrable to the common reader.

If I am not fond of jargon, it's because I value the power of fine prose to convey experiences and ideas in imaginative ways. If a given dance is blunt and forceful, perhaps that quality can be captured in the style of the writing. If a dance is lyrical and delicate, perhaps the choice of words and the flow of sentences can reflect that. A colleague's way with words and thoughts can excite or move me. Arlene Croce wrote of "the vast, tireless corps" in Petipa's *la Bayadère* and how it "responds in echoes, diverges, vanishes, regathers into

garlands, into gateways, tosses, and friezes," her prose capturing the weight and lavishness of 19th-century ballet symphonism. My thinking is stimulated when Marcia Siegel describes Dana Reitz as being "so linear that she makes even a circle look like a passage from point to point."

Currently, various problems menace dance criticism across the U.S. Print space for reviews is dwindling. Back in the 1930s, inhabitants of New York City had access to six or more major daily newspapers. Now the *New York Times* is one of the few that publishes dance criticism and the only important newspaper that has two full-time dance critics and three regular freelancers. In a city that offers fifteen or more dance events in any given week, very few get reviewed. A number of publications in the U.S., such as *New York Magazine* and the *Boston* Globe, no longer even have dance critics. Some papers would rather publish feature articles than reviews.

On the other hand, dance writing flourishes on the Internet, either in blogs or online publications. My half to three-quarter page space in the *Village Voice* can be expanded by additional reviews that appear only on the Voice's website. One of our best critics, Tobi Tobias, can now be read almost exclusively online, in her blog at artsjournal.com. Writing for the web has its delights (there's no limit on space) and its discouraging aspects (rarely any pay).

It's fortunate that thinking about dance, probing into it, and attempting to bringing it to life in words, whether on the page or in virtual space, remains for many of us dance critics not just a job but a vocation. We cannot imagine not doing it. We press on, striving to do it better.

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국문요약

종이 위에서 춤추다

데보라 조윗
미국「빌리지 보이스」무용평론가

미국 춤 비평의 특성은 춤의 사회적 지위와 불가피하게 얽혀있다. 미국에는 아시아 국가들과 같은 오래된 춤 전통이 없으며, 특히 오랜 기간 청교도주의가 춤에 대한 인식을 지배했기 때문이다. 춤을 정신성이 결여된 것으로 보았기에 그에 대한 논의 역시 전문성이 요구되지 않았다. 따라서 20세기 초까지도 춤은 음악의 부속물로 취급되거나 뮤직홀에서의 춤과 공연예술로서의 춤이 구분되지 않았다.

20세기 전반기 미국의 대표적인 무용비평가들의 경향은 변호적 비평, 즉 대중들이 오해하고 있다고 판단되는 특정 양식을 옹호하는 비평이었다. 존 마틴은 마사 그레이엄과 도리스 험프리 등을 중심으로 형성된 현대무용을 옹호하였고, 에드윈 덴비는 발란신의 줄거리 없는 발레를 해설했으며, 질 존스턴은 1960년대 포스트모던 춤을 옹호했다. 변호적 비평이 항상 필요한 것은 아니며, 평론가가 개인적인 이유 때문에 특정 예술가를 광고하는 것은 비윤리적이다. 허나 대중들이 작품을 심도있게 이해하도록 도와주는 것은 평론가의 과제 중 하나이며, 이는 설교나 강의가 아니라 춤을 생생하고 흥미롭게 묘사할 때 가장 효과적으로 달성된다.

춤 비평의 네 가지 요소인 묘사, 해석, 평가, 맥락 중에서 20세기 초의 평론가들이 평가와 해석을 강조했다면, 1960년대 이후의 평론가들은 자신의 견해를 뒷받침하고 춤의 흥취를 전달할 수 있는 묘사를 강조했다. 묘사를 강조하는 이유는 첫째, 너무나 잘 알려진 춤의 덧없음 때문이며, 둘째, 집필의 대상인 춤 자체가 변하였기 때문이다. 즉 춤에서 서사구조가 배제되고 실험성이 강조되자 안무가가 풀어내는 소재 자체 보다는 이를 어떻게 풀어내는지가 중요해진 것이다. 이렇게 볼 때 묘사란 동작 하나하나를 정확하게 나열하는 것이 아니며, 단어를 통해 그리고 문장의 리듬과 형태를 통해 글쓴이가 보고 느낀 바를 예리한 직감력으로 환기시킬 때 가장 설득력 있는 묘사가 된다.

나아가 비평가는 그들이 살고있는 환경과 시대의 산물이며, 춤에 대한 글쓰기는 춤 자체에서의 변화에 상응한다. 예컨대 1960- 70년대의 비평가들은 움직임 발견, 혁신적 구성, 그리고 예술에 대한 급진적 생각들에 초점을 맞추었지만, 포스트모더니즘의 영향을 받은 80년대 이후 비평가들은 제각각의 텍스트들 사이에 존재하는 유의미한 관계, 혹은 그 의도적인 부재를 찾으려 노력한

다. 최근 춤계의 범위가 넓어지고 세계화되면서 평론가는 인종과 젠더, 혹은 전통적 스타일과 현대적 실험에 주목해야할 필요 역시 증대되었다. 이처럼 맥락, 역사, 의미를 고려하는 것이 중요해지면서 비평의 방식 자체가 변하기도 한다.

현재, 미국에서는 무용비평을 위한 활자공간이 줄어들고 있다. 반면에 춤에 대한 글쓰기는 블로그나 온라인 출판을 통해 인터넷에서 번성하고 있다. 인터넷에 글을 쓴다는 것은 공간적 제한이 없다는 점에서 즐겁기도 하고, 돈을 벌기는 거의 불가능하다는 점에서 암담하기도 하다. 종이 위에서건 가상적 공간에서건, 많은 춤 비평가들이 춤에 대해 생각하고, 이를 탐사하고, 언어로서 다시 소생시키고자 노력하는 것을 단순히 직업이 아닌 소명으로 삼고있다는 것은 참으로 행운이다. 우리는 계속 나아갈 것이며, 좀더 잘하기 위해 노력할 것이다.

주제어: 무용비평(Dance Criticism), 미국 무용비평사(the history of American Dance Criticism), 무용비평 방법론(Methodology of Dance Criticism), 묘사비평(Descriptive Criticism), 무용비평가(Dance Critic)