

Title: Broadcasting Bodies: Ballet on Television During the Cold War
Author: Megan Race, Harvard University

Abstract:

In 1962, Russian-American choreographer George Balanchine brought his company, the New York City Ballet, to the Soviet Union for the first time. As one of the first U.S. State Department-sponsored tours to the Soviet Union, Balanchine and the New York City Ballet's appearance on Soviet stages was a critical benchmark of the cultural exchange landscape of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Though the Bolshoi and Kirov troupes had already been to the West as early as the late 1950s, and American Ballet Theatre had toured the Soviet Union in 1960, Balanchine's return was heralded by both the Americans and the Soviets as especially significant: the choreographer was returning to the land of his birth and childhood for the first time in almost forty years with his iconic American ballet company in tow. This paper looks at a Soviet television documentary, "The New York City Ballet in Moscow," which covered the troupe's appearance in the Soviet capital. In particular, I examine the Soviet mass culture depiction of the New York City Ballet beyond the press reviews concurrent with the tour, focusing especially on the depiction of Balanchine's ballerinas. Balanchine liked to say that "ballet is woman," and I further explore how well this credo is captured by the Soviet critical narrative. This paper expands upon work that I've done on Balanchine's work for television in the United States. It is part of a much larger project on the way in which ballet (particularly Balanchine's) was put on television with increasing frequency during the mid-twentieth century, focusing on the way in which television was used in the Soviet Union and the West as a part of a kind of cultural competition within the larger competing political ideologies.