
Book Review

McFEE, GRAHAM. *The Philosophical Aesthetics of Dance: Identity, Performance and Understanding*. Dance Books Ltd 2011, 356 pp., \$34.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Hetty Blades

For various reasons dance is relatively under-explored in philosophical aesthetics; although discussed under the umbrella of performing arts, dance-specific philosophy is a small field. As Graham McFee himself points out, his own work, particularly *Understanding Dance* (1992), has been instrumental in the development of this area. His current project expands on this work. McFee sets out to address the key issues in the philosophical study of dance. These are broadly categorized into four areas: the nature of “performables,” the making of dance, the role of the dancer, and the significance of a dance history narrative.

McFee considers these topics in relation to broad themes such as ontology, authenticity, authorship, understanding, and appreciation. McFee smoothly negotiates the general and the specific, simultaneously outlining dance’s uniqueness and its value in broader philosophical discussions. McFee’s approach is systematic. He starts with a problem posed by dance, outlines the development of existing philosophical theories that may help solve the problem, and assesses their applicability to dance before offering his own adaptations and solutions. This method provides insight into topics beyond the remit of dance philosophy, while highlighting the value of dance as an object of philosophical contemplation.

The features of dance that distinguish it from other art forms are reiterated throughout. These include the essential role of the dancer and a specific reliance upon live instantiation. McFee suggests that, unlike music and theatre, dance works cannot be made or experienced in any other way than through human bodies. Specifically, he claims that we cannot access dance works through scores or recordings. He outlines the subsequent difficulties of addressing the experience of dance through philosophical investigation: the ephemeral nature of the form makes it difficult to access, yet first-hand experience is fundamental to understanding it.

The Preface outlines the structure of the text and introduces the framework. This involves four “pillars”: the contrast between artistic and aesthetic interest and judgment; the occasion-sensitive nature of understanding and meaning; the possibility of meaning to change over time; and McFee’s institutional account of art (not to be confused with George Dickie’s institutional theory

of definition). These pillars provide McFee with flexibility, and some protection from rebuttal. He endorses contextualism, suggesting that answers are question specific, and does not aim for “exceptionlessness.” He sets out to discuss and highlight questions, not always reaching definite conclusions.

As one might expect, there have been conceptual and stylistic changes to dance since 1992. There has also been increased interest from audiences and scholars, making this a welcome and timely update. It is clearly a personal project, with Chapter One dedicated to McFee’s history and interests, such that the reader is able to note the development of his theories over time.

One such theory is McFee’s Thesis of Notationality, which suggests that notation (codified systems such as Laban notation that allow for the description of movement through symbols) can document the essential features of a dancework, allowing for identification of genuine instances of the work, therefore providing a practical solution to issues of variation and work-identity. In *Understanding Dance*, McFee suggested that notation would inevitably be adopted by the danceworld. Although this prediction proved false, McFee maintains his belief in the value of notation as an idealization: although notated scores for dance rarely exist, they theoretically allow for explicit reference to the constraints of the type. Another area McFee returns to is the issue of defining dance. McFee’s suggestion in *Understanding Dance* was that definitions are neither useful nor necessary. He re-examines this thesis in the Conclusion of his current book, referring to an observation from Sally Banes that recent choreographic practices have challenged our ideas about what constitutes dance. Banes suggests that this may generate a desire to draw conceptual lines around dance through the formulation of a definition. McFee, however, maintains his anti-definition stance, providing an alternative account for the identification of dance in reference to the “Republic of Dance” and his institutional theory of art.

These discussions demonstrate McFee’s motivation to re-evaluate his previous work. Yet the updating does not go as far as it could. For example, McFee’s non-interest in the rapidly increasing role of technology in dance is notable. Although reference is made to video recordings in discussions of ontology and reconstruction, there is no mention of the increased role of technology in performance, choreography, and documentation. It is possible that McFee sees this shift as having no impact on our understanding and appreciation of dance, particularly in light of his commitment to its fundamentally human nature, or perhaps such practices fall into the bracket of exceptions. While the lack of reference to technology does not detract from the text, it raises questions in its absence.

McFee’s commitment to dance as ‘works’, as opposed to ‘texts’, and his analysis of the complexities of the work are of particular value to the field. He clearly articulates some of the difficult ontological issues posed by dance works. McFee repeatedly claims to be wary of ontological inquiry, yet despite this avowed commitment to a non-ontological approach, his metaphysical discussions form some of the book’s most interesting points. The Appendix provides a particularly insightful explanation and critique of Julian Dodd’s Platonist account of music ontology.

McFee has provided another crucial addition to philosophical aesthetics and dance philosophy. This text provides a detailed overview of many of the main philosophical questions raised by dance. It will serve both as an introduction to dance philosophy and an anchor for further investigation, making it useful for scholars and students alike. The book is divided into four sections, each consisting of two or three chapters, in turn sub-headed to help outline his arguments. The structure and frequent cross-referencing allow for easy navigation, making the work highly functional as a textbook. Although McFee addresses complex theories, his frequent use of examples and conversational style make this an accessible text and a valuable teaching tool.

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