Instantiating Dance On Screen

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital technology has significantly transformed the performing arts. Theatre, music, and dance works are now recorded and transmitted in a wide variety of ways, challenging the centrality of “live” performance, and re-configuring the role of performer and spectator. While a fair amount of philosophical attention has been paid to theatre and music in this regard, the ontological effect of technology on dance is relatively under-explored. This paper examines existing dance discourses from David Carr (1987), Graham McFee (2011) and Francis Sparshott (1995), in relation to the work of David Davies (2009, 2010) and Amie Thomasson (2005), in order to explore the ontological status and effect of digital screenings and recordings of dance.

The role of the score in dance is largely considered to set it apart from music and theatre. While in Western artistic practice plays are usually written down and musical works commonly composed through notation, the situation in dance is somewhat different. Although codified notations exist no single method of inscription has ever been universally adopted. The lack of score means that dance is often referred to as particularly ephemeral, reliant on the presence and action of a human body to be adequately experienced. For example, McFee claims that “one cannot really encounter the dance itself without seeing it in performance” (2011, 33), a view shared by Carr (1987) and others. In light of our increased access to dance in digital form, however, this poses interesting questions such as: What are we watching when we view dance on screen? And what does it mean to truly encounter a work of dance art?

As a response to these questions, this paper proposes three challenges to the view that dance works are only accessible through live performance. First, I suggest that viewing dance through recordings and screenings allows the viewer to gain knowledge of the work and appreciate its features. Second, extending an analogy with sports matches introduced by Davies (2001) and McFee (2011), I suggest that the experience of dance works follows a hierarchical structure. Lastly, I discuss the way in which recent developments in dance practice and discourse de-centralize the body in both material and digital contexts. Following Davies (2009) and Thomasson (2005), this study adopts a non-realist ontological perspective. Thomasson suggests that adopting an realist empirical methodology, under which mind-independent facts may be “discovered,” does not help us to understand the nature of art. Because artworks are products of human endeavours, they are intrinsically linked to social practices (Thomasson 2005). I therefore claim that evolving practices for viewing dance might alter the ontological status of the form.

II. TYPES OF DIGITAL INSTANCE

Dance is digitally transmitted and documented in various ways. Conventional performances may be recorded or screened online, on TV, projected on to cinema screens, or temporary “theatres” in public spaces. For example, The Royal Opera House in London runs a series of screenings in public locations around the UK. Such events may or may not be recorded and archived. Furthermore, recordings may be shared as excerpts or full-length films, which may or may not be edited. They are used for artistic, educational, promotional and entertainment purposes. They may be embedded with digital scores or annotated by students, audiences and scholars.
Screenings and recordings are the main focus here. However it is important to refer to two related examples. First, specially made dance films are increasingly common. Such films may or may not arise from conventional performance works. Either way, the film is developed on set or location, with no “audience” other than the cast and crew. The second, somewhat rarer example is performances that only happen online, such as Jerome Bel’s *Shirtology* (1997), performed as part of the Tate’s “Performance Room” series in 2012. Such instances are akin to live screenings, but the fact that there is no audience in the same space as the performance sets them apart, meaning that they fall somewhere in between dance films and screened performances. Each of these examples may be considered “live,” albeit in different ways. Furthermore, each has a unique relationship to the notion of a “performance” and to the abstract work. However, related questions are posed by each case study: What type of thing are we watching? And what does it mean for dance to be “accessed” and “performed”?

III. ACCESSING DANCE

Scholars who have addressed the ontology of dance works and attended to issues of identity, persistence, and documentation include Anderson (1983), Carr (1987), Conroy (2013), Margolis (1981), McFee (1992, 2011), Pakes (2013) and Sparshott (1995). Although there is not always agreement about the most appropriate way to explain dance ontology, many consider the type/token schema first introduced by linguist Charles Pierce (1931–58) and developed for art by Richard Wollheim (1980) useful. Under this schema each dance work is considered an abstract “type,” made present through the physical “token” of the performance. The conventional view, advocated by Carr (1987) and McFee (1992, 2011), suggests that only a live performance counts as a token or instance of the work. The problem with this view is that it rules out works that are not shared solely via live performances, and it does not reflect the ways we commonly talk about our experiences of dance.

IV. KNOWLEDGE AND NON-REALISM

McFee suggests that it is incorrect to claim expertise of a work one has only viewed via a recording. He highlights a “profound difference” between dance works and musical works in this regard, proposing that

Perhaps a person who has listened to all of Mozart’s compositions on DVD has heard all of Mozart’s music; but someone who has never seen actual bodies in motion (rather than merely the recording of them) does not, in the same way, even arguably seem to have seen all of Christopher Bruce’s dances; or even any of them. (McFee 2011, 113)

Here McFee claims that in order to access dance one must have experienced live bodies in motion. It is not entirely clear whether he means that one must have seen Bruce’s dancers performing Bruce’s movement, or merely have a background knowledge of dance in live form. However, either way, his view posits a central role to the dancer’s body. McFee goes on to claim that, “if right, this seems to imply that a person who has seen only those recordings had not seen any dance at all” (2011, 113). Although McFee acknowledges that it is an extreme position, he maintains that we cannot seriously regard such a person to be an expert in Bruce’s work. However, this claim is not reflected in practice. Dance scholars and audiences frequently claim, and accept claims of, expertise about works that they have not seen live. If expertise were dependent upon live performance, there would be no contemporary or future experts of 19th Century dance pioneer Loie Fuller’s work, for example. Indeed dance scholarship in general would be significantly diminished. While one might wish to argue that there is not enough primary evidence to
claim expertise of historical dances, this is not reflective of the practices of the dance world, which is generally accepting of such claims.

The question of whether we have truly seen a work closely relates to issues of knowledge and appreciation. McFee acknowledges that watching a recording provides knowledge of the work, pointing out that repeatability allows for in-depth consideration of certain properties (2011). It is therefore possible to argue that repeated viewing might allow for fuller appreciation of the work than a live performance. However, while attending a live performance is likely to enhance appreciation, live audience members may also find their appreciation enhanced through the repeated watching of a recording. An ideal situation would arguably include both forms of viewing. However, the key point here is that recordings alone can provide knowledge and inform appreciation, which are therefore not essentially linked to live performance.

It seems strongly counter-intuitive to claim that one can be an expert about a work that one has not seen. In the case of art, epistemology and ontology are related modes of enquiry. Thomasson argues that the type of knowledge we are able to gain about art ontology is different to the empirical knowledge that we might acquire about natural kinds. This is because in order to disambiguate artworks we must have an existing understanding of the concept of the type of object we are faced with, thus demonstrating an intrinsic link between language and ontology (Thomasson 2005). Davies (2009) agrees with Thomasson that ontological enquiry must work in accordance with common practices. He calls for the deployment of a “pragmatic constraint” (PC), suggesting that we must constrain ontological proposals in accordance with common practices. Van Camp (2006) also endorses the adoption of a pragmatist framework in issues of artwork identity, suggesting that, “the identity of works of art can be understood pragmatically as ways of talking and acting by the community of the art world” (2006, 52).

Following these perspectives it appears that in cases where we develop expertise through recordings and screenings, and therefore claim to have seen the work, we should logically allow for digital instances of dance works. However, it is not the case that all forms of digital representations count as an instance. Watching a highly edited trailer of Siobhan Davies’ White Man Sleeps (1988), for example, arguably does not constitute a full experience of the work and fails to provide adequate access to the work’s properties for claims of expertise to be made. This raises the question; what constitutes a digital instance?

In order to answer this question we must determine what is meant by an “instance” of a work. Davies (2010) suggests that “An instance of a work is something that makes manifest to receivers certain properties that bear experientially upon the appreciation of the work” (2010, 412). This account raises the question of what these properties are. If one considers the physical presence of dancers as an essential property of the work, recordings and screenings would fail to constitute instances of the work. However, it is possible to argue that this property is inessential. Furthermore, recordings arguably have the potential to possess all of the other manifest properties of the work, and are able to bear experientially upon appreciation.

Davies suggests that there are two forms of instance at play in ontological discourse. He distinguishes between a work’s “provenential instances” (P-instances) and its “purely epistemic instances” (E-instances) (2010, 411). Davies’ description of a work’s P-instance smoothly applies to performance:

A work’s P-instances are the logically first products of the artist’s generative activity that possess the kinds of manifest properties required in entities that are to ‘bear experientially’ on the appreciation of the work. (Davies 2010, 414)

Davies draws a distinction between P-singular art forms such as painting, in which cases there is one P-instance of the work, and forms such as music (and dance), which can have multiple P-instances. In the case of dance, for example, the premiere of a work is not prioritized over subsequent performances, meaning that the “first product of the artists’ generative activity” can have multiple, equal manifestations. However, the “history of production” to borrow Goodman’s (1976) term does inform the status of the P-instance, which arises directly from the artist’s actions.
An E-instance, on the other hand, possesses the manifest properties of the work, regardless of how it comes to do so. Davies suggests that:

An instance of a work in general, as we have seen, is something that makes manifest to receivers certain properties that bear experientially upon the appreciation of the work. An instance in what I am terming the purely epistemic sense fully justifies this requirement, and does so simply in virtue of the manifest properties that it possesses, independently of how it came to have these properties (2010, 415).

The issue here is whether the physical presence of a dancer is an essential property for the appreciation of the work. Given the widespread use of recordings for reconstruction, analysis and appreciation, it is worth taking seriously the idea that the physical presence of a dancer need not bear essentially upon the appreciation of the work. Therefore, I suggest that the notion of a work’s E-instance may help to explain how it is that we can gain knowledge of a work through a recording. Given that recordings and screenings aid in the appreciation of works, it seems possible to suggest that they might count as E-instances by offering epistemological access to the work, whilst not claiming to be exactly the same type of thing as a live performance, or P-instance. Davies suggests that:

It is possible for a performable work to have E-instances that are not performances because an event can play the relevant role in appreciation without standing in the relevant causal-intentional relation to the composition of the work. (Davies, 2010, 421)

However, even if we are to accept recordings as E-instances the question remains as to which digital objects or events possess the correct properties to constitute E-instances. McFee points out that there need not be an “exceptionless” answer to the issue of accessing the work (2011, 115). It seems tempting to consider the problem on a case-by-case basis, which is not entirely satisfactory. A possible strategy is to refer to the intended format of the work. For example, if Davies intended her work to be experienced live, it is possible to argue that it is inaccessible through recording. However, it is not quite that simple. A comparison with music reveals why; it is impossible that Mozart intended for his compositions to be experienced through recording, however theory and practice allow for us to encounter his works in this format. In addition, the intentions of the choreographer are not always clear or accessible, and so relying solely on this approach leaves too much room for speculation. The notion of E-instances might bring us closer to determining which digital objects allow access to the work as it foregrounds the requirement that they must comprise the relevant properties, thus arguably eliminating edited or partial recordings, however, the question of what these relevant properties are remains open.

V. UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES

In order to establish which examples constitute “tokens” or instances of the work we should turn our attention to the way we describe our experiences. Accessing music via transmissions and recordings is a widely accepted state of affairs. It is possible to argue that the situation in music is different due to ontological distinctions between music and dance. Fully disputing this view would involve entering into the discussion regarding Platonic types and I am not sure that this will reveal much about the issue at stake here. Instead, I suggest that philosophical discourse allows for digital instances of musical but not dance works because this is our primary mode of experiencing music and is therefore a legitimate medium for developing both musical practices and academic discourses thereupon. In the past, the primary mode of accessing dance has been via live performance, however the situation is changing. A report published in 2010 by the Arts Council of England concluded that over the half of the online
population use the internet to not only to retrieve information about art and culture, but also to engage with audio-visual content. This is significantly more common among the 16–34 age group than any other, signifying a generational shift. While music is the most frequently sought art form online, 30% of the 341 respondents reported watching dance online (ACE 2010, 18), making dance the second most popular form of art to be experienced via the internet. Indeed, the internet allows us to view a vast array of dance works and styles, and in many cases this is the only possible way to do so, due to temporal, geographical and financial constraints.

How then do we explain such experiences? McFee clarifies that

while time spent watching the film is best described as exactly that, it is not exactly wrong to say that one spent one’s time watching the dance – after all, one had been watching that film and not some other. (McFee, 2011, 112)

McFee points out that he could truthfully say that he had spent the afternoon watching Ghost Dances (Bruce, 1981), even if he had only been watching the film (2011, 112), although he maintains that we would not have truly seen the work. Following Thomason’s view, however, this cannot be the case as ontological categories are determined by language. Sparshott suggests that when we watch a film of a dance there are several different things that we can say we are doing (1995, 441). We may say that we see the performance on film or a film of the performance. We might say we see an “image” or “view” of the performance, or that we see the filmmaker’s interpretation (1995, 441). Sparshott admits that not all of these options occur in practice (1995). However, despite the fact that he was writing over 20 years ago, our practices remain somewhat ambiguous.

McFee raises an analogy with sport to justify his position. He suggests that “sports fans want to attend the matches, even though the view from one’s couch is more comfortable” (McFee 2011, 114). This comparison highlights the significance of live performance. However, despite the fact that sports fans want to attend matches, when asked, “did you see the match,” it is legitimate and normal to answer “yes” even when one only saw it on TV.

There is a hierarchy applied to experiences of sport that I suggest is useful for understanding dance works. To see a football match at the time and place that it is occurring is perhaps the most desired form of experience. Following this, to see the match through a screen, as it occurs, is second best (of course one could contend that they would rather watch the match in the pub with their friends, but this is likely to include acknowledgement that this is widely considered a secondary experience to attending the game). A third option is to view the whole game via a recording. Even these distinctions are not always entirely clear; time delay and the ability to record, pause and fast-forward TV means that one’s temporal relationship to the event can change during the match. Importantly, following each of these situations the spectator is likely to claim that they saw the game. One last way of viewing the match would be to watch edited highlights. In this case fans are likely to explain that they missed the match, even though they know what happened.

This way of discussing and viewing sport relates closely to social conventions around music, as demonstrated by Davies (2001), who also draws a comparison with sport. He suggests it is equally legitimate to experience sports and musical broadcasts via technological transmission:

Just as someone can truly say, “I saw the first game of the World Series yesterday,” though he watched it on TV, so Ham can truly say “I heard the first performance of Minimo’s new quartet last night,” though he listened to the radio and was not at the concert (Davies, 2001, 301).

I suggest this state of affairs also applies to dance. Although it may be preferable to attend a performance event, or P-instance, a live screening provides an alternative way to see the work. This form is one stage removed from the provenance of the work, and lacks the physical presence of the dancer. Still, it partially maintains its “live” status, due to its shared temporality with the event. Therefore I suggest that a live
screening can be considered an E-instance of a work of dance. Failing this, a recording allows us to see what occurred on stage and arguably offers an alternative form of E-instance. The acquisition of knowledge is central to this claim. While one might wish to argue that a recording fails to provide access to the relevant properties required for appreciation, the counter-argument remains that the repeatable format of recordings means that they provide the potential for greater knowledge of the work than encountering the work in live performance. Indeed it is often exactly this methodology that leads people to make claims of expertise. Examining the language a fan would use might also give insight into the status of edited recordings. Just as a sports fan who has only seen edited highlights is unlikely to claim that they saw the match, dance fans are unlikely to claim to have seen a work having viewed only a short excerpt. Perhaps we can say, broadly speaking, that one can claim to have seen a work only when they have viewed a full-length recording or screening, attended to in an appropriate manner.

So where does this leave the type/token schema? If a performance is viewed via a screen at the same time as the event is happening on stage, what prevents it from being a token of the work? Since the performance token is occurring and being experienced in real time, there seems no obvious reason, other than historical convention, to argue that one must one be in the same place as the dancers in order for the instance to count as a token of the work. However, because one object or instance cannot be any more a token than any other, the type/token schema does not allow for a hierarchical structure. While one might claim that Monday’s performance was better than Tuesday’s both performances are either tokens of the work or not. It does not seem to follow, therefore that recordings, screenings and live performances can all to be tokens of the work, since live performances, or P-instances, hold a privileged position. So can we maintain this way of thinking about the form? One possibility from Sparshott (1995) is to consider each performance as both a token and a type, of which there might be further tokens. However, this does not help us to determine which of these tokens are legitimate. Another possible avenue is to extend Sparshott’s discussion of “hypertypes” (1995, 404) to develop a schema that allows for non-equal tokens, in accordance with Davies distinctions between P and E instances. Unfortunately space does not permit such a development here, but it is clear that the issue warrants further attention.

VI. THE BODY

We have not yet fully addressed the ontological centrality of the dancing body. McFee firmly believe that the way dance is made—with the body—means that it cannot be physically present without the dancer. This requires further exploration. The role of the body is not necessarily entirely disrupted by screenings and recordings; one might argue that the dancer is equally central to such instances as they are to live performances. However, recent dance practices pose a more pertinent challenge to this view. Discourses have recently reflected upon the expansion of the term “choreography,” which is no longer applied solely to the planning of conventional dances. This is evidenced through the development of choreographic works by established dance artists which do not involve the traditional performance of a human body. William Forsythe’s Scattered Crowd (2002), for example, is a performative installation involving thousands of white balloons, through which the viewer moves. Other choreographers are experimenting with the role of the body on stage. For instance, choreographer Mette Ingvarsten’s The Artificial Nature Project (2012) uses dancers to perform purely functional movement in order to control the behaviour of hundreds of pieces of metallic paper. The focus is on the movement of materials, questioning the role of the dancer. Of course, “choreography” and “dance” are not exactly the same thing (Forsythe 2008), and one may wish to argue that these works are not dance at all. However, the lack of definition for dance means that recognition of the form is dependent upon context and authorship. Thus, as established dance artists question the role of the body, they increase the breadth of the form.

Technology is playing an important role in the evolution of dance as the increasing developments in and digitization of dance challenge the centrality of the body. There are many examples of digital dance practices in which works are performed by avatars or within immersive technological contexts. There are now computer programs that allow artists to develop movement on a screen using digital shapes and
avatars,\textsuperscript{20} disrupting the view that dance-making concerns solely the body. Furthermore, dance analysis and scoring practices are being developed that focus on cultivating alternative expressions of choreographic principles without the human body.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, more choreographers are adopting digital tools to share features of their work that are not accessible in live performance alone,\textsuperscript{22} often with the intention of enhancing appreciation of the work.\textsuperscript{23} Each of these examples requires in-depth consideration, and each has a unique relationship to both work and performance. Importantly, the body is not entirely absent from each example it is either literally or metaphorically present, however, it frequently adopts a different, less pivotal role than in conventional performance events.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The claim that dance works can only be accessed through conventional forms of live performance is based on a traditional view of dance ontology. However, as with music and sport, digital technology has altered the way we engage with and refer to the form and, following a non-realist view, therefore alters its ontological status. As Thomasson points out,

ontological disambiguation is achieved not by a philosophical and explicit decision on the part of grounders about what their term will refer to, but rather by appeal to background practices already in place that co-evolve with the use of the art-kind term. (Thomasson, 2005, 12).

The implication of this is that ontology and practice are intrinsically linked. I suggest that dance is not all that different to sport and music. However, our practices, examination and thinking around these forms have evolved more quickly. Furthermore, while one may wish to argue that the physical presence of a dancing body is an essential property for appreciation, emerging practices for the making, viewing, analysis, and documentation of dance challenge that view.

Thus, I maintain that dance works can have digital instances. However, this does not mean that all digital representations of dance provide access to the work. Rather, I suggest that there is a hierarchical structure to our relationship with the work, dependent upon our temporal and spatial relationship to the primary instantiation. It is clear that the type/token schema does little to clarify which digital instances provide access to the work and that we require new systems for understanding the expanding form of the art of dance.

HETTY BLADES
Coventry University
EMAIL: bladesh@uni.coventry.ac.uk
Endnotes

1 See Auslander (1999) for a full discussion of the complexities of the notion of ‘liveness’ in relation to technology.
4 Labanotation and Benesh notation are the most widely used in the UK and USA.
5 McFee (1992, 2011).
7 Here I am referring to Stephen as oosed to David Davies.
8 See http://www.roh.org.uk/about/bp-big-screens.
11 See Thomas (2003) for an insightful discussion into the role of recordings in dance reconstruction.
12 See Wimasatt and Beardsley (1946).
13 See Davies (2001); McFee (2011).
15 See Davies (2001) for a detailed discussion of this issue in relation to music.
16 I discuss this issue in more depth in a previous paper, see Blades (2011).
17 See Allso and Lepecki (2008) for a detailed discussion of this.
19 The work of Gibson and Martelli provides clear examples of this.
20 Life Forms (Cunningham/Simon Fraser University 1991); The Choreographic Language Agent (Wayne McGregor/Random Dance/ Open Ended Group 2009).
21 Synchronous Objects for One Flat Thing, reproduced (Forsythe/Ohio State University 2009).
22 A Choreographer’s Score (deKeermaeker and Cvejic 2012); Using the Sky (Hay/Motion Bank 2013) See Leach (2013) and deLahunta (2013) for in-depth discussion of these and related projects.
23 I explore this issue in relation to aesthetic empiricism and post-strucutralist views in a chapter in forthcoming edited collection entitled, Through the Virtual Toward the Real.

Bibliography


Carroll, Noël and Jinhee Cho Choi. 2006. Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures: An Anthology. USA, UK, Australia: Blackwell Publishing.


Dance Works Cited


