DANCE ON THE INTERNET: AN ONTOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

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Questions regarding the ontology of artworks have been discussed by scholars for many years, however, increased digitalisation of such artworks means we are now facing new ontological issues. This paper seeks to raise questions regarding the ontological status of online dance films. By examining philosophical discourses from Graham McFee, Peggy Phelan, Richard Wollheim and Philip Auslander, I investigate how recorded versions of dance performances that exist on the Internet impact on established understandings of dance ontology.

Peggy Phelan claims that "[p]erformance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive".[1] She argues that performance cannot be documented, and that if it is "it becomes something other than performance".[2] This suggests that the ephemeral nature of a performance is crucial to its ontology. She claims that although works can be performed more than once, each performance is essentially a different thing. The notion that the exact event in the exact time that it exists cannot be repeated is central to Phelan's argument. Due to this characteristic, Phelan believes that the recording or reproducing of performance "betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology".[3]

These observations raise questions regarding the ontological status of recorded documentation and highlight the significance of 'liveness'. For example, can someone say that she has seen a particular performance if she has only seen a video of the

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[1]   Phelan (1993), p.148.
[2]   Phelan (1993), p.146.
[3]   Phelan (1993), p.146.

event? Following Phelan's argument, this would not be seeing the performance, as a performance can only exist in the time and space in which it is performed. I wish to ask: what, then has she seen? Whilst someone watching only the film may not have seen the live performance, I suggest that she will have, in some sense, experienced the performance.

Filmed recordings are widely enjoyed by art audiences and are used in the study and documentation of performance. Therefore an investigation into their ontological status is important. By considering the potential 'liveness' of recordings and overlapping ontological features of film and live performance, I seek to understand how the two formats relate to one another.

Graham McFee observes that performing arts "must be brought into completeness by being performed".[4] Their specific form of existence makes performance works, such as *Swan Lake,* abstract notions until they are instanced. This means that performances are harder to access than forms which always physically exist, such as painting, meaning fewer people see and discuss performance and that it is easy for performances to get lost or forgotten over time. Without a physical record performance exists only in memory and dialogue. This status as memory does not make the work necessarily non-existent outside of performance. We are able to discuss, visualise and re-perform the work, meaning that, arguably, it still exists. However, this temporary existence in the physical world means that performance can be considered unimportant in art discourse and history, as it cannot always be accessed. This has generated an ongoing focus on the documentation of performance via writing, film and notation in order to maintain performance's place in history. How such documentations relate to the initial performance and the abstract notion of the work is the key issue in this investigation.

I. THE ONTOLOGY OF DANCE

Dance has a specific ontology that is distinct from other performance art forms. Whilst it fits into the category of performance, it is different from theatre and music, as dance works do not originate from physical objects. Theatre and musical works traditionally relate to a physical text or score, which are as much the work as the live performance. Aside from notated works, which are fairly rare, dance does not share

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[4]   McFee (1992), p. 89.

this feature. This means that dance possesses a particularly fluid ontological status; works are physically present only temporarily.

Phelan claims that performance is non-reproductive, and each instance of performance is a different 'thing', Graham McFee, however, aims to "acknowledge its permanence" and points out that "the very same dance can be re-performed at some later date".[5] An important issue with Phelan's argument is that if the work is performed more than once, she considers each performance a completely different thing. This is problematic; *Swan Lake* is considered to be *Swan Lake*, regardless of whether it is the Friday or Saturday version. Indeed it is considered to be *Swan Lake*, regardless of where it is performed and whom it is performed by, providing it meets the constraints of the type, and is, therefore recognisable as *Swan Lake.*

In order to explain how it is possible for different performances to be the same thing, McFee, amongst others, draws a distinction between "particular objects" and "multiples".[6] Particulars, he suggests are objects such as *The Mona Lisa*, whereas James Joyce's *Ulysses* is typical of a multiple, in that there are many copies of the same thing. McFee points out that things such as novels, dances and pieces of music are usually multiples. In order to discuss the nature of multiples McFee borrows Wollheim's terminology of 'types' and 'tokens'. Wollheim sets out to address the issue that "certain works of art are not physical *objects*"[7] and looks to establish what kind of thing they are. In order to identify what it is that music and novels are, Wollheim borrows the term 'type' from Peirce. He goes on to say, "Correlative to the term 'type' is the term 'token' […] In other words, *Ulysses* and *Der Rosenkavalier* are types, my copy of *Ulysses* and tonight's performance of *Rosenkavalier* are tokens of those types".[8] This relationship helps to clarify the way in which a work of art can have many manifestations. For the purpose of this paper I am going to make use of McFee's and Wollheim's distinction between types and tokens to examine online dance recordings.

II. THE RECORDING OF DANCE

My focus in this paper is on a relatively new mode of filmed performance to be found on the Internet, especially on dance company websites and video sharing sites such as

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[5] McFee (1992), p.89.

[6] Wollheim (1968), p. 90.

[7] Wollheim (1968), p.91.

[8] Wollheim (1968), p.91.

YouTube. These filmed versions of live works are heavily edited to fit into the technical restraints of digital media. They tend to take two forms: the first being a traditional style documentation, whereby the piece stays true to the time frame of the live event. The second form is a version of the work that is highly edited, in order to fit the predominant features of the work into a specified length. These films are used primarily for marketing purposes and give a brief overview of the dynamics, movement style and quality of the live performance, in much the same way that a written newspaper review or press release might. In this sense they are essentially a representation of the live work, as opposed to documentation.

One such film, which carries many of the typical features of this medium, is an edited version of Rafael Bonachela's *The Land of Yes and The Land of No* (2009) (henceforth, *TLYTLN*). The live performance lasts approximately 90 minutes. It consists of six dancers performing abstract movement. The stimulus for the work is the signs that govern our daily lives and the effect that these instructions have on us. The movement is primarily fluid and its dynamic qualities range from soft and slow to sharp, fast and angular. The work is made up of multiple sections, which flow into one another without disjuncture. In the edited representation the piece has been condensed into four minutes. The film consists of sections, of approximately 30 seconds each; every scene is cut sharply and replaced by a new theme or idea. The selected movement material contains unison, counter-point, duet, solo and contact work lending unpredictability to the work. The editorial style presents brief, fast-paced images creating a frenetic quality that is distinct from the movement dynamics. The result is that tranquil moments from the live work are lent a different energetic quality through the editorial process. The disruption of time also changes the nature of the movement, as we are not able to experience individual movements, motifs or energy patterns developing.

Some consideration of these films is important due to the apparently infinite possibilities of virtual media in terms of access and longevity. The way that performance is represented via a digital portal, in a form that has dramatically departed from the live work, is of specific interest in the context of this investigation. Unlike many dance recordings, which focus on replicating and reproducing the experience of live performance, these films present a new form of dance recording. Their edited state and virtual existence create a complex ontology that is different from other types of dance recordings.

III. THE ONTOLOGY OF RECORDED DOCUMENTATIONS

An enquiry into the ontology of performance was what led Peggy Phelan to claim that non-reproductiveness is central to the essence of the form. So where then does that leave us in terms of investigating the ontological status of repeatable documentations or representations of performances? Whilst Phelan claims that performances cannot be repeated, this is problematic. Borrowing the terms 'type' and 'token' from McFee allows us to understand how different performances of the same work *can* exist. The type/token schema allows us to consider a dance work such as *TLYTLN* as a type, and each performance of it as a token of that type.

This line of thought can help us to clarify the positioning of filmed documentations in relation to a dance work, as we can ask: is a filmed version of a performance a token of that work? Is it the same thing or the same type of thing as the work? McFee points out that these issues are not concerned with similarity but rather asking if it is exactly the same thing.[9] In order to establish whether a film can be considered the same thing as the work, we first need to decide whether or not ephemerality is a crucial feature of the work. Considering the way in which dance works are developed – as performances – it seems safe to suggest that liveness (and therefore ephemerality) is a fundamental ontological feature. However, there are problems with this analysis. In recent years there have been works created specifically for film, challenging the significance of live performance. There is a potential argument here that there was a performance that took place during filming, therefore requiring us to establish what is needed to classify action as performance. In this paper I will focus on work, which is developed as live performance and subsequently documented. In this instance, if liveness is crucial to the work's identity, it would seem that a recorded version of a live work cannot be a token of that work, whether or not it has been edited. By being viewed on a screen, after the event has occurred, it fails to fit the constraints of the type. However, if we accept that only things that can be tokens of a work are live performances of that work, we are left with the question, what is a recording of a live performance?

The question of the film's relationship to the abstract concept of the 'work' is complicated. It does not seem appropriate to say that the film is a token, as it is not

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[9]   McFee (1992), p.90.

exactly the same as a performance – which is already established as the token of the type. We cannot have two varieties of token for the same type: therefore we must accept that these films are not tokens. However, it is not the case that a filmed recording of a performance is a *completely* different thing to the live performance. We still consider these films to be the work, in some sense. Due to the fact that essential components of the work are presented, the filmed version of *TLYTLN* is still part of the identity of *TLYTLN*. This is due to more than aesthetic similarities. Even when edited, the content, and therefore essence, of the film is the token (the performance), and therefore the type (the work). Whilst it arguably possesses its own ontological status, it cannot be divorced from the "work" altogether. Here we have reached the crux of the issue: the established type/token schema does not allow for consideration of the relationship between filmed representation and type. This is an increasingly relevant issue, as digital representation of art expands, the Internet frequently becomes our first, and often only contact with dance works. Therefore, it is crucial that we are able to understand what these things are.

We have two options at this juncture: we can accept that these films do not fit within the type/token schema, or we can experiment with the idea that a film can be considered a type in its own right. Option one establishes the need to develop a new taxonomy for dealing with this issue. This is a complex task; the digitalisation of art has generated multiple types of things. We need to consider the nature of documentation and representation, the distinctions between the two, and how this impacts on ontology. For example, there are dance performances screened live onto cinema screens, works made specifically for the Internet that are or are not performed live, full-length works, edited works and works created with computer programmes, to name a few.

In order to establish a schema that allows us to consider how these relate to the work, we must first decide whether each of these types of thing are the same as one another. It does not seem feasible that we can consider all digital versions of performance in the same category, due to the fact that they are developed in different ways, with different functions. There are ontological distinctions to be made between documentation, live relay and representation. Each of these outcomes has a unique relationship to the work; meaning multiplicity is needed in order to explain such phenomena. The development of a new, or altered understanding system is beyond

the remit of this paper, but these issues show us how digitalisation is impacting and challenging established ways of understanding dance.

Here I will take the second option and examine whether or not we can consider these films as types in their own right. This is a pragmatically sound option. Common parlance suggests that we draw a distinction between the live performance and the filmed version, and consider the film a thing in its own right. For example in response to the question 'Have you seen Bonachela's *The Land of Yes and The Land of No*?' it would be perfectly reasonable to state, 'I have watched the film'. This is where the difference between the documentation and representation becomes particularly significant, as this is an unlikely response had you seen only the edited film, given the way in which it does not replicate the live performance.

Leaving aside for a moment the question about which film you've seen and whether or not that means you've seen the *work*, it seems reasonable to consider a filmed version of a performance as a type, (of which there are many copies on video or DVD which are tokens of that type). However, films which exist only on the Internet problematise this relationship. The issue here is not their edited state or non-naturalistic representation of performance. If the edited version of *TLYTLN* existed as a DVD of which there were multiple copies it would adopt the same ontological status in relation to this element of the type/token discussion. The fact that these films exist only in the virtual sphere removes them from the above relationship.

We cannot say there are multiple physical manifestations of the same abstract type, but rather multiple viewings of the same thing. Whilst manifested through a physical object (the screen), the film exists digitally, but not always in its embodied form. Where and how the information exists, outside of encoding and viewing, could be considered here. This is a complicated issue; digital information is stored in different places, in different ways depending on how it is created and uploaded. For example, would we draw a distinction between a film that is recorded onto a memory card and one that uploads straight onto the Internet?[10]

What is of more significance is that the film exists in a different, dormant, and potentially abstract state until it is enacted. So, does this imply that each instance of viewing the film is a token, correlative to the type? Or suggest that the films are particulars? This is implausible as these films have no static presence of their own and

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[10] Blackwell (2011).

can exist in multiple places at the same time. Whether or not the films exist in coding, the notion of the film is still abstract. This means that – despite there being no physical object, such as a DVD – virtual films can potentially still be considered a type, of which each viewing is a token. So, if we consider the dance work a type and the filmed version of the work also a type, the question here remains: what connects the two types? This again highlights the limited applicability of the schema to recordings.

Whilst these questions can be asked of any type of digital information, we can start to see how these films share ontological features with performance. If information on the Internet comes 'into existence' only when required, then it exists in a similar way to a performance. Whether or not the two things exist – as code and memory when dormant – neither the performance nor the film possess a permanent physical 'original', due to the lack of score. These ontological overlaps between films and live performance are not enough to suggest they are the same thing, however it goes some way to deal with Phelan's problem with recordings. She claims that it is the fact that recordings are not ephemeral which means they detract from performance's ontology. However, they *are* ephemeral, they share key existential characteristics with performance and, (to borrow McFee's explanation of performing art) are encountered only when instantiated.

IV. THE PERFORMATIVITY OF RECORDINGS

There are also similarities in the way that we experience live performance and films, according to Philip Auslander, who disputes the notion that filmed or televised performances are ontologically different from live performance. He suggests that television offers "no sensuous distinction between the live and the repeat or replay", and that "its production as a televisual image occurs only in the present moment".[11] This suggests that the experience of watching something on television is as significantly momentary as live performance, and implies that the same is true of filmed recordings.

This leads us to the issue of repetition: one of the central points to Phelan's argument is that performance can never be repeated, which is not the case for films. However Auslander argues that repetition of the viewing experience is only a

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[11]   Auslander (2007), p. 51.

possibility, rather than an ontological feature of the medium. He suggests that the potential for repetition is not an intrinsic feature of the viewing experience. If we are watching something for the first time, repetition is not relevant. He questions the significance of exact repetition and suggests that film and television images exist only in the present. Disappearance is also addressed by Auslander, who argues that films and videos also 'disappear' due to the fact that they deteriorate over time. He suggests that due to the fact that they erode each time we watch a video tape it is the only time we will see it in that specific state of being.

Whilst Auslander addresses neither the hugely different time frame for disappearance for live performance and video, nor whether or not this is applicable to computer code, he does raise some interesting counter-arguments to Phelan's account of the ontological specificity of ephemerality. By suggesting that filmed recordings are ephemeral, he implies that Phelan's issues with the permanence of recordings are unfounded. If liveness is fundamental to performance and these films are also live, they cannot be considered a 'betrayal' to the form's ontology.

The implication is that performances are repeatable – films are ephemeral, and filmed images are time specific in terms of the viewer's experience. They therefore can be considered to be 'performed'. This notion is problematic, as a recording of a performance offers no scope for variability. During a live performance the possibility of events such as a mistake, a fall, power cut, or sneeze all contribute to the uniqueness of that single moment in time. Once the performance is recorded this element is lost. Stephen Davies points out, in relation to music, that once we cannot experience the "performer's decisions as spontaneous […] they lose their immediacy and vibrancy".[12] He goes on to suggest, however, that if we appreciate that a recording is of a *live* performance we are able to recognise that "the performance options were taken in real time and under the usual circumstances".[13]

It seems that it is the variability of performance that is important to Phelan. In relation to edited representations though, this invariability becomes potentially less significant. The nature of these edited films suggest that they are not aiming to replicate live performance, which distinguishes this form of representation from many other forms of dance recordings. This seems paradoxical – the editorial decisions imply a desire to create a sense of unpredictability and vibrancy by creating short,

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[12] Davies (2001), pp. 304-5.
[13] Davies (2001) 306

frantic scenes. However, this is not necessarily connected to a desire to replicate liveness. Here we need to call on Davies' observation and note that because we are aware that the content was recorded live, we can appreciate the vibrancy and potential for variability that existed in the original instance.

By understanding how we can consider films ontologically linked to performance, we can question Phelan's claim that reproductions are something other than performance. This impacts on the significance of liveness and therefore our previous understandings of dance ontology. We are able to see how this phenomenon challenges our previous ways of understanding dance. Whilst these films do not necessarily change the initial relationship between the work and the performance, they embody a new form of dance that is inexplicable within the current schema. Auslander's arguments have shown us how films can be considered 'live'. This further questions Phelan's thesis. Recordings, like live performances, are simultaneously live and repeatable. They are made from the performance and share the name of the work. Therefore, we can begin to suggest, they are as much a performance of the work as the live event.

V. CONCLUSION

We can see how liveness is not a set concept. The way in which recordings share key ontological features with performance helps us to re-evaluate the notion of the live. Recordings of performance that exist only on the Internet are ephemeral. They only exist in their embodied form when viewed, an event that could be considered an instance, in the same way as a live performance are. The marked 'change' that Phelan discusses between each performance is embodied in the relationship between viewer's body and time.

Recorded representation does impact on existing understandings of dance ontology. By considering how the three components relate to each other, and how important this is, we can dispute Phelan's thesis. For socio-cultural, economic and archiving reasons nearly all performances are now recorded. Whilst Phelan believes that recording lessens and betrays performance's ontology, recorded representation has become a crucial part of a work's identity. As opposed to lessening the form, documentation plays an important part in forming the ontology of a work, due to the fact that it is often our first, or only contact with a work. Establishing exactly what

this role is, and how the representation and the work connect through the development of a more appropriate understanding system, is the next stage of this investigation.

There are many forms of digital dance performance. Examination of the significance of these various types is important in order to establish whether we can consider digital versions of dance performance as possessing one ontological status. For example, there is a distinction to be made between edited and non-edited films. Non-edited representations have more features in common with the original token, however their mode of existence (as recordings), means they are still not *exactly* the same thing as the token, or therefore, the type. Edited virtual films do not share the structural and durational features of the performance, yet are still made up of a performance. This means that we are seeing a performance of a work, in a re-represented manner.

Additionally, if we consider the films as types in their own right, we cannot completely disregard Phelan's analysis, as we seem to be in agreement that reproduction is different to performance. Both Phelan and McFee's explanations of dance ontology are problematised by digitalisation. Whilst neither can be completely dismissed, they also do not allow for all of the complexities of dance's existence in digital form. Where they leave edited and non-edited films in terms of relating to the work is profoundly complex.

There are multiple ontological quandaries raised by this discussion, some of which are not specific to dance. The ontological status of digital information is an area I am only able to touch on here, but this investigation has shown us that such discussions carry significance for dance, and in fact may become more relevant in future investigations than the current vocabulary of art ontology. It seems evident that the very terminology of 'existence', 'location' or 'multiplicity' is of dubious applicability when applied to virtual phenomena. Therefore we must adopt or develop more appropriate ways of understanding dance ontology. As dance continues to interact with digital technology our ontological analysis of the form and its many shifting features must keep pace.

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Hetty Blades originally trained in contemporary dance. This paper is an adaptation of an essay written as part of an MA in Dance Studies at Roehampton University last year. Hetty is currently taking part in multiple performance projects as a dancer, and writing dance criticism. She is due to commence a PhD at King's College London in September. Her research interests are: the effects of digitalisation on dance ontology,

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