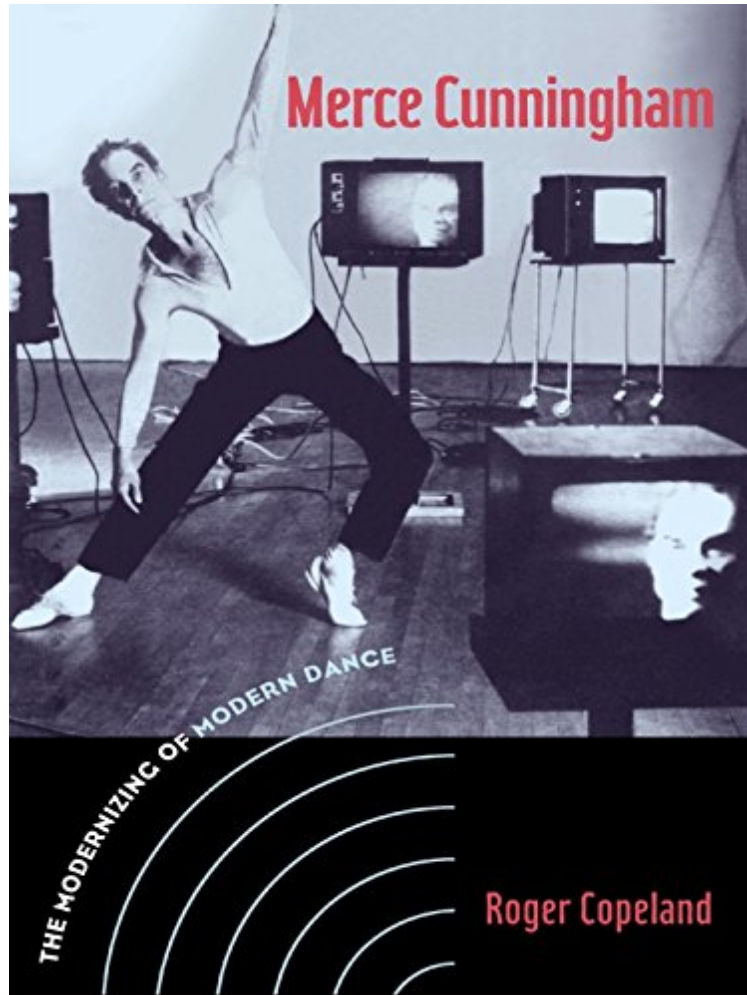


Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance

Roger Copeland

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Roger Copeland : Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Repetitive, Polemical, Simplistic
By Eric Mullis
I read this as part of mfa (dance) research and was surprised by it in several ways. As someone else noted, it's very repetitive and doesn't need to be 300 pages. For example, Copeland writes over and over again about the aesthetics of cool indifference, but that point was clearly made in the introduction. Another issue is how biased it is. I love Cunningham's work but it has its artistic problems. Instead of actually spelling out the details of arguments about those problems, however, Copeland simplifies any criticism and then concludes that the critics just don't get it. For example, Cunningham was a control freak who set up rigorous systems for chance decisions. But as Steve Paxton pointed out, if Cunningham REALLY was into change as a way of taking himself out of the decision making process, then his movement vocabularies (and dance aesthetics) would change from piece to piece. Instead of really digging into the issue of rigorous control and chance and the consistency of Cunningham's aesthetic, Copeland just emphasizes again and again how impersonal and

freeing Cunningham's methods and work can be. But it isn't that simple. Copeland similarly quickly dismisses any approach to dance movement that is anti-intellectual in nature by going back to early modern-dance's emphasis on emotions and the unconscious. But that's just not the complete story; why should we believe that there are only two options: "cool intellectualism" or "hot emotionalism"? Again, Copeland simplifies not only by presenting only two options but also by basing them in Cunningham's early career (e.g. as a reaction to Graham). But Cunningham's career spanned decades and many approaches to dance movement arose that go beyond that facile dichotomy. Lastly, Copeland dismisses any kind of social critique of Cunningham's work as silly PC identity politics, but again, it's not that simple. At the very least, he needs to engage the rather complex issues of the dancer as person and the possibility of formalist work successfully bracketing the personal, and the political implications of that kind of bracketing. It's academically irresponsible to dismiss the issue (as well as all the quality work on dance, ethics and politics) with a bit of blustery hand waving. But, again, that's Copeland's repetitive argumentative strategy: simplify the issue and then state your alternative conclusion. Anyone who is more informed about dance studies (or logic) will see through this and, since it's so repetitive, will likely get irritated with it. If you're interested in a more informed and balanced approach to many of the issues that Copeland (kind of) discusses, I would take a look at Susan Leigh Foster's masterful book: "Reading Dancing" Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance³ of 4 people found the following review helpful. Engaging but repetitive By Michael Richards As a highly unschooled Cunningham fan -- this is the first dance book I've ever read -- I found Copeland's book engaging in its scope, contextualizing Cunningham's choreography in relation to the leading cultural and aesthetic movements of the last half century. Copeland has essentially one thesis, stated fairly cleanly in the introduction. I would highly recommend the introduction. Unfortunately the rest of the book can be tedious and dogmatic as Copeland attempts to bolster his arguments through a strategy of repetition and exhaustion. Every movement and idea of the late 20th century seems to be a nail for Copeland's rhetorical hammer, and while I found the tie-ins and tidbits of history interesting enough to finish the book, I found the tone and structure of the book to be artificially argumentative and quite lacking in the openness and nuance that Copeland praises Cunningham for.³ of 4 people found the following review helpful. Superb tour through the 20th century -- and beyond By A Customer What an extraordinary book! Copeland does not just tell the story of one figure, even though Cunningham is a great figure central to just about every artistic movement of the last 70 years. Copeland also relates in lucid prose how each of those movements arose, what made it tick, and how its legacy affects us today. After the "culture wars" of the 1990s, there were very few individuals left standing who could both appreciate and criticize the twists and turns of modernism and post-modernism. Copeland is among this saving remnant. If you are looking for a strong-minded, witty, engaging, eloquent Virgil to guide you through the Inferno and Purgatory of art since the 1930s, look no further. Copeland's your man.

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""Copeland's book about the sixty-year career of Merce Cunningham is also a brilliant sixty-year history of theater, dance, art, music and intellectual movements in America. . . .""-Sally Sommer, Professor of American Dance Studies at Florida State University. "Examines the trajectory of Merce The Choreographer and places him just where I think he belongs--as a global artist of the twentieth century moving in all directions into the twenty-first..""-Valda Setterfield, Member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, 1964-1974 "Copeland's book will bring joy to Cunningham partisans."-Allan Ulrich, "Dance Magazine About the Author Roger Copeland is Professor of Theater and Dance at Oberlin College. He is coeditor of the widely used anthology What is Dance? His essays about dance, theater, and film have appeared in The New York Times, The New Republic, The Village Voice, and many other publications including The Encyclopedia of Dance and Ballet.