Dancing the divide: Reconfiguring the relationship between body and mind through pain and disease

Essay

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Hogeschool 2018-2019
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Pain and disease are experiences that arise in response to the recognition of the body as being in an endangered state. Pain is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, and it is influenced by attitudes, beliefs, personality, and social factors. Disease is an abnormal condition affecting a living organism, generally understood as a medical condition involving a pathological process associated with a specific set of symptoms.

Pain and disease arise from the complex communication that takes place between the body and the mind in moments of danger or affliction, as part of the struggle for self-preservation. These are among the few moments in which the mind and body come together in a direct dialogue, something that human beings have sought through a diversity of practices, envisioning an ideal alignment between the two. It is through the struggle for self-preservation that we approach the most sincere connection to our primary dimension, which, together with other dimensions, constitutes our human nature. We are animal beings, but also social and political beings. This is why established notions and interpretations of Health are subject to specific factors within the context of our civilization, which has favored the development of our social and political dimensions while inhibiting our animal dimension.

The way individuals interpret and relate to their bodies and minds varies according to specific contextual factors that fall under the umbrella of culture. Consequently, the same applies to the experience of illness. Practices such as dance can provide a space in which these interpretations and relationships are expressed and even transformed through the body. This work seeks to celebrate this capacity by defending the idea that dance works which give voice to bodies inhabited by pain or disease can serve as a crossfader between the culturally constructed gap separating the body and the mind.

The research has been guided by the following question: Is the culturally conceived relationship between body and mind being reformulated in dance works based on physiological afflictions such as illness or pain?

First, the historical origins of the Western paradigm that sustains the duality between mind and Body will be presented. Second, three examples of dance practices based on pain and disease will be explored, each emerging from different cultural and historical contexts. Finally, a conclusion will address the relevance of this approach to the body and the mind (the being) in dance.

I. The Origins of the Paradigm

The first philosophers, in the sixth century BC, considered that everything endowed with life was governed by a soul in which lay the principle that allowed living beings to be born, develop, and die. This soul was understood to be material in nature, although of a different and more subtle kind than the matter composing the physical body. The position of these early philosophers was monist, meaning that the soul and the body did not belong to radically different natures but were different manifestations of the single substance that constituted the totality of things.

Nevertheless, at the same time, the religious ideas of an emerging religious movement known as Orphism were being introduced in Greece. According to these ideas, the soul that enabled movement and life in the body had a divine and eternal origin. It preceded the Body, entering it before giving it life, and continued to exist after death and the decomposition of the Body.

For Plato, the soul and the body were of completely different natures. Each belonged to a separate world: the body belonged to the sensible world, which was subject to change and corruption, while the soul belonged to the divine world of ideas and remained unchangeable.

With the advent of Modernity, Descartes redefined the concepts of body and soul by refining their composition and faculties. The soul was assigned the functions of reason, will, speech, and the management of thought and sensations, bringing the concept of the soul closer to that of the thinking mind and further away from the divine and eternal substance described in ancient Greek philosophy. The body, on the other hand, became the host of emotions. It was radically deprived of the faculty of thought, although it was capable of moving itself, thereby confirming the irreducible dualism separating the two. Descartes proposed an important perspective on their relationship: passion would be the only link capable of connecting the Body and the soul, without making their unified composition possible. Passion was understood as a degenerate and disturbing connection originating in physical matter and erupting into the soul as a disruption.

Over the last hundred and fifty years, science has established itself as one of the most important sources of authority, underpinning much of what belongs to the collective subconscious. The increasing permeability between different branches of thought has allowed for a broader perspective on the social dimension of individuals. It has also enabled the observation that interaction and intersubjectivity contribute to the construction of meaning around the body. This has led to the conception of the body as a system of symbols, a cultural, social, and knowledge-based construction of society, or as an effect of social discourse.

From an anthropological perspective, the body is understood as a means of expression, highly influenced by culture but capable of absorbing and retaining a wide range of knowledge through experience. The body not only reflects the social situation, which simultaneously shapes it through behavioral patterns, but also reflects upon that situation. Its symbolic expressions of the circumstances and concerns of the group to which it belongs can be used to transform the existing situation.

In this sense, the perception of the body depends on its cultural framework. In Latin American Indigenous communities, the body is an expression of identity in relation to nature and a source of interpersonal relationships, both with other human beings and with nature itself. In communities from the Andean region, the body is understood as a totality: the starting and ending point of all dimensions of human existence.

II. Afflictions in Dance: Variations in Cultural, Historical, and Experiential Contexts in Dances Based on Pain and Disease

Rita Marcalo is a Portuguese choreographer and performer based in the UK. On 12 December 2009, she staged a 24-hour "performance party" at the Bradford Playhouse Theatre, during which she intended to experience an epileptic seizure in front of an audience. The "performance party" consisted of various audience-participation activities and was expected to culminate in a live seizure. At that moment, the audience was invited to film the event with their phones, highlighting the voyeuristic nature of this artistic choice. In preparation for the event, she stopped her medical treatment a month beforehand and exposed herself to experiences that could contribute to triggering a seizure, such as consuming alcohol, chocolate, and coffee, or dancing under strobe lights.

Among the motivations behind this work, the artist identified, first of all, an interest in making public what is usually private. In her case, this meant sharing epilepsy as part of her identity and exploring how it relates to the context in which she lives. A second relevant motivation was to challenge the limits of control over her body and its condition. Seizures are characterized by their unpredictable nature, and she sought to gain control over an unexpected activity of her body.

"(…) there are these episodes in my life where I don't have any control over what my body does – the movements it does (hence the reason I call these [epileptic] episodes my involuntary dances). Another facet of the work is this exploration around control: I may not be able to control what happens during an epileptic seizure, but this work was an attempt to take control of the conditions within which an epileptic seizure happens".[1]

[1] Rita Marcalo. *Involuntary Dances.* 2012
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1747016112437686

This artistic choice prompted both positive and negative criticism. Members of the medical community and epilepsy charity groups questioned its relevance, claiming that the risks involved did not justify this particular attempt to raise awareness of the condition. They therefore viewed the work with skepticism. On the other hand, some art followers recognized the value of a work that emphasized the fact that adults with epilepsy have ownership of their own bodies and the right to decide what to do with them, without the constant intervention of charitable organizations acting on their behalf.

This artist sought to raise awareness of a pathological condition through its deliberate exposure in a performance setting involving audience participation. On the other side of the world, a very different form of exposure to pain and disease emerged in Japan in 1959, after the Second World War. Butoh originated amid the ruins left by the war, during a period of social change, urbanization, and political disenchantment. It emerged as a response to Japan's subjugation to Western political and artistic models. In its origins, this new form of dance, intense and extraordinary from a Western perspective, was not concerned with reproducing movements but rather with embodying pain, disease, and death, turning dance into an experience that stood in opposition to the aesthetically pleasurable spectacle that Western culture had comfortably established.

In her book “Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy” (p. 89), Sondra Fraleigh describes the final solo, “Leprosy”, performed by one of the icons of Butoh, Tatsumi Hijikata, as part of the performance “Summer Storm”.

“Is a dance about leprosy too obtrusive? Does it take advantage of illness? Hijikata’s is a dance about real suffering and long-held prejudice in the face of sickness and disfigurement. Hijikata’s psychic control is not apparent. (…) He himself does not have Hansen’s disease (leprosy), yet he takes into his empathetic embodiment of the condition, and that’s enough.”

Although Rita Marcalo and the pioneers of Butoh belong to very different cultural and historical contexts, they share an important similarity: they are integrated into the social fabric of their respective cities, where they have agency as members of civil society. They do not belong to minority or vulnerable groups within their respective cultural contexts. This raises an important question: What forms of movement do groups of people who do not belong to what is commonly referred to as "civilization" create in response to pain and disease?

Indigenous peoples constitute minority and vulnerable groups around the world. There is one particular Indigenous ethnic group that addresses pain and disease through ritual and collective dance. The Embera are an Indigenous people belonging to the Chocó group. They are distributed across eastern Panama, southern Costa Rica, northern Ecuador, and western

Colombia, particularly along the Pacific Coast.

In one Embera community in Colombia, known as Embera Tumburrulá, the body is not designated by a single word. The body can be referred to as “Cacúa”, a concept that encompasses organs, muscles, intelligence, and breath (the vital component). It cannot be used to refer to dead bodies. In this community's language, there is no equivalent to the Western concept of the soul; body, intelligence, and vitality are understood within the same concept.

The Healing Dance is one of the rituals practiced in some Embera communities when a child becomes ill. It consists of prayers and dances performed exclusively by adult and young women from the community. They believe that women's dancing has the power to contribute to the child's recovery.

As a community, they believe in the positive and direct effects that dance has on the body. This is why it is an intrinsic component of their ritual practices, which focus on the body's well-being.

Rita Marcalo expressed an attempt to control the uncontrollable and unexpected movements produced by her condition by framing them within a voyeuristic performance. In this case, disease becomes an artistic subject that makes it possible to challenge the boundaries between mind and body. In Butoh performances, the embodiment of disease and pain is the source of movements that take the body into extreme and incomprehensible states, which may appear disturbing and extravagant from a Western cultural perspective.

On the other hand, because it takes place within the context of a ritual, the dance involved in the Embera Healing Dance has a different social and cultural dimension from that of Rita Marcalo's *Involuntary Dances* and Butoh. A ritual is fundamentally structured around symbolic guidelines that serve a communal purpose. It is associated with the supernatural or the religious and involves a clear structure of behaviour to be followed. In this sense, the cultural position that dance occupies in Rita Marcalo's work and in Butoh differs from the position it occupies within the Embera community, even though all three share an exploration of ways of separating the body from the mind through dance. The Embera Healing Dance demonstrates the positive impact that dance can have on both the closed-off and the ailing body.

The cultural constructions surrounding the boundaries between the body and the mind have determined aesthetic and performative canons in Western society. This affects not only the outcomes of artistic research processes but also, indirectly, the approaches encouraged within training institutions. Ultimately, art consumers are conditioned by these constructions, which seem to have reduced their openness to the extent that they struggle to appreciate different artistic visions concerning the relationship between body and mind in performance.

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