

The reformulation of the culturally conceived relation between body and mind in dance works based on pain and disease

Essay

Isabella Arboleda Tovar
Portfolio Dance B.A Artesis Plantijn Hogeschool
2018-2019
Katleen Van Langendonck

Pain and disease are experiences that act as a response to the recognition of the Body 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 to be medical condition that involves a pathological process associated with a specific set of symptoms.

Pain and disease are exerted as a result of the complex communication that happens between the Body and the mind in moments of danger or affliction in the struggle for the preservation of the being. It is one of the few moments, where mind and Body are get together in a pure dialogue, something that the human being has searched for through a diversity of practices, visualizing an ideal monomial alignment. It is in the struggle for preservation done by the being, that we approach the most sincere link to our primary dimension that together with other dimensions compose our human nature. We are animal beings, but also social beings and political beings. This is why the established notions and interpretations related to Health are subjected to specific factors of our civilization's context that has chosen the uprising of our social and political dimensions while inhibiting our animal dimension.

The interpretation and relationship individuals have towards their bodies and minds varies according to specific contextual factors that are gathered under the umbrella of culture, and in consequence it happens the same with illness. Practices like dance, can be the stage for these interpretations and relationships to be expressed, and even transmuted through the Body. This work wants to celebrate this capacity by defending the idea that dance works that give voice to bodies inhabited by pain or disease serve as crossfader of the culturally constructed gap between the Body and the mind. The research has been guided by the following question: is the culturally conceived relation between body and mind being reformulated in dance works that are based on physiological afflictions such as illness or pain?

At first, the historical origins of the Western paradigm that holds the duality between mind and Body will be presented. Secondly, two examples of dance practices based on pain will be exposed, each one of them coming from different cultural and chronological contexts. At last, there will be a conclusion over the relevance of this approach of the Body and the mind (the being) in dance.

I. The beginning of the line. The origins of the paradigm

The first philosophers, in VI b.C considered that everything that is gifted with life, is directed by a soul in which lays the principle that allows them to be born, develop and die. This soul is of a material nature, but a different and more subtle nature than the one that composes the physical Body. The position of these first philosophers is monist, which means soul and Body don't belong to a radically different nature, but are different manifestations of the unique substance that constitutes the totality of things.

Nevertheless, at the same time the religious ideas of a nascent religious current called Orfism are being introduced in Greece: the soul that enables the motion and life in the Body has a divine and eternal origin; it precedes the Body, given that it enters to it before supplying it with life and it continues existing after death and the corruption of the Body.

For Plato, the soul and the Body are of completely different nature. Each one of them belong to different and separated worlds: the Body belongs to the sensitive that is subjected to change and corruption, while the soul belongs to the divine world of the ideas and it remains unchangeable.

With the arrival Modernity, Descartes redefines the concepts of Body and soul, by refining their composition and faculties. The soul is assigned the functions of the reason, the will, the word, and the sensations of the management of thought, which pushes closer the concept of soul towards the thinking mind and further apart from the divine and eternal matter that the ancient Greek philosophy stated. The body, on the other hand, is the host of the emotions. The body is radically deprived of the faculty of thought, but it is capable of mobilizing the body, in the confirmation of the irreducible dualism that separates them. He states an important perspective over their relationship: passion will be the only link that can relate the Body and the soul, without yet making possible their unitary composition. Passion is a degenerated and disturbing link that originates from the physical (the Body) matter and bursts into the soul as a disruption.

In the last hundred and fifty years, science has position itself as one of the most important Oracles, underpinning a lot of what is in the collective subconscious. The sober permeability between branches of thought, has allowed the openness of perspective towards the social dimension of individuals, and therefore the observation of the fact that interaction and intersubjectivity act on the constitution of sense for the body, which leads to the conception of the body as a system of symbols, a cultural, social and knowledgeable construction of society, or as an effect of a social discourse. From an anthropological view, the body is understood as a means of expression, highly influenced by culture, but capable of absorbing and reserving the most varied knowledge through experience. The body not only reflects the social situation, that simultaneously frames it with behavior patterns, but also reflects on it; its symbolic expressions of the situation and of the concerns of the group of people in which it is existing, can be used to transmute the current situation.

In this sense, the perception of the Body depends on the cultural frame. In Latin-American indigenous communities, the body is an expression of identity with nature and it's the source of interpersonal relationships with other humans as well as with nature. In the communities from the Andes region, the body is a totality, it is the starting and ending point of all dimensions of human existence.

II. AFFLICTIONS IN DANCE: Variations of cultural, historical and experiential context in dances based on pain and disease

Rita Marcalo is a Portuguese choreographer and performer based in the UK. On the 12th December 2009, she executed a 24 hours “performance party” at the Bradford Playhouse Theater in which she intended to have an epileptic seizure in front of the audience. The “performance party” would be composed by various audience-participation activities expected live seizure and in that moment, the audience was invited to film it with their phones, to highlight the voyeuristic nature of this artistic choice. As a preparation for the event, she stopped her medical treatment a month before and exposed herself to experiences that would contribute to the induction of the seizure, such as the consumption of alcohol, chocolate and coffee or dancing under strobe lights.

Among the motivations for this work, the artist named that first of all, there was an interest of making public what is private which in her case points to sharing epilepsy as part of her identity and how does it stand in relationship to the context in which she lives in. The second relevant motivation was to challenge the limits of control over her body and its condition, because the seizures are characterized for being of unexpected nature and what she was searching for was to have 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

This artistic choice occasioned positive and negative criticism. From the medical community, epilepsy charity groups question its relevance, claiming that the danger that it presented didn’t justify this way of attempt of giving more visibility to the pathology, to which they looked at with skeptical eyes. On the other hand, some art followers, recognized the value of making a work that carries the fact that adults with epilepsy own their own bodies and have a right to choose what to do with them, without the permanent intervention of charitable organizations to step in on their behalf.

This artist decided to draw awareness towards a pathological condition by searching its deliberate exposure under a performance setting involving audience participation. In a very far apart side of the world, another type of exposure on pain and disease emerges on 1959 after the II World War, in Japan. Butoh originated in the midst of the ruins that war had left; during a time of social change, urbanization and political disenchantment; as a response to the Japanese subjugation to political and artistic Western models. In its origins this new form of dance, intense and extraordinary for Western eyes, was not concerned about reproducing movements, but rather in embodying pain, disease and death, and making of dance an experience in counter

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

position to the aesthetic pleasurable spectacle that Western comfortably had established.

In her book *Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy*, (Pg. 89) Sondra Fraleigh describes the last solo *Leprosy* of one of the icons of Butoh Tatsumi Hijikata that makes part of the performance *Summer Storm*.

“Is a dance about leprosy too obtrusive? Does it takes 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.”

Even though Rita Marcalo and Butoh pioneers belong to very distant cultural and historical contexts, they have an important similarity: they are installed in the cohabitation system of their respective cities, where they have agency as being part of the civil society; they don’t belong to a minority or vulnerable group in their cultural contexts. Then, it is important to ask, what is the translation into movement of pain and disease that groups of people that don’t belong to the so called “civilization” make?

Indigenous people are one of the minority groups and vulnerable groups around the world. There is one specific indigenous ethnicity that deals with pain and disease through ritual and collective dance. The Embera is an indigenous ethnicity that belongs to the group of Chocoes. They are disseminated along east of Panama, south of Costa Rica, north of Ecuador, and the west of Colombia specifically through the Pacific Coast.

In one of the Embera community in Colombia, called Ember Tumburrulá, the body is not designated by only one word. Body can be called *Cacúa*, which involves organs, muscles, intelligence and breath (the vital component), it cannot be used to designate dead bodies. In this community’s language, there is no parallel to the Western concept of soul; body, intelligence and vitality are gathered in the same concept.

The Healing Dance is one of the rituals from some Embera communities practiced in the moment of a child’s sickness. It is composed by prayers and dancing made exclusively by adult and young female part of the community. They believe that the female dance has the power to contribute to the recuperation of the child. Collectively, they believe in the positive and direct effects that dance has on body, this is why it is an intrinsic component of the ritualistic practices focused on the body’s well-being.

Rita Marcalo expressed an attempt to control the uncontrollable and unexpected movements that her disease produces in her body, by framing it as voyeuristic performance. Here disease is used as an artistic object that enables the challenging of the borders between mind and body. In Butoh dance performances, the embodiment of disease and pain is in the source of movements that take the body into extreme and

incomprehensible states which can be, to the eyes of Western culture, perturbing and extravagant.

On the other hand, because it is *performed* under the context of a ritual, the dance involved in the Healing dance from the Embera has a different social and cultural dimension than what happens in *Involuntary Dances* from Rita Marcalo and in Butoh. A ritual holds in its quintessence symbolic guidelines that serve a communal purpose and it is related to the supernatural or religious and there is a clear structure of behavior to be followed. In this sense, the cultural position that dance exhibits in Rita Marcalo's work and in Butoh is different from the it exhibits in the Embera community, even if the three of them share a research on ways of abandoning the body from the mind through dance. The Healing dance of the Embera shows the positive impact that dance has in both an hermetic and sick body

The cultural constructions around the limits of the body and the mind have determined aesthetical and performative canons in Western society. This affects not only the outcome of artistic research processes but also it indirectly holds the approach that is stimulated in training institutions. Ultimately, the art consumers are vaccinated with these construction that seems to have reduced flexibility to allow the true appreciation of different artistic visions related to the place of body and mind in performance.

WEBGRAPHY

- Moreno-Altamirano Lorena. Gaceta Médica México Vol. 146 No. 2, 2010. HISTORIA Y FILOSOFÍA DE LA MEDICINA. “Enfermedad, cuerpo y corporeidad: una mirada antropológica”. Publishing: 09.09.2010. Pgs 153-155. Internet. Date of visit: 16.03.2019. Available https://www.anmm.org.mx/GMM/2010/n2/64_vol_146_n2.pdf
- Marcalo Rita. Research Ethics-Sage Journals. “Involuntary dances”. Publishing: 09.03.2012. Internet. Date of visit: 16.03.2019. Available: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1747016112437686>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Sondra Fraleigh. “Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy.” Place of publication: Board of Trustees, university of Illinois, United States. 2010