

Resisting to Dystopias of Bodily Control

Dance training and anorexia/bulimia

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WALKING TOWARDS UTOPIAS OF BODILY CONTROL

Utopia lies there at the horizon. When I walk two steps towards, it retreats two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward, it swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is just for that: to make us walk.¹ (Galeano 2018:320)

Artistic training organizes and intensifies a desire to reach a utopic horizon by crafting a transformational practice that works patiently, step by step, day by day. However, as Galeano expresses, this utopic horizon always slips further away, not only on a horizontal plane but also on an internal receding depth, as there is always

a desire to search further and deeper. These sites of practice become heterotopic sites of intensive experience where practitioners enter a process of transformation, assimilating and incorporating values and aesthetic ideals.

Dance training aims for a utopia of bodily control in order to develop an artistic expression through movement. The dancer seeks to control their body according to the values and aesthetics intrinsic to the training methodology. The urge of control has always been something very keen to humankind but also very sensitive and ambiguous. Different methodologies of such modes of control reflect not only different aesthetics, but also different values and visions

¹ My translation from Portuguese: 'Aproximo-me dois passos, ela afasta-se dois passos. Caminho dez passos e o horizonte recua dez passos. Por mais que eu caminhe, nunca a alcançarei. Para que serve a utopia? Serve para isso: para caminhar.'

■ Resisting to Dystopias of Bodily Control, 2020.
Photo Cecília de Lima



of the living body. They are not innocuous physical training but transformative practices of the self in relation to the world. Therefore, such utopia raises critical questions: What is the nature of (self-)control envisioned within dance trainings? What aesthetic values form the horizon of a training process and how does its transformative power operate?

This paper departs from a personal experiential process to expose a critical perspective on the practice of bodily control developed by some dance trainings. Such perspective is conceived through an interrelation between traditional ballet training with the state of anorexia nervosa/bulimia, which is counterpointed by somatic dance training.

Grounded on an empirical understanding this is a practitioner narrative about utopian dance training and a manifesto against any practice of control that becomes a dystopia of oppression and annihilation of the fundamental knowledge intrinsic to the living body. Instead, it cries out for a new perspective on the notion of control. Control needs to be perceived as a practice of deep understanding of the nature of the living body, as a condition of the body-world transformative process.

A TRAINING EXPERIENCE AND ITS RELATION TO BODILY CONTROL

At 11 years old I suffered from anorexia nervosa. Even in 1985 this was a rather unknown health disorder within the Portuguese medical community. Finally, after being diagnosed, I remember that the doctors used to say: 'She doesn't eat because she doesn't want to grow; she wants to remain a child.' Such a diagnosis didn't feel right. I did want to grow and become an adult. Looking back, I see now that the problem was precisely a strong desire to grow that collided with an intense feeling of self-absence perceived as the actual physical sensation of an empty hole. As I sought to find myself, I felt fixated by this super-protected, obedient child fulfilling all the expectations of others. I needed to reduce that child to a diaphanous body and to strictly control what I ingested and absorbed from the world. Through this control, the child would fade away; I would

practice and demonstrate a strong willpower and would fulfil that hole of self-absence.

During this period, I was accepted at the School of the National Ballet Company of Portugal. Every day I stepped into this heterotopic place where I could practice further the control over my body. The training aimed to achieve a mirror image of a delicate, long figure with resilient muscles. The dream was to attain a controlled, diaphanous body that barely touches the floor, eternally pure. The methodology focused on developing strength through extreme effort and precise repetitions, flexibility through extreme stretches and control through muscular contraction. The breath should be held at the level of the chest to conceal the movement from the belly. The indications were exact and assertive with no space for creativity or discovery.

After some time, such practice of control resulted in an uncontrolled bulimic behaviour. The act of eating and vomiting was associated with the conflicting need to simultaneously reduce the body and fill in its internal hole. Presently, I associate this condition with a paradoxical cyclical motion between affection and individuation (de Lima 2013), where individuation and affection can be considered as opposing forces of 'a tensile, oversaturated system, beyond the level of unity' (Simondon 1995 cited in Manning 2013: 3). Affection is here manifested according to Massumi (2002) as a pre-personal experience of intensity intrinsic to the body's survival – a need of affecting and being affected. Affection relates to the body movement of opening into the world and turning the inside out and the outside in. Diversely, individuation relates to the need of closing and not disintegrating, maintaining an individual being (de Lima 2013, 2017). The bulimic condition results from an unbalanced process of affection and individuation, opening and closing. On the one hand, it manifests an extreme urge of affection at a basic level – incorporating the world through eating and disintegrating the body into the world through vomiting; on the other hand, it manifests a reduced capacity of individuation – an intense physical feeling of a hole, a sense of self-absence.

It was only in 1997, when I entered the European Dance Development Center in the

Netherlands, that I really initiated a very different dance training and my relationship with self-control started to transform. Here I was practicing *Awareness* with Eva Karczag and *Release* with Mary O'Donnell Fulkerson. The paradigms of these classes were completely contradictory to my previous learning experience, not only concerning dance training but also general education. Now the focus of practice was not on the image of the external figure but on deep somatic perception, on learning to listen to the body and trust its intrinsic knowhow. The learning process was not based on executing by command, but rather on a process of self-discovery with space for creativity. Commitment was not associated with hard struggle but related to self-awareness. Verbal communication was no longer concrete or assertive but mostly alluding to images and metaphors. The sense of time was not about rushing but about dwelling – 'to be in the moment' was a recurrent expression. The values were not about virtuosity but rather about authenticity and deepening sensory-somatic perception. It was precisely a process of release and awareness as Skinner (2009) describes it: releasing unnecessary tensions and fears and liberating the usual patterns of movement and of modes of thinking. This training paradigm rejects the notion of self-control as something to be achieved through tension and restrain blocking an expressive existence. It is about a process of discovering self-consciousness at a fundamental sensorial and perceptive level, where the self is not something determined but is rather a constant body-world relationship.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Our living nature is a constant process of transformation fed from a constant body-world relationship and regulated by our intrinsic capacity of homeostatic balance. Therefore, it is vital to proclaim a new perception on the notion of control:

- NO to any practice of control by restraint, oppression and annihilation of a body-world relationship!
- INSTEAD let's cultivate a notion of (self-)

control that is a practice of deep understanding of the living body as being in a body-world transformative process; a practice that exercises a homeostatic balance within the body-world relationship and therefore is renewed by continuous discovery; a practice of consciousness integrated within our living process.

- NO to heterotopic trainings becoming dystopic by dehumanizing and oppressing human life.
- INSTEAD let's practice utopia in the way Galiano proclaims: a utopia where the purpose is simply to *dance* towards the horizon and play the game of balance intrinsic to each step.

IN MEMORY OF MARY O'DONNELL
FULKERSON¹

Dear Mary, you are with me in all dances.

Thank you for teaching me so much about life and about dance. With you I learned to listen, to trust and let myself be wild.

Thank you for all the pioneer visions, questions and revolutionary thoughts that you brought to the world of dance.

I miss you on this side of the universe!

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¹ Mary O'Donnell Fulkerson (1946–2020) was a dance teacher and choreographer, recognized for being one of the founders of Release Technique. Born in the United States, she had a major influence in the development of New Dance and has been credited for being responsible for bringing somatic dance to Europe.