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Title: Dance and philosophies of embodiment: bringing body to mind

This essay evaluates how different philosophies and perceptions of the body, mind and their relationship, initiate diverse traditions of performing and training in dance. The historical Western paradigm of mind-body split is briefly examined in opposition to the more organic approach of Eastern traditional thought, which favours integration of the mind and body. Contemporary movement practices, such as Skinner Releasing Technique, Contact Improvisation and Japanese Butoh are explored, especially as they converge on the mind-body problem although maintaining their own recognizable style. The research proposed in this essay is an attempt to understand and explore the role of the mind in dance. Besides, the focus is on an "unusual" state of mind experienced through personal practice in Butoh dance and some dance forms based on improvisation. The relation between this state and the kinaesthetic experience is discussed.

Historically Western culture has encouraged division rather than integration. Culture has been separated from nature, art from philosophy, science from religion and body from mind. René Descartes is considered the father of the dominant paradigm which confers to man a dual nature, "a form of psycho-physical dualism in which body and mind are considered to be distinct substances able to casually interact" (Burwood, Gilbert, Lennon 1998:2). The Cartesian thought, aside of setting a dichotomy between the mental and the physical, also considers the "primacy and autonomy" of the first - a theory which was supported also by Christianity, which depicted the mind/spirit as superior to the body. This approach to the theory of

mind seems to have gained incredible popularity among the general public, and still contribute to shape popular understanding of the mind and body.

Definitions of the mind have always been controversial and problematic. Keith Campbell in his text *Body and Mind* (1970), considered to be a standard introductory text in the philosophy of mind (Burwood, Gilbert, Lennon, 1998), assumed that the body is a material thing whilst the mind is a spiritual thing. Campbell's definition of "spiritual" is: "immaterial and capable of mental life" (Campbell 1984:24). He also declares that since the mind is an "object which does not have all the qualities of matter" (19), it is difficult to define. In fact, the mind is non-spatial and is not subject to physical laws. Its elusiveness makes it impossible to investigate with "normal research techniques" (42).

This could be a reason why at the end of the 1990s, Reductionism became the most popular theory of mind among philosophers. Reductionism claims "that, given two fields of discourse, there is an equivalence of either meaning or reference between the statements of the two fields so that anything explicable in terms of one field is explicable in terms of the other" (Burwood, Gilbert, Lennon 1998:3). This approach tends to understand the mind in physical terms, attempting to use the empirical methods of natural science. It completely rejects the possibility of the existence of a "spiritual" substance, arguing against the Cartesian conceptions of mind.

However, these theories "continue to work within a framework of Cartesian categories and assumptions" (21) - that is the notion of the human body as a mechanical system and the mind as an "inner" realm.

The traditional Cartesian belief of mind/body split and superiority of the mind over the body has had a deep impact on Western culture. It could be argued that this belief has contributed to the development of the rational, analytical aspect of the mind; on the other hand it has provoked an alarming collapse of the intuitive, instinctive aspects of the mind, more deeply connected with body feelings and sensory perceptions. Here "intuition" is defined as a:

[...] psychic organ or means to apprehend reality. It is a synthetic function in the sense that it apprehends the totality of a given situation or psychological reality. It does not work from part to whole -- as the analytical mind does -- but apprehends a totality directly in its living existence (Assagioli in Skinner, Davis, Davidson, Wheeler, Metcalf 1979, www.skinnerreleasing.com).

The "primacy" of the rational mind over the physical body has been supported also by Christianity. A strict policy of control of the natural forces of the body, like sexuality and emotionality, has been applied over the centuries because "flesh" was "seen as weak and sinful and in need of strict control and regulation by the mind"

(Brown in Shilling 2000:55). Furthermore, emotional impulses and affection became "rationalized" and controlled also through the "civilization process" (Elias in Shilling 2000:151). According to Elias, the "civilization process" could be described as a phenomenon witnessed in the passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, characterized by profound social behaviour changes (in Shilling 2000). During this period people started "defin[ing] their embodiment in opposition to everything they [felt was] animal or natural" (Shilling 2000:156). The natural functions of the body were seen as "disgusting" and "hidden away in back-regions" (156).

In the 1970s, when social constructivist theories took over, a very radical view about the body was proposed and any connection between the body and nature was severed. These theories argue that "the natural is the construction of the social" (Shilling [1993] 2000:81) and that the body is already "culturally mapped; it never exists in a pure or uncoded state" (Fuss in Shilling 2000:81). Sociologists, such as Foucault and Bourdieu, have discussed that the body is always invested by social forces and shaped by social meanings. Furthermore, the body is controlled and manipulated, firstly by society, through rules and regulations, secondly by the mind, as a result of the internalization of codes of social behaviour. According to these theories, as Shilling suggests, the body is believed to be a passive, inert "stuff" entirely dominated and marked by social experience.

These arguments, however, stand out when associated to the work

developed within the Japanese Butoh scene. Kazuo Ohno, one of the internationally acclaimed founders of this practice, claimed: "as long as the body maintains an existence marked by social experience it cannot express the soul with purity" (Ohno in Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988:94). A similar idea was explored in a Butoh workshop which took place in London in 2006, facilitated by the Butoh dancer Atsushi Takenouchi. During the workshop students were asked to move as if society would have never taught them how to do it.

In Butoh is suggested that the body possesses an "unconscious" existence, hidden underneath the layers imposed over it by society or that part of the mind, itself influenced by society. In relation to this, the dancer and professor Sondra Fraleigh has argued:

What is natural and what is [culturally] acquired are in perpetual relation. In terms of human movement, nature is by no means just the passive surface on which culture plays (Fraleigh 2004:54).

Butoh dance through the technique of the "corpse", introduced for the first time in dance by Tatsumi Hijikata founder of Ankoku Butoh, tries to discover and express the natural, organic body. The "corpse" is the body freed from every-day physical habits and trainings, in order to regain and express its own forgotten essential nature and spontaneous movement. The exercise of moving as if society would have never taught how to do it, could connect the dancer with a source of

movement which is closer to natural and physiological impulses than to acquired stereotyped physical actions.

In Butoh the body is not an instrument of the creative mind, but it spontaneously composes a dance which is the result of an interplay between what is recorded onto it (physical memories, acquired habits, socially suppressed instincts) and physiological impulses. Nevertheless, these "awaked" memories, performed in form of kinaesthetic and physical dynamics, are not only individual/biographical but also collective. This means that the body as "matter" possesses also deep memory of the whole cosmic order.

When I first started training in Butoh dance in 2003, with the Italian Butoh teacher Alessandro Pintus, my understanding of the body and dance changed considerably. Dance was not fixed in shapes and the traditional five arms and legs positions were substituted by the assumption that there are infinite possibilities for the moving body. Each infinitesimal point of space outside the body was significantly valid. Each parts of the body (internal or external) could effectively dance. The body was studied not only in terms of muscles strength and external lines but as a more complex biological and psycho-physical system. My experience of this work was that of witnessing an unfolding of new movement patterns and a deeper awareness of my embodiment, which consequently led me to a fresh understanding of my mind and body.

The concept of "body" can, in fact, be subject to different interpretations. Susan Foster has written about how different characterization of the body produced different ways of moving and dance styles. She identified the dancer's body as "a medium for displaying ideal forms" as in Balanchine's work, as "bones, muscles, ligaments, nerves, etc." in Cunningham's, or as "a fluid aggregate of cells" as conceived by Debora Hay (Foster in Novack 1990:31). In Contact Improvisation, a dance form developed in America in the 1970s, the body is an "intelligent practitioner of the art" (Novack 1990:185) and "thinks faster than the mind" (Woodberry in Novack 1990:182). Its movement is not shaped by "ideas (mind) separated from body" (Novack 1990:185) but "follows natural forces, such as gravity and inertia, and it get lost in the forces" (Stark Smith in Novack 1990:181). In other words the body "is nature" (Novack 1990:184).

Either Butoh or Contact Improvisation identify the body as part of nature, in fact nature itself. Therefore, it could be argued that their understanding of the body conflicts with social constructivist theories. In both practices, dancers attempt "to match" the body rather than to master it. In other words dancers follow the subtle energies, impulses and sensations of the body rather than training to control them.

Despite this common starting point, however, these two dance forms ascribe different meanings to "nature" or "body as matter". This

different understanding is possibly due to the fact that they have been originated in two diverse cultures. For instance, Japanese phenomenology of the body, as developed by the philosophers Ichikawa Hiroshi and Yuasa Yasuo, claims that body is "spirit" (Fraleigh 2004). Alongside, the Butoh dancer Akira Kasai in an interview with Fraleigh stated:

the understanding of matter between East and West is entirely different. In the West, matter is body. In the East, there is ultimately no matter. Dancing spans from the body of matter to the nonmaterial larger body (Kasai in Fraleigh 1999:234).

Kasai sustains that a specific awareness of the body and its senses and how senses change during the dance, it is an essential feature for dancing. Furthermore, he insists that "when the senses change, consciousness changes, and the physical body itself changes [...], matter changes" (233).

Butoh dance, almost mystically, expands the possibilities of the mind/body entity beyond the human, asserting that it is possible to embody (to become/to identify) other objects and energies, such as plants, animals, natural or supernatural forces, archetypes and mythical characters, in fact everything that comes from the universe and unconscious world. "Identification" means a shift in the consciousness (which is a quality of the mind) and since they are

conceived as integrated, the physical body as well undertakes a physiological change. This identification allows the dancer to experience different states of being and of moving from that of human.

In relation to this, Kurihara Nanako, who trained extensively with Ashikawa Yohko, a former student with Hijikata, wrote:

Dancers can then "reconstruct" their bodies as material things in the world and even as concepts. By practicing the exercise repeatedly, dancers learn to manipulate their own bodies physiologically and psychologically(Nanako [1988] 2000 in www.jstor.org).

It does not surprise in postmodern times to find a multiplicity of opinions around the meaning of "nature" and "body". François Lyotard argued about the heterogeneity of postmodern times, where a mix of identities, realities and gender roles coexist together. He maintains that the Western dominant worldview, supported thus far by science or religion, has been substituted by a fragmentation of beliefs and an emergence of diverse subcultures (Powell, 1998). Some of these have been influenced by the proliferation in the West of Eastern philosophies and practices such as the Hard Martial Arts, T'ai Chi Chuan and Yoga. The spread of the Eastern traditional thought, for its different approach towards reality, has contributed to undermine pre-existent Western ideas favouring the birth of new or assorted

beliefs.

The Eastern thought has been identified by Cynthia Novack as a strong influence in the development of dance forms such as Contact Improvisation:

Since the '50s, Eastern philosophies have been of particular interest to many American intellectuals and artists, often because they have seemed to offer an alternative to existing European and North American models of art. By the '60s, Zen conceptions of acceptance of nature rather than mastery over it also coincided with some people's rejection of America's ecological attitudes and political policies. Zen was seen as an antidote to competitive striving and struggling, characteristic of capitalist society (Novack 1990:184).

On one hand, mainstream Western culture has never completely accepted these imported ideas, supporting a sceptical attitude, in an attempt to demystify them, especially through the media. On the other hand these new ideas became instead the foundation of more marginalized dance practices such as Contact Improvisation and Skinner Releasing technique in 1970s America. The concept of "non-doing" and not forcing the movement, for instance, (Zuzuki, D.T. in Herrigel [1953] 2004), as practiced in Zen spiritual philosophy and physical trainings such as T'ai Chi and Aikido (Horwitz, T. and Kimmelman S.

with Lui, H.H 1985; Novack 1990), inspired new physical explorations in the West. This new kinaesthetic dynamics lie on "let, allow, release rather than on get, achieve, take, put" (Ryan in Novack 1990:182) as in more classical Western dance forms such as ballet.

However, although Contact Improvisation has been largely influenced by the Japanese martial art of Aikido, a Western secular approach to the body is still present in this work. In Contact Improvisation the body is believed to be responsive and intelligent and "acting best and most correctly with the least amount of conscious will or intention possible" (Novack 1990:184); aside this clear Zen influence in the practice there is no space for the "spiritual" and "inner psychological realm". Steve Paxton, founder of Contact Improvisation:

[...] tried to shed the concept of a psychological domination of the body by the inner soul expressing itself through movement. Along with others, he posited the body as a sign in itself, replacing the image of the body dominated by an expressive inner self with the responsive body - mindful, feeling-filled, and physical (Novack 1990:188).

This secular approach, as expressed by Paxton, however, suggests that the 'mindful, feeling-filled, responsive body' is much closer to a unified 'body-self' (Fraleigh 2004: 8) or mind/body entity than to an inert mechanical body, made of flesh and bones. Mind/body integration

seems thus achieved. For its ability to feel and for its "intrinsic" intelligence the body is "alive" and responsive.

Paxton's approach to the body produced a specific type of training which stresses the sensuous experience of movement with an emphasis on raising "kinaesthetic awareness". Dancers such as Anna Halprin and Joan Skinner or some Butoh teachers have also been working in this direction. Their training draws to the "experience of movement to a much greater degree than on the appearance" (Novack 1990:30), as in more formal conventional dance. Emphasis is on the sensation of movement occurring in muscles and joints, rather than on the "visual experience of one's own movement" (165).

The performance *Föhn* (2007), showed at Middlesex University's Lakeview Theatre as part of my undergraduate final project, was mostly inspired by these ideas of experiencing the movement and the body. The intention was not of making a "spectacle" but presenting my individuality (my presence/being) and the intrinsic kinaesthetic dynamics of my "body-self" in a specific setting in time and space. For this performance I was working with a movement dynamic based mainly on waves. This felt much more natural, in contrast with the more linear approach of traditional Western contemporary dance. Tensions of the body and sudden impulses were not controlled but manifested. The aim was not that of appearing or showing socially approved aesthetics, but that of presenting my body-self with honesty and with an accepting attitude of what is commonly perceived as

"ugly" or "out of control" in Western culture.

In Contact Improvisation a basic skill is that of becoming aware of one's own embodiment by cultivating a state of awareness of weight and touch. This "'sensory' preparation" (Novack 1990:152) could be achieved, for instance, by shifting the focus on the body weight and/or on the contact between the skin and the floor whilst lying down with eyes closed. A similar preparation is required in Skinner Releasing. In this practice dancers are asked to lie down onto the floor and to relax bringing awareness to body feelings and sensations. The teacher would then suggest an image, "a mental picture of something" (Langer in Skinner, Davis, Davidson, Wheeler, Metcalf 1979, www.skinnerreleasing.com), which communicates special kinaesthetic information and helps tune with specific parts of the body.

Likewise, in Butoh dance "sensory preparation" is essential as well as working with a watchful awareness of each parts of the body, from skin to bones. Working in slow motion and various forms of body massage are methods involved to bring attention to the subtleties of the body and its energetic processes. The Oriental Butoh illuminates the kind of work that is possible to explore when mind and body work in alignment. A regular self-analysis of the dancer's internal states (thoughts and feelings) and external states (physical posture and activity undertaken at the moment of the analysis) is required during the training.

The following is a method to carry on this self-analysis - when the teacher produces a specific sound (for instance a whistle), dancers have to stop and make a check-list of their own internal and external states. They would then log the results of this self-investigation. During intensive workshops (seven days, seven hours per day), the dancer could experience a complete alignment of his or her own internal and external activities, finding himself or herself utterly present to the moment, instead of the more common feeling of doing something whilst thinking something unrelated.

"Sensory preparation", in Skinner Releasing, is believed to produce "'deep states' of mind, where [...] brain waves slow down and [the] journey [is] just below conscious level" (Skinner, Davis, Davidson, Wheeler, Metcalf 1979 in www.skinnerreleasing.com). According to Skinner this deep state of awareness is similar to meditation and "the senses are heightened" (Skinner, Davis, Davidson, Wheeler, Metcalf 1979 in www.skinnerreleasing.com).

Meditation is an Eastern mind training which develops a quiet, receptive attitude of the mind. This attitude seems to be in neat contrast with Western culture, more preoccupied with action, doing and controlling (Maupin in Tart 1972). There are different modalities of practising meditation. One of them is "paying attention to the breath and to sensations in the present moment rather than getting lost in thoughts" (Bonadonna 2003 in www.hnpjournal.com). As Ramita

Bonadonna, a PhD student at the Medical University of South Carolina, remarks in her medical investigation on meditation to cure mental illness: "paying attention to the breath and bodily sensations rebuilds the bridge between mind and body [...], yielding an experience of wholeness" (2003).

The psychologist Charles Tart in the 1970s, in collaboration with his colleagues, undertook a study of the so-called "altered state of consciousness (ASC)" and classified the experience of meditation as ASC. Tart defined an ASC as a "qualitative shift" in an individual's mental functioning and subjective experience (Tart 1972). In other words, an alteration of the 'normal' state of consciousness "in which [the individual] spends the major part of his waking life" (1). Physiologically, during these states, brain waves frequencies undertake a change, slowing down in the case of meditation and relaxation. Dream and hypnotic states, trance and ecstasy are all considered as ASCs. Although there are various forms of ASCs, they all share some of the same characteristics (1972). In some tribal societies, these states have socio-cultural functions, whereas in Western culture they are disregarded as pathological (1972).

Skinner's work through relaxation and mental imagery to achieve a "deep state" that brings "the journey below the conscious level", suggests an 'altered' way of perceiving the kinaesthetic experience, connecting a deeper level of consciousness with the experience of dance. Mental imagery is a tool to stimulate the imaginative mind and

body, suggesting different kinaesthetic and consciousness experiences. Whether in Skinner Releasing the imagery work usually involves one image for the whole body or sometimes two images for two different part of the body, in Butoh the same process is more complex.

Butoh also makes strong use of images and metaphors to inform the kinaesthetic experience. However, in this practice the body could be divided in four parts: head, trunk, arms and legs; for each part there could be a series of ten or more images. An image for each part of the body is given, so the body is moving under four different stimuli. One at the time these images change, until the body is stimulated by four new mental pictures. An overall image could be added. In Butoh these stimuli are metaphors expressed by illogical sentences, whereas in Releasing the phrases provided to convey an image are metaphoric but more obvious or logical.

In Butoh training, as originally elaborated by Hijikata, imagery work is deeply connected with language itself. Imaginative words were essential in Hijikata's creative and training process. Mind being embodied, language was considered as something totally physical, able to induce a specific physiological and kinaesthetic state. His writings were, however, very difficult, surrealistic, and equivocal even for Japanese people. "His sentences are sometimes incorrect according to Japanese grammar", states Nanako, "he freely coined his own terms [...]". Hijikata's language implies meanings and feelings that

logical language cannot convey. [His] writings are both evocative and challenging" (Nanako [1988] 2000 in www.jstor.org). Nanako, recalling his experience on training with Ashikawa, regards the idea of becoming a "twisted wet rug" as totally strange but adds: "[...] in a little I became sensitive to my own physical state of being; I felt freed from my daily self by becoming such a lowly thing on the floor" ([1988] 2000).

The "deep state" of consciousness in which the dancer has to commit him or herself to truly achieve the "embodiment", is combined with physiological (the brain waves slow down through relaxation) and psychological (identification of the self with an object) "alteration", which provokes an unusual kinaesthetic experience. This state could correspond to a light trance state and therefore it could be argued about its validity and matter of investigation as an ASC.

However, this "trance state" is not about loosing consciousness but, according to the Italian writer and Butoh expert Maria Pia D'Orazi, consciousness becomes much more lucid (D'Orazi 2001). The intensification of sensory receptivity and the imagery work facilitate this state; as a result ordinary mind activity dilutes and the mind becomes more receptive and vigil to react to the most subtle perceptions, be they internal impulses or external stimuli. Furthermore, in this state thought and action are unified. This means that the body acts promptly, instinctively, without the mind interfering or controlling. Body and mind become a unified entity,

suggesting that 'experience of wholeness', which Bonadonna was referring to when discussing meditation.

This "deep state" of mind/ body integration is not, however, easy to achieve in a performance situation and therefore a disciplined training is constantly required. Weeks before *Föhn* was shown, I worked with meditation and relaxation. Meditation was useful to help bring the ordinary conscious awareness to a deeper state; however, meditation could also be deceiving. To avoid to focus entirely on the mind and therefore detaching from the body, meditation should be, in fact, body based - that is focusing on breathing and bodily sensations.

Relaxation exercises and Skinner Releasing weekly classes also helped to develop an awareness to focus inwards on deep sensory perceptions and sensitive response to imagery. To slow down the ordinary mind activity during the performance, it was also helpful the original music played on stage by the London Improviser musician Matt Davis. This music was meant to create a "physical or psychological space", as defined by Davis, where the dance could happen. It avoided melodic, harmonic or conventional musical themes and added intriguing sound textures to my dance.

Föhn was conceived as an improvised dance/music duet within a set structure. Improvisation seemed to be the best means to experience presence "in the moment" with a clear and receptive mind, and to

follow a movement dynamic which is unplanned and unpredictable. To feel more confident and prepared to start the piece with a good level of focus, I decided to start on stage and use those minutes before the piece started to reach a state of openness and receptivity. During this time I started to connect with the space around me, inclusive of noises and the energy of the audience coming into the theatre. This approach created a profound connection between me and the environment, working towards integration rather than separation between myself and "the other". In the initial phase of my performance I had established my presence in the space.

The first night of performance, however, I felt as if it did not work. My mind was still very stiff when the piece started. I was intensely concentrated on my mind alone, in an attempt to calm it, and I forgot to become fully aware of the state of my body. Furthermore, that night was the third time the piece was repeated (after the technical rehearsal and the dress run), and it felt as if my mind was trapped within known patterns. I was locked within the rigid form of what has been my initial spontaneous kinaesthetic experience during rehearsals. My mind was not moving with the body. I felt as if the movement was forced and not spontaneous. Therefore, on the second night I decided to change some elements to bring freshness to the piece. I changed my costume and my starting position. The second night worked better in my experience. New movement patterns and sensations aroused. It felt "right". I had a sense of flowing and "allowing the dance".

The concept of "allowing the dance" is a characteristic of Contact Improvisation, Skinner Releasing and Butoh. These practices suggest an experience of "allowing" the dance rather than "doing". During this experience the dancer should have the feeling of "being danced" rather than intentionally making the dance. It is interesting at this point to briefly remind of a feature ascribed to some tribal trance dances all over the world, as they have been studied and reported by anthropologists and psychiatrists. In these ritual dances, it is said that the dancer is "caught" (Drewal in Cooper Albright and Gere 2003:124) by the dance (or by the "spirit" associated to that dance), therefore the dancer is in fact "danced". Some examples are the Yoruba people dance in Nigeria (2003) or the Tarantella, a ritual dance from Southern Italy (De Martino, [1961] 2002; Bourguignon, 1968).

During my experience in the contemporary dance practices discussed in this essay, and anytime my mind is especially engaged in the kinaesthetic process, I encounter this sensation of "being moved". In relation to this, Novack has observed that whenever the feeling of "being moved" in Contact Improvisation, is interrupted by conscious manipulation, she experiences a "frustrating dance" which causes an "awkward state" (Novack 1990:153), not felt anymore as natural and "right". I found this statement very relevant to my experience on the first night of performance, when I felt an "awkward" sensation of trying to make the movement rather than letting it happen as instead

took place on the second night.

An investigation of the mind, body, and their relationship would seem to be fundamental to set forth a theory of dance practice which questions and becomes aware of the kinaesthetic possibilities of the human body as a psycho-physical entity. The contemporary dance practices discussed in this essay have been working towards this understanding, emphasising the organic origins of the body, receptive aspects of the mind and their integration. Through practice these trainings demonstrate their power to incredibly broaden the understanding of one's own embodiment and the movement potentialities of integrated mind/body engagement. In fact, this approach to dance aside from offering space for new movement explorations also justifies, at different levels, an ontological enquiry into the meaning of being and embodiment.

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