Ballet, what is the *pointe*? A study of ballet as a social community
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An image of the *prima ballerina* as a lone figure is widely conveyed by popular culture. This dancer is anti-social; motivated by internalized jealousy she cares only for herself. As a keen amateur ballet dancer I have never felt this image conveyed ballet accurately. During two weeks of fieldwork, attending intermediate student ballet classes in Cambridge, it became apparent to me that ballet was social. Ballet as a skill is conveyed through socially mediated imitation. Jealousy in ballet is not individually centered, instead it relates to social status. Ballet dancers also use their body as a means of communication in a way that non-dancer cannot. Depending on how one enters an analysis of ballet the individual becomes insignificant. For instance because ballet as a skill demands a harsh disciplinary regime it has been taken on by the state as a means of communicating nationhood. I have often thought of going to ballet classes as stepping into a different world. My fieldwork revealed that ballet has given rise to a kind of community, complete with its own methods of communication, rites of passage and definitions of gender and puberty.

At the start of my first fieldwork ballet class I stood at the back of the room hovering uncertainly, unsure of where to stand. Ballet classes start at the *barre* or bar[1]. During my first class several girls strode confidently passed me to the front standing to attention. Some dancers also milled at the back, leaning casually across the *barre* and chatting comfortably. Mrs Turner, the ballet teacher, then entered walking the length of the room she surveyed us all before fine-tuning our order at the *barre*, "you at the front that's right…Elena swap with Lucy and take the back spot I don't trust her … make sure Josie [myself] has someone on both sides". I was ushered into a place at the centre of the *barre*. This ensured I would always have a girl directly in front of me to imitate. "*Pliés* begin", and with that class had started, the elderly pianist coaxed the piano into life, and gracefully the class sunk to their

[1] This is attached to the inside wall of the studio and normally runs in a straight line down the length of the room. It is gripped parallel to the dancer by one hand and is used for stability. Each exercise is performed once with the right hand and once with the left hand gripping, allowing each leg to be fully utilized.

knees. Two counts behind I followed them. In the line of dancers it could be observed how variations, mistakes and time lapses travelled progressively to the centre, as those of us with inexperience imitated those in front. Wulff (1998: 2-4) reinforces the importance of imitation in ballet suggesting it to be a source of inspiration. The male principle of the Swedish Royal Ballet only decided on a career in ballet whilst watching 'The Taming of The Shrew' as a boy (Wulff 1998: 2). However it can be argued that imitation does not just serve as a one-time source of inspiration but actually functions to facilitate the diffusion of skill on a daily basis.

The diffusion of ballet as a skill is mediated on a social level. For centre work[2] during my fieldwork classes we were split into four lines. Those who were inexperienced would be placed in lines three or four ensuring they had someone to imitate. The teacher was able to convey social status via these placements. By positioning bodies in space she publically defined our dancing capabilities. Rest times were staggered in terms of lines. Thus I chatted to dancers of a similar ability and observed those still performing. Over the course of my fieldwork I learnt who was considered to have confidence, respect from the teacher, a reliable memory and good technique. These factors influenced my choice of who I should look to when imitating a sequence of steps. Thus I suggest ballet as a skill is dependent on sociality. Being aged ex-ballerinas, ballet teachers suffer from joint conditions and are often not supple enough to demonstrate movements. Therefore ballet would be difficult to pass on through one-on-one student/teacher relationships. Instead inter-student relationships are important. Coleman (1988: 34-40) also suggests that skill is reliant on socialization. When learning the process of pig butchery he reflects on his initial naivety in thinking he could have understood such a process by reading a book. Instead it was learnt in a highly social context, in which he imitated and participated in the process alongside an experienced couple of pig butchers. Coleman (1988: 38-42) suggests that sociality allows skill to be passed on in a continuous fashion. During the course of the weeks I attended ballet classes my confidence increased and I was placed towards the front of the bar and in lines two or one. The dancers I trained with reported a similar sequence that occurred each

[2] Ballet performed in the centre of the room.

time they moved up to a more advanced class, where they would first imitate and later become the object of imitation. In a sense ballet is passed cyclically, thereby forming a self-regulating system. Ballet as a skill therefore appears to flow continuously, in a process enabled by sociality.

Mauss (1979: 103-5) states that when dancing the body is used as an instrument or tool. However because ballet classes involve imitation of ones peers not only does one use their own body as a tool, but also everyone else's. Each dancer's body provides a distinctive example of how a particular step could be performed, thus the manner in which subsequent dancers relate and emulate each other's movement becomes an essential tool when learning ballet. During my fieldwork the students I danced with were welcoming. However I did not feel integrated with them until I was involved in their jealous assessments of my and other's abilities. This was because it marked me out as having joined the collective pool of 'bodies' each dancer uses to further their own efforts. These situations involved no malice. The conversations were entirely public; engaging the jealous party and the object of jealousy in light-hearted banter. After a lesson on *ports de bras*[3] we sat during break discussing the class.

> Elena: "Josie how do you remember your arms like that without forgetting them halfway through, it's so annoying mine always go droopy",
>
> Sophie: "Because she's got a ridiculous memory",
>
> Josie: "No, no I never bother much with my feet, arms are way more fun."

Mead (1931: 35-48) suggests that cultural learning can influence how jealousy is generated and communicated. It can be argued that in the context of the ballet class jealousy legitimizes social status, in terms of an individual's ability to act as a tool for another dancer. Therefore contrary to popular belief jealousy in ballet is not an individually internalized phenomena. Instead it is felt and expressed on a social level.

[3] Exercises that involve complex arm movements.

On reflection I acknowledge that in other situations individual jealousy has its place in ballet, as it does in many art forms. However ballet as a skill requires a kind of unachievable perfection, and each dancer its constrained by the limitations of their own body. From a young age I was aware that no matter how hard I worked there were always going to be people better than me. The expression of jealousy on a positive social level could therefore be a dancer's way of coping with this realization, as it drives our motivation to strive for impossible perfection.

Imitation and jealousy allow for a guided navigation of ballet skill, in terms of the capabilities of your own body. Ingold (2000: 90-128) suggests that skill is passed on through a process of guided re-discovery, led by our senses and shaped by our environment. In the context of the ballet class vision and introspective sensation are important as you both see what you are attempting to replicate and feel your own body positions simultaneously. Imitation and jealousy act to guide the attention of the sense allowing skill to be developed in relation to personal abilities. During my fieldwork two of the students *grand battement*[4] were the source of public jealousy. Not being flexible I could not replicate the height of their legs. However a visually pleasing quality of their *grand battement* was the level of control demonstrated as they lowered each leg to the ground. I sought imitate this, feeling for the correct bodily sensation. As I have argued imitation and jealousy are defined on a social level. Therefore although it is often portrayed as an individualized art form, ballet as a skill system is actually reliant on sociality.

Mirrors further enable social imitation and jealousy in ballet. They generally line one wall of the ballet studio. Mirrors underscore the social basis of the ballet class, as you see yourself as one of many, understanding your position and ability in relation to those around you. Mirrors act to focus visual attention, facilitating the diffusion of skill in a social context. During ballet class real-time guidance from fellow students can occur because the mirror allows you to watch and dance simultaneously. During a fieldwork ballet class Mrs Turner called for us to perform an *enchaînment*[5] first attempted the previous week. Not having been present when it was taught I knew I would have to rely on imitation of the other students. As we

[4] High leg kicks, performed to the front, side and back of the body.
[5] A combination of dance steps.

began the exercise I looked forward into the mirror. Seeing that many students were looking at a girl in the centre left row I copied the exercise from her. Later I asked the students why they had looked at this particular girl, some stated she had a knack for remembering dance steps. Others replied that they had seen their fellow students looking and assumed she knew the exercise. Ingold (2000: 4-13) suggests skill to be reliant on the social direction of sense. Similarly I found mirrors in the ballet studio act to guide visual attention. Furthermore the transmission of skill again facilitates sociality, in that guidance comes from the social groupings and social knowledge.

Mirrors also enhance the social nature of ballet as they are used to refine the sociality of the body. The aim of ballet is to communicate stories purely through movement. This process has been termed metakinesis. It entails the 'transference of aesthetic and emotional concept from the consciousness of one individual to that of another' (Martin 1983: 23-38). Although ballet demands bodily sociality in a performance context, it also generates bodily sociality in a class environment. Blacking (1977: 23-4) suggests that professional ballet dancers will experience momentary states of flow, where they are able to move without thinking. This suggests that training is orientated towards developing ballet as the ultimate form of dance communication. As a byproduct of this training dancers develop an extra method of communication. Wulff (2002: 73-4) states that ballet dancers have no need of sound to communicate; instead they use the body as a conversational tool. The development of such skills is enabled by the constant exposure of the body within the ballet studio; both mirrors and leotards ensure that it is always the central focus. During quiet moments in my fieldwork classes I was able to make my fellow dancers laugh whilst with my back to them. Because of the constant exposure a ballet dancer's knowledge of form and body placement is extensive. Therefore by altering my posture to create drooping angles I was able to create comedy, signaling boredom to those around me. Dancers also develop sensitivity towards bodily communication from their peers. For instance the girls at my fieldwork class were able to tell who was ill or upset by the way they moved their bodies. It can be suggested that through ballet training dancers develop their body into a new communicative tool, the practice of ballet thereby becomes a form of embodied

communication. Therefore rather than being unsociable ballet dancers have the tools and capacity to be more social than non-dancers. Furthermore such a unique means of communication has acted to shape ballet classes into a community.

The focus ballet places on the body as a social object has developed it into a location for expression. Wulff (2002) suggests that the practice of wearing dance company uniform creates, 'a sense of community… and belonging' (Wulff 2002: 78). During fieldwork I wore a leotard in the colours of a ballet school I previously belonged to. The importance of the body as a site of communication meant that my fellow dancers took this as a bold statement. They continuously nagged and cajoled me into wearing their colours. Ballet as a skill transforms the body into a communicative tool; the consequence of this in terms of adornment is the generation of a community. Thus ballet again gives rise to sociality as dancers use body adornment to express allegiance.

Bodily adornment in the ballet class is not restricted to expressing allegiance to a dance school. Wulff (2002: 79) notes that during rehearsal dancers wear grungy, ripped attire. This is done to demonstrate the hard work they apply to learning ballet. In class my fellow students took pride in the tatty nature of their *pointe* shoes[6], "we normally buy them around the same time, it's pretty cool when they wear out all together". The *pointe* shoes they wore symbolized the regime of hard work they had endured together. Therefore suggesting the tradition of wearing ragged clothes in ballet does not only make a statement about the individual but the regime they have endured as part of a group. Thus bodily adornment is used diversely as a means of communication in ballet. This again suggests that contrary to popular belief ballet enhances sociality. Ballet dancers also embody this type of sociality, as visual wear and tear to ones body is also looked upon with group pride. The state of the feet, which become twisted and mangled when dancing *en pointe*[7]*,* was of particular importance during by youth in a beginner's *pointe* class. Comparing black toenails and blisters together was a novel past time during my early training. Having bad feet consolidated your membership to the community of ballet dancers. Furthermore as a class we used to reason that the worse a classes feet the harder

[6] Shoes used to dance on the tips of the toes.
[7] Dancing on the tips of the toes.

they worked, thus feet were used as a means of communication and comparison between other classes or dance schools. Thus again ballet creates an exclusive form of embodied communication.

Although often conceived of as a self-centered art form it can be argued that ballet has a place in establishing national bonds and communicating political and social values. Court dance in Yoguakatra, situated in Indonesia, is used to promote socially acceptable behaviour (Hughes-Freeland 2001:147-55). For instance the *Sēmbah* dance is a form of salutation. Court dancing also develops the self-control needed for peaceful interaction (Hughes-Freeland 2001:147-8). Cohen (1993: 7-10) suggests that dance can be applied in terms of a political regime functioning symbolically and instrumentally. Ballet classes can be used to promote politically and socially acceptable values. At the end of each class students perform a *reverence*[8] to their teacher and pianist. Ballet teachers demand high levels of respect. I described a vivid memory of an early ballet class to my fellow students. During the class several girls had been milling at the back, giggling harmlessly. Suddenly our teacher shrieked viciously, telling them to leave the class. My fellow class members reported similar occurrences. We concluded that after such experiences no older dancer would dare to be disrespectful to their teacher. Learning ballet also requires discipline, as dancers constantly push through pain to develop their bodies. The values ballet promotes can also be used to create a sense of nationhood. In England the most influential ballet companies include the Royal Ballet or the English National Ballet. Other countries also have worldwide acclaimed companies such as the Paris Opera Company, the New York State Ballet or The Bolshoi Ballet. Ballet as a skill demands dancers to be hard-working, disciplined and respectful. These are important values for a state to promote, thus suggesting why ballet is an important vessel in establishing a sense of nationhood. Each national company also has their own distinct methods of teaching, learning and dancing. Thus each company exemplifies other values relevant to a nation, such as endurance, uniformity or individuality. To those who strive to be part of these companies dancing becomes a duty and responsibility in relation to its nation. Anderson (1983: 122-3) suggests folk dancing

[8] A curtsy.

could be used to imagine a community too big to exist on a one-to-one basis, as it creates a sense of national convention and pride. Therefore it can be suggested that ballet is used as a social tool on a national level, as it communicates to a public audience what it is to belong to a nation. I suggest the qualities that allow ballet to define a nation are also active amongst us in the lower ranks of dancing. However removed from their original national context they help to create a smaller scale dance community. Thus in opposition to popular belief ballet creates bonds and reinforces sociality among nations and small-scale ballet dance communities, communicating key values such as respect and discipline.

The disciplinary regime set out by ballet classes also strengthens social relationships among dancing peers. Foucault (1991: 135-54) suggests that the submission of bodies to power can be brought about through systematic observation, which enables discipline to be exerted. This transforms bodies into cogs in an overall machine. Ballet teachers will exert discipline through the systematic positioning of bodies in space so as to enable observation. Furthermore I have described ballet as a self-regulating machine. I argue that sociality liberates bodies from acting passively in the face of discipline. Sociality allows power in the ballet class to flow from teacher to dancer and dancer to teacher. During my fieldwork the girls I danced with initially trained at different schools. However a mutual appreciation of each other was easily developed. This was because we were all aware of the demanding routine every dancer has to endure across the course of ballet classes. After being out of ballet for a year I struggled with *pointe* during fieldwork ballet classes. The other dancer sheltered me from view of the teacher, doing the steps in my place so that I could break and stretch my feet. This meant my peers withstood the pain of *pointe* for longer. Therefore suggesting the rigid regime set out by ballet acts to generate strong, supportive relationships between peers. This sociality enables resistance in the ballet class, as my fellow students were able to restrict our teacher's observational power. Again this shows ballet as a means of strengthening sociality rather than reducing it.

The combination of intense regime and sociality has shaped ballet into a community. This can be argued in terms of the rites of passage unique to ballet. These rites socially construct gender and puberty in relation to definitions of growth

and femininity significant to ballet. Van Gennep (1960: 3-54) states that rites of passage transform the body in order to complete a person. Many small-scale societies in Sudan think of gender as androgynous. They construct sex artificially, carving gender onto the body. For women this involves female circumcision (Gruenbaum 2000: 48-75). Among the Vanuatu, of Papua New Guinea, land-diving is a rite of passage used to define puberty. Boys practice land-diving as they journey to adulthood, thinking of it as a way to enhance their strength, proving themselves as men (Jolly 1994: 131-5). In ballet going *en pointe* can be considered a rite of passage in that it defines both gender and puberty. A fellow ballet class member, Morgan, described to me her experience of beginning *pointe* work:

"I think I was about eleven and there was a special group of us, about four. We had to do loads of *barre* without the others. After a few weeks of that our teacher checked us for *pointe*, we had to *relevé* on *demi pointe*…without the bar. I was so nervous I was literally shaking. She kneeled next to me and tried to wobble my ankles. She checked everyone and then told us we were ready to buy *pointe* shoes…I was so excited…when we bought them we went to the pointe class...it was awful. I stood at the back, and would only do the basic bits, rising onto my toes, but your feet bleed loads and get cramps and blisters… We got used to it though your feet sort of change and you just get used to it. Then we felt like real dancers. We could do actual dance steps."

Morgan's recollection appears to fall in line with Van Gennep's (1960: 11-25) description of a rite of passage. The girls first experienced 'pre-liminality', as they were separated and trained ready for *pointe*. Next they underwent 'liminality', as they began pointe and their feet were transformed. Finally they began to feel like real ballet dancers, experiencing 'post-liminality'. *Pointe* therefore acts to facilitate the transition of a child into a capable adult dancer. It also establishes her femininity. Ballet classes are unisex during childhood but as girls begin *pointe*, males begin weight training. Going through a rite of passage also has to do with the social recognition of an individual. In a study of fishermen, off the Icelandic coast, Pálsson (1994: 904-12) suggests the concept of gaining ones 'sea legs' is a form of social

recognition. This is because it is given to a young sailor by experienced seamen. Similarly in ballet being *en pointe* is a status that receives social recognition from older dancers. It can be argued that ballet as a skill has produced a community. This community applies its own definitions of gender and puberty to the social construction and recognition of dancers.

In the end the *prima ballerina* will step out onto the stage alone. It is perhaps this image that has led popular culture to depict ballet as an individualized art form. However I argue that she steps out with the support of a ballet based community. The way she dances has been shaped by sociality, as social imitation and jealousy allowed the transmission of ballet as a skill. Whilst on stage her body may express a story to the audience, but in the process of developing this technique she has learnt another means of communication strengthening her relationships with fellow dancers. It is the mutual strength of her peers that has enabled her to endure the demanding training regime. Ballet as a community has also employed rites of passage to define her in their own terms. Therefore it can be argued that sociality is an intrinsic part of ballet, which shapes it as a skill, means of communication and community.

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