

Ballet: What's the Pointe?:

Ballet, Cinema, and Perception Versus Reality

Close your eyes. If I say the word “ballerina,” what image materializes in your mind? Perhaps there is a sylphlike woman with long, thin legs and arms, twirling *en pointe* around a stage in an ornate tutu and dazzling tiara, lighter than air and an embodiment of feminine beauty and grace. This is the idealized illusion of the ballerina. Now, envision a life that dedicates six days a week, eight to ten hours a day, to a sweaty studio, routinely pushing the body to its maximum limits and then beyond; where there is always someone scrutinizing and criticizing your lines, your shapes, your body; where the blood from torn blisters or toenails accompanies your sweat and tears. Imagine being a body monitored by society’s standard of “prettiness” all while your throbbing muscles and mutilated toes desperately tell you otherwise. This is the reality of the ballerina.

The contrast between the external images of the ballerina and the internal hardships she endures is exemplary of an inevitable discord between perception and reality. Various cultural authorities condition society’s attitudes by perpetuating stereotypical images and ideas as a basis of fact; consequently, the real truth can be complicated and difficult to accept. Commercial film serves a paramount role in fostering the paradigms and expectations for the ballet world that make it recognizable solely as a visual rather than a culmination of time and training. Even the ballerina dances to this dissonance as her persona is unparalleled in its proficiency to mask this physical effort and psychological strain under a veil of beauty and grace. After all, a dancer’s success depends on their ability to achieve the idealized aesthetic society demands— which usually entails unnatural thinness and imponderable etherealness.

The visual expectation of the ballet world is a product of societal pressures, subsuming our culture’s glorification of thinness as an ideal aesthetic, often prompting eating disorders and warped body images. Nevertheless, ballerinas often materialize in young girls’ dreams, with princess-like images of perfect femininity existing at the forefront of this performing art. Reality is not a fixed truth; it is contingent on an individual’s perception of it. Reality is just an agreed-upon fiction, which explains the longstanding persistence of ballet stereotypes. As someone who coveted that dream of becoming a ballerina and endured the grueling lifestyle to actualize it, I understand the reality that ballet is bipartite: physically and mentally cruel *and* a display of awe-inspiring artistry and elegance. In Hollywood, however, seldom can it truly be both.

By separating the “image” of the ballerina and the extent of her rigorous training into two distinct narratives, mainstream media neglect the subtle nuances that distinguish perception from reality. Within Hollywood, an apparent dichotomy between the representation of ballet in children’s movies and films geared toward adults emerges. Children’s film regularly sanitizes the narrative of the ballerina, purposefully excluding its aspects of blood, sweat, tears, and

self-deprecation; instead, these light-hearted movies rely on material extravagance and body appearance as a basis for their narratives. Conversely, films for older audiences frequently emphasize the, inherently common, sense of individual inadequacy by projecting a variety of delusional obsessions onto the ballerina. While this narrative is often real, is it not the whole truth. The disparity between these balletic perceptions prompts a discordant, binary representation of who the ballerina is, which places the collective external understanding of ballet at odds with the internalized reality of it.

Ballet's representation in children's media is overtly superficial, choosing princess-like stories and material objects—e.g. tutus and pointe shoes— as cynosures of the ballet world. Cinema is a prominent medium of education where children come to normalize cultural and societal values; in this case, the depiction of the cinematic ballerina motivates these easily impressionable minds to adopt contrived body expectations and conceptions (Markula and Clark 2018). My earliest exposure to ballet manifests through Mattel's ballet-themed, Barbie films: *Barbie in The Nutcracker* (2001), *Swan Lake* (2003), *The 12 Dancing Princesses* (2006), and *The Pink Shoes* (2013). A common thread that runs through the series draws a clear parallel between the princess and the dancer, in that each protagonist – a consistently thin, light-skinned, perfectly proportioned female – is, to some degree, a princess who knows some degree of ballet. Indeed, the cover image of Barbie in a glittering tulle dress, wearing a sparkling crown is an active appropriation of the tutu and ballet to signify girlhood or, as Mariko Turk, a Ph.D. candidate specializing in American children's literature and girls' studies, appropriately labels it, "princess culture" (Turk 2014). In *Barbie in The Nutcracker* (2001), for instance, Clara's magical transformation out of her nightgown and house slippers into the sparkling tutu and pink pointe shoes of the Sugarplum Princess who, unsurprisingly, had been "with us all along!" aptly illustrates this culture (Barbie). Similarly in the other three Barbie films, the art of ballet has become a subsidiary of the tutu. The dancing exists, but the recurrent tutu 'transformations' ungraciously upstage it.

Although Mattel attempts to interlace their narratives with balletic elements, the focus on the ballerina image – a thin, light-skinned female complete with a tutu, pink tights, and pointe shoes – roots the film in a frivolousness that is incompatible with ballet's true nature, disregarding the complexities concomitant with this art form. While I recognize that for many young girls, ballet may only be a hobby and not a pursued passion, for those that want to fully delve into the world of the tutu, some iteration of mental preparedness for the inevitable, upcoming hardships is necessary. At that young age, I did not have time for complexities or nuances; seven-year-old me aspired to be this ballerina, to transform into her image. That was the problem in itself: I, a short, tan Asian with normal body proportions, wanted to look like the 'princess ballerina' in those Barbie films. Unless my skin tone paled a few, drastic shades, my weight suddenly decreased, and, by some miracle, my legs grew disproportionately longer than my torso, I would never be the idealized image that danced across my television screen. Though my preconceived notions of the ballet world eventually shifted out of strict "princess culture" at

the age of twelve— following my casting as Clara— this did not negate the fact that *eleven-year-old* me was racked with anguish that my at-the-time artistic director would never cast me, an Asian, in a leading role.

While children's film effectively builds an image of ballet upon physical signifiers, films oriented for adults focalize the mental condition of the ballet world in a way that underlines or exemplifies it but fails to propound the full truth. There are a handful of Hollywood films that address both the beauty and brutality of ballet, such as *The Turning Point* (1977), *Center Stage* (2000), and *Mao's Last Dancer* (2009), but even within these films there is a discernible emphasis on some variation of cognitive trauma; the 2010 film *Black Swan* is the extreme case when psychological barriers impede the dancing. *Black Swan* notoriously propels the dark side of ballet into the spotlight as Nina Sayers, played by Natalie Portman, shows the dangers of chasing perfection past its own boundaries. Unlike the superficial ideas in children's media— that everything looks beautiful in ballet— this film provides a stark contradiction, capitalizing on the often cruel and unfair aspects. *Black Swan* offers insight into the harsh physical and mental discipline that exists in ballet, but the film mutates those adverse facets into a horrifying nightmare; the sheer number of sacrifices ballet demands augments into a self-induced maelstrom of torment. Nina is a "self-tormentor," which alludes to the neurotic reality of the ballet world but is far from the whole truth of it (Macaulay 2011).

By the time I finally dedicated time to watch this sinister yet sensual melodrama, I had achieved my dream of becoming a professional ballerina; at The Joffrey Ballet, I was well-entrenched in the ballet world. There were unavoidable moments when I had to vigorously convince myself, usually while icing my feet into numb oblivion, nursing a freshly opened blister, or staring into the mirror at the body that would never physically be "perfect," that ballet was worth it. At the end of the day, as I performed my craft, my natural love of dance gave me that sense of assurance. That is the reality of ballet: incredibly taxing yet intrinsically fulfilling. What the film *Black Swan* neglects to include, for dramatic purposes, of course, is the counterpoise between the rigorous training, both physical and mental, and the gratifying performances— the reality of the ballerina, still skewed.

Both the Barbie series and *Black Swan* are exemplary of Hollywood's tendency to perpetually reduce the ballerina down to an image or psychological state of being, which lends authority to promote "the 'new' ballet featuring... gloriously beautiful, thin, and agile young women" (McLean 2008). While one sheds light on visual beauty and perfection, the other delves into the dark and severe physical and mental demands; nonetheless, both endeavor to elevate the importance of a dancer's image as others perceive it. This circulating perception, this paradigm that mentally restricts both cinema and society, perpetuates the discord between the projected ideal and the internalized reality. Along with the influx of ballerina bodies around now, there is the candid reality that the ballet world excludes the figures that fail to fit the mold of the idealized dancer from professional consideration "regardless of their abilities" (McLean 2008). Dance is already a highly competitive and stressful profession, and this emphasis on body

standards over technique only reinforces an unhealthy mentality that, in itself, produces a variety of problems, most notoriously, eating disorders.

“Dance is one of the worst areas [for disordered eating],” said Dr. Michelle Warren (qt. in Dunning 1997). Warren stresses that “the average incidence of eating disorders in the white middle-class population is 1 in 100. In classical ballet, it is one in five.” As startling as this information is, I know it is all too real. Amid grueling rehearsals and classes, I would, much too often, see my fellow Joffrey Ballet trainees skip meals because “they just weren’t hungry” or joke about needing to buy groceries when friends ask why their lunch consists of a banana and a few nuts. On a rare occasion, a dancer might explicitly say they are starving themselves to ‘properly’ fit into a costume. By conditioning the image of the ballet world to reflect that which society perceives through films, the former simultaneously drives the aspirations of ballet towards the ideal vision instead of the perfect technique.

Against the perceptions that ballet-themed films propound, most artistic directors and ballet powers-that-be argue that appearance is entirely a secondary factor to technique, an element that pushes the already skilled dancer forward. However, I have routinely witnessed, firsthand, the infusion of infuriating subjectivity into ballet – be it losing a role to someone as equally talented but taller and slimmer or facing rejection, despite having well-founded confidence and demonstrable technique, because your body type did not resonate with the company’s vision. I begrudgingly accept the disheartening reality that my arches will never be high enough– no matter how much stretching and bending I force upon them– nor will my muscular, proportionately-equal-to-my-torso legs achieve the gracefully thin, long lines idealized by society. No matter how much my mentality and technique struggled to conform to society’s impossibly tight mold, my physical self would never fit. Optimistically, there is an increasing number of artistic directors endeavoring to steer the demographics of their company towards body and ethnic diversity, such as former professional dancer and current director of the English National Ballet Tamara Rojo who voices her resoluteness to foster a healthy body image within her company (Kelly 2017). Nevertheless, the stigma that appearance outweighs technique persists– both in reality and cinema– and, consequently, the ballet world’s overall momentum in its battle against perception remains stagnant.

Some dancers are out there “breaking the mold” of society’s perfect ballerina, but there are few whose existence challenges the glorified weight of that ballerina. Of course, ballet demands a high degree of athleticism and strength that accompanies the precision of training and self-discipline. The ballet world requires, from this appearance, a particular element of thinness, but the range of varying body types often leads to contorted mental ideas about appropriate thinness. Instead, the dance world needs to start appreciating a dancer’s degree of fitness and leanness that is healthy for their body type. That can happen when film no longer depicts the dancer only as an individual who moves from one beautiful pose to the next under an aggregation of shiny tulle and excessive sparkles nor reduces them down to their psychological states. When Hollywood decides to assign more value to ballet as a profound medium of artistic

expression and communication, concomitant with both positives and negatives, then a more holistic, inclusive, and unified form of craft can emerge.

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