

## “Must See the Bones”: Critiquing Ballet’s Methodology

### Through the Lens of Nietzsche

It is common knowledge that ballet dancers often fall victim to a variety of health problems, such as foot pain, joint issues, or even eating disorders. These issues are typically accepted by dancers, parents, and teachers as unfortunate side-effects of pursuing such a demanding endeavor. However, I instead argue that the physical and psychological damage sustained by ballet dancers is not accidental or simply misfortune. Through the lens of Nietzsche, the methodology of ballet appears to be intentionally destructive. Ballet cannot be easily classified according to Nietzsche’s aesthetic evaluations, working perfectly as neither an Apollonian nor Dionysian art. I argue that this difficulty in categorization arises from ballet’s role as an ascetic practice: as a combination of morality and aesthetics, it both hurts dancers and characterizes this damage as empowering. As the methodology of ballet has only become more severe since its inception in the 1500s, the detrimental effects on dancers have increasingly grown.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche attributes the development of art to the duality of two art tendencies: the Dionysian and Apollonian. Both tendencies are employed to cope with the feeling of “primordial pain” (§3) that is caused by our inability to experience the world objectively. For the Dionysian tendency, its spirit is its most crucial element: through Dionysian arts such as music or dance, a man can “become a work of art” (§1) himself and thus express his “wilder emotions” (§1). Consequently, Dionysian artworks typically carry an impassioned and chaotic energy, since they serve to embody the tumultuous feeling of primordial pain. Dance qualifies as a Dionysian art because it allows dancers to become works of art, and its “gestures bespeak enchantment” (§1). However, the energy and movements of ballet are markedly

different than the dances Nietzsche defines as Dionysian. He connects orgiastic movements, as well as the dancing crowds of the German Middle Ages (which contemporaries viewed as primitive and unrefined) with the Dionysian tendency. These types of motions exude an uninhibited and frenzied energy very unlike the calculated and restricted movements of ballet. The rigidity of ballet is an anomaly, especially in comparison to other contemporary forms of dance, such as modern dance. Furthermore, the differences in dance technique can be attributed to their respective focuses and influences.

For instance, in her book *Nietzsche's Dancers*, Kimerer LaMothe argues that two modern dance choreographers—Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham—successfully created styles that reflected Nietzsche's vision. The two women specifically cited Nietzsche as their influence, and both were integral to the development of modern dance—a form consisting of looser, impassioned, and spontaneous movements. At every turn, the choreographers characterize ballet as the antithesis of modern dance: Duncan rejected ballet because of how it “imposed formal codes onto [dancer's] bodies” (LaMothe 108), an objection she similarly leveled against Christian morality. She also criticized how the ballerina's motions were not movements that “they themselves discovered through the careful study of and attention to their own bodily natures” (LaMothe 118). To support her point, LeeWei Chao—a teacher at the Alonzo King LINES Ballet Program—praises modern dance for “focus[ing] less on how high the leg is or how arched the feet are” (qtd. in *Pointe*) and instead teaching dancers “how to move” (*Pointe*). Implicit in Chao's comments is that ballet prioritizes the creation of the very unnatural movements that Duncan criticizes, rather than fostering true expression. Evidently, ballet training inhibits expression rather than cultivating it, which sets it apart from other forms of dance.

A dance form that stifles emotion fundamentally conflicts with the spirit of Dionysian arts, which embrace experiences of passion and pain. Consequently, the Dionysian label does not fully suit ballet. It is implicit in Nietzsche's examples that Dionysian forms of dance are disordered, messy, and even socially unacceptable at times (ex: orgiastic), traits that do not match the glamorous and refined image of ballet. For this reason, it might initially seem more appropriate to characterize ballet as an Apollonian art instead.

By contrast, the spirit of the Apollonian tendency does not embrace chaos, instead prioritizing order and beauty. The "plastic arts" (§1) mask our tumultuous feelings with "dazzling representations and pleasurable illusions" (§3). Evidently, the coping mechanism presented by the Apollonian tendency is markedly different than that of the Dionysian: rather than embodying our chaotic emotions, Apollonian arts strive to maintain serenity and order. The technique of ballet similarly aims to mask a painful reality with enchanting illusions. The development of pointe work exemplifies this phenomenon, as Jennifer Homans explains in her book *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*. Originally an acrobatic trick performed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, pointe work—or dancing on one's toes—eventually became a vital part of ballet. Marie Taglioni, an Italian ballerina, was key to this revolution, and her methodology reflects Apollonian ideals: to comfortably rise to her toes, Taglioni practiced for six hours every day. Rather than just performing the move, Taglioni prioritized masking "her considerable vigor in a soft aura of femininity and grace" (Homans). While beautiful, the integration of pointe work into ballet came at the expense of dancers' health. Nowadays, pointe work is the "most compromising form of dance for the feet" (Chertoff), making ballerinas significantly more prone to injuries like stress fractures, sprains, and pinched nerves. For example, a study of two hundred elite-level ballet dancers found that among the two hundred injuries sustained over the five-year study

period, “fifty-three percent of injuries occurred in the foot/ankle” (Bamboea et. al). Despite the clear physical damage pointe work causes, it persists in ballet because of its ability to make the body appear weightless and ethereal. Ballet operates very similarly to Apollonian arts in this regard, because of how beautiful appearances are used to hide the presence of pain. However, the discrepancies between ballet and Apollonian arts soon become apparent when examining other characteristics, such as relying on the interpretation of “dream-images” (§1), or symbols to operate.

Though ballet attempts to mimic the Apollonian dependence on dream-images, the incorporation is unsuccessful because it clashes with ballet’s form. The Apollonian artist observes “dream-images” (§1), and from them he “reads the meaning of life, and by these processes he trains himself for life” (§1). This dependence on imagery to create art is reflected in ballet by the dependence on the mirror to master complex positions. American Psychological Association president Dr. Nadie Kaslow, who has worked extensively with dancers, remarked that the mirror “is often the lens through which dancers have a relationship with their body” (qtd. in *McGuire*). Additionally, LeeWei Chao refers to the mirror as a “third person” (qtd. in *Pointe*), which serves as “an intermediary between the dancer and instructor” (qtd. in *Pointe*). However, this dependence actually hinders dancers from dancing to their fullest potential because of how it deteriorates their stability:

“‘If you use your eyes to find balance,’ Chao says, ‘you’re not using your mind–body connection,’ and you’ll lose stability when static poses become movement. To demonstrate his point in class, Chao will ask his dancers to do an arabesque. Many automatically look in the mirror to find their placement. Next, he’ll have them try an

arabesque turn. The line they created with the help of the mirror isn't there, and the turn is often unsuccessful" (*Pointe*).

While the intended usage of mirrors in ballet parallels the function of "dream-worlds" (§2) in the creation of Apollonian arts, the actual effect of mirrors in ballet is much less beneficial than in Apollonian arts. For the Apollonian artist, the "beauteous appearance" (§2) of symbols only aids the creation of art. Meanwhile, for dancers, depending on the static images they see in the mirror comes at the expense of their balance and fluidity, thus preventing them from effectively dancing. In emulating the Apollonian tendency's reliance on dream-images, ballet's contradictory existence reveals itself: imposing symbols or images (Apollonian) onto dance, a form which fundamentally rejects stagnation (Dionysian), creates the stiff and unnatural movements characteristic of ballet. From this conflict, it can be inferred that ballet is not fully Apollonian either, since the usage of dream-images in ballet is far less effective than in Apollonian arts. Furthermore, considering how Nietzsche explicitly describes Apollonian arts as "plastic arts" (§1), it becomes increasingly clear that ballet cannot fit into that category either, thus remaining an enigma.

Poetry, painting, and sculpture all fall under the category of Apollonian arts, or "plastic arts" (§1), and they are unified by two key characteristics: the artwork is inert, and it stands as a separate entity from its creator. The former attribute—the stationary nature of "plastic arts"—is what makes the usage of dream-images so effective in their creation, since motion and fluidity do not play a role. This explains why, for ballet, the usage of dream-images is detrimental to the art rather than beneficial. The second Apollonian attribute—the artwork being a separate entity from its creator—also conflicts with ballet's form. In any type of dance (even ballet), the dancer

creates the artwork solely through her movements. Dance and music are intangible forms, unlike the “plastic arts” (§1) which all can be directly touched and felt. These qualities make it impossible for ballet to be viewed as fully Apollonian, though it does share the characteristic of masking pain with beautiful appearances. Conversely, ballet cannot be considered fully Dionysian either. Though dance, as an art form, belongs to the Dionysian realm, ballet uses dream-images to create an exceptionally rigid type of dance, the energy of which does not match the wild spirit of Dionysian dance. Thus, the binary constructed by Nietzsche cannot conclusively characterize ballet. Ballet exists as a contradictory art form, something that can be explained by the relationship between the moral world and the aesthetic world.

In his self-criticism, Nietzsche argues that art and morality are mutually exclusive terms. He specifically claims that Christian dogma is the antithesis of “the purely aesthetic world-interpretation and justification taught” (§5) by *The Birth of Tragedy*. He reasons that art intrinsically lacks moral content, while Christianity “is only, and will only be moral” (§5). Evidently, art and morality are incompatible because art affirms the self, or life, while morality (specifically Christian dogma) negates life. Through this depiction of the relationship between art and morality, it becomes clear that the two are completely separate realms. As an art form, ballet should theoretically lack moral content and be easily classified according to Nietzsche’s aesthetic categories. However, ballet was originally created with moral meaning: to reinforce Christian values.

The moral aim of ballet was made quite explicit by its creators. The founders of the first official ballet school—the Académie de Poésie et de Musique, which was established in 1570 by Charles IX—sought to “bring [man] closer to the angels and God” (Homans). Ballet was conceived as a method to “take man’s troublesome passions and physical desires and redirect

them toward a transcendent love of God” (Homans). Evidently, ballet was never intended to be an exploration of expression and passion in the same way as other Dionysian forms, but instead meant to inhibit those emotions. Conversely, the founders’ prioritization of order and etiquette seems closer to Apollonian tendency, but the Apollonian tendency does not seek to condemn our wild emotions as sinful or wrong. The rhetoric of the founders exemplifies their hostility towards affirming the self: instead of reconnecting man with his animalistic nature, ballet was intended to further sever that bond. Ballet exists as a combination of aesthetics and morality: as an art form, ballet is inherently aesthetic, but the art also contains moral meaning. The difficulty in properly categorizing ballet can be attributed to this fusion of two worlds that fundamentally conflict. Through ballet, Christianity has diminished the purpose of art by transforming it into an ascetic practice—a severe form of self-discipline.

In the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche explores how asceticism presents self-negating behavior as fulfilling and moral. The meaning of ascetic ideals varies according to different subsets of people: for priests, Nietzsche describes ascetic ideals as “their best instrument of power” (§1). An ascetic priest derives satisfaction from the “voluntary deprivation [and] destruction of self-hood” (§11), and “imposes his valuations of existence” (§11) onto others. The priest presents the negation of life to others as an empowering and glorious act, as does ballet through its methodical yet damaging technique. The aforementioned development of pointe work exemplifies this phenomenon, as does the evolution of first position—a rudimentary pose which consists of joining the heels and turning the toes outward. According to Homans, first position was originally just a “restrained stance that indicated ease of being”, but later evolved to “ply open the feet and legs to a physically extreme 180-degree line”. Once recognized as either extreme or acrobatic tricks, these strenuous technical feats are now

basic expectations for aspiring ballet dancers. It is not coincidental that “sixty to ninety percent of dancers are injured during their careers, and [that] most of their injuries affect the lower extremities and back” (Steinberg et. al). Yet these damaging acts are not just normalized, but praised for how they beautify the dancer’s body. The worst example of this is, as mentioned earlier, the overwhelming presence of the mirror in dance studios.

The usage of mirrors in dance studios—whether ballet, modern, or any other type of dance—has been proven to both worsen performance and body image. In 2011, a study was conducted to determine whether or not mirrors were helpful to college dancers—fifteen were taught with mirrors, fifteen were taught without mirrors, and their progress was evaluated at the end of the semester. The non-mirror class progressed significantly more than the mirror class, with “increase[s] in adagio performance scores and a trend increase in allegro performance scores from pretest to posttest” (Radell et. al). The researchers concluded that using a mirror can negatively affect the skill acquisition of a dancer, and additionally contributes to low body image. With such incriminating evidence against the usage of mirrors, it would be reasonable to expect dance studios to remove them or temporarily cover them up. On the contrary, dance instructors routinely cite the mirror as an integral part of training. For example, Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet school principal Alecia Good-Boresow claimed that the mirror is “a tool to get symmetry, to get perfect lines, [and] to see the positions that you're supposed to make every time” (qtd. in *Pointe*). Her positive characterization of mirrors may seem puzzling given these findings, but it exemplifies the essence of ballet as an ascetic practice. Characterizing a self-negating tool as beneficial encourages dancers to rely even more heavily on it. The promotion of the mirror parallels an even more disturbing development: the increasing prominence of eating disorders and worsening body image amongst ballerinas.

Over the last six decades, the prevalence of eating disorders has risen in conjunction with increasingly severe body standards. Though ballerinas have always been thin, “the fixation on thin became amplified in the 1960s when [George] Balanchine’s preference for long and lean ballerinas promoted a thin aesthetic that influenced other companies worldwide” (Kelly, “The Cult of Thin). The implementation of this standard has proven to be extremely detrimental over time. As early as 1979, Richard Druss and Joseph Silverman found that dancers’ views of their own bodies were highly distorted. They conducted a questionnaire with thirty-one Joffrey Ballet students, and all reported that they “wished to be ‘a bit lighter’ in weight” (118), despite all being underweight (the average weight was one-hundred and eight pounds). As mentioned earlier, distortions of body image can largely be attributed to the usage of mirrors, but in the years since this study, the mirror has remained prominent in classrooms. The consequences of this, as well as the thin standard itself, are dire. A 2013 study called “Prevalence of eating disorders amongst dancers: A systematic review and meta-analysis” found that ballerinas were three times more likely to suffer from eating disorders than the regular population, particularly anorexia and EDNOS. According to Linda Hamilton, a former New York City Ballet dancer and psychologist, the prevalence of eating disorders could be even higher: “One out of two dancers suffers from an eating disorder,” she told *Washington Post*. Despite more research emerging and demonstrating that the current body standard of ballet only harms dancers, the aesthetic is still upheld. This illustrates how the culture of ballet physically and psychologically hurts dancers, and unfortunately, the promotion of self-negating tools does not stop at the mirror. In some cases, eating disorders are also portrayed as beneficial to the success of ballet dancers.

Key to Nietzsche’s concept of asceticism is the way that self-negating acts are characterized. It is not enough for self-negating practices to exist; they must be incentivized so

people will value them. For ballet, the incentivization of self-negation is primarily carried out by dance instructors. In the article “Humiliating weigh-ins at ballet schools: Dancers tell of eating disorder battles”, one dancer recalls being told by her teachers that “it was a good thing to skip breakfast” (Caldwell). George Balanchine, the most influential ballet director of the twentieth century, repeatedly told his dancers that he wanted to “see the bones” (“Eating Disorders Haunt Ballerinas”). While the presence of mirrors, the integration of pointe work, and the rigid technique are all harmful, this sort of rhetoric elevates ballet from a damaging practice to a true ascetic form. The rhetoric teaches dancers to value unhealthy eating habits and harmful standards of thinness, which undoubtedly contributes to the development of eating disorders and low body image. The appraisal of self-negation can also manifest itself in less explicit ways, such as those described by Linda Hamilton: “The companies and schools may talk about health, ‘then you see that the skinniest dancers are the ones who are getting cast’ in lead roles” (qtd. in *Washington Post*). In every instance presented, neglecting bodily needs is portrayed as a sign of a dancer’s strength and dedication. Though dancers themselves may also promote self-negating behaviors, the instructor’s authority gives self-negating acts the necessary credence to incentivize them. Ballet’s insistence on denying the self indicates that ballet’s existence is a corruption of aesthetics, which teaches us to express ourselves and fulfill our needs. While ballet, as an art form, is aesthetic by nature, the philosophy of ballet teaches asceticism to its students. Thus, ballet represents the successful exploitation of art by Christian morality, an exertion of power that effectively changed the purpose and meaning of dance.

The future of ballet and whether it will substantially transform its harmful methods is unclear, but all is not lost. Though the thin aesthetic does persist, the ballet world has slowly begun to accept the existence of other body types. An example of this is Misty Copeland, an

American Ballet Theater dancer who was promoted to principal in 2015. She has demonstrated that ballerinas can defy the “pre-woman” (Druss & Silverman 119) archetype and still become immensely successful, inspiring others to follow in her footsteps. However, this is only a small step in the right direction. Ballet instructors can institute small changes immediately, such as covering the mirrors in studios for extended periods of time and becoming less demanding in their standards of weight. Any radical change, though, will require drastic alterations to ballet curricula, which is unfortunately unlikely because of how the increasingly strenuous and damaging standards of ballet are framed as progressions of the art form. Higher leg extensions, arched feet, and thinner bodies are merely examples of how ballet has pushed the boundaries of human capability. To undo the strain on dancer’s bodies, ballet would have to regress to the standards of the early 20th century, which—knowing now how ballet operates—seems incredibly unlikely. All the while, ballet dancers become more and more prone to having physically and psychologically damaging experiences.

The human cost of ballet cannot be understated. As a competitive ballerina for eight years, I experienced many of the things mentioned either through myself or girls I knew. My shame at not being able to adhere to these standards manifested itself in unhealthy practices: I broke down whenever I was forced to weigh myself; I avoided the mirror and cameras at all costs; I developed an extremely unhealthy relationship with food. Worst of all, my ballet teachers echoed some of the same harmful rhetoric mentioned in this essay. While not all dance instructors do this, enough do for ballet to become seriously damaging to those who participate in it. Even five years after quitting, the effects of my ballet experience still linger within me. Ballet can change itself, and for the sake of those who participate in it, it needs to change.

Pursuing ballet should not necessitate the development of a visceral hatred towards the body, but as it currently functions as an ascetic practice—it overwhelmingly does.

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