The Disruptive Power of the Disabled Body in Dance: Lloyd Newson’s *The Cost of Living*

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This paper is based on the analysis of Lloyd Newson’s film adaptation of *The Cost of Living* by DV8 Physical Theatre. I consider scenes from the film in which Newson draws attention to the physical excellence of a disabled dancer to comment on social conventions and ableism in dance. The main focus of this article is on the body – bodily ideals, where they come from and what happens with bodies that are not perfect. Simultaneously, I investigate how the body can become the site of political manipulation through imposed body standards, self-control and constant surveillance of everything that is ‘out of order’. I explore the disabled body in dance as a metaphor of difference that can render visible the suppression of the body in Western culture. Overall, I aim to discuss how the film facilitates the re-envisioning of assumptions about who and what is acceptable in the context of dance.

*Keywords*: dance, disability, dance theatre, body politics, bodily discourse.

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Introduction

A legless man enters a ballet studio and, with a swaying motion of transferring weight from one arm to another, ambles among the legs of dancers who *tendue* and *glissade* by the *barre*. As he approaches one of the female dancers stretching on the floor, the two bodies engage in a rolling *pas de deux*. They slide, counter-balance and duck beneath one another with a grace and technical excellence that creates a sense of ease and freedom of movement. This scene from Lloyd Newson’s film adaptation of *The Cost of Living* by DV8 Physical Theatre is an example of how Newson explores the physicality of disabled and non-disabled dancers. The main characters in the film, a young man (Eddie Kay) and his legless friend (David Toole), are members of a street performance troupe and could be generally defined as ‘outsiders’. As Newson explains, his characters ‘are not perfect and they cannot pretend’ (Golloagher, 2011). Through examination of people who do not fit into categories, the film recognises fundamental aspects of society such as class, gender and hegemony of presentation in employment that operate to sustain the structures of power.

Newson’s stricture of social conventions, together with the anecdotal character of the narrative, forces the viewer to reconsider their assumptions about the identities attached to certain bodies and their relationship to them. This paper analyses perceptions of the disabled body with reference to Marry Russo’s (1994) notions of the grotesque and classical ideal, and Julia Kristeva’s (1982) concepts of fear and surveillance of the abject body – the body that is outside the symbolic order. The examination of society and its power structures with regard to Michel Foucault’s (1979) theory of docile bodies and Laura Mulvey’s (1999) explanation of gaze in the performance aims to extend the investigation of the disruptive power of the disabled body in dance and its capability to critique the social structure and society’s obsession with image. Given the growing tendencies among various dance companies and communities to question what kinds of movements can constitute a dance or who can be a dancer, it seems relevant to consider assumptions attached to certain bodies and how they can contribute to re-envisioning preconceptions about dance.

The need to control the body and the grotesque

The general critique of the film (e.g. Watson, 1999; Rockwell, 2005; Smith, 2005; Golloagher, 2011) identifies the most striking scenes as those involving dance sequences performed by David Toole. Perhaps the reason why Toole’s performance is so distinct is because his disabled body is to a great extent shown as independent and the characteristic features of his disability are vividly exposed. By addressing the expectation of a disabled body to be covered...
up or hidden, Newson questions the need for bodily control and considers how disability confronts the aesthetic ideal of a perfect body in dance.

Don Johnson’s (1993) and Michael Foucault’s (1979) works explain the control of the body as a way of maintaining the matrices of political and social power. Johnson (1993) considers the impact of the body-mind split on the subsequent marginalisation and repression of the body in Western culture. He further demonstrates how the myth of the mind’s superiority leads to an obsession with the body as an objective entity, causing disconnection from inner signals and somatic weakness. The loss of bodily authority is perpetuated by dominant cultures, as individuals become compliant to imposed standards of how the body should be or look like. Johnson (1993, p. 65) summarises this in his powerful statement: 'I am [...] a result of ideologies within which I move'.

Foucault also considered body as a site for political manipulation, although, as Jill Green (2002, p.8) points out, Foucault was more ‘suspicious of typical somatic conceptualisations such as bodily experience and practice’. Foucault (1979) focuses on different ‘technologies of the self’ as he calls them - self-disciplining practices that society requires of people in order to maintain the needs of the bourgeoisie. He describes the system of social construction as ‘a machinery of power that explores [the human body], breaks it down and rearranges it’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 138), to explain how bodies under constant surveillance become docile and self-regulated.

Corresponding to the bourgeois society’s need to produce ‘docile’ bodies was the aspiration to achieve a perfect or ideal body that would not be beset with weakness or pain. Mary Russo (1994, p.63) describes it as ‘classical body’ and identifies its features as ‘monumental, static, closed and sleek’. Russo contrasts the immortal, detached from the reality of corporeal existence classical ideal with the ‘fleshy’ experience of the ‘open, protruding and extended’ grotesque body – ‘the body of becoming, process and change’ (p. 219). In the context of dance, an art form that traditionally idealises physical ability, the disabled body becomes a site of the grotesque, an uncontrolled negation of classical ideals. The disruptive power of the grotesque body is revealed in the anxiety that it will shatter the classical body’s illusion of grace and lack of effort by the impact of its corporeality - fragility of health, physical injury or mortality. Newson emphasises the impact of the grotesque body in dance when David Toole enters the ballet studio in the scene described above. At the beginning of the scene, as the dancer moves along the barre, the camera is angled to frame only the lower halves of the bodies, bringing the attention to the hyper-extended limbs of practicing dancers. The contrast between Toole’s fragile body and the dancers’ legs, shooting in dynamic dégagé and piqué, raises questions about culturally sanctioned but odd-looking ideals in dance.
Later on, the surprise of a disabled man’s appearance in the dance studio continues as Toole and the ballerina engage in contact improvisation on the floor. More importantly, the dance is a dialogue between the two dancers that merges the physical virtuosity and fluid physics of partnering. Smoothly and in tune with one another, they negotiate with the characteristics of each other’s physicality by the way in which they pull one another, press, change levels and slide. Newson’s choice of the ballerina’s classical body shows the polarisation between the ability and disability or the classical and the grotesque. At the same time though, the flow and sustained dynamics of their motion direct the gaze away from the extraordinary sight of the duet to the interactions between the dancers. Through the exploration of movement possibilities of different bodies, Newson challenges assumptions attached to them and the aesthetics of the ideal body in dance.

Ann Cooper Albright (1997), a dancer and scholar, reflects in *Choreographing Difference* on the disabled body’s lack of physical integrity as the negation of the perfect body’s wholeness. She explains that disabled body poses a symbolic threat by reminding us about the restrictions of health and beauty ideologies. Newson focuses on the aspect of physical integrity in another scene when Toole, standing on the grassy slope, starts to move forward to the tune of klezmer-inspired waltz and is suddenly joined by the chorus of dancers who follow his lead. The dancers copy Toole’s characteristic movement of swaying from one arm to another and use swinging dynamics of the momentum of their pelvises to stay close to the ground and dance almost entirely on their arms.

The unison of the dancers makes Toole’s movement less extraordinary, but at the same time Newson surrounds him with reinforcement by directing the camera angle at the collapsed knees and useless-looking feet of other dancers. Through the movement vocabulary and camera framing, Newson emphasises that Toole’s lack of lower extremities allows him to develop dynamic qualities and movement solutions that are foreign to non-disabled bodies. Toole’s disability opens up a whole new source of movement material that other dancers can embody. By showing how creativity in dance can be expanded when different bodies are involved in the choreographic process, Newson challenges the preconception that physical ability equals quality.

**The fear of abjection and surveillance through the gaze**

The unfinished state of the grotesque body seems to also echo through Julia Kristeva’s (1982) reflection on abjection in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. The abject body does not
fit into symbolic categories of what is ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ and as a social antithesis induces the reaction of fear and a need to control. This control can be represented by series of gazes that objectify and invigilate the abject body, limiting its power and agency. In the context of visual performance, this is intensified because of the power relation between the viewer and performer, in which the performer becomes passive to the viewer’s objectifying and dominant gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Newson addresses both the fear of the abject body and the issue of the power implicit in the viewer’s gaze, to question reactions to the sight of disabled bodies.

Julia Kristeva (1982, p. 4) defines the abject as everything that ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules’ and that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’. She identifies two sources of abjection: the archaic memory of ‘primitive effort to separate ourselves from the animal’ (p.12), and the individual psychosexual development, when the abject marks the moment of separation from the mother and recognition of the boundary between ‘me’ and ‘the other’. According to Kristeva, the fear of abjection reinforces the symbolic system and categories of proper, pure and unitary, simultaneously giving the need to control everything that does not fit within these boundaries. A disabled body, being neither present nor absent, defies the symbolic categories such as ‘broken’ and ‘whole’. Therefore, the fear of disability resembles that of abjection, as of everything that is ‘out of order’.

The need for the constant surveillance of the abjection is embedded in the system of social power and results in the oppressive forces represented as series of gazes. The disabled body becomes caught in the paradox of hyper-visibility and invisibility. There is a permanent control over the disabled body’s otherness or fragility. Simultaneously, the humanity of a disabled person seems to disappear (Sandhal, 2004). In the context of visual performance, Laura Mulvey’s (1999) theory of gaze brings a valid point about the binary opposition in the spectacle, where the performer is a ‘passive, raw material for the active gaze’ of the audience (p. 843). Therefore, Newson’s portrayal of disability in a dance film challenges both the fear of abjection and the voyeurism of the spectacle. In one scene in particular, David Toole, in his monologue atop a deserted bar, unwraps the layers of scrutiny placed on his body and makes us, as the viewers, aware of our own complicit gaze. In this scene, Toole addresses the viewer directly, repeating twice an invitation to join him for a dance, as he moves across the surface of the bar. He glides and spins around, continuing his monologue and pointing out ironically the aspects of his infirmity and related body parts. As he mentions his legs and his rear, he performs a sensuous turn and faces the camera again, saying ‘I saw you looking’ (Gette, 2013). Toole’s interaction with the audience reveals the linear relationship between the viewer and the performer, casting the viewer as the voyeur. Newson not only unveils the controlling gaze, but also breaks the infectious power of surveillance by suggesting that we are the ones who are being watched.
While watching this particular scene, a personal experience came to my mind. I had a chance to meet Mr Toole personally in December 2014 during the Stop Gap Dance Company’s annual event – the Christmas Community Dance Platform Late Night Tales. Even though I did not get a chance to talk to him, I remember that I found myself entrapped in a constant urge to look at his body. At one point he cast a quick glance at me, which gave me a sensation of being harshly reprimanded. I did not dare to look again. In both my personal encounter with Mr. Toole and Newson’s playful interaction with the viewer in the bar scene, it was the unexpected catching of the viewer as a voyeur that made such a powerful impact. The reversing of the power implicit in the controlling gaze allows Newson to expose the fear and objectification of the disabled body. He makes visible the structures of power and oppression in dance, in order to critique assumptions that dehumanise people with disabilities.

**Conclusion**

The commitment of dance to an aesthetic of ideal beauty can be explained as the need to create a perfect and controlled body that reflects the standardised and normalised bodies in society, which is, following Johnson’s (1993) and Foucault’s (1979) thought, a matter of political and social manipulation. The imperfect disabled body is a radical opposition to the classical ideal and, as Mary Russo (1994) describes it, becomes the limited or protruding grotesque. The further analysis of disability with reference to Kristeva’s (1982) concept of abjection and the abject body’s negation of the symbolic categories of ‘pure’ and ‘unitary’ shows the fear of people with disabilities and their categorisation as ‘other’. The disabled body becomes transgressive as soon as it enters the dance space to face social preconceptions about dance and the ideal of a dancer’s perfect body. Newson uses the disruptive power of David Toole’s body to radically deconstruct and reform the structure of dance performances, and forces the audience to reconsider the identities attached to bodies that do not fit into categories of classical beauty. Through the exploration of movement, the capability inherent in different bodies and the inversion of the controlling gaze in performance, Newson critiques the system of oppression based on society’s obsession with image. He questions the nature and meaning of dance, to eventually facilitate the re-envisioning of assumed boundaries that determine who and what is acceptable on stage. However, in order to investigate further the disabled body’s disruptive power, Toole’s technical excellence should be considered in more depth. It should be questioned whether Toole has entered the dance scene only by virtue of his ability to embody an almost classical ideal of grace, strength and control.
References


