

Unravelling the Dance: an exploration of dance's underdeveloped relationship with its kinaesthetic nature, with particular reference to Skinner Releasing Technique.

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Abstract

Dance is a kinaesthetic art yet lacks a tradition of reflecting on or evaluating the significance of the first person kinaesthetic experience. Most somatic techniques, although defined as engaging with the first person experience (Hanna 1987) are intellectually mediated and gain their limited but burgeoning acceptance in the dance world by being posited within an analytical, scientific framework .

Such a framework, however, offers no insight into the kinaesthetic experience of dancing. The pedagogy of Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) engages only with the first person perspective and since SRT was developed from kinaesthetic experience without any reference to analytical sources what means do we employ to critically reflect on its process ?

The releasing experience, or the act of dancing as revealed by SRT, is an aesthetic process. Shusterman's proposed somaesthetics (1999), phenomenology and the ontology of art all give credence to this assumption and in doing so they reveal Skinner Releasing Technique not to be a pedagogy in search of a method for critical reflection, but rather to be a process which itself further unravels the hermeneutics of the dancing experience.

Paper

The first person experience:

Kinaesthetic intelligence can be defined as a form of intelligence which develops and reveals itself through our bodily skills (Gardner 1984). We can distinguish between understanding the nature of kinaesthetic intelligence as revealed by the body as object (the outward display of these skills) and as revealed through our inward relationship to our own bodies as subject. The practices within the field of somatics are defined as engaging with first person rather than third person experience.(Hanna,1987) and in doing so are assumed to reject the Cartesian notion of a mind – body duality.

Curiously however, dance - a kinaesthetic art form whose practitioners and training institutions are turning increasingly to somatics as a route to increased bodily skill - lacks a framework for reflecting on or evaluating the first person experience. Most somatic techniques are intellectually mediated via external (third person) received knowledge. The somatic experience is thus made accessible and acceptable through a scientific framework which explains, justifies, evaluates and facilitates the kinaesthetic experience through reference to anatomy, physiology, psychology, neurology and

biomechanics. Skinner Releasing Technique, however, can not be mediated in this way.

What is Skinner Releasing Technique?

Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) is a way to develop our dancing skills: our strength, endurance, flexibility – in other words our freedom of movement. It does this through and in the act of dancing thus in form and function can be defined as a dance technique. Enhancing dancing is not its only application though, in fact SRT can have relevance to any activity.

In an SRT session image guided floor work and hands on tactile studies are used to facilitate the letting go of tensions; a deeper kinaesthetic experience of movement; an effortless way of moving and an integrated alignment of the whole self. The images Skinner uses do not describe anatomical truths, rather they express metaphorically the kinaesthetic experience of a releasing alignment which maximises movement potential. The imagery is poetic in nature and Skinner likens them to Haikus as they are brief and send out some sort of reverberation (Skinner, cited in Skura, 1990). A pre-requisite for the SRT teacher training programme is 'a background in poetry, or an

introductory course in poetry that includes learning about the function of imagery and the resonance of words.’(Skinner, cited in SRT Website, 2003).

The use of imagery is not unique to Skinner and it is undoubtedly possible to explore how images function and to analyse the neurology behind their usefulness in reconditioning neuromuscular patterns. Skinner, Davis, Davidson, Wheeler and Metcalf (1979) recognize this in their seminal article Skinner Releasing Technique where they discuss the work of Todd and Sweigard. However, arguably to justify and evaluate SRTs significance through such methodologies is to engage in a process of intellectual mediation which is irrelevant to the process of the work itself. Skinner states that ‘the human organism is not seen as a mind – body duality but as a dynamic network of energies. The network is totally unified, yet within it are complex, diverse autonomous patterns and forms of energy. Although there are reverberations within the network of energies, there is no linear pattern of cause and effect.’ (Skinner, Davis, Davidson, Wheeler and Metcalf,1979) Other somatic practices share similar perspectives but arguably Skinner has embodied this idea more deeply in her work for she intuitively avoided any analytical work while developing her pedagogy (Skura 1990) and the SRT teacher training programme does not involve any third person perspective of body parts and how they function. The work engages solely with the first person experience and unmediated subjective kinesthetic intelligence.

How then do we reflect on this practice?

Skinner's work is not without substance. However in SRT theoretical revelations can be experienced in the act of dancing without a linear pattern of previous understanding followed by application. SRT, although originally developed without reference to or knowledge of the work of the new physicists, has made parallel discoveries and shares their perspective of the human organism as an energy system within the larger energy systems of the universe. Skinner's discoveries, however, were not made as the result of scientific reasoning and although the experiences lived through can be posited within a framework of quantum physics such an exercise does not of itself provide a method for reflecting on the work within its own terms of reference. Science proves its points through gathering more evidence whereas philosophy goes through a process of unravelling the original statement (Ayer, 1980) and Skinner's process is one of unravelling, not induction. Significantly, phenomenology, with its primacy of perception and its concern with embodiment, philosophically unravels many of the ideas experienced in SRT and experimented with in quantum physics. The phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1989) grounds philosophy and science in a direct and pre-reflective relationship with the world and in doing so articulates what the dancer in the releasing process experiences kinaesthetically. (1)

Skinner Releasing Technique as an aesthetic experience:

Releasing involves the letting go of conscious control, of intellectualization and preconceived ideas and thus the Releasing process frees the imagination (Skinner, Davis, Davidson, Wheeler and Metcalf, 1979). In an SRT class a number of processes of letting go lead the student to a state of being, just beyond conscious control. These practices and indeed many aspects of the releasing process are often likened to Zen Buddhism. Both deal with a way of how, not what; and they share an intuition of universal connection which is accessed through a state of heightened awareness. This state of consciousness facilitates students of SRT to be more receptive to the work and more available to the images. The image is not merely absorbed by the student, it is immediately experienced in an individualized way, spawning its own spontaneous images which are themselves metaphors for the technical principles the student is working with. Thus the learning process is a creative one and the releasing experience becomes 'a self propelling aesthetic process' (Skinner, Davis, Davidson, Wheeler and Metcalf, 1979).

Shusterman (1999) does not refer to Skinner Releasing Technique, nor even in detail to dance in his proposal for a new discipline of somaesthetics, but his provisional definition of somaesthetics as 'the critical meliorative study of the experience and use of ones body as a locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation

and creative self fashioning' suggests that this is potentially a discipline that dance practitioners could and should take a leading role in developing, particularly as we need to find a means of critically engaging with the first person kinaesthetic experience. Shusterman's positioning of the body as a locus of perception has resonance for any discussion of Skinner's work. It allows for Merleau-Ponty's pre-reflective relation to the world and firmly establishes that the dancing experience (as revealed through the processes of Skinner Releasing Technique) is itself aesthetic and can be reflected on discretely from the form it creates.

Ontological debates within aesthetics – even opposing ones - grapple with notions of intuition. For example; Bell argues that we have a separate aesthetic sense which is immediate, intuitive, non inferential and reveals something about an ultimate reality (Gould,1994). For Dewey, art is not a product but a quality of doing (Haskins, in Murray, 2003) and Gadamer proposes that art can transform actuality and that there is no actuality ontologically prior to art. (1976).

Skinner's pedagogy does not intellectually engage with these debates but the dancing experience as revealed by the releasing process does embody the intuition and transformation hinted at and grappled with by aesthetics, Zen philosophy, quantum physics and theories of multiple intelligences alike. This

paper began by searching for a methodology with which to critically engage with the first person experience, in particular the first person experience as revealed through Skinner Releasing Technique. Unsurprisingly, however, such a process of unravelling is not a linear one and therefore instead of reaching finite conclusions it reveals further layers of possibility. Here there emerges the possibility that Skinner Releasing Technique is itself a process of unravelling which reveals, not a methodology for, but ontology of, the dancing experience. This layer of possibility, of course, creates its own opportunity for further unravelling.

Notes:

(1) For further discussion of Skinner Releasing Technique with reference to the work of Merleau – Ponty see Skelton (2003)

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