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Author

Cohen, Naomi Giavanna

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Is dance disrespected in media portrayals?

From ballerinas in movies and on TikTok, to models in pointe shoes, distortion can be harmful

by Naomi Giavanna Cohen

Picture yourself walking down the street with a microphone in hand, asking passersby to describe ballet in a few words. This experiment could elicit a variety of responses. Ballet may be described as "girly," "delicate," or "cute," labels that imply preconceptions or a lack of knowledge about ballet. Others, on the other hand, may use more accurate descriptors, such as "graceful," "technical," or "challenging." Stereotypes about ballet persist in our collective imagination, raising questions about the media's role in shaping views of the art form. Ballet depictions in the media frequently promote a narrow and exclusive view of the dance world, which can reinforce harmful stereotypes and limit people's understanding of the art form's diversity and richness. It is critical to consider what messages people receive from the media and how they influence people's perceptions of dance, particularly ballet.

Over time, media has significantly impacted public perception, promoting the notion that ballet is a feminine art form, despite its origins in male performance. Consequently, there is a cultural perception that ballet is exclusionary and only available to those with feminine qualities, regardless of gender. This perception has been perpetuated by media emphasis of ballet as traditionally feminine. Dancers are often portrayed as delicate and dainty, as opposed to the powerful and athletic performers they are (Verzwyvelt, 2022). The narrow and stereotypical portrayals of ballet have perpetuated a restricted understanding of the art form and its intended audience.

The media has the potential to challenge limiting perceptions of ballet. For instance, films can dispel harmful stereotypes and demonstrate the talent and commitment required for ballet and other dance styles. Or they can perpetuate inaccurate and detrimental ideas about dance, or perhaps contain both positive and negative characteristics to varying degrees. One such example is the film *Center Stage* which follows a group of students at a fictional ballet school as they seek to become professional dancers. While it highlights the hard work required to excel, it also shows ballet dancers as elite, arrogant, and competitive. The critically acclaimed psychological thriller *Black Swan* is another example that had a considerable impact as it reached a significant audience. The film's depiction of the dance world has been chastised for spreading negative preconceptions and misconceptions about the art form. It implied that the world of ballet was not only one of cutthroat competition and backstabbing but where physical and mental abuse ran rampant. While some of these components may be true in some capacity, the film sensationalizes and exaggerates these elements excessively. Furthermore, the film promoted the idea that to be successful, a dancer must be willing to sacrifice everything, including their physical and mental health, a harmful message to transmit to viewers, particularly young aspiring dancers.

The depiction of the dance style and the treatment of stunt performers in *Black Swan* was also criticized. Although Natalie Portman's performance was praised, it was later revealed that professional dancer Sarah Lane performed most of the ballet onscreen without credit. This lack of appreciation for the work of professional dancers perpetuated the myth that anyone can learn ballet quickly and easily. Ballet is a highly challenging and technically demanding art form that requires years of practice to master. By failing to acknowledge the talent and dedication of professional dancers like Lane, the film devalued the efforts of the ballet community and promoted negative preconceptions about the art form (Katrandjian et al., 2011). As scholar Jade Boyd discusses, "when considering the extensive reach of mainstream films...it becomes apparent how influential dance films can be in molding perceptions of dance" (Boyd, 2004).

Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram also provide a variety of representations that can influence our perception of ballet. Isabella Boylston, an ABT principal ballerina, has a prominent online presence. She shares inspiring behind-the-scenes content about her life and career, including company classes, rehearsal videos, and performance footage. She reveals dance 'fails' and uploads video bloopers to demonstrate that the online idealized portrayal of dance is not necessarily the truth. In all her content, Boylston illustrates the hardships and intricacies of ballet beyond its aesthetic appeal and showcases the artistry and dedication required for the art form. Boylston's online presence offers a positive representation that is educational, insightful, and accessible to many. Conversely, it's frustrating to see models and celebrities like Kendall Jenner pose on pointe without proper training or respect for the art form, then post images online, reaching millions of people. These depictions suggest anyone can perform ballet without skill and that ballet is only for slender, elegant, and conventionally attractive people. It also minimizes the time and effort needed to master ballet techniques, which is disrespectful to experienced dancers who have trained for years. Professional dancers should be given these opportunities instead.

Another representation of ballet in the media is the rise of the popular social media and online fashion trend, "balletcore." This style incorporates ballet-inspired clothes and iconography and is often depicted with individuals wearing high-cut revealing leotards, tights, leg warmers, and pointe shoes. "Balletcore" is criticized for fetishizing ballet's aesthetic while failing to promote the art form and real dancers. Many individuals in the dance community believe that this trend lowers ballet to a mere fashion statement, dismissing the inherent complexity of the art form and the hard effort and attention required to master it. While ballet-inspired fashion and aesthetics can be lovely and inspiring, it is critical to appreciate and support the art form and the authentic dancers who bring it to life.

Most importantly, media portrayals of dance shed light on the critical issue of lack of diversity and inclusivity in the dance community. Due to the limited range of body types and racial diversity portrayed in the media, numerous excellent dancers are excluded from the discussion. This lack of representation can negatively impact dancers' self-esteem and limit the opportunities for diverse perspectives in the dance field. Jade Boyd discussed this in her article about the film

Save the Last Dance and how prevalent racial prejudices and assumptions occur throughout it. The film's depiction of ballet as a dance form exclusive to white women disregards ongoing efforts to diversify. Black individuals are only depicted as hip-hop dancers, whereas white women can excel in both hip-hop and ballet. A conversation between Sara, the main character, and a Black woman on a train in the film highlights this issue in a significant way. The Black woman comments on Sara's dance magazine featuring a famous ballerina and states, "I've always loved ballet, but never had the physique for it." She chuckles and inquires, "Hey, do you dance?" Sara replies, "I used to." The Black woman's laughter on the train prompts viewers to consider the absurdity of a Black woman with her physique dancing ballet. This passage assumes that Black women do not do ballet, which conceals the reality that many people of color are professional dancers. In addition, it obscures the fact that race, not talent, has been and remains the primary reason for the widespread exclusion of Black dancers from ballet (Boyd, 2004). Thus, it is essential to critically examine media portrayals and address negative preconceptions that limit opportunities for underrepresented groups.

In conclusion, the media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of dance and ballet, in particular. Unfortunately, media portrayals of ballet often perpetuate stereotypes and harmful perceptions. However, it also has the power to challenge limiting perceptions of ballet. Social media platforms offer a variety of dance representations that can be very influential, as well. Ultimately, it is essential to consider what messages are conveyed through media, how they influence people's perceptions of dance, and to acknowledge the talent, dedication, and hard work required to master ballet and other dance styles. Otherwise, we risk perpetuating a narrow and exclusive view of dance that does not reflect this art form's true diversity and richness, and many talented individuals may be discouraged from pursuing their dreams.



Naomi Cohen will graduate in Winter of 2023 with a B.A. in Dance Performance and a B.A. in Criminology, Law, and Society. She plans to continue pursuing her passion for dance before attending law school, with the ultimate goal of finding a way to bridge her two interests.

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