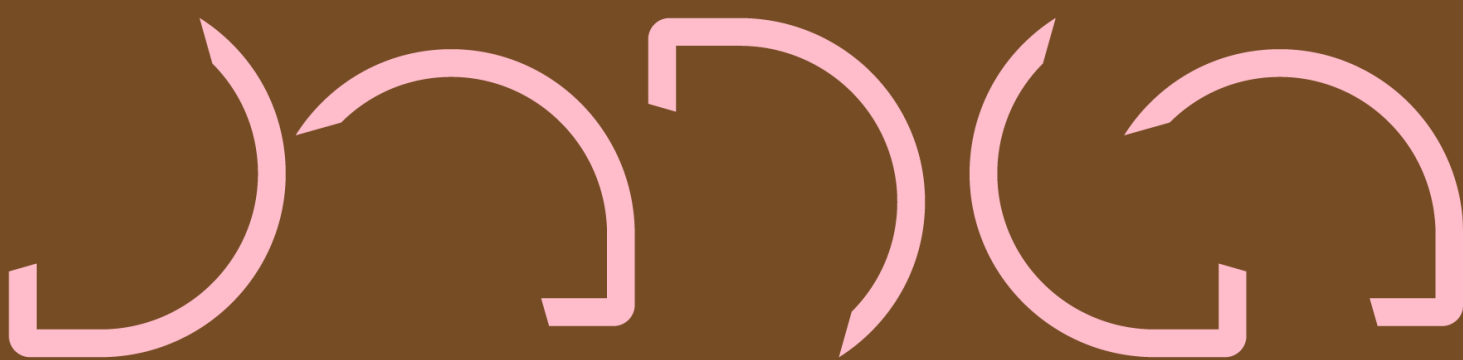


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Intersections between the feminine and classical ballet: femininity demands from ballet dancers throughout centuries

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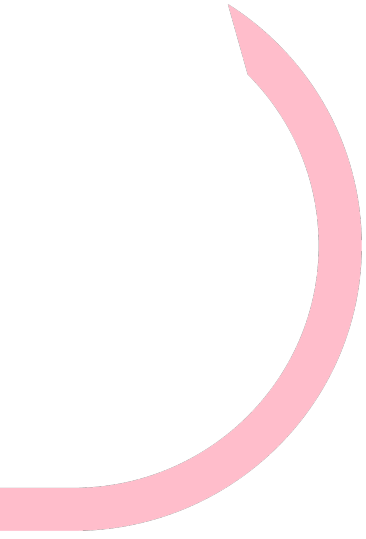
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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this research was to understand social and historical changes of femininity in classical ballet. To do so, it was necessary to investigate historical aspects of classical ballet from the XIV century until the XXI century, as well as to analyze representations of the feminine in classic ballet in works of art. This work was carried out as qualitative research, characterized as a theoretical essay, contemplating the moral and physical aspects demanded from ballet dancers throughout the years. The findings in this study allowed us to understand that the construction of femininity in classical ballet was permeated by the constitution of culture and its demands. Thus, this article proposes to the field of psychology a look at women who practice classical ballet, and how this dance style has repercussions on their subjectivities.

KEYWORDS: classical ballet; femininity; psychology.



Intersections between the feminine and classical ballet: femininity demands from ballet dancers throughout centuries

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1. Introduction

In studies and reflections concerning the gender division insertion in the psychic life of individuals, it is clear that the first signifiers that inscribe subjects in places of symbolic order are “man” and “woman”. These two words designate the human being when he/she is born and run through his/her entire personal life history. Before any possibility of choice, as well as the subject constitutes his/her desire, he/she is accepted by the parents due to the genital difference inscribed in his/her body. From this, the individual will have to deal with this issue to form his/her desire, his/her desiring position, his/her object of choice and the discourse that will narrate his/her story (Kehl, 2016; Nogueira, 2001).

While the terms “woman” and “man” refer to the biological sex, the term “gender” encompasses cultural, psychological and social aspects; considering norms, expectations and behaviors considered appropriate for a man or a woman in a given society (Hanna, 1999). The concept of gender is not a natural one, it is a social construction and it needs to be learned and internalized by individuals through social institutions (State, school, Church, family). This way, gender is transmitted, constructed and reproduced through social learning consequently being crystallized in roles considered appropriate for a given sex (Mota-Ribeiro, 2005; Nogueira, 2001).

Besides the set of behaviors that would be appropriate for members of one sex in a given society, there is a set of social beliefs and expectations regarding the capabilities and preferences of each individual. Such widespread beliefs about what is typical for each sex and what their main attributes are – whether physical properties, personality traits or certain behaviors – constitute gender stereotypes (Mota-Ribeiro, 2005). One example is from the 18th-19th-century European culture, which produced a significant number of social norms aiming to promote the adaptation of women to their supposed set of attributes, functions, predicates and restrictions, which may be called femininity. The attributes of femininity demanded from women modesty, kindness and passivity considering the desires and needs of men (Kehl, 2016).

This way, cultures are shaped by biological distinctions, creating social norms and trying to systematize teachings and guidance for the behavior of men and women, usually opposing each other. Societies construct specific ways to issue these gender guidelines and show to the individuals how to fit into them, including dancing (Hanna, 1999). Consequently, if there is a construction of how femininity should be, and if this is shared in a fantasy and social imaginary, then we may speak about an internalized feminine identity or a set of beliefs that describe how a woman should be and such description is experienced in reality by female human beings (Mota-Ribeiro, 2005).

One mean to propagate gender stereotypes is the dance with classical ballet being one of the main forms where this can be seen (Hanna, 1999). Ballet has its roots in the Italian Renaissance (14th century) under the name of court ballets, where dancing activities were reserved for men, especially young men from high society, to showcase their skills and gain social prestige. However, with subsequent investments, ballet was transferred to theaters and the professional dancing of men and women occurred in the 17th century. In the 18th century, the rise of ballerinas on stage is observed. Female dancers occupied leading roles and perfected the classical technique, a fact that was further amplified with the romantic movement of the 19th century with its notable repertoire ballets (Anderson, 1978). Romanticism, present in most diverse arts, valued fantasy and the ethereal creatures of the female figure (Camargo, 2012; Samarino, 2021). Consequently, pointe shoes were adopted aiming to provide women with the ethereal character that was valued, despite the discomfort and injuries they caused to ballerinas (Portinari, 1989).

Therefore, given that the repertoire ballets from the Romantic period still have great prestige and preserve the ideas of what a ballerina should represent, the general aim of this research was to understand the sociohistorical changes – and permanence – of women in classical ballet to build a basis for future studies in the area. The specific objectives were to investigate historical aspects of classical ballet from the 14th to the 21st century, as well as to

analyze the representations of women in classical ballet through art works of female ballet figures.

It is understood that the theme of classical ballet offers important considerations about the imaginary and real women, which are often intertwined with historical-social issues – mainly of domination – in the construction of Western society. Therefore, regarding the permanence of the practice of classical ballet until nowadays, it is possible to understand that its practitioners also remain under the influence of this modality that carries significant gender narratives. Considering this, the field of psychology has the potential to work and investigate issues that are pertinent to classical ballet.

2. Methodology

A qualitative research is characterized as a process of interpretation and understanding of social reality, through which it is seen as a dynamic and complex construction and is interpreted and understood through a historical, systemic and contextualized process (Araújo; Oliveira; Rossato, 2016). A qualitative research works with a type of unquantifiable reality by valuing the universe of meanings, motives, beliefs, values and attitudes. This research investigated what corresponds to a deeper space of relationships and phenomena that cannot be reduced to the operationalization of variables (Minayo, 1993).

The theoretical essay format was also adopted, aiming to provide reflections based on the analysis of an object without requiring any specific system or model. In the theoretical essay, the object is the priority but it is necessary to consider that the subjectivity of the essayist is always interacting with it. This way, the essay needs to have some element of originality associated with novelty. It may even be in the argumentation, in the choice for the object of analysis, the scope given to analysis, the epistemological approach and/or the subversion of the dominant rationality related to the theme (Meneghetti, 2011).

To carry out this theoretical essay, we chose to intertwine the historical and social aspects of classical ballet based on art works with important ballerinas from each century. Ballerinas as Marie Taglioni in *“La Sylphide”* (1830-1840), *Bibliothèque Des Arts Decoratifs*; Marie Taglioni (1832) Lithograph, Paris; Fanny Elssler as Florinda dancing *La Cachucha* in *“Le Diable Boiteux”* (1836), Achille Devéria (1800-1857); Anna Pavlova in *“Dying Swan”* (1905) *Museum of London*; Portrait of the Ballerina Gelsey Kirkland (1973) by Jack Mitchell; Marianela Nunez (2015) by Rick Guest; ballerina Svetlana Zakharova (2015) by Jack Devant; *Photographs of the New York City Ballet* (2012) by Henry Leutwyler. Theorists as Hanna (1999), Portinari (1989) and Bourcier (2001) were also used because of their importance in discussing dance arts.

3. Results And Discussion

3.1 The place of the feminine in classical ballet from the 14th to 19th centuries.

Ballet as a form of dance emerged during the Italian Renaissance (between the 14th and 16th centuries) and later inspired artistic movements in France where it had its greatest development and fame. In Italy, the formation of courtly society began transforming dance in an instrument of entertainment for the court. During the development of court ballets, only men danced, even though they did not have a refined technique and when the female roles needed to be played, man dressed *“en travest”*¹¹. In this context, women occupied only the audience position, since the artistic performances had as their primary objective the socialization and inclusion of young people and elite men to promote education and increase their prestige (Bourcier, 2001). Only after performances, and the consequent interactions of the men, the ball began and women and others could participate (Anderson, 1978).

¹ when wearing a costume of the opposite sex, of the time, in order to play a role or character of the opposite sex. In this case, they tried to wear supposedly feminine costumes, such as dresses and wigs, aiming to portray women.

In mid-1581 Catherine de Medici, the then queen consort of France, brought ballet from Italy to France aiming to celebrate important moments and keep her children entertained while she ruled. She imported artists and courtiers from Italy who were specialized in luxurious shows that were supposed to keep the court entertained for a good part of the time. The show was a combination of dance, singing and spoken texts, aiming to reach the social and political spheres, because, while it was taken as a pastime for the monarch and his court, it also served as French nationalist propaganda, highlighting the figure of the king and proposing an image of French power. However, it was only during the reign of Louis XIV, who had also been a dancer, that dance received greater investment, including the founding of *L'Académie de Musique et de Danse* in France in 1661 (Faro, 1998).

With government investment and administrative maneuvers, ballets were transferred to theaters, gaining larger stages and audiences than they had when they served only the French court. This way, it did not take long for the ballet fashion to conquer the European courts and, consequently, to encompass new interpretations and techniques from other European countries (Faro, 1998). However, ballet was only conceived as a profession in the 17th century, when professional male and female dancers danced, and no longer only the young noblemen. Women were included on stage in 1681, with *Mademoiselle Lafontaine* (1655-1738), the first ballerina considered a professional, certifying that ballet would be an art for both sexes (Anderson, 1978; Siqueira, 2006).

Later, in the 18th century, France was one of the epicenters of dance with the Paris Opera where ballerinas began to have leading roles in shows. They perfected and refined the ballet art, which until recently had been conceived and constructed according to the male body (Siqueira, 2006). However, during the French and Industrial Revolutions (18th and 19th centuries), dance was discredited due to ideological and moral bias of the time, which emphasized the danger of sin, moral laxity and enemies of spiritual life in the everyday lives of individuals, affecting the dancing activity. For this

reason, as well as due to low pay, men gave up the profession, giving women more opportunities to perform.

It is important to emphasize that the expression “ballet girls” was correlated with the ranks of prostitution and had a negative connotation until mid-20th century due to this latent issue, since some less prominent ballerinas left the stage to become prostitutes. It is interesting to analyze that at a time that the repudiation of the so-called carnal sins of Christianity was exalted and refer to issues of sexuality, not only as a sexual act but also as a human characteristic was also repudiated; the oversexualization of ballerinas happened simply because they showed their legs in a ballet presentation, making rich men insist on sexual rewards (Hanna, 1999).

It was in the 18th century that ballet technically evolved with an important ballerina, Marie Sallé (1707-1756), who kept an image and position of Christian purity and chastity for the public. She was one of the pioneers in abolishing the uncomfortable costumes of the time, such as the extravagant dresses that had a series of layers and high-heeled shoes. Another ballerina, Marie Camargo (1710-1770) also contributed to the technical development of ballet, shortening skirts and achieving the so-called technical brilliance, which was related to high technical and aesthetic skill, until then just reserved for men (Anderson, 1978).

Later in the 19th century, the Romantic period began, arising from the idea of revolutionary freedom being both French and Industrial together with the Napoleonic wars. Romanticism revealed a fascination with the supernatural, the exotic and fantasy, making fairy tales and melodramatic and pornographic novels be present than ever. The Romantic Movement aimed to the predominance of feeling over reason, instinctive spontaneity and even passionate violence. These characteristics opposed the rules of Christian classicism created in France, where the rigid court etiquette of Louis XIV prevailed. Although Romanticism has its roots in Germany and England, it was in France that its center of convergence and diffusion was established (Portinari, 1989).

The works from the Romantic period reflected reveries, anguish and psychic and sexual ambiguities. Accordingly, the

choreographers of the time sought to represent magical elements, emphasizing the emotional and intuitive aspects instead of rational ones. In this context, women were exalted as inaccessible beings, something that belonged to the imaginary realm. This ethereal feminine figure was an ideal dreamed by men, making them willing to sacrifice their lives for it (Hanna, 1999). Therefore, to elucidate the Romantic period, we can look at the founding work of the movement: *La Sylphide* from 1832, by the choreographer Filippo Taglioni, father of the main dancer Marie Taglioni (Figure 1). The work demonstrates characteristic traits of Romanticism, such as the use of pointe shoes, ethereal creatures, the predominance of the female figure, tragic drama and the desire for emotion (Portinari, 1989).

Figure 1 - Ballerina Marie Taglioni in “*La Sylphide*” (1830-1840)



Fonte: Getty Imagines (2004)²

Taglioni's daughter was the first ballerina to wear pointe shoes. Marie Taglioni (1804-1884) (Figure 2) personified and embodied the

² Impressão colorida da arte feita no século XIX. Disponível em: <https://www.gettyimages.com.br/detail/foto-jornal%C3%ADstica/the-ballerina-marie-taglioni-in-the-ballet-la-foto-jornal%C3%ADstica/159830109?adppopup=true>. Acesso em: 19 de outubro de 2023

sublime, ethereal and pure Romanticism character. These characteristics formed a model to be followed, as essential elements of ballet, which was restricted to women. The ballerinas of the time, who were the majority on stage, sought to resemble Taglioni, promoting and sustaining the idealization and idolatry of this feminine figure (Anderson, 1978).

Figure 2 - Marie Taglioni



Fonte: Universal History Archive (1831)³

Despite the elements that could be considered sexualized, as the tight bodice, the skirt that almost reached the ankles and bare shoulders, Taglioni's chaste figure was embodied by the absence of any trace of carnal expression in the danced movements (Anderson, 1987). In contrast to Taglioni, the dancing of Fanny Elssler (1810-1884) (Figure 3), famous for her performance of *La Cachucha*⁴ in *Le Diable Boîteux* (1836), was seen as impetuous, libertine and

³ Marie Taglioni (1804-1844) bailarina sueca com ascendência italiana. Disponível em: <https://www.gettyimages.com.br/detail/foto-jornal%C3%ADstica/marie-taglioni-italian-swedish-ballet-dancer-foto-jornal%C3%ADstica/1162714653?adppopup=true>. Acesso em: 19 de outubro de 2023

pagan. Fanny Elssler was known as one of the ballet girls because while Taglioni ruled the stage, Elssler shared sexual favors with wealthy men. A notable characteristic of Fanny Elssler's dancing was her surprising ability to interpret male roles when the plot required it (Hanna, 1999). However, it would not be the first time that this duality of chaste and libertine appeared. In the 18th century, the ballerinas Marie Camargo and Marie Sallé were also placed in these two models (Anderson, 1978). Thus, it is clear that, with the persistence of the social stigmas of culture, the possible representations of the feminine in classical ballet were only repeated.

Figure 3 - Fanny Elssler as Florinda dancing *La Cachucha* in "*Le Diable Boiteux*" (1836)



Fonte: Fine Art Images (1836)⁴

It was only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that the possibility of representing a woman who possessed the

⁴ Arte de uma coleção particular. Autoria de Achille Devéria (1800-1857). Disponível em: <https://www.gettyimages.com.br/detail/foto-jornal%C3%ADstica/fanny-elssler-as-florinda-in-the-dance-la-cachucha-foto-jornal%C3%ADstica/464443013?adppopup=true> Acesso em: 19 de outubro de 2023

characteristics of the two stereotypical female roles mentioned above arose. The Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova (1881-1931) (Figure 4) became known for being able to combine the chaste woman with the libertine woman – both Taglioni and Elssler – and for encouraging women to leave their private circles and express themselves through dance in public (Hanna, 1999; Money, 1982). Consequently, choreographies took on erotic overtones, the cult of the ballerina gained great proportions and many male roles were danced by ballerinas (Anderson, 1978; Hanna, 1999).

Figure 4 - Anna Pavlova in “Dying Swan” (1905)



Source: Museum of London (1905)⁵

This way, thanks to the women’s ability to perform “*en travest*” and their technical skills with pointe shoes, it is possible perceive the eclipse of male presence on stage. The element of pointe shoes elevated women above the audience and promoted

⁵ Anna Pavlova in “Dying Swan” (Le Cygne), 1905. Available at: <https://www.gettyimages.com.br/detail/foto-jornal%C3%ADstica/anna-pavlova-in-dying-swan-c1905-foto-jornal%C3%ADstica/464476443?adppopup=true>. Access on: 19 October, 2023

female technical virtuosity, with a new fast, subtle style and with exotic and ethereal elements. In contrast, *en pointe*⁵ restricted natural movements due to the shape and material of the shoes (tight fit and stiffened with glue and strong cloth), perpetuating the ethos of female fragility and dependence on the male figure (even if played by a woman) (Hanna, 1999).

Therefore, the celebration of the ballerina in the 19th century created a movement of upheaval to the detriment of the male dancers, and the audience was enchanted by the dancer “*en travest*”. However, dressing as male characters did not mean achieving powers and prerogatives that accompany the male identity. In short, the female roles in romantic ballet did not represent independent women, but rather unattainable and indefinable *sylyphs*⁵ or peasant libertines, although not slaves to male satisfaction (Hanna, 1999). Nevertheless, there was also the figure of the erotic and vengeful *Willis* in the work *Giselle* (or *Les Willis*), initially performed by the Paris National Opera in 1840. The *willis* represented young women betrayed before their wedding night, living on another plan, governed by women where rules radically different from those on Earth prevailed. On this plan, in which their betrayed souls lived, they remained trapped on Earth by the desire for revenge against unfaithful men, condemning them to dance until their deaths (Caminada, 2021; Hanna, 1999).

Regarding this, it is clear that the conception of women in classical ballet, in the periods discussed above, was determined by male ideals and imagination. The possibilities of the feminine were stereotypically dictated by the chaste, libertine and/or vengeful. Therefore, it is worth reflecting on what remains of these ideas present until nowadays. Are there new elements taking up space? What are the aspects required of ballerinas in the 20th and 21st centuries? After all, who is the woman in the current classical ballet scene?

3.2 The different demands and perspectives of classical ballet concerning the female figure in the 20th and 21st centuries

To analyze the role of women in classical ballet today, it is necessary to investigate the effects it has had on the conception of femininity. It is important to emphasize that, although women have dominated the stage, ballet has remained under male dominance, as men still held control as renowned ballet teachers, choreographers, directors, producers and theater directors (Hanna, 1999). This male power in the hierarchical organization of ballets has had considerable importance regarding the demands placed on female dancers.

Considering these power relations, 20th century choreographers and ballet directors sought to shape ballerinas according to the ideal of femininity that equated beauty with excessive thinness. One of these agents was the famous choreographer George Balanchine (1904-1983) who worked with the most renowned classical ballet companies, such as the New York City Ballet. He was recognized for the so-called anorexic appearance of the ballerina. For example, one of the ballerinas in *Balanchine's corps de ballet*, Gelsey Kirkland (Figure 5), reports this body pressure in her autobiography "Dancing on my grave" (1986) where she describes how the choreographer reinforced that her bones should be visible and tirelessly repeated – "don't eat anything" (Kirkland, 1986, p. 56).

Figure 5 - Retrato de Gelsey Kirkland



Source: Getty Images (1973)⁶

This pressure on body aesthetics that the ballerina reports is still considered a source of suffering for classical ballerinas today (Souza, 2023). What was once required in terms of character is now transposed to the visualization of the aesthetic body in reality. Before investigating the narrative of classical ballet about the permanence of these body standards, it is important to point out that contemporary Western societies, in general, have been organized under this ideal. The thinness standard is especially imposed on women, for whom physical appearance represents an important measure of personal value. Regarding dance, the demand for a thin body is greater for classical ballerinas because they need to demonstrate lightness of body and gestures (Kuwae; Silva, 2007)

The classical ballet modality, by demanding excessive concern from its practitioners with body aesthetics, can promote image distortion and eating disorders – such as anorexia and bulimia – with the main characteristics being an intense fear of gaining weight and the presence of body image disturbance. It is known that anorexia

⁶ Portrait of the ballerina Gelsey Kirkland. New York, December 1973. Available at: <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/portrait-of-dancer-gelsey-kirkland-new-york-new-york-news-photo/1551211112?adppopup=true> Access on: 19 October, 2023

is characterized by food restriction and refusal to maintain body weight above the minimum normal for age, which can lead to amenorrhea. In turn, bulimia is characterized by recurrent episodes of binge eating (uncontrolled food intake with large amounts of food in a short space of time), as well as compensatory purgative behaviors, such as self-induced vomiting, laxative abuse and intense physical exercise (Simas; Guimarães, 2002).

Such disorders are common in the classical ballet world because of the great pressure on a certain body type, with thinness as synonymous to better performance. This pressure for a body standard causes many dancers to take risks using the rigorous methods mentioned above to achieve the so-called ideal body (Hartman et al., 2017; Silva; Confortim, 2022). The fixation on body image, as well as the search for perfectionism, high expectations, pressure from instructors and family members, and emotional instability can lead dancers to body dysmorphia and eating disorders (Nascimento, 2021; Schafle, 1996). Body dysmorphia is understood as a behavior related to the distorted perception of physical image and an exaggerated concern with an imaginary defect in appearance or extreme discomfort in relation to identified bodily imperfections (Bonfim; Nascimento; Borges, 2016).

Currently, there are studies that analyze the relation between eating disorders and classical ballet. A study conducted with 30 non-professional classical ballet dancers of both sexes, aged 15 to 19, in São Luís/MA-Brazil, showed that the participants had a high prevalence of risky eating behaviors because the modality advocates low body weight and overvalues aesthetics (Guimarães et al, 2014). In a study conducted in Guarulhos/SP, with 36 male and female ballet dancers aged 12 to 24, it was observed that in ballet, eating disorders are more frequent in women, as there is greater social, media and cultural pressure for a certain phenotype (Araújo et al., 2016).

Therefore, body image ends up being a central point in the routine of classical ballet – in addition to support, balance, physical preparation and pointe shoes – a thin body is a constant pressure for the dancer, although there is no scientific data that such a body provides better performance (Simas; Guimarães, 2002). This way,

the insistence on following the thin body model can distort body image and lead to eating habits such as progressive dietary restriction, elimination of carbohydrates, episodes of binge eating, excessive exercise, consumption of medications and legal and illegal drugs, besides self-induced vomiting (Appolinário; Claudino, 2000).

It was found that the ideal body for ballet, regardless of the means to achieve this goal, is the one highlighted in the Romantic period: a thin, fragile and long-limbed body. As stated by Moura (2001), this is expected of a ballerina:

[...] who has a body that corresponds to the stereotype of the 19th century European romantic ballerina: who is a sylph or a fairy even when she's not walking on tiptoes. She should be light, graceful, slim and long. And that this girl keeps her youthful appearance for as long as possible. And that - if fate or the genetic code hasn't equipped them for it - they have enough discipline and determination to change whatever it takes to fit the model, at any cost (Moura, 2001, p. 18).

It can be seen from this excerpt and the current scientific bibliography that the great repertoire ballets still require the romantic body type. However, although the demands regarding physical conditioning are directed towards thinness, muscle toning is also necessary to give good physical fitness to the dancer (Anjos; Oliveira; Velardi, 2015). Famous ballerinas are often taken as references, above all, because they meet the two main contemporary demands, thinness and muscle strength – the ideal body of the ballerina (Oliveira, 2018).

In a study conducted with eight classical ballet practitioners in the state of Ceará, aged between 20 and 30, it was reported that the ballerinas Svetlana Zakharova (Figure 7) and Marianela Nunez (Figure 8) are references for most of the participants. Svetlana Zakharova is a model of the classical romantic body while Marianela Nunez is an example of the athletic body, which has been increasingly valued today. It was noted from the study that the interviewees critically evaluated – but still admired – the romantic body and valued the importance and beauty of the athletic body as a form of protest against the demands of thinness. Although the participants cited these ballerinas as body references, they also

made some criticisms such as “too thin” or “too athletic”, demonstrating the intense dissatisfaction and critical search for the so-called perfect body (Oliveira, 2018).

Figure 6 - Svetlana Zakharova in “*Dying Swan*”



Source: Devant (2015)⁷.

Figure 7 - Marianela Nunez

⁷ Available at: <https://www.jackdevant.com/svetlana-zakharova-in-the-dying-swan/>
Access on: 20 November, 2023



Fonte: Guest (2015)⁸.

The recent appreciation – or simple acceptance – of the athletic body is considered positive because of the incongruity of what is presented on stage with the real woman who plays the romantic character, since the reality of the ballerina is not as delicate and fragile as projected in this scenario. The classical ballerina presents a high level of physical demands, considering that ballet is characterized as an intermittent exercise, which involves aerobic and anaerobic resistance, strength, flexibility and balance (Agostini, 2010). Consequently, due to the excessive physical effort in the movements, mainly impact on the ground and the repetitiveness characteristic, there is a high prevalence of injuries in this population (Schmidt; Souza; Ramos, 2017).

In addition to this essential role of physical fitness in terms of range of joint movement and precision of turns on or off the body axis, mastery of emotional balance becomes essential for good performance in this modality (Malanga, 1985). To demonstrate the incongruence of the real woman with the romantic figure, it can be observed, as shown in figure 9, that, despite demonstrating lightness

⁸ *What Lies Beneath* (2015). Disponível em: <https://rq-dance.com/whatliesbeneath/index.html>. Acesso em: 9 de novembro de 2023

and grace, classical dance demands considerable athletic performance from its practitioners (Lima, 1995; Mendes, 2011).

Figure 8 - On one foot, the presence of the pointe shoe, demonstrating lightness and delicacy; and, on the other, naked, the strength and injuries generated by it.



Fonte: Leutwyler (2012)⁹.

As it can be seen, the figure of women in ballet presents classical romantic characteristics such as lightness, fragility and delicacy, in contrast to what the ballerina actually experiences during her technical construction. However, it is worth reflecting on the fact that these pressures on women do not only affect classical ballet. As it happens in this form of dance, society demands that women appear graceful, delicate and light; however, this is an expectation that is incongruent with the reality of female individuals. Female suffering is present in everyday life, incorporated and rooted in the collective social imagination of what is expected of the female figure, supporting references to account for a reality that is no longer coherent with the role of women in society (Silva, 2010).

This can be supported by the study of Oliveira (2018), which presents reports from professionals who seek references that are no longer strictly physical but dancers who present themselves as real women. Whether by sharing common events of female life in society, such as marriage and motherhood or by providing ethnic-racial representation within the rigid and Eurocentric space of classical ballet

⁹ Ballet, *Photographs of the New York City Ballet*. Disponível em: <https://www.henryleutwyler.com/books/ballet-1st-edition> Acesso em: 20 de novembro de 2023

Although the famous repertoire ballets – which represent the figure of women as in Romanticism – still enjoy great prestige, today the ballerina can be understood beyond the roles of *sylph* or *willi*. She can be understood as a real woman by showing her strength on stage, even if it is only through the body in which the fragile figure will be interpreted. This body can highlight a reality that has long been experienced by women who call the attention to the physical to make themselves visible to others. Through this body, there is the possibility of communicating the message of feminine strength, even when delicacy and passivity are required.

Nonverbal communication carried out through the body in classical ballet is one that has been present in humanity since its beginnings, involving gestures, postures, facial expressions and physical characteristics (Knapp, 1980). From this, it is understood that not only body language but also the body's own characteristics communicate messages and meanings, constituting the body as a means of information about the subject and their culture (Silva et al., 2000). Thus, given the social pressure for a thin body model and the denial of women's phallic characteristics in the social imaginary field, it is clear that, for the aspect of strength in classical ballet to be recognized, it must be visually presented, through one of the most primitive resources of human perception.

4. Final Considerations

By investigating the socio-historical changes – and permanence – of the feminine and its representations in classical ballet, interesting content and formulations on the subject were identified. From this study, it was noticed that, over time, there was a growing appreciation of ballerinas on stage, and the figure of women began to be signified according to the moral norms of the society in which they were inserted, which established specific roles for the possibilities of the feminine to present itself.

The 19th-century Romantic Movement gained credit for disseminating the greatest female stigmas in classical ballet, including chaste, libertine and vengeful. However, from the 20th century on, a change occurred in the narrative that demanded

specific aspects of the ballerinas, no longer requiring moral characteristics of character, therefore, changing the focus to the external - in which the body is the one that establishes the main role in the classical ballet scene. This focus on the body with the already existing social pressures on women, must be emphasized, corroborated the high incidence rate of eating disorders in this modality.

Initially, when investigating the classical ballet history, the assumption was made that there had not been many changes, which was confirmed by the permanence and overvaluation of repertoire ballets (most commonly those from the Romantic period) associated with the almost unchanged technique. However, with the central shift in the focus of demands on women, which previously consisted of moral aspects and now of physical aspects, it was possible to find important perspectives of women regarding the figure of the ballerina. The recent valorization and, mainly, acceptance of the athletic body of the ballerina was understood as an important movement of resistance and narrative taking by women in the face of what was imposed on them regarding femininity and the feminine.

This perspective also concerns the search for real references, not centered on the physical characteristics of thinness disguised as lightness or, then, on the moral aspects of puritanism and chastity. Consequently, models are sought for those dancers who present themselves as women of ordinary life, with their struggles and battles, as a social individual permeated by the concept of femininity.

This claim by women to their place in classical ballet repositions the feminine within concepts that were previously developed by male imagination and crystallized by gender domination patterns. Therefore, what is called femininity is nothing more than a discursive product constructed from the male position and this becomes clear in the history of classical ballet, mainly through choreographers. It is pertinent to think about the duality of the feminine that hovered – or still hovers – over men: the chaste and the impetuous. How can two women live in one? Because they do not live, this was separated by the probable inability of men to

support the field of the real feminine and its subjectivities. It was also possible to see that, each time more women are taking their place of speech within the space of classical ballet that demands characteristics that are incongruent with the feminine reality, offering representation to girls and women.

Furthermore, based on art works, it was possible to conduct a study on the socio-historical changes of women in classical ballet from its creation to the present day, resuming the visual resource as one of the most primitive of human beings, also as a method to reach the reader. Although classical ballet covers important themes for psychology and the entire scientific community, the possibilities for research have not ended. Although obtaining fundamental writings on classical ballet is difficult to access and studies intersecting gender issues with this dance modality are scarce, we suggest here research on the possible subjective formations within classical dance, as well as its relations with cultural instituted social roles.

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