Objectification of the Female Body, Anorexia, and Ballet Dancers

“I thought … that I was molding myself into that wonderful ascetic pure image … I felt that I had to do something I didn’t want for a higher purpose … I created a new image for myself and disciplined myself to a new way of life.”

This epigraph comes from an interview of a young woman with Anorexia Nervosa, an eating disorder that involves an inability, and refusal to eat to achieve slenderness and aesthetic perfection. Two former roommates of mine were ballet dancers, and were obsessed about being thin. They starved themselves to achieve a specific look until they became anorexic. But what causes anorexia, and what are women trying to achieve by striving to be thin? Gail Corrington, in her article, Anorexia, Asceticism, and Autonomy argues that “both ascetics and anorexics strive for perfection [because they are] dissatisfied with the feminine image their world gives them” (61), so they create an image that is satisfying to themselves” (61). The media promotes a “cult of thinness” where women are supposed to be thin and weak, the feminine ideal, yet strong and powerful as in masculine. Not being able to fit into this ideological construction of femininity, such women resort to self-starvation in an attempt to achieve this unrealistic standard of beauty to gain control, a striving for perfection that ironically parallels with male competition and power.

Susan Bordo, in her book, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body, argues that the female “Body” is objectified by the media, which projects an “ideological construction of femininity” (2243) that is unrealistic. Socially-constructed ideals of beauty and femininity ascribed by the media cause feelings of helplessness to develop in women who struggle to achieve this unrealistic ideal of beauty. Michel Foucault, in his book, Discipline and Punish, argues that the body can be shaped by authority figures who use disciplinary procedures to create socially-desirable “docile” citizens. Dance
scholars, Jill Green, in her article, “Authority and Myth of the Ideal Body in Dance Education”, and Wendy Oliver, in her article, “Rereading the Ballerina’s Body” discuss how power relations influence female dancers’ behavior by enforcing a specific look for dance performance. Placing these two theorists and dance scholars together is important because they all address how the body is shaped by social forces to fit an ideal of feminine beauty that is impossible for women to accomplish.

Susan Bordo, a postmodern third-wave feminist, shows how the female “Body” is objectified by the media, and addresses the issue of women’s powerlessness in her essay, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Bordo specifically focuses on the eating disorder of Anorexia Nervosa in women, which is an “obsession with thinness leading to a distorted body image that results in self-starvation” (*Lips, A New Psychology of Women*, 349). Bordo uses this disease to demonstrate how social forces can control and manipulate women’s behavior by idealizing how a woman’s body should be. On the one hand, Bordo claims that American culture exerts power and control over women and their bodies by shaping attitudes about traditional feminine roles for women, and projecting “an ideological construction of femininity” (2243) in the media. Bordo asserts that the body “is [in fact] a text of femininity” (2243), and examines this homogenized ideal of femininity in her “double bind” (2246) masculinity and femininity model. First, Bordo states that “our culture still widely advertises domestic conceptions of femininity…” (2245). Society expects women to adopt the traditional female labor role of altruistic “emotional and physical nurturer” (2245) – the mother role. A woman must be selfless, and “learn to feed others” (2245). She must deny herself food for their sake. For example, a woman is shown cooking for her family in a TV food commercial. Furthermore, a woman must demonstrate ideal feminine virtues. Bordo criticizes the media for promoting images of ideal femininity such as “Slenderness … [which] carries connotations of fragility and lack of power” (2245) because such attributes reinforce weakness, and render women powerless. Thus the cultural ideal of femininity is for a woman “to emulate
the impossibly thin body … presented as the ideal in countless media images” (2238), but is impossible for many women to achieve.

On the other hand, a woman must show power and strength; she “is urged to take control of her own life, … [and] become a superwoman” (2238), which is ironically the embodiment of masculinity. The anorexic in this case achieves a sense of power by vigilantly controlling her diet, and refusing to eat. She becomes as Bordo states, “more and more practiced at the “male” virtues of control and self-mastery” (2246). Bordo adds that the anorexic performs a type of socio-cultural ritual through her “exacting and normalizing discipline[s] of diet” (2241). Thus the anorexic becomes an expert at self-discipline and control. Her selfhood is paradoxically shaped by social forces that dictate what the ideal for femininity should be (slender, weak, and submissive) while reinforcing masculine traits (strength and control) that become “self-destructive.”

Jill Green, in her article, “Somantic Authority and the Myth of the Ideal Body in Dance Education”, extends Bordo’s objectification of the female body to ballet. Green discusses how power relations in ballet influence female dancers’ behavior. First, Green explains that dancers’ bodies are “socially inscribed” (82) by Western culture that objectifies and idealizes the female body as slender. Dancers’ audiences expect them to be aesthetically attractive and thin. Second, dancers are under constant surveillance by their instructors who discipline them. Green states that in ballet “the constant focus on the externalized view of the body, as reflected in the mirror, objectifies the dancer’s body” (81); this Green adds, “requires students to strive to achieve a “specific” look while being [physically] “corrected” … to perform a “proper” dance technique” (81). This ideal, Green claims, is a “myth perpetrated by dominant culture … to more easily control people” (82). Green’s second claim is that dancers’ bodies are trained into becoming “docile bodies”, which connects with Foucault’s theory of the body in relation to power; the idea that bodies are trained into submission. In ballet, the dance teacher assumes a position of power and control over her female dance students by enforcing strict rules such as
“present[ing] specific movements that require rote learning” (Green, 81). Thus dance students submit to the teacher’s rules for the sake of praise, but sacrifice as Green concludes, “their bodies to their teachers” (81), which indicates a loss of control.

Dance scholar, Wendy Oliver, in her article, “Reading the Ballerina’s Body: Susan Bordo sheds Light on Anastasia Volochkova and Heidi Guenther”, extends Jill Green’s discussion of power relations in ballet by applying them to actual ballet dancers with anorexia. Like Green, Oliver explains how ballet dancers’ bodies are physically trained according to the slender ideal. Ballet dancers in a desire to meet this feminine ideal are required to engage in “disciplinary practices” (48) that follow specific rules for dance under the strict authority of their dance instructors. Such practices require that they diet to achieve an “ideal weight” (48) for ballet. Oliver asserts that dance instructors expect female dancers to “have superhuman bodies that are stronger, more flexible, more graceful, and thinner than the viewers might ever hope to be” (46). But in reality, such an ideal of cultural femininity and beauty is never achieved by young women. Oliver gives us the example of a 22-year old ballerina from the Boston Ballet, Heidi Guenther, who was told by her instructor to “reduce” her weight to achieve the ideal dancer’s look, but developed anorexia, and tragically died of a heart attack. According to Oliver, Heidi Guenther, “was 5’4” tall and weighed [only] 93 pounds” (39) when she died. Clearly then ballet dancers’ bodies are not their own because dancers submit control of their bodies to their teachers, disassociating themselves from their own physical power.

Oliver applies Bordo’s double bind masculinity-femininity model to anorexia in female ballet dancers. Oliver explains that “Thinness in the ballet world is connected to personal power” (51) and success. Oliver continues that “Thinness is also associated with self-control” (51). On the one hand, the slender body represents the woman in control” (49); whereas, the “woman out of control, is represented by consuming (binging on) food …” (49). Guenther, the anorexic dancer, was “in control”, but was starving herself. Oliver concludes that thinness is a symptom of “our culture’s need to keep its citizens
under control” (51), in a Foucauldian power sense, which is “a form of external, unspoken control in which we all participate” (51). Oliver implies a parallel between “issues of thinness, agency, and control in the ballet world” and the external world because young women and female ballet dancers share similar control issues. While female ballet dancers are conditioned into sacrificing their bodies to receive praise from their instructors and the audience, young women are “trained” by media images to lose weight to gain control.

Social control of female bodies in ballet connects with Foucault’s concept of power relations and the body. Foucault, in his book, Discipline and Punish, argues that the body can be shaped to “induce[s] modes of behavior and the acquisition of skills [that] is inextricably linked with the establishment of power relations (1491). Foucault analyzed how institutions like prisons enforce excessive discipline to shape the body into socially-desirable “docile” citizens. Foucault referred to this power-relation as a kind of “disciplinary technique exercised upon the body [which] ha[s] a double effect: a soul to be known and a subjection to be maintained” (1491). Thus the body can be trained into submission. In his interview, “Read Me: Foucault Interview – ’In a Sense, I am a Moralist’, Foucault explained that “power is a set of relations … between two free subjects, and this relation is unbalanced” (www.critical-theory.com).

Foucault means that there is an agency in power where “one can act upon the other, and the other is acted upon” (www.critical-theory.com). One individual asserts pressure upon another, and the other, the receiver of that action, submits to their command. Foucault explains that power relations are “relations of force”, but “power is not always repressive” (www.critical-theory.com) – it can be resisted. Johanna Oksala, in her article, “Anarchic Bodies: Foucault and the Feminist Question of Experience”, quotes Foucault who asserts that “where there is power there is resistance” (105). Thus in ballet, dance instructors enforce power over their female ballet students by dictating rules for their diet and training, but dancers can resist their authority.
Although Foucault argues that power is “not repressive”, I argue that in ballet, the power that dance instructors assert over female ballet dancers is repressive and destructive. Such manipulation by instructors persuades female dancers to change their lifestyle and diet all to achieve a slender look that is appealing for the audience, yet is unrealistic for women to achieve. In Green and Oliver’s respective articles, they specifically address how power relations in ballet enforce a specific body image for female dancers by placing demands on the female body to be thin, weak, yet athletically strong and powerful. Oliver explains that dance instructors order dancers to “reduce” (48) or lose weight, yet they are still required to have “superhuman” (46) strength. Recall that “the performers … are stronger … and thinner than … viewers might ever hope to be” (Oliver, 46). Yet how is that strength possible, when dancers are so underweight, and their weight is tightly controlled through discipline and dietary restraint? Based on the preceding discussion, I argue that eating disorders like anorexia, once thought to be about beauty are now about control because social forces like the media, and power relations within the performing arts, promote a “cult of thinness” that distorts women’s attitudes about their body image. The helplessness that women experience in how they are perceived leads them to self-starve to gain control, yet only by asserting themselves through achievement not appearance, will women find true value in themselves. This argument is valuable because recognizing that the cause of eating disorders is about control not beauty will bring awareness to women that they are autonomous subjects not idealized objects, and thus are not powerless in how they perceive themselves. Rather women can resist and subvert cultural values about beauty and femininity presented by the media, and define their identity themselves.

Bordo’s theory that the female body is subject to a feminine ideal in the media is especially important today because society has become increasingly photographic. The media projects an aesthetic ideal of femininity in commercials and magazines where women’s bodies are objectified for men. Consider how women’s bodies are sexualized and idealized in Victoria’s Secret Ads. The media projects an image of perfect beauty where models are presented with flawless skin, perfect hair, and makeup. In
the YouTube video, *Media & Distortion of Body Image*, we are given a definition of ‘The Ideal Female’ by Beth Teressa Bell and Helgar Dittmar who state that she is “Predominately thin, yet impossibly toned and curvaceous, accompanied by perfect skin, teeth, and hair” (1:59). Such images create pressure on young women who aspire to achieve that impossible look of perfection, which leads to problems like eating disorders. The video alarmingly informs us that “In the US, 10 million females are fighting a life and death battle with an eating disorder” (2:38). Thus Bordo’s work is crucial because young women buy into the feminine ideal, and allow it to redefine their identity. Therefore, continuous exposure to images of slenderness can distort a woman’s perception of her body image.

Women are bombarded daily by media advertisements in fashion magazines and on TV, which distorts their self-perception. Even the children’s fashion toy Barbie projects unhealthy images about beauty and the female body. Barbie has sexualized characteristics, which sends a message of objectification of women. Her breasts are large, her waist super-thin, and her hips curvaceous. By giving children dolls that sexualize women, we are sending a message that this is what ideal women should be like. Susan Linn, in her blog, “Put Down That Barbie (2013 Edition)—And Find Empowering Dolls!” claims that “what we’re saying to that child is ‘This is what people look like, this is what women look like, this is what you might aspire to’” (www.msmagazine.com/blog). Sadly, girls and young women buy into these images, yet feel that they can never achieve this ideal, which as Bordo states creates feelings of “insufficiency, of never being good enough” (2241). This leads to women spending thousands of dollars on plastic surgeries all to change the way they look to achieve aesthetic perfection. Therefore, whenever a woman is defined by the restricted structures of her culture through false media advertising she is compelled to pit the complexities of her identity, her real self, against the certainties of idealized femininity. Failing to achieve this feminine ideal, such women resort to self-starvation to try to achieve aesthetic perfection.
This need to construct as Bordo explains, “the appropriate surface presentation of the self” (2244), one that aligns with the flawless look of a waif-like model on the cover of a magazine, becomes the anorexic’s obsession and mantra. The effect is disastrous since anorexics starve themselves all to achieve that perfect ideal of femininity, so the ideal is an imperfect standard because it leads to health deterioration. I agree with Bordo when she argues that anorexia is “a comprehensible response to powerlessness” (2238) because anorexics by refusing to eat take the female role too far, which is self-destructive. Thus the media’s unrealistic portrayal of women’s bodies sends a conflicting message that only one ideal is acceptable, the feminine ideal, but you are supposed to be your own woman, and show masculine strength. But how can women take control of their lives, and assert their true identity when they are being force fed idealized images about femininity from the media? They must define feminine beauty on their own terms, and refuse to be objectified.

So what causes anorexia, and who is prone to developing this eating disorder? I would argue that eating disorders are not about beauty, but control. Anorexics use mastery and self-discipline of their bodies to regain control where they feel they have none. According to a qualitative Swedish clinical study, “Causes of Adolescent Onset Anorexia Nervosa: Patient Perspectives” by Nilsson K. et al, research shows that female adolescents with anorexia were more likely to be perfectionists and high achievers who have a tendency to control. When former adolescent anorexic patients were interviewed regarding the cause of their anorexia, they responded that their “own demands/perfectionism” (Nilsson K. et al, 2007, 130) was the main reason. But what are women trying to achieve by striving to be super thin? Is it male attention, or to be like a model? Anna, a recovered anorexic responded, “I want to be perfect” (129). What does a woman expect to achieve by being perfect? What power is she striving for? Control of herself? Many of the anorexics in the study were experiencing conflict; their lives were out of control like Evelyn who “wasn’t popular with the boys” (130). Young anorexics use the social goal of the feminine ideal for body shape, and allow it to redefine their identity. They resist traditional cultural values and roles.
imposed upon them by male authority (recall Bordo’s mother-role of “emotional and physical nurturer” (2245)), which they do not control, and instead focus on self-starving as a means to “transcend a dilemma” (Corrington, *Anorexia, Asceticism, and Autonomy*, 57). These women compensate their powerlessness, and inability to control by refusing to eat. Paradoxically, through diet control, anorexics regain control over their lives.

Extending Jill Green and Wendy Oliver’s positions is especially important because, in their articles, they discuss actual ballet dancers with anorexia, and how power relations influence dancers’ behavior. Green shows how the ballet body is trained into submission; she asserts in Foucauldian terms that “the body is the direct training instrument in dance” (83). She argues that issues of power and powerlessness exist in ballet because “authoritarian” instructors enforce control over dancers who submit to their demands. Oliver alarmingly recounts a dancer, Gelsey Kirkland’s experience, who was physically forced by her instructor to diet. Kirkland’s dance instructor “With his knuckles, … thumped on [her] sternum and down [her] rib cage, clucking his tongue and remarking, ‘Must see the bones’” (47). He told her to “Eat less” or “Eat nothing” (47). This demonstrates Foucault’s theory of discipline and power where individuals lose autonomy to authority figures in the name of social compliance. So why do female dancers acquiesce to their instructor’s commands? Green states, “students anticipate teacher praise and attention through correction and physical manipulation” (81); they do it for the recognition. But the problem is that dance instructors place strictures on female power and autonomy, which indicates a loss of control.

I agree with Oliver when she questions Bordo’s masculinity-femininity model because being emaciated, yet strong seems impossible for a woman to achieve. On the one hand, female dancers’ bodies have to be amazingly powerful and athletic, which embodies masculinity, yet they must also be slender, hence feminine, which leads to issues of control, and powerlessness. How can women starve themselves, and yet remain strong enough to exert physical strength? Ballet dancers like other female athletes today
such as gymnasts and cheerleaders have to be powerful and strong to physically withstand extreme postures. If they were too thin, they would not be able to effectively perform. The central message of the “cult of thinness” in ballet and the media is that a woman who is “fat” has no self-control; she has “an undisciplined nature” (Oliver, 41), but if a woman is thin, she is “in control” (Oliver, 41). Hence “eliminating [women’s] curves brings women closer to maleness” (Oliver, 41), so the “cult of thinness” could also be a “cult of control.” Oliver emphasizes this point by claiming that a woman’s self-worth (including sexual) is linked to her weight, for “In dance, too, the women on stage may be sexualized or exoticized” (45) like Victoria’s Secret models, or Barbie. The problem is that as Oliver concludes “these images of physicality actually create a scenario that dictates behaviors and morals for women” (45). So what is needed is a new way of presenting images to women to change their perceptions of body image.

Women can gain control by refusing to accept unhealthy, idealized images about femininity from the media, and focusing instead on achievement over aesthetic appearance. The YouTube video, *Cause and Effect: How the Media you consume can change your life* (1:25-1:55), proposes a five-step solution on how to solve the negative effect of media consumption on young women’s psychological health. I would like to focus on Step 2 where women are advised to focus on achievement over appearance to find true value in themselves. Women are suggested to “appreciate [their] uniqueness, and [to] celebrate [their] accomplishments” (1:29). Through leadership work in their communities and “invest[ing] in the leadership of other women” (1:52) by becoming a mentor, women can assert themselves and gain control. Women can also resist cultural norms of the feminine ideal by, as Step 4 explains, “use[ing] their voice to create change online by … boycott[ing] harmful media” (1:43). Women must overlook the superficiality of beauty and slenderness, and focus on more positive attributes such as intelligence and leadership abilities to gain autonomy.

A common argument against my claim is the value I place on achievement over aesthetic appearance. Some people feel that slender female dancers and models can still be high achievers and
successful in dance performance despite being anorexic. Oliver tells us “In the world of ballet, … extreme thinness has become associated with high status, not only for the dancer, but for the entire company” (45), but I argue how is that possible when they become weak and emaciated?

I realize that my discussion is limited to objectification of the female body by the media, and that I have neglected to discuss the male body, and its power in advertising as an agent of social control. Steve Grimes, in his blog, “The Body as Cultural Text”, contrasts the difference between how the male and female body is represented in ambient advertising. Grimes explains that the male body is presented as having “strength and power” (consider muscular male bodies in Lynx deodorant ads); whereas, the female body is sexualized and “gazed upon and scrutinized” by a male and/or female audience as weak and compliant. Since the male body in advertising is presented as more powerful than the female body, it controls the amount of power assigned to the female body. Grimes states that the male body only “gives the female body as much strength and power … in relation to how much the male body allows.” The audience also asserts agency over the female body, and renders it powerless by limiting the female body to its aesthetic function. Reading Bordo’s text from the male body perspective is crucial because it shows how the female body is viewed as “compliant”, which reinforces my point about dancers, and the environment of ballet where a woman’s body is not her own.

In a media-driven world filled with images of perfection, it’s not surprising that many women develop a distorted body image. It’s hard not to be influenced by the images advertising “a cult of thinness” that seems so ingrained in our culture, but while it may be true that anorexia is caused by socio-cultural forces, a possible solution would be to change the way women think about aesthetic beauty, and how they perceive their bodies. By deemphasizing aesthetic beauty, and promoting leadership and achievements instead, women can move beyond superficial aesthetic appearance and find strength and power within themselves.
Works Cited


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