Inversion? Circus Hand-Balancing and the Discourse of the Upright Body

Camilla Damkjaer

ABSTRACT

I kroppens historia har den upprättstående kroppen varit ett tema i filosofiska diskussioner, något som undersökts naturvetenskapligt, såväl som utgångspunkten för praktiska sätt att upprätthålla sociala normer. Det är även möjligt att iaktta en viss diskurs om den upprättstående kroppen som modell för vad det vill säga att vara människa. Samtidigt har människor sedan länga experimenterad med motsatsen: den omvända positionen. Figuren handstående är ett av de mest tydliga exempel på försöket att vända upp och ner på den upprättstående kroppen. Inom cirkus har handstående även utvecklats till en egen konstform. Denna artikel undersöker hur cirkuspraktiken handstående förhåller sig till den upprättstående kroppen. Artikeln föreslår att handstående förhåller sig till den upprättstående kroppens diskurs på ett paradoxalt sätt, i och med att den både vänder upp och ner på diskursen och förstärker den. Artikeln argumenterar för att detta kommer till uttryck inte bara på ett representativt plan, men också på ett tekniskt och erfarenhetsbaserat plan.

ABSTRACT

In the history of the body, upright posture has been the theme of philosophical reflections on human nature and the object of scientific explorations and practical measures ensuring social norms. It is even possible to locate a certain discourse of the upright body as a model for understanding what it means to be human. However, humans have long experimented with the opposite: the inverted position. The handstand is probably the epitome of this endeavour to invert upright posture. Within circus performance, hand-balancing has been developed into an art form of its own. This article examines how hand-balancing relates to the upright body. The article argues that circus hand-balancing participates in the discourse of the upright body in a paradoxical way, both inverting and reinforcing it. The article argues that this is expressed not only on a representational level but also on the technical and experiential levels of the practice.

Inversion? Circus Hand-Balancing and the Discourse of the Upright Body

Camilla Damkjaer

Inverting hand-balancing

In the history of the body, upright posture has been the theme of philosophical reflections on human nature as well as the object of scientific explorations and practical measures ensuring social norms. Indeed, it is even possible to locate a certain discourse of upright posture as a model of understanding for what it means to be human (Vigarello 1978, Gilman 2014). However, humans have long experimented with the opposite: the inverted position. The figure of the handstand is probably the epitome of this endeavour to invert upright posture. The question is how this inversion relates to the discourse of the upright body.

Handstands, in a variety of forms, exist in many different physical practices, such as gymnastics, diving, street dance, yoga, circus and capoeira. Even if these handstands may be variations of the same principle, handstands are practiced in different ways, for different purposes and with different associated meanings. Within a circus performance, balancing on your hands has been developed into an art form of its own, where the handstand becomes the starting point for artistic expression within the performing arts.

The effect of turning the body upside down is easily associated with the circus's capacity to provide a different world with other rules, a mythical space that inverses expectations. Part of the myth surrounding both traditional and contemporary circus is the idea of circus as, by definition, subversive—even if this myth of course needs to be and is being questioned (Fricker & Malouin 2018). In the case of hand-balancing as a specific discipline, I suggest that understanding how it relates to social norms also needs to be explored through analysing if and how hand-balancing participates in the discourses of the upright body.

In fact, there seems to be quite a discrepancy between the myth of the subversive circus body, turning all rules of gravity, anatomy and society upside down, and the rather strict, repetitious training of hand-balancing, striving towards a body ideal that also builds on ideals of clean lines, total bodily symmetry, combined with measured strength and perfect flexibility. But to understand hand-balancing's relation to the upright body, we need to go into much more detail. In this article, I will analytically invert circus hand-balancing to discuss whether circus hand-balancing participates in the discourse of the upright body and how this may happen on representational, technical and experiential levels.

Though informed by my background as a performance scholar, my methodology lies close to practice-based ethnography, as used by, for instance, Greg Downey (Downey 2015) and Luïc Wacquant (Wacquant 2006). For approximately ten years, I have been practicing hand-balancing, discussing hand-balancing with circus practitioners and teachers and trying to understand the technical foundation of the discipline and its bodily implications. Though I have not had the chance to be an apprentice or an official student, a large part of my understanding of hand-balancing comes from dialogues with specialists. I am especially indebted to my conversations with Thierry Maussier, who has many years of experience teaching hand-balancing to circus students in higher education. It is largely through these discussions that I have come to gain a better grasp of the technical aspects of the discipline.

My analytical approach is to conduct a socio-historical reading of hand-balancing practice, seen in relation to circus history and the cultural history of the upright body. First, I will look into existing research on the ideology of the upright body and the way it may continue today. Second, I will address the relationship between the history of circus hand-balancing and the discourse of the upright body. Third, I will look more closely at the technique of hand-balancing and the traces it may carry of this discourse on a practical level through the incorporation of ideas and ideals. Finally, I will explore how the hand-balancer's experience of the inverted upright body relates to the discourse of the upright body. Thus, the article sheds light on some aspects of the on-going cultural history of the practice of the upright and inverted body.

The upright posture and the discourse of the upright body

In different historical periods, upright posture has been used to define the relation between humans and other animals, as well as the relation between body and mind, individual and society. Since the 1960s, a critique of the ideological assumptions of these ideas has been developed, not least in the vein of Foucault's analysis of the disciplining of the body. The training of the upright position is already part of what Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Foucault 1991), describes as the development of the organic body. With the organic body, Foucault means the body that was constructed *as* natural and organic in order to create a body that was measurable and controllable and could be analysed in its movement, tasks and progression. This analysis of the upright body as part of an ideology was further pursued by Georges Vigarello's work (Vigarello 1978). Vigarello showed how the upright posture became a crucial site of modern education and the formation of citizens across school systems, training regimes, medicine and fashion (Vigarello 1978). To become upright was considered part of becoming a complete, civilised, autonomous and well-behaved subject.

More recently, the topic of the upright body has come to the fore again to understand how the history of this discourse continues to inform our understanding of bodies, bodily diversity, health and posture. One example of this recent interest is Sander L. Gilman's article ««Stand Up Straight»: Notes Towards a History of Posture» (Gilman 2014). Gilman approaches the upright body from a historical perspective and points out how, within modern Europe, the upright posture came to have a specific relation to the understanding of the civilised subject. Moreover, within this discourse, the upright posture was used as a feature to distinguish humans in terms of ability, gender and race. Even if it originated in Europe, this understanding of posture also spread to other parts of the world.

Gilman goes into detail about the way this discourse developed and spread in different domains. As Gilman writes, 'The idealized upright static and mechanical posture in early modern West seems to have originated in the late 16th century with both the development and representation of military drill formation' (Gilman 2014, 58). From here, it spread into many different fields of training, from dance to singing, fencing and different kinds of sports and physical education. At the same time as social practices for rendering the body upright expanded, different interrelated scientific understandings of upright posture were developed within evolutionary, medical and biomechanical understandings of the body.

As Gilman points out, Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory had the consequence that upright posture became not only a characteristic of the human species, but also a developmental history that shows how humans became humans. This was the starting point of a branch of research still ongoing, exploring how and why humans have become bipeds and what the consequences are physiologically and cognitively. At the same time, it provided a new scientific basis for

the idea that humans, among other things, through their upright posture, are superior to animals in terms of intelligence. Thus, Darwin's thoughts carried an already-existing discourse into science. Importantly, Darwin was not alone in this assumption; it was a prevalent feature in both philosophy and science in the 19th century (Gilman 2014, 63–64).

At the same time, posture has increasingly become the site of medical knowledge and intervention. As Gilman writes, 'In the 19th century, there is an entire medical sub-speciality that defined the healthy body and treated the ill body based on notions of ill posture' (Gilman 2014, 66). Here, and within the training systems that were advised in relation to medicine, 'Bad posture is not only a sign of physical pathology but also of moral degeneration' (Gilman 2014, 66). Thus, rectifying people's posture was not only a medical but also a societal issue.

Thus, the modern discourse of the upright body has been developed and depends on links across many different areas such as philosophy, science, medicine, educational systems, training cultures and fashion. Following Foucault, Vigarello and Gilman, I would thus claim that to stand is not simply something humans do and are evolutionarily and morphologically geared to do. To stand, that is, stay upright on your feet, is a part of a discourse if we understand discourse to not only include linguistic structures that regulate what we can know and think, but also the physical and institutional practices that regulate our behaviour. To stand—and, especially, to stand in a certain way—is to participate in a discourse that also includes implicit expectations about what a subject is. On a symbolic level, the discourse of the upright body has associated the upright posture with values of superiority, moral correctness, intelligence, strength, autonomy and independence.

Where do we stand in relation to the upright posture?

The discourse of the upright body has been an integral part of the modern understanding of the body and the subject, but it may be relevant to ask whether it still exists. It seems as if the upright posture continues to intrigue us and pose challenges even today, both scientifically, practically and ideologically, even though it has also been subjected to critique.

Within different scientific fields, the upright body continues to be of interest. For instance, contemporary evolutionary biology is still discussing how and why humans have become biped. As Carsten Niemitz points out, more than 30 scientific hypotheses as to how and why the human species became upright have been proposed in the 20th century (Niemitz 2009, 241), and the discussion of them continues today. If we look to chiropractic practice, physiotherapy and other related fields, upright posture is central to our understanding of muscular-skeletal functionality and health. How this may continue the ideology of the upright body within physiotherapy has, for instance, been discussed by David Nicholls (Nicholls 2018). A lot of research attention is necessarily still focused on helping humans cope with difficulties, pains or dysfunctions when it comes to standing upright or walking. Therefore, we have not yet finished understanding how to practice upright posture, or, for instance, how to deal with the effects of sedentary and immobile lifestyles on posture and muscular-skeletal health.

Within cognitive sciences and phenomenology informed by cognitive sciences, there is also renewed discussion of the upright position and its consequences. In the chapter «The Upright Posture—It's Current Standing» in *Enactivist Interventions: Rethinking the Mind*, Shaun Gallagher puts this question at the centre of an enacted understanding of embodiment, seeing environment, body, sensation, action and mind as mutually constitutive (Gallagher 2017).

Gallagher also includes cultural and social aspects as part of an enactive understanding of the evolutionary development of human cognition (Gallagher 2017). This idea dismantles the classical understanding of the upright position as an evolutionary predetermination of the human body, seeing it instead as part of an ecological system that is also constituted by cultural meaning-making.

The key question for our understanding of current postural practices, including hand-balancing, is of course whether the traces of the discourse of the upright body—as a carrier of social and moral ideas about the body—still play a role in our understanding of the upright posture. Treating this issue in its entirety is beyond the scope of this article. However, what does appear is that, even if the moralising discourse may have moved out of the sciences of posture, the discourse does continue in the sense that the upright posture is still seen as central to *normality* in our social environment.

This is something that has been brought up in the critique of the discourse of the upright body, not least from the perspective of disability studies. The normative assumptions implicit in the idea of the upright posture are something that has been addressed by, for instance, Thomas Abrams in the article 'Is Everyone Upright? Erwin Straus' «The Upright Posture» and Disabled Phenomenology'. (2014) and Jack Rusczek in the article 'Living the Upright Posture With a Disability: Challenges and Lessons for a Philosophical Anthropology' (2014). Both articles address the understanding of normativity inherently implied in Erwin Straus' account of the upright body in 'The Upright Posture' from 1952 (Straus 1952). But their work also reminds us more generally that differently abled bodies have been largely ignored in thinking and research focusing on the upright body and that we live in a culture that 'values independence, mobility, productivity and physical strength' (Rusczek 2014, 100). Abrams also points to the fact that the 'economy of personhood' relates to the upright body, as there are material hindrances that make it hard to participate in society if one does not meet the requirements of uprightness. As he writes, 'there are material prerequisites that bodies must meet to perform phenomenology in the first place. Only then do humans get to be subjects' (Abrams 2014, 571).

The discourse of the upright body has also been criticised from a feminist perspective. This critique addresses the cultural associations of the upright body and their links to a certain kind of masculinity. Instead, Camille O'Connor provides a feminist relational perspective. In the interpretation of the upright posture and its consequences for experience, O'Connor suggests that being upright also involves vulnerability, exposing a vital chest, and allowing softness and touch, thus emphasising not only independence but also relations (O'Connor 2014). This leads to a different vision of the upright human: 'So yes, we are upright, alone and fighting to stay on our feet. But from where I stand, I can see another way of conceiving of being human: a way that appreciates the primacy of our reaching out, even our losing our boundaries in the other' (O'Connor 2014, 92).

To the extent that we live in a culture where uprightness is related to certain values and where many socio-material mechanisms depend on uprightness, we can say that we are still part of the discourse of the upright body. Even if we do not deliberately believe in a discourse of the upright body with all its associations, we may nevertheless participate in it through the ways in which we practice posture.

Representations of the inverted body in circus history

Hand-balancing as a circus discipline has evolved parallel to the modern discourse of the upright body and the question relevant for the line of this article is how it has related to this discourse. However, it can be difficult to track this question, as circus and circus

disciplines do not have a unified history, and historical research into specific circus disciplines is fragmentary. What we commonly understand as circus evolved from the modern equestrian circus as it was developed by Philip Astley and others at the end of the 18th century (Stoddard 2000, Jacob 2002). Today, it is mostly the development of contemporary circus, generally practiced without animals and within theatre spaces, that is the driving force of the development of circus, at least in many European countries, Australia, Canada and South America. As with many other circus disciplines, it is difficult to trace the history of hand-balancing specifically, as very little research is available. What one can conclude, however, is that hand-balancing probably has many different roots. In the history of Chinese acrobatics, or 'baixi' (Mauclair 2002, Jacob 2008), elements of hand-balancing seem to have been present, for instance, as a part of contortion exercises. Also, the travelling performers in Europe, before the formation of the modern circus, seemed to have done balancing exercises on their hands. Here, I will limit myself to looking at some fragments of the history of hand-balancing that may have influenced hand-balancing's relation to the discourse of the upright body.

Modern circus grew out of a close relation to a military tradition—a societal institution where the upright position was being intensively rehearsed through standing and marching (Gilman 2014), and with a circus perspective, we can add: riding. It was, to a large extent, former military horse riders who brought the activities that we understood as circus under the same roof or tent. When Philip Astley and others started showing their acrobatic virtuosity on a horse at the end of the 18th century it was, among other things, a way for them to use and live on the skills they had developed within the military (Jacob 2002, 24–40). Furthermore, staying upright on a horse (and doing acrobatic tricks while doing so) was part of the circus' representation of the relation between humans and animals. Within this frame, we can say that doing hand-balancing became a way to confirm the (military) uprightness of humans compared to animals.

Another interesting track to follow is how modern circus developed at the same time that bodily culture in general underwent an important shift at the end of the 18th and during the 19th century. As already mentioned, the bodily education of the citizens came into focus and new regimes of bodily training were developed. The development of the circus was influenced by expansion of gymnastics, early body building and flexibility training. Handstands were often included in different gymnastic systems of the 19th century, and there were porous relations between gymnastics, dance, circus, variety and theatre. In fact, 'gymnast' was not an unusual appellation for circus acrobats. Even if this history has not been traced in detail within circus research, there is reason to believe that there are fluid relations between the use of handstands in these different fields. But in the circus, hand-balancing was not only used for training but for performance, thus participating in the discourse of the upright body.

Thus, historically, the circus is not that far from the practices that are often described as part of the training of the upright, standing position and its ideologies. On a representational level, when presented in the circus performance, one could say that the feat of balancing on the hands was the exaggerated proof of how a human body masters the erect position, even upside down. Part of the circus' aesthetics depended on how humans overcome and exceed human nature: defying gravity, doing the impossible, or mastering even inverted postures. As such, it can be read as a way to surpass the erect posture through another upright posture, demanding even more mastery.

At the same time, the hand-balancing body was not only presented as excellent or superior, but also as deviant. For if there is something that has been persistent in the history of modern circus, it is the myth of it being on the outside of society. We

find this in multiple forms, from the artistic interest in the figure of the 'saltimbanque' (circus performer, itinerant performer, acrobat referred to also in poetry and painting) at the end of the 19th century, to the representation of circus in popular culture today. Also, contemporary circus often refers to this myth. However, both historically and today, this is a myth with modification needed (Fricker & Malouin 2018).

The modern circus has historically built itself not only outside, but also very much within and in relation to the majority society. As Brenda Assael has shown, modern circus during the 19th century deliberately played on the limits of bourgeois and middle-class society (Assael 2005). In the circus, the current gender norms were both exceeded and confirmed, especially in terms of what women were allowed to do. Circus allowed the audience to see both perfect and so-called deviant bodies, and the circus was thus highly involved in the negotiation of bodily norms. The human capacity to master the animal world was demonstrated, and the circus also participated in the colonial way of presenting what was considered strange and exotic. As a result, circus was not only an alternative to, but also a carrier of social structures. Nevertheless, the circus deliberately played on the idea of an alternative world in the way it presented itself (Assael 2005).

Within the myth of the circus, the acrobatic body (including hand-balancing bodies) has been presented as extraordinary in their capacities and deviant in their lifestyles and behaviour. In that sense, one could ask if hand-balancing has presented alternatives to the ideals of the upright body. Indeed, one could say that circus hand-balancing represents both an excessively skilled upright body, strong and flexible enough to stay upright even upside down, and a deviant body, showing the possibility of inversing the social expectation of contained bodies that stay in ordinary positions.

We may find an example that is telling in terms of how these contradictory representations of the body may coexist in Katrina Carter's analysis of acrobatic feats performed by men injured in American civil wars (Carter 2018). As Carter shows, it is not unusual to see disabled performers perform, showing their skills rather than their disabilities. She draws attention, for instance, to one-legged acrobats performing hand-balancing and contributing to the development of the technique. Here, the body is presented as deviant, but at the same time, it is the capacity and the skill of the body that is underlined.

Thus, in terms of how the hand-balancing body is represented in the circus, it has participated in the discourse of the upright body in a paradoxical way. It seems to have been both a contradiction of the upright body—a deviant, excessive body—and a reinforcement of the upright body—an even more capable upright body. Today, I would argue, this paradoxical relation continues. Within circus performance, hand-balancing is still one way of presenting an excessively skilled body. At the same time, contemporary circus has started questioning the way the circus performer is presented, allowing for more vulnerable presentations of the circus body (Lavers, Leroux & Burtt 2019).

Hand-balancing technique – practicing biomechanics

Just as standing, walking or running, balancing on one's hands is a bodily technique that happens in culturally specific ways. Through these bodily techniques, different social and ideological understandings of the body are possibly sedimented in the individual body through enculturation. Therefore, I would like to explore the relationship between the circus hand-balancing technique and the discourse of the upright body, starting from the technique as it is understood and practiced today.

Circus has developed its own hand-balancing technique, which is different from the way handstand is used, for instance, in gymnastics, dance or other

bodily practices. Here, balancing on one's hands is not only one acrobatic feat among others, but a discipline of its own, with its own vocabulary, progression, props and so forth. This requires a great amount of precision and detailed adjustments, which are specific to circus hand-balancing.

As the history of hand-balancing has not been thoroughly explored, it is hard to say exactly how technique has evolved. However, through images, we can trace how handstands have actually become more and more aligned, upright and straight during the 20th century. On pictures from the 1920s and 1930s, the recognisable 'banana handstand' is still current. Since then, a straighter and more aligned form of hand-balancing has been developed. Though the details of this process are still not well documented and researched, it seems reasonable to think that the circus schools in the former Soviet Union had a capital role in developing this technique into a repertoire, and today, it is often referred to as the 'Russian' technique. The Soviet circus schools were among the first state-funded circus schools, and one of the innovations was to draw more heavily on other kinds of expertise to develop the circus training (Jacob 2002). In this way, it seems that the technique was specialised through the use of a more scientific and biomechanical understanding of the body.

Indeed, it is a biomechanical understanding of the body that is the basis of the discipline as it is practiced today, although not all teachers are explicit about the theoretical underpinnings of the practice. This understanding underlines how the hand-balancing body needs to move in such a way as to permit an efficient distribution of weight. This efficiency starts with the proper placement in a simple handstand, which is considered the base position and the starting point for all other positions. Here, the hand-balancer is supposed to place the bones of the body as close as possible to one central line. This becomes the starting point for more complex balancing positions, where it is more complicated to distribute the weight correctly, for instance, in different one-arm balances where one is working with a much smaller surface or flags where the legs are extended far from the base of the hands.

This biomechanical understanding of the body in a certain way ties the technique of hand-balancing to the history of the discourse of the upright body, in the same way as other biomechanically informed practices, including physiotherapy and other forms of rehabilitation. One example of this link today is the way 'proper alignment' is still part of many forms of physical training, rehabilitation, dance and somatic practices. Also, within the training of hand-balancing today, the idea of a correct position and an ideal 'alignment' play an important role. The physiological and biomechanical alignment, which is ideal in hand-balancing, however, is not the same as in the upright standing position.

Due to the inversed position, the technique of circus hand-balancing requires a different way of aligning the back. By extending and locking the shoulders and tilting the pelvis, the back is flattened in a way that differs from how other practices see the aligned body in the standing position. Actually, it seems that in this position, the back is even straighter than in the aligned upright position on one's feet. The purpose in this case is not to sustain a healthy posture but to learn to master a posture that allows the maximum number of tricks with a minimum effort through biomechanical efficiency. By aligning the back in this particular way, the technique makes it possible to stabilize an otherwise very unstable position so that the hand-balancer can create different figures. To reach this, however, is extremely difficult; therefore, many years are spent training the 'ideal' position in a simple handstand.

Also in other ways, hand-balancing training cultivates a biomechanically efficient body. For instance, once the hand-balancing body starts performing figures other than the basic handstand, different kinds of

symmetry are demanded. In particular, the split position of the legs plays a central role, as it is often used for mounting and descending, and for different one-arm balances. Ideally, the hand-balancer should have perfect split, again so that the weight of the body can be distributed as efficiently as possible. If this is not the case, practitioners are encouraged to engage in sustained flexibility training to reach a more well-adapted physical set-up on this point.

When we look more closely at hand-balancing as a technique, it therefore turns out that hand-balancing requires a very biomechanically analytical approach to the body—requiring that each body part, movement and progression is separated and monitored in detail—compared to the upright position. This is because it is biomechanically more difficult to balance on your hands. As the shoulders are not as stable as the hip joint, and as one's centre of gravity is further away from the ground, a more detailed control of the position is needed. Due to this difficulty, where the margin of errors is extremely small, an even more perfect control of each joint and each movement is needed.

Of course, one could say that a biomechanical view of the body is simply a description of the functioning of the body. However, as we see in hand-balancing, biomechanical knowledge is not only a tool to describe, but a tool that engages with and changes the body. Biomechanical ideals in hand-balancing not only describe a body as it is but demand a restructuring of the body according to the lines of biomechanical efficiency. The great advantage of this is that it has made the development of a very detailed and sophisticated technique possible and has allowed even more incredible postures. However, we must be conscious that biomechanical principles may be used in ways that go beyond the individual body, attempting to achieve an impossible ideal. If biomechanical knowledge is employed normatively, without taking into account the actual physiological differences of individual bodies, one may force bodies into an unobtainable ideal rather than helping bodies to balance.

Thus, on a technical level, one can say that hand-balancing is not in opposition to the discourse of the upright position—even if one stands upside-down—but participates in it in an even more complicated way. It inverses the upright position but builds on the same biomechanical idea as the upright body. It makes the hands the ground for balancing, but it requires an even more symmetrical body. It builds on the apparent symmetry of the body, but demands it to an extent that goes beyond the constitution of most bodies. It inverts the upright anatomy of the body, but the position demands even more alignment, analysis and control.

The experience of hand balancing—the precarity of upright posture

Technically, hand-balancing requires years of training in order to restructure one's body and balancing system. How this process and the act of balancing are perceived by the performer may be important to understand in relation to the discourse of the upright body. On the one hand, hand-balancers often comment on the satisfaction of mastering and succeeding a figure—thus confirming the picture of hand-balancing as being a matter of control. But at the same time, the process of learning and performing hand-balancing also includes situations where one may fall, wobble, stumble, feel tired and in other ways be in lack of control. This is, of course, particularly pronounced in the novice's experience. However, I would argue that it is also an integral part of the experience of the practice on different levels of expertise in different kinds of situations. This largely depends on the ways in which perception changes when inverting the upright position.

Whereas the upright position gives a visual

overview, sight has another phenomenal character in hand-balancing. Neurologically, vision is, of course, crucial, as vision interacts with other senses within our sense of balance (Downey 2015, 173–175). However, on an experiential level, the visual overview disappears. Instead, one enters into a more tactile relation to space and, of course, to the ground or the apparatus. However, reliance on visual input is strongly felt at the same time. Even if hand-balancers train to balance with closed eyes (in order to train the other parts of the balancing system), there are situations when sudden changes in vision make the balancer wobble, as when the light changes or disappears, thus leading to an experience of how central vision is to balancing—and how vulnerable balancing can be without it.

Another aspect of balancing that one is made aware of through hand-balancing is the fact that the sense of balance is a system where all parts are dependent on each other. Even if we, in daily speech, refer to a sense of balance, balance is not one sense but many. As Downey accounts for in the article 'Balancing between Cultures: Equilibrium in Capoeira', balance is a relational or ecological system in which the vestibular system, proprioception, tactility and vision interact (Downey 2015). As balancing on your hands is biomechanically more complex, this becomes even more apparent (Downey 2015, 182–183). If only one of the sources of sense information changes, everything else can become unclear in one's perception—at least until one has acquired the capacity to compensate. If someone suddenly turns off the light, I might lose the precision of my perception. Even a slippery surface can confuse tactile impressions and make it very difficult to maintain balance. In this way, the experience of hand-balancing emphasises to what degree our balancing system is relational.

Furthermore, hand-balancing puts emphasis not only on what I *can* sense, but also on what I *cannot* sense, or *cannot sense yet*. The learning process in hand-balancing is to a large extent based on what I would call a sensorial discrepancy, where the subject is constantly made aware of what cannot yet be sensed. At each stage of the process, and in the process of learning each new figure, it is not rare that one is made aware that a leg is too low or too high and that one is tilting, even if it does not feel that way. Developing hand-balancing is a constant fight to be able to sense what cannot yet be sensed. In this way, the experience of hand-balancing is not a holistic process where everything unites perfectly, but a quite violent process where the individual is confronted also with the incomplete capacity to sense.

Seen from an experiential point of view, hand-balancing thus contains many characteristics that have the potential of—indirectly and by contrast—making the subject aware of its own perception and distribution of the senses within the upright position. One could say that the subject within hand-balancing becomes aware of the complex bodily structures of consciousness that even the upright position contains. If the discourse of the upright body underlines the autonomy of the subject, hand-balancing underlines the subject's dependence on these relational processes. If the discourse of the upright body underlines the unity of the subject, hand-balancing underlines its internal complexity and its limits. Though there are moments where one experiences euphoric control, there are just as many where one experiences vulnerability, confusion or disorientation.

Conclusion

Though the moralizing aspects of the discourse of the upright body, as it was expressed in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, may seem foreign to us today, the discourse of the upright body has not completely disappeared. As the critique shows, the upright body is still considered a default position, a strong part of what is considered normal. Though we may wish to see art practices as subversive, we also need to be aware of the extent to which they carry

such discourses. Here, the cliche that hand-balancing inverses the upright body is one that needs to be modified.

As shown in this article, circus hand-balancing may invert the body physically, but it does participate paradoxically in the discourse of the upright body on some levels—representationally, technically, experientially. Thus, hand-balancing is not necessarily a privileged site to explore a critique of the discourse of the upright body. However, it is a fascinating site for seeing the complexity of how this discourse works on many levels and how these are deeply integrated into bodily techniques and experiences. Furthermore, as hand-balancing is an artistic practice that calls for deliberate reflection on what and how artists communicate, there is a potential for discussing, varying and modifying how we may deal with the discourse of the upright body.

Indeed, this is something that calls for much more research into the socio-cultural specificities of different postural practices. Such work can shed light not only on circus hand-balancing or similar practices, but also on the way inverted, tilted and twisted postures have been and are involved in the discourse of the upright body. This is relevant not only to understand circus as an art form or other forms of bodily training and display but also to understand the complexities of posture and the specific ways in which postural practices are socially and culturally informed.

References

Abrams, Thomas. 2014. «Is Everyone Upright? Erwin Straus' «The Upright Posture» and Disabled Phenomenology.» *Human Affairs* Vol.24:4, 564-573

Assael, Brenda. 2005. *Circus and Victorian Society.* London: University of Virginia.

Carter, Katarina. 2018. «Freaks No More: Rehistoricizing Disabled Circus Artists.» *Performance Matters,* vol.4.

Downey, Greg. 2015.»Balancing between Cultures: Equilibrium in Capoeira.» In *The Encultured Brain: An Introduction to Neuroanthropology*, edited by Daniel H. Lende and Greg Downey, 169-194. London: MIT Press.

Downey, Greg, Monica Dalidowicz, and Paul H Mason. 2015.»Apprenticeship as method: embodied learning in ethnographic practice.» *Qualitative Research*, 183-200.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* London: Penguin, 1992.

Fricker, Karen, and Hayley Malouin. 2018. «Introduction: Circus and Its Others.» *Performance Matters*, 1-18.

Gallagher, Shaun. 2017 «The Upright Posture: Its Current Standing.» In *Enactivist Interventions: Rethinking the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online.

Gilman, Sander L. 2014.»Stand Up Straight: Notes Towards a History of Posture.» *J Med Humanit* (35), 57-83.

Jacob, Pascal. 2008. *La souplesse du dragon: repères et références pour une historie du théâtre acrobatique en Chine*. Paris: Magellan & Cie.

Jacob, Pascal. 2002. *Le cirque: du théâtre équestre aux arts de la piste*. Paris: Larousse.

Lavers, Katie, Louis Patrick Leroux, and Jon Burtt. 2019. *Contemporary Circus*. London: Routledge.

Mauclair, Dominique. 2002. *Planète cirque: une histoire planétaire du cirque et de l'acrobacie*. Paris: Balzac Éditeur.

Nicholls, David. 2018. *The End of Physiotherapy*. London: Routledge.

Niemitz, Carsten. 2010. «The evolution of the upright posture and gait - a review and a new synthesis.» *Naturwissenschaften* (97), 241-263.

O'Connor, Camille. 2014. «Fluidity and Intersubjectivity: A Feminist Perspective on Embodying Uprightness.» *The Humanistic Psychologist (42)*, 88-93.

Rusczek, Jake. 2014. «Living the Upright Posture With a Disability: Challenges and Lessons for a Philosophical Anthropology.» *The Humanistic Psychologist* (42), 98-101.

Stoddard, Helen. 2002. *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Straus, Erwin. 1952. «The Upright Posture.» *Psychiatric Quarterly vol. 26(1)*, 529-561.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2006. *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vigarello, Georges. *Le corps redressé: histoire d'un pouvoir pédagogique*. Paris: Jean-Pierre Delarge, 1978.

BIOGRAPHY

Camilla Damkjaer, PhD. Assistant Professor in Performing Arts, Department of Performing Arts, Stockholm University of the Arts

Camilla Damkjaer's research concerns the practices and philosophies of the body and the methodologies of practice-based research. Her research focuses on the articulation of embodied knowledge in circus, dance and yoga. She is also particularly concerned with the historical and political implications of bodily practices. Her work includes the publication *Homemade Academic Circus: Idiosyncratically Embodied Explorations into Artistic Research and Circus Performance* (2016).

camilla.damkjaer@uniarts.se