

Wellbeing Writing with Dani Bower



Dani has been in the photography industry for over 15 years, specialising in dance photography and arts marketing for the last 6 years. Through her work in this field, Dani has built an in-depth knowledge of editing imagery in post-production. In this article she discusses the current trend for enhancing and altering images in the pursuit of so-called 'perfection', and what this might mean for dancers and dance photographers moving forward.

Editing Perfection – The Altered Truth

From the age of 14 I fell in love with photoshop and creating things that I could only produce in illustration. I explored different worlds where people would defy gravity and my imagination could come to life.

As I went through my photography studies, I learned about the ability to retouch images – erasing pores, widening eyes, and altering the shape of a person. I learnt about how the industry standard in the fashion world is to fit people into a specific shape in the pursuit of perfection. If a person doesn't fit this ideal "perfect" form, then you can change them in post-production.

As strange as it sounded, I found this comforting because I didn't look at magazines and desire to be like the people on the pages. I understood that beyond what was perceivable was a world of make-up, lighting, photography composition, and almost definitely photoshop. It took away the pressure of comparing myself to these women in the magazines

as I understood that what I was being presented with was a fabricated ideal of perfection. It wasn't achievable because it wasn't always real. Awareness is growing that magazine images have been altered in some way, and whilst I might have taken solace in that, I knew that a lot of young people would still look at these images and see it as an expectation for themselves. I hope to use my knowledge and experience of retouching and editing to help others understand about the exact extent of the extra work behind the images.

At university I moved into dance photography. Dance was a massive part of my life through my childhood and my teens, but unfortunately, due to an injury, I was advised not to dance anymore. Reconnecting with dance through photography meant I was still able to be part of a world I found mesmerising and missed so much. Through the dancers, the 'impossible' images I had been creating started to be more possible in-camera. Dancers could bend, move, and look like they were floating, so I started to push it further and explore those moments. I liked to create images that made you question, 'is this possible? Is this just the dancer's natural ability?'. Whilst working in dance photography I quickly learnt the importance of perfectionism in dance. How hard dancers worked to create these exact movements, their bodies needing to look exactly right and not a finger out of place.



When working as an assistant to some incredible dance photographers, I learned there were two types of working. The first way was a single shot in-camera, the second was multiple shots that would later merge. The former would snap again and again and again to get that perfect shot, and the latter would say 'don't worry we can use the foot placement from the previous image'. The first way of shooting meant that when the image was captured you get that real sense of achievement and excitement. The second way of working would often take that pressure off the dancer to be perfect and would allow the shoot to move more freely. This of course also depends on how accomplished the dancer is in their career and how used to photoshoots they are. For a lot of dancers, the option of retouched images makes them feel more confident and less self-conscious when in front of the camera. People feel safe when making mistakes, and less anxious about angles and positions because they don't have to constantly think about every aspect of their body in images whilst shooting.

Even if you are not editing the dancer in post-production, everything is exaggerated before the photo is taken. You use make-up to enhance your favourite features and cover what you see as flaws. You use styling to shape your body and draw the eye to what you want

people to focus on. You can use props to make you jump higher, stay in the air longer or emphasize your movement. You are catching the moment before the fall. You shoot lower to show a higher jump, a taller stance and powerful body. You shoot higher for headshots to make the eyes seem bigger and the body smaller. You are creating lighting that enhances muscle tones, bone structure and softens the skin – even though this is in-camera, it is still enhancing the truth of what is in front of you. Retouching dance images plays into these ideals, you often use a stronger contrast for shadows, and highlights to exaggerate muscles. You take away any blemishes in the skin, and sometimes tattoos or scars at the dancer's request. It's all an exaggeration.



Now there is even more pressure for dancers, especially younger dancers with social media. You are inundated with perceived perfection all the time; not only with professionally produced dance photography, but your dance community and idols displaying daily photographs and videos with the stereotypical 'ideal bodies' and perfect skin. This can all now be edited using filters, bespoke body editing apps, or even just by setting phone cameras to 'beauty mode' which decides that beauty is blurred skin, big eyes and a smaller jawline. This can result in the production of seemingly instant candid images which has become so widespread that it is now an expectation to retouch your images to fit this mould. Retouching doesn't just belong to the glossy magazines anymore, it's available for everyone and you're expected to use it. Now, you're not only comparing yourselves to models, elite dancers, and influencers but to your friends and your peers. I feel like social media platforms encourage you to apply filters, to smooth your skin and slim down your waist, increase your bust, accentuate your jawline. The problem is, we have lost the boundary between reality and idealism because it is so easy to edit and adapt yourself. It challenges your thinking of what is real and has a significant impact on confidence.

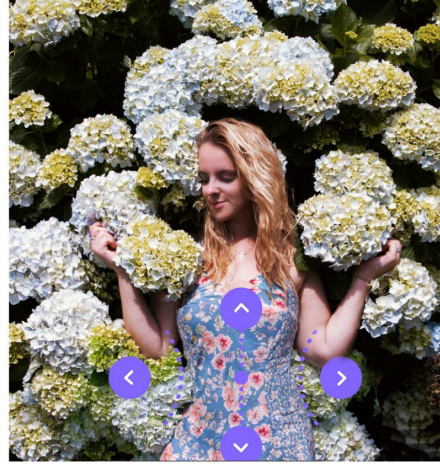
Our new normal is retouching, therefore our new aspiration of aesthetics is not achievable in reality. Even if you manage to achieve the 'ideal body' you're constantly chasing that illusion of what you 'should' look like.

I think the important take in all of this is to be open. To realise that what you see on the screen can be fantasy and enhanced towards perfection, but not an ideal to aspire to. If you look at images and you immediately feel inferior or judge yourself harsher after seeing them, just know that you are not the only one.

No edit



Mobile app edits



Photoshop edits



The way I think of it is that they are a painting of themselves, the right light, the gentle brush strokes, the angle and the absence of imperfection. It is like how people used to sit for their portrait – it's an artist's impression of what they want to portray to the world.

So, when you are taking dance images of yourself or getting a photographer to photograph you, it is important to work together to own your image. To ask questions about the shoot itself and the retouching process, communicate with the photographer the things you like to show and what you don't want shown. It is important you feel empowered and that you are the one controlling how your body, movement and message is being portrayed, because at the end of the day you should be the one who decides how the world sees you. Is it more authentic and raw? Is it precise and lit perfectly? Is it retouched and enhanced? As long as we are all open on the same page, and know that everyone has had the choice to edit or not to edit, this hopefully takes away the pressure to achieve perfection in reality.

You can find more information about some of the key themes discussed in this article by visiting the links below.

Mental health and perfectionism:

- NIDMS mental health resources page,
- Nordin-Bates, S. (2014). Resource paper – Perfectionism. International Association for Dance Medicine and Science. [online article]. Available at: <http://rdtheatredance.artez.nl/perfectionism-by-sanna-nordin-bates/> [last accessed 21.06.2021]

Body-image:

- Chin, J. (2020). Body Image and Dance. The Dance Psychologist. [online blog]. Available at: <https://www.thedancepsychologist.com/blog/2020/7/4/ny6l9nauxhgofe18jx39tb8839evq> [last accessed 21.06.2021]

Copyright:

Hutchins, M. (2014). Copyright for Dance. One Dance UK Information Sheet 4. [online resource]. Available at: <https://www.onedanceuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/DUK-Info-Sheet-4-Copyright-for-Dance.pdf> [last accessed 21.06.2021]

Images: Dani Bower Photography

Image 1 – Dancer Milly Moss – Photoshoped image to look impossible

Image 2 – Dancers Benjamin Warbis and Harry Alexander – Photoshoped image to look impossible

Image 3 – Dancer Rae Piper Chantry Dance – Image enhanced by lighting before the it's even been taken

Image 4 – Editing examples of myself. Left – non edited original image. Middle – Retouched using a body edit app, a skin smoothing app and a filter from phone photo settings. Right – retouched image in photoshop using image painting, warp tools, blur tools, gradients, cloning and masking.