On not being there: the democratic potential of the active spectator

The democratic potential of Martha Graham’s choreography

In this paper I argue that dance entails a democratic potential in a vibrant embodied dialogue between two bodies. When one reduces its movement to minimum the other may experience increased sensation, which in turn can push it towards action. I focus upon the technique and choreography of dance pioneer Martha Graham. I mobilize Jacques Rancière’s conceptions of democracy and theatrical reception and critically engage the triadic conception of embodied reception, Martha Graham’s work and democratic action by arguing that on the one hand, most accounts of Graham’s politics fail to acknowledge the political potential she unravels by reducing movement language to a minimum. At the same time, I argue that Rancière’s account of reception misses the intricacies of embodiment and inscription as part of the reception process which can occur through embodied practices.

1. Rancière: from spectatorship to politics and from emancipation to democracy

For Rancière, democracy/ politics\(^1\) is the insertion of a situation of radical equality into a situation in which that condition is absent. It is the moment in which the non-part acquire a voice and become part of the community. It is a moment of radical rupture, reorganization and reconstitution of a community of equality. Thus, drawing upon Rancière’s philosophy entails seeking moments in which (1) there is movement/action/reorganization of communities and (2) that moment articulates equality in a radically new way. Consequently, Rancière’s philosophy brings about a paradoxical interest in spectatorship: on the one hand, if we are seeking moments of equality we must focus on both sides of the dialogue, not just the artists but their audiences, those who respond to the rupture and enable the distribution of the sensible. \(^2\) On the other hand, this philosophy is very much action based, one that seeks

\(^1\) For Ranciere, the moment of politics is ipse facto democratic. “Democracy is not a political regime. As a rupture in the logic of the arkhe, that is, of the anticipation of ruling by disposition, it is the very regime of politics itself as a form of relationship that defines a specific subject” Rancière, J. (2010). Dissensus: on politics and aesthetics. London, Continuum.

\(^2\) “Politics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable” (Ranciere, op.cit)
moments of disagreement not stability. This conceptual interchange of equality and action carries through to Rancière’s work on aesthetics. In his *Emancipated Spectator* Rancière discusses this situation and terms it the paradox of the spectator. Here this entanglement of equality, action and spectatorship is discussed further. If we are focusing on action then being a spectator is a bad position to be in; after all, she/he is sitting in the dark (literally and figuratively) and is not the one actively redistributing the sensible. She/he are inactive.

Rancière’s discussion brings about the complexities, but also the potential, of reception and spectatorship. He writes: “There is no theatre without a spectator. But according to the accusers, being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is being held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act” (Rancière 2009, p.2). This emphasis on the inability to act as spectator brings us back to Rancière’s larger formulation about politics and democracy, which accentuates the political or democratic moment par excellence as a moment of radical rupture. The definition of democratic politics as the insertion of a new situation of equality into a position of inequality brings about an accentuation of action on the one hand and of equality on the other as essential parts of the political moments.

Rancière offers several solutions for this paradox of the spectator, none of which he accepts as effective. The moment in which the spectator becomes active, the moment of insertion of radical equality, is not created by an intentional mobilization from above; it does not entail physically shifting the spectator from her seat. The paradox of the spectator is refined and elaborated again in Rancière’s latest book, *Aisthesis*. Rancière writes: “those seated on the benches were not—should not have been—spectators watching a play, but men committed to

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3 My emphasis DM
4 “Politics is by no means a reality that might be deduced from the necessities leading people to gather in communities. Politics is an exception in relation to the principles according to which this gathering occurs. The ‘normal’ order of things is for human communities to gather under the rule of those who are qualified to rule and whose qualifications are evident by their very rule” (Ibid, p. 35).
5 Two main formulations of this switch: (1)”the spectator must be roused from the stupefaction of spectators enthralled by appearances and won over by the empathy that makes them identify with the characters on stage”. (2) Artaud/Brecht: According to the second formulation, it is this reasoning distance itself that must be abolished. The spectator must be removed from the position of observer calmly examining the spectacle offered to her. (Ranciere, the Emancipated Spectator, p. 4)
the performance before them, *equally* responsible for the development of collective bodily potential” (Rancière 2013, p.188). There is a possibility, then, of inserting equality into moments of inequality crystalized in the essential condition of spectatorship thus creating democratic politics in reception. This possibility comes about in re-interpretation, in re-configuration of the systems that are perceived as unequal.

This brings us back to Rancière’s treatment of the problem (or paradox) of the spectator. Rancière offers a different way out of this paradox that, in faith to his reverence to rupture and conflict does not seek to dispose of them but rather to draw upon them while emphasizing the underlying equality of the condition of being human. Rancière writes: “what our performances – be they teaching or playing, speaking, writing, making art or looking at it- verify is not our participation in a power embodied in the community. It is the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes everyone equal to everyone else. This capacity is exercised through irreducible distances; it is exercised by an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations. It is in this power of associating and dissociating that the emancipation of the spectator consists- that is to say, the emancipation of each of us as a spectator. Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed. There is no more a privileged form than there is a privileged starting point…..every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor, every man of action, is the spectator of the same story” (Rancière 2009,p.17). It is precisely the interchangability of roles, the ability to re-interpret the position of the spectator rather than to change it in which the possibility of emancipation lies. Later Rancière defines emancipation as the blurring of the boundary between those who act and look, between individuals and members of a collective body. “A reconfiguration in the here and now of the distribution of space and time, work and leisure” (Rancière 2009,p.19). This, we may recall, is precisely what Rancière sees as politics. It is the ability to reorganize a community while including those who are perceived as voiceless and non-actors but are never really just that. They are always actors in their own story, creating and re-creating the narrative of their theatrical experience and of their life as part of a community. The process of emancipating a spectator hence does not necessarily culminate in explicit action. Art that emancipates its spectator is art that enables the artist and spectator alike to

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6 My emphasis DM.
acknowledge that the boundary between artist and spectator, between passive and active, is purely contingent and we are all equal in the grand community of sense that the Theatre convenes. The emancipated spectator is the spectator who knows she is the author in her own story and has more of a voice than may seem in the initial positioning of a seemingly passive viewer. She is the one who is never passive. She is always able to reconfigure the sensible. In the next parts of the paper I argue that Martha Graham’s choreography induced this process for her spectators; her work brought about a spectator who is able to understand she has more of a possibility of action than may seem at first sight. Martha Graham emancipated her spectator by quietening down her own movement and creating a unique kind of embodied dialogue.

2. “I was afraid she would give birth to a cube”: Graham’s movement language and its clandestine political potential

Martha Graham is far from being an obvious example for Rancière’s conception of politics (and for his work on aesthetics and politics) and indeed he overlooks her throughout his analysis of dance in Aisthesis. Although her work was groundbreaking in the 1930s, the Grande Dame of American dance died when she was considered of irrelevant and dull. Even at the height of her career, in the 1950s and 1960s, her choreographies were controversial not for their avant garde aesthetics but rather for repetition of her earlier aesthetics and for her minimalist, sharp movement. At the same time, she was criticized for not being political enough. However, I wish to argue, this conjuncture of minimalistic choreography which is not explicitly political provides a new conception of the spectator which is democratic in the terms set forth by Rancière.

Graham proved a tough case study for dance scholars who sought politics in her work. Helen Thomas quotes from an interview with Graham claiming that there was no intention on her part to choreograph dances of social or political protest (Thomas 1995,p.108). Henrietta Bannerman notes that the major concern in Graham’s dances between 1926-1948 was the

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7 See Ellen Graff's discussion of dance and politics in NY in the 1950s/1960s, Stepping Left, for an analysis of the rejection of Graham by socialist artists of her time.
individual’s struggle for freedom rather than protest against social or class issues (Bannerman 1999, p.16). Bannerman goes on to look at the political significance of specific works: “Chronicle (1936) and Deep Song (1937) reflected anti-Fascist feelings connected with the Spanish civil war and recalled the horror associated with the First World War” (Bannerman 1999, p.17). Here the emphasis is on the intentional strata of the work only, and there is no real consideration of the reception of her work and its place in its politics. A different strand of discussion of Graham and politics in dance scholarship looks at her public actions and verbal statements. Reynolds argues that “On the whole (with the notable exception of her outspoken opposition to fascism), Graham did not overtly concern herself with politics” (Reynolds 2007, p.102). Bannerman contextualizes Graham’s actions in her historical context: “Graham responded to the sense of unrest in the build up towards the Second World War by refusing Hitler’s invitation for her company to appear at the Berlin games of 1936” (Bannerman 1999). Here there is no real effort to engage her dance; it is not clear why Miss Graham’s statements about politics would be of interest more than any other colloquial interpretation of politics provided by any other person. Moreover, one is pushed to ask, why are we looking for politics in the words of someone who sought to express themselves through movement? Once again, when politics is considered through Rancière’s prism and the concept of the distribution of the sensible we do not need to seek the narration of aesthetics in verbal language. We must let the dances speak for themselves.

At the same time, there have been some theoretical efforts in dance studies to move away from this strand of discussion. Mark Franko evokes the tension between Graham’s verbal statements and the effect her choreographic work had on audience reception: “Although unequivocal political meaning is not found in Graham’s statements, she did court a left-wing audience, and her dances did contain revolutionary fantasies. Her emotional ambiguity, however, was apprehended by the left as political evasiveness” (Franko 1995, p.63). Franko moves away from the verbal discourse of the choreographer towards the impact of her work on her audiences and their consequent interpretation of politics. I do not read ambiguity (or ambivalence) as evasiveness; contra Franko I argue that aesthetic ambiguity may hold political power in its ability to destabilize the dancing body and the bodies of its recipients, and consequently the symbolic frameworks which allow them to communicate with each other. Moreover, I argue that evasiveness can lead to a democratic conception of dance.
Graham’s evasiveness, both intentionally and unintentionally, created a spectator who is able to reconsider the boundaries between action and non-action, passive and moving, as contingent.

Martha Graham is remembered not only as an esteemed choreographer but also as the first dance-maker who created a movement language, a technique. Graham’s technique has two core concepts: that of contraction and that of release. In the contraction, the body unfolds into itself, whereas release entails unravelling of the spine towards the ceiling and the opening up of the body towards its environment. Whereas in the action of contraction the dancer explores the density of her own corporeality, in release the dancer places herself in her spatial setting and locates her body within its surroundings. Those two actions are based on not only the body’s anatomy but also the primordial action of breathing, reflecting the tension between inhaling, taking air from one’s surroundings, and exhaling, releasing air to one’s environment. The release can be henceforth seen as the more communicative action between them both; it is that action that returns brings the dancer back to awareness of her surroundings and other dancers around her. However, in Graham’s conceptualization of those concepts even the contraction had communicative purpose. Copeland argues that “Graham’s contraction also serves to generate an involuntary muscular response in the perceiver, thereby uniting the spectator and the dancer in a shared kinaesthetic experience” (Copeland 2004, p.141). The contraction, although seemingly inward looking, is communicative in that it enables the spectator experience a similar to the one experienced by the dancer. In fact, it brings the spectator and the dancer to a position of equality, despite one body being seemingly inactive and one body being active. Contraction in Graham technique is a delicate and minute way to emancipate the spectator, to revisit Rancière’s terms. Although the spectator doesn’t become active as in Brecht or Artaud’s re-conceptualization of the role of spectatorship, through Graham’s use of contraction she experiences the action taking place on stage in an embodied dialogue, thus the demarcating line between active and passive, dancer and spectator is negotiated. Although the release is conceptualized as more outward looking, contraction holds more democratic power for the spectator. It establishes the radical equality

8 “she examined the basic breathing rhythm of the body and changes that take place when a person inhales and exhales...when the dancer contracts, the front part of the body shortens and the muscles in the back lengthen. When the dancer releases, the muscles in the front lengthen, giving an emotional lift to the body” McDonagh, D. (1974). Martha Graham: a biography. Newton Abott, David & Charles.
of the dancer and the spectator as inhabiting their bodies. I shall proceed to term this condition *radical embodied equality*.

To expand this argument let us return to Mark Franko’s analysis of Graham’s work and specifically his use of the concept of *encryption*. In his important recent study of Graham, Mark Franko revisits his analysis of Graham’s “evasiness”. However his recent study is more refined and subtle. Franko discusses what he calls encryption, which he defines as “the insinuation of absent characters and actions beneath or within what is visible” (Franko 2012, p.7). He argues that the audience could intuit elements they did not see before them. Franko discusses Graham’s work *Voyage*, which was a commercial and artistic failure, in which he argues that “ambiguities which lay open to the inspection of the surface, and divisions, which constitute psychic uncertainty represented in visual terms” (Franko 2012, p.155). Let us put together this choreographic concept and the discussion of the contraction in Graham’s technique. For Graham, the absent is made present by minimalist movement, and the spectator is pushed towards becoming active through reduction not elaboration. Just as the more minimalist, inward looking movement is the one which is meant to create action as “filling in the blanks” among the spectator, the absent characters send the spectator in search of them, without making them move from their seats (as in the solutions Artaud and Brecht provide and Rancière rejects). The movement becomes more austere and minute, but consequently the spectator is sent to do more interpretive work. Graham’s spectators are conceptualized as much more equal to the dancers in terms of possibility of action when the dancers’ movement is reduced to a minimum. Her dances become more democratic when her movement becomes more still and involve less characters and more contractions, since the spectator becomes involved in the work hence emancipated. The demarcating lines between dancer and audience member become more and more contingent, since both parts of this relationship are active. The more austere the movement, the more efficacy it has in terms of negotiating power structures and inserting moments of radical equality in which both the dancer and the spectator are active. Both are reconfiguring their sensed world by an embodied dialogue in motion. Let us turn towards one of Graham’s most seminal dances to examine this argument and to explore Rancière’s discussion and its shortcomings.
3. Lamentation (1930) : from the inner to the outer, from the single dancer to the community

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgf3xgbKYko

A lone figure sits on a bench. The gender identity of the figure isn’t clear. Nor are other particular characteristics of the moving silhouette. The figure is manipulating a tube of fabric that is acting as its costume but also as an extension of her body, making its contours softer and less defined. The figure retreats into herself and expands outwards; negotiating the boundaries between her moving body and its environment. The figure shifts between Graham’s signature movements: contraction and release. It is an exemplar not only of her choreography but of her technique.

Kimere Lamothe reads this piece with Isadora Duncan’s Mother (1924). Lamothe notes that “Duncan’s “mother” spills from movement to movement with fluid grace. Her arms reach and curl in unending flow; her torso bends and circles, while her lower body remains fiercely rooted in the earth. The soft folds of the dancer’s gown move with her cycles, brushing the air. Graham’s figure, rooted to her bench, sheathed in a purple tube of fabric, rocks tightly back and forth. Her movements are stark, percussive. Arms reach and punch, stretch and twist against her torso. The body convulses, doubles over, opaque and articulate in its silence” (Lamothe 2006, p.152). Indeed, the differences between Duncan’s lyrical movement and Graham’s harsh gestures are striking. Lamothe’s emphasis on the ability to articulate a message in silence is telling. When the movement is reduced to minimum messages it can be clear and succinct as in a dramatic (if not melodramatic) movement such as Duncan’s. But, there is one missing element in Lamothe’s analysis. She does not seek where this articulate message comes from. The release clearly opens the body towards the ceiling, the environment, the audience. But it is the moment of contraction which acts like a fist punching the spectator in the gut. Those are the moments in which the spectator experiences grief, the theme of the piece, when they go through the kinaesthetic experience Graham elaborated in her technique. This piece pushes the spectator to articulate their own message, hence the clarity to counter opaqueness comes from the spectator. Lamothe places an emphasis on the possibility of inducing response by reducing movement. She does not inquire into the conditions of this possibility. I shall explore those below.
The piece is quite telling in its spatial positioning; by placing the dancer sitting down on a bench she makes her equal to the spectator who is also sitting in her seat. This, we will recall, makes her seemingly passive to Rancière. But the spectator isn’t passive; she is making the message clearer through her re-interpretation which is enabled by this spatial equality. The dancer is not passive; she is sitting down but always moving. Hence the spectator is pushed towards exploring possibilities of movement that arise out of this spatial equality. Graham here is inserting a moment of radical embodied equality into power structures separating the active from the passive. The moving dancer is equal to the sitting down spectator. Moreover, the technique of encryption adds an active edge to this moment of equality. Graham makes the spectator consider the absent rather than focus on the present; by that she makes them more involved in the piece than had she used stage techniques that place everything in front of the spectator. The combination of a singular sitting figure (equal to the spectator), contracting (unleashing similar responses within the spectator) and in her solitude on stage evoking the presence of other human beings (by using encryption and moving the focus towards the bodies not present) Graham creates a moment of radical rupture in which the demarcating line between passive and active, absent and present, moving and still, acting and non-acting are negotiated. This is the quintessential democratic moment for Jacques Rancière.

Graham’s dancer does far less than Duncan’s. She does far less than a dancer trained in classical ballet, a technique drawing on jumps and turns. But in so doing she is making the space of embodied dialogue more equal, and hence democratic in Rancière’s terms. There is more space for the spectator to re-configure her space of experience, to re-interpret her distribution of the sensible, once the emphasis is on the embodied equality between the dancer and spectator rather than on the differences between them. Graham uses technique in a way that enables the body to accentuate the radical equality bringing all embodied human beings assembled together rather than showcasing one moving body which is presented as superior to another. Graham’s technique teaches us that the body never simply retreats into itself. When it is writing upon itself and contracting into itself it unravels possibilities in other bodies, those which are watching it. The minimalist movement arising out of that radical
embodied equality sends the spectator to re-interpret her own position and her placement within her configurations of sense. The body is never stabilized. In its reduction of movement it sends other bodies to further action. Graham’s spectator is *not* immobile in her seat; she is responding to a figure that is playing with the demarcations between mobility and immobility.

4. Reconsidering the emancipated spectator: dance as the boundary between the human and the embodied

Jane Bennett provides us with the beginning of a critique towards Rancière’s conception of politics when when read with embodied practices. She writes: “When asked in public whether he thought that an animal or a plant or a drug or a (nonlinguistic) sound could disrupt the police order Rancière said no: he did not want to extend the concept of the political that far; nonhumans do not qualify as participants in a demos; the disruption effect must be accompanied by the desire to engage in reasoned discourse” (Bennett 2010, p.106). Why must we extend the critique of the centrality of reason and language in Rancière’s thought to nonhumans? What about methods of human methods of communication that don’t qualify as rational discourse but can still create re-distributions of the sensible? What about expansion of discourse or language from the rational to the embodied?

Jane Bennett offers a forceful interpretation of embodied dialogue as recorporealization: “On this model of eating, human and nonhuman bodies recorporealize in response to each other; both exercise formative power and both offer themselves as matter to be acted on” (Bennett 2010,p.49). This reading of embodied dialogue is contradictory to this claim put forth by Rancière: “In politics, subjects do not have consistent bodies; they are fluctuating performers who have their moments, places, occurrences, and the peculiar role of inventing arguments and demonstrations- in the double, logical and aesthetic senses of the terms- to bring this nonrelationship into relationship and to give place to the nonplace” (Rancière 1999, p.89).When those two conceptions are put together through dance we gain a forceful interpretation that draws on the strength of both accounts. Dance is understood as a way human beings work on their bodies by developing a specific technique, a language, a method
of communication, while drawing on the fact that they are equal in their inhabiting an embodied space. We do not do away with Rancière’s quest for radical contingency which brings about politics in moments of rupture and insertion of new systems of meaning distinct for human beings. At the same time, we find a way of replying to Bennett’s astute critique of Rancière’s tendency to privilege the spoken word in his interpretation of politics, and draw upon her powerful account of dialogue between two embodied beings. We may draw upon the fact that Bennett herself employs the metaphor of dance to discuss the borderline between the human and the non-human: “humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other. There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfoliding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore” (Bennett 2010, p.31).

Martha Graham gave the world a choreographic body of work and a system of movement that articulated the idea of emancipating the spectator, not the dancer. She did not physically move the spectator from her place; instead, she reduced the movement of the dancer. The body of Graham’s dancer enables her to play with her placement and to challenge its spatial boundaries; as we saw in Lamentation, the piece deals with the subject’s ability to contest its own embodied boundaries. At the same time Graham developed a discourse that is human and embodied. In her technique she celebrated the contingency of the moving body and its ability to create the re-corporealization that Bennett so aptly discusses, but she draws on her humanity to do so. Graham’s lamenting figure is in a never ending motion of resisting the finalities of her embodiment. Through her stretching figure she shows us there is nothing permanent about embodied subjects; in fact, she empowers her dancers and spectators to resist this finality; to work on their bodies and contest contours as a full stop. At the same time, the moving figure succumbs to Graham’s movement language and that becomes one with her moving body. Pace Rancière, Graham’s use of the human body as at once the material and the form of contestation makes it a space to be demarcated and inscribed upon rather than a being disabling further possibilities to occur.

Dance is a human practice that uses the embodied flesh. It is ever-moving, shifting, hence draws upon inherent contingency. At the same time, it uses methods of communication crystalized in techniques which serve the same function as spoken language. Dance can be democratic in its ability to re-organize systems of meaning. At the same time it is political as it enables those moments of rupture to be sustained and bring about further responses by
providing the dancer and spectator alike with methods of embodied communication. Martha Graham, by making multitude of acting bodies on stage absent, empowered her spectators and made them present. Her choreography is democratic not in its intentional themes or in her verbal statements describing it; it is democratic in its ability to radically re-organize the power distributions that put her dancer on stage and a spectator in the audience. She empowered her spectator by making herself absent. There is power in not being there.


