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Latent tradition in modern dancing:

The body politics of “The Green Table”

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Abstract

In the turmoil of the Weimar Republic German choreographer Kurt Jooss created *The Green Table* (1932), a farsighted ballet that critically looked back at the atrocities and suffering inflicted by World War I and anticipated the events of World War II. Although Jooss's piece drew directly from the ongoing political climate, the narrative was placed in an untraceable location and time, thus rendering it a timeless, universal protest against war that made *The Green Table* artistically and aesthetically resilient.

In this paper we will analyze how Jooss expressed political opinions and conveyed social commentary, claiming his share of the sensible in Ranci re's words, through both experimental and traditional movement (modern dance and ballet), and how dance as a non-verbal art form used its instrument, the human body, to convey images of tradition, repression and cultural symbolisms of race and gender.

Key words: gendered body; tradition; political commentary; representational power.

Quite often dance tends to be thought of as apolitical. Yet it goes with no contention that dancing bodies and the movement they perform are in their own way political, enabling the artist to intervene in the public sphere. Even when it apparently becomes abstract and self-referential, as in some Balanchine ballets, or in Merce Cunningham's choreographies, dance still conveys political and social meaning (rebellious against or conforming to normativity) through its traditional or innovative movement codes, through stereotyped man-lifts-woman partnering or groundbreaking he-dances-with-him duet work, through angel light body shapes or gravity pulled heavier bodies, through spatial hierarchies on stage, through the choice of performing sites, costumes and set designs, and mostly through subject matter which contains and shapes all other aspects:

On a micro-historical level, dance may perform protest, a direct and local way of upsetting a power balance. (...) The dancer's body (...) can be "intolerable", "a provocation", and "a living blasphemy". (...) The dancing body has rhetorical, persuasive, and deconstructive force in the social field of the audience, which is a variant of the public sphere. (Franko, 2006, p.6).

Highly visual and symbolical, dance is ripe for interpretation: patriarchal authority, racial and national hegemony, social hierarchy, national identity, political power, class struggle, disobedience and resistance, they can all be read through the medium of the human body and the movement it performs. And the more imaginatively and aesthetically they are conceptualized, the higher the chances of conveying their political message; ballet, for instance, through its narratives, noble characters, strict spatial design and unattainable, fragile ballerinas has helped to shape authority, political power and male domination on and off the stage (Foster, 1996) from the time when Louis XIV recognized the latent controlling power of dance, and through its academization managed to control his dancing courtiers.

At the dawn of the 20th century, as new theories about movement and the body in motion emerged both in the United States and in Europe, independent strong-willed modern dancers¹ sought to express a new individuality that challenged canonical technique and the world view it represented, establishing dance as "an intensely personal expression of the self" (Dils & Albright, ed., 2001, p. 219). Yet this strong assertion of individuality greatly contributed to keep "dancers by and large (...) aloof from national political issues" (Dils & Albright, ed., 2001, p. 221), and in a certain way to make them disqualify

¹ Mostly women "who appeared as images of the new woman – independent of a male partner and free to create her own identity". (Dils & Albright, ed., 2001, p. 218).

themselves from the “community of equals” (Rincièrè, 2004, p. 52) expected to think about the political and to produce political discourse.

However in the 1930’s, as the world plunged into economic depression and social chaos, dancers on both sides of the Atlantic engaged in dancing that commented and resisted political power and social injustice². In Germany, “as political factionalism intensified during the closing years of the Weimar Republic (...) a few dancers³ finally felt compelled to take sides” (Albright, ed., 2001, p. 221), allocating dance modernism an unexplored political perspective, as Franko observes:

An early twentieth-century avant-garde art movement and an authoritarian state apparatus encounter each other at a moment crucial in the development of each; something new is being created, both artistically and politically, that reveals contradictory forces and tendencies at work (Franko, 2006, p. 3).

Kurt Jooss⁴ was one of the dancers that chose the path of resistance to the rising power of fascism. His best known piece, *The Green Table*⁵, premiered in 1932, in Paris, where it won the first prize at the international choreography competition sponsored by the Archives Internationales de la Danse.

Amidst social and political instability, one year before Hitler came to power, Jooss used dance to reflect the *Zeitgeist* of the 1930’s in Germany: “post-war trauma, political cynicism, social injustice, greed, alienation, loss, suffering” (Walther, 1994, p.59), and

² New York was the home of the “New Dance Group” and the “Workers Dance League”, whose slogan was: “Dance is a weapon in the revolutionary class struggle” (Dils & Albright, ed., 2001, p. 317).

³ Valeska Gert (1892-1978), Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943), Jean Weidt (1904-1988).

⁴ Kurt Jooss (12 January 1901, Wasseraalfingen – 22 May 1979, Heilbronn). German dancer and choreographer, strongly influenced by Rudolf von Laban movement and dance theory, with whom he studied and danced in the 1920’s.

After leaving Laban’s dance company, Jooss established his own company, Die Neue Tanzbühne. With pedagogue, dancer and choreographer Sigurd Leeder, Jooss opened, in 1925, his own dance school, called “Westfälische Akademie für Bewegung, Sprache und Musik”.

Unlike other expressionist dance artists of his time, whose *Ausdruckstanz* was plotless, Jooss’s pieces were choreographed upon narratives and themes that addressed moral issues and political concerns, and combined for the first time classical ballet with theatre, thus placing Jooss as the founder of the *Tanztheater*. Following lack of support for his work, considered too avant-garde and innovative, Jooss moved to Essen in 1927, where he started a new company and school, the Folkwang Tanztheater and the Folkwang Schule. His committed and critical works as well as his open support towards Jewish musicians and company members forced him to flee Germany after Hitler came to power, only to return after the end of World War II. His choreographic work continued in London, where his dance company was renamed Jooss Ballets. Upon his return, and until 1968, he resumed his position as dance director of the Folkwang Schule, where 15 year old Pina Bausch came to study in 1955. He directed his dance company until 1969, when former student, dancer and assistant Bausch succeeded him as artistic director. Jooss continued to choreograph and restage his ballets until his death in 1979.

⁵ Music composed by Fritz Cohen (1904, Bonn – 1967, New York).

the fear that war could be on the horizon again, we shall add. Intended to be a strong anti-war statement, *The Green Table* “sought to reveal the fallibility of the human condition” (Strauss, 2011, para.2) through unconventional movement codes that combined the tradition of classical dance technique with meaningful and exaggerated daily gestures and the expressive use of the torso. Moreover, dancers did not perform the roles of enchanted princesses, swans or angel light sylphs partnered by equally noble princes; on the contrary they represented typified citizens⁶, embodying the fragilities and the weaknesses of human beings challenged by devastation. Instead of aristocratic alterity they were dancing, for the first time, oneness with audiences⁷, performing what was around them, but would not always be seen.

Structurally, *The Green Table* progresses around eight scenes that evolve to compose a narrative, where war and its consequences are the central theme. “The Gentlemen in Black” is the opening scene: a diplomatic conference is taking place around a large table. All speakers wear masks and white gloves that highlight their gestures. As the debate goes on, courtesy and threat alternate until war is finally declared. The central figure of Death, inspired by the medieval *Danse Macabre*, dances the transition to the following scenes that reveal several aspects of wartime: “The Farewells”, “The Battle”, “The Refugees”, “The Partisan”, “The Brothel”, “The Aftermath” and finally the return to “The Gentlemen in Black” that resume their emphatic bows and threatening gestures of the opening dance⁸.

The rebellious spirit of Modern Dance initiated only a few decades earlier on both sides of the Atlantic had given choreographers the opportunity not only to experiment on new movement codes that conveyed increased theatrical emotion and expressivity through the dancer’s body, but also to create reality inspired characters and to address social themes that were alien to traditional ballet narratives, and thus giving way to a new dance aesthetics and a new “regime of identification of art” (Rincièrè, 2009, p.28) made possible by the historical and social context where their art was both produced and received:

⁶ Characters did not have a name of their own, they were named after the type/group they represented: The Gentlemen in Black, The Standard Bearer, The Soldiers, The Partisan, The Young Girl, The Refugees, The Profiteer.

⁷ “Death” is the only character performing otherness, embodying both the threat of war and of the fascist ideals. His strong, healthy, accomplished body shape standing for the idealized Arian human type.

⁸ The circular form of the piece’s structure points to the dead end and failure of political negotiations that plunged the world into two consecutive wars.

To establish the edifice of art means to define a certain regime for the identification of art, that is to say a specific relationship between the practices, forms of visibility and modes of intelligibility that enable us to identify the products of these latter as belonging to art or to an art form. (Rincière, 2009, p. 28)

Yet, if innovative in its dance aesthetics and groundbreaking political stance, *The Green Table*'s latent body politics still resonates with traditional views of gender roles and identity. A brief analysis of the movement performed by male and female dancers allocates fundamental differences to each of them. Masculine characters ("Death" and the "Soldiers") perform movements that are direct, angular and bound; their posture is very much uplifted and the chest is open as they stamp their feet on the floor while marching in clear straight patterns; in "The Battle" men lift and throw each other in the air, emphasizing muscular power and masculine prowess⁹. Most notoriously, the central figure of "Death", with his clenched fists, emphatic muscularity and accomplished Arian body type conveys an image of absolute power as he conducts and connects the narrative. Conversely, women walk and *bourrée* frailly on the *demi point* in circular, undefined patterns ("The Old Woman", "The Young Girl"), they perform sustained movements with which they attempt to control the pulling of the weight on their bodies ("The Refugees"), or they move with uncontrolled gestures while being partnered by the soldiers in the brothel ("The Young Girl"). Throughout the piece men's bodies are empowered by their physical appearance and strong movement, while women's look dis-empowered as they mainly represent the victimization of women in war times. As Mulvey (1975) suggested about cinematic narratives, the action in *The Green Table* progresses around a dominant a male ("Death"); female dancers do not take part in the political decisions that lead to war and do not fight in it, thus rendering their role just as irrelevant to the piece's diegesis as it was to the governance of the political in the real world.

Unlike the work of independent female dancers, whose solos allowed them to choreograph their own movement and embody the spirit of their newly empowered female identities, the movement and body politics latent in *The Green Table* point to the fact that aesthetical and artistic changes often precede the changes occurring in society and in mentalities, since the deep roots of patriarchal traditions cling strongly even to an

⁹ Early 20th century dancers and choreographers were concerned with returning to the modern male dancer its masculine and heterosexual status that had been lost to the stereotyped 19th century romantic homosexual male dancer (see Ted Shawn's "Men must dance" in Foulkes, J.L. (2002). *Modern bodies: Dance and American modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey*. The University of North Carolina Press.

innovative artist like Jooss. The dancing bodies of *The Green Table*, despite making a pioneering political statement against war and a groundbreaking artistic change, still abided to and confirmed conservative views and expectations about gender roles and identities. As suggested by Butler regarding actors, dancers in *The Green Table* re-constitute on stage

(...) theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its act (...) constituting the identity of the actor (...) as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief* (Butler, 1988, para.3).

In Jooss's piece, in the 1930's, gender identity as a "performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (Butler, 1988, para.3), would have risked, if too abruptly disrupted, to render unintelligible the work of art to its contemporary audiences and consequently fail to convey its political statement.

But the narrative and the relationships between characters further reinforce the patriarchal presentation of bodies and movement: after losing the maternal protection of the "Old Woman" the "Young Girl" ends up in the brothel, run by the masculine figure of "The Profiteer". Salvation, if possible, would have depended on the agency of yet another man – the young soldier whose love would redeem her, had she not succumbed to the sins of sex. Mother, angel or sinner: Jooss stages traditional female identities, the ones that do not question patriarchal power. "The Partisan" is the only feminine character that seems to possess any will of her own, thus representing a potential threat. She is empowered by her highly technical and skillful dancing, with big leaps that cover a lot of space, by the strong rhythm of the music that supports movement and by the cause she advocates, which ironically it will be, later in the narrative, the very cause of her death under the firing squad.

Again in the case of "The Partisan" there is a fine line diving the modernity of political commentary, the protest against repression, and the reinforcement of patriarchal order, the silencing of the independent women. Curiously, Mulvey (1975) points to the very same solutions Jooss found in his narrative to deal with the feminine: devaluation (the frailty of "The Old Woman", the lack of agency and control of "The Young Girl", the victimization of "The Refugees"), punishment (the death of "The Young Girl", the execution of "The Partisan") and saving ("The Young Soldier's" attempt to save the "The Young Girl" through his love).

The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (...). (Mulvey, 1973, p.385-386).

As the dance reaches its final scenes, a procession of agonizing survivors embody the trauma of post-war times in “The Aftermath”, in a process of “remembering in order to prevent forgetting”, suggested many decades later by Assman (2010, p.12), which ascribes the dancers bodies with the power of memory, bringing to the stage a painful collective memory of World War I combined with latent fear of the times laying ahead. In the closing scene, the diplomats resume their naturalistic gestures and parodied poses, engaging in negotiations that lead to a new war, where again “the body operates as a symbol (...), and the rituals, rules, and boundaries concerning bodily behavior can be understood as the functioning of social rules and hierarchies” (Desmond, 1977, p.83).

The particular case of *The Green Table* demonstrates how the complex cultural context of Modernism in the 1930’s, a time of uncertainty and instability that preceded an explosion of violence, fostered the emergence of the creative power of resistance and encouraged dance artists to claim their share of the sensible and to produce political discourse through the human body in motion. Jooss’s overtly political choreography, with which he transformed “what is seen and what can be said about it” into movement, claiming his “ability to see and the talent to speak” (Rincièrè, 2004, p.12).

But, despite breaking away from previous canonical dance narratives, theater codes and vocabulary systems, Jooss still held on to latent signifiers of tradition that facilitated the work’s intelligibility without compromising its political stance, since

(...) dance can absorb and retain the effects of political power as well as resist the very effects it appears to incorporate within the same gesture. This is what makes dance a potent political form of expression: it can encode norms as well as deviation from the norms in structures of parody, irony, and pastiche that appear and disappear quickly, often leaving no trace. (Franko, 2006, p.6).

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