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Feminist Discourse and American Identity in Modern Dance: Martha Graham and the Social Significance of the Female Dancing Body

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Abstract. This article reflects on the concepts of feminist discourse and American identity in the context of the social significance of the dancing body as portrayed in choreographies by the American dancer Martha Graham. Here, we approach the impact of the revolutionary works of *Heretic* (1929) *Lamentation* (1930), *Primitive Mysteries* (1931), *Frontier* (1935), *Letter to the World* (1940) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), exploring the social significance attached to the demarcation of masculinity and femininity in Graham's vision of dance. The visual iconography, extraordinary music scores and sensory atmosphere created for and by these seminal choreographies are unique experiences of a specific dance art that constructs feminist discourse. Martha Graham's contribution to the shaping of modern dance and her signature of contract and release movements at the core of the Graham Technique, in which energy is at the centre of the body, is saturated with human emotion. The feminist discourse embedded in these choreographies speak of love and death, of oppression and freedom, of the limitations of genre and the struggle for identity. Her illuminating contribution to contemporary dance rested on her mesmeric movement sentences and her uncompromised questioning of socially constructed bodies. Martha Graham created a new movement vocabulary that revolutionized dance and was shaped by 'cultural embodiment, cultural communication and the whole shift in the Western lifeworld at the beginning of the twentieth century'[1].

Keywords. Martha Graham, Graham Technique, modern dance, social significance, feminist discourse, female body, social groups, American identity, musical landscape, female dancing body.

Discurso feminista e identidad americana en la danza moderna: Martha Graham y el significado social del cuerpo femenino

[1] Parviainen, J. (1998). *Bodies Moving and Moved: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Dancing Subject and the Cognitive and Ethical Values of Dance Art* (p.82). Tampere University Press.

Resumen. Este artículo reflexiona acerca de los conceptos del discurso feminista y de la identidad americana en el contexto de la significación social del cuerpo danzante tal y como está representado en las coreografías de la bailarina americana Martha Graham. Aquí abordamos el impacto de las obras revolucionarias *Heretic* (1929) *Lamentation* (1930), *Primitive Mysteries* (1931), *Frontier* (1935), *Letter to the World* (1940) y *Appalachian Spring* (1944), explorando su significado social con referencia a la demarcación de la masculinidad y de la feminidad en la visión de danza de Graham. La iconografía visual, las partituras extraordinarias y la atmósfera sensorial creada por y para estas coreografías seminales son experiencias únicas de una danza artística específica que construye el discurso feminista. La contribución de Martha Graham a la formación de la danza moderna y sus característicos movimientos de 'contract and release' que forman la Graham Technique, en la que la energía se localiza en el centro del cuerpo, está saturada de emoción humana. El discurso feminista incorporado en estas coreografías habla del amor y de la muerte, de la opresión y de la libertad, de las limitaciones del género y de la lucha por identidad. Su contribución iluminadora a la danza contemporánea se basó en sus frases de movimiento corporal únicas y en su cuestionamiento sin concesiones de los cuerpos construidos socialmente. Martha Graham creó un nuevo vocabulario de movimiento que revolucionó la danza y se configuró debido al 'cultural embodiment, cultural communication and the whole shift in the Western lifeworld at the beginning of the twentieth century'[2].

Palabras clave. Martha Graham, Graham Technique, danza moderna, significado social, discurso feminista, cuerpo femenino, grupos sociales, identidad americana, paisaje musical, cuerpo danzante femenino.

Martha Graham believed that dance is 'like poetic lyricism, [...] it's like terror or it can be a terrible revelation of meaning'[3]. At the core of this statement lies her uncompromising stance to explore the boundaries of human experiences and feelings, entwined with her perception and understanding of the constrictions the social world and its rules and limitations impose on the human body. In this context, dance is a way of performance that allows for embodying and bringing to life experiences that could contribute to break down genre categories and to foster the questioning of structures of power present in hierarchy. In an ever-metamorphosing world, an objective art such as ballet in the discipline of dance reassures the spectators and reinforces their disposition to recognized cannons. Hence, in a cultural arena in which this recognised genre of performed dance art often enacts rituals that instil archetypal peripheral visions of male and female bodies, the introduction of modern dance and its questioning of the social

[2] *Ibid.*
[3] Hanna, J.L. (1988). *Dance, Sex and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance and Desire* (p.14). University of Chicago Press.

significance of the dancing bodies catapulted to the mainstream a more organic proposal of the human body.

Graham's own private life journey as an American woman played an important role in the development of her dance technique and in the way she contested the objectification of the female dancing body as just an artistic entity to be viewed, delimited and catalogued. Graham Technique is based on her personal approach to Delsarte's principle of tension and relaxation. Delsarte advocated that human gesture has an emotional meaning, effectively proposing an almost endless scope for its social significance and its capacity to generate discourse. The work of Martha Graham is part of this simple principle. From it, diverse degrees of coding emerged, such as the tags of 'hot' or 'cool' attached to dancers' dynamics and kinetics, creating a new way to assess dance works as the performative scope of these tags 'effect or enact what one names'[4]. Consequently, in modern dance, the advent of new idioms to define different categories related to dance and movement sentences left behind the traditional and static French terminology commanding ballet and moved into a distinctive descriptive realm. Nowadays, the evolution of what we decided to label in this article as the identifier 'dance's encoding' – like the labelling of Pina Bausch's work as 'cool' or Martha Graham's as 'hot' – is a case of specific terminology being used as illocutionary speech, which then renders the name (the 'tag') to perform itself and consequently manufactures a specific perlocutionary reaction. In Graham Technique, the energy flows through the body and it is produced by it; here, crucially also, the floor work of the dancers seems attuned to the importance of Earth and grounding in body movement. Delsarte's principle of 'tension and relaxation' became in Graham's hands the dichotomy 'contract and release'. This method truncated ballet's realm of lightness – often based on an illusion, on a denial of gravity- as the collation of Graham Technique's dance sentences used the weight and internal energy of the body, emphasising the organic presence of the self. On this basis, the development of a whole new idiom and body's borders in contemporary dance began to develop. In *Dancing Modernism, Performing Politics*, Mark Franko concludes that this revolutionary approach to dance aimed to develop a specific type of *avant-garde* vernacular that sought to attune the representation of the human body to the complex thinking currents and socio-cultural historical arenas of 1930's and 1940's America. In context, the massive impact of the Great Depression and the far-reaching implementation of the New Deal were seismic events in American history and provided the perfect breeding ground for the development of radical approaches to dance, for what Franko denominated 'revolutionary dance'[5]. This 'revolutionary dance' and its bearing on the semiotic activity of the human body had the opportunity of building new vocabularies across disciplines that could articulate the changing social, cultural, and political transformations occurring in precise time and space, consequently providing a new discursive approach to the semiotic activity of the social body. At this point in time, the discursively

[4] Parker, A. & Sedgwick, E. (1995). *Performativity and Performance* (p. 203). Routledge.
[5] Franko, M. (1995). *Dancing Modernism. Performing Politics* (p.25). Indiana University Press. Bloomington and Indianapolis.

identifiable body created by Graham moved away from naturalistic settings and became a token of social significance in the understanding and making of American identity because of its capacity for 'making and remarking social life'[6]. This latter point is also at the core of the inherent feminist discourse found in her choreographies and reinforces her lasting influence not just in the realm of dance, but also across much of the imaginary of the United States as a country, where she is considered the "Mother of Modern Dance". Indeed, its was Graham's uncanny capacity to create referents in which connotations and denotations of identity were encoded the constitutive significance behind the cultural evaluation of her works. The discursive value of her dance corpus, entwined with the effects and consequences happening in complex historical and political times, delivered a visual and cognitive understanding of the American character in historical context and introduced an innovative dance vocabulary that gave meaning to new cultural practices. This confirms our belief that culture is defined in terms of 'shared meaning or shared conceptual maps'[7].

Martha Graham was born in 1894 in Allegheny, then a municipality founded in 1778 in Pennsylvania by the river of the same name that was absorbed by Pittsburgh in 1907. Her main formatives years were spent in Santa Barbara, being trained in a variety of dance styles and techniques at Denishaw in Los Angeles, the school of Ruth St Denis and Ted Shawn. During the 1920s, the Denishawn Company ruled the arena of modern dance's productions and was the perfect breeding ground for (future) seminal dancers like Martha Graham, Charles Weidman and Doris Humphrey. It was during her time at the Denishawn that Ted Shawn cast Graham in 1920 in the title role of *Xochitl*, his Aztec inspired dance piece. It was also here where she met Louis Horst, the musical director at the Denishaw School of Dancing, who later became her musical director and the composer of several of her choreographies. She did continue with Denishawn until 1925, when she began working for the Eastman School of Music. There, she collaborated with Rouben Mamoulian, at the time Head of the School of Drama. Graham set up her Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance in 1926 in New York, and on 18 April 1926 she debuted her first production of eighteen solos danced by herself and of trios she had choreographed. It was the beginning of a career as a dancer and as a choreographer that spanned decades, produced 180 seminal pieces of modern dance, countless collaborations and left a legacy that changed our perception and understanding of contemporary dance evaluated as a new dance art.

Graham's approach to performance was interweaved into the relationship between human actions and reactions existing in social structures found in social groups and groupings, making of it – as first Durkheim and later the English anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown argued-, a ceremony part of a ritual. Graham's phenomenological offering to the spectators showed a gendered

[6] Howson, A. (2007). *The Body in Society. An Introduction* (p.7). Polity Press, Blackwell.
[7] Hall, S. (1999). The Work of Representation. In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (p.18). SAGE Publications.

'awareness of self' that could 'develop through social interaction [...] rather than emerge as the outcome of anatomical form and physiological features'[8]. Yet, the tension we encounter in these productions is direct consequence of our reaction to the bodies we see on stage, more specifically, to the female bodies, as Graham positioned them as 'central to self and identity'[9], asserting their significance beyond feminist conceptualization, and firmly placing them in the frame of the disciplines of sociology and history as part of an unavoidable process of recognition of identity. In the works of *Heretic* (1929) *Lamentation* (1930), *Primitive Mysteries* (1931), *Frontier* (1935), *Letter to the World* (1940) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), performance's visceral material is the body itself and the reactions provoked by it. This approach was ground-breaking as it forced to re-evaluate the role of the dancing body. As bodies are central to our identity and are crafted by history, heritage and sociocultural semiotics, the hitherto established theory prevalent during early twentieth century's thinking trends found in studies of sociology that argued the body was an 'absent presence' - as mind was the priority – began to be contested by philosophers developing new interdisciplinary paths of thinking in sociological practice. Since, from Durkheim's postulate on how social relationships are the result of collective representations and collective forms established despite difference[10], to Shilling's conceptualization of the human body in society's theories[11] that present the body as a crucial element possessing socio-cultural capital shaping sociological theory, have fostered an intriguing area of research that merges the corporeal with the study of positions and dispositions found in social strata. This chimes with Graham's unrelenting reviewing of individuality and identity across spheres, as she understood that human behaviour is not just ruled by internal thoughts and experiences, but also by external forces. Here also, the social significance placed by the dancing bodies in the stories they tell is formed by the social context in which they function and by their agency of habitus. Bourdieu argues that habitus is an array of several embodied dispositions present in social groups and groupings reproducing society ad libitum[12]. Graham's contribution to this cycle of action and renewal occurred in a particular historical era of American history and her works interpreted the world around her in precise chronotope, as Graham's understanding of the dancing body perceived and queried philosophical currents. Foucault argued that there are not 'essences' in people's bodies, but 'inscriptions' of identity[13]. However, the Foucauldian body is fundamentally a passive agent, which often constrains the development of his/her identity and agency. Martha Graham challenged this claim via her perception of how the human body moves and why, as the struggle for individuality and self-identity is at the core of her works, and it is regulated by the awareness of the dancing bodies interacting in situations we can relate to in a symbolic or organic way. In the choreographies

[8] Howson, A. (2007). *The Body in Society. An Introduction* (p. 60). Polity Press, Blackwell.
[9] *Ibid*., p. 8.
[10] Durkheim, É. (Extended updated edition, 2014). *The Rules of Sociological Method. And Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method*. Free Press.
[11] Shilling, C. (2006) *The Body and Social Theory*. SAGE Publications.
[12] Bourdieu, P. (2007). *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Routledge.
[13] Shilling, C. (2006) *The Body and Social Theory* (p.203). SAGE Publications.

we are analysing here, the boundaries of the dancing bodies on stage (the connexions between 'my body-your body') could be structured by the positions of the dancers in groups or as isolated agents, and by the conceptualization of space (the stage design) that framed she/he/their movements.

Heretic (1929) is a striking example of the position of a single agent striving for individuality and the pressure social forces impose upon her for being different. It is an unnerving vison of our need to blend in, to be accepted as part of a defined group to avoid isolation and stigma. Originally named as *A Faith*, it was premiered at the Booth Theater in New York on 14 April 1929 and was presented as a production by the Martha Graham and Group, a first-time ensemble work. Against a bare stage, the simplicity of the costumes designed by Graham formed a visual imaginary that reminded the spectator of the Greek myths' iconography found in theatrical similes, as chorus formations are played in this dance in opposition to a solitary performer. Here, a group of women dressed in simple black long dresses, they hair severely covered with tight scarves, dance as a group in almost serrated formations, a silent unnerving presence that provides the backdrop for a female dancing body dressed in white, her diaphanous presence, innocent in its luminosity against the black figures. The group and the solitary dancer create eerie visual compositions, like the iconic moment when a semi-circle of black figures is facing the audience and the dancer dressed in white stands behind them, right at the back of this semi-circle, her arms raised straight with her hands united in a gesture reminiscent of prayer, the only vision of herself available to the audience. There is an uncomfortable sense of rejection here that projects an uneasy feeling on to the spectator and prompts questions. The first question is related to status: why is she being rejected? And then, why is she different? Every attempt by the woman dressed in white is met with rejection. The tension created by the energy of opposing forces is relentless, as the increasingly exhausting repeated attempts to enter and becoming part of the circle are stopped by almost architectural-looking body sentences and positions, static and finite, suggesting to the spectator pictures seen in Greek or Roman frescos related to drama or in images found in Egyptian hieroglyphs. There is a rigidity of movement in the group of women dressed in black that sharply compares with the fluidity found in the body of the woman dressed in white. In this piece, the musical landscape created by the dance score is organically interlaced in the body sentences of the dancers. The choreography was performed to *Tetus Breton*, an old song steeped on Breton folklore tradition and part of the collection *Chansons de la Fleur de Lys*. Originally suggested to Graham by her musical director, the American composer and pianist Louis Horst, this was due to his interest in using and adapting pre-existing musical structures to new choreographies. Arranged by the French composer Charles de Sivry, the dance score included a verse and chorus, and consisted in ten percussive bars repeated seven times. The almost martial chord that opens the piece evolves into an unfussy melody, the music landscape filling the space and taking the place of a sensorial design in which the power struggle between the individual and a definitive - yet anonymous-social group is played out in front of our eyes. The dance explores the

contradictions and needs found in the factors of human personality and conduct, elements considered sacred by Durkheim, who argued that 'the greatest good is in the communion with others'[14]. At the end of the piece, the oppressive power the women dressed in black had over the attempts made by the dancer dressed in white to become part of a socialization process of integration and acceptance is devastating, as the physical capital we have seen functioning in a definitive habitus demonstrates the pressure external forces can exercise in the formation of body hexus and in the shaping of abstract/emotional self-identity schemes of perception and assimilation. In this seminal piece of modern dance, Graham delivers a message on the social significance of the dancing bodies on stage when they 'congregate in socially durable groups'[15] and the risks that can occur when struggling for individuality in a hostile world.

On 8 January 1930, Martha Graham presented at the Elliot Theater in New York a short solo piece, part of a concert staged by the Dance Repertory Group. Performed mostly sat on a bench, *Lamentation* is an extraordinary piece of work, a visually suggestive lynchpin in contemporary dance that encapsulates a specific vision of the female dancing body existing in Graham's sensorial and visual imaginary: it is a highly symbolic piece. This embodiment of the significancy of grief is presented and delivered without remorse and has the power to feel like a punch in the gut. Here, as Sarah Boxer accurately argued, the 'less literarily' – certainly explained - 'grief is depicted, the more effective is in dance'[16]. Subtitled *Dance of Sorrow*, Graham defined its meaning as 'not the sorrow of specific person, time or place but the personification of grief itself', effectively enlarging its ambit and making of it a universal experience. Performed to the striking piano chords of *Piano Piece, Op. 3, No* 2 by Zoltán Kodály, the symbiosis between body and music is encapsulated in the extraordinary costume created by Graham for this choreography. She devised a long stretchy tube of a dress in purple colour, the colour itself associated with mourning. Graham plays with the performativity of the dress and the possibilities its physicality allows to the female dancing body to show her stretching to the limits of emotions, of the tightening that our thoughts and movements endure when sorrow holds us up close. The dance starts with a female dancer sitting on a bench in silence, her body still and her legs in second position. Then, after she cues the music with a taping of her foot, the dance begins. The restriction and scope created by the elastic dress gives a social significance to the body that deconstructs recognisable images of gendered bodies and breaks our conventional image of the female dancing body. Graham Technique's 'contraction and release' is here visually stunning, yet increasingly sobering as the message encoded in the dance slowly permeates the space where it is performed. Here, the movement sentences speak a language of grief made

[14] Durkheim, É. (1950). *Sociology and Philosophy* (p.321). Cohen & West.
[15] Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. (1991). *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (p. 185). Penguin Books.
[16]Strauss, N. (2001/09/13: New York Times). *The Expression of Grief and the power of Art*. Retrieved 03/07/2023 from https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/13/arts/the-expression-of-grief-and-the-power-of-art-91977770195.html

of endless sorrow. This perspective is reinforced by the way the bench on which the dancer sits is centrifugal to the emotions' energy, the bench signifying a limited space wherein human energy and human feeling collide and body movement takes shape. The simple stage design is deeply performative and it resonates with Graham's signalling of her choice of costume, as the dance movements and energy of the female dancing body encased in this stretchy tube of a dress reinforces - like Goffman argued -, a body idiom in which 'physical gestures, position and conduct' indicate the 'restricted space in which women operate and the closed body characteristic of feminine comportment and movement signifies an imaginary space that confines women'.[17] In this seminal piece, the deconstruction of emotional restrain found in classical dance's male and female bodies, in which archetypal images of beautified distress are the norm, is reframed, offering instead a 'meaningfully interpreted'[18] and universal depiction of human emotion at the core of human life.

Martha Graham's spiritual and socio-cultural connexion with the world around her was intimately braided into her identity as an American woman. The social tapestry and multicultural manifestations of her country fostered in her an interest in the heterogeneity of ethnic groups, placing her explorative eye on the rich Native American's southwest heritage. *Primitive Mysteries* (1931) depicts the relationships happening in the Indian villages dotting the vast American landscape and explores the impact of the Catholic religion and colonial influences incorporated into native cultures. It spoke of the Native American temperament, of borders of identity, of the force of religions and the enduring strength of rituals steeped in ancient customs. Considered a major work of Graham's dance art, it was structured in three sections steeped in rituals and was devised around the female dancing body on stage and the dynamics of relationship between a group and one individual. Louis Horst wrote the score for this dance piece, which illustrates the musical trends that began in the 1930s and 1940s in the United States and 'exemplifies a wide-open sound that came to be labelled 'Americana'[19]. Originally called just 'Ballet for Martha', the exquisite score began playing in two different keys, the harmonization using open fifths with dissonate polytonality. This creates a particular musical atmosphere, as the bitonal use affects the structure, harmony, rhythm and ultimately the whole texture of the composition, enriching the organic experience of the dancers' body sentences. In this seminal piece of art dance, the cultural phenomena encoded in the movements of the female dancers and the visual imaginary they produced cannot be understood in abstraction from the social group they portrayed. However, Graham's ritualistic delicate portrayal of a female world does not fall into the trap of 'romancing the otherness' as argued by Turner in

[17] Howson, A. (2007). *The Body in Society. An Introduction* (p. 59). Polity Press, Blackwell.
[18] Hall, S. (1999). The Work of Representation. In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (p. 3). SAGE Publications.
[19] Teck, K. (2011). *Making Music for Modern Dance: Collaboration In The Formative Years Of A New American Art* (p. 111). USA: Oxford University Press.

his theory on anthropology and multiculturalism[20], but recognises it as a representation of a 'collective of social identities'[21] brought together by ritual, as Graham fully understood – as Foucault also did- that human knowledge and existence are interlaced. There is deep sense of the relationship between the sacred and the profane, of the human and divine in this choreography that celebrates private and traditional belief, framed by the movements of female dancing bodies. Graham designed the costumes and played here with the spectator's sensitivity to colours, setting out the character of the single dancer as dressed in white, the performativity of this choice automatically bestowing upon the single female dancing body a different social significance that the one attached to the group of female dancers. This piece is performed in three sections: the 'Hymn', the 'Crucifixus' and the 'Hosanna', the specific naming bringing to us the canonical gospels and defined religious iconography. The 'Hymn' is about the Pietà, one of the artistic representations associated with Our Lady, the other two being Mater Dolorosa and Stabat Mater. 'Crucifixus' evokes the feeling of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and the last section – the beautiful 'Hosanna'- is the celebration of the Assumption. Here, 'religion, ritual, and art began as one, and a religious or metaphysical element is still present'[22] in every section of this modern dance piece. The sections begin and end in silence, a feeling of ritualistic religious processions permeating the scene. As the group of female dancers constructs a mirroring formation, with the dancers positioning their cupped hands in their hips, the solitaire female dancing body dressed in white establishes a sacred space with her body as the focal point: this is the beginning of the journey of these characters, whose movements and interactions evolve as the rhythmical energy changes the emotional landscape of the sections. This production is a powerful theatrical statement and commands the 'emphatic parallelism' of the discerning audience. As Beckerman argues in *The Social Body and Social Theory*, this empathy reflects 'the shifts of tension either between the characters or between stage and audience'[23] and rests on the historical significances present in the sacred and profane elements of the dance. Here, the intersection of cultures and beliefs we see is not a jerking experience, but an organic process. Graham's feminist discourse in this piece of modern dance puts the dancing female body at the centre of the narrative, framing it in opposition to the more familiar view of the male dancing body, often personified as a mesomorph presence capable of absorbing and embodying visions of patriarchal colonialism.

Martha Graham's *Frontier* is an extraordinary and timeless piece of dance art that has contributed to the definition of American feminist discourse. The choreography embodies the continuous experience of the woman's expressive possibilities found in how her body does move in space. This solo piece with

[20] Turner, T. (1995). Anthropology and Multiculturalism: What is Anthropology that Multiculturalism Should Be Mindful of It? In *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*. D. T. Goldberg (Ed.). Willey-Blackwell.
[21] *Ibid*., p. 407.
[22] Plagia, C. (1995). Sex and Violence or Nature and Art. In *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (p. 42). Yale University.
[23] Shilling, C. (2006). *The Body and Social Theory* (p. 8). SAGE Publications.

music by Louis Horst, with the female dancing body's costume designed by Graham herself and with a captivating set designed by Isamo Noguchi, was the first of Graham's 'American' works in which American identity was explored via one single female character inhabiting a symbolic space saturated with American tropes. Subtitled as *American Perspective of the Plains*, it began as part of an ensemble together with the piece *Marching Song*, this latter work set to music by Lehman Engle. It was premiered on 28 April 1935 at the Guild Theather in New York, though by the end of that same year Graham was performing just the piece *Frontier*. This mesmerising piece of modern dance encapsulates Graham's purpose of creating an 'uniquely American' dance aesthetics, which would 'bring forth an art as powerful as the country itself'[24]. The simplicity of the set design created by Isamo Noguchi is deeply performative as it is impossible to dissociate it from the movement sentences the female dancing body is articulating. Indeed, it is Noguchi's 'representation of space'[25] and its relationship with a human body functioning on that precise space what sets the performativity value of the set design. On stage, the rope sculpture seems to suggest a world without borders, the bench where the dancing female body sits a platform for her to stand and view the vastness of the new land that cannot be contained by gates and fences. It is an exhilarating experience in which body and space function in perfect harmony. The body in *Frontier* is intrinsically linked to the social and cultural semiotics attached to the concept of 'space' and to the connotations of freedom linked to American vast landscapes. This piece is also representative of the difference in dance analysis between a semiotic approach, in which we concern ourselves with how Graham's feminism discourse is represented, and the role of the discourse itself, which has the effect of making the spectator to reassess the role of the pioneering woman in the building of American identity. Horst's score creates again an exhilarant experience with the use of harmonization in fifths, like he did in *Private Mysteries*. Movement and music have an almost military feeling, it suggests at times a victorious march that makes the spectator to stand alert and to be open to the experience of vastness and lonely power enacted. Here, the score is not a long repetitive melody, but an ensemble of sections that correspond with the changing mode embodied in the dance sentences. To the audience, the pioneering woman's gaze fixed on the horizon signals her journey to the immense land ahead of her. She is not waiting for man to come. Instead, she is becoming part of a territory which is already being conquered by her actions. The dancer moves on stage, performing a series of steps, shaping a square on the floor. These steps delineate the shape of her own borders and give an indication of her future home. As the choreography ends, the woman 'closes the gate' again. After offering us a glimpse into her future, she goes back to contemplating the space in front of her. She becomes, all over again, part of the American landscape.

[24] Freedman, R. (1998). *Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life* (p. 75). Clarion Books.
[25] Lefebvre, Henri. (2007). *The Production of Space* (p. 33). Trans. Donald Nicholson- Smith. Blackwell.

Letter to the World is one of Graham's 'American' dance pieces that reflects on the position of the American woman and celebrates womanhood as part of the American experience. Devised and premiered in 1940 and revised in 1941, *Letter to the World* encapsulates the shamanistic value of the female dancer body in ritual practices, her presence evident in recognizable signs rooted in our consciousness. The lasting impact and legacy of this piece of dance art is evident in the iconic visual images that resulted from the choreography, the most notable the alluring photo by Barbara Morgan, 'Letter to the World (kick)', taken in 1940. In 1986, this photograph became the inspiration for one of the pictures included in the screen-print 'Letter to the World (kick) 389' by Andy Warhol, based on Morgan's original. Barbara Morgan had seen a choreography by Martha Graham in 1935 in New York - when the country was still gripped by the Great Depression - and was fascinated by Graham's new dance technique and by the connexions she was making in her work concerning recognized features embedded in American identity. Morgan's trademark aesthetics, in which the contrast between the colours white and black in her photos draws attention to the expression of the dancer's face and body, absorbed the visual impact of the imaginary created by Graham, and their meet set the path for a collaborative effort that lasted over six decades. The title of this piece of dance art comes from an Emily Dickinson's poem: *This is my letter to the World*, written circa 1862.

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me
The simple News that Nature told
With tender Majesty
Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see
For love of Her Sweet countrymen
Judge tenderly of Me

Born in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830, Emily Dickinson is one of the most important American poets of her generation and was a favourite writer of Martha Graham. In context to the poem, Dickinson was an author worried with the idea of death, especially the death of those she loved, hence the poem has been often associated with the idea of isolation, as indeed is expressed when she talks about the World she cannot communicate with. In Graham's seminal work, the visual perception of the spectator is supported by kinetics elements and by the distinctive semiotic values attached to genre, to the female dancing body on stage. Yet, the piece is not meditative, but an exploration of the poetic internal landscape found in New England. It is a lyrical piece of modern dance that intimately encapsulates the identity of an American woman in time and space that presents herself in a way that outlines her as an independent agent. In this piece of modern dance, the design of the dancers' costumes denoted a recognition and closeness to decipherable American images associated with the pioneering movement. It rested on Graham's perceptions of the American woman – specifically the New England's woman- and her relationship with her male partners and the world around her. The whirling skirt, twirling sleeves

pinched at the elbow and the little cape covering the female dancing body's shoulders are performative, as the dance movements project the fabric onto the air, amplifying the space where the body itself is located. With a simple set designed by Arch Lauterer, the bench on stage and a high wooden structure to the right create an architectonical feeling, suggesting a garden or a space in which social encounters can, do and will take place. The arrival of the male dancer and his encounter with the female dancing body holds social significance, both agents recreating social acts of good manners, even bowing to each other in recognition. The groups of female and male dancing bodies also reinforce the social significance at the core of this dance, dancing in pairs or in formations, reproducing interaction amid social groups. The changing of mood in the piece and its consequences in the exchanges of movement sentences, when the female group of dancers return to the stage dressed in dark dresses and with black veils covering the faces, enact recognisable rituals of social significance surrounding death and mourning encoding human signifying practices. In this piece of modern dance, the relationship between the gendered dancers is subject to the poetic dance movements of the female dancing body on stage that encapsulated the many sides of Emily Dickinson's personality. The centripetal force created by these female dancing bodies generates what Sally Banes called 'the autonomous female on stage'[26], a highly complex social creation. The music score was by the American composer Hunter Johnson, and it played an intrinsic role in the performance as signifier. Chords and sounds function as signs, and they are part of a system which express meaning hybridity and an understanding of that which is represented. Johnson's orchestral music for *Letter to the World* reflected the influence of neoclassical, neoromantic and nationalist trends cohabiting in the States during the 1930s and 1940s, producing a lyrical landscape that was perfect foil for Graham's portraying of Emily Dickinson's poetics.

Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring* was premiered on 30 October 1944 in Washington D.C. and tells the story of a disappeared America. Devised as the Second World War was finally approaching an end, the story of a young frontier couple on their wedding day encapsulated hope and reinforced the American mythology created by the conquering of the West. This luminous piece of American identity won the Pulitzer Price to its composer, the American Aaron Copland, whose variations of the Shaker hymn *Simple Gifts* included in the original score is now played as a concert suit, yet it was originally an intimate chamber work for thirteen instruments only, the steady ostinato repeating the same musical voice and separating, yet unifying, the two melodies in the score. This choreography by Graham is also linked to a poem, this time by the American author Hart Crane. In the poem *The Dance*, the author's suggestive lines, '*O Appalachian Spring! I gained the ledge; Steep, inaccessible smile that eastward bends, And northward reaches in that violet wedge* […]', encoded the ideas of simplicity, work and family values at the core of a settled community. A

[26] Banes, S. (1998). *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (p. 165). Routledge.

feeling Graham took and transferred on to a choreography she coded as a telling of love, piety and honour encapsulated in Aaron Copland's mesmerising score, in which the Shaker tune beautifully gelled in the music with the interactions of the male and female dancing bodies on stage. The piece opens with a serene composition of strings and winds, the female and male dancers slowing grouping as social entities: the revivalist preacher, the central character of the older pioneer woman, the young frontier couple to be married and the followers. It is a happy and luminous piece of dance art, very nearly pictorial at times, in which genre dynamics are harmonious and strong, signifying the strength of human relationships based on shared beliefs. In a simple yet powerful set design, Isamo Noguchi recreated a feeling of open space and the existence of houses and territories, of new communities being built. The entrance of the revivalist priest is almost like the arrival of a mystical presence, it encapsulates the strength common belief has in the formation of new social groups. Later, this male presence is taken over by the entrance of a group of female followers, whose vivacious movement sentences code in their movement sentences the role of prayer in their lives, of the influence that shared moral ground has on the formation of human communities. The interactions of the dancing bodies are pregnant with social significance and evocative of social rituals, like the pas a deux of the young frontier couple or the gendered formations of the groups of followers. Here, Graham's choice of costumes created an atmospheric imaginary, as the ensemble of female and dancing bodies' dancing patterns, interactions and costumes influence their performative effect on the audience, recreating imageries of early twentieth century America that encapsulate the shaping of its identity as a nation. In this piece of modern dance, the support and stability found in established communities are represented by the older pioneer woman. Her gestures are secure and open, at times almost stately, but the energy is different, and the movement of this definitive civilized body exercises her presence in interactions with less dramatic force. In *Appalachian Spring*, the young Quaker couple being married by the revivalist priest are introduced to a new social setting. Accordingly, the body of the dancers play distinctive biological roles which profile their social identity: the husbandman's gesture is mesomorph, strong, while the bride's feminine and softer movements seem to shape her light-hearted abandon. The relationship between the young frontier couple to be married in this piece is evolutive. Yet, there is a feeling that the bride's movements are performed mainly under a male gaze, a perception that reinforces discursive gendered positions in a hierarchical and traditionalist way. Here, qualities of the civilized body appear in the interactions and coordinated movements of the followers, positioning them as finished social bodies that bestow on *Appalachian Spring* a stunning vision of social order, embodied in the semiotic activity performed on stage. In the choreography, the formations of 4-1 dancers (four followers and the revivalist priest), or 2-1 dancers (two of the followers and the priest alone), are almost exhilarating before the solo of the bride, whose dress has a white rose as a corsage pinned to her dress that visually codes her identity as innocent and virginal. Later, when the bride interacts with the older pioneer woman, the latter bridges the connexion between the young frontier couple's future life and their new world, as she instructs them in their future duties and roles, like when her movements

enact the holding of a baby to a sat and attentive bride. It offers a vision of settling female domesticity that depicts clear characteristics of a social body in a civilized social group, in precise chronotope. It is a learning exercise to the bride, pointing to the path to follow if she is going to be accepted within the rules of a community. But as we carefully watch the human interactions playing out, glimpses of Graham's encoded exploration of female and male identities in a precise space become evident. In *Appalachian Spring*, the group of female dancers embody the position of the young women in this particular social group and share characteristics – a social body- which make them participants of a representative social grouping. Their semiotic activity conveys Bakhtin's belief that the individual exists as part of a group[27]. Indeed, the older pioneering woman represents the finished social body to the bride. The bride, an unfinished social entity instead, is entering what Norbert Elis called 'the lengthy process of education before [the body] is accepted fully into society'[28] and it is related to what Shilling calls the 'social control' of societies (2006, 132). This perspective is intimately related to the formation and shaping of the social body and to the delimiting of civilized bodies functioning in social groups. In *Appalachian Spring*, age, movement, and genre craft the social body of the characters, purporting a definitive social world grounded into the corporeality of the human body. It is a luminous ethnographical approach to American history in precise chronotope. Identity and setting are demarcated, enmeshed in our emotional perception of pioneering America. Here, the final body-product is a result of both, nature, and culture. In *Appalachian Spring* Graham adapted her percussive technique to the historical period of the piece, making its semiotic and feminist discourse more recognizable to an audience, whilst widening its appeal across the sensorial spectrum. In this mature piece of modern dance, Martha Graham left behind her representation of the single woman's journey in the pioneering era of the United States and delivered a seminal work on American tradition and nationhood that explored binary opposites with historical identifiable traditions at its core.

In the works of *Heretic* (1929) *Lamentation* (1930), *Primitive Mysteries* (1931), *Frontier* (1935), *Letter to the World* (1940) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), the shared valency of the dancing bodies on stage underlines Durkheim's postulate that systems of belief and knowledge are socially constructed. These decisive works are representative of what Judith Lynne Hanne defines as 'the American temperament'[29], as indeed can be categorized as a vivid interpretation of the American *zeitgeist*. Here, cultural representation is enmeshed in bodily experience, delineating its margins. In these works, subjective experience and practice refine those 'margins of the body' and produce an expressive final product. This is due to our capacity to read signs and to recognize their semiotic

[27] Bakhtin, M. (1982). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays: 1*. University of Texas Press Slavic Series.
[28] Shilling, C. (2006). *The Body and Social Theory* (p. 131). SAGE Publications.
[29] Hanna, J.L. (1988). *Dance, Sex, and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire* (p. 205). University of Chicago Press.

activity in a way that captures our imagination; also, to our sensitivity to the movement sentences the choreographies suggest and leave open to our interpretation. Here, what counts is the dancing bodies 'and the stories they tell'[30]. In these seminal pieces of modern dance there is an element of cognitive understanding in the stories we are told, also a theatrical flavour that connects the performance with definitive anthropological American's traits of identity. In her works, Graham's feminist discourse does not contain the feminist rhetoric associated to post deconstructive practice. Instead, she presents to the spectator a bodily performative dramaturgy interlaced with how 'the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived'[31]. Martha Graham's contribution to modern dance is indisputable and acknowledged across multidisciplinary realms. Her consecration as a centripetal force in American modern dance is justified by Camille Plagia as she classifies Graham as 'revolutionary', linking her corpus to the 'primacy of the body in the North American intellectual tradition'[32]. Sally Banes also supports this view and places Graham – among other dancers such as Duncan, Humphrey, St. Denis or Fuller - as belonging to a group that raised modern dance 'as a democratic or communal nationalist art form'[33]. Graham's proposal of a prescriptive set of meanings gave a feminist discursive validity to these seminal works of modern dance devised and performed in a definitive milieu of American *zeitgeist*. Her illuminating works delivered magistral visions of the social body, sociocultural semiotics and embodiment; concepts that became unique experiences of womanhood influencing American feminist discourse. In the global sphere of modern dance, Martha Graham's works delivered a corpus 'possessing an eternal universal value'[34] that shaped and is, intrinsically, part of the fundamental significance encoded in our lasting and universal perception of female identity and the female body across disciplines and borders.

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