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The pelvis as a focus: Marta Graham, a grammar

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ABSTRACT
The American dancer and choreographer Marta Graham (1894 - 1991) inaugurates not only a new way of organizing narrativity and claims in the scene, but how to insert the female body into another kinesthetic and kinetic agenda. With the justification of the need to pay attention to psychological traits, he organizes training with adjustments especially in floor work whose emphasis is on the female pelvis. She herself lends her body to trial and error for what is called the "pelvic truth" house. Today, the vocabulary and syntax of the Graham technique share notoriety, but do not confer its diffusion for requiring unfeasible expenditure in a world "in a hurry". The technique survives in the midst of the current miscellany of procedures to arrive at the scene.

Keywords: Graham Technique, Floor Work, Female Pelvis, Kinetic grammar.

1 INTRODUCTION

Between the 1970s and 1990s, the dancer, who had enjoyed them for decades, gained prominence and notoriety, but the artistic design provided by the vocabulary and *sui generis* syntax of the American Marta Graham (1894 - 1991). The expression of the "house of pelvic truth" (BANNERMAN, 2010), current among the various dancers of the company, seems to be the unfolding encapsulated especially in *the floor work* and in the spirals, always starting from the pelvis.

However, the current agenda of the contemporary scene seems to restrict the possibility, paradoxically, of the various types of languages, of the diversity of procedures, including what is available as a formative of the specificity of the dancing body. This understanding is a product of the rush to appoint oneself as the organizer of a new "model" necessary to poetize the scene (WALON, 2011), and with difficulties in advancing in the academic and artistic sectors. Generically, they call them "reports of "individual" experiences that are not transferable to others. They are ineffective

theoretical and justificatory utterances, in an attempt to draw attention to what cannot be shared; They use maxims and jargon of the fashion of so-called "scientific" or philosophical production and refer to everything as "political".

This began in the theoretical field in the 1960s, guided by the French relativistic philosophers (DELEUZE, G.; GUATTARI, 2011) who appropriate findings from other areas to justify elocutions. He makes this the foundation of the so-called "reports of individual experiences". However, the insertion of dance as a knowledge-propelling activity goes back "far", from the first court manuals of the city-states in what is now Italy. Although the attempt to erase the contributions of choreographers who do not fit into the *mainstream* can be foreseen here and there, one cannot forget the exercise of hundreds of dance creators in the construction of tools and vocabularies suitable for organization in dance.

What is a body? What is a movement? These are recurring questions in current writings on dance. This seems to be the floor that many want to sneak on, but forget that they are questions that have always been the object of creators. Self-reflection comes from afar; let the authors of the court manuals or Jean-Georges Noverre (1727 – 1810) and *Letters on Dance and Ballet* (1760) with the "Action Ballet". Some manage to present new ways of organizing the scene based on such questions, but what thrives are verbiage and deception under the excuse of poetic license in articles and justifications for the scenic enterprise. They want to make "critical self-reflection" the framework they claim to be based on, yet they sneak on the surface of what they intend to communicate, such as activism and victimization of their surroundings.

There are chronologically previous artists who postulated innovation in a secluded environment, but demonstrated the effort and detachment of energy for such a purpose. Among them, the intent of the American dancer and choreographer Martha Graham, whose apex is the role configured for the female pelvis in dance and another scenario for the moving body. The daring, in the back and forth between the stage and the classroom, was helped by male dancers, such as her husband Erick Hawkins (1909 –1994). Which needs to be seen, too, as a boldness not witnessed in the theatrical dance scene. western. Graham's "breakthrough" is at the summit of the ideals of a language, which can be universally transferred into a grammar of steps and movement.

Her ambition for the much-vaunted "emotional interiority", with a presence in her productions, thanks in part to conversations with her father, a psychiatrist, finds shelter in its own format that unfolds in another scenic vocabulary through training and understanding of the dancing body: the "intimate sensation" initiated by the *contraction/release* binomial, especially in *floor work*, in the need to confer horizontality to what is in encounter with the female anatomy and in the synchronous or non-synchronous use of the arms. However, it is not apparent that they will accept the training proposed by Graham as a gain to the artistic enterprise for the dancing body.

This undertaking is based on the choice not to hide the bodily effort, but to open up the falls and suspensions, the spirals and the displacements through the scenic space, walks and runs. This is shaped by the intrinsic characteristics of the area and the kinesthetic and kinetic characteristics that come from them.

However, there are few authors to dwell on the type of proposition modulated in the grammar developed by Martha Graham; a laborious and persistent record drawn and often altered in more than six decades of trajectory. The analyses are based on scenic productions, especially those devoted to ancient Greek plays in which women are involved in tragedies. Pulula literatura (BANES, 1998; SIEGEL, 1979; JOWITT, 1983, 2005, 2009; SORELL, 1986; REYNOLDS, 2013) dedicated to the scenic feats of Graham and his followers, but does not resort to or does not emphasize what has been formatted from the female pelvis, and Graham's grammar does not seem to find an echo among artists who call themselves "contemporaries". They seem to forget the minutiae needed to format a body in action.

A grammar with the set of words and recurrent organization allows the content in sentences that, in turn, become eligible thanks to recursion (PINKER, 2003). Its punitive nature does not limit the complexity of what is enunciated. However, any grammar has rules, which are molded into subsystems. Thus, the kinetic grammar established by Martha Graham is also constituted – the diversity found in it seems to have no counterpart in the 20th century; the ballet arranged from the court, especially that of Louis XIV, continues the saga of inclusions and exclusions without erasing the principle of fundamental principles: verticality.

We want to emphasize here the importance of the grammar of the Graham technique as a *sui generis* endeavor. We present aspects of *the modern dance* of the American lineage and also discuss, albeit briefly, the modeling of what is known as the Graham technique. Borrowing the expression "house of pelvic truth" (BANNERMAN, 2010) reinforces what we imagine this displacement promoted by her by insisting on the female anatomy. Far from exhausting, the discussion attempts to erect what seems to be dormant.

1.1 AMERICAN MODERN DANCE

The American critic Walter Sorell (1986) points out a controversy, that modern dance is not systemic, but a state of mind that emphasizes the personal artistic dream. What appears to be weakness may be, at the same time, his natural strength: "the extreme of individual expression" (SORELL, 1986, p. 388). But he seems to forget the strength of grammar, especially the vocabulary composition developed by Martha Graham. Taking the center of the body, from which radiates movements made visible with the lower region of the abdomen and the prominence of the pelvic area, the main line of what is meant, is a unified master task for those who dance.

The expression *modern dance* was used for the first time in 1926, precisely to designate what Graham began to undertake: a new vocabulary of gesture and a new "phraseology" of movement (BARIL, 1987). We can affirm it, today, as a breakthrough of the scenario presented as scenic dance.

As stated by Sally Gardner (2008), *modern dance* is developed in relation to "we move". However, for this to happen, paradoxically, there must be particularities contributed by individuals. If *modern dance* succeeds in implementing this relationship containing it, there will always be a space for reflection on such a paradox. In the author's understanding, *modern dance* is resistant to generalizations and operates at the limit of what can be shared between individual bodies and the physical relationship between them.

The New York critic John Martin (1893-1985) became the broad defender of *modern dance* and did not seem to see in it the existence of a paradox. As the first dance critic of *The New York Times*, he has an unknown territory, and precisely because of this the possibility of conceiving art and dance, and the defense of *modern dance*. Which means developing along with *modern dance*, but also analyzing what is happening in the scene, promoting new understandings and, especially, dedicating oneself to what one cuts as a professional occupation. Martin emphasizes the need for the audience's openness to the scenic enterprise *of modern* dance to what dancers can engender with their bodies and, as he focuses on Graham's technique, and what they dance through a dogged representation of the interiority of those who dance. He credits this as a true art form (MARTIN, 1989).

> John Martin, a major proponent of modernist dance, linked modern dance to phenomenology by arguing (along with others) that perception itself was a neuromuscular event, an activity of and within our bodies. For Martin, modern dance was a new art that made tangible the mutual genesis of a body-self and a world (GARDNER, 2008, p. 56).

Modern dancers have embarked on a new way of perceiving the scene, and what inhabits it becomes an indisputable fact:

> Like Picasso, Matisse, and other modernist painters, modern dancers created new ways for people to see themselves, from angular, disjointed compositions of body parts to colorful, rounded, and flowing contours. New images emerged from new roles. Modern dance was distinct from other artistic genres in the groups of people it attracted: white women (many of whom were Jewish), gay men, and some African-American men and women. Women occupied leadership roles on and off the stage, replacing the common scenic image of the sexual naïve with that of the pioneering individual who moved his own body with abrupt and unsettling force (FOULKES, 2002, p. 3).

As the author (2002) points out, for the modernists of American dance, life is laborious in accordance with the present motto, especially before the 2nd. World War, of "Do It Yourself", but it is also the possibility of uniting bodily procedures accessible to "everyone", to universality, with the individuality of those who dance. The mission of uniting apparent opposites, instances of the psychological and instances of the social.

With these procedures, you change what you see and who sees them. "Modern dance changed what was on stage, who was in the audience, and the expectations of the audience" (FOULKES, 2002, p. 27). This alteration necessarily takes place as a package whose main apex is the way of representing, the technique, how this can be articulated in the bodies. "Personal expression has remained the inspiration and motivating force behind modern dance" (FOULKES, 2002, p. 37), however, the technical framework allows us to go beyond the individualistic and "interior" perspective.

More than the creativity inherent in the choreographic and narrative process, we want to reinforce the dedication to the systematization and rationalization of a movement code – a technique, an educational instrument of the movement itself – that Graham had to build in order to sustain, in turn, his choreographic universe when he extended it from solo work to group productions (BANNERMAN, 1999).

1.2 GRAHAM TECHNIQUE: "HOUSE OF PELVIC TRUTH"

In the classroom and on stage, he draws a choreographic lexicon and a grammar that is unique throughout the course of more than five decades. The anatomical alternations are the product of the understanding of the breath in an opposition – contraction and *Release* – the apex of which starts from the pelvic area. Its aim has always been to make visible the "tensions" and the different states that the theme may arouse.HART-JOHNSON, 1997).

The Graham technique forever alters the understanding of how dance can become a kinetic act soaked in the tensions that take us by storm. Sequencing from the ground takes the need for the malleability of the pelvis to erupt in spirals and unprecedented use of the arms, until then. The expression "house of pelvic truth" (BANNERMAN, 2010), current among the various dancers of the company, goes against what we defend as a professional choice, whose unfolding cannot be inferred by the person responsible when proposing and shaping another *training for* what is imagined to represent: "interiority" when it focuses on the binomial *contract/release*, contract and expand. "the phrase 'pelvic truth' was synonymous with the rigors involved in the anatomical movement of the pelvis that needed to be conquered to deliver the torso drama" (BANNERMAN, 2010, p. 1).

Graham (1983) expresses himself on the expression "pelvic house of truth":

> I am amazed that my school in New York has been termed 'the house of pelvic truth' because so much of the movement originates in a pelvic thrust or because I tell a student "you are not moving your vagina". This led a member of the company to tell me that when I prepared one of my ballets, Diversion of Angels, at Juilliard, for his graduation, he walked away thinking that the Martha Graham Dance Company was the only one in America where men were envious of the vagina. [...] I know that my dances and technique are considered deeply sexual, but I pride myself on putting on stage what most people hide in their deepest thoughts. (GRAHAM, 1991, p.142).

Henrietta Bannerman (1999) summarizes the way Graham sought to find the truth of the movement during the initial phase, but which is perpetuated in a grammar:

> ... It had a 'strong and tense trunk with its deep contractions and spasmodic releases of breath'. Twists in the upper body, walks that carried the dancer dramatically and purposefully through space, hips and elbows thrust in counterpoint to each other, or to the knee, typified Graham's austere vocabulary (paragraph 5).

The dancer and historian Victoria Thoms (2013), experienced in Graham's grammar, shows a special preference for the "deep stretches" elicited by a typical part of training concentrated in *floor work*. Sitting, with the bones of the pelvis glued to the floor, arms extended at the sides, at the cadence of the breath, one has the feeling that something is projected with the curvature of the spine in continuous expansion:

> Then, the form releases and from the lower part of the pelvis, where the thigh bones insert into the hip cavity, the energy arises backwards and downwards, initiating the undulating release of the spine in a forward diagonal. Now the spine is straight but tilted over the legs spread, the force rising simultaneously from the top of the head and descending to the floor through the pelvis. It's as if the entire torso is cantilevering over a deep precipice, a chiasm, resisting a descent into oblivion while reveling in the ability to maintain this precarious vibrant position. From there, the entire trunk returns to vertical, where the exercise began, so that it can be repeated again (THOMS, 2013, p. 160. Our translation).

Graham dedicates herself to accentuating *the floor work* she developed with the expression "flesh to the ground": "an instruction that has put us skillfully in touch with the search for pelvic truth – a truth that resonates with the search for the primordial and earthly aspect of Graham's dances" (BANNERMAN, 2010, p.2)

Graham's technique class is based on the goal of controlling movement in five basic categories, usually starting at floor *work*, from bottom to top: (1) on the floor - sitting or supine; (2) kneeling; (3) standing – both in place and moving through space; (4) in the air, and (5) 'the falls' (HART-JOHNSON, 1983), which are taught at all vertical levels, the final 'fall' called the 'backward fall' which uses the use of four levels – sitting, standing, bench press and back. After the floor work, he gets up to a standing position, although we can't forget the help of his arms. In this change of level, the arms tear through the air with spirals coordinated with the movement of the whole body. It should be noted that the floor work section of the classroom is a phase of the work for the standing position (HART-JOHNSON, 1983).

Floor work is composed of a series of articulated positions always with breathing and the *contraction/release binomial,* which has the pelvis as the driving force of the movement, namely: warm-up, stretching, sitting in the first position and fourth open position; the hands curved in the shape of shells and legs and the arms in a parallel position, with the simultaneity of the feet flexed.

It should be noted that we must not forget the impact of the binomial on this process *contraction/release* and breathing – exhaling/inhaling, whose impact is also reflected in falls and suspensions; When you stretch, inhale the air; When it contracts, exhale itself. The contraction of the trunk and the transfer of weight to a part of the back play a fundamental role in the alternation of the formation of images for those who see them.

The falls are done slowly at first, and then successively falls, the counts are eliminated one by one and the movement is reduced until finally, the dancers fall to the floor in a count and regain position in a count in lateral extensions and twists of the spine, in the second part of the class that Graham calls *the lift series - center work.* Here the knee flexion exercises take place, always performed with the swings of the torso, swings that depend on the coordination of the arms; all in different qualities of accents and rhythms.

Therefore, basically, a class of Graham's technique is developed from floor *work, together with breathing exercises*, combined exercises to strengthen the knee, exercises performed standing in the center of the room, such as *pliés and* tendus, exercises on the bar to especially work *on leg range, and diagonals, walks, runs, side falls, jumps* and spins (HOROSKO, 2002).

> The entire floor work section of the class is seen as a progression from a seated position to a standing position. In fact, up until this point, there was a prescribed transition phrase of movement connecting each exercise (also called a 'combination') to the next. These formalized conjunctions between the exercises make it possible, in the most advanced classes, to perform almost the entire series of non-stop ground work, from "Pronto, e..." to knee work or "the lift" (BANNERMAN, 2010, p.2).

In summary: Both start and arrive through the pelvic muscles, the contraction and the stretching; in the first, the front of the torso becomes concave and lengthens, in a curved line, the spine. The *release*, the moment of inhalation, projects and expands the energy that the contraction had concentrated and brings the spine into its normal alignment. In the pelvis, the beginning of contraction when movement travels down the spine to the head. Relaxation, its counterpart, also starts from the pelvis until it stops on the back. In pelvic and abdominal contraction, in *release,* breathing occupies a preponderant role, inhaling and exhaling.

As *Joshua Legg (2009) suggests, Graham's technique emphasizes spirals, but understanding their parts is fundamental to achieving it. For this reason, he gives the tip of observing the spirals in nature, the flora, "perhaps helps in the understanding of how the pelvis and the spine work together in the twists and curvature of the torso" (2009,* our translation*). The spirals bring the dimension of three-dimensionality.* They start in the fourth position, by one of the hips, and show how the pelvis should be connected to the floor because it is the pelvis that is the point of stability and the motivator of movement. The spiral has an upward rotation movement that spreads through the trunk and the action of the shoulder blade that "pulls" in the opposite direction, and so on (GIGUERE, 2014).

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Howard Gardner (1993) reinforces the principles linked to this technique and how much it becomes an invention of the 20th century, similar to what we can observe in Einstein and Stravinsky, for example. The author's enthusiasm must be considered, after all it is the invention of a dance idiom, in the form of a new combinatorics of steps and movements from the (female) pelvis.

> Students were aware of the power of the back, the unique role of the pelvis and the pressure of the floor; they were introduced to how feelings can emerge through contractions, releases and stretching, spasms of the muscles of the torso... Graham made use of vivid imagery to convince the desire to move... (GARDNER, 1993, p. 298)

2 FINAL THOUGHTS

Turning to Marta Graham will always be a tribute, but what we want here is to draw attention to the role of the female pelvis in the grammatical design of the technique or mechanism by coherence with what was shaped in the scene. We are convinced that this venture took advantage of longevity, but it points to the need to return to dance, and not only in factors external to it. It doesn't need slogans, flags or "passwords" to make itself seen as a pioneering act.

The language invented and developed by Graham is in itself a historical-artistic intervention, in the sense of allowing those who dance to shape images and, in particular, those that want to denote an "inner reality". It is true that language has an agenda, but from it weaving alternatives into the body may be possible. Knowing the training proposed by Graham, therefore, adds another possibility to update yourself as a professional choice. It requires bodily availability and costly task, although it may incite new shortcuts, and it also requires the enjoyment of other mottos than those that have currently flourished.

The deep connection between inner expression and movement defended by Graham does not, however, prevent his vision of dance from being guided by the rigor of the movement itself, by the specialization of movement, if we may say so, which only formal training and systematic preparation can confer: The coming and going of opposing parties seems never tested before; Graham has done so in his more than 60-year professional career.

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