

Martha Graham's Modern Dance and its Impact on France during the Fifties

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During the spring of 1950, Martha Graham, the American inventor of modern dance, started her first European tour. The opening night, at the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées* in Paris, was considered a disaster. With very few exceptions, the public and the press were negative about the company's performance, called 'a crossword puzzle',¹ and about the right of modern dance to be considered an art. Graham and her company did not benefit even from a *succès de scandale*, which accompanied Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, on the same stage in 1913. The rest of the tour was reduced to just one more appearance before the Parisian audience, and although the company went to London, they did not dance, and the tour was cancelled. The expected conquest of artistic Europe by American modern dance and its promoters was a failure. A second tour, in 1954, was slightly better received by the Europeans, but the triumph had to wait until the sixties, when Graham and her dance were called a new chapter in the history of dance.²

Martha Graham was born in 1894 and died in New York City in 1991, after a career of seven decades. Our paper will try to explore the reasons which determined the negative reception of modern dance in Europe during the fifties, analyzing the way in which the political, cultural and social intermingled into the cultural resistance to the new form of dance promoted by the Americans. We will focus on France primarily, preferring to concentrate on a country whose reaction toward Graham was, even if not identical, representative of the way in which the Western European countries related themselves to American modern dance and American art in general during the fifties.

Soon after the Second World War, in France, the image of the smiling Yankee from the top of his tank, liberating the European cities, was replaced by a feeling of resentment. The presence of the Americans gradually became unwelcome, 'the French feeling tired of being occupied'.³ In a tense and suspicious political and diplomatic atmosphere,⁴ the American cultural offensive, devised by the State Department, the

Central Intelligence Agency, and the Voice of America, began.⁵ Carefully and extensively organized, the cultural offensive was designed in very competitive terms, intended to show Europe that the US was not just a country which produced scientists, but ‘also creative artists’,⁶ and ‘to demonstrate the superiority of the products and cultural values of the system of free enterprise’.⁷ The American Institute of Contemporary Arts proudly wanted to show Europe the modern dance, an art in which they considered themselves the pioneers, and considered Graham one of the most representative and successful artists in this field.

The competition for world supremacy transformed culture into a weapon meant not only to obtain and consolidate supremacy, as in the case of the United States, but also to reshape and redefine the sense of a national identity, as in the case of France. After losing political power, the fact that even their cultural superiority was questioned touched the already wounded feelings of the French. They felt that, to put it in Bertrand Russell’s words, God was no longer European and bourgeois.⁸ The arts, including dance, lost their ‘political innocence’,⁹ gradually operating in a dialogue with both exclusive and inclusive ideologies. Under these circumstances and already with a long tradition in French culture, to be anti-American was not only an ad-hoc reaction against the new rulers of the world, but it became an organized duty meant to protect French cultural primacy. The intellectuals, the leaders of the national cultural resistance, involved themselves in the battle against what was metaphorically called the ‘Coca-Colonization’ of France. It soon became a national issue, discussed in the pages of *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, and the image of a French person giving up the tradition of drinking wine for the Coca-Cola was portrayed as an outrage and a conquest by American materialism. Even more significant and with deeper consequences was the fight against the American cultural offensive, the ‘un-equal exchange’ and ‘asphyxiation of French culture’.¹⁰ (Before Graham’s tours to France, famous names of its culture and society, such as Sartre, Beauvoir, Cocteau, to name just a few, traveled to the US, and back home shared their American experience with their compatriots.)

Only a few intellectuals, such as Maurois, seemed to believe in ‘the cultural bond between the US and France’, accepting that ‘the US has taken the lead’;¹¹ the rest, strongly represented by Sartre and Beauvoir, looked at America with contempt,

reassuring themselves and the culture they represented that America could not be a menace to French culture, 'renowned for sophistication and brilliance'.¹² The USA was just a 'cultural desert', a nation of Chevy-drivers and gum-chewers, an 'entertaining' country.¹³ The Americans were portrayed as a nation for which thinking 'was a waste of time', among whom the French 'real' intellectuals felt 'like a ghost',¹⁴ 'titans in the material world, but Lilliputians in matters of mind'.¹⁵

The French were struggling to maintain their last stronghold, their culture, its viability, credibility, and superiority. In this context, anti-Americanism was a component of a very complex web of feelings related to the shattered French national identity, and it was one of the causes for the negative reception of modern dance. It manifested itself through a negation of the Americans' power to create and present art, because of their lack of traditions, natural qualities, and emotions necessary for it. At the time Graham came to France, what diminished even more the chances of modern dance to be accepted was its promotion by an American woman. During that time, American women were considered inferior to the intellectually sophisticated French women -- yet another occasion to blame America and its values. The negative publicity of American women was consistent and powerful, in newspapers, books, and cartoons. Like their husbands, they were seen as anti-intellectual, incapable of passionate love, materialistic, and badly dressed. The *France-Amérique* edition of *Le Figaro* called them also 'exigeantes et égoïstes comparées à leurs soeurs européennes', who, 'Parisiennes ou paysannes, elles demandent peu et donnent beaucoup'.¹⁶ 'Les Américaines exigent beaucoup mais elles donnent peu',¹⁷ said the same magazine, while Beauvoir depicted them as falsely self-assured, servile, incapable of any social or political thinking, and, because of the Puritanism of their culture, ignorant of their bodies.¹⁸ Belonging to such an unintellectual and unsophisticated category of women, Graham was considered, even before her arrival, little or not at all capable of thinking, playing and exporting culture.

The negative reaction against Graham's modern dance was a response to its 'Americanism' and to the fact that it was led by an American woman, but it was also due to the fact that, during the fifties, as Janet Flanner said, France 'leaned on its past'.¹⁹ During the 'vacillation between modern and nostalgia',²⁰ which characterized the fifties, modernism was less emphasized than the neoclassicism which was seen as a safer

method to maintain cultural superiority. It was not a new type of cultural reaction during national difficulties; for instance, before and during the First World War, even the cubists painted in a 'neoclassic' style, a trend considered more suitable for an art which was a part of the artistic national revival. Even if not absent, modernism in the fifties mostly manifested itself in arts in which France had already gotten a pride in rebelling against traditions. Surrealist, fauvist and cubist exhibitions were presented to the public before and during the early fifties, while Picasso, Leger, and Vlaminck²¹ regained a new wave of fame; Proust and Joyce were 'freshened up' and presented to the French public in exhibitions which acclaimed their role in modern literature.

The stage arts, the theater and dance, had less or almost no modernist orientation. The way Camus (*Caligula*), Giraudoux (*La folle de Chaillot*), and Sartre (*Les mains sales* and *La putaine respectueuse*) wrote the plays presented before the public who 'packed' the halls, despite the hardships of everyday life,²² was modernist, but the plots and the problems of the heroes had a strong classic component. On stage also came classic masterpieces, like Hamlet, or plays by foreign authors who pinpointed negative aspects of their cultures, such as Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*; it was the foreign play with the greatest success because, after all, it showed that, before exporting their culture, the Americans should have fixed their problems at home!²³

If being an American and being modern were already difficulties on the path to success, the task of bringing something new in dance was even harder because it was the most complicated and sensitive art in the French cultural spectrum. The public in France always showed less interest in modern innovation of dance than the public in Germany and Britain, and despite the cultural officials' support for the modern stage arts, such as André Malraux's, modern dance never became a dominant element of the French culture.²⁴ Modern dance is, even if not totally, a negation of ballet, but despite being opposite to each other, the two forms of dance developed in a strong relationship with one another. In Britain and the US during the fifties Ashton and Balanchine promoted neoclassicism in ballet through a contemporary stylization of the technique.²⁵ One can say that it opened the way for an easier acceptance of modern dance in these countries because the neoclassical ballet, like modern dance, besides using a contemporary stylization of the technique, also went beyond the story, the beautiful decors, the

costumes, and the impeccable execution, concentrating more on the pure movement. Some modernist attempts attracted a moderate interest from the French public, such as Jean Weidt's *Ballets 38*,²⁶ which toured during the fifties with *Ballets Modernes de Paris* and Cocteau's *La mort de l'homme*, presented in 1946 by Roland Petit Ballet.²⁷ Danced to jazz and Bach's music, with angular and acrobatic movements, Cocteau's attempt was not in fact modern dance, but an interesting experiment which had the merit of presenting to the French public other forms of dance than ballet.

In France, during the fifties, the ballet was in its classical stage. Although the roots of ballet were, beside Italy, in France, and despite being a highly popular art, starting from the end of the 19th century the center of ballet moved to Denmark and Russia, France having to import the companies and dancers who made history on the Parisian stages.²⁸ By the time Graham came, the Cinderella of the French arts, the national ballet, was at new beginnings, in the process of being rebuilt and in its most classical stage. This was reflected by the themes, values, and aesthetics promoted during this period in the world of French ballet, but also by its nationalism. Classical works, such as *Giselle*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Copellia*, were presented promoting just French dancers. Because every valuable personality of French culture was needed, the 'not-enough' intellectual patriots from the war were acquitted or forgiven, this being the case for the collaborationist Lifar, the director of the Paris Opera Ballet,²⁹ even long forgotten ballets were presented, such as *Les Indes Gallantes*, whose premiere was during Louis XV's reign.³⁰ In this atmosphere characterizing ballet during the fifties, with its strong nationalism and classicism, other influences were considered inappropriate or simply rejected. Graham's dancing style was not only foreign, but it was also too far from the beauty of the classical ballet.

This lack of French openness toward other dances than ballet had as a direct consequence a public less prepared visually and emotionally to watch modern dance. Before the tour, in 1949, the Baroness de Rothschild, a financial supporter, friend, and promoter of American art, published a book called *La Danse Artistique aux États-Unis*³¹, introducing modern dance to her country and trying to prepare the public for its novelty. In spite of this, Graham faced an audience which was not ready for the style, technique, and themes of modern dance, who found comfort only in the classical beauty of ballet.

The broken and syncopated movements, the opposite of the ballet's fluidity and elegance, and Graham's peculiar technique – in which the focus is on the contraction of the diaphragm, the abdominal muscles, and the pelvic area – were a visual shock for the French audience. One of the critics said that, if Graham had given birth, she would have produced a cube.³² Using minimal props, based on suggestion, and costumes which looked casual, because of the use of jersey, wool, and cotton, modern dance, as the French public claimed, 'devalued' the dance, instead of enriching it. It is true that not everybody believed that the French audience's national cultural endeavor and aesthetic sophistication caused this negative reaction. The dance critic Pierre Tugal humorously remarked that the Parisians did not like modern dance because they were 'accustomed to pretty spectacles, which do not demand much from either intellect or emotion'.³³

At the moment when Graham, *l'avant-garde de l'avant-garde*, arrived in France, the renewed French national self-consciousness and the negative estimation of the American culture, reinforced and not eased by the American cultural offensive, contributed to the lack of success of the opening night. The public who could afford the high price of the tickets came to the show doubting the capacity of an American group of dancers led by a woman to offer real art, but they also came not having the tradition, the tools for understanding, and not even the patience to learn how to understand modern dance. Was then the unconvincing performance and the negative reception of Graham just a result of the complicated political and cultural atmosphere, as well as of a shattered national self-image of the French nation? The answer is no.

The way Graham was received in France during the fifties was also a result of Graham's own mistakes, of the inadequate way in which she designed the tour, and of personal problems. It is interesting to mention that her first invitation to dance in Europe came from Hitler, for the opening of the Berlin Olympic Games, but she rejected it because she was opposed the Nazi politics.³⁴ At the time Graham went to Europe, in the fifties, she had little knowledge of its history, recent traumas, and its public. Well-known as a highly self-centered artistic personality, little or not at all involved in the political and social events of her time, Graham did not prepare the tour from the perspective of an audience who, just a few years before, had struggled with a devastating war, and even at that time was only started on the path to recovery. The program Graham presented did

not and could not elicit a strong response in the minds and hearts of the French public. By comparison, Rossellini's movie, *Rome, Open City* was still making full halls at the time Graham danced in France, because its story of bravery and loss was more a part of the public's real and emotional world, compared to Graham's dances. Before the tour Graham proudly declared in an interview that she did not 'care if the Europeans will understand her dances, because what was important was to feel them'.³⁵ In consequence, she did not devise any strategy meant to help the reception of modern dance. One year before Graham, Merce Cunningham also toured Paris with his own company, but he had a different approach. Instead of presenting revolutionary dances both in technique and themes, Cunningham played in the middle, and he not only danced with a French ballerina, Tanaquil LeClerc, but also presented classical works, namely *The Seasons*, in a modernist version.³⁶

The dances presented by Graham focused either on American history and culture or on mythology. 'Frontiers' – Graham's trademark – , 'Appalachian Spring' and 'American Document' were 'a whole history, a whole life there',³⁷ pure Americana. The pioneer-dancers brought before the audience the American past, its traditions and beginnings, but the emotional flow between the artists and the public, which makes an artistic creation unforgettable, was not there that night. The desire and power of the American people to conquer the spaces, despite all hardships, was the last thing the French audience was ready to enjoy and applaud. Graham also presented dances based on mythology, mixtures of legend, sexuality and psychoanalysis, having as heroines dramatic and powerful feminine characters, such as Judith, Medea, Phaedra or Jocasta. Graham was fascinated by myths and by psychoanalysis, being a supporter of Jung's theories and therapies,³⁸ but even in these dances she tried to connect some of the themes with the American heritage. Having the suggestive, minimal props of Isamu Noguchi, often just a huge shell, a pair of bull's horns, or some hanging ropes, Graham explored the world of emotions, fears, repressed desires, and sexual fantasies of her heroines. Mythology as an artistic source of creation was not unknown to the French public; for instance, during the early fifties, Cocteau also explored it through his cinematic trilogy based on the character Orpheus. But unlike Graham, Cocteau's movies presented love as a possible hope for emotional fulfillment, while love in Graham's dances was

complicated, possessive, and destructive -- not a time of healing, but a time of crisis.

Love was, even if in a different form and phase, another reason which affected the tour negatively. Just a few years before, Graham, a woman in her late fifties, had married a much younger dancer from her group. Hoping to save their troubled relationship, she mostly focused on her emotional life before the tour. She even choreographed a dance based on the story of King Lear, 'The Eye of Anguish', through which she wanted 'to show Europe the real Hawkins',³⁹ her husband. Even during normal times the atmosphere in her company was a tense one, but now the tensions amplified. A former dancer declared that the 'solution' for a relationship with Graham was to be so in love with dance that working with her did not really matter.⁴⁰ During the tour, most of the dancers felt that they had been left behind and that it was a personal affair between Graham and her husband, ego, and delusions about her own importance. Graham's 'tremendous ego'⁴¹ made her push her aging body long after other dancers stopped, so, during the opening night, she injured her knee. Instead of giving her roles to other dancers, hoping to impress her husband and the whole audience, she preferred to dance. Not to mention that because the costumes were not ready, the dancers removed the pins until the last minute, before the curtain's rise. Like a bad omen, even the guest of honor, Mrs. Roosevelt, was late.⁴²

At the time of the intermission, 'the exhausted audience'⁴³ started to leave, not sufficiently attracted and impressed by American history and psychoanalysis. If they had stayed, they would have seen two of the most beautiful dances ever produced by Graham: 'Every Soul Is a Circus' and 'Letter to the World'. The first is an intriguing and delightful story about the human longing for happiness, while the second is based on Emily Dickinson's sensitive poetry. The next day, most of the press ignored the presence of the American group in Paris. Janet Flanner, the American correspondent who lived most of her life in Paris, scrutinizing with a keen eye the city's social, political, and cultural life, did not mention Graham. The tone of the press which discussed the company's tour varied between bewilderment and brutality. *Le Figaro* said: 'At the end of the evening, one could not stand any more symbolism and metaphysics; one would have liked to see the French cancan or the ballet from Faust'.⁴⁴ The second night was excruciating, as one of her former dancers said. Already before the start, it was a failure, and not only because nobody was buying tickets. Not at all supportive of her company,

Graham declared: 'If I can't dance, I don't give a damn if anyone dances'.⁴⁵ The next day the season was closed. The group traveled to London, but they did not dance. It was, in the words of Pearl Lang, one of the most gifted dancers of the company, 'a big mess'.⁴⁶ Graham preferred not to mention anything about the French tour in her memoirs, and except some of the former dancers' bitter memories, her biographers avoided the topic or presented it briefly. Back home, despite the failure of the American modern dance to prove the American superiority in terms of dance and innovation, the country awarded her a medal.

Shortly after, in 1954, Graham and her company returned to Paris in another attempt to conquer it. None of the elements which contributed to the first tour's failure disappeared. At most, they became less acute. A reason for the indifference with which the public received Graham and her company during the second tour might be the distress caused by the fall of Dien-Bien-Phu, and, beside and because of this, the cancellation of the expected visit of the Russian ballet. With 10,000 tickets sold, 'le tout Paris'⁴⁷ was planning to attend. In this atmosphere Graham's visit passed almost unobserved. The comments about the American modern dance group were sparse and short. 'Her visit here accomplished its mission in rousing great interest',⁴⁸ the American correspondent of *Dance Magazine* said politely, hoping for a new visit of the American artist. In 1954, when Martha Graham and her company left Paris, there were few signs which announced the future triumph of her art during the sixties in Europe, including France. At that time, the Parisian audience was desperate at not seeing the star of the Russian ballet, Galina Ulanova, 'with her sweet face and humble manners',⁴⁹ while Graham's tour apparently confirmed what Simone de Beauvoir stated, namely that America was not the birthplace of art.

During the sixties, modern dance was called 'the new wave', and, after more than a decade, Graham could finally be considered 'the best ambassador this country has ever sent'.⁵⁰ Graham, an artist from a country which did not have anything to offer to Europe in terms of culture, because of its 'cultural desert', was compared to and considered an equal of Picasso, Stravinsky, D. H. Lawrence and other innovators of the artistic world.⁵¹ Her influence in art, the critics said, was similar to that of Picasso, namely a break with the tradition through a new form of expression, equally sophisticated, strong, and

meaningful. Can this success be totally separated from the new political and social climate of the sixties? It would be simple to answer no, but it would be more interesting to see the proportions in which the background of art, namely the social and the political, affected the positive acceptance of American modern dance. Concentrating on France, our paper tried to demonstrate that Graham's tours in the fifties were more than a simple relationship between the French audience and an artist and her company. In the spring of 1950, when Graham's company first danced in Paris, at the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*, there was more than an artistic confrontation between two cultures. There were two nations, with their past, present, and future. It is fascinating to see how, when involved in a 'we-they' discourse, culture loses its neutrality, carrying and expressing beyond the national pride, the taboos, fears, and insecurities of a nation.

¹ Agnes DeMille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 297.

² Pearl Lang, 'Introduction', in Ernestine Stodelle, *Deep Song: The Dance Story Of Martha Graham* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984), p. XIV.

³ Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 46.

⁴ Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), p. XIII.

⁵ David Caute, *The Dancers Defects: the Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 2.

⁶ Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War* (New York: The New Press, 2000), p. 21.

⁷ Andree Grau and Stephanie Jordan, *Europe Dancing: Perspectives on Theatre, Dance and Cultural Identity* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 4.

⁸ Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated and Transformed American Culture since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 67.

⁹ Grau and Jordan, *Europe Dancing*, p. 4.

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- ¹⁰ Roger Philippe, *The American Enemy: A Story of French Anti-Americanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 432.
- ¹¹ Andre Maurois, *My American Journal* (London, Falcon Press, 1950), p. 174.
- ¹² Grau and Jordan, *Europe Dancing*, p. 36.
- ¹³ Pells, *Not Like Us*, p. 238.
- ¹⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 29.
- ¹⁵ Roger, *The American Enemy*, p. 425.
- ¹⁶ Victor Dallaré, 'Femmes Françaises and femmes américaines', in *La Vie Française*, 30 April 1946, pp. 199-200.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- ¹⁸ Beauvoir, *America*, p. 270.
- ¹⁹ Janet Flanner, *Paris Journal* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), p. 63.
- ²⁰ Grau and Jordan, *Europe Dancing*, p. 36.
- ²¹ Flanner, *Paris Journal*, p. 163.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- ²⁴ Grau and Jordan, *Europe Dancing*, p. 36.
- ²⁵ David Vaughan, 'Classicism and Neoclassicism', in *The Ballets Russes and Its World*, edited by Garafola Lynn and Nancy Van Norman Baer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 157.
- ²⁶ Grau and Jordan, *Europe Dancing*, p. 32.
- ²⁷ Flanner, *Paris Journal*, p. 59-60.
- ²⁸ Grau and Jordan, *Europe Dancing*, p. 35.
- ²⁹ Grau and Jordan, *Europe Dancing*, p. 49.
- ³⁰ Flanner, *Paris Journal*, p. 176.
- ³¹ DeMille, *Martha*, p. 181.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- ³⁴ DeMille, *Martha*, p. 223.

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- ³⁵ Don McDonagh, *Martha Graham: A Biography*, (New York, Paraeeger, 1973), p. 146.
- ³⁶ Richard Kostelanetz, *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time: Essays 1944-1992* (Chicago: A Capella Books), p. 54.
- ³⁷ McDonagh, *Martha Graham*, p. 137.
- ³⁸ Martha Graham, *Blood Memory* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 178.
- ³⁹ Robert Tracy, *Goddess: Martha Graham's Dancers Remember*, (New York: Limelight Editions, 1997), p. 134.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.66.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.69.
- ⁴² DeMille, *Martha*, p. 294.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- ⁴⁵ McDonagh, *Martha Graham*, p. 216.
- ⁴⁶ Tracy, *Goddess*, p. 134.
- ⁴⁷ Serge Lido, 'Russian Dancers in Paris', in *Dance Magazine*, 28 (1954), p. 18.
- ⁴⁸ Thomas Quinn Curtiss, 'Direct from Paris', in *Dance Magazine*, 28 (1954), p. 77.
- ⁴⁹ Pierre Tugal, 'Paris', *Dancing Times*, 44 (1954), p. 552.
- ⁵⁰ 'Graham returns amid Europe', in *Dance Magazine*, 53 (1963), p. 3.
- ⁵¹ A. H. Franks, 'Martha Graham in London', in *Dance Observer*, 30 (1963), pp. 10-14.