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Modern Dance, Embodiment, and Society: The Graham Technique's Resistance to Conditioned Physicality

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Abstract

Martha Graham, foremost pioneer of American Modern dance, is the originator and developer of what is known today as the Graham technique. When this technique is removed from performative contexts, the philosophy of its practice can add insight to a discussion of embodiment and what it means to resist socially prescribed embodiments. This paper will examine the ways in which the Graham technique cultivates awareness of embodiment's origins and processual nature, and therefore how a conscious resistance to social conditioning can arise. The neuroscientific and physiological processes behind this cultivation of awareness will be discussed, and several examples of resistance to social conditioning using key elements of the Graham technique will be developed.

I. Introduction

American Modern dance developed in the first half of the twentieth century, and, although eclipsed by subsequent developments of postmodern dance and contemporary dance, is still practiced today. When considered historically, it is often treated as a lineage of shape-based movement tied to problematic social and political systems. The subsequent developments of Postmodern dance and Contemporary dance sought to address some of those problems by rejecting shapes, rejecting theaters, and even rejecting categorization. Due in part to these rejections, consideration of Modern dance techniques is rarely extracted from the historical lenses of social and political contexts that they were (and are) performed in. I argue, however, that the interior-facing work of Modern movement practices, particularly that of Martha Graham's seminal technique, when extracted from those performative contexts, can offer something new to the consideration of Modern dance's impact on embodiment. While performative contexts must be acknowledged to exist and to be inseparable from Modern dance, to put them to the side and fix the focus on the internal work enacted by practicing the

Martha Graham technique offers a movement analysis that directly affects embodiment at a societal level. The awareness of embodiment cultivated in the Graham practitioner, as well as the estrangement from conditioned physicality enacted by the technique, activates a physical resistance against embodiments prescribed by social contexts. These prescribed social embodiments are the physical constrictions resulting from participation in a society that conditions the body to physiologically act in specific relationships to the external world. The constant activity of embodiment initiated and maintained by practicing the Graham technique resists such physical prescription by estranging the body from itself and excavating space for alternate modes of existing.

The body is an affective instrument of being. In other words, the body is in conversation with the external world, and responds to this conversation by assuming iterations of embodiment. This idea is crucial to understanding how cultivating awareness of physicality can have an impact on a body's interactions with the external world. The practice of dance techniques can serve as an access point to such cultivation, because dance techniques deal in the body's physicality, or, in other words, its capability to *do*. A definition of "doingness" put forth by Gilles Deleuze intersects doing with physicality, physicality with iterations of embodiment, and iterations of embodiment with the external world. In his 1997 work *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, Deleuze states that "what a body can do corresponds to the nature and limits of its capacity to be affected" (218).[1] In expressing what the body can do as a function of this capacity to be affected, he conceives of the body's doingness as a *cycle* of affective projection and response, rather than more linearly as a projection of outward-facing action. Doingness is cyclical; it involves embodiment as response and embodiment as projection, which is an idea central to understanding how the physical awareness cultivated by practicing a dance technique can impact the nexus of embodiment and external world. One dance technique in

[1] Deleuze, Gilles. *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. New York: Zone Books, 1992.

particular functions to cultivate this awareness: the Martha Graham technique, developed by the seminal American Modern dancer Martha Graham and her company, school, and legacy.

Before examining more closely this technique's relationship to a cultivated awareness of "doing," it is necessary to zoom out and determine exactly what defines a dance technique. A dance technique is a physical vocabulary tied together by a specific philosophy or theory of movement. This physical is not just formal in nature, or designed to regulate visual perception of a body within space. Such a definition remains two-dimensional, and fails to account for the interior involvement of a dance technique, its affective physical responses, and its regulations of a body within time.

Beyond the technical definitions, there are socially contextualized aspects to dance techniques that embroil the movement in systems of culture, beginning with the very word "technique." Because the word "technique" together with "dance" is primarily used within the context of Western dance traditions, such as ballet, it is often inextricable from ballet, which obscures the distinct movement systems that exist everywhere in the world, from Bharata Natyam and Kabuki to Lamban and folk dances. Globalization and colonization have mixed, developed, and synthesized culturally specific techniques to create new movement vocabularies, such as jazz, hip hop, and modern dance. Therefore, a final, essential component of any dance technique is that its boundaries are constantly in flux, imbibing and being imbibed by neighboring techniques as well as any social, cultural, or political influences it brushes against. In this way, the Martha Graham technique has developed and shifted consistently throughout the century that has now passed since its namesake, Martha Graham, began creating movement. This constant development, as well as its inherent social contextualization, cannot be ignored. However, while acknowledging the ways that technique is implicated in its history and social contexts, there are technical aspects of the Martha Graham technique that can be put under the microscope to explore powerful conversations a practicing body enters into with the physicality of social embodiment.

The movement vocabulary of the Graham technique developed over decades of experimentation, collaboration, codification, and social engagement. As Marian Horosko puts it in the preface to her 2002 compendium of testimonies from Graham dancers and teachers over the decades, “It is tempting to believe that her dance theory sprang full and complete at her first concert in 1926. The training method, however, evolved through seventy years of teaching dancers and actors, as well as through her life-long work of making new dances for herself and her company” (ix).[2] As Graham continually produced new choreography, her invented movements made their way into the technique bearing her name. As Graham’s work developed correspondingly to different contextualized social climates, such as several choreographies devoted to antiwar statements in the ‘30s (*Chronicle*, 1936, and *Deep Song*, 1937), the invented movement took on specific embodied character that reflected that social contextualization. For example, both *Chronicle* and *Deep Song* develop abstract geometrical shapes that feature sharp angles and violent contractions of the torso, meant to portray anguish and anger against the ongoing conflicts. At the most visible level, the technical work of the Martha Graham technique as it is known, taught, and practiced today cultivates an awareness of embodied physicality’s cyclical relationship with an external social reality. This cultivation, as we will see, is deepened and expanded through various levels of visibility and work in the Graham technique.

Examining the Graham technique’s cultivation of physical awareness must first acknowledge that the technique doesn’t operate only on a technical level. As discussed, modern dance as a whole is historically implicated in performative politics, and the Graham tradition is no different. Modern dance’s flaws were admonished by the advent of postmodern dance in the second half of the twentieth century, including the use of grand theaters and dramatic character portrayals, and a reliance on archetypes. Yvonne Rainer’s famous “No Manifesto” of 1964 sums up the postmodernist admonishment rather well; “No to spectacle. / No to virtuosity. / No to...the

[2] Horosko, Marian. *Martha Graham: The Evolution of Her Dance Theory and Training*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002.

heroic."[3] The postmodern gripe with modern dance grew out of what postmodern practitioners saw as modern dance's hypocrisy: despite beginning as a rebellion against entrenched hierarchies of dance (namely ballet) that privileged certain bodies, classes, and social historiographies, modern dance's emphasis on the geometric shapes of the body and its reliance on decontextualized theatricality had, to a certain extent, prevented it from rupturing that entrenchment. As dance theorist Sally Banes puts it, there is an "oppositional role to modern dance" (xiii)[4], or in other words there is an oppositional range of interpretations made by and about the field, borne of its multiplicity of roles, practices, and situations. While certain aspects of the Modern dance movement in America continue to be celebrated as radical and boundary-shifting, there will always be historical examples of extravagance and form-driven exclusion to counter them. As we can see from the outright rejections of Rainer and the measured analysis of Banes, entirely isolating the technical aspects of Modern dance from the performative aspects is ultimately impossible, since the foundational Modern dance techniques were cultivated out of movement developed for the stage. However, to the extent such isolation is possible, it provides us with a platform to consider the value of cultivating certain embodiments of action and reaction within the Modern tradition.

In order to isolate the technical value of the Graham technique, valuing the body's external shape as mold or model of the technique done "right" must be dispensed with. The value of cultivating a practice of embodiment such as the Graham technique is in what it can provide *internally*, as an impetus for action and as a sculptor of the body's relationship with the exterior world. To that end, the focus on the Graham technique must not be on the exterior *result* of the embodiment, but on the *activity* and *process* of embodiment that it generates. These focused activities of embodiment are accessed by engaging neuroscientific processes

[3] Rainer, Yvonne. "No Manifesto." 1965.

[4] Banes, Sally. *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*. Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

such as proprioception and kinaesthetic sensing, as well as theories of embodiment put forth by philosophies of movement.

What, ultimately, is the value of the Graham technique that can be found by engaging its enactment through these lenses? Its value is in cultivating awareness of the prescribed social embodiments that we live within, and in excavating through practice alternate spaces of embodiment that upset and resist those that are socially prescribed. The awareness of body and embodiment that must occur internally and actively to manifest the Graham technique upsets and disassembles entrenchments of body in culture and society in a way that Modern dance as a performative whole could not do for performance dance's entrenchment in those same infrastructures.

II. Graham and Embodiment

VIDEO: CONTRACTION AND RELEASE

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdUul-3wC88

Figure 1. Demonstration of the Graham exercise called "breathings." Filmed/danced by Cara McManus, 2021.

There are specific processes within the Graham technique that cultivate awareness of how the body iterates social conditioning. The foundational physiological basis for the technique is the internal and external movement galvanized by the organic and essential process of breathing; an "ancient awareness of the physicality of movement as dependent on the breath, and the anatomical changes to the body due to the breathing process" (x).[2] From this foundation, it is evident that, for this technique, exterior shape and visual perception of the body are secondary to an active process that takes place *inside* the body, yet manifests traceable change upon the *outside* of the body. The video above (see Figure 1) depicts one of the first exercises practiced in a Graham technique class, aptly named "Breathings." Essentially, this

exercise is a series of exaggerated breaths in and out, structured to fulfill the entire physiological capacity for the breathing process. Each breath out is called a *contraction*, a term which becomes the fundamental building block from which a large portion of the Graham technique is built. As air leaves the body, the muscles of the diaphragm and ribs relax, deflating the lungs and hollowing out the torso, and initiating a chain reaction of deflation through the entire body. Importantly, the contraction is not a fixed shape; it is a constant *process* of activity activated by the real, physiological work of a breath out. Initiating this internal activity is the primary function of the contraction, and the visually perceptible shape that manifests as a result of the internal activity becomes secondary. From the model of the contraction, a cyclical relationship between internal embodiment, external body, and exterior world begins to emerge. This cyclical relationship reveals the patterns by which each link in the cycle affects and is affected by the others, resulting in a network of perceived body, perceiving world, and unperceivable activity. The way in which these three components of the network intersect in the practice of the Graham technique yields a particular result. The practitioner draws upon information imparted by the perceiving world to activate specific unperceivable activities, which manifests perceivable changes to the body. Along the way, the unperceivable activity that was activated is made perceivable to the practitioner themself, due to the Graham technique's function in cultivating heightened awareness of embodiment. Thus, the Graham technique works to reveal the internal activity that links the external world with the body in a cyclical relationship. Revealing this internal activity is the very act of cultivating physical awareness that may lead to resisting socially conditioned embodiments.

One access point to examine this network is via the use of imagery in teaching and practicing the Graham technique. In any dance technique, there will inevitably be a certain extent of visual "mirroring" used to pass exercises from the teacher to the practitioner. However, too much reliance on such mirroring two-dimensionalizes the full, three-dimensional physicality of a body in motion, and reduces the technique too often to external outlines of shapes. The

Graham technique, in particular, because it is premised so heavily on the work of internal musculature and physical awareness, must centralize a full three-dimensionality as the focus of the practice. To further clarify the distinction between two-dimensional mirroring and three-dimensional embodiment, attention can be drawn to what dance theorist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone terms "objects-in-motion" and "movement."[5] The former, in Sheets-Johnstone's conceptualization, is materially visible, and therefore quantifiable and measurable. It is described as the "making happen" aspect of dance. The latter, however, is a qualitative experience, and therefore unmeasurable, conceptualized as "the happening itself."[5] Sheets-Johnstone's "movement" is adjacent to the immeasurable network of perception linking internal body, external body, and exterior world; therefore, a cultivated awareness of this network is accessed by recourse to images external to the human body. This recourse to material beyond the body to activate embodiment indicates a fundamental level of separation between self and movement, à la Sheets-Johnstone's separation between "object-in-motion" and "movement." It is only in projecting processes of internal embodiment upon an image that is "other" that the full internal activation can be accessed.

Such imagery excites, or galvanizes, a visceral reaction inside of the body. One of the earliest members of Graham's company, Bessie Schönberg, remembers an incident during a class in which external imagery provided her access to the inner physicality of a Graham exercise: "I remember once saying, shyly, to Martha that the exercises reminded me of a snake dancing on its tail and she responded that that was exactly the image I should have. She meant that there should be no weight on the floor and the body should be almost supported in suspension" (11).[2] Here we see the two-dimensional surface shape of the exercise in practice supplemented by an image from the external world. As that external image is reembodied, the exercise produced is able to engage the *processes* the body undergoes in activating,

[5] Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. "On Movement and Objects in Motion: The Phenomenology of the Visible in Dance." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol 13:2, pp. 33-46.

maintaining, and transitioning movement. These movement *qualities*, supplemented by imagery, manifest traceable changes upon the visible exterior of the body. By engaging in this process within the framework of the Graham technique, the practitioner develops heightened awareness of iterations of embodiment. This heightened awareness can work to resist prescribed social embodiments, and can instead excavate space to cultivate alternate pathways of networking the internal body, the external body, and the exterior world. By utilizing the physicality of the Graham technique to rework these physical pathways, the practitioner essentially draws upon the cyclical network of affecting and being affected that the body experiences in order to shift the relationships of the body to the world in that very cycle. The result is an attention to embodiment that can navigate the unconscious conditioning of society's imposition on the physical by activating a physical capacity to affect and be affected in new ways. In this way, a process of resistance to the entrenchment of bodies in social and political realities can be initiated.

VIDEO: THE SPIRAL

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUDEkLumwZs

Figure 2. Demonstration of the Graham exercise called "fourth position turns around the back." Filmed/danced by Cara McManus, 2021.

After the contraction, the most fundamental building block of the Graham technique is the spiral, which is any variation of spinal articulation that physicalizes a spiral shape using dynamics of tension and opposition. Figure 2 above shows one of the most fundamental spiraling Graham floor exercises, known as "Fourth Position Turns Around the Back." As with most Graham exercises, which were developed on Graham's or her dancers' bodies before being named for teaching and reproductive purposes, the name is quite literal to the embodiment. The practitioner, in various repetitions of increasing complexity, sequentially engages body parts in a spiraling process. Beginning inside the hip, then ascending unbroken

through the waist, chest, neck, and out the top of the head, dynamics of tension in the muscle fibers push sequentially forward along the pathway of the spiral energy. This tension is created because simultaneous dynamics of opposition are pulling the muscle fibers not yet caught sequentially in the forward spiral *backwards*, in resistance to that forward push. Once all the body parts have sequentially been dragged out of oppositional resistance and engaged in the full forward thrust of the spiral energy, the body then pulls back along that same spiral pathway in an exact reversal of the original sequentiality. Key to the entire exercise is the coexistence of pushing tension and pulling opposition; one cannot proceed on an internal level without the other. The process is thus highly concentrated on the internal level; there is a concentric energy maintained toward the spinal axis, from which any deviation toward the external body, say, sideways or backwards, disturbs the conversation of tension and opposition that creates the spiral.

Because these dynamics require constant internal work and muscular activation, just grafting the visible shape of a spiral from one external body onto another is not an effective way to teach and practice. For example, the "turns around the back" exercise could be attempted by copying the visual placement of limbs and the order of limb movement, but such external mirroring does not activate from precise internal origin points and does not involve a processual internal muscular cohesion, and therefore does not manifest the internally-driven dynamic that the exercise requires. Instead, recourse to imagery external to the human body can be used to jumpstart the process "embody, disembody, and re-embody," (15)[6] which projects embodiment outside of itself in order to activate its internal physicality. What this means in practice is that the external shape of the spiral is projected outward, onto any number of non-human images, with the intention of estranging the spiral process from an originally *external* understanding. When teaching the technique, Graham teachers initiate this projection in Graham practitioners by

[6] Lepecki, André. *Dance: Documents of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012.

suggesting images such as a DNA helix, a conch shell, or the galaxy. Images such as these, being completely external to the human corporeal experience, when re-embodied make the body strange and therefore more aware of itself. The estranged body now has an alternate/new understanding of what "spiral" means, and therefore can activate internal work that the original copied external shape could not. The very strangeness of an image like the galaxy to the human body provides the impetus for excavating alternate internal physicalities aligned not with the external *shape* of a spiral, but instead with the internal *dynamics* of tension and opposition. We as humans can't see and copy the mix of concentric and eccentric muscle contractions that cause the initial push forward of the hip in the seated spiral; however, in invigorating the felt sense of internal muscular work by conceiving of it as strange to our usual selves, we activate the correct dynamics and therefore the muscular work that results in those dynamics. Through this recourse to imagery, practitioners of the Graham technique pierce beyond the block of external shape to activate the internal processes of embodiment that manifest secondarily as a visible exterior. Without an internal *process* in motion, the spiral is relegated to external shape, and cannot cultivate an awareness of embodiment.

Why is it significant that imagery external to the human body is leveraged to cultivate an estrangement from the body that ultimately deepens and dimensionalizes the practitioner's embodiment of the Graham technique? Summarily, it unfetters embodiment from learned, conditioned patterns of corporeal participation in society. As will be explored in depth later on, the body responds physically to the stimuli of social participation. In that way, physicality is as much a receptive, inward-facing action as it is a "doing," outward-facing action. The general public conception of dance technique is as a performance, and performative embodiment in that way is inextricably associated with outward-facing action, from mover to audience. However, the more often neglected inward-facing action of dance technique *can* be separated from performative connotations, and studied as a practice with internal value. This separation is where the intersection of embodiment in dance technique and in social participation can be

found. The result of being a physical body in society becomes, over time, conditioned embodiment.

This conditioned embodiment can be thought of in the terms of Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the way power exerts itself on a subject. As he states in "The Subject in Power," this social conditioning is "a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to."(781)[7] For Foucault, the subject is both a self-aware individual and a product of systemic subjugation. The "product" indication here insinuates the imposition of an external system on the physical. Such an imposition, in this context, is what results in the conditioning of embodiment. The very act of being as a physical body in society conditions embodiment via power's systemic subjugation and subject-making of the body. In disengaging physicality from conditioned embodiment, via recourse to imagery that estranges the body from itself, the practitioner of the Graham technique can reprogram their awareness of embodiment and its internal work. The result is an active process of resistance against the forms of power that subjugate physicality at a systemic level.

The Graham exercises, when executed correctly, or, in other words, when executed internally to manifest externally, "affect you kinaesthetically and emotionally."[8] This ability of physicality to affect the very body doing the work is a shift in the original network of affection, which cycled through perceived body, perceiving world, and unperceivable activity. In this conceptualization, for the first time, we see a perceiving body and a perceived body functioning reciprocally to activate kinaesthetic awareness and thus kinaesthetic resistance to conditioned physicality. In the spiral-based exercise shown in Figure 2(video), the practitioner re-embodies a physicality via imagistic estrangement, with two results: first, the initiation of internal physical processes, and second, *awareness* of those processes. Thus, the Graham practitioner, in

[7] Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1982, pp. 777–795.

[8] Eilber, Janet. Interview by Cara McManus. 26 March 2020.

executing the exercises internally *and therefore making unperceivable activity perceivable*, uses the perceiving body to affect the perceived body. The dual work of the body, both perceiving and perceived, is what cultivates the practitioner's awareness of embodiment, also known as kinaesthetic sensing.

III. Graham and Neuroscience

Understanding the role of kinaesthetic sensing in the Graham technique must be prefaced by a broader delve into some neuroscientific baselines. Neuroscience over the past century has given us a fuller understanding of how the reciprocal relationship between the perceiving body and the perceived body functions at an empirical level. Hence, it also gives us insight into how that reciprocal relationship might render unperceivable internal activity perceivable. The inside of the body is governed by the nervous system, which, in our current understanding, breaks with Cartesian models of the self as an isolated thinking organ to embed a ceaseless cycle of activity and information between brain and body. Already, in that framework, we can see how essential perceiving that internal activity at some level may be for cultivating awareness of embodiment. As Andrew Huberman, a Neurobiology Professor at Stanford University, explains in his podcast "How Your Nervous System Works and Changes," "Your nervous system is this continuous loop of communication between the brain, spinal cord, and body, and body, spinal cord, and brain."[9] The irreducibility of the body's role in the continuous loop inevitably involves iterations of embodiment, and all their constituent material, in practical applications of neuroscience. Indeed, a study of the internal activity cultivated by practicing the Graham technique and how that affects social embodiments cannot be accomplished without acknowledging and excavating the material reality of the nervous system's integral role in movement.

[9] Huberman, Andrew. "How Your Nervous System Works and Changes: Huberman Lab Podcast #1." *YouTube*, 4 Jan. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-XfCl-HpRM.

The distinction between sensing and perceiving, as defined in neuroscience, is vital to understanding how neuroscience functions in the Graham technique. Sensation is the mechanism by which our body imbibes and filters the outer world into the inner nervous system, which generates experience. It is a gathering of uninterpreted information, a sort of raw data scraper. Perception, however, is a distinct mechanism, a distinction that occurs with the imposition of specific and controllable attention; "While sensation is non-negotiable[..]perception is under the control of your attention, and the way to think about attention is it's like a spotlight."[9] Perception involves putting focus and attention on the raw data, an application that inevitably results in interpretation and editing, just as a spotlit stage would. Perception, within the constraints of what has been sensed, is under the perceiver's control. This distinction between sensation and perception is crucial to understanding the relevance to the Graham technique of both kinaesthetic sensing and a separate, yet vitally important, motor function called proprioception.

Kinaesthetic sensing is the body's awareness of its own physicality. By nature, it evaluates and evolves the motion, activity, *doingness* of a body, which, although not always consciously acknowledged, is constant. In the Graham technique particularly, because the internal, muscular involvement must be so acute, acknowledging kinaesthetic sensing by developing an awareness of it is an important part of the practice. In a sense, the practice of the technique is both the means by which kinaesthetic sensing is achieved, and the result of kinaesthetic sensing. Such a cyclical process makes sense when considered in the context of the Graham technique, in which the perceiving body and the perceived body communicate to make unperceivable activity perceivable.

The necessity of accessing kinaesthetic sensing by cultivating kinaesthetic sensing emerges because such perception is solely experiential, and cannot be perceptually shared. Elaine Scarry, in her seminal *The Body in Pain*, explores what it means to deal with an unshareable corporeal experience. In her work, the focus is physical pain, which can be real

and experienced with no perceivable or even referential external markers. She proposes a reconfiguration of perception itself in order to approach the interior, unshareable quality of physical pain:

> To conceive of the body as parts, shapes, and mechanisms is to conceive of it from the outside: though the body contains pump and lens, 'pumpness' and 'lensness' are not part of the felt-experience of being a sentient being. To instead conceive of the body in terms of capacities and needs (not now lens but 'seeing,' not now pump but 'having a beating heart,' or, more specifically, 'desiring' or 'fearing') is to move further in toward the interior of felt-experience. (285)[10]

Scarry acknowledges that interior, felt experience cannot be accessed by externally-focused perception. Instead, perception must shift away from the big, external markers that it most habitually relies on and submerge itself inside the *felt processes* that eventually *manifest* as external markers. Translating from physical pain to the Graham technique, "not now lens but 'seeing'" becomes "not now spiral but 'spiraling.'" Taxonomizing this relationship from external, reified marker to the process behind that marker can encompass the full range of the Graham technique, giving us a cultivation of kinaesthetic sensing via its practice.

The function of kinaesthetic sensing in the Graham technique is notably distinct from a more general understanding and application of kinaesthesia. Probing this distinction can both clarify and further elucidate how the role of kinaesthetic sensing in the practice of the Graham technique estranges embodiment to resist conditioned iterations habituated by society. Kinaesthesia as a concept is credited to H. Charlton Bastian, a neurologist working in the latter half of the nineteenth century.[11] He used the term to develop his theory that there is a "muscular sense" that "subserves movement" and results in motor learning. (3450)[11] Foremost in the

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[10] Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, 1987.

[11] Compston, Alistair. "From the Archives." *Brain*, vol. 138:11, pp. 3449-3458.

process of kinaesthetic sensing is an awareness and understanding of where limbs are in space, which is informed by “differences in resistance and weight by means of which the brain derives unconscious guidance in the performance of movements.”(3451)[11] Here is where the functional importance of practicing the spiral with *tension* and *opposition* becomes apparent---those internal processes, among others centralized in the Graham technique, are the very work that develops and strengthens the sensory capacity for movement via “differences in resistance and weight,” otherwise known as kinaesthetic sensing. Developing kinaesthetic sensing is a situation in which direct experience is the only way to deepen, heighten, and increase both range and precision of sensory facilities. Practitioners of the Graham technique are engaging in that experience consciously, willfully, and with extensive inherent internal engagement. The intent and the willfully conscious development of kinaesthetic sensing in the Graham technique are distinct from those Bastian referenced in his work. Bastian, and other neurologists working with kinaesthesia, have suggested that the notable net gain of kinaesthetic sensing is that “...over time, the role of ‘consciousness’ diminishes even for movements that are highly skilled such as dancing or playing a musical instrument.” (3451)[11] Bastian’s idea is that kinaesthetic sensing’s evolutionary purpose is to reduce the amount of conscious attention spent on motor actions. The more experience one accumulates in sensing limb positions and weight/resistance differences, the closer to automatic functions those experiences become as they are re-experienced again and again. However, this conceptualization is articulated from the perspective that conditioning and habituating embodiment is the goal-- the less conscious attention spent on motor function, the better. The Graham technique has developed out of a different perspective, which uses the process of kinaesthetic sensing to *increase* conscious attention to motor function and its range of sensory capacity. This conscious attention is applied by cultivating *perception* of the *sensation* of kinaesthetic sensing, therefore bringing conscious awareness to the motor processes. The perception in this case is achieved through another motor function, called proprioception. In a sense, kinaesthesia and kinaesthetic sensing are raw

data, and the Graham practitioner accesses them by wielding the tool of proprioception to induce specific results.

Proprioception as a concept was coined by twentieth-century neurophysiologist Sir Charles Sherington. As the material reality of the nervous system was being discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century by neuroscientists such as Santiago Ramon y Cajal, Sherrington focused on the material of movement as a function of the internal body's neural network. He first introduced the term "proprioception" in a 1906 publication of ten lectures, titled "The Integrative Action of the Nervous System." He used it to refer to movement awareness as perceived from within the body, rather than as a response to external stimuli.[12] In other words, proprioception is a process of perception constituted by an awareness of changes in muscle and joint position. While proprioception sounds equivalent to kinaesthetic sensing on the surface, the key distinction is that kinaesthetic sensing is a process of internal sensation, whereby the practitioner absorbs the raw data of their own physicality, while proprioception is a process of internal perception, whereby the practitioner interprets that raw data by applying focus and conscious attention to the sensation of their own physicality. Therefore, by applying the tool of proprioception to the raw data of kinaesthetic sensing, the practitioner can develop the internal work cultivated by the Graham technique. This development of internal work is the cultivation of conscious embodiment, the consciousness of which can be used to resist the kind social conditioning implied by Foucault's politics of institutionalized power. Overall, we can see the process of imagery at work in fundamental Graham technique exercises, such as the spiral, initiating physiological awareness of how embodiment affects and is affected by the exterior world. The actionable takeaway of this awareness is that the practitioner is cultivating the possibility for reimagined relationships of affection between the perceiving body and the perceived body, by way of newly-perceivable internal activity.

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[12] Burke, Robert E. "Sir Charles Sherrington's *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System*: A Centenary Appreciation." *Brain*, vol. 130:4, pp. 887–894.

IV. Graham and the Resistance to Conditioned Embodiment

Direct recourse to external imagery is not the only way proprioception is applied to kinaesthetic sensing in the practice of the Graham technique. Another method of accessing proprioception by estranging the body from itself occurs in the method by which the Graham technique trains the use of the eyes in movement, in order to achieve a particular gaze. This gaze is very tricky to articulate, as its purpose is, in fact, to move the process of "seeing" *away* from the very comfortable, heavily utilized sense of sight as focused frontally, and more toward a less comfortable, less utilized, internally motivated sense of sight involving kinaesthetic sensing.

There is a movement repeated multiple times in a Graham class called the "high release," which will be a useful access point for dissecting the gaze in the Graham technique. A regular release is the opposite of a contraction; once the torso has completed the process of contracting, it reverses the action of the breath out with a breath in, or a release. A high release extends the regular release up and over into an arc back of the upper lumbar and cervical spines. The prime directive of the high release is to not sink down at all, but to send the chest straight up while spreading sideways between the collarbones and the shoulder blades as much as possible. For a visual of a high release, see :20 seconds to :23 seconds of the Figure 1 video. Often, when a practitioner is just starting to embody the high release, they will initiate the arc up and over by looking up with their pupils, and secondarily beginning to activate internal processes of elongating the torso, stretching muscles of the lumbar and lower thoracic spines down while lengthening muscles of the upper thoracic and cervical spines up and over as well as side to side. However, because these beginner practitioners are so used to relying on perception of frontally focused sight to tell them where their bodies are in space, they don't end up fulfilling the true embodiment of a high release; once their pupils reach that focus of the ceiling, they consider themselves "there" and don't have enough proprioceptive awareness of

their internal kinaesthetic sensing to realize that it's only their eyes looking up and over, not their torsos. What needs to happen is a shift in focus away from the comfortable, frontally focused use of the gaze, and a reappropriation of that focus into awareness of the body's internal processes. Once that shift in focus and awareness has occurred, what's left over for the eyes is what Huberman calls "panoramic vision, or optic flow."[13] What those terms indicate is a non-focused, non-frontal use of the gaze, which is more useful for keeping the focus on kinaesthetic sensing; "When [you] look at a horizon or at a broad vista, you don't look at one thing for very long. If you keep your head still, you can dilate your gaze so you can see far into the periphery—above, below and to the sides of you." By activating panoramic vision and thereby reducing frontal focus and reliance on external visuals, the practitioner can reroute more focus and awareness to developing proprioceptive interpretation of kinaesthetic sensing. Less attention spent on interpreting raw data from frontal "seeing" means more attention can be redirected to interpret raw data from kinaesthetic sensing. For the high release, this means the physical process of the torso, lengthening up and over in the cervical and upper thoracic spine while simultaneously rooting down in the lower thoracic and lumbar spine and spreading sideways between the shoulder blades, can be fulfilled internally. The result is a practice of the Graham technique that cultivates, appreciates, and centralizes the malleability of internal activity, and therefore the variety of embodiments that become possible as a resistance to social conditioning.

What, specifically, are the alternate embodiments cultivated by physical awareness? Huberman is part of an emerging branch of neurophysiology with "a growing understanding of how vision and breathing directly affect the brain—rather than the more nebulous categories of the mind and feelings." "Vision" and "breathing," as seen through Scarry's work, are indicative of internal *processes* here, rather than simply externalized products. More broadly conceptualized,

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[13] *(subsequent citations in parentheses)* Huberman, Andrew. Interview by Jessica Wapner. *Scientific American*, 16 Nov. 2020.

this idea indicates that the internal content of actual physiological processes can have a direct impact on the brain, and therefore on how embodiment interacts with the external world. Placing this idea within the context of a cyclical network of "doingness" as both response and projection, awareness of physicality becomes the "new information" that can alter the passage from one (response) to the other (projection). In this way, the actual, physical relationship of the body to an external world it is constantly interacting with can shift, resulting in iterations of embodiment that may resist externally imposed conditioning.

As seen in the manipulation of gaze required to achieve the Graham technique's high release, the redistributed frontal focus allows the body to access internal processes that situate it differently in space and time, and therefore in a different conversation of response and projection with the external world. Neurophysiological research provides an example, exploring how this altered iteration of embodiment can have a direct impact on the way the body "does" stress; "We can actually turn off the stress response by changing the way that we are viewing our environment." In other words, developing panoramic vision and practicing physicalities that proceed from that replacement of frontally-focused vision can resist the "stress" response conditioned by everyday systemic participations, such as making the train or earning money. As Huberman explains, "When you see something exciting or stressful[...]Your field of vision narrows. You see one thing in sharper relief, and everything else becomes blurry[...]stress controls the visual field." The entire body is affected by this narrowed, hyper-focused vision; "This focal vision activates the sympathetic nervous system. All the neurons from your neck to the top of your pelvis get activated at once and[...]make you feel agitated." While of course stress is not a universally bad response, inasmuch as it is a result of our participation in systemic realities it is implicit in the subjugation of Foucault's subject. The embodiment of stress centralizes hyper-focused, frontal vision, which from there catapults into a full-bodied physical response. Resisting that full-bodied physical response requires cultivating an alternate physical response, or, in this case, panoramic vision. Knowing what panoramic vision *is* isn't enough;

instead, understanding the *internal processes* that comprise its embodiment, and how the rest of the body reacts physiologically to those processes, is necessary to resist the stress response conditioned by systemic realities. The Graham technique, by allowing practitioners to develop an understanding of panoramic vision and the resultant attention to full-body physicality, ultimately cultivates an alternate embodiment to resist the systemically prescribed stress response.

VIDEO: THE BACK LEG EXTENSION

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieChXU6T3io

Figure 3. Demonstration of the Graham exercise called "back leg extension." Filmed/danced by Cara McManus, 2021.

The floorwork of the Graham technique as a whole is a key element that can be isolated to provide more insight on how practitioners cultivate a physicality that resists social prescription. One of the most unique features of the Graham technique is that roughly the first half of a class takes place seated on the floor. Because the two foundational elements, the contraction/release and the spiral, are processually focused in the torso, the seated orientation can centralize that focus and deepen the internal physicality involved by eliminating the human tendency, as a biped, to rely on limbs moving through space. The resulting concentration on movement physicality as initiating in the torso and progressing sequentially outward through the limbs is a radical reorientation of habitual, limb-focused gestural movement. In order to access this concentration, a primary concern for the floorwork is that the practitioner's upper body weight be distributed at all times *as though standing*, so that the torso can reach maximum expansion and malleability without being impeded by proximity to the floor. Figure 3 above demonstrates one of the culminating exercises of the floorwork, titled "back leg extension." In this exercise, as in all of the preceding exercises on the floor, the ischial tuberosity (bottom of

the hip bones, more colloquially referred to as the sitz bones or sitting bones) acts as the heels would in a standing alignment, and the muscles surrounding the hips and spinal column work to counteract gravity's pull. The resulting effect is of "standing" on the hips. During the back leg extension in particular, the "pulling up" of the muscles in the hip compartment and up the spinal column is essential to create the space, tension, resistance, and dexterity required to execute the intense series of spirals and contractions that develop.

"Standing" on the hips is a radical reorientation of physicality as it exists and is utilized routinely every day. By training the body to sense, perceive, and ultimately become aware of what is happening internally as a result of this radical reorientation, the practitioner of the Graham technique is once more estranging their body from its everyday conditioning in social contexts. The shift in physicality resulting from this estrangement is an understanding of what movement's internal origin in the core of the body, or the torso, entails. Correspondingly, gestural movement isolated in limbs is physically understood and distinguished. This reappropriation of muscular articulation from the seated exercises to standing is an embodiment that can purposefully initiate movement from the torso, which then sequentially unfurls out to the limbs, and can recognize and avoid habitual gestural patterns. What is meant by "gestures" is movement that is isolated to a body part, usually a limb or extremity, that imparts contextually agreed-upon meaning. What is meant by "habitual gesture patterns" is what Foucault identifies as a significant subsection of power relations; "gestures imposed by tradition or apprenticeship" (787).[7] The reliance on habitual gesture patterns, which people are conditioned to embody by participating in social contexts, is a system imposed by the traditions of systemic power relations. For example, gendered gestures, or gestures connoting dominance and subjugation, are conditioned by systemic physical habit. This conditioning is habitually embodied from a standing alignment, with no physical understanding of what an alternate, torso-centered initiation of movement might be. However, estranging the body's "upright" orientation via the Graham floorwork can develop that physical understanding by contrast, by providing an

alternate embodiment of movement that originates in the torso. Reappropriating an alternate movement initiation point developed from the “standing on the hips” orientation of the Graham technique can resist the imposition of gestural power relations that Foucault identifies. The Graham technique, in providing the practitioner an alternate understanding of movement initiation from inside the torso, cultivates the possibility of standing embodiments that do not fall into the habitual gesture patterns that are conditioned by the power relations of social context.

V. Conclusions

The Graham technique is a body of physicality whose edges and boundaries are constantly shifting, dependent on when, where, how, why, and by whom the technique is practiced. Despite the prevalence of performative contexts foregrounded in most considerations of the Graham technique, isolating the technical, process-based approach to movement driving the philosophy of the technique in practice can illuminate its impact on embodiment. Practitioners of the technique can resist certain embodiments that have been socially conditioned by cultivating an awareness of embodiment itself, both as a process and as a conditioned product.

Embodiment must be understood, following the Deleuzian conceptualization, as both a response and a projection. The plotted points along this cyclical network of response and projection include the external world, the external body, and the internal body. The Graham technique’s role in shifting the perceivable manifestation of embodiment on the external body away from social conditioning is to cultivate an awareness in practitioners of the *process* of *internal activity* that initiates that external manifestation. The foundational contraction and release, for example, bring awareness and consciousness to the extent by which a simple breath out and in function internally first to manifest external shape second. The spiral, in initiating sequential activities of tension and opposition inside the body, focuses the practitioner’s attention on internal processes. Methods of teaching the spiral from the inside out

rely on imagery from the external world to estrange the body from itself, and therefore to bypass the unconsciously conditioned reliance on perceivable, external shape in initiating movement. In making perceivable the previously unperceivable internal activity at the nexus of perceiving world and perceived body, the Graham technique's practitioner is able to cultivate an awareness of the processual basis of embodiment.

Neuroscientifically and physiologically, this cultivated awareness is accomplished by applying the perception-based process of proprioception to the sensation-based process of kinaesthetic sensing. The distinction between sensation and perception here is essential; while sensation is unfiltered, raw data accumulated by sensing processes, perception is the focused attention paid to that raw data to filter it into conscious awareness. The Graham technique develops proprioceptive capacities, allowing the practitioner to consciously log awareness of internal muscular sensations, and therefore to cultivate an understanding of physicality at work and of the resulting externally manifested embodiments.

The results of this increased understanding and awareness are evident in several examples drawn from key elements of the Graham technique in which resistance to socially conditioned embodiments can be enacted. In the first, the stress response that has been habituated by navigating today's society is seen to proceed from a specific, hyper-focused frontal gaze. The Graham technique, as seen through the internal processes activated in the high release, combats the stress response by developing a panoramic gaze. By sending the focus into the peripherals, this gaze redistributes attention and perception into the physicality of the body and prevents the hyper-focused frontal gaze from setting off a chain reaction. Thus, a resistance to the stress physically conditioned in the context of today's society is cultivated by practicing the Graham technique. A similar resistance can be traced in the role of the Graham technique's floorwork more broadly, in which roughly half an hour's worth of exercises are executed sitting on the floor, with the ischial tuberosities (the most posterior, distal points of the hip bones) taking on the role of the feet in a standing position. This reorientation of the body in

space develops an awareness of all movement's initiation from the center of the body, the torso, rather than from the extremities. This reorientation is therefore able to develop a resistance against naturalized gestures that are indicative of political, constructed content, such as gendered gestures or gestures that reinforce power relations.

Overall, despite being shoehorned into a problematic lineage of systematically problematic performative contexts, Modern dance's Graham technique, when considered outside of those performative contexts, lends valuable insight to the way embodiment manifests in a social world. By centralizing and rendering shareable the internal processes activated before embodiment manifests externally, the technique can enact resistance to social conditioning. Foremost in this process is the cultivated awareness that it is, indeed, a process, and not a product. In developing this awareness at a deeply physiological level, practitioners of the Graham technique can ultimately navigate a social world with increased freedom and possibility.

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