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Dancing Art and Politics beyond the Iron Curtain:

Martha Graham's 1962 Tours to Yugoslavia and Poland

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Abstract. Admired widely for her impressive artistic career, the modern dancer's Martha Graham political performance as an American cultural diplomat during the Cold War was not much known or discussed by dance lovers or scholars alike. Having "the State Department's blessing" the dancer rehearsed this new role on the occasion of her tours to Europe, in 1950 and 1954, and started it officially in 1955, during the Asian tour, considered a tremendous success for the dancer and of her country's cultural diplomacy abroad.

While her tours to Western Europe and the complicated relationship with its audience were at least mentioned in her biographies, the ones to Eastern Europe's countries were not paid attention at, or wrongly localized in space and time. My paper brings them to the scholars' attention, by presenting Graham and her Company's 1962 tour beyond the Iron Curtain, in former Yugoslavia and Poland. However, it also corrects an inaccurate assumption, wrongly stated in Graham's biographies, namely that the company travelled to Romania.

My work also demonstrates that Graham's artistic and politic performance beyond the Iron Curtain was a bold enterprise which deserves full attention and analysis, and not only because it redefined and enlarged the dancer's career and the boundaries of American cultural diplomacy in Europe. The tour was a significant moment which, while proving the versatile power of dance in making the political and ideological curtain less opaque, gave contour and substance the presence of American culture, politics and modernism in Eastern European. Not less significantly, it also made Eastern Europe for the rest of the world, European or not, a more immediate space and reality, which, as the history showed, was waiting to be (re)discovered and (re)invented.

Keywords: Martha Graham, Iron Curtain, dance, cultural diplomacy.

At the end of December 1957, Francis Mason, the cultural attaché of the American Embassy in Belgrade, sent Martha Graham a letter informing her about the modern dancer José Limon visit to Belgrade, who "had there, and in seven other cities in Yugoslavia, a warming and phenomenal success." Even though "no one cared or knew about American dance" Mason asked her to consider a tour to the country ("May I go out on a limb and insist, within my limited powers, that you come to Yugoslavia"), and promised to inform the State Department and ANTA about this possibility.¹

Written two years after Martha Graham reached international fame during her first State Department sponsored tour to Asia, in 1955, Mason's invitation was a delicate one, as the dancer's two tours to Europe, one in 1950 and another in 1954, privately sponsored, had a limited success.² However, my recent findings proved that, during Graham's first European tours, from behind the stage or openly, the American ambassadors, the embassies' officials and cultural attachés from Europe supported and logistically helped the American dancer while in Europe. The best proof of the political involvement in Graham's fifties' European tours is a picture of Juliana, the Queen of the Netherlands, and Princess Irene greeting Graham after a performance.³

The dancer would perform beyond the Iron Curtain, but only in 1962, on the occasion of Graham's first State Department tour to Europe, when she and her Company would visit Yugoslavia and Poland. However, they did not, as wrongly stated in Graham's biographies, perform in communist Romania.

While unfolding the story of Graham's first performances in Eastern Europe, my work looks for the reasons behind the choice of these two communist countries to be toured by the famous artist, for the logistics involved in the tours, while also searching into the way in which they made the Iron Curtain less opaque, making possible, at least for a short time, the construction or re-construction of the "other's" image on both sides of it. Last but not least, my work also places them in the larger context of the American grand cultural diplomacy of the Cold War, which refined and enlarged the artists' roles. Until then, expected to be just "witnesses of their time in history,"⁴ now artists were given the choice of becoming cultural diplomats, actively involved, but, as cultural diplomacy mirrored, helped, adjusted and softened the "real" diplomacy, also sharing the latter's difficult moments.

Martha Graham's 1962 Departmental tour was the best example of this, as it took place during a very complicated political context, marked by the construction of the Berlin Wall and the Bay of Pigs moment, increased by the Missile crisis' significance, and culminating with the naval blockade of Cuba which ended on November 20, 1962. That day, Graham, who was already touring Eastern Europe, had the second performance in Zagreb. On November 15, 1962,

she and her dancers traveled to Belgrade, and had two performances on the 16th and 17th in the city's Opera House; the next day they traveled to Zagreb, where they performed for two days.⁵ On November 21, the Company traveled to Warsaw, and had three performances at Theatr Dramatynczny.⁶

Graham's inclusion on the list of cultural diplomats in Europe was not surprising. A worldwide famous American icon, her 1955 tour to Asia, was a success, while dance had cultural visibility, and could knit together easily art and politics, making and un-making national identities.⁷ Besides, its specific language – of the bodies in motion – with meanings hard to untangle, was useful especially in countries where censorship could be a problem,⁸ while modern dance, unlike ballet,⁹ was an American invention, and its promoter, Martha Graham, was undoubtedly one hundred percent American.¹⁰

Even if involved officially in the State Department's tours since 1955, Graham was not much of a "political person." She was proud to be an American, during her tour to Asia her Americanism was carefully emphasized, some of her works had political themes, but she was neither involved directly in politics, nor close to political personalities. She refused even an invitation to the inaugural ceremonies of John Fitzgerald Kennedy's presidency.¹¹ As one of her former dancers, Pearl Lang, put it: "She did not care! All she cared about was dance."¹²

However, becoming a cultural diplomat asked artists, including Graham, to rethink, redefine, and refine their political stance and commitment, as shown by the language of an official letter – pragmatic, precise, task-oriented, and clearly branded – received by Martha Graham prior to the tour: "As you are about to start on a tour for us, under the Department of State's Cultural Presentations Program, we want to send you this word of gratitude and to let you know that *we shall be following every performance with the keenest interest, as the reports come back from our embassies and consulates.* [...] *The money for your and all other tours comes from the American taxpayers, through annual appropriations by the Congress.* The amount has been about two and a half million dollars each year. [...] She was reminded about the tickets sold at a "very low price" to encourage attendance, that ANTA (with whom she had the contract) was the agent of the State Department, received funds from it, and had the last word in sending her abroad. Chosen for her "artistic pre-eminence," her name was next to other "huge names of American arts" and she was expected to demonstrate her "belief in this program," as "never was the comprehension (mutual understanding) more important for the survival of our country and our way of life."

It was pointed out to her that she would be "constantly in the limelight, off stage as well as on," but that at every stop she would be "in the hands of the USIS" and "in the charge of the cultural officer of the USIS," while her activity would be reported directly to the American ambassador. Most importantly, she was told that the American officers will arrange for her "to meet the nationals" and this is where her "*offstage activities*" were beginning, was suggested to participate in many activities, but keeping "in mind that, as guests in their country and as representative of our American Government program," she was in a "*special position*."¹³

Why this special person, with a "special position," in Poland and Yugoslavia? And why not Romania?

For centuries the imagery of Eastern Europe, especially in the western world, was associated with the Babel of contrasting and conflicting religions and nations. Once communism encapsulated them, a new image was constructed, based on the idea of a compact block, leveled by the Soviet ideology, and reduced to the status of powerless satellites. In fact, there were many tensions within the bloc, and different degrees of independence from the USSR, all varying from country to country, and from a decade to another. Almost each comunist country had its moment of rebellion against Moscow's politics,¹⁴ the moment of "refreshing" and questioning communism's development and of "finding solutions for its future. The trend was initiated in 1956 by Nikita Khrushchev, but at the beginning of the sixties the Soviet "awakening" stopped,¹⁵ and a new kind of Cold War started,¹⁶ with the conflicts between East and West open, and an obvious deterioration of the relationships between their leaders.¹⁷

In this sensitive and confusing Eastern European context, for the American politics it became crucial to get closer to Eastern European countries which, at that point, looked less under the spell of communist dogmas and which, à la longue, could develop into a division of states independent from Kremlin.¹⁸ In this scenario, the key element was Yugoslavia, which had an "anomalous position in the Cold War that objectively suited U.S. purposes,"¹⁹ and was considered a "non-Soviet bloc" nation.²⁰ However, during the Kennedy era, after the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the U-2 spy incident, the relations between Yugoslavia and the United States began to break down. In 1961, Tito criticized the Americans and expressed "understanding" of the Soviet actions,²¹ while in 1962, the Congress denied aid grants to Yugoslavia, and revoked the country's most favored nation status.²² By the time of Graham's arrival, the difficult situation got a moment of respiro (Tito reaffirmed the non-aligned position,²³) but the softness of the cultural power was more necessary than ever for the American politics and diplomacy in the area.

In this atmosphere of the hopeful past, unfulfilled expectation, and tense present which characterized the American-Yugoslavian relationship, another communist country had to be chosen. With USSR out of the question, Hungary after a bloody revolution, and Romania and Czechoslovakia not (yet) openly searching for independence, the choices were not too many. Thus, in the light of "Gomulka's thaw,"²⁴ the "bearable communism," the apparently normalized relationship with the West,²⁵ and with a majority of Polish people "thinking that they were part of the world,"²⁶ Poland looked as advancing towards a non-aligned country status, and seemed a good move for the American cultural diplomacy.

Finding Eastern European countries culturally friendly towards America was also a necessity, as Martha Graham, too sexual for the "Soviet man" (whose pristine private life and sex were the preoccupation of the Communist Party,)²⁷ and for the Soviet censorship,²⁸ was never invited to USSR. The country was against the modern arts²⁹ and asked the artists "to carry on in the good old Socialist-realist tradition,"³⁰ aware that the cultural exchanges could possibly be the Trojan horse, "smuggling into the country alien and hostile ideas."³¹ Thus, when it came to exchanging dance, American ballet companies were invited; ballet was not only a male dominated art, but also a controlling one, in which the dancers, as people in a communist system, were mostly objects. Modern dance was disobedience, sexuality, female lead and control, questioning, and unrest.

Compared with this grim cultural atmosphere, the countries visited by Graham had – even if limitedly – an artisite openness toward the cultural West. "America was the sworn enemy" of those trying to maintain the nationalistic purity of the culture in Eastern Europe, and who preferred folk music, as jazz and pop music "cheated people of their money and spoiled young people."³² But the history of dance in Serbia had a unique feature: contrary to other European countries and America, modern ballet was established in Serbia before the classical one, with Maga Magazinović the first and the most dedicated champion of modern dance.³³ By the time of Graham's visit, there was an active contemporary dance group at the Contemporary Theater, while its theater company owed its "golden age" to the successful performances of the works of contemporary American playwrights. In the sixties' Poland, the early "captive years" ³⁴ were also innovative and more culturally permissive,³⁵ thus in Warsaw there was always a choice between Greek tragedy, an American psychological play, and world classics. The Polish dance experimenters had Tacjanna Wysocka as initiator and leader.

Choosing the countries of Yugoslavia and Poland for Martha Graham's first performances beyond the Iron Curtain proved to be an inspired move. The tour was a success: it took place in a favorable atmosphere and without major incidents, and generated mostly positive reactions of the audience and critics. All showed that the political and cultural permissiveness of the two countries was a necessary factor for the success of American cultural diplomacy in the area. However, the success was due to much more than a good choice and serendipity, as Graham's tours were designed ahead of time – skillfully and holistically, – with great care, attention for every detail, and solidly sponsored. Last but not least, the way they were instrumented proved the growing importance of the area in the larger spectrum of the American interests, as well as the importance of cultural diplomacy in the sophisticated mechanism, supposed to make Eastern Europe a friendly space for the American culture and politics.

The dancer and her company arrived in style, had press conferences, and lived at the best hotels,³⁶ attended officially cultural events, dinners and galas. Graham gave lectures –demonstrations in every visited city, and the newspapers covered her presence prior to, during, and after the performances. These were attended by American ambassadors, American officials, and their local counterparts, and after the first nights telegrams were sent to the USA, reporting the progress of the tour.³⁷ The Program of the performances, the largest issued on the occasion of Graham's performances abroad, was a complete and complex piece of elaborated cultural diplomacy itself, containing an extended biography of the artist, numerous pictures (beautiful close-ups of Graham, and with dancers in performance,) as well as biographies of Isamu Noguchi, and of the musicians who composed the scores.

Following a tradition of the American Embassies abroad when American dancers performed in the capitals of Europe, the dancer was invited to a dinner hosted by Mrs. and Mr. Engle, the Cultural attaché of the US Embassy in Belgrade; with her were Bethsabée de Rothschild, also her manager, the conductor of the orchestra, and local cultural personalities attended the dinner.³⁸ After the opening night in Belgrade, the American Ambassador, George Keenan, and Mrs. Keenan celebrated Martha Graham and her company in a lavish reception, to which more than one hundred local guests with their spouses were invited, twenty people from the American Embassy, and four members of foreign embassies (two British – including a representative of the British Council, the French attaché, and one member of the Polish Embassy.) It is interesting to notice that the Belgrade Opera House has around three hundred seats, which means that more than half of the audience was invited to the reception.³⁹

In Poland, the fifth issue of the "Kultura USA" journal, edited by Ambasada Amerykanska, was dedicated to Graham.⁴⁰ Almost a month prior to her tour, "Trybuna Ludu" – "People's Tribune," the official media and propaganda outlet of the Polish United Workers' Party – had a weekly article focusing on Graham, explaining the "ballets," presenting the biographies of the dancers, all completed by pictures.⁴¹ A week prior to her first night in Warsaw, new articles called her one of the "six most prominent women in America," and presented her beginnings, her school, her collaborators, and the dates of her performances.⁴² The first night was attended by Tadeusz Galinski, Polish minister of culture and art, and other important representatives of culture and art. The American Embassy was represented by Albert W. Shearer,⁴³ while members of other diplomatic missions were also present. After the performance, 57 people, among who were the 20 dancers of Graham, were invited to a reception at the American Embassy. The next day there was a tour of the capital, including a tour of the new opera.⁴⁴

But beside the political and diplomatic performance of the Americans touring the two Eastern European countries, the dancer and her company performed another task, not scheduled, planned, or organized, namely the "thinning" of the Iron Curtain. Once it was lifted, even for a short time, people from both sides of it, the American dancers on one hand, and the Eastern European audience on another, could re-invent each other, give more substance to the frames

of "otherness," change nuances, mirror one another's culture, and also relieve some of the anxieties on the two sides of the curtain.

The traveler dancers of Graham's company could see that beyond the curtain there was a nuanced and diverse world, with common traits as well as differences. "Yugoslavia is very nice, people are friendly and very sweet,"⁴⁵ wrote the dancer Helen McGehee, who could go to dinner to her friend Vera's house, whom she did not see for "many years," and met her and her family undisturbed on different other occasions. McGehee did not like Poland much: "I still can't describe [it] – the life in the hotel was most circumscribed, uncomfortable;" "The city would be beautiful, with long avenues and trees, they still reconstruct the city. But now life is very depressing!"⁴⁶

The "communist spectator's" features were more complex than often imagined and constructed by those outside the Iron Curtain. The "peasant-like naiveté and simplicity"⁴⁷ associated with the Eastern Europeans, and their total "lack of sophistication" proved to be a myth, as the Easterners did not lack artistic refinement. An American official report of the tour called the communist audience "which filled the theaters" was "sophisticated and highly critical, with 95% of them being "standard European intellectual type, including commerce, business, and officials."⁴⁸ In the State Department's analysis of the tour, the success of the 1962 Eastern European tour was compared with the one to the Far East in the mid fifties, namely that it was an audience success, as each night crowds watched an "elated and exhausted" Company; on the closing night in Zagreb people did not leave after thirty curtain calls, screaming "Mar-tha, Mar-tha,"⁴⁹ so she had to take a personal call with each member of the cast.⁵⁰

But, unlike it was probably expected, imagined, or hoped, the "communist spectator" of the early sixties was not a political one. Liking Graham was an artistic choice, except for those for whom communism was hardly bearable; for them, attending Graham's performances was a gesture of subliminal rebellion, as America and its culture were considered the epytomy of modern, but also of freedom.⁵¹ The communist spectator was also curious, intelligent, and it could be a little snobbish.⁵² Still, even if mostly classically "trained" as a spectator,⁵³ she or he was not unaware of the past and the present of the modern arts.⁵⁴ Graham was considered a "spiritual sister of Isadora Duncan," her art being analyzed in the context of Rudolf Laban, Kurt Jooss and Mary Wigman,⁵⁵ but the Eastern European audience could encompass her artistry, comparing and contrasting her with her countrymen artists, who already visited Eastern Europe, namely José Limon and Jerome Robbins.⁵⁶

The artistic millieu of Eastern Europe also did not lack personalities who penetrated the boundaries of the Iron Curtain as well as the universality of the artistic creation, and who acted as channels of communication and information between the two sides of the curtain. (Ivo Andreric won the Nobel Prize for literature, Miroslav Krezla was a candidate,⁵⁷ Andrzej Wajda was already famous.⁵⁸) Next to Paris, New York was the most important center of Eastern European intellectual immigration,⁵⁹ and dancers and choreographers such as Jan Cieplinski kept dance lovers informed about the newest developments in this art.⁶⁰

Most remarkably, the critics' reaction was also a relaxed one, with the "normal" Graham mix: positive, negative, puzzled, neutral and informative. It might have come as a surprise, as an official observer of the tour remarked, that "In Poland and Yugoslavia their utter novelty did not create reactions less sympathetic,"⁶¹even more so that in order to write for a journal or a newspaper one had to be a member of the Communist Party. The critique of Graham also did not reach a political note, as it happened in Europe, in a negative way, in 1950 and 1954, and in a positive way in Asia in 1955. It is equally true the nationalistic discourse was also absent in her artistic performances, as they did not present *Frontier, American Document*, or *Appalachian Spring*, the Americana pieces, and focused on universal themes, Greek myths, philosophical themes, and some "lighter" works. However, not only that the critique of Graham's art was not politicized, but also the ironical and cynical tones, mocking her nationality, age, and "mental state," so present in the Western European critics' response, was completely absent in the one of the Polish and Yugoslav critics.

The dislike of Graham focused on the same "lacks" brought up previously, in the USA or abroad. The most notable ones were the lack of classicism (the dancers do not float, as "He" (sic) is lying with his feet, palms, knees, face – a man (sic) turning over in dust;")⁶² the ugliness of the "new esthetics" (which could be "courageous and original," but had "many curses and slang words," and did not have harmony.)⁶³ The length of her works was a minus ("for some, her works were a revelation, to others were boredom, the majority considers them tiresome, and only a few will go to a fourth performance,")⁶⁴ as it was "tiring for the spectators, for whom everything was new."⁶⁵ *Clytemnestra* was "a rather long and tiring story," with "the complicated group scenes,"⁶⁶ also disliked for its monotonous pace,⁶⁷ disapproved of in both countries.⁶⁸

They had reservations vis-à-vis her "symbolic and suggestive style,"⁶⁹ while the music was also criticized for the "repetitions, emotional declines, unachieved gradations,"⁷⁰ and for being "neither modern nor classical."⁷¹ In the light of these, some doubted that Graham had the chance "to win over the conformism," but using "the stubbornness, typical of small, apparently weak women […] she might succeed (sic)" ⁷²

Other critics loved her "crystal pure style of the modern art," the movements of the dancers which were "perfect" and called *Night Journey* (which was usually considered a "dark" piece,) "a dance full of decisiveness."⁷³ For them Graham was an "ever young, excited, intelligent, fanatic seeker of the new," whose art was a "rebellion against the five positions of ballet."⁷⁴ They loved the "modernity of artistic expression," "phenomenal submission to dance technique,"

"dancing of freeded (sic) movements" and her "new artistic language."⁷⁵ Exploring themes from literature and philosophy was found interesting, as well as her excelling technique, and the "poetic charm" of her art.⁷⁶

Irena Turska 's (a Polish former dancer and critic) long article dedicated to Graham can be considered the epitome of the reaction of the Eastern European audience in front of Graham's modern dance: a bit surprised, a bit uninformed, maybe puzzled, but not unwilling to appreciate modern, newness and "otherness." Admitting that modern dance was an art foreign to Poland, able to arouse diversified discussions and controversies, Turska appreciated the "superb technique" and the "meticulously studied form of movement," "the mastery of the body, physical dexterity, balance, elasticity," and the "softness of the movement." She corrected the idea that Graham's dancers were trained as classical dancers, but mistakenly claimed that Graham's style was the intersection of "symbolism, abstractionism, and strange conventions," a combination of negro (!) and Indian dances, and inspired by Isadora Duncan, Laban, Delsarte, and Mary Wigman.⁷⁷

After the last performance in Warsaw, Graham and her company left for Germany and the Nordic Countries, before returning to the USA. The tone of the tour's analysis made by the State Department was positive and content, even if the reviews from Belgrade and Poland were considered better than the Zagreb ones, where "there were several reservations." The most important aims of the tour were reached: the company and their leader did in Eastern Europe, on and off stage, "a good propaganda to the American way of life," Graham "skillfully handled the questions," while "there were no special problems on the tour."⁷⁸

My paper demonstrated that Graham's artistic and political performance beyond the Iron Curtain redefined and enlarged the dancer's career and the boundaries of American cultural diplomacy in Europe, but also that the tour was a significant moment which, while proving the versatile power of dance in making the political and ideological curtain less opaque, gave contour and substance to the presence of American culture, politics and modernism in Eastern Europe. Not less significantly, it also made Eastern Europe for the rest of the world, European or not, a more immediate space and reality, which, as the history showed, was waiting to be (re)discovered and (re)invented.

Biography:

Camelia Lenart is a doctoral candidate at the State University of New York at Albany, in the last stage of writing her dissertation "The European Response to Martha Graham's Tours to Europe during the 1950s and 1960s."

Her examination of Martha Graham's European tours on both sides of the Iron Curtain expands and enlarges the historians' and the audience's perception of Martha Graham, being an interdisciplinary approach which makes a new contribution to the dance, cultural, and diplomatic history of the Cold War.

Dancing in native Romania during communism made her discover the subliminal power and the silent language of dance, understand the relationship between arts, the human body, and politics, and ultimately propelled her actual research interest. Camelia presented in numerous conferences, and her work was published in the USA, Canada, England, and Romania. She is the recipient of various awards, including a prestigious Mellon Fellowship from the Institute of Historical Research in London.

Endnotes

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⁴ Robert Rauschenberg, American painter whose works anticipated the pop art movement

⁵ Schedule of the tour, Box 350, Martha Graham Collection, Library of Congress, Washington

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⁹ Clare Croft "Ballet Nations: The New York City Ballet's 1962 US State Department–Sponsored Tour of the Soviet Union" *Theatre Journal*, Volume 61, Number 3, October 2009, pp. 421-442

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¹² Pearl Lang, interview with the author, October 2008

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³¹ Ibidem, p.188-191

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³⁷ Telegram, unknown sender, box 352, Martha Graham Collection, Library of Congress, Washington

³⁸ Invitation to dinner from Mr. and Mrs. Engle, box 350, Martha Graham Collection, Library of Congress, Washington

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⁴³ Sherer was diplomat specialized in the Eastern European Affairs

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- ⁶⁹ Zdislaw Sierpinski, *Zycie Warszawy*, November 28, 1962
 ⁷⁰ Branco Dragutinovic, *Politika*, November 18, 1962
 ⁷¹ Branco Dragutinovic, *Politika*, November 19, 1962
 ⁷² Branka Rakic, "Forms of a new Esthetics, An Encounter with Martha Graham and her art, " *Zagreb Weekly Telegram*, November 23, 1962
 ⁷³ Milica Zacev, "The perfect culture of movement," *Borba*, November 18, 1962
 ⁷⁴ Branco Dragutinovic, *Politika*, November18, 1962
 ⁷⁵ Nand Turkalj, "Pure Dance, first evening of performance," *Vecernji List*, November 20, 1962
 ⁷⁶ Zdielew Siaminski, untitled article. *Zvcie Warszawy*. November 28, 1962

- ⁷⁶ Zdislaw Sierpinski, untitled article, *Zycie Warszawy*, November 28, 1962
 ⁷⁷ Irena Turska, "Martha Graham's world of dance," *Ruch Muzyczny*, no.1W, Jan 15, 1963
 ⁷⁸ Evaluation of Martha Graham's tour, box 354, Martha Graham Collection, Library of Congress, Washington

⁶⁴ Ibidem