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Free Movement: André Lepecki on Hannah Arendt and Dance

“[P]olitics in Arendt can be redefined as a general orientation towards freedom. Consequently, Arendt’s sentence can be re-rendered as: the meaning of politics, which is also its aim or direction, is freedom.” (Lepecki 14)

In his 2013 article “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics,” André Lepecki celebrates dance and choreography as means to liberate decision-making and intention within controlled societies (Lepecki 15, 25-26). However, Lepecki’s argument does not focus solely on movement. He also centers twentieth-century political philosopher Hannah Arendt’s assertion that politics “aim[s]” towards freedom, presented above (Tömmel and d’Entreves). Lepecki defines freedom as a question “not merely of policing, but above all, of self-policing” (Lepecki 18). Freedom does not refer to the absence of restrictive institutions; instead, free individuals do not internalize institutional authority. Lepecki also introduces politics as opposition to “the business of [conventional] politics, politicians, and policy makers” (17). To him, true politics introduce freedom by counteracting these restrictive structures. Lepecki thus accepts Arendt’s proposition that politics “aim[s]” towards freedom. However, he never explains why he assumes freedom as politics’ obvious end (14). My initial approach to Lepecki’s piece left me puzzled by his implicit acceptance of this connection between freedom and politics. However, as I focus on his

assumption that politics exist to create freedom, I realize that he establishes their relationship as unimpeachable so that he does not need to question the merits of defining politics as freedom. Instead, he can discuss the means by which politics create freedom: through movement, or rather, action that “must be learned, rehearsed, nurtured, and above all experimented with, practiced, and experienced” (14). I read Lepecki’s focus on physically creating freedom through politics as a choice that presents freedom as a universally understood value. It also illuminates the physical means by which freedom may be obtained. Lepecki emphasizes freedom and links it to movement in order to demonstrate that movement is valuable not only as entertainment, but also in pursuit of liberty.

The Rhetoric of Freedom: Discussing Arendt, or Not

Lepecki demonstrates his focus on the motion between politics and freedom through his translation of Arendt’s ideas. Arendt, he explains, considers “true” politics “bound, deeply, even ontologically, to the notion of freedom” (13). However, rather than expound on his own acceptance of politics as connected to freedom, Lepecki concentrates on the nature of politics and freedom’s relationship in Arendt’s philosophy. For example, upon introducing Arendt’s sentence “*Der Sinn von Politik ist Freiheit*” (“the meaning of politics is freedom”), Lepecki centers his discussion on the delicate translation of *Sinn*, which he renders as “sense” rather than “meaning” (13). His focus on *Sinn* excludes *Politik* (“politics”) and *Freiheit* (“freedom”), highlighting the relationship between politics and freedom instead of those concepts themselves. Lepecki proceeds to explain that “sense” implies “direction” as well as “signification,” and therefore, Arendt’s writing implies physical motion between politics and freedom (14). By

transitioning directly from Arendt's introduction of politics and freedom to the movement he sources in her language, Lepecki omits any discussion of politics and freedom themselves. This omission centers the connection, or rather, the movement, between politics and freedom as key to understanding freedom. However, it also assumes that Lepecki's readers already have a basic understanding of freedom that he can build upon without explaining freedom's definition—or importance. To Lepecki, it seems, freedom's value as an end-goal is so obvious that it does not need an explanation.

Lepecki further demonstrates his assumption of freedom's importance by discussing what freedom means to Arendt. To her, freedom “is nowhere inscribed as that which defines, or centers, or founds humanity;” it does not constitute a natural right, but rather “a difficult, ever-evolving commitment” (14). However, although Lepecki explains why Arendt views freedom as non-fixed, he does not explore why she believes it must be “practiced [...] again and again, and again and again,” or rather, why it is worth striving towards (14-15). Through this omission, Lepecki implies that Arendt views freedom as worth the difficulty it takes to achieve rather than explaining why she holds this view, adopting her assumption that humanity inherently desires freedom. Yet rather than minimizing freedom's value, I find that his excision of any explanation for freedom's importance emphasizes that very importance as so fundamental it needs no explanation. In light of Lepecki's emphasis on freedom as an all-important end goal, politics' inclination towards freedom seems natural—and movement, the means by which politics create freedom, becomes critically important.

The Rhetoric of Motion: Seizing and Transforming

With freedom established as the ultimate goal towards which humanity strives, Lepecki proceeds to explore the means by which societal freedom can “[come] into the world” (Lepecki 26). He argues that those means are based in movement. For example, he “venture[s] that the particular political subject that transforms spaces of circulation into spaces of freedom has a specific name: the dancer” (16). He also states that movement, especially danced and choreographed movement, constitutes a method for “the activation of freedom” (26). Lepecki has already implied that freedom is humanity’s all-important end goal, so by presenting movement as the means to create freedom, he frames movement as a critically important human practice. To him, actual, physical motion solves Arendt’s challenge that “if we do not yet know how to move politically [or rather, freely], we had better figure out how to do it” before oppressive social structures make freedom impossible (Lepecki 13, 15).

The rhetorical structure within which Lepecki discusses movement also emphasizes the link between movement and freedom, further demonstrating movement’s value. For Lepecki, the inherent enemy of freedom is “choreopolicing,” a neologism he offers to index “critical-theoretical expansion” of the institution of the police (19). Choreopolicing refers to any controlling system that “imposes a forced ontological fitting between pre-given movements, bodies in conformity, and pre-assigned spaces for circulation,” or rather, a system that restricts freedom by regulating motion (20). The concept of choreopolicing thus presupposes a link between freedom and motion. Lepecki strengthens that link by introducing choreopolicing through a motion-focused performance piece, *Tatlin’s Whisper #5* (16-19). By explaining choreopolicing and freedom exclusively through motion, he implies that neither concept can exist without motion. He even employs motion and freedom interchangeably: although choreopolicing opposes freedom rather than movement, on a rhetorical level, it has much more to

do with the latter than the former. Choreopolicing “predetermines pathways [and] establishes routes for circulation,” and in its societies, “even without a cop in sight, a daily choreography of conformity emerges” (19, 20). Both these rhetorical images substitute physical motion for freedom as the target of choreopolicing. Free movement and societal freedom, the two targets of choreopolicing, thus become synonymous.

Choreopolitics, the kinetic means by which choreopolicing may be subverted, offers a further means by which movement creates freedom (26). As he did with choreopolicing, Lepecki introduces choreopolitics through performance pieces, a Turf Feinz dance video and *Devotion Study #1 — The American Dancer* (20-26). However, unlike choreopolicing, choreopolitics allows “movement whose only sense (meaning and direction) is the experimental exercise of freedom” to begin. Through “the field of dance,” choreopolitics reintroduces “the concrete, literal, physical principle of agency”—or rather, of freedom—to politics (26, 20). Choreopolitics thus affirms dance, a form of motion, as a means to actualize freedom. This framework firmly establishes motion as the all-important method that makes freedom possible.

Essential Motion

As I consider Lepecki’s elevation of movement, I realize that his discussion of the meaning and significance of freedom underscores his ultimate point: movement’s importance in creating freedom. Movement, Lepecki insists, prevents individuals from mindlessly obeying oppressive structures. It thus actualizes his definition of freedom. For Lepecki, movement is not merely a form of entertainment or expression of aesthetics (Bory). Instead, by enabling individual agency, it becomes a form of true politics.

Works Cited

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