

Rechoreographing Homonymous Partners:  
Rancière's Dance Education with Loïe Fuller

**ABSTRACT:**

Contemporary philosopher Jacques Rancière has been criticized for a conception of “politics” that is insensitive to the diminished agency of the corporeally oppressed. In a recent article, Dana Mills locates a solution to this alleged problem in Rancière most recent book translated into English, *Aisthesis*, in its chapter on Mallarmé's writings on modern dancer Loïe Fuller. My first section argues that Mills' reading exacerbates an “homonymy” (Rancière's term) in Rancière's use of the word “inscription,” which means for him either a vicious literal carving on living bodies, or else a virtuous figurative carving on nonliving bodies. The former, I call “bodily carving,” while the latter is the “corporeal writing” that I take Mallarmé to affirm in Fuller. My second section observes that Rancière himself misses a homonymy in Mallarmé on Fuller, namely “dance,” meaning either “ballet” or dance in general (including Fuller's). My third section concludes that Rancière's chapter on Fuller includes another “dance” homonymy, meaning either “concert dance” or what I term a new “art of meta-movement” in Fuller. The latter art, I conclude, is equivalent to Mallarmé's “corporeal writing,” and can be understood as a new form of dance education, in pursuit of a new utopia of worker-dancers.

Keywords: Jacques Rancière; dance; Stephane Mallarmé; Loïe Fuller; social justice

The present article stages a new kind of dance educational encounter with Jacques Rancière, motivated in part by the frequent objection from Rancière's critics that his philosophy (of democratic rupture) inadvertently undermines the agency of the corporeally oppressed. The solution to this problem, I argue, lies in his concept of “homonymy,” when the latter is reinterpreted as a duet between two figurative dance partners, whose dance can thus be rechoreographed. Homonymy is also at work in Rancière's most sustained engagement with dance, namely in his recent analysis of the Symbolist poet Stephane Mallarmé's dance criticism of the modern dance pioneer Loïe Fuller. More precisely, I identify a crucial case of “homonymy” in Rancière's interpretations of both poet and choreographer, and in Lois McNay's interpretation of these two interpretations by Rancière. It is in this moment that I find the possibility for a new kind of dance education through the example of Fuller.<sup>1</sup>

To elaborate, McNay misses the homonymy “inscription” in Rancière, which can mean either a negative “bodily carving” or a positive “corporeal writing.” Rancière misses the homonymy “dance” in Mallarmé, which can mean either “ballet” or “dance” (including modern dance). And finally, Rancière misses his own homonymy of “dance” in his chapter on Fuller, which can mean either “concert dance” or a new “art of meta-movement.” My rechoreographing of these homonymous partners is to pair Rancière's “corporeal writing” with Mallarmé's “Fuller's modern dance,” and Rancière's “art of meta-movement.” This trio, I suggest, is Rancière's proposed locus for empowering the agency of the corporeally oppressed, a new form of dance education, oriented toward a utopia of worker-dancers, practicing a new modern art of meta-movement through corporeal writing. This new art moves beyond concert dance to Fuller's serpentine dance and Chaplin's dancing filmic images, and thereby beyond even the distinction between literal/figurative dance, and therein lies its educational promise.

I. Critiquing Rancière on Dance

Though there is a growing secondary literature on Rancière, there is only one piece of scholarship that considers his engagement with dance, so it is there that I will focus.<sup>ii</sup> Dana Mills prefaces her interpretation of Rancière on Fuller by noting that multiple scholars object that his concept of “politics” fails to provide a positive, institutional space for social justice.<sup>iii</sup> For example, she cites McNay’s claim that Rancière, along with radical democratic theorists generally, underestimates what Bourdieu calls “social suffering,” or the fact that oppression can diminish the capacity for agency in the corporeality of the oppressed.<sup>iv</sup> While Mills grants the legitimacy of critiques such as McNay’s, she nevertheless concludes that a satisfactory response to these critiques is suggested by Rancière’s recent book, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, more precisely in its chapter on Mallarmé’s formal dance criticism of the pioneering modern dancer Loïe Fuller (1862–1928).<sup>v</sup>

Mills argues that Mallarmé and Rancière both miss the agency of Fuller’s revolutionary dance technique, which Mills identifies as the power behind Fuller’s body becoming “unlocatable” in her famous serpentine dance.<sup>vi</sup> It is this power to make one’s body unlocatable, Mills argues, that constitutes the inscription that could also be deployed at the level of Rancière’s political subject. That is, the political subject might only *appear* not to have a place, while in fact operating behind the scenes, engaged (like Fuller’s dance) in Mallarmé’s “corporeal writing.” For example, Mills turns to Isadora Duncan, who based her founding of modern dance on her embodiment (bare feet over pointe shoes) and gender (naturalistic movement for women’s bodies rather than balletic artificialization). Mills then concludes that Duncan’s dance was “inscribed” – citing the interpretation of that concept in Rancière by Aletta Norval – on the bodies of her many students and audiences.

To get clearer on what Mills means by “inscription,” I now turn to Norval’s article. To begin, she describes “inscription” as involving both a “carving” and the “writing in the sky.”<sup>vii</sup> This raises the question, already, as to how “inscription” could be both things simultaneously, given that sky-writing is a temporary deployment against a gaseous background, whereas carving is a permanent alteration of a solid surface. Unfortunately, Norval’s later elaboration of “inscription” fails to clarify the issues, namely “projecting and inscribing new and unheard-of ways of being and acting onto existing political imaginaries.”<sup>viii</sup> On the one hand, the phrases “projecting” and “onto existing political imaginaries” sound more like temporary sky-writing; on the other hand, the phrase “ways of being and acting” sounds more like the durability of carving.

In this way, Norval’s take on “inscription” begins to sound like an example of what Rancière calls a “homonymy,” which philosophy divides into its component meanings. In my terms, philosophy rechoreographs a homonymy’s dancing conceptual partners. As Rancière puts it in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, “What I have attempted to think through is not a negative dialectic but rather a positive contradiction,” a “galvanizing tension.”<sup>ix</sup> As he elaborates in *Dissensus*, philosophy “deploys the intervals which put the homonymy to work” in theoretical discourses, which makes philosophy “an inseparably egalitarian, or anarchistic, practice...of de-classification that undermines all policing of domains and formulas.”<sup>x</sup> Put differently, theoretical discourses (such as philosophy) rely on concepts (such as “philosophy”) that blur two or more distinct concepts (such as “love of wisdom” and “wisdom”), the reconfiguration of which is philosophy’s responsibility. I will return to this issue below and attempt to rechoreograph three such homonymys.

Returning to the homonym of “inscription,” its significance for both Norval’s and Mills’ interpretations of Rancière is as follows: their defenses of him rely on the claim that

“inscription” pulls his concept of “politics” away from mere disruption and toward constructive stability. As Norval frames it, Rancière faces the following dilemma:

On the one hand, democracy is presented as ruptural, as a moment of break from the prevailing order. On the other hand, the democratic experience must be able to intervene in and reconfigure that order, which is possible only if it does not take the form of a rupture or a complete break.<sup>xi</sup>

Norval claims to have resolved this dilemma by locating (in addition to the “disidentification” that Rancière explicitly posits as the basis of his “political subject”) the possibility of “(re)inscription” and “reconfiguration.”<sup>xii</sup>

To illustrate the latter two phenomena, Norval turns to one of Rancière’s favorite examples of politics: the 1832 trial of the revolutionary Auguste Blanqui, who when questioned by the magistrate as to his profession, replied, simply, “proletarian.”<sup>xiii</sup> In doing so, Rancière observes, Blanqui utilized the homonymous power of “profession,” which he re choreographs as the two dancing partners of “career” (which one pursues) and “creed” (which one declares). Though I concur with Norval that inscription and reconfiguration are essential dimensions of the political for Rancière, I do not agree that they must involve the long-term identifications of individuals. Instead, I find in Rancière a predominance of short-term group identifications.

As Rancière writes in his book *Disagreement*, “Politics is primarily a conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it,” who are the “performers” on that stage.<sup>xiv</sup> Put in these terms, while Norval insists that sustainable political change requires an exemplary figure (such as the revolutionary proletarian Blanqui) adopting a permanent new identity, I find it sufficient for a small group of people to occupy a literal or figurative theatrical stage and identify with a specific character or role in an unfolding drama. One example, also cited frequently by Rancière, is the May ’68 activists, who identified themselves with the slogan: “We are all German Jews!”<sup>xv</sup> Thus, the construction of the political in Rancière is not the work of the nameless masses, nor of the solitary hero. Instead, it is the work of small groups of performers – borderland dwellers, misfits, and transients. These small groups move through Rancière’s writings like Roma families or circus troupes, sustaining themselves via performances through temporarily-hostile and changing worlds.

In *Proletarian Nights*, for example, Rancière does not focus on the masses of factory workers left destitute after the July Revolution, nor on any solitary hero thereof, but instead focuses on small groups of artisans and semi-skilled professionals, as they find their way literally and figuratively across a temporarily-destabilized France. In Rancière’s words, such in-between groups represent “the fundamental class contaminated by the illusions and irresolute forms of action peculiar to the intermediaries – petty bourgeois people, artisans, and shopkeepers – who insinuate themselves into all the pores of the natural tissue.”<sup>xvi</sup> These hybrid worker-artists include the “worker-writer” J. P. Gilland (son-in-law of an unnamed “weaver-poet”), an unnamed “tailor-poet,” and the “shoemaker-poet” Savinien Lapointe.<sup>xvii</sup>

It is thus not qua proletarian, nor trade guildmembers, nor bourgeois that these small groups of people created a new political subject – but rather as actors, playing temporary and dynamic roles. As Rancière puts it in *Disagreement*, they are “subjects who do not have consistent bodies” and instead “are fluctuating performers.”<sup>xviii</sup> This seems a far cry from Norval’s interpretation of “inscription” as the carving of long-term individual identities. Drawing on the latter interpretation, Mills goes one step further than Norval, conceptualizing this carving of long-term individual identities as a carving onto the individuals’ bodies specifically. It is here that the tension between “writing in the sky” and “carving” becomes most vivid, and most

vividly problematic. The solution is to apply Rancière concept of “homonymy” to his own usage of “inscription,” a rechoreographing of the two conceptual dancing partners I will term “corporeal writing” and “bodily carving.”

Alongside the more numerous positive and neutral references to “inscription” in Rancière’s writings (which Norval and Mills emphasize), there are also many pejorative ones. In *Proletarian Nights*, for example, several of the numerous references to “inscription” are decidedly negative, in a broadly Foucauldian and Deleuzian sense of “inscription” as the marking by oppressors of the corporeality of the oppressed. In one such reference, Rancière refers to “debts too deeply inscribed in the flesh and the heart to be paid off later with wage increases.”<sup>xxix</sup> In another example, having just referred to the Panopticon structure of new factories in nineteenth-century France, Rancière adds that “no peculiar architecture is needed to stamp the omnipresence of mastery and servitude on the body of the workers,” which was due to the “lesions and contusions that inscribe the arbitrariness of Capital’s power on the body of the ‘damned’.”<sup>xxx</sup> And *The Politics of Aesthetics* observes that the “art of imitations is able to inscribe its specific hierarchies and exclusions in the major distribution of the liberal arts and the mechanical arts.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

Overall, I find a pattern in Rancière’s writings in which inscription on living bodies (as opposed to inscription on inanimate objects) is either (a) positive/neutral and figurative, or else (b) negative and literal. In *Aisthesis*, for example, there are twenty instances of “inscribe,” thirteen of which are figurative and positive/neutral, and seven of which are literal. Of the latter, five are positive markings on art materials (such as stone, canvas, and film), and two are negative markings on living bodies. Similarly, in *The Politics of Aesthetics* there are eleven instances of “inscribe,” all of which are positive/neutral and figurative. In neither text, however, is there a single positive/neutral and literal inscription on a living body.<sup>xxii</sup>

This textual evidence appears to support my rechoreographing of inscription – when applied to living bodies – into the conceptual dancing partners “corporeal writing” and “bodily carving,” which correspond to the two abovementioned parts of Norval’s description of “inscription.” The former, aligned with the phrase “writing in the sky,” and named after Mallarmé’s phrase, I define as “the positive and figurative writing by a political subject.” The latter, aligned with her word “carving,” I define as “the negative and literal writing onto the body of political subject.” Put briefly, “corporeal writing” is the act of the political emancipator, and “bodily carving” is due to police oppression of uncounted bodies. Thus, only the former holds the potential for what I am calling a new kind of dance education.

Perhaps the reason that Mills, Norval, and Rockhill miss or gloss over these tensions within “inscription” is that, in attempting to satisfy Rancière’s critics, they underestimate the power of art to politically illuminate new forms on the (literal and figurative) stages of politics. Such stages, I wish to suggest, constitute the locus for a superior form of constructive politics in Rancière – neither mere rupture (as his critics claim), nor a permanent institution (toward which his defenders attempt to bend his thought), but a happier medium in between. Consider the staging of artworks (such as paintings’ canvases, books’ paper, and theatrical stages) and political speeches (which often take place on literal stages, such as those of gymnasias, schools, and churches). In Rancière’s words from *The Politics of Aesthetics*, “Politics plays itself out in the theatrical paradigm as the relationship between the stage and the audience, as meaning produced by the actor’s body, as games of proximity or distance.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Moreover, this theatrical locus can be a site for public education via dancing performances onstage.

Put differently, when a new political subject takes Rancière's stage, it comes as an ensemble, armed with new names or epithets (such as "We are all German Jews!"), and the ensemble articulates an imaginative new vision that rechoreographs the spaces of appearance, through a corporeal writing empowering the political struggle for a new dividing of the sensible. Putting this interpretation in more formal terms, Rancière's constructive politics consists of (1) staged performances of (2) individual artworks belonging to (3) various historical traditions. In other words, what takes Rancière's politics beyond mere rupture is the disruptive perpetuating of artistic and political traditions. To return to Fuller, the true power of her "corporeal writing" is that it sustained the tradition of Western concert dance by disruptively separating the homonymous partners of "dance" and "ballet." To get clearer on the details of this "corporeal writing," I now turn to its authorial source: the dance criticism of Stéphane Mallarmé.

## II. Mallarmé's Rechoreographing "Ballet" and (Modern) "Dance"

Both pieces of Mallarmé's dance criticism that Rancière analyzes, namely "Ballets" and "The Fundamentals of Ballet," can be found in the collection of Mallarmé's writings called *Divagations*, in the section entitled "Scribbled at the Theater." Here I consider both pieces, along with two others from "Scribbled at the Theater." My conclusion is that Mallarmé is not, as Rancière claims, affirming dance per se, but rather critiquing ballet in favor of the modern dance of which Fuller was a (largely underappreciated) pioneer. He is finding in Fuller an exemplar of a new form of dance education, liberated from the patriarchal strictures of ballet.

Beginning with "Ballets," it consists of Mallarmé's criticism of two specific ballets performed at the Parisian Eden Theater: *Viviane* (choreographed by Luigi Manzotti in 1884) and *Les Deux Pigeons* (choreographed by Louis Mérante in 1886). Mallarmé describes a scene from the former ballet as follows:

the whole chorus of dancers will not, grouped around the *star* (could it be better named!), dance the ideal dance of the constellations. Not at all! from there one would take off, you see through what worlds, straight into the abyss of art.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Mallarmé's claim here appears to be that *Viviane's* choreographer modeled that dance on a poem rather than on nature (in this case, the starry heavens), which makes the dance a secondary interpretation of the poem (as itself the primary "interpretation" of the stars).

Rancière's reading of this passage in his chapter on Fuller, however, appears to miss Mallarmé's point. Fuller's dance, Rancière writes there, "embodies exactly the idea of dance expressed seven years earlier by Mallarmé: the body of the ballet figuring 'the ideal dance of constellations' solely around the central star."<sup>xxv</sup> The phrase "the body of the ballet" seems to be Rancière's translator's attempt to render into English the technical term "*corps de ballet*," which refers to the group of non-starring dancers in a ballet (and which thus should have been left untranslated). If my inference is correct, then Rancière is mistaken when he writes that Mallarmé claims that *Viviane's* supporting dancers successfully executed the constellations' dance (since in the above passage he indicates that they fail to do so).

After the above block quote, Mallarmé proceeds to claim that "the dance" (which I am tentatively interpreting as referring to *Viviane* specifically, rather than ballet or dance):

in its ceaseless ubiquity, is a moving synthesis of the attitudes of each group; just as each group is only a fraction, detailing the whole, of the infinite. There results a reciprocity producing the *un*-individual, both in the star and in the chorus, the dancer being only an emblem, never Someone...<sup>xxvi</sup>

The crucial interpretive question here is whether Mallarmé is affirming a disembodiment of dance per se, or instead critiquing *Viviane* as a specific piece of subpar choreography. At stake in the answer to this question are both Mallarmé's valuation of embodiment (affirming or rejecting) and the scope of his remarks (balletic concert dance or dance in general).

This tension only intensifies in the next paragraph, which – given its centrality for Rancière's chapter on Fuller – is worth quoting here in its entirety:

The axiom or judgment to be affirmed in the case of ballet! Namely, that *the dancer is not a woman dancing*, for these juxtaposed reasons: that *she is not a woman*, but a metaphor, summing up one of the elementary aspects of our form: a knife, goblet, flower, etc., and that *she is not dancing*, but suggesting, through the miracle of bends and leaps, a kind of corporeal writing, what it would take pages of prose, dialogue, and description to express, if it were transcribed: a poem independent of any scribal apparatus (emphasis original).<sup>xxvii</sup>

The stakes of interpreting this second block quote are even starker and clearer. To wit, ignoring the first sentence of this passage and interpreting “dancer” as “dancer in general” rather than “ballerina” results in an interpretation which is indeed disembodiment, as well as undermining of the female dancer's agency – to say nothing of its being nonsensical. No dancer is a woman who is dancing? (Can one even imagine him instead writing “No poet is a man who is composing”?) Moreover, on this “dancer” = “all dancers” interpretation, even this passage's otherwise most promising part is undermined, namely Mallarmé's positing of “corporeal writing.”

Mallarmé identifies this corporeal writing – not with “dance” (which would indeed affirm the agency of the female dancer) – but with the “dancer.” For example, the dancer might adopt a posture and gesture, in compliance with the choreographer's commands, that renders her a visual metaphor for a flying bird. In support of this inference, the very last words in “Ballets,” following Mallarmé's reference to the “unlettered ballerina” as an “unconscious revealer,” are as follows: “a Sign, which she is.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Here again, as in the above quote, the dancer (and not the dance) is identified with pure gesture/sign/language, her agency and mastery stolen by her reduction to a linguistic *object d'art*. That she is a dance, not as a conscious master of signs, but as the unconscious object that is a sign.

Alternatively, on the “dancer” = “ballerina” interpretation of the above block, one might interpret the passage as a feminist-sympathetic criticism of ballet as a specific dance form (as opposed to modern dance or flamenco, for example). In other words, perhaps Mallarmé is agreeing here (with Fuller, Duncan, and modern and postmodern dance communities generally), that ballet problematically reduces women's full embodiment to the status of an object imitating other objects (such as Romantic ballets' imaginary creatures, or neoclassical ballet's temperaments, geometrical figures, and other abstractions). Put differently, perhaps Mallarmé is suggesting that the ballerina is prevented from manifesting the complex idiosyncrasies of her womanhood, and from channeling the full agency of her desires into her dance (as in Martha Graham's contraction-and-release method).

Moreover, on this alternate, “dancer” = “ballerina” interpretation, the passage's most promising part (on “corporeal writing”) is also redeemed. To wit, the reduction of ballet (rather than dance in general) to “corporeal writing” amounts to a reduction of a specific form of dance that from a feminist perspective has always been reductive and disempowering for female dancers vis-à-vis their gender. In other words, Mallarmé's description of “corporeal writing,” when understood as applied to ballet, might constitute a criticism of corporeal writing in ballet

qua mere tool for the choreographer. And the choreographer, in turn, who was almost always male in Mallarmé's era, was merely the tool of the operatic or poetic text for the ballet.

Textual evidence in Mallarmé for this "dancer" = "ballerina" interpretation can be found in his later essay, "The Only One Would Have to Be as Fluid." There, he claims that one cannot "recognize in Ballet the name of Dance – which is, if you will, a hieroglyphic language."<sup>xxxix</sup> As opposed to the ballerina who, he claims, "understands no other form of eloquence [than "steps"], not even that of gesture," perhaps the dancer in general for Mallarmé (such as Fuller?) might still be master of her original corporeal writing, just like the poet is master of his (presumptively male) literal writing.<sup>xxx</sup> Moreover, since this quote about hieroglyphics identifies said hieroglyphics with "Dance" (rather than with the "Dancer") there remains a possible ontological distance between artwork and artist (or between "work" and "worker") sufficient to prevent a reduction of the female dancer to her corporeal "writing."

Against the background of my reading of Mallarmé, Rancière's interpretation of his claim that "She is not a woman dancing" is novel and significant for the specific dance to which that claim is applied, namely Fuller's serpentine dance. Rancière claims that Mallarmé pens this famous line "as if in anticipation" of Fuller.<sup>xxxi</sup> Compared to the "dancer" = "dancer" interpretation, Rancière's "dancer" = "Fuller" interpretation is clearly a significant improvement. For one thing, unlike most dance forms (and all ballet), Fuller's serpentine dance involves almost no locomotion (which makes it a more appropriate bearer of the descriptor "she is not dancing"). For another thing, that which engages in the appearance of dance in Fuller's work is a dress (rather than Fuller's body), which as such could just as easily be manipulated by a male performer (which makes Fuller's dance a more appropriate bearer of the descriptor "she is not a woman").

There is nevertheless a significant problem with Rancière's interpretation, which recalls a similar problem in his interpretation of Mallarmé's criticism of the "ideal dance of the constellations." For starters, the referent of Mallarmé's "the dancer is not a woman dancing" is not explicitly "Fuller," which means that Rancière is attributing a perspective on Fuller's dance to Mallarmé that the poet did not explicitly articulate. More importantly, by reading "dancer" as "Fuller," Rancière is either (a) affirming an account of dance in general that problematically affirms the disembodiment of the dancer in general, or else (b) mistaking a potentially feminist-sympathetic critique of ballet for a simple affirmation of Fuller. In short, Rancière is either (a) ethically wrong *alongside* Mallarmé, or else (b) hermeneutically wrong *about* Mallarmé.

As readers of Mallarmé and Rancière, we therefore cannot have them both be simultaneously good and correct in this instance. So I propose that we sever what may have initially seemed a happy interpretive thread, running from Mallarmé via Rancière to Fuller. This would allow us to preserve intact what is arguably most valuable in Mallarmé, namely a feminist-sympathetic critique of ballet in favor of Fuller's dance. Fortunately, one can nevertheless trace an independent path to a similar-spirited conclusion in Rancière. As I will explore in my next section, the homonym "dance" can be rechoreographed into its dancing conceptual partners of (1) an inferior formal concert dance (including ballet), and (2) a new art in Fuller that I am calling "meta-movement."

### III. Rancière's Rechoreographing of "Dance" and "Art of Meta-Movement"

My reading of Rancière begins, following Mills' reading of him, with the chapter in *Aisthesis* on Fuller. Rancière's chapter title, "The Dance of Light: Paris, Folies Bergère, 1893," immediately suggest the same controversy as in Mallarmé's "Ballets": here in Rancière it is the

light, not the woman, who dances. More precisely, the light dances with “a new body, relieved of the weight of its flesh, reduces to a play of lines and tones, whirling in space,” in an “aesthetic rebirth.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Rancière introduces Mallarmé as someone who “attempted to formulate this new aesthetic around three notions: figure, site, and fiction,” and then defines two of the latter three notions, which he implicitly projects onto the poet First, the “figure” is “the potential that isolates a site and builds this site as a proper place for supporting apparitions, their metamorphoses, and their evaporation.” Second, “fiction” is “the regulated display of these apparitions.”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Note that Fuller, as dancer and choreographer, is thus reduced to pure potential. It is unclear, though, whether this reduction is performed by Mallarmé, by Rancière, or both, due to Rancière’s use here of what literary theorists call “free indirect discourse.” In the latter technique, the reader cannot determine whether the narrating voice is that of the author, the narrator, or some hybrid of the two. Rancière uses this strategy of free indirect discourse pervasively in his corpus, especially his historical studies. (For example, in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, the voices of Rancière and his protagonist, radical democratic educator Joseph Jacotot, are frequently indistinguishable).

Whoever the source of this reduction of Fuller, in addition to reducing her to pure potential, they also reduce her dance to the status of apparitions, like the shadow-dance on the cave walls of Plato’s *Republic*. I use the phrase “shadow-dance” to highlight, as I have explored in detail elsewhere (in regard to Kierkegaard’s relationship to dance), that the German phrase translated is *Schattenspiel*. *Schatten* means “shadow” and *spiel* means either “play” or “dance.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Rancière implies that this shadow-play is a shadow-dance in the chapter of *Aisthesis* on Charlie Chaplin as choreographer of the shadows of the cinematic machine’s light. (This implication is already suggested by that chapter’s title, “The Machine and its Shadow”). This *spiel*-dance connection also has a significant implication for Friedrich Schiller, who occupies the heroic apex of Rancière’s aesthetic regime of art. Schiller’s central concept of *spieltrieb*, usually translated as “play impulse” but also translatable as “dance impulse,” is Rancière’s frequent exemplar of a utopian vision of a people who have overcome the worker/artist division.<sup>xxxv</sup> This *spiel*-dance connection might thus help explain the surprising prevalence and importance of dance for Rancière.

Returning to the three terms of the new aesthetic (figure, fiction and site), site is the only term that Rancière does not explicitly define, and yet it is also for him the only seemingly-substantial term. Specifically, “site” appears to be, implicitly, the space where the dancer’s potential can be actualized, in the form of dance’s illusions (such as the flower and waves that are evoked by Fuller’s serpentine dress). At this point, then, if one attributes this reductive aesthetic to Rancière as well as Mallarmé, then Mill’s criticism (namely, that Rancière disembodies Fuller) begins to seem justified. The dancer and her dance are both empty. This simple picture is immediately complicated, however, by Rancière’s subsequent description of Fuller’s serpentine dance.

First, Rancière notes that Fuller herself “designed and popularized” her dance. Second, he writes that the thing which Fuller “does with the long dress she projects around herself” is to “draw the shape of a butterfly, a lily, a basket of flowers, a swelling wave, or a wilting rose.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> Third, he qualifies that these corporeal drawings “are primarily pure spinning: spirals and swirls centered and guided by her body.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> Notice how, in all three moments, Rancière attributes agency to Fuller, and to her body. Moreover, Rancière adds that Fuller’s dress “is the supplement that the body gives itself to change its form and its function.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> In other words, the dress is her



body's first piece of dancing technology, extending the dance beyond the merely organic, all the way to the boundary between dance and the other arts (including fashion and theatrical lighting).

Additionally, even the most seemingly-disempowering moment in Rancière's description of Fuller's dance, namely his reference to her body as "a 'dead centre'," is merely another quote from Mallarmé (and thus not necessarily Rancière's own view). As with the abovementioned reduction of Fuller to potential and her dance to mere apparitions, so also with this "dead centre" quote, it is unclear whether it is attributable only to Mallarmé, or to both him and Rancière. One reason to lean toward the Mallarmé-only interpretation is that Rancière immediately thereafter ascribes agency to Fuller again (for a fourth time), referring to "the body that uses a material instrument to produce a sensible milieu of feeling that does not resemble it in any way."<sup>xxxix</sup> Even the phrase that Mills' repeatedly emphasizes in her criticism of Rancière's account of Fuller's dance, namely "unlocatable body," only appears after Rancière first affirms "the artifice through which a body extends itself to engender forms into which it disappears."<sup>xl</sup>

Rancière thus appears to anticipate Mills' claim that the alleged disappearance of Fuller's dancing body is merely the appearance of a disappearance, and one that is directly empowered by Fuller's embodied dancing technique. In support of this possibility, on the next page Rancière writes that "the body of the dancer constitutes both the operation of the poem and the surface upon which it is written," and that Fuller "is a self-sufficient apparition" (Rancière 2013, 98). This latter phrase, I argue, is more significant for Mills' concerns than "unlocatable body," because it suggests Rancière's recognition of Fuller as *more* fully embodied than her non-dancing audiences. That is, for Rancière, Fuller's body is self-sufficient, not only to sustain her everyday embodiment, but also to create a new kind of apparitional embodiment on the dancing stage. Further supporting this interpretation is Rancière's analogous affirmations of Chaplin's dancing work as a technologically-empowered doubling (rather than a reduction) of his everyday embodiment.

Having cautioned against a hasty identification of Rancière's and Mallarmé's interpretations of Fuller's dance, and having suggested how Rancière's interpretation might be defended against Mills' criticism that Rancière disembodies Fuller, I now shift to a reading of the entirety of Rancière's chapter on Fuller. The conclusion of my reading is that Rancière's central goal is to rechoreograph the homonym "dance" into two dancing conceptual partners, "concert dance" and an "art of meta-movement." From this perspective, Rancière is in fact very much concerned with bodies, just less so with the bodies of professional dancers like Fuller, and more so with the bodies of her working-class audience members at the Folies Bergère – proletarians whose emancipation is prefigured in her new art's dancing lights. An emancipation that their descendants might yet find, if we see her work as exemplar of a new form of dance education.

In the opening pages of Rancière's chapter on Fuller, he claims that her "performance draws the general form of what light makes visible," more precisely the "forms and elementary relations of form" that "symbolize the pure act of appearing and disappearing." Put briefly, the light's primary revelation is of forms-in-relation (rather than objects). In Fuller's case, light's form-performance gravitates around her long dress, which Rancière calls (following Mallarmé) a "veil," and which he describes as "both figure and background."<sup>xli</sup> That is, (a) the dress-qua-dress is the background, (b) the dress-qua-shapes-it-makes is the figure, and both (a) and (b) are constituted by one continuous fabric. For Rancière, this is the key transformation of Fuller's work: not from embodied woman to disembodied dancer (as Mills claims), but rather from dancer-*as-figure* to dance-*as-figure-and-ground*.

Having gestured toward this new choreographic move, in which the embodied dancing figure expands to fill her (former) background, Rancière then returns to the concepts he projects earlier onto Mallarmé, namely “figure” and “fiction,” fleshing them out in a way that undermines the traditional figure/ground distinction. The concept of figure in general, Rancière asserts, “is two things in one,” namely (1) “the literal, material presence of a body” and (2) “the poetic operation of metamorphic condensation and metonymic displacement.”<sup>xlii</sup> Put differently, a figure is both a thing and an image; and sometimes a figure can be both at the same time, or exist somewhere in between the two, perhaps especially in Fuller’s dance. As for “fiction,” Rancière redefines it as a “pure display of a play of forms.” In Fuller’s case, this form-display is a “sketching [of] flight rather than the bird, the swirling rather than the wave, the bloom rather than the flower.”<sup>xliii</sup>

In short, this “new fiction” is “the deployment of appearances as a form of writing.”<sup>xliiv</sup> This new fiction of appearances’ appearing is also, according to Rancière, “the meaning of the word ‘symbolism,’” namely “the suppression of the difference between symbolic and direct expression.” The pinnacle of symbolism, therefore, looks at first blush like dance (and, at second blush, like blush’s appearing per se). “Movement presents itself in every movement,” Rancière writes of Fuller’s art, because “the movement of veils is not a part of movement: it is its potential at work.”<sup>xliv</sup> Put differently, Fuller’s movement transcends dance to become a new art of the movement of movement, or what I am calling “meta-movement.”

This point about Symbolism and its concept of a singular “art” is also significant, according to Rancière, for retroactively vindicating Fuller’s unsuccessful effort to secure a copyright for her serpentine artwork. Her effort failed, Rancière notes, because “the American judicial system” was still operating according to “a poetic code...belonging to the representative regime of the arts.”<sup>xlvi</sup> From the perspective of Rancière “aesthetic regime,” however (which includes Mallarmé), when it comes to Fuller’s work, “we are not dealing with a woman making graceful gestures, but with a figure: a body that institutes the place of its becoming metaphorical, its fragmentation into a play of metaphoric forms.”<sup>xlvii</sup> In this way, Rancière argues, “fragmenting the dancing body, redistributing its forces and making it engender forms outside of itself,” Fuller “participated in the rupture through which the new art of dance dismisses the representative art of ballet.”<sup>xlviii</sup> That is, while ballet limits itself to one organic human body, Fuller’s art divides the body and uses it to supplement itself with artificial bodies.

This is already high praise from Rancière, but he elevates Fuller still higher, implying that her work also transcends modern dance, and then dance per se. Fuller is even more important than Isadora Duncan, Rancière claims, because while Duncan remains bound to modern dance, Fuller “was a pioneer in a greater undertaking of which modern dance was an autonomous shard.”<sup>xlix</sup> In addition to Fuller’s “proposing new bodily gestures,” she also, Rancière claims, “sought to remodel all the elements of performance: staging, lighting, even the architecture of the place.”<sup>l</sup> In effect, Fuller proposes “a formula for Art Nouveau as such,” helping to create the following:

an art of the indistinction of the arts – an art of their fusion, as it were...because it negates the supposed specificities of material and processes, because it presents itself as the display of potentials and forms anterior to these specifications. Before dance, there is movement; before painting, gesture and light; before the poem, the tracing of signs and forms: world-gestures, world-patterns.<sup>li</sup>

In other words, Fuller expands the power of the art of dance, and even of art per se, by locating and manipulating a more fundamental, almost invisible, level of material: the movements of

which gestures are made. In this way, Rancière writes, Fuller completes “the dream begun by romanticism,” namely of an art that “focuses on following its own potential, which is captured in the Greek notion of *physis*.” For this dream, Rancière writes, “Loïe[ Fuller]’s dance offers its exemplary formula,” by offering “pure artifice, a pure encounter between nature and technique.”<sup>lii</sup>

For this reason, Rancière concludes, “Fuller is the artist per se, the artist who makes her body into a means for inventing forms,” but “also indissolubly the inventor who, in the margins of her performances, files patents for inventions that extend, amplify, and multiply this invention of forms.”<sup>liii</sup> In other words, having already transcended dance to reach a new art of meta-movement, Fuller also transcends art, through artifice, to reach a new nature. In Rancière’s words, Fuller reveals that the “intoxication of art is nature – the passage of the night into forms and the return of forms to the night – recreated by pure artifice.” Here, Rancière finally admits he has taken leave of Mallarmé, who “did not lend a great deal of attention to electrical ideality. The veil counted for him more than the light that lit it up.”<sup>liv</sup> This artificial, electrical light is central for Rancière, however. “Electricity,” he writes, “was suited to realize the new ‘intoxication of art’ because it is both the natural force of artifice and the artificial force of nature...the spiritual form of matter, or the material form of spirituality.”<sup>lv</sup> In short, Fuller offers “the stage of a new world where art and science come together.”<sup>lvi</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion: Dancing Rancière’s Utopian Dreams

With this dancing connection thus illuminated from the shadowed walls, I will now conclude by considering Rancière’s chapter on Fuller alongside both his chapter on Chaplin and his writings elsewhere on the two dancing partners of the homonym that is his aesthetic regime of art. For Rancière, Fuller represents one tendency of the aesthetic regime of art (exemplified by Schiller’s “aesthetic education”), namely utilizing art to remake a new world of sense-perception (in Fuller’s case with an electrically-illuminated dress continuously reshaped before the working-class audience of the Folies Bergère). Chaplin represents the opposite tendency of that regime, exemplified by Adorno’s critical theory, which is to insist on art’s purified autonomy from capitalist commodification.<sup>lvii</sup> “To the extent,” Rancière claims in *Dissensus*, “that the aesthetic formula ties art to non-art from the start, it sets that life up between two vanishing points: art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art,” whereby “the life of art in the aesthetic regime of art consists precisely of a shuttling between these scenarios.”<sup>lviii</sup> This “shuttling,” moreover, between the two partners of the dance of the aesthetic regime of art, could itself be understood as a playing (*spielen*) or dancing.

That is, Fuller uses her dance of light to teach a predominantly working-class audience about the creation of new forms and relations of life, while Chaplin uses his dance of shadows to satirize the shadow-existence of and for the prisoners of the blinding fluorescence of late-capitalist cages. For both Fuller and Chaplin, it is the social suffering of oppressed bodies that is at stake. It is precisely for those oppressed bodies that Rancière comes to both (a) his optimistic conclusion regarding Fuller (celebrating her separation of the homonym “dance” into its partners “dance” and “art”) and (b) his pessimistic conclusion regarding Chaplin (witnessing Chaplin’s spotlighting of capitalism’s crushing of the natural remnants of the human bodies it exploits).

Throughout his work, Rancière remains sympathetic to the figures of the “social suffering” various peoples, from ancient Roman plebeians, to nineteenth-century French artisans, to twentieth-century suffragettes, to Syrian refugees today, all denied the leisure necessary for full participation in the arts (liberal, fine, etc.). Put in terms of concert dance, since not everyone

has an equal opportunity to dance on stage, Rancière seems to exhort us to let those stages burn, and to let the resulting fire re-choreograph that dance into its conceptual partners of (1) bourgeois dancing artform, and (2) meta-movement re-dividing the sensible. In that way, dancing technologies (such as Fuller's dress and electric lights, and Chaplin's movie cameras and lights) might teach us the way to a recreated nature for all the mutely invisible socially-suffering bodies.

This, finally, is what Rancière in *Disagreement* calls "the contraction of two worlds in a single world," the everyday world and the world of the artful political stage, the latter being the site of the staging, works, and traditions that constitute art and politics' dance.<sup>lix</sup> This is the true place of dance in Rancière, where homonyms are re-choreographed into their dancing conceptual partners. Rancière's dancing inheritance is dual one, from the dance of Hegel's dialectic and the dance of Schiller's *spieltrieb*. It is the "galvanizing tension" of the "positive contradiction" that reverses the dialectic. And it performs what social dancers call "back-leading," in which the follower leads the leader from their subordinate positioning, harmonizing what Schiller would call the partners' "energizing" and "melting" beauty.<sup>lx</sup> In this Hegelian dialectical dance, and in surrendering to this Schillerian impulse, Rancière takes the "torsion" he identifies with politics and applies it to philosophy. He finds dances within and among Chaplin, Fuller, and Mallarmé, exploring their choreographies of "corporeal writing," light, and elementary forms and relations. And Rancière moves, throughout, in choreographic pursuit of a new division of society, where every worker will also be an artist, and all who have experience "social suffering" in their corporeality can join the utopian dance.

At this point, two important objections likely remain. First, how can one distinguish a positive vision of dancing utopia from the twentieth century "mass movement events" affiliated with Stalinism and the Nazis, including Rudolf Laban's "movement choirs"?<sup>lxi</sup> One encouraging answer can be found in Ramsay Burt's *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, "Race" and Nation in Early Modern Dance*. In a chapter entitled "Totalitarianism and the Mass Ornament," Burt claims that such mass movement events predated the infamous totalitarian versions, and were also used by far-left organizations (Burt 2011, 106). "What is significant about" Hitler's use of these performances, Burt adds (citing Eichberg), "is the fact that they found them difficult to control and ineffective."<sup>lxii</sup> In short, the Nazis not only did not have a monopoly on these events, they did not even have a good handle on them. As for Laban's relationship to the Nazis, Ramsay emphasizes "the cancellation of Laban's *bewegungschore* and Laban's subsequent dismissal from his post in Goebbel's Ministry of Propaganda."<sup>lxiii</sup> Overall, what makes the totalitarian appropriation of these events problematic, Burt concludes, "lies not in the activity itself but in the ideals to which the participants were encouraged to aspire."<sup>lxiv</sup> In short, these events have been repurposed for leftist ideals, and similar events could easily be compatible with Rancière's utopia of worker-dancers.

This, finally, suggests a final likely question. How does one get to such a utopia from this new art of meta-movement, given its inclusion of metaphorical and figurative dances? One good starting point is folk dances, such as the Latin dances known as salsa and bachata, because they are not designed by bourgeois choreographers (like Graham or Laban), nor by government ministries of propaganda. Instead, they arise organically, among the disempowered masses. They are part of the communal atmosphere, learned at home, practiced at local gatherings, and helping to consummate the milestone events in the lives of individuals and the community.<sup>lxv</sup> They are thus easily taught, and easy for ordinary people in the community to learn.

In this same spirit, Fuller entertained the masses at the low-brow Folies Bergère, while Chaplin delighted comparable audiences for the low price of a movie theater ticket. Thus

inspired, many of the disempowered began to imitate Fuller's serpentine dress dance and the imagistic dances of Chaplin's tramp. When a dancer (like Fuller) brings dance to the masses by transforming it into more accessible forms, or an artist (like Chaplin) transforms a non-dancing artist practice into a figurative dance, or a philosopher (like the present author) moves among the people and learns the vernacular dances that they continue to create and improvise, each time the workers and artists get closer to dancing together, both literally and figuratively, in the direction of achieving Rancière's utopian dreams.

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#### Notes

<sup>i</sup> For more on Rancière on aesthetic education and emancipation generally, see Tyson E. Lewis, *The aesthetics of education: Theatre, curiosity, and politics in the work of Jacques Rancière and Paulo Freire* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

<sup>ii</sup> Rancière's most influential interpret in English, perhaps, is Todd May. See, for example, Todd May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière* (Edinburgh, 2008). For a critique, see Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Another recent popular overview can be found in Davide Panagia, *Rancière's Sentiments* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). And for a good introduction, see Jean-Philippe Deranty, *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>iii</sup> See, for example, Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, "Radical intimacy: Ontroerend Goed meets the emancipated spectator," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 3 (2012): 412–20.

<sup>iv</sup> See, for example, Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014). This strikes me as prima facie implausible given Rancière's early magnum opus, *Proletarian Nights*, which chronicles the agency-crippling suffering imposed on various groups of the nineteenth-century French proletariat. I will return to this issue below.

<sup>v</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso 2013); Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Aletta J. Norval, "'Writing a Name in the Sky': Rancière, Cavell, and the Possibility of Egalitarian Inscription," *The American Political Science Review* 106, no. 4 (2012): 810-826.

<sup>vi</sup> Dana Mills, "The Dancing Woman is the Woman Who Dances into the Future: Rancière, Dance, Politics," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 49, no. 4 (2016): 482-499, 487.

<sup>vii</sup> Norval, "Writing a Name," 814.

<sup>viii</sup> Norval, "Writing a Name," 813.

<sup>ix</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 54, 55.

<sup>x</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 226.

<sup>xi</sup> Norval, "Writing a Name," 813.

<sup>xii</sup> Norval, "Writing a Name," 825.

<sup>xiii</sup> Norval, "Writing a Name," 818.

<sup>xiv</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, tans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 26-27.

<sup>xv</sup> Mills, "The Dancing Woman," 813.

<sup>xvi</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-century France*, trans. John Drury (New York: Verso, 2012), 26.

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- xvii Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 4, 8, 14.
- xviii Rancière, *Disagreement*, 89.
- xix Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 168.
- xx Rancière, *Proletarian Nights*, 233, 234.
- xxi Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 40.
- xxii In the glossary appended to his English translation of *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Gabriel Rockhill does offer one instance of a positive and literal inscription on a living body: namely, “meaning is inscribed like hieroglyphics on the body of things” (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 85). Thus, like Norval and Mills, Rockhill appears to blend (perhaps unconsciously) (a) positive and figurative inscription on nonliving bodies, and (b) negative and literal inscription on living bodies, to create a new type, namely (c) positive and literal inscription on living bodies. As (c) is present rarely, if at all, in Rancière, thus seems unsuitable as a basis for a constructive politics in his work.
- xxiii Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 12.
- xxiv Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 129.
- xxv Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 99.
- xxvi Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 130.
- xxvii Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 130.
- xxviii Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 134.
- xxix Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 139.
- xxx Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 133.
- xxxi Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 103.
- xxxii Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 94.
- xxxiii Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 94.
- xxxiv See Joshua M. Hall, “Religious Lightness in Infinite Vortex: Dancing with Kierkegaard,” *Epoché: A Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23, no. 1 (2018): 125-144.
- xxxv For more on the importance of dance for Schiller, see Joshua M. Hall, “Core Aspects of Dance: Schiller and Dewey on Grace,” *Dance Chronicle* 40, no. 1 (2017): 74-98.
- xxxvi Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 95.
- xxxvii Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 95.
- xxxviii Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 96.
- xxxix Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 96.
- xl Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 97.
- xli Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 98.
- xlii Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 99.
- xliii Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 100.
- xliv Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 101.
- xlv Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 101.
- xlvi Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 102.
- xlvii Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 103.
- xlviii Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 104.
- xlix Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 104.
- l Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 105.
- li Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 105, 106.
- lii Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 106.

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- liii Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 107.
- liv Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 107.
- lv Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 108.
- lvi Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 109.
- lvii Rancière, *Aisthesis*, 21, 22.
- lviii Rancière, *Dissensus*, 140.
- lix Rancière, *Disagreement*, 27.
- lx For more on the relationship between Hegel and his dialectic to dance, see Joshua M. Hall, “St. Vitus’ Women of Color: Dancing with Hegel,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (2017): 43-61.
- lxi See, for example, Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avante Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (New York: Verso, 2011).
- lxii Ramsay Burt, *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, “Race” and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 1998), 107, citing Henning Eichberg, “The Nazi Thingspiel: Theater for the Masses in Fascism and Proletarian Culture,” *New German Critique* 11 (1977): 133-150.
- lxiii Burt, *Alien Bodies*, 107.
- lxiv Burt, *Alien Bodies*, 117.
- lxv For a recent exploration of the example of salsa’s origins and transformations, see Juliet McMains, *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce* (New York: Oxford, 2015).