

Katie Phelan  
Research Paper  
DANC 6060: Graduate Seminar  
Prof. Armando Duarte  
11/30/2020

### A Modern Recreation of Lamentation

Within this research paper, I investigate a modern recreation of Martha Graham's *Lamentation* with interactive technology and digital illustration. I discuss the history of *Lamentation* and its variations of many artists throughout the last century. I articulate the impact our digital possessions have on the grievance process. I propose a possible an entry point into the creation process of the choreography, film, and digital work. I argue reasons why this recreation is important to the understanding of our digital culture. I share a personal understanding of my own grievance process as discovered by the research.

Martha Graham's *Lamentation* premier in New York City in 1930 as a solo work, with choreography and performance by Graham herself. The work, which is less than six minutes, is performed entirely seated on a bench and within a tube of fabric encasing the dancer. The fabric hides most of the body and only allowing visual sign of part of the head, hands, torso, and feet. The piece is supported by the articulation of a restricted movement quality, which is enhanced and supported by the fabric encasement. Resembling the consistency of skin, the fabric shifts, stretches, and moves in unnatural shapes around the body. This alludes to Graham's idea of human ability to stretch outside of one's bodily restrictions, such as skin.

Up until the time of *Lamentation* no dance had redefined the image and the perception of the dancer as this work did. Unlike the choreography of the body that moved across multiple plains of space, the dancer was seated, in on location for the duration of the work. The visibility of the body and the bodies movements were obstructed by the fabric causing spectator to use imagination or kinesthetic experience to perceive what the body was doing. The performer in not human, nor animal, nor male or female, nor black or white. They are the symbol of grief and

embody that emotion through this work. This work shifted the image of a dancer and has been a token of study because of that.

*Lamentation* is used widely within academic dance programs, especially those with post-modern curriculum. Using this masterpiece with expansive historical value as a base will have an incredible impact on the fields dance and multimedia. Not only is this recreation a gateway to new ways of creating and viewing dance, but it is inviting the spectator to view and experience the work, and dance, in a completely new manner. I acknowledge the field of film as historically being dominated by cisgender white heterosexual male leaders and cinematic conventions were developed to their perspective. As a female multimedia artist, I hope to bring perspective of the female into the framing and film techniques. Not only does this speak to pushing the boundaries of inclusiveness and equality but it values the work that has been produced by woman in history. This project is an opportunity to expand upon an iconic work of American modern dance by a leading female pioneer of dance by use of technological languages and tools of the 21st century. Several choreographers that have done new interpretations of *Lamentation* throughout the years - resulting in new perspectives and perceptions of the work - but none of these recreations have engaged multimedia as this work will.

After 9/11, members of the Graham Company took part in an outreach workshop to use *Lamentation* as a method for youth students to express their grief. This workshop was a springboard for a similar project, involving Tadej Brdnik. The project involved teaching postures from *Lamentation* to student of varying ability including those who are blind. The results proposed a new area of question that focused on the embodiment of *Lamentation* verses the visual perspective. Later, in 2007, three choreographers of the Martha Graham Dance Company began a commemoration project of 9/11, which as inspired by their responses to *Lamentation*. The project was title *Lamentation Variations* and premiered on 9/11, 2007. With a positive

response, the pieces became part permanent part of the Company repertoire and aided in the opportunity of new commissions. In 2015, the MGDC had 12 variations of *Lamentation* in its repertoire.

In the last century, it has been recreated in many fashions, offering new interpretations to the classic work. Drag performer, Richard Move, began his series of shows titled “*Martha @..*” in 1996. Within this production, Move reenacts *Lamentation* – performing as Graham herself. This recreation offered *Lamentation* a queer perspective of the piece. It also offers a perspective on how memory can be stored within the body and kinetic movement. “When the piece has been performed, what remains depends upon the uncertain duration of the kinetic memory of the dance, like a soft and dusty precipitate in the dancers’ bodies.” (Schwartz, 63) By use of kinetic memory, the spectator can relate to the work from a place of familiarity and makes a stronger connection to the work because of that relation. In this way, the recreation of *Lamentation*, offers this kinetic memory to its origins, but presents itself through a digital medium; making the piece more relatable to a generation that is highly influenced by technology. The premise of *Lamentation* was a commentary independent of race, gender, or human characteristics, but at the time of its creation and much of its recreation, it could not consider how technology impacts grief. This work set out to define the impact of our digital society on our grievance processes and transition the work to assist in relatability in the 21st century.

To understand the human embodiment of grief, I researched rituals of grievance, such as the ritual of letting go. Within this research, it is defined that the process of letting go is a major component of the grievance process. “Letting go is critical during life transition related to loss of loved ones through breakup, divorce, or bereavement, when one’s identity and attitudes toward significant possessions are actually called into question.” (Sas, Whittaker, Zimmerman, 2) The effects of disposing physical possessions has proven beneficial, psychological outcomes.

However, the effects of digital methodologies of letting go have different psychological outcome within the overall process of grief.

Practices of letting go can involve the disposal of physical belongings that represent emotional attachments to the relationship. For this explanation, the examples of the grievance process are associated with the loss of a relationship, including but not limited to death of family member or friend, divorce from spouse, or break-up of romantic relationship. The process of letting go examples are the disposal of material possessions that have an emotional tie to the relationship with a methodology that engages the body in the task. “We detail three types of disposal practices: covert, open and dynamic, characterized across dimensions of embodiment or the role of one’s body in disposal, the visibility of the result of bodily actions on the objects and the speed of objects’ transformation.” (Sas, Whittaker, Zimmerman, 3) Physical material disposal incorporates multiple categories of actions. This includes visibility, action of the body, element of nature, time interval, and target emotion. With the action of disposing a love letter, I offer three scenarios of disposal and the placement in each category of action.

Burning the love letter occurs over a few seconds; a brief time interval. It has an open visibility as it is seen by the viewer and requires action by the body to throw or toss physical object into fire. It requires the natural element of fire and releases a target emotion of anger. Alternatively, the letter could be released into a body of water, with water being the natural element. The duration of the event – the dissolution of the physical object - could take days, weeks, months, offering the viewer a long-time interval. The action of the body and visibility are likely to be low due to the time interval and quality of dissolution. Here, the target emotion is sadness.

Between the two examples above, is a common action of letting go: release. The releasing of a balloon tied to the love letter - which requires medium bodily action - has open

visibility with a medium duration. The event lasts only minutes and the viewer watches as the balloon drifts away, maintaining sight of the balloon for most or complete duration. Utilizing the natural element of air, the target emotions of sadness and regret. As humans, these layers of actions and reasonings provide space and time for our physiological grievance processes. However, “digital and physical possessions have very different properties which need to be carefully considered in the context of ritualist disposal.” (Sas, Whittaker, Zimmerman, 4) Within the study, it is found that the same categorization cannot be made for the disposal of digital possessions human harbor through technology.

In the 21st century, our lives are ingrained in a digital world; one that we have molded to our own satisfaction, shaped to showcase the best parts of ourselves, and filled with digital possessions. These possessions are representations of memories, events, relationships, and activities that define our lives. Many questions, “if it isn’t posted on social media, did it really happen?” This may be approached as a facetious joke to many, but it uncovers some underlying tendencies in approaching these digital worlds. “People increasingly live their lives online, accruing collections of digital possessions.” (Sas, Whittaker, Zimmerman, 2) The realm of digital archives is placed higher in personal importance than acquiring the physical objects of remembrance. For example, with the objective of sharing photos from a recent vacation, more people are likely to upload photos to a social media album than they are to make a scrapbook or physical photo album.

Like the separate of physical objects as a process of grief, there are some studies in the positive impact of these digital possessions throughout the grievance process, such as the celebration and remembrance to honor the deceased. However, there are contrasting thoughts of the negative impact on the grieving process due to these digital possessions. Technology offers a deletion process that occurs instantaneously with little or no visibility, action of the body, or

natural element. For example, the deletion of an emailed love letter. The action of the body is low, in terms of one-click on the mouse. The time duration does not exist as it is an instant reaction. There is no visibility within the event – the email is merely gone. There is no element of nature with the event. “We use the framework to critique current digital disposal as lacking many critical aspects of letting go and explore how letting go might be better addressed through new design.” (Sas, Whittaker, Zimmerman, 3) Without fulfilling these points of interaction, our brains cannot experience the same level of involvement as when disposing of physical objects. The process of letting go is cut down from a comprehensible experience to an expectation of being instantaneously healed.

Additionally, due to the complexities of technology, internet, cellular devices, and social media, our digital possessions are lacking in organization and tidiness. Although you have deleted the file, that might not be the only file of it. We proceed through our lives producing more and more digital information like text messages, emails, photos, ect. and lack the consideration of where and how these files are being stored. There is not always a clear organizational method to our digital worlds which can lead to complexities within the deletion process. Unlike a physical photo, which have one place of existing, digital photos can have multiple locations of existence like, in your phone’s photo app, on your computer, on Facebook, on Instagram, and tagged in your friend’s profile. When the unfortunate time comes to dispose of these materials, how are we sure we can get all of them?

People are less likely to delete or remove digital possessions than they are to destroy physical evidence. We hold onto our same digital footprints because they are a part of our history. But within these spaces are fragments of past relationships that are waiting like time bombs to reemerge. This can lead to untimely reminders of grief. These fragments reemerge through “memories” on Facebook or the cell phone number you never deleted that still pops up

when you scroll to find someone else's number on your contact list. The disorder of digital collectives provides an unpredictable interaction with unwelcomed memories. This can bring up otherwise suppressed emotions or begin the grievance period over again.

So, how is this in relationship to Graham's *Lamentation*? This work set out to define the impact of our digital society on our grievance processes and transition the work to assist in relatability in the 21st century. From this research we can understand how the grievance process has evolved or decreased in nature. We can also understand the psychological impact of the shift in grievance as a technologically advanced society. In thinking about the transitions this information would have on the recreation of *Lamentation*, I propose two shifts to the piece. First, the representation of encasement of grief as a visual object. Second, the perspective or relation to the work that might be perceived by the spectator.

In considering the visual representation of encasement, I wondered if grief in the modern day looks like an ever changing, malleable web that stretches and shifts through each experience of life. This web reminds me of the fabric tube that encases the dancer in *Lamentation*, which stretches and reacts as the body of the dancer moves. I wonder if instead of solid tube, the influences of modern-day technology offer evolving holes within its structure. The holes of the web might open larger in moments of release and clarity to offer light inwards. They sharply close from time to time to reflect the unexpected shift in emotions when presented to an unwelcome digital reminder.

In considering the perception that might be retrieved from this work, I investigated what technology-based perspective could have in untraditional methods of performance and viewership. It is clear, in its prior recreation, *Lamentation* serves a purpose in assisting its viewers with their own grievance processes. But how can the intersection of dance and

multimedia through use of animated illustration be defined as important to the intention of this work? Again, I look to the history of this work to understand the spectator's relationship to it. Graham's work relied heavily on this kinetic perception of the spectator within its success because the viewer could relate to the grief portray. "Choreography has specialized both in training the dancers to develop kinesthetic expertise and in creating formats for spectators to access particular fields of movement experience." (Fabius, 331) Kinesthesia, being the ability to feel movement of the body, can also be an experienced of the spectator through their own body. The spectator can understand the grief within *Lamentation* because they have known what that grief feels like within their own body. By using kinesthesia and empathy as collaborative tools, the spectator can interact with the performance through their own experiences, emotions, memories, and bodily responses. "Combining kinesthesia with "empathy," this concept emerges as an empathetic interaction between performer and viewer that embodies aspects of the performer's movement. This interaction is a sensory experience, perhaps facilitated by emotion, memory, and imagination." (Wood, 246). By understanding this, we can understand the emotional impact Graham's original *Lamentation* has on its audience and why it has remained an influence piece throughout history.

By understanding the spectator's relationship to the work historically, we can understand how their grievance processes were tied to their experience of the piece. However, as grievance processes have shifted in the last thirty years due to technology, we can speculate that this historic work is not as relatable its modern-day viewers as it was at its premier. Using the research already conducted, I argue that the presentation of *Lamentation* in a technology-based modality is needed to allow this work to remain prevalent in the eyes of today's technologically advanced generations. I believe the same psychological connections to the work can be made by both addressing and connecting the lacking aspects of the viewer's grievances.



The interesting aspect of dance is even though its creation process is through the engagement of the body, it is traditionally viewed through a visual sensory. While my proposed work still relies on spectators engaging through viewership, I believe the kinesthetic relationship to the work is what defines *Lamentation* as valuable. Relating through their own place of knowing, the spectator connects their own emotions and empathy to the work. This piece might serve the spectator in ways of understanding grievance, as it did for individuals viewing it in 1930. However, unlike the time of its premier, society thrives on the connection made through technology, sometimes to the point of psychological harm, as stated in the research about rituals of letting go. The digital platform of this recreation offers an opportunity to a broad range of spectators to engage with the work and engage with the idea of grievance through technological platforms. One might even understand why their own journey of grievance has been personally unsuccessful in manner of digital disposal.

I think about my own grief and the weeks following the passing of my grandmother. Even at 94 years old, she was technologically progressive. She was a regular user of Facebook; staying involved in the platform by uploading pictures, engaging through comments on posts and photos, and remaining in touch with her geographically far children and grandchildren. I was not physically present for her passing, and a funeral was not held. Due to these circumstances, I have struggled with the conceptualizing of her death. With a Facebook page that still displays her photos, and Memories feature that shares her comments on my posts, I am reminded of my own struggles in my grievance process. Within the understanding of this research, I offer myself room to grief in a more traditional manner. The purpose of the recreation could be in the same discoveries for others.

By understand the grievance process associated with rituals of letting go, one can understand how technology might decrease the process of those rituals. From there, they might

be able to understand if grief has been harbored in themselves from lack this process due to technology. In connecting these aspects, a spectator might find insight through the technologic iterations in the recreation of *Lamentation*. By connecting their own emotions and empathy to the work, this piece might serve them in ways of understanding grievance, as it did for individuals viewing it in 1930. It is my hope that this recreation of *Lamentation* will find its own place in history and scholarly research.

Through the articulation of the impact our digital possessions have on the grievance process, I have proposed a possible an entry point into the creation process of the choreography, film, and digital work of a modern recreation of Martha Graham's *Lamentation*. I discuss the history of *Lamentation* and its variations of many artists throughout the last century and investigated the interaction of technology and digital illustration within the work. By sharing a personal understanding of my own grievance process, I have argued reasons why this recreation is important to the understanding of our digital culture.

## Bibliography

- Hill, Mary Carol. "Postmodern Reflections on Dance Modernism: Modernist Currents of Primitivism, Dimensional Reality, and the Artist as Seer on Martha Graham's "Heretic", "Lamentation", and "Primitive Mysteries"." 2001.
- Fabius, Jeroen. "Seeing the Body Move: Choreographic Investigations of Kinesthetics at the End of the Twentieth Century." *Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader*, 2009, pp.331-345.
- Paxton, Blake A. "Transforming Minor Bodily Stigmas Through Holding Onto Grief." *Qualitative Inquiry* 19, no. 5 (2013): 355-65.
- Sas, Corina, Whittaker, Steve, and Zimmerman, John. "Design for Rituals of Letting Go." *ACM Transactions on Computer-human Interaction* 23, no. 4 (2016): 1-37.
- Schwartz, Selby Wynn. "Martha@Martha: A Séance with Richard Move." *Women & Performance* 20, no. 1 (2010): 61-87.
- Siegel, Marcia B. *The Shapes of Change : Images of American Dance / Marcia B. Siegel ; Illustrated with Photos*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.
- Simonari, Rosella. *Lamentation Project: a Superb Dance Adaptation of Martha Graham's 1930 Solo*, 1 Jan. 1970, [adancehistory.blogspot.com/2015/11/lamentation-project-superb-dance.html](http://adancehistory.blogspot.com/2015/11/lamentation-project-superb-dance.html).
- Theys, Emily Macel. "Graham, Gone Wild: An Eclectic Mix of Artists Reenvisions Martha Graham's Lamentation. (Kyle Abraham in Lamentation Variations)." *Dance Magazine* 89, no. 2 (2015): 20.
- Wood, Karen. "Kinesthetic Empathy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Screen Dance Studies, The Oxford Handbook of Screen Dance Studies*, 2016-08-01. 1st ed. Oxford Handbooks. Oxford University Press, 2016.