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Performance as Propaganda: The Rockettes and the ideal citizen

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Hearing this week that the Rockettes and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir have been chosen to sing at Trump's inauguration, I immediately made parallels to Nazi Germany's use of choreographer Rudolf Laban's movement choirs as propaganda. The main images that come to mind when thinking of these two ensembles are uniformity, anonymity and though not exclusively, but surely, whiteness. Recently having given a lecture at San Diego State University's dance department, I touched upon Laban's and also choreographer Mary Wigman's dances and beliefs and how they fit into and were manipulated by Nazi Germany. I had thought at the time this dialogue was speculative, and would stir students' thoughts towards realizing how their work could benefit society and what responsibility they have as an artist. Now, it frighteningly feels like I was sending a warning or premonition that history would repeat itself.

Laban's group dance formations were exploited to show the newly formed *Ausdrucksstanz* as Germany's proud artistic invention promoting solidarity. As well, Wigman followed instructions to kick out any Jewish dancer from her group. "*Ausdrucksstanz*, among other arts, was thus used as an instrument of international relations in Hitler's hands, dramatically conveying to the rest of the world that the Nazis had transformed Germany into a magnificent nation and brought the people together into a decidedly unified population" (Dickson 2016, 7). Laban's intentions were more spiritual than militant, as the Rockettes intend entertainment, but that doesn't absolve the reality of what is being presented and the underlying messages being conveyed. Laban "saw movement choirs as a way of bringing people together *en masse* to celebrate the mystic and find a "higher reality" together. However, he simultaneously endorsed choric dance as a "new folk dance movement of the white race"" (Dickson 2016, 4). As Trump's slogan has been to 'make America great again,' we could ascertain by the celebratory spectacles planned on January 20th, 2017 that his great America lacks racial diversity, is conservative, unified and strictly obedient. The America that Trump wants recognized by his entertainment selection bares strong resemblance to the ideal nation Nazi Germany had sought.

Marjorie Shrimpton describes the Nazi soldiers in Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda documentary film *Triumph des Willens* as portraying the ideal citizen and the perfect physical body. She writes that video shots of the soldiers "portray the "in-a-perfect-world" scenario where every man follows orders exactly, carries out formations beautifully, fits perfectly in his right place, is happy in his rank, and praises the almighty one above him—*sein Führer*" (Shrimpton 2012, 4). Though this is a description of the soldiers in a German film, it conjures a similar metaphoric transfer when thinking of the Rockettes' dances or the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's performances. Beauty is obedient, precise exactitude. Like Laban's movement choirs these current performance ensembles are being exploited for their formations and perfect-world representations. And as we know historically, Germany's truth was far from perfect. It is these subtle types of tactics we should be weary of if not outright scared.

Quoted on the Rockettes' website we even see that they perform soldier themed dance numbers; "Our iconic "Parade of the Wooden Soldiers" number in the *Christmas Spectacular* has been a fan favorite since the show's inception in 1933 (even the costumes have remained nearly unchanged!). We're honored to carry on the legacy of this number, which so many women have performed as Rockettes for generations before us" (2016). I can't help but fear the idea of a dance troupe whose body measurements all fall into a certain prototype, promoting the novelty of their unchanged 1933 soldier-like costumes being the chosen artistic statement next to Trump's inauguration. Luckily, some Rockettes have spoken out about their concerns dancing next to the man who has admitted to using his power to 'grab women by the pussy.' "One Rockette felt reluctant to "perform for this monster", referring to president-elect Donald Trump, and another said she "wouldn't feel comfortable standing near a man like that in our costumes" " (Wikipedia 2016).

A description from The Mormon Tabernacle Choir's website describes themselves as "dedicated to the universal language of music that has the power to bring joy, peace, and healing to its listeners. This unique music organization transcends cultural and generational boundaries and brings together people from around the world through stirring music" (Mormon 2016). Though this surely sounds like a nice message, one must wonder is peace and healing really being promoted by two performance ensembles that together exemplify equality through uniformity? What I see as dangerous is the subtle pairing of these ensembles together, when we have already seen how this has been used historically as propaganda. It should be commended at

least, that the Rockettes organization has made it clear no dancer is forced to perform in this event and former Mormon Tabernacle Choir members have expressed concern about the decision to perform (Phillips 2016). It is hopeful to hear artists within these organizations speak out and wish to not have their work associated with a man who has made fun of disabled people, woman, people of color and other minorities. It is important that the people who happen to demographically fall into this uniformity, choose not to be complacent and speak out for the other citizens not represented, so as not to merge aesthetics with politics.

It has also been reported that The Beach Boys have been asked to perform but as of now it is unclear if they have accepted (Phillips 2016). Perhaps this is the America Trump is trying to make great again; a place where they 'all could be California girls.' "Art can be a powerful tool; it can also, as Hitler and Laban both knew, be dangerous" (Dickson 2016, 10). We should support the dancers and singers who choose to not have their artistry be manipulated into propaganda and be critical as outside viewers what messages are being suggested by something as simple as Trump's entertainment choices, before we continue to find more and more parallels to our regretted past.

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