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# Police

## Choreographing demobilisation

MARC VILLANUEVA MIR

Although much has been written on dance and politics as well as on the relation of dance to protest and emancipation, dance studies have seldom addressed police performance from the point of view of movement, even when police constitute a body that accomplishes its order-enforcing mission primarily through and upon movement. The existence of such a blind spot is most notably recognized in André Lepeki's article 'Choreopolice and choreopolitics; or, the task of the dancer', where well-organized and choreographed police deployments are identified as a constant in various protest settings around the world (2013: 16).

Tackling police from the perspective of the politics of movement may shed some light on how choreography has become a tool for the exercise of biopower. I argue that we should not think of choreography solely as an artistic practice, but as a movement-producing strategy that can be applied (and so it is indeed) to different realms far beyond the arts scene. The police performance in front of a demonstration is one such realm. As I will unfold in this paper, power is an integral aspect of choreography, which does not operate by halting but by producing and reshaping movement. The political paradigm of choreography and police echoes what Michel Foucault coined as biopower: the shift from the sovereign right to 'take life and let live' to the biopolitical operation of 'making live and letting die' (2003 [1997]: 241) finds correspondence on the choreographic imperative of *making move*. From this point of view, the confluence of choreography and police is far from being accidental. On the contrary, it bears witness to a shift in the exercise of power, which does not focus any longer on the mere repression of dissensus but promotes as well a production of consensus.

### POLITICS AND POLICE

Let us first look closely at what we mean by the notion of police. On the one hand, police can be defined as an institution. It stands for an order-keeping type of force that is committed to law policing and law enforcement on behalf of the state. In democratic political systems, police walk the thin line between serving an allegedly independent justice system and complying with the politically motivated commands of the government. Moreover, police literally embody the state. While this can be said to be true of any civil servant, this case is especially meaningful because police officers accomplish this embodiment through their very physical performance, allowing citizens to engage hand to hand with the state body.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, we could approach police as a practice of bodies. Since the state has been defined as bearing the monopoly on violence (Weber 2004 [1918]: 33), the use of force in order to enforce the law can only be performed by those bodies that are legally entitled to do so. Looking at police as a practice of bodies allows us to focus on the bodily performance of police officers, not as a simple by-product of their customary task, but as a performance informed by a technique. The bodily performance of the police is the result of a foregrounded, acquired movement technique, and can be analysed alongside any other practice of foregrounded movement such as choreographed dance.

Third, police can be defined as a logic of distribution or a 'symbolic constitution of the social' (Rancière 2010: 36). The philosophical approach developed by Jacques Rancière in *Disagreement* (1998 [1995]) provides us with an interesting way to tackle the topic while thinking beyond the very categories that our object of research—police—discursively produces.<sup>2</sup> Rancière asks us to unlearn what

<sup>1</sup> While police are bound to a broad number of tasks, from traffic control to crime investigation, my arguments focus on the policing of social protest.

<sup>2</sup> As David Correia and Tyler Wall express it, 'nearly everything we think we know about police comes to us through a vocabulary patrolled by police' (2018: 274).

we think police is and opens up a vast field for discussion that allows for new categories to be produced.

In Rancière's account, the Greek concept of the *polis* is to be found at the root of two opposite social logics that derive from it: that of politics and that of police. The definition of these two terms bears the trace of a major confusion. According to Rancière, politics 'is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution' (1998 [1995]: 28). However, politics is defined by Rancière as an ongoing struggle for the achievement of social equality (1998 [1995]: ix, 35), which has nothing to do with the state mechanisms of distribution and legitimization described in the first place. Hence his strong statement that we shouldn't call these mechanisms politics but police. Rancière is not dealing though with politics or police as mechanisms of state apparatus but as two different logics of understanding the community and distributing the sensible among its members:

Two ways of counting the parts of the community exist. The first counts real parts only—actual groups defined by differences in birth, and by the different functions, places and interests that make up the social body to the exclusion of every supplement. The second, 'in addition' to this, counts a part of those without part. I call the first the *police* and the second *politics*. (Rancière 2010: 36)

In order to properly understand this distinction, we must bear in mind that for Rancière politics always emerges as a result of a wrong in the society, which distributes bodies and divides them into two categories: 'those that one sees and those that one does not see, those who have a logos—memorial speech, an account to be kept up—and those who have no logos' (1998 [1995]: 22). As he continues:

Politics exists because the logos is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the *account* that is made of this speech: the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just, whereas some other emission is merely perceived as a noise signalling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt. (Rancière 1998 [1995]: 22–3)

From this point of view, police represent, most of all, an order of what can be seen, said and be socially recognized. Importantly though, the essence of police does not lie in the repression of those activities that are expected to remain invisible, of those voices that are expected to remain unheard, but in the very distribution that establishes proper ways of being, doing and saying. Repression is not a main concept for Rancière, because for him the police logic is not defined by the negativity of a reaction but by the positivity of a production: if the essence of police does not lie in surveillance nor in punishment, and if the model of the disciplinary society described by Michel Foucault (1995 [1975]) is no longer depicting the latest transformations of a biopolitical capitalism (Deleuze 1995 [1990]), we must look for its essence in subtle forms of acquiescence. For Rancière, the essence of police lies in the production of conformity and normality.<sup>3</sup>

If the police order is largely uncontested as such, that is because it presents itself as a political order. Democracy or consensus are just some of the idioms that the state wields in order to legitimize itself (Rancière 1998 [1995]: 110). What the state offers is a compromise with some degrees of 'realizable' freedom and a mode of participation that ensures that no one's path is going to be disturbed. Unlike police, though, politics is not concerned with the assurance of an uninterrupted circulation, but with its very interruption. According to Rancière, the 'modes of dissensual subjectivation that reveal a society in its difference to itself' constitute the essence of politics (2010: 42). Political activity implies the disruption of the police arrangement: politics aim to distort the count by which the community enacts its exclusions and by which it denies visibility and audibility to those who are systematically left uncounted. In other words, politics aim to the appearance and recognition of those uncounted subjectivities in the public space.

#### CAPTURING MOVEMENT: POLICE AS APPARATUS OF CAPTURE

Rancière tries to make crystal-clear the

<sup>3</sup> That is why this logic cannot be reduced neither to the figure of the police officer nor to any overarching concept of state apparatus: conformity stems as much from the rigidity of the state as from the spontaneity of free interacting people (Rancière 1998 [1995]: 29).

rationale for the distinction between politics and police, since what is at stake for him is an understanding of democracy that differs greatly from that of contemporary democratic states. Breaking down what we understand as politics is therefore crucial for him. The problem that we encounter is that he doesn't explicitly reflect on the ontological dimension of the very distinction politics/police that he is introducing. How should we understand the philosophical and practical operability of this dualism, as a dualism? I argue that neither an essentialist nor a dialectical point of view is fit to unfold the distinction politics/police accurately and suggest focusing instead on the logics of capture as described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). This approach aims not only to disclose the complexity of the relationships between politics and police but also to inscribe the question of movement (and the politics of movement) as a fostering agent for this very complexity.

In this sense, I would also like to follow Lepecki and introduce the logics of capture by exploring the relations between movement, dance and choreography.<sup>4</sup> In modernity, dance is regarded, in its aesthetic and disciplinary dimension, as having everything to do with movement, until the point that the bind between dance and movement is referred to as 'dance's very essence and nature, ... its signature, ... its privileged domain' (Lepecki 2006: 1). However, Randy Martin tackles this purportedly sacred bind by stressing a different point of that of aesthetics and tradition. For him, dance, as an embodied practice, is informed by social forces and tensions that take place 'beyond a given performance setting' (Martin 1998: 5). As Martin continues, 'dance displays, in the very ways that bodies are placed in motion, traces of the forces of contestation that can be found in society at large' (6). Martin's view recognizes movement not as a 'privileged domain' but as a social reality, which manifests itself in manifold social realms: from the modern project of 'unstoppable mobility' (Lepecki 2006: 3) to the neoliberal requirement for permanent flexibility, from the regulation of movement through state borders to the upheaval of political protest through social mobilization (Martin 1998: 4).

We must retain the diverse implications that these spheres of movement bear and the subjectivities that they produce in order to understand what is at stake for Lepecki when he addresses choreography as an 'apparatus of capture' (2007). As he stresses, the origins of choreography are to be found in the dance manual *Orchésographie*, written in 1588–9 by the Jesuit priest Thoinot Arbeau. Arbeau devises a fictional setting in which he teaches the art of dance to a young male lawyer named Capriol, so he can be successfully accepted in the court life: moving and behaving in a certain manner, complying with the rules of class and gender, is mandatory in order to be granted admission into social theatrics. As Lepecki notes, the choreographic idea behind this book consists not only of the erasure of the distance between the subject who writes (Arbeau) and the subject who moves (Capriol), but furthermore depicts a specific appropriation by which dance is turned into something useful from the perspective of the state. After all, we cannot oversee the significance that the 'powerful foundational duo' (Arbeau and Capriol) bears: maleness, religion and law are embodied in the two of them and become the framework in which dance can start to be written, archived and reproduced (Lepecki 2006: 26).

If the relationship between movement and dance consists of a permanent flow defined by a phenomenon of capillarity, by which one continuously permeates into the other, choreography appears as a technology based on dance's drainage (124). As Lepecki specifies:

[D]ance, once it falls prey to a powerful apparatus of capture called 'choreography', loses many of its possibilities of becoming. Which is to say that dance loses its powers (*puissance*) as it is submitted to the power (*pouvoir*) of the choreographic. (Lepecki 2007: 122)

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari elaborate on the notion of 'apparatus of capture' in order to describe the functioning of the state as a form of political and social organization. In their account, the nomads, stateless populations, represent the exteriority of the state. This external and untamed power is what Deleuze and Guattari call 'the war machine' (1987 [1980]: 354). The war machine's main function is to ward

<sup>4</sup> I refer to dance as a human activity that draws on the movement of (both human and non-human) bodies in order to produce forms of subjectivity and processes of subjectivation (Lepecki 2006).

off the state and keep the nomadic movement as it is. What is, on the contrary, proper to the state is the apparatus of capture. As Deleuze and Guattari expose, the capture of a territory or a population on behalf of a state rarely means the devastation of that territory or the annihilation of that population in order to replace from scratch what used to exist by a new set of instruments or practices provided by the state. The state proceeds by stratification; it turns the smooth space of nomadism into a striated space; it replaces military strategy with semiotics (433). The state does not limit itself to appropriate something that already existed, but it performs a productive operation by which it changes the meaning of that which is captured: 'the mechanism of capture contributes from the outset to the constitution of the aggregate upon which the capture is effectuated' (446). In this sense, the state does not proceed by totalization nor by homogenization but by overcoding: territories are captured as land (which can be subjected to rent), human activity is captured as labour (which can in turn produce surplus labour) and exchange is captured under the creation of money (which can become a subject of taxation). Choreography cannot be seen either just as recorded dance but as a necessary technology for the transformation of dance into a commodity or into an instrument able to serve the interests of the state. And not just of dance: choreography may well be seen as a technology of capture of movement in a broader sense. That encompasses, of course, the capture of mobilization. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri offer in *Empire* a description of this process:

From one perspective Empire stands clearly over the multitude and subjects it to the rule of its overarching machine, as a new Leviathan. At the same time, however, from the perspective of social productivity and creativity, ... the hierarchy is reversed. The multitude is the real productive force of our social world, whereas Empire is a mere apparatus of capture that lives only off the vitality of the multitude—as Marx would say, a vampire regime of accumulated dead labor that survives only by sucking off the blood of the living. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 62)

From this perspective, a new interpretational frame for Rancière's dualism emerges: politics is not just opposed to police, but police is the

performative operation by which politics is captured by the state apparatus, its *puissance* turned into power (*pouvoir*) and control. Police become, from this point of view, a form of scripted politics, which draws its vitality from the same forces of social mobilization that it seeks to foreclose. As Deleuze expresses in *Bergsonism*, 'life as *movement* alienates itself in the material *form* that it creates' (1991 [1966]: 104). The same tension informs the relationship between the agent of social mobilization, the *mob*, and the agent of the state order, the *cop*, as we can eventually disclose from its very etymology:

Even though the word 'cop' is perhaps the most common vernacular synonym for police officer, its origins are unclear. One common explanation is that police officers came to be known as 'cops' due to their copper badges or helmets ... More likely, the word cop comes from the Middle French *caper*, meaning 'to capture', and from the Latin *capere*, meaning 'to seize, to grasp'. (Correia and Wall 2018: 229)

#### CHOREOPOLICE: TECHNIQUE AND IDEOLOGY

As Martin describes it, and as it resonates in Rancière and in Deleuze and Guattari, politics draws its energy (*puissance*) from and is performed through movement. Martin's insistence in participation and mobilization highlights the importance of movement in the production of a dissensual subjectivity and the disruption with a fixed social order. However, as Lepecki points out, this positively connoted conception of movement seems to overlook the logics of capture, that is, that police also draw their power (*pouvoir*) from movement and not from fixity. The state is not static, and imagining it so will drift us away from the important question of 'if and how the dominant moves, and ... when, what, and who is it that the dominant requires to be moving' (2006: 12). One of the most prominent contributions in this regard is the aforementioned article 'Choreopolice and choreopolitics', where Lepecki observes police performance first and foremost in terms of movement:



More or less persistently, more or less violently, the police appear wherever political protest is set in motion, to break down initiative and to determine 'proper' pathways for protesters. Facing a demonstration, the police function first of all as a movement controller. They impose blockades, contain or channel demonstrators, disperse crowds, and sometimes even literally lift up and drag bodies around. Choreographically as well as conceptually, the police can thus be defined as that which, through its physical presence and skills, determines the space of circulation for protesters, and ensures that 'everyone is in a permissible place'. (Lepecki 2013: 16)

Although in this paragraph Lepecki seems to look at police as a practice of bodies, he warns us immediately that, in his account, police 'needs not be embodied in the cop' (2013: 19), his concept of 'choreopolice' being basically informed by Rancière's approach. In his further development, Lepecki describes choreopolice as a logic of movement that seeks to 'de-mobilize political action by means of implementing a certain kind of movement that prevents any formation and expression of the political' (20). Police is understood as that which choreographs the circulation of subjects and goods through the city, while producing 'nothing other than a mere spectacle of its own consensual mobility' (19).

One of the flaws of Lepecki's insightful proposal is that his translation of Rancière's concepts to the vocabulary of choreography ends up establishing a hierarchical description of the dualism choreopolice/choreopolitics. Choreopolice is used as a springboard to approach choreopolitics, which constitutes the actual core of the article. Therefore, the question of what a political movement may look like is properly addressed and answered, whereas the practices involved in choreopolicing remain obscure.

I would therefore like to differentiate at least two levels of analysis that the term 'choreopolice' seems to enfold: on the one hand, choreopolice relates to the choreographed nature of consensus along with the distribution and mobilization of bodies either as workforce or as consumers according to the demands of capitalist circulation; on the other hand, choreopolice invites us to interrogate how that

order is choreographically embodied in the performance of cops.

The first level of interrogation carries a meaningful connotation, because it establishes movement not just as a political power but as a currency.<sup>5</sup> The understanding of movement as a currency, which ensures the flow of goods, the continuity of the exchange and the endurance of control and security mechanisms, allows us to understand why many of the last largest protests that we have witnessed adopted as a main strategy a refusal to move. From the 'Occupy' movements in 2011 (from Tahrir Square to Wall Street or the Spanish 15-M) to the targeting of crucial logistic nodes such as airports or main highways in Hong Kong or Catalonia in 2019, contemporary forms of protest seem to pursue no longer the temporary interruption of production (as in a classical factory strike) but to collectively question and re-arrange a socially and economically constructed mobility-based subjectivity, by turning 'urban communication paths into public space' (Rancière 1998 [1995]: 30).

The second level of interrogation addresses the embodiment of choreopolice in the actual body of the cop. Policing social protest is not just a matter of rules and codes of movement but of physical and material engagement between different bodies. If police act 'first of all as a movement controller', as Lepecki points out, they do so by deploying a bodily performance of their own. That's why the analysis of police as a choreographing force that we find in Lepecki (2013: 19) feels slightly incomplete, since it suggests a disembodied role of police as mere choreographer and overlooks the fact that police choreograph the multitude just as much as they choreograph the movement of the cops themselves. This assumption leads Lepecki to a problematic identification of the protester with the dancer:

I would like to qualify this subject, appearing away from preassigned modes and spaces of circulation, as the political subject. Its appearance results from its excessiveness and unforeseen mode of reclaiming spaces for mobility. I venture that the particular political subject that transforms spaces of circulation into spaces of freedom has a specific name: the dancer. (Lepecki 2013: 20)

<sup>5</sup> Mobility is indeed one of the overcoded outputs of the capitalist appropriation of movement.

Besides risking a reduction of social movements to arts, this identification might be constraining for the critical study of dance, since it forecloses any option for police officers to be seen as dancers as well. The cop's body is a trained body. His or hers is the constructed result of a foregrounded movement technique that involves both individual skills (like the ones used to frisk, cuff or use a weapon) and group abilities (like the ones used to charge, block or retreat). Importantly, this technique does not just aim to fulfil a goal, but it bears in itself a strong dramaturgical dimension: gestures mean as much as they affect. During a social protest, the tension in the body of the cops may indicate the imminence of a charge. The deployment of special units may indicate a change in their level of tolerance, as well as the introduction of some props like visors, shields or rubber bullet guns, which appear first of all as linguistic

signs and are usually used only later as actual weapons. The movement technique of the police is a mashup of human and non-human moving bodies: from the cops to their vehicles, from the flashing lights to police dogs and sound pulses and even more distorting atmospheric agents, like tear gas or high-pressured water.

Looking at a police deployment as a choreographed arrangement means looking at a complex array of bodies, machines, rhythms and positions in the space, which all use movement—and the immobility of bodies in front of the blue flashing lights is a certain production of movement—in order to alter or affect another movement: that of protesters.

As Diana Mills claims, dance 'unfolds on a stage—not necessarily a theatrical stage, but rather the space allowing for the meeting of two dancing subjects in embodied conversation' (2017: 11). From this point of view, it is possible to look at the clash between police and protesters as a form of dancing together. The interfacing nature of these situations of protest becomes even more clear if we keep reading Mills while imagining the cops and the protesters as dancing subjects:

Release is the process by which the dancer inhabits the phenomenological space around them and affirms that space as their world. However, the boundaries of this space are never stable; with every new moment of release the dancer shifts the boundaries of their bodies in space. They can expand the space their body takes in the world or reduce it; in either case the constitution of the world is a process of renegotiating boundaries in every movement. (Mills 2017: 13)

In any confrontation with the police, protesters seek to cross, reach or occupy a space that the police foreclose by acting as a living border. As Mills stresses, such a situation is not just about drawing boundaries or trespassing them but about constituting the world through a continuous process of negotiation. The world that is being created is the direct result of how bodies move in it and what subjectivities are produced by that movement.

A concept that allows us to tackle the contingent and phenomenological nature of the dialogue between police and protesters is what Erin Manning calls an 'ecology' of movements

q Police training exercise near Spielfeld, on the Austrian border with Slovenia, as it was performed in front of the Austrian media to show how police would act before a new arrival of refugees. The 'migrants' were played by 200 Austrian cadets. 26 June 2018. Image distributed by the *Polizei Steiermark*



(2016: 117).<sup>6</sup> From this approach we can see how police, rather than following a fixed script, perform a dance of attention by ‘dancing-with the environment cueing’ (Manning 2013: 108). Every move, every reaction to the behaviour of the protesters, constitutes and redraws the physical perception of the environment. Cues and directions are spread in the space and among other bodies like energy sparks.

However, while the bodies of the protesters are unceasingly pierced by countless cues, the uniforms, shields and simple choreographed language of cops work like a sponge that absorbs and cancels most of those cues. That accounts for a power imbalance that shapes the behaviour of both protesters and police officers. Indeed, one of the preferred tactics of police consists of producing a situation of chaos among the protesters in order to dissipate their collective strength by saturating them with cues. The goal of a charge is but the flight, which spreads panic and forces people to negotiate their own position among hundreds or thousands of bodies on the run. A related goal is the exhaustion of the protesters. Either by standing and expanding time or by charging repeatedly against the same groups of people, police always try to take the most of the multiplicity and heterogeneity that defines every array of protesters. The movement that police force on protesters aims to produce an outbreak of cues—loudspeakers, people screaming, bodies spinning, running, pushing and so on—and thus a destabilization of the environment as it is perceived or claimed by the protesters and the eventual cancellation of their space of appearance. Under police siege, the body that seeks to move differently, undermining the economic or political function of space, is constantly assaulted by movements that *make it move*, so it can never settle.

In this sense, we can recognize a tight bond between the two levels of analysis described above: *choreopolice as a technique*, as the actual language of the cops, is a pattern of choreographed movement that aims to break up the deviant movements of the protesters in order to impose on them, and more broadly, on the entire population, *choreopolice as a pacified circulation*.

## CONCLUSIONS

Besides looking at police as a regime, as Rancière does, I suggest to understand police as a performative operation, which following Deleuze and Guattari’s inspiring concept of the apparatus of capture, captures ‘while simultaneously constituting a right to capture’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 448). Therefore, the legitimacy of police violence does not lie in its tautologous definition as lawful, as essentially opposed to criminal—understood as performing an unlawful appropriation—but on a much more nuanced process of capture that transforms the power of mobilization into a choreography of acquiescence.

Once captured by capitalism, movement has come to play a central role in the assurance of the uninterrupted mobility required by contemporary biopolitics, governed by logistics and a constant global stream of goods, bodies and data (Neilson 2012). Hence the relevance of police, both as a distortion of politics that aims to pass off logistical needs as social consensus and as an actual force that does not hesitate to use violence in order to avoid any interruption of the logistical chain of value. It is from this perspective that envisaging police just as a repressing force of (dissident, deviant, unforeseen) movements feels incomplete if we don’t take into account that police is producing movement too: both in the form of an assured circulation through secured pathways (which involves the suppression or physical elimination of any alternative use of those spaces) and as forcing the displacement of bodies that otherwise refuse to move (in order, for example, to block a road or occupy a building). Martin and Lepecki insist on the power (here to be understood as *puissance*) of movement in the creation of political subjectivities. For this same reason we must look at the professionalized production of acquiescent patterns of movement as a conscious operation of power (now *pouvoir*) aiming for demobilization. Throughout this article I have argued that choreography is the tool that police deploy in their twofold operation: on the one hand, choreography is used in order to make cops move like a single body before a heterogeneous multitude of

<sup>6</sup> In Manning’s words, ‘choreography is less about a body than about an ecology. This ecology is more-than-human, composed as much of the force of atmosphere, of duration, of rhythm, than it is of something we might call the body-envelope’ (2016: 126). See also Egert (2019).



protesters. Through destabilization tactics, police usually overwhelm protesters with movement cues, while they stick together as one shielded block that rejects most of the cues that come from the protesters, their dancing partners. On the other hand, choreography makes people and goods move according to the demands of economy and 'social theatrics' (Lepecki 2006: 26). The outcome of either operation is but the transformation of public spaces of dialogue and dispute into spaces of mobility and circulation.

To make move is a characteristic imperative of biopolitics: mobility has become a highly valuable currency under the current transformations of capitalism, which pay special attention to global logistics, not just as a fostering agent for economic development, but also as a forge for new subjectivities (Neilson 2012: 335). Police make move, both as a choreographer and as a dancer. Realizing how police capture the political potentialities of movement and turn them into choreographed demobilization may help us find new ways to deal with movement and move through the enmeshed networks of contemporary biopolitics and logistical capitalism.

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