Dark Utopia, Or Sleeping Through Marten Spångberg's Natten

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After the first 44 minutes, which seem, to me, the most complicated as everyone's expectations start to settle in and it's clear that the work is not going to go beyond what we are seeing, I opt to sleep for a while. I firmly believe that there is something beautiful in an artistic work that gives you the option to sleep. To sleep, to wake up, seeing that we are all still there, going back to sleep, half sleep, deep sleep, snoring, opening our eyes, still being there... (Bigas 2017)

Even before it starts, Marten Spångberg's dance performance Natten (2016b) pushes the audience out of its comfort zone. Instead of taking on the form of a traditional one-hour performance—the unofficial format for contemporary dance—the piece lasts for more than seven hours, starting at 11 p.m. and lasting until the early morning hours. As such, Natten, Swedish for 'the night', does not announce itself as a simple dance piece, but as an invitation to spend the night together. Upon entering the theatre venue, the audience is confronted with a dimly lit space. Blankets, carpets and pillows are spread out on the floor in half a circle, loosely demarcating the division between the seating area and the stage. Small piles of Natten books, specifically written by Spångberg for this performance, are spread out over the floor. A video of dark clouds is projected on one of the walls and shiny golden and silver-coloured draperies, vaguely reminiscent of security blankets you get when you suffer from hypothermia, are hanging from the ceiling. Together these elements create an atmosphere that is at once laidback and uncanny, homey and futuristic. In this landscape, nine dancers, Tamara Alegre, Simon Asencio, Linda Blomqvist, Louise Dahl, Emma Daniel, Hana Lee Erdman, Adriano Wilfert Jensen, Else Tunemyr and Alexandra Tveit, develop a slow, lingering dance. The term 'develop', however, might be misleading here. The dance does not build towards something. It does not create a progressive movement in which the different actions merge in order to create a unified narrative or overarching dance phrase. Instead, the composition generates an undulating movement in which the dance comes and goes. At some moments the dance seems to wash over the stage, as the dancers suddenly start to perform

virtuoso dance phrases. Just as soon as the dance came up, however, it disappears again, resulting in moments of suspended time during which the dancers are standing still or are seated among the audience. This feeling of coming and going is emphasized by the light and the sound. Although the light stays low throughout the whole performance, its intensity varies. During brighter moments the audience is able to clearly see the dancers. At other moments, however, the light is so low that it is difficult to even make out the dancer's contours, thus rendering the dance virtually invisible. Similarly, the music that is used in the piece, a mix of ambient soundscapes and (modified) pop songs, comes and goes like the waves of the sea, sometimes flooding the whole space and at other times disappearing in the background. All these elements result in a performance that does not provide a clear structure that we can follow, or a linear dramaturgy that we can tap into, but unfolds like a dreamlike landscape in which the audience gets lost. As Ana Vujanović argues, Natten has a 'spiral dramaturgy' (2017: 115). This spiral, however, should not be understood as a hermeneutic circle in which each turn creates a more profound understanding of the theme, but as a vertiginous vortex that makes us lose our sense of direction.

Natten is not the first piece in which Spångberg challenges or confuses the traditional theatrical frameworks. The Swedish artist who lives and works in Berlin and Stockholm, has a long track record in the field of dance and performance, not only as a choreographer and dance maker, but also as a performer, teacher, curator, dance critic and theorist. In his works Spångberg experiments with different practices and media (performance, text, visual artwork, video work), often adopting a provocative approach, a 'machine gun attitude' that disrupts the reigning dogmas of the field and messes with the expectations of the audience (Spångberg 2016c: 85). This attitude has earned him the title of 'bad boy of contemporary dance' (Winship 2013: 18). Despite this label, which Spångberg himself calls 'embarrassing' (2016c: 85), we should be careful not to reduce Natten to a provocation, a (meta)critical gesture that cynically deconstructs the medium it is working with. Quite to the contrary, Spångberg's piece testifies to a care for, and a careful exploration of, dance. Spångberg is interested in the poetic potential that is ingrained in the medium.[{note}]¹ As he mentions, 'Natten is through and through a critical work, but it's poetic in a way'. This poetics does not refer to poetry, but to dance's poietical

potential to bring about change, 'to set in motion the possibility for a different kind of change, a difference in kind instead of a difference in degree' (87).

In this article I will argue that Spångberg's poetical approach can be understood as utopian. This utopian quality, however, diverts from what we traditionally associate with utopia. Spångberg's performance does not confront us with a projection of a better, brighter future towards which we should all work. Instead, it is expressive of an 'immanent utopia' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 100). That is, a utopia that focuses on the singularity of the present and explores the utopian potential that is engrained into this present. In order to understand this, I will first analyse the temporality that is produced by the piece. Drawing from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, I will then explore the utopian potential of this temporality. Finally, I will turn back to Spångberg's idea of dance and its relation to the poietical.

Dancing with myself

In his insightful article 'Scène and contemporaneity' (2007), Frédéric Pouillaude discusses the temporal logic of dance. According to the French dance theorist, this logic is directly shaped by the structure of the scene, which, in turn, is defined by the simultaneous presence of the performers and the spectators (127). In order to constitute itself as a dance work (an oeuvre), dance is dependent on the scene. It needs to be performed live, in front of an audience. Moreover, the scenic structure not only serves as a necessary precondition for the existence of dance, but also as its structuring principle. The space of co-existence that is opened up by the scene is completely contingent. 'Those who are doing and those who are not do not actually have any reason to be there, and even less to be there together' (128). Consequently, each dance performance has to deal with this feeling of contingency. Its first task is to give all parties a reason to be there, thus transforming the contingent collective into a 'genuine community' (127). The dance piece can only work (as a work) when it 'explains the fact of the coexistence, and reinsures it as being a matter of a truly common present'. Pouillaude explains this by referring to the moment before the beginning of the performance. Although this moment is exciting, it is marked by emptiness and a distinct feeling of waiting:

One waits for the coexistence of those who are doing, of those who are not, and of their ensemble, to escape at last from the pure absence of foundation by which this coexistence is originated, and to reestablish itself around some 'commonality.' One waits for something of Truth, of Presence (a supplement of presence, or rather a transsubstantiation of 'p' to 'P') to redeem the slightest bit of the initial contingency and give it back under the form of a recognized community, of a present truly shared. (Pouillaude 2007: 128–9)

The task of the dance piece should thus first and foremost be understood in terms of the creation of a 'commonality', a shared project that enables for the development of a community. This community, however, is always temporary and unstable. Because there is no pre-established common ground to fall back on, the communal feeling can only emerge in and through the performance. In other words, the promise of a community can never be truly fulfilled. As such, the community of dance is not only temporary, but it is also marked by a specific temporality. The piece continuously creates a temporal horizon that propels us into the future in the hope to finally achieve a true community. This projective temporality becomes clear during the final applause. As Pouillaude mentions, this applause is nothing but 'the delayed indication of such a hope [for a community], its ultimate and disappointing substitute'.

Together with Pouillaude we can conclude that, in order for a dance piece to 'work', it should be able to create a shared experience between the public and the dancers, a common project around which the different parties can come together. Seen from this perspective, Natten does not seem to work. Moreover, it seems to blatantly refuse to do its job. The piece refrains from engaging with the audience. It does not establish a common project that enables both the spectators and the dancers to affirm themselves and to transform their contingent co-existence into a community. Instead, it is marked by a feeling of withdrawal and indifference. As we have seen, Spångberg's piece does not create a future-oriented, temporal movement. There is no sense of direction or clear temporal project. As Spångberg argues:

The piece is completely set but it is set in a way that is not there to be in any respect convincing or guiding, nor is it there to be unconvincing or unguiding. It is there to be in difference to the perspective of the individual spectator. It is

not there to confirm you as cultural consumer, neither is it interested in being confirmed as a dance performance, it's equally happy. (Spangberg 2016a, my emphasis)

This feeling of indifference is also clearly present in the performative quality of the dancers. Despite the informal setting and the laidback atmosphere, Natten does not establish a rapport between the performers and the audience. The dancers never acknowledge the audience. Their dance remains unaffected by its presence. As Vujanović observes Natten 'vibrates with a tone of self-sufficiency' (2017: 110). 'It is as if the performance says: I exist and you may as well not be here... I do not need you to justify my existence.' The light, or rather the absence of it, enhances this feeling of withdrawal. As we said in the beginning, the light is often so low that it is difficult to see the performers. Despite this darkness, however, the dancers keep dancing. In doing so they affirm the piece's indifference. The piece doesn't care if you are watching. It is dancing, by itself, in the dark.

Despite its refusal to engage with the audience, however, Natten should not simply be understood in terms of deconstruction or negativity. Although the piece does not adhere to the temporal logic of the scène, it does remain within its realm. Natten is still a scenic event. The dancers are still dancing, live, in front of the audience. In other words, Spångberg suspends the temporal unfolding of the scene, but he does not abolish it. Rather, the piece extends the 'bare event' of waiting, the moment 'nothing is actually done yet' (Pouillaude 2007: 128). This extension is both frustrating and generous. In the first instance, the refusal to engage is frustrating, because it does not meet our expectations. As Pouillaude mentioned, the beginning of each performance is marked by a feeling of tension, because all parties involved are waiting for the actual dance in order to overcome the contingency of their factual co-existence. In Spångberg's piece, however, we wait in vain. Our presence never becomes a Presence and the spectators and dancers never become unified around a shared project. Once the audience becomes aware of the fact that 'nothing' is going to happen, however, they settle into the situation and the feeling of frustration makes way for a feeling of ease. The invitation that is extended by the piece is now experienced as a generous offer. We do not have to participate. We do not have to inscribe ourselves in a larger narrative, actively working towards the success of the performance. Instead we can simply be. Here, the piece opens up towards a different

experience of commonality—one that does not revolve around a common project(ion), but is predicated on the simple fact of being together. ‘Time is passing... And we are still there, tied by the space and time spent together’ (Vujanović 2017: 114).

The specific communal feeling that is developed in Natten is probably most palpable at one moment in the piece when the dancers all seat themselves and start to sing a slowed down version of Going Home by Asgeir. Seduced by the soft quality of the song a lot of audience members actually fall asleep, thus creating a moment of collectivity. This collectivity, however, is not brought about through collective action, the joint participation in a specific project, but through collective inaction. It is a collectivity that is based on the simple fact of being there together, of sharing space and time. Together with Bojana Kunst we could argue that Natten ‘discloses itself as the critical potentiality of something, which is neither affirmative nor purely negative, but insists endlessly and stubbornly, holding, arresting’ (2017: 50). Natten lingers in the realm of the ‘not yet’ (49). In doing so, it develops a specific temporal structure, an unbecoming temporality that does project itself into the future, but turns on itself. Referring to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, I will show that this dimension in time can be understood as utopian.

Sleeping together

In What is Philosophy? (1994) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to the concept of utopia in their discussion of the relation between philosophy and history. According to the philosopher duo, philosophy ‘does not belong to history’, because of its preoccupation with becoming (96). In order to ‘become’ or ‘to create something new’ philosophy must wrest itself from its historical conditions. Despite this independence from history, however, philosophy can also not completely disconnect from its time. ‘Without history, becoming would remain indeterminate and unconditional.’ In other words, philosophy should always entertain a particular relationship with history. It should create concepts that are developed from within the milieu of time, but at the same time break away from it. To understand this particular conjunction between philosophy and time, Deleuze and Guattari refer to the concept of ‘utopia’ (99). Utopia ‘is what links philosophy with its own epoch’. In line with what we just saw, this link is always double. On the one hand, utopia is ‘political’ because it ‘takes the

criticism of its own time to the highest point'. On the other hand, this critique should always be developed from within the present and thus be 'connected with the present relative milieu' (100). Referring to Samuel Butler's satirical novel Erewhon (1872), Deleuze and Guatarri stress the fact that utopia 'refers not only to no-where, but also to now-here'. For this reason, both philosophers make a distinction between 'transcendent' and 'immanent' utopias.[note]2 Transcendent or 'authoritarian' utopias are teleological. They put the present at the service of an abstract image of the future. In doing so, however, they relate neither to the present (now-here), nor to future (no-where). They are not really concerned with the singularity of the present, because they instrumentalize this present, understanding it as a tool, a gateway to a better future. Similarly, they are also not opening up towards a radically new future, because they frame this future as a logical continuation or extension of the present. The future is here reduced to an improved version of the present, bigger and better but not really different. Immanent utopias, on the contrary, are marked by an impulse from within. Here, the present is no longer enslaved by the image of a better future. Instead, utopian thinking explores the potential of the present in itself, in order to create a vision of a radically different future. To understand this, we can refer to Deleuze's conceptualization of 'exhaustion'.

In 'The exhausted' (1995), an essay on Samuel Beckett that was published shortly year after What is Philosophy?, Deleuze makes a distinction between tiredness (fatigue) and exhaustion (épuisement). 'The tired has only exhausted realization, while the exhausted exhausts all of the possible' (3). Tiredness is connected to the effort of realizing possibilities. In our daily life, we constantly have to define our goals and preferences by choosing between different options. These choices can be tiresome, as they constantly force us to re-establish our individuality and our relation to our surroundings, but they can never lead to exhaustion. The possibilities are there, even when we lack the energy to act upon them. When we are exhausted, on the contrary, the possibilities disappear. Exhaustion can be defined as the fundamental inability to affirm your identity, to distinguish yourself from your surroundings. It denotes the moment when 'you renounce all order of preference and all organization of goal, all signification' (3–4). In other words, exhaustion is a state that is marked by apathy and unbecoming. The exhausted is stuck in the present, no longer able to propel themselves into the future through the realization of certain possibility. Despite its catatonic character, however, the state of exhaustion is

marked by freedom. Only when we have exhausted all possibilities, we are free to create a futurity that is truly new. Here, the future no longer appears as the realization of a prefabricated possibility, a re-affirmation of the same slightly improved self, but as the creation of a different set of possibilities, the affirmation of a new self. As such, the future no longer presents itself a logical continuation of the present, but as an 'aberrant movement' that breaks open the present in order to create a radically different future (Lapoujade 2014). Returning to Deleuze and Guattari's development of utopia in What is Philosophy?, we can argue that the moment of exhaustion can be understood as a true utopian moment. It indicates the moment when the present is exhausted, when the current set of possibilities is turned against itself 'so as to summon forth a new earth, a new people' (1994: 99). Here the thinking frees itself from its social and historical conditions in an attempt to source from the present (now-here) in order to become radically different (no-where).

Returning to Natten, we can now come to a better understanding of the utopian potential that is engrained in the piece. In first instance, the piece's engagement with inactivity and sleeping can be understood as a critique on our time. As Jonathan Crary argues, sleep poses a problem for the '24/7 universe' of late capitalism.

Most of the seemingly irreducible necessities of human life—hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and recently the need for friendship—have been remade into commodified or financialized forms. Sleep poses the idea of a human need and interval of time that cannot be colonized and harnessed to massive engine of profitability, and thus remains an incongruous anomaly and site of crisis in the global present. (Crary 2013: 10–11)

More in general, the piece's refusal to develop a common project through which the dancers and spectators can actualize themselves and their community, can be understood as a resistance against the project-oriented 'spirit' of late capitalism, which constantly encourages us to explore our possibilities and maximize our abilities (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Instead, the piece evokes the distinct feeling of being stuck in time. You are not activated. There is no project that you can connect to, no possibilities that should be realized. 'You press on, but towards nothing' (Deleuze 1995: 4). The lack of a shared project, however, does not only

indicate a critique on our current time, but also paves the path for the creation of something new. In this moment of immobility or stagnation we can find glimmers of hope. Stripped from its obligation or orientation towards the future, the utopic potential of the present comes to the fore. We no longer have to participate, to collaborate with one another and with the dancers in order to make the piece work, in order to realize its possibilities. Instead, we experience all the utopian potential that is ingrained into the 'bare event' of being together, of sharing space and time with a bunch of other people. In a passage towards the end of 'The exhausted', Deleuze argues that 'beyond the possible there is only darkness' (19, trans. modified). Together with André Lepecki, we could state that Deleuze here uses darkness as 'another name for full potentiality' (2016: 55). Darkness is not characterized by the absence of something, but defines a realm 'beyond the combinatorial of possible and their pre-established pre-givens' (56). In this realm, the linear temporality makes way for a utopian temporality in which the flow of time stops and turns on itself in order to explore the potential of a radically different future. Or, as Spångberg argues in the book that accompanies the piece: 'In the dark time isn't standing still, it doesn't cease, instead it slips away and disappears as if it never was. For in the deepest obscurity there is neither then or later, there is only now and all the time' (2016b: 6–7, my emphasis).

Sushi or sashimi

We are guided enough in life, directed and etc., by the state, the economy etc. We are placed in front of pre-fabricated choices—sushi or sashimi—which is choice as production. I've had it. My shows are there exactly for the possibility of poiesis. (Spångberg 2016c: 95)

In a lecture given during the symposium Post-Dance in MDT (Sweden) in 2015, and later published in a book with the eponymous name (2017), Spångberg advocates for the emancipation of dance from choreography. Traditionally, dance and choreography are understood as two sides of the same coin, choreography being the means and dance the end. Since the 1990s, however, choreography has gradually divorced itself from dance. Building on a generic definition of choreography as the organization of movement through space and time, choreographers

increasingly explored 'choreography's potential to structure processes other than dance' (Cvejić 2017: 102). On the one hand, this exploration resulted in the expansion of media that can be choreographed. With the words of Spångberg: 'One of the possible expressions that choreography can take on to gain representation is dance but it can as well be a score or an algorithm, a text or drawing, video, film or memory' (361). On the other hand, the expansion paved the path for the development of choreography as an analytical tool to draw attention to the 'social choreographies' that are ingrained into (contemporary) society (Hewitt 2005; Cvejić and Vujanović 2015). Spångberg was at the forefront of the expansion of choreography. He co-organized the international symposium Choreography As Expanded Practice (2012) and in his own artistic practice he used different media to explore the potential of choreography outside of its traditional comfort zone.{{note}}3

Twenty years after the emancipation of choreography from dance, however, Spångberg deems it necessary to make the reverse movement. That is, to 'free' dance from the dominion of choreography and to draw attention to its specific capacities and qualities (373). According to Spångberg, dance can be understood as the opposite of choreography. While choreography is characterized by its structuring force, dance should be understood as 'a non-organized some thing' (370). Although it needs a structure in order to come into existence—but not necessarily a choreographic one—it always has the tendency to undermine that structure, to slip through the cracks. Dance is a force that continuously blurs distinctions. This is also why dance should be distinguished from performance. Performance is always related to the affirmation of the self in relation to the surroundings. 'Performance is the subject performing subjectivity' (374). Dance, on the contrary, is 'a subject performing form'. In dance, the dancer becomes 'a vehicle for the dance' (375). Consequently, to dance is to forget oneself, or 'to become anonymous'. It is the creation of 'a space of dissolving subjectivities' (377). Traditionally, choreography can be understood as a 'domesticating' force that holds the subversive power of dance in check by organizing it into different gestures, steps, sections, phrases and so forth (360). According to Spångberg, however, we have to 'use choreography not to harness and domesticate dance but instead to free dance from our desire to locate it' (384). We should not refrain from choreography altogether, but create choreographies that leave room for the appearance of dance. This turn to dance implies a shift from production to poeisis. Freed from its choreographic structure, dance no longer aims at the

production of a specific movement, a project that both the dancers and the spectators ascribe to in order to make the dance 'work'. Here the dance becomes 'speculative' (384), 'a machine that produces indetermination' (385) and opens us up for the 'possibility of a contingent non-projective future' (386).

Natten testifies to Spångberg's interest in the emancipation of dance. Although the piece is clearly choreographed, throughout the piece the dancers constantly follow a prewritten score and some of the dancers even openly consult their phones to see what movements come next; there is no attempt to 'domesticate' the dance. On the contrary, Natten refuses to organize the dance along the lines of a clear overarching movement. The piece lacks clear directionality and there is no build up that we can ascribe to or climax that we build towards. Instead, the choreography allows the dance to come and go, like the waves of the sea. Moreover, because of its clear presence, the choreographic structure stresses the formal qualities of the dance. The dancers are not expressing themselves through the dance. They are merely performing the forms, putting themselves at the service of the dance. Together with the undulating movement, this formality exhausts both the dancers and the spectators. Both parties are not truly activated, cannot really engage with the piece. Instead, it feels like they are just going through the motions. As we saw, however, this lack of engagement should not simply be understood in terms of negativity. By refusing to create a common project, the piece opens up towards another dimension of time—one that is no longer focused on the realization of our future possibilities (something), but turns our attention to the indeterminate potential (some thing) that is engrained in the time we spend together. Following Deleuze and Guattari we can now come to understand this temporality as (immanently) utopian.

Notes

1 The focus on the poietical potential of dance marks a shift in Spångberg's work. In his earlier work, the Swedish choreographer often turned to 'structural cynicism' with the aim to 'detect circumstances, structures and go around them' (2016c: 86). Ever since La Substance, but in English (2014) Spångberg became more interested in the poetic quality of dance. Additional to La Substance and Natten, the pieces Gerhard Richter, Une pièce pour le théâtre (2017) and The Internet (2016) also testify to this interest in poietics.

2 In a footnote that accompanies the passage, Deleuze and Guattari explicitly refer to Ernst Bloch's The Principle of Hope (1954–9). In this canonical trilogy on utopian thinking Bloch makes the distinction between concrete and abstract utopias, favouring the first because of their relation to concrete historical situations. Deleuze and Guattari base their distinction between transcendent and immanent utopia on this dichotomy.

3 The symposium took place in Barcelona in 2012 and was organized by the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA), the University of Dance and Circus in Stockholm, the Foundation Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona and the Mercat de les Flors in Barcelona.

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