

Cinematographic Motion & Serpentine Dance

Towards a Media Archaeology of Modern Dance

Danae Kleida

ABSTRACT

Dance is a humanities field in which the human is in the spotlight; in the centre of the stage, and, consequently tends to be approached in the most literal sense from an anthropocentric perspective. The history and evolution of Western dance is usually studied as an uninterrupted evolving continuity, in which individual intentions and social influences formulate the status quo of the discipline. This paper aims to examine the transition from classical ballet to early modern dance from a media-archaeological perspective, in order to show that nonhuman-centered methods within the humanities, despite or because of the *contradictio in terminis*, can expand the potential and the capacity of cultural analysis. It does so by examining Loïe Fuller's technological experiments and by introducing a rupture in dance historiography, which can be located in the incorporation of 'new' technologies on stage (e.g. electricity) and the emergence of 'new' analog media at the start of the twentieth century. Fuller was an American performer who experimented with mirrors, reflectors and new aspects of technology such as lighting and electricity. Through her technological experiments, Fuller suggested a new type of performance that did not include only the human performing body. Her experiments and the use of new technologies shifted the centre of a performance from the performing body to an assemblage composed of technical media and the body.

KEYWORDS

Serpentine dance, skirt dance, cinematograph, traces of movement, shifts, Loïe Fuller

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only dance.
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.
(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*: Burnt Norton, 1943)

Traditional dance historiography conceives of 'modern dance' as a movement that came into being in opposition to classical ballet and strongly associates it with Isadora Duncan.¹ Duncan became a central figure in the evolution of modern dance, affecting future choreographers such as Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham.² However, in this paper I argue that Duncan should not be

¹ See (Au 2002, 89)

² Isadora Duncan's contributions: invention of new movement vocabulary that abandoned unnatural ballet positions; discard of corsets; introduction of torso movement.

considered as the principal figure for the birth of modern dance and that the focus should shift to Loïe Fuller's technological experiments.

Dance historians distinguish two main dance categories for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: classic dance (ballet) and romantic dance (Isadora's Duncan free dance) (Albright 2007, 157). Romantic dance is often regarded as a continuation of classical ballet; as if it arose due to its opposition with it. (See, Daly 1995; Homans 2013). However, a leap is usually made from classical ballet to Duncan's early modern dance, and Loïe Fuller's case is almost never mentioned. I believe that the reason for this is that Fuller was not considered a dancer of high art for many decades. Up until recently, she was considered more of a vaudeville or burlesque dancer and not a performer/dancer.³ For this reason, I maintain that a close study on Fuller's experiments can prove enlightening for the genesis of early modern dance. It seems that by not examining these technological experiments, it is possible that we miss some radical innovations introduced by Fuller in the field of performance, and some inventions that have since been employed in modern and contemporary dance performances.

The theoretical framework through which I examine the shift from classical ballet to early modern dance is that of media archaeology. According to Jussi Parriika and Erkki Huhtamo, media archaeology is a field defined by "disparate approaches that are however unified by a contempt for standardised narratives of media culture and history" (2011, 3). Media archaeologists prefer non-linear and non-chronological historical perspectives and "point out hitherto unnoticed continuities and ruptures" (2011, 3) which challenge teleological and evolutionary emplotments of traditional historiography.

My methodology lies in between the two main strands of media archaeology; namely, the Anglo-American (Parriika, Huhtamo, Elsaesser) and the German one (Kittler, Ernst). That is to say, I aim on proposing an alternative understanding of dance's history while giving emphasis on histories of media technologies. The question is: what does it mean –in terms of methodology– "to employ media archaeology and suspend our subject-centered interpretations for a moment" (Ernst 2013, 73)? This paper responds by taking into account the medial and technological conditions of early modern dance while scrutinizing the media themselves. Understanding performance as "not intrinsic or prior to technology but rather made possible and directed by technology itself" (Kittler 2006), I suggest a non-linear perspective on dance history that showcases how the invention and incorporation of technical media (e.g. cinematograph) on stage affected the genesis of early modern dance.

³ Three books have been dedicated to her recently. See (Current 1997; Garelick 2007; Albright 2007).

THE DECLINE OF BALLET IN EUROPE AND RISE OF NEW MEDIA ON STAGE

One of the great reformers of classical ballet was Carlo Blasis who studied and analysed ballet technique in depth while being the director of *Teatro Alla Scala* (1837-1850).⁴ His studies were of the utmost importance for the evolution of ballet movement and his students reached high levels of virtuosity. However, the period of his studies coincides with the start of the decline of ballet in Europe, and it seems that the achievement of such technical virtuosity had a negative impact on the artistic part of dancing (Homans 2013, 179). The dancers developed an excessive focus for impressive technical skills and neglected the expressiveness of their movement. As a result, the 1830s and 1840s choreographies included a redundant amount of acrobatic routines which aimed to bedazzle audiences. Ballet technique ceased being the medium for dance and became its only aim. Another factor contributing to the decline of classical ballet in Italy and France was the emergence of new technologies in the opera (Homans 2013, 184). With the invention of lighting, opera offered a much more attractive spectacle than ballet. However, the efforts that took place for the integration of these technologies in the ballet were unsuccessful; Wagnerian opera spread all over Europe and ballet was cast aside (Au 2002).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the growing emphasis on technical virtuosity and visual spectacle led to a lack of depth in content and to a limited range of choices for choreographers (Au 2002, 87). The creative years were over and ballet was no longer considered a high form of art. This inadequate range of choices led three young choreographers, in particular, namely Loïe Fuller, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Dennis to explore new forms of dancing. Each considered herself more of an artist than an entertainer, and it is essential to notice that each respectively drew the attention of many artists from the fields of music, painting, etc. (Au 2002, 87). In this paper, I examine Loïe Fuller's case, because I maintain that her experiments constituted great innovations for the history of dance. It appears that she was the first to use new ground-breaking media on stage. As Tom Gunning mentions, "Fuller's originality and genius lay in synthesizing and improving the highly visual spectacular effects of the turn of the century that almost immediately used new technologies for entertainment purposes" (Gunning 2003, 83).

⁴ "Italian Ballet Company which was established as the official dancing company of the Teatro alla Scala in Milan when it opened in 1778... It reached its peak of activity during the first half of the 19th century when it became one of the great centres for Romantic ballet ... The school at La Scala...was founded in 1813 and after Blasis was appointed director in 1837 became one of the most important training centres in Europe. But during the second half of the century ballet declined into formulaic spectacle and La Scala's repertoire was dominated by the large theatrical works of Manzotti, such as *Excelsior* (1881) and *Amor* (1886)" (Craine and Mackrell 2010).

LOÏE FULLER'S EXPERIMENTS

Loïe Fuller (1862-1928) was born in Chicago, and after having a successful career as an actress, manager, and playwright she started dancing in burlesque companies in New York in 1886. The first time that Loïe encountered the type of dance that defined her dancing career was in London in 1889, when Loïe acted as a replacement for the famous skirt dancer Letty Lind in the Gaiety Theatre (Sommer 1975, 60). In 1891, she presented for the first time her own skirt dance at the Holyoke Theatre. She was dressed with a skirt made of a rather lightweight material. “Trying to make myself as light and airy as possible, to give the impression of a floating spirit’, she lifted the sides of her skirt as she ran lightly about the stage, raising her arms high above her head” (Sommer 1975, 56).

Fuller had expressed that although she was born in America, she was made in Paris (Sommer 1975, 54). This claim seems to derive from the fact that her greatest artistic and scientific breakthroughs were achieved in Paris. In 1892, she stopped participating in unknown vaudeville productions and joined the prestigious Folies Bergère theatre company; there, she created her ‘textile dance’. Taking the producer’s suggestion for the creation of a hypnosis scene, Fuller came up with a skirt dance (Hagen 2002, 120). She used a green silk iridescent cloth and her success was tremendous; her act was staged for 300 consecutive nights in the Folies Bergère.

After the success of this run, she started experimenting in order to develop her show even further. She began exploring the effects of mirrors in accordance with her reflection. Through these experiments, she realised that a unique and special effect could be achieved by prioritising the agency of movement and projection of lighting upon the draperies over her dancing skills or her emotional interpretation. During one of her rehearsals she was recorded as saying: “I shook the silk and saw a thousand movements unknown up to that moment... the silk itself created a movement vocabulary independent of the initial gesture” (as cited in, Sommer 1975, 56–57). This realisation made Fuller experiment intensively with mirrors, reflectors, and new aspects of technology, such as lighting and electricity. “Theatres of the time were converting from gas to electric light, and there was a great deal of experimenting with light machines and projectors” (Sommer 1975, 62). This



ILLUSTRATION 1: PORTRAIT OF LOÏE FULLER (GLASIER 1902)

gave her the opportunity to experiment with new types of lamps and reflectors, and, later on, she invented her own light machines.

Following these experiments, her *Serpentine dance* was created.⁵ Fuller designed a billowing silk skirt that would perform all the new images and figures conceived during her rehearsals. The costume consisted of approximately 100 yards of silk cloth which were attached in two long wands that functioned as the lever for the movement of the costume.⁶ Through the handling of the drapery, Fuller was able to transform her stage presence into a series of images that evoked the figure of a butterfly, of a tulip, or of a burning fire (through the projection of red light) that was consuming her body. When the design of the silk dress reached its final form (after a time-consuming process of experimentation), Fuller studied it meticulously, exploring all its possibilities until she knew exactly what she could do with it and exactly how to do it (Sommer 1975, 62).

However, her most significant breakthrough was the projection of light upon this silk surface. The incorporation of the effect of light projection into her show was achieved through the utilisation of coloured light, gels, and glasses which illuminated her silk iridescent costume. The emergence of electric light was crucial for Fuller's choreographies, and she began to study this newly invented technology right away. In fact, she not only experimented with a great variety of lamps, reflectors, and lighting machines, but she also invented and patented some of her own (Sommer 1975, 62). In addition, she upgraded these lighting machines with slides and coloured glasses which were responsible for the produced kaleidoscopic coloured patterns (Brannigan 2003).

Another great innovation attributed to Loïe Fuller is *selective visibility*.⁷ Previous lighting techniques illuminated the stage space peripherally, creating a two-dimensional effect restricting the lighting of multiple and specific parts of the stage. Fuller desired to stop using this peripheral way of lighting the stage and to illuminate the performers from alternative positions. As soon as the light projectors were invented, Fuller was able to experiment with lighting and managed to light the dancers from multiple, unusual positions whilst simultaneously creating shadows in their

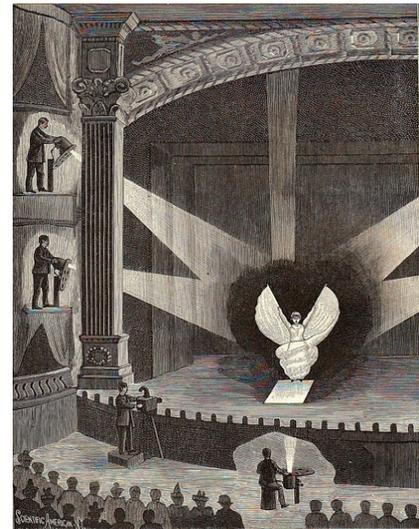


ILLUSTRATION 2: ILLUSTRATION OF LOÏE FULLER ON STAGE, WITH A MAGIC LANTERN PROJECTION (SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN 1897)

⁵ Loïe Fuller was attributed with the name 'The Serpentine Dancer' from critics and spectators due to her smooth movement and the bizarre alternation of colours.

⁶ While holding the two wands Fuller was able to manipulate her voluminous skirt.

⁷ Until then, the technique of border lighting with gas light was able to illuminate the space of the theatre hall adequately but it was not sufficient enough to light the actors' faces. In addition, the border lighting technique did not provide a large range of levels of luminosity (Leonard 1964, 87).

faces. It appears, that these light projection experiments were driven by her wish to draw the audience's attention to specific parts of the stage (Leonard 1964, 87).

DEFINED BY THE CINEMATOGRAPH

In this section, I elaborate on how the invention and incorporation of technical media on stage were determining factors for the formation of early modern dance. I follow Friedrich Kittler's argumentation regarding how "our writing tools are also working on our thoughts" (Friedrich Nietzsche as cited in, Kittler 1999, 200) and Vilém Flusser's analysis of our perception processes (Flusser 2007, 2011).

During the end of the nineteenth century, new media, such as the gramophone and the cinematograph, emerged. According to Kittler, these media changed the way of storing, editing, and transmitting information and the so-far dominant media became secondary or even supplementary. The example he provides refers to the monopoly that linear writing (and books) held up until the invention of the gramophone and more importantly, of the cinematograph (1999, 186). Since the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, books had been the main medium for organizing knowledge. However, the invention of the phonograph and the kinetoscope (1877 and 1893) broke the monopoly of writing (Kittler 1990, 6). According to Dionisios Kavvathas (in Kittler 2005, 362), the book loses its monopoly to the organisation of knowledge and because of that, alteration would take place in the way a person/subject (in this case an artist), comprehends her field or herself as a person.

The way in which we read reality depends on the *a priori* forms that we are able to recognize in each historical period. In other words, as stated by Flusser, our *forma mentis* are shaped by the linearity of the alphanumeric code (letters, numbers and signs, such as stops and quotation marks) (2007, 18); these signs demand "that the writer think[s] in the way that uniquely corresponds to them" (2011, 23). It is claimed that media are responsible for the construction and shaping of the forms that we are able to identify. Taking the gesture of writing and its near effect as an example, Flusser explains how this gesture shapes our perception processes:

The gesture of stringing letters expresses a specific way of thinking, but then refers back to this way of thinking and reinforces it: The more texts one writes (and reads), the more textually one thinks, and the more textually one thinks, the more one writes and reads. The feedback between thinking and writing has an effect on brain functions: Neurophysiology is beginning to localize centers of writing and functions of writing in the brain. Our brain is differently organized and it processes the acquired information differently than the brain of analphabets. (Flusser 2007, 19)

We believe and comprehend linearity and time sequence in accordance with our writing gesture. The sense of linearity can be explained if we notice that when we write, we put things in order, one right after the other, and as a result they are perceived as happening in this order. As Flusser claims, it is the linear codes that demand a progressive reception and “the result is a new experience of time, that is, linear time, a stream of unstoppable progress, of dramatic unrepeatability, of framing; in short, history” (Flusser 2011, xiv). Consequently, from the moment cameras take over and undermine writing, the perception of our reality changes significantly. For the purposes of this article, the most interesting medium is the cinematograph, because it seems that it changed the way we perceive ourselves:

Media have become privileged models, according to which our own self-understanding is shaped, precisely because their declared aim is to deceive and circumvent this very self-understanding. ... In other words, technical media are models of the so-called human precisely because they were developed strategically to override our senses. (Kittler 2010, 35–36)

“Media determine our situation” (Kittler 1999, xxxix), or better – as the infamous dictum of Media Studies has been renewed – “media are our situation” (Mitchell and Hansen 2010, xxii). It seems that it is not the person that uses media as tools. They do not appear to be the subject of conscious control. When we experience a situation, we assort it spatially and temporally, automatically, so we can presume that the media have already programmed the way we have functioned. Reality is in instant relation with the medium we use (Kittler 2005, 364). The medium we use can, therefore, alternate and define the way we function.

For this reason, I believe that the cinematograph was a crucial invention for the emergence of early modern dance. The cinematograph not only introduced the new technical media on stage, but also altered our perception processes. It should be noted that the period in which the cinematograph was invented, was a time of significant change for the field of dance: Ballet was considered a sterile art form and several artists were seeking alternative ways of expression. On the one hand, several choreographers (mostly female makers) started experimenting with costumes that would allow a more natural dancing style. On the other hand, Loïe Fuller was experimenting with mirrors, reflectors, and later on, with the cinematograph; which proved pivotal for her artistic practices.

The first portable cinematograph was created by the Lumière brothers in 1894. The cinematograph was a device that recorded and projected light upon static surfaces. This invention was a determining factor for Fuller's work as such a breakthrough in the media could not leave the artist unaffected. Fuller participated in film production in 1904, when she collaborated with the Lumière brothers for her first experimental film.⁸ She embedded the concept of projection of light upon static screens (inspired from the Lumières) into her performances (Sommer 1975, 54). She projected sharp, mostly coloured light upon her silk dress or behind her figure, in order to give the impression of being consumed by shadows. Fuller's innovation was the shift of light projection from a static screen upon a moving screen: the body. Fuller's cloth functioned as the projection surface of light but also as the main body of the performance. "It was through the movement of the 'screen' that light achieved motion, shattering and fragmenting as it caught on the surface of the silk" (Sommer 1975, 54). Fuller shifted the focus from the performing body to a unique image that the performer was creating with the help of the technologies; she created a type of dance that focused on the moving body's visual result, rather than the body itself.

Fuller was (in contrast to her contemporaries, St. Dennis and Duncan) striving neither for a new movement vocabulary nor for a return to primordial rhythms. It was imperative to her to reshape all the elements of a performance: stage, lighting, space architecture, and the employed media. Her experiments and the use of new technology functioned as starting points for the vast employment of this type of media on stage. Lighting became an indispensable element of all performances and later on projections were integrated. As Sommer claims, "[l]ight was yet another medium for choreography, and she used its color to shape and define the performing space" (1975, 63). This choice was a determining factor because it seems to be the first time that the body ceased to be the only medium considered to be able to perform.⁹

From the moment light projections and the cinematograph became the new media, Fuller recognized and assessed reality and herself in a totally different way. Self-observation was



ILLUSTRATION 3: POSTER FOR LOÏE FULLER'S PERFORMANCE AT THE FOLIES BERGÈRE (DE PALÉOLOGU 1893)

⁸ Three more films followed.

⁹ There were definitely other media on stage and not only human bodies. However, they were supplementary and used in order to highlight performing bodies and their motion. For instance, Charles Didelot's flying machines (see. Evert 2002).

enabled, a function that was impossible before the invention of the cinema (Kittler 1999, 13). For the first time, the cinematograph afforded the ability to record ourselves and then observe. A choreographer became able to record rehearsals, observe mistakes, change points of view and watch the performance from the audience's point of view. It is my contention that the most crucial ability that the cinema offered to choreographers was the ability to observe themselves not only in the mirror, but in a film and adjust according to what they see. A characteristic example is the fact that before cinematograph's invention, Fuller commissioned other dancers to perform her piece during rehearsals so she could examine the visual outcome of her performance from every possible angle (Sommer 1975, 62). However, with the cinematograph Fuller was able to record her body, discard the help of the mirror for corrections, and conceive a technological dance. From this point on, film was subconsciously used by Loïe Fuller as the technological implementation of the mirror.

The imaginary, ... is linked with the technology of film, because the sequential processing of single frames into a projected continuity and wholeness corresponds to Lacan's mirror stage—that is, the child's experience of its imperfect body (in terms of motor control and digestive function) as a perfect reflection, an imagined and imagistic composition in the mirror. (Kittler [1986] 1999, xxviii)

Fuller's *serpentine dance* did not include the traditional elements of classical ballet.¹⁰ Fuller invented a new type of movement that was achieved through light and shadows. Her movement was not composed by static balletic poses, but by an ever-evolving image. The use of the cloths and the effect of coloured lighting gave the impression of an alternating sequence. Fuller was not revealing the technical abilities of the body, but she was adding new dimensions by manipulating cloths and shadows. It is essential to note that at this point the dancer's body was no longer trying to feature its abilities, but to highlight a material instead. The spectator no longer followed the movements of the body, but the movements of the fabric. Fuller's innovation represents the invention of a new kind of performing body. We no longer observe the body but its visual results.

CONCLUSION

After the emergence of the technical media, the available media for storing, transmitting, and editing information changed, and the up until then dominant, became secondary or supplementary. The invention of the cinematograph not only introduced new technologies and different ways for representation, but also recasted the artistic medium as it had been known. Fuller pushed forward the integration of technical media in the performing arts and suggested a new type of movement that did not include only the body. She discovered a new body by

¹⁰ Such as static poses, pointes shoes and *en de hors* positions of the feet.

reshaping the elements of a performance: stage, lighting, and the media used. Her experiments and the use of new technologies shifted the centre of a performance from the human body to a performing assemblage composed of technical media and the body.

Fuller's technological experiments introduced a rupture in performing arts history as they transformed future artistic practices (e.g. selective visibility and the first dance films in the 1940s).¹¹ Thus, she marks one of the points of departures for a media archaeology of modern dance, rather than a creative genius behind the innovations. She acts as the Archimedean point to observe how dance became modern: as an assemblage of cultural practices, dance techniques, and media technologies. In a discipline dominated by an anthropocentric perspective, this article suggests an alternative narrative for one of the most important moments of dance history – a narrative in which the evolution of body movements is the immediate effect of media and technology. This article does not intend to narrate a linear and evolutionary history of dance. On the contrary, it demonstrates how technological experiments and technical media can perform as shifting levers for artistic practices. It is interesting to observe that dance in 'the age of mechanical reproduction' does not lose its 'aura' but re-invents itself and takes a very distinctive direction.

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¹¹ See, (Brannigan 2011).

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