Introduction: Modern Dance and the Birth of the Twentieth Century

I.1 Modern Dance: Questions and Answers

Upon opening their Sunday morning paper on December 3, 1911, readers of the progressive Berlin newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt* (Berlin Daily News) were confronted with a rather unsettling question: "Must One Dance Naked?" In the article under this headline the prominent ballerina Antonietta dell'Era – whose accomplishments included being the first Sugarplum Fairy in the world premiere of *The Nutcracker* in 1892 – took to task the young French dancer Adorée Villany, who had been arrested in Munich two weeks earlier on a charge of public indecency. Villany had been performing in cities around Central Europe for some years; her standard procedure, which she followed in Munich as well, was to rent a theater, send "personal" invitations to buy tickets to most of the city's artistic and social elite (normally an effective means of getting around decency laws, which did not apply to "private" performances), and present a dance program that included a good deal of exposed skin. By the standards of the day a woman who exposed her legs below the knee and her arms below the shoulder was as good as naked; but Villany's performance included a certain amount of outright nudity, as we would define it today. Dell'Era regarded Villany's act as a travesty, a degradation of the art form. Performances like hers might be "pleasing to the eye," but they had nothing to do with "true dance art." The latter was a matter of the mind. It was the product of "years of difficult, demanding study"; it was intended to "free the body from the coarse law of gravity"; and it "laid the highest value on decency." The standard female dance costume – the tutu – was designed to be like a "light, incorporeal cloud covering the body," effectively "suspending the very concept of clothing" by denying that there was anything merely material there to cover up.[1] Ballet, in short, was art; Villany was an amateur appealing to mere prurient interest.

[1] Antonietta dell'Era, "Muss man nackt tanzen?," *Berliner Tageblatt*, no. 628, December 3, 1911; Ivor Guest, *The Dancer's Heritage: A Short History of Ballet* (London: Dancing Times, 1977), p. 60.

Villany got a chance to reply in the following Sunday's edition, in which she wrote – under the same title – scathingly of the ballet's "ridiculous distortions" of natural movement. Ballet was "soulless" and "mechanical," it valued "military precision" and "drill" over any meaningful expression. Her own dance in contrast replaced the "unnatural, forced movements" of ballet with naturally beautiful, graceful, organic "life-filled lines" (*lebensvolle Linien*) that authentically expressed the artist's "feelings" or "moods." *This* was art – not just physical technique, but real art, with real expressive power, performed not by a windup doll but by a real person. It required nudity because the expressive medium of the dance as an art form is the human body; clothes could only obscure its expressive potentials. This was not mere frilly decoration and empty technique: it expressed the essential, the real. "I shed my shirt," Villany claimed, "in order to bare my soul." Ballet costumes were artfully coquettish, suggestive, hinting at forbidden pleasures where forthright nudity would allow the viewer to develop a pure appreciation for the real beauty and expressive power of the female body – and through it, for the dancer's *soul*.[2]

This debate in the pages of one of Berlin's popular daily newspapers was just one skirmish in a wider battle that radically reshaped the dance in Europe in the years before World War I. Between 1902 and 1914 the culture market of Western and Central Europe was invaded and occupied by a small mercenary army of slender, scantily clad, young female dancers. These women transformed dance as an art form – its aesthetic language, content, organization, and audience. But they also transformed the place of dance in European and ultimately world culture, giving it incomparably wider resonance and prominence. Before 1900, dance in Europe was a peripheral art – often not considered an art at all but a form of entertainment, and almost never a respectable or "high" art, with profound philosophical or spiritual or political implications.[3] For a period of decades between the 1900s and the 1940s, the modern dance explosion made dance one of the most important art forms in Europe – not only aesthetically, but also philosophically and politically. Leading painters, sculptors, and composers took dance seriously as a theme and resource for their own artistic productions. The avant-garde intellectual elite regarded it as an art form with profound spiritual, philosophical, and political implications. Dancers were taken seriously by leading

[2] Adorée-Via Villany, "Muss man nackt tanzen? Eine Antwort," *Berliner Tageblatt*, no. 628, December 10, 1911.

[3] See, particularly, Hanna Järvinen, *Dancing Genius: The Stardom of Vaslav Nijinsky* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), p. 41.

political figures of the day – kings, prime ministers, and political party leaders. Even the religious implications and functions of the dance were widely discussed, both by those who thought the new dance sacred and those who thought it sinful. Dancers made significant amounts of money from performances in theaters both "respectable" and popular; they were highly paid entertainers for the social elite; and they played a key role in the emergence of a new form of middle-brow spectacular entertainment – neither popular culture nor "high" culture, but "mass" culture. But they were also ubiquitous in the emerging mass consumer economy of the early twentieth century – for example, in advertising campaigns promoting cosmetics, perfumes, dietary supplements, fitness regimes, and fitness equipment (sometimes of their own devising); in the fashion industry; and in the new and explosively expanding film industry. Dance was a big deal.

A theme that sounds odd to the modern ear was central to the discussion of this dance revolution. Both the modern dancers and those who appreciated and supported them frequently asserted that the aesthetic qualities of modern dance – the qualities that made it exciting and revolutionary – sprang from the "blood" of those who performed it. Some argued straightforwardly that the qualities of a performer's art could be explained by her ethnic background or family heritage – her Greek, Hungarian, Italian, German, African, Celtic, Slavic, German, Gypsy, Indian, or even American "blood." German dancers were soulful; Celtic dancers were romantic; Spanish dancers passionate, and so on. Dancers of mixed parentage could combine these qualities in particularly fruitful and interesting ways. Equally important, however, others argued that modern dance expressed a potential and an aspiration that was universal in all human beings: the aspiration to embody a beauty, grace, and spiritual power beyond the merely human. In fact, the modern dancers from the outset claimed to embody a process of upward progression that was immanent in every human being and indeed in all of nature, in the "blood" of all living things: the process of evolution. Evolution toward greater perfection was, indeed, understood by a great number of people around 1900 to be the aim of nature, of all of creation. It was the purpose of life, and what gave life meaning. Modern dance claimed to give it artistic expression. Specifically, modern dance constantly appealed both to the archaic – to ancient Greek or Middle Eastern art forms, and to the "primitive" archaic aesthetic forms of "less civilized" societies – and to the future, to liberation from the past and its conventions and restrictions. In combining these two apparently contradictory gestures, it enacted the magnificent history

of evolution – the connection, through the body of the dancer, between the primitive past and the transcendent future of humanity.

Modern dance, then, performed two themes, both addressed by the language of "blood." On the one hand, modern dance embodied and expressed the diversity of human life, which gave the world its spice and interest and much of its creative potential. On the other hand, it embodied the common purpose of all human life – transcendence, what filled life with meaning and promise.

These themes were appealing at the time for specific historical reasons. The three or four decades before World War I were the first great age of globalization, a period of remarkable global political, economic, and cultural cross-fertilizations. Modern dance, with its celebration of diversity and of crossings and admixtures of "blood," partook of the excitement those processes generated. These were also decades of tremendous scientific, technical, and material progress – as yet not darkened by an immediate experience of the destructive potential of modern technologies. The idea of progress and of evolution was given greater power by the evidence of rapid change and improvement that was all around Western people in these decades. Ultimately these themes proved equally attractive to people in many other parts of the world as well. Modern dance before World War I was, then, an aesthetic language in which to discuss the ultimate implications of central features of the modern condition as it was emerging during the early period of globalization in the decades around 1900.

Beyond being an artistic revolution, then, modern dance was a profound philosophical upheaval as well – an integral part of the revolt of self-conscious modernism against received traditions of knowledge, truth, and authority by those who believed that every aspect of human society must be reformed and reshaped to meet the challenge of the conditions created by rapid technological, social, economic, and cultural change in (at the time) the nineteenth century. In fact, modern dance was part of a much broader cultural "war," a set of interrelated and interlocking struggles in multiple arenas of European life and increasingly of human life globally, between radical modernists and those more inclined to preserve tradition.

Most immediately, the battle over modern dance was part of a much wider struggle over standards of beauty in the arts generally. Antonietta dell'Era, for example, appealed to a definition of beauty that was universally known and acknowledged in European culture at the time: the idea – originating with the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant – that true aesthetic appreciation is purely spiritual, and that real

beauty cannot be a function of active desire in the beholder, but only of passive and ideal contemplation.[4] Adorée Villany's response typified that of many artistic modernists: that sensual desire is not egoistic, sinful, and destructive because it is "merely" natural (not spiritual), but vital, life-affirming, and creative because it is wholly natural; and that the appreciation of sensual beauty is therefore morally and aesthetically legitimate. The tendency in the arts to hide the "merely" material (as the tutu did) was a tacit admission that one did not have the maturity to deal with one's natural desires – that one was not so "idealistic" and spiritual after all.

That debate in the arts was very closely related to the broader debate about decency more generally. In this period, some morality activists prevailed on public authorities to glue fig leaves over the offending bits of public statuary; where they failed, some undertook nocturnal raids on public fountains and monuments to chop those bits off. There were major debates, campaigns, and scandals around nudity and sexuality in art, literature, the theater, and advertising. And this debate over decency was in turn closely related to debates over the moral status of sexuality. Was the only morally legitimate sex procreative marital sex? Or was it ethically defensible for people to meet their sexual needs in other ways, as long as they did so responsibly – by using prophylactics, say, or contraceptives, or in the understanding that they were responsible for supporting any children born to nonmarital relationships? There was, for example, a major policy debate across Europe between the 1870s and the 1930s over the regulation of prostitution by the police – a system defended as a public health measure (because the women involved were subject to medical inspections), but condemned for turning the state into a pimp and a procurer.[5]

The struggle over beauty and decency had profound political implications. For the artistic avant-garde, the question was simply this: Does the citizen have the right to set his or her own standards of decency and beauty; or does the state have the right and duty to establish and police those standards for everyone? Is the citizen a morally autonomous and independent personality, with the capacity and right to reason out moral

[4] See Immanuel Kant, *Critik der Urtheilskraft* (London: Routledge, 1994 [1790]), esp. pp. 5, 15, 65.

[5] See Edward Ross Dickinson, *Sex, Freedom and Power in Imperial Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Steven C. Hause, "Social Control in Late Nineteenth-Century France: Protestant Campaigns for Strict Public Morality," in Christopher E. Forth and Elinor Accampo, eds., *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2010), pp. 135–150; Deana Heath, *Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

questions for himself or herself? Or is the individual a morally dependent subject, reliant on obedience to the superior moral judgment and guidance of the political, religious, and social authorities? In the decades before World War I, European societies were in the throes of an intense struggle between the advocates and opponents of political democratization. Modern dance was an important embodiment of that struggle in the arts and entertainment: Attending a modern dance concert – in which artists like Villany appeared nude on stage – was a public performance of the claim to democratic citizenship.

These debates in turn were closely related to another issue of the day: the social role of women. Under the impact of rapid social change, women's roles were being transformed around 1900. Cultural conservatives defended the ideal of the wife and helpmeet who made civilization possible by attending to the home fire, the children, and morality while their husbands fought the hard, competitive battles of productive labor, politics, and artistic creativity. But women were entering public life in growing numbers – as professionals; civil servants; service-sector workers; independent intellectuals, writers, and artists; consumers; even as advocates of women's political, legal, educational, and sexual rights. The "New Woman" of this period was not a frail, shy, retiring, domestic creature; she was strong, independent, and ambitious.

Finally, that debate was just one part of a broader revolution in European conceptions of the self, of what it is to be a person and a member of a particular society. Historians have often referred to this revolution as the revolution of individualism – a profound shift in which people ceased to allow others to govern their lives according to the needs of their families, or the conventions and expectations of their class, or the traditions of their religion and culture (e.g., inherited codes of sexual morality and public decency), and threw themselves into the hard work of answering the question "What do *I* want?" and getting it. But this was also a period in which people were hard at work constructing new collective identities. The ideas of the nation, ethnicity, race, and what it meant to belong to one of them, and how one could tell who belonged to which one, and what that means for us as individuals – all these were burning questions at the time.

Modern dance played a critical role in all these changes. As women using their bodies as their expressive medium and often arguing for – and using – nudity on stage, modern dancers put themselves at the heart of a firestorm of debate over decency. Because the body was thought of as the material counterpart to the spiritual/intellectual ideal, dance

posed with particular urgency the question of the function of the ideal and the real in art. The modern dancers epitomized the social revolution in women's roles. Adorée Villany, for example, was an independent artist, not part of a ballet company or dependent on a theater establishment; she was not directed by a male choreographer; and she was not dependent on a male audience because much of the audience for modern dance was female. And dance posed the question of identity not just for women, but for everyone. Race, ethnicity, and nation – again, expressed most frequently using the term *blood* – were understood to be bodily states. Because the medium of dance is the body, dancers confronted the meaning of their "blood" with greater immediacy and urgency than any other artists.

Modern dance, then, was a point of convergence for a whole range of questions raised by social and cultural change around the turn of the twentieth century. But more important for our purposes here, modern dance constituted a powerful response to those questions. In fact, modern dance was a masterful synthesis, a cultural form that developed explosive potential precisely because it could generate synergies between disparate trends and elements in European and indeed world culture at the time.

First, foremost, and as a precondition for its other roles, modern dance was a brilliant marketing strategy – the subject of Chapter 1. In its thematics, styles, and self-consciously multichannel market strategy, it was exquisitely tailored to the emerging "mass" culture market of the modern metropolis – a market that defied and eroded the distinctions between elite and popular culture, between high art and commercial entertainment, between male and female audiences, between distinctive national audiences and tastes. It was above all this success in the culture market that gave dance its remarkable symbolic power. Modern dance did not answer the questions posed by modernism and modernity (i.e., the conditions of life in the modern era) in the abstract; it turned its answers into a practice – a form of entertainment and a business – that was perfectly suited to the changes that were transforming its social environment. Modern dance did not argue that women should be autonomous participants in the public sphere; it *was* autonomous women in the public sphere – demonstratively, even outrageously. It did not argue that honest, open, natural sensuality is in the moral sense chaste and therefore legitimate; it demonstrated that this was so. Modern dancers did not argue that their art expressed something universal about humanity; they proved by their market success that it did – indeed, Chapter 5 will address the fact that, ultimately, many of the stars of modern dance would go on to bring

modern dance to the world – to the United States, Latin America, India, Japan, and Australia.

Second, as Chapter 2 will show, modern dance realized with extraordinary force and immediacy the single most important aim of artistic modernism as it emerged in the wake of the Romantic ideal of artistic genius and inspiration: authentic self-expression, the striving to find the individual authorial voice of the artist. Dance was uniquely placed to accomplish that aim because in dance the artist *is* the art. But the modern dancers, unlike most ballet stars or the various exponents of folk or "national" dances in this period, made themselves independent not only of choreographers, but also (so they claimed) of all traditional or inherited movement idiom. Modern dance was the ideal Expressionist (as those most focused on this agenda called it) art form: the artist herself, expressing her "soul" – as Villany put it. The artistic avant-garde not only loved it; repeatedly, they were its most important champions and patrons, undertaking the job of educating the broader public in the meaning and value of the new dance.

Chapter 3 will argue that modern dance developed a rather remarkable answer to the question of individual and of ethnic/racial/national identity. It is an answer that we can trace in other forms of performance (like theatrical acting) as well, but that had particular power and immediacy when it was danced. That answer was a bit surprising: It turned out that being authentically who one is and faking it were the same thing. Building on theories of performance and on philosophical currents that were just being worked out between the 1870s and the 1900s, modern dance developed a highly effective method for producing authentic selfhood. To do that, modern dancers had to reach beyond their own immediate origins, and discover themselves as mongrels – either spiritually or literally, ransacking their family trees for admixtures of exotic blood. Modern dancers were not only experts on identity; they were also alchemists of "blood." By mixing it, they discovered its true properties. Not coincidentally, doing so opened the global culture market to them.

Modern dance was also uniquely powerful because in developing integrated answers to these questions – social change, beauty, truth, art, sexuality, individual identity, belonging – it developed a comprehensive response to the spiritual changes, tensions, and crises of the age. Indeed, modern dance was very often religious – explicitly, self-consciously, and in the eyes not only of performers but of reviewers, commentators, audiences, and critics. Modern dance performance was a revelation and a liturgy for the new religion of evolution – and of freedom, love, joy, and life. This will be the subject of Chapter 4.

Ultimately modern dance was less successful as a religion than as a business; and in the 1920s and 1930s its spiritual element would be largely attenuated. Yet as Chapter 5 will demonstrate, the "revelatory" power of dance before World War I had a lasting impact, in that it gave rise to cultural energies that flowed into and helped to power multiple projects after the war. Most unfortunately, one was radical authoritarian collectivism. Modern dance helped to feed the cultural energies of both communism and fascism. However, modern dance also came to play an important role in various formulations and experiences of democratic culture – in Social Democracy on the continent, in more conservative law-and-civilization democracy in Britain, and in populist and national-chauvinist democracy in the United States. Modern dance in the 1920s also had a formative impact on the culture of celebrity and particularly of the self-destructive complex of sex, drugs, and disorientation. More happily, modern dance played a central role in the development of a whole range of pedagogical and therapeutic methods that are still important today in the fields of mental health, occupational therapy, rehabilitative medicine and physical therapy, and art education. What is more, by the 1920s modern dance as a means of discovering and defining identity was being transferred to multiple other regions around the world, where it made an important contribution to anticolonial nationalism.

In short, in some very important ways, modern dance played a central role in giving birth to the global twentieth century. Whether one must or not is a question; but it is indeed remarkable what can be accomplished by dancing naked.

I.2 Cast of Characters

The chapters that follow will occasionally discuss particular dancers as individuals with particular stories of their own. For the most part, however, they will use stories about individual dancers as examples illustrating broader patterns. It will be useful, therefore, to establish at the outset the cast of characters involved. Doing so is also a way of pointing out two important patterns in modern dance.

The first is that modern dance happened first in Europe, but was not really European. The first wave of modern dancers came primarily from outside Europe. The United States – and particularly California – was exceptionally well-represented. An early cultural bridgehead was established by Loïe Fuller, an American who moved to Europe and eventually established her own dance idiom and her own theater in Paris in

1900, amid an explosion of international dance performance (much of it essentially ethnographic and representative, not modernist and innovative) associated with the Paris World Exposition in that year.[6] The greatest star, advocate, and philosopher of modern dance was Isadora Duncan, who performed and taught in private homes and variety theater in her native San Francisco Bay Area; toured the country with the company of a prominent variety-theater impresario starting in 1895; made a name in New York society circles, performing at private parties, by 1898; moved to London in 1899 and on to Paris in 1900 and was picked up and mentored by Fuller; and became an extraordinary cultural phenomenon in her own right starting with her performances in Munich, Budapest, and Berlin in 1902 and 1903.[7]

Duncan was followed in 1903 by Maud Allan, also from San Francisco. Allan had studied music in Berlin from the middle of the 1890s, but switched to dance. After developing a dance based on the story of Salomé and John the Baptist (Salomé loved John but he spurned her, whereupon she persuaded Herod – by dancing – to decapitate him), she gained some notoriety when Christian conservative morality campaigners managed to have her performance banned in Munich in 1907. She was invited to perform for the King of England while he was on vacation at a spa in Marienbad; on the strength of his approval she moved to London in 1908 and became an enormous success, performing more than 250 times at one of London's leading variety theaters.[8] Shortly after Allan's initial successes, Ruth Dennis (stage name St. Denis), from New Jersey, established herself as a dance phenomenon especially in Germany. St. Denis had worked in

[6] Richard Nelson Current and Marcia Ewing Current, *Loïe Fuller: Goddess of Light* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997); Loïe Fuller, *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1913), p. 221; Gabriele Brandstetter and Brygida Maria Ochaim, *Loïe Fuller: Tanz–Licht-Spiel–Art Nouveau* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1989); Giovani Lista, *Loïe Fuller: Danseuse de la Belle Époque* (Paris: Somogy-Stock, 1995).

[7] The literature on Duncan is enormous; among many other studies, probably the most successful in placing her in broad social and intellectual context are Ann Daly, *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Peter Kurth, *Isadora: A Sensational Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2001); Fredrika Blair, *Isadora: Portrait of the Artist as a Woman* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986).

[8] On Allan see Felix Cherniavsky, "Maud Allan, Part I: The Early Years, 1873–1903," *DC* 6 (1983): 1–36 (quotation p. 30, Greek vases p. 27); "Maud Allan, Part II: First Steps to a Dancing Career, 1904–1907," *DC* 6 (1983): 189–227; and "Maud Allan, Part III: Two Years of Triumph, 1908–1909," *DC* 7 (1984): 119–158; Amy Koritz, *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art: Dance and Literature in Early Twentieth-Century British Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); and "Dancing the Orient for England: Maud Allan's *The Vision of Salomé*," in Jane C. Desmond, ed., *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); and Judith R. Walkowitz, "The 'Vision of Salomé: Cosmopolitanism and Erotic Dancing in Central London, 1908–1918," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003).