Modernism and Dance

Paul Zmolek

Modern Dance is generally understood to be those styles of dance that were developed by early to mid-twentieth century American and German choreographers who attempted to create contemporary, individualistic modes of expression. A deeper impression can be found by embracing Modern Dance as the dance expression of Modernism, the overarching *zeitgeist* of "western" civilization during the turbulent first half of the 20th century.

The audacious pronouncement, "God is dead" by German philosopher Frederich Nietzsche (1844-1900), idealized a "superman" who could rise above accepted moral and ethical constraints to actualize human potential. This radical concept disrupted the traditional connection between religion, politics and art. Classical art forms, which historically reinforced the values of patrons from the religious and aristocratic hierarchy, were perceived as inadequate expressions for the burgeoning Modernist culture. Artists turned elsewhere for inspiration. Pre-classic and primal cultures, which positioned the arts as the locus of spiritual expression, held particular fascination in an era that had lost faith in the power of the sacred.

Pre-Modern Dance innovator Isadora Duncan (1878-1927) , inspired by representations of sacred dance on ancient Greek vases, became an international sensation by daring to dance barefoot in loose, flowing costumes modeled upon Greek tunics to music that had previously been deemed "too serious" for dance. She, in turn, inspired Russian-born choreographers Michel Fokine (1880-1942) and Vaslav Nijinsky (1890-1950), company members in impresario Sergei Diaghelev's (1872-1929) Ballets Russes, to explore their Slavic heritage for movement vocabulary and thematic ideas. Nijinsky created perhaps the most notorious of the early modern dances when he staged "The Rite of Spring" (1913), his interpretation of a Slavic pagan human sacrifice. Hunched-over ballerinas heavily collapsing with turned in feet to Igor Stravinsky's (1882-1971) pounding mixed meter score proved too much for the audience of Paris sophisticates - they responded by rioting and tearing the theater apart.[1]

The "grandmother" of American Modern Dance, Ruth St. Denis (1878-1968) found her muse in an image of the Egyptian goddess Isis on a poster advertising cigarettes. She and husband, Ted Shawn (1891-1972) formed the Los Angeles-based Denishawn Dance Company , thrilling vaudeville and international audiences with their interpretations of dances from other cultures and the imagined past. Austrian-born Rudolph Laban recalled Europe's agrarian pre-history by organizing huge movement choirs to celebrate seasonal festivals and his student, Mary Wigman (1886-1973) created Modern dances that embodied the spirit of German nature religions.

The Paris International Expositions, in the late 1870s through the 1930s, showcased cultures from across the globe to "western" audiences who had developed a taste for exoticism. In the 1930s, African dancer Asadata Dafora (1890-1965) and Spanish and Indian dance expert La Meri (1899-1988) brought

dance from other cultures to the American concert stage. American anthropologist/dancer Katherine Dunham (b.1910) studied the dances and religion of the African diaspora in Haiti, incorporating its movement into both entertainment and art-based dances. Los Angeles-based Lester Horton (1906-1953), and New York-based Martha Graham (1884-1991) have both been credited for leading the first inter-racial Modern Dance companies in America. Dunham, Horton and Graham each independently developed techniques that utilized a percussive contraction in the center of the body to activate the large powerful ilio-psoas muscle. These techniques tended to embrace, rather than avoid, the depiction of the body's weight and effort, and featured a flexible, articulate spine.

In the late 1800's, Dr. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) perceived a pattern of sexually repressed neurotic behavior exhibited by his female Victorian era patients. From these observations, he conceived of the Id, Ego and Superego as interior warriors within the psychological battleground of sexual frustration. Freud's psychoanalytic theories had as much influence in the Arts as they did in the field of Psychology. Martha Graham found that the deep visceral pull and the concave shape from the contraction of the central torso correlated nicely with her use of Freudian symbology. Graham established contraction-release as the central metaphor and the major biomechanical principle of her technique.[2] While Graham explored the psychoanalytic aspects of Greek Myth, her composer/accompanist/mentor Louis Horst (1884-1964) conducted choreography classes based in the codified pre-symphonic dance suite and other pre-classic forms. His teachings influenced many New York-based choreographers in the 1930s and 40s.[3]

The Moderns sought to create a style of dance that, though abstracted, was completely concerned with the human condition. At the turn of the twentieth century intense nationalistic patriotism destabilized the European continent. Shifting economies catalyzed migration from rural agrarian communities to urban industrial centers. Mass production democratized material possessions by making production more efficient and thus more affordable while devaluing the worker as an interchangeable part of the "assembly line" economy with no more individual identity than the cogs and gears of the machine s/he served. Philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883) envisioned an egalitarian utopia which would emerge after the proletariat ultimately overthrew their Capitalist oppressors. The Russian monarchy was overthrown and workers, artists and intellectuals gathered inspiration from the promise of international brotherhood held out by the new Communist system. Ironically, communism and its polar opposite, fascism, spawned totalitarian regimes that were led by flesh and blood parodies of Nietzsche's ideal of the "superman." Italian Futurists idealized speed and the machine, claiming that war was the ultimate aesthetic expression. The first modern, mechanized international war (1914-1918) reaped death and destruction in unimaginable and never surpassed levels. Ballet themes of the time were perceived by Modern dancers as escapist fantasies of swans and fairies and, thus the Classical form was deemed an inadequate expression for the Modernist era.[4]

Many of the Moderns were motivated by a rejection of the strictly codified artifice of ballet and the imitative exoticism of the Denishawn company's repertory of "world" dance. In opposition to ballet's seemingly effortless denial of gravity to create the illusion of weightless sylphs, the Moderns embraced gravity and the sinews of the body at work. Doris Humphrey (1895-1958), with Charles Weidman (1901-1975), broke away from the Denishawn company to explore the force of gravity to create momentum. As artistic director of her student José Limón's (1908-1972) company, Humphrey further developed the Humphrey-Limón "fall and recovery" technique. Weidman, known for his ability to create character through dance, explored the comic possibilities of "kinetic pantomime," stringing together unrelated gestures in a physical free association of non-linear non-sequiters.[5] At the end of her career Humphrey analyzed the craft of choreography in her seminal book, The Art of Making Dances (1959).

Modern Dance techniques and styles were developed to facilitate each choreographer's approach based upon their own physical preferences. Modernism's individualistic and democratic creative approach only applied to the choreographers, however. Just as the Russian revolution was incapable of fully realizing Marx's dream of an egalitarian international brotherhood, so too was the Modern dance revolution not fully capable of realizing its democratic ideals. The full expression of each "major" choreographer's unique approach required an uniformity of dancers as codified as any *corps de ballet*. For example, the Bennington College Summer workshops in the 1930s brought the Modern Dance pioneers together to share their innovations. Workshop classes exposed students to all of the major innovators. Among loyal company members, however, there was a separatism similar to that uneasy truce between different religious sects, who each "know" that they, alone, have received the one true Word. The early Moderns felt as though they were driven on a sacred quest that required purity; most would not consider becoming "tainted" by training in other techniques - Classical or Modern. When the performers rather than the choreographers began teaching these techniques, the styles often stopped evolving and became as codified as Ballet. The form was Modern but the spirit was Classical.

The Moderns utilized scientific analysis to determine central principles of movement and dance. Swiss composer and music teacher Emile Jacques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) created *eurythmics*, a system of bodily exercises for strengthening the dancer's or musician's sense of rhythmic and harmonic structure. French music and acting teacher François Delsarte (1811-1950) developed a training methodology of expressive movement and gesture. The curriculum of the Denishawn School included Delsarte training . Ted Shawn maintained that this was the inspiration for former Denishawn dancer Martha Graham's technique based upon "contraction-release." [6]

Rudolph Laban expanded upon Delsarte's and Dalcroze's work to create an elegant notation system to precisely describe exact movements in time with spatial tensions and muscular efforts. Laban's work was a major influence upon the *Lebensreform* ("life reform") movement of the Weimar Republic from which emerged the "new dance" of Germany.[7] In 1931, immediately prior to the

outbreak of World War II, Laban's most prominent student Mary Wigman sent her student Hanya Holm (1893-1992) to America to share these ideas. German choreographer Kurt Joos (1901-1979) combined Laban Analysis with ballet technique to choreograph Modernist social critiques, including "The Green Table" (1932), his acclaimed masterpiece lampooning the Capitalists' manipulations that led to WWI and were ultimately leading to WWII.

To escape the Nazis, Laban repatriated to the United Kingdom where his work became more focused upon industrial applications in war-time U.K. It is tempting for dance scholars to gloss over this latter phase of Laban's career because, at first blush, his investigation into industrial modes of production appears to be an about face from his earlier dance-based work, having had more in common with Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1856-1915) Scientific Management and Frank (1868-1924) and Lillian Gilbreth's (1878-1972) Time and Motion studies developed in America - which treated human laborers as machines that could be fine-tuned to provide the greatest profit margin when installed within Henry Ford's (1863-1947) concept of the assembly line.[8] However, Laban's contribution to Taylorism and Fordism was as much an expression of Modernist thinking as his earlier explorations of mass movement choirs. Modernism was a reaction to the inevasible penetration of the machine age. Modernism celebrated the progress of mechanism while indulging in a romantic nostalgia for agrarianism.[9] Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) was developed in service of both thrusts of Modernism. LMA is an important tool of Modern Dance and continues to be the basis for Creative Dance taught in the majority of British public schools. Given this historical progression, it is difficult to ignore the direct effect the industrial revolution, the ensuing world wars and the politics of the day had on the development of Modern Dance.

Lillian Gilbreth's research of home economics, Margaret Sanger's (1879-1966) campaign to legalize contraception, and the development of self-awareness of the body through Physical Education were early feminist attempts to expand the woman's role beyond domestic drudgery and motherhood. In 1926, the same year that Martha Graham gave her first group performance in New York, Physical Educator Margaret H'Doubler (1889-1982), inspired by Liberal Education philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952), created the first dance degree program in America at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Her curriculum, initiated in 1917, was based in the analysis and exploration of the elements of body, space, time and energy. This course of study rejected the Victorian ideal of passive woman who was a stranger to her own body. Though H'Doubler's work was process rather than product oriented, H'Doubler and her students created a educational environment that was crucial to the development of Modern Dance.[10]

The Modern dancers understood the vital role of education in promoting their art. Critic John Martin's(1883-1985) *New York Times* reviews coined the term "Modern Dance" and played a vital role in teaching the general public about this new expression in dance. Lecture-demonstrations and workshops brought dance directly to non-metropolitan communities which built audiences throughout the United States. This emphasis on teaching was matched by H'Doubler-influenced dance in higher education until the 1950s when the Modern era was on the wane

and there ensued a mass migration of dance programs out of Physical Education into Fine Arts conservatory models which tended to emphasize performative rather than pedagogical training.

“The war to end all wars” proved an empty slogan for World War I when an isolationist American Senate torpedoed President Woodrow Wilson’s (1856-1924) dream of a League of Nations. The social-political experiments of the German Weimar Republic (1919-1933) collapsed under the incendiary inflation ignited by vengeful war reparations. Eugenics, the "science" of selective breeding, and Anti-Semitism vied for intellectual respectability throughout Europe and America. Hitler’s (1889-1945) Fascism was made palpable to a desperate population when American bankers, panicked by the crash of the Market on Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929, recalled usurious loans on Germany's onerous war debts. The unrest and war in Europe created an inhospitable climate for art-making. Hitler’s "Exhibition of Degenerate Art" (1933) organized by Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945) made the consequences clear for creating works that didn’t share the Nazi worldview.[11] Modern European artists and intellectuals fled to America to escape the Nazi *blitzkrieg* ("lightning war"). In spite of this suppression, Laban’s legacy from Mary Wigman's expressionist ritualistic dances and Kurt Joos’ socially conscious works survives in the contemporary European Dancetheatre tradition that is best known through the work of German choreographer Pina Bausch (b. 1940).

Totalitarian Josef Stalin’s (1879-1953) widespread pogroms eliminated any perceived opponents to his bleak version of Communism in the Soviet Union, killing the rich Modernist arts experiments that had thrived in the early, idealistic stage of the Leninist Revolution. Though the Ballets Russes had created some of the most fully realized modernist dance of the early 20th century, virtuostic folk dance ensembles and, ironically, the aristocratically structured classical ballet became the favored dance vehicles for furthering the “proletarian” message of Stalinism and, later in China, Maoism.

In America, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s (1882-1945) "New Deal" policies of 1932 saved America’s economy through socialist programs that defied Capitalist free market ideology. FDR’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) programs in response to the Great Depression created employment for dancers thus boosting the Modern Dance movement. The New Dance Group (f. 1932) was a collective of independent choreographers and dancers made possible by WPA funding. Many of its choreographers were inspired by strong, controversial social themes, exemplified in their slogan "Dance is a Weapon." Pearl Primus' (1919-1994) "Strange Fruit" (1943) is an excellent example of the collective's dances that revealed lynchings and other terrorist acts of white supremacists, the bloody repression of the union movement, and domestic violence against women which were a hidden scar on the American landscape.

World War II (1939-1945) ended when America dropped The Bomb on noncombatant citizens of Japan. The end of World War II catalyzed the development of Butoh,[12] the Japanese Modern Dance movement influenced by German expressionist choreographer Harald Kreutzberg (1902-1968).[13] Japan’s

feudalistic government collapsed, leaving a void that was filled by Capitalism and created a socio-economic environment that gave resonance to Modernism's individualistic, abstracted expression of empathy for the human condition.

Many writers see the Atomic Age and the commencement of the Cold War as the end of the Modern era, and the beginning of Post-Modernism. In the late 1940s, after World War II, American choreographers Merce Cunningham (b.1919), Alwin Nikolais (1910 - 1993), and others began creating dances that were essentially about the manipulation of movement in time and space rather than the more human-centered themes of their predecessors. This change of choreographic focus signals the beginning of Post-modern Dance. Eras, however, don't begin and end as neatly as they are usually outlined in history books. Though the onset of the Atomic Age is a convenient marker for the end of Modernism, Modern Dance didn't suddenly die along with the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki but, instead, continued with lessening influence as the Cold War lurched forward.

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[3] Horst, L. & Russell, C.(1961) Modern Dance Forms San Francisco, CA: Impulse
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[5] ibid
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[12] See Essay 6, "Piercing the a Mask of Japanese Dance Theatre."
[13]Blackwood, M. (1990) Butoh: Body on the Edge of Crisis [Video] Michael Blackwood Productions