

Public Abstract

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Title:WHERE THE DANCER MEETS HER DIVINE: DANCE AS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE LIVES OF LOIE FULLER AND ISADORA DUNCAN

All too often, when we think of religion and dance, we think of liturgical, shamanic, ecstatic, and/or trance dance. In those situations, we usually do not question whether the dancer is having a religious experience. However, this thesis begins with the question of whether a concert form of dance (such as ballet, modern, jazz, etc.) can be considered a religious experience. Framing this question within the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I focus on the experiences of two dancers (Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan), who each created a new form of dance that led to the eventual formation of modern dance. I combine historical data (autobiographies, newspaper articles, secondary sources) with theories on religion and dance in order to understand both the historical atmosphere in which Fuller's and Duncan's dances arose and how to understand the complexities of the dancing body and religious experience. Ultimately, I conclude that dance was indeed a site of religious experience for Fuller and Duncan—an experience created through their dynamic processes of interacting with the religious ideas and institutions of modern society.

This thesis contributes to the wider scholarly dialog of religious experience - how do scholars approach this topic without invalidating the experience of their subjects? How can we understand experiences which we do not share? By considering the dancing body, we can begin to examine religious experience as something that is performed, created, and done within one's own movement. This research also posits a new method for considering religious creativity in individuals by suggesting that we think of the relationship between individuals and religious ideas/persons as Contact Improvisation - a process in which something new is formed through the dynamic contact of two 'movers.' This allows us to rethink how we perceive the process through which people subscribe to religions, suggesting that this process is much more dynamic and interactive than commonly perceived.