ing discarded and new ones were being invented at an alarming speed. In that space of radical cultural change, the confounding of the gaze in dance may have reinvented gender, too—until the new conventions became entrenched. Modern and postmodern dance today are as much a spectacle as ballet.

It is ironic that when feminist literary theorists come to a point where words no longer suffice, they often invoke dancing as a metaphor. And yet dance is too infrequently the subject of feminist inquiry. I still think Jacques Derrida’s words, in a published interview called “Choreographies,” are ones to look and think and write by:

[What if we were to approach here ... the area of a relationship to the other where the code of sexual marks would no longer be discriminating? ... As I dream of saving the chance that this question offers I would like to believe in the multiplicity of sexually marked voices. I would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminate number of blended voices, this mobile of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each “individual,” whether he be classified as “man” or as “woman” according to the criteria of usage. ... Then too, I ask you, what kind of dance would there be, or would there be one at all, if the sexes were not exchanged according to rhythms that vary considerably?]

I admire Hanna’s attempt to tackle the analysis of gender in dance across cultures. At a time when everything in our own culture seems to lead unrelenting to the difference between “man” and “woman,” cross-cultural study holds the promise of freeing up our imaginations. What is gender in a culture that is not bound to bipolar opposites: to the mutual exclusivity of here and there, of you and me, of male and female? And what is its dance?


Unlimited Partnership
Dance and Feminist Analysis

Among all the arts in Western culture, dance may have the most to gain from feminist analysis. Certainly the two are highly compatible. Dance is an art form of the body, and the body is where gender distinctions are generally understood to originate. The inquiries that feminist analysis makes into the ways that the body is shaped and comes to have meaning are directly and immediately applicable to the study of dance, which is, after all, a kind of living laboratory for the study of the body—its training, its stories, its way of being and being seen in the world. As a traditionally female-populated (but not necessarily female-dominated) field that perpetuates some of our culture’s most potent symbols of femininity, Western theatrical dance provides feminist analysis with its potentially richest material.

Like any kind of analysis, feminist analysis is a quest to determine how something is put together—how it works. Feminist analysis draws upon a variety of methodologies: never ones such as semiotics (the study of symbolic systems) and deconstruction (loosely speaking, a kind of reading “against the grain” to unearth an underlying ideology), and more traditional ones such as ethnography and movement analysis. Rather than being defined by any particular methodology, feminist analysis is distinguished by its point of view.

Earlier in this century, when the social sciences were still identifying and defining themselves with the “hard” sciences in their bid for legitimacy, admitting a point of view was as good as confessing sin. But today that patina of objectivity has been tarnished. No analysis, no interpretation, no history, no criticism is ever disinterested. Every inquiry, inasmuch as it asks certain questions and not others, is governed by some point of view. Ideology exists everywhere, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. The traditional social sciences, whose white, male, middle-class, high modern ideology has long passed for disinterested, has been invigorated in the past twenty years by a host of other points of view. These alternative perspectives—including those of feminists—have yielded a much richer understanding of history, anthropology, literature, and the arts.

The feminist point of view in the United States can be defined only broadly. Really, one cannot talk about the feminist point of view at all, for beyond the specific concern with women, feminism at this moment of entry into the 1990s is a widely varying phenomenon.1 The variety is part generational, part personal, and part theoretical.2

Late-twentieth-century feminism burst onto the social and academic scenes in the late 1960s—early 1970s as “Women’s Lib.” At that point, generally speaking, feminism was concerned with ennobling the history, culture, and social reality of Woman. Literary scholars initiated a kind of analysis that focused on images of women, separating the regressive from the progressive. In the burgeoning genre of performance art, ritual enactments that reclaimed the archetypal Goddess helped to empower women on a personal as well as an aesthetic level.

Today, a generation later, the context for feminist analysis is very different. The backlash against feminism is fierce and, if you can believe the “New Traditionalist” advertising campaign of Good Housekeeping, an overwhelming trend.3 The framework for feminist analysis of the arts has changed radically, too. With the introduction of semiotics and psychoanalysis into the feminist discourse by cinema studies in the 1970s, the terms of analysis shifted from a social to a
theoretical ground. Two key changes in thinking occurred that underlie most of current American feminist analysis in the arts.

First, feminist scholars no longer accept blindly a category of Mankind known as Woman. Although the earlier generation of feminists embraced and found empowerment in the notion of their fundamental difference from men, an outspoken segment of the current generation of feminist scholars (along with postmodernists in all fields) has called into question the very concept of “difference.” For difference, Monique Wittig wrote in 1982, necessarily implies dominance. It separates the world into an “us” and a “them,” with the “us” always providing the measuring stick and the “them” inevitably failing to measure up. In modern Western culture, Woman has always been the Other, defined according to the fantasies and power structures of men.

Second, the object of analysis has been shifted from just the image itself, in isolation, to the entire process of representation, which also encompasses the spectator and her/his process of interpretation. The power of the spectator in constructing the representation has been dubbed the “male gaze.” As tiresome as this term has become to feminists and nonfeminists alike, it remains a fundamental concept: that in modern Western culture, the one who sees and the one who is seen are gendered positions, despite the actual sex of the participants. The one who is looked at—the performer who puts her/himself on display for the spectator—is in a passive, traditionally female position. The spectator, again regardless of her/his actual sex, is the one who looks—who consumes, who possesses—the image on display. The spectator is in the position of power: a traditionally male position. Thus, the term the “male gaze.”

As fragmented as the current intellectual climate seems—deconstruction, semiotics, postmodernism, ethnography, etc.—it all revolves around the issue of representation. How is a representation created? Whose point of view does it embody? What role does it have in the spectator’s construction of everyday reality? Feminist scholars today are concerned with the schism between cultural or aesthetic representations of Woman and the lives of real women. How does our culture—a patriarchal one—construct representations of Woman that somehow come to determine our standards of femininity in everyday life, where women are not usually sylphs or pin-up girls? How can women represent themselves onstage without being co-opted by the conventions and expectations of the male gaze? Is it possible for women to reconstruct their own standards of beauty that need not depend on becoming the object of male desire?

The theory of the male gaze has obvious implications for dance, and dance has much to offer to the development of that theory. In film, where the concept of the male gaze originated, the performer is flat on a piece of celluloid; in dance, the performer is live. How does that affect the dynamics of the male gaze? Is the male gaze then more vulnerable to being dismantled when the performer is live? How can a dancer—who fundamentally displays her/his body for the viewer—avoid being objectified? Does some dance create a literal and metaphorical space in which spectator and performer can share the dance together, on equal terms, rather than the one serving her/himself up for the other? Are there dancers who have been able to achieve this?

At this time, most feminist dance analysis is brewing informally in discussion groups, individual exchanges, and classrooms, as well as at conferences. Some of this activity has made its way into print, taking a variety of forms: criticism, history, biography, formal analysis, ethnography, interviews, and roundtable discussions. The subject matter ranges from nineteenth-century travesty dancing to the pas de deux and dance criticism, from George Balanchine to Pooh Kaye and Martha Graham.

Several years ago an entire issue of Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory was devoted to dance. It was called “The Body as Discourse.” The variety of articles in this special issue indicates the range of content, methodology, and point of view in feminist dance scholarship. Issue editor Marianne Goldberg’s essay was a poetic text that probed the theoretical underpinnings and cultural connotations of the female body in dance. Carol Martin reflected on the complexity of analyzing gender across cultures, pointing out both the imperialistic dangers of imposing one’s own agenda on another culture and the potential benefits of finding new ways of thinking about gender. Goldberg and Ann Cooper Albritton held a roundtable discussion with postmodern choreographers Wendy Perron, Johanna Boyce, and Pooh Kaye to record their perspectives on the problems and possibilities of being female onstage. My own essay attempted to deconstruct some of the critical rhetoric that has conspired to preserve the notion of difference and of male superiority in classical ballet. Two other authors focused on women artists who have been marginalized by mainstream history and criticism: Ann Gavre Kilkeley on tap dancer Brenda Bufalino and Lynn Garafola on choreographer Bronislava Nijinska, most often referred to as the sister of Vaslav Nijinsky.

Once you start thinking about the kinds of questions that might be prompted by feminist analysis, the list seems endless: Why was it almost exclusively women who invented modern dance? Is the dance of universal emotion possible, or is it always colored by gender expectations, based on the sex of the performer? What was Marie Sallé’s theory and practice of the ballet d’action? Was Delatartism a liberating outlet for women’s creativity in the late nineteenth century, or was it a restrictive, sanctioned outlet for women’s potentially hysterical “emotionalism”? How did Isadora Duncan’s radical reconfiguration of the conventions of dance allow her to defuse the issue of “sex” in her stage presentation? What is the relative importance of anatomy, training, and cultural conditioning in the
construction of female and male body images in dance? How has the female and male body image of modern dance, or ballet, changed over the past hundred years, and what do those changes tell us about shifts in culture? What are the differences between dance forms that depend on the mirror in the training process and those that do not? What were the feminist implications of Yvonne Rainer’s “dances of denial”? How does the social hierarchy of the dance world embody sexist attitudes? Does Pina Bausch’s Tanztheater effectively condemn or glorify gender warfare?

The value of feminist analysis to dance studies, however, is not just for feminists. It promises to contribute to the development of the field at large, in at least four ways. First, the emphasis on the process of representation is leading to new insights into the ways that dance produces meaning. Second, research about dance figures overlooked by the canon (the list of dances, choreographers, and dancers that our field generally agrees are the most important) is enriching and expanding our understanding of dance history. Third, the introduction of theories and ideas from other disciplines is a potential stimulant to dance scholars of all persuasions. And fourth, the broadened view of dance as a cultural practice, rather than as a purely aesthetic phenomenon, will lead dance into a more prominent place in the social sciences. In this sense, feminist analysis is part of a larger trend in our discipline toward an expanded concept of dance studies as a field of significant social, political, and cultural relevance.1


Dance History and Feminist Theory
Reconsidering Isadora Duncan and the Male Gaze

Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) is unarguably one of the seminal figures in twentieth-century American dance.1 Her importance lay neither in the extension of an existing form, as did George Balanchine’s, nor in her progeny, as did Ruth St. Denis’s, but rather in the fact that she created an entirely new form of dance. Duncan’s choreography offered her spectators a new kind of meaning and demanded from them a new way of seeing. She ennobled the previously suspect image of the human body and succeeded in her bid to legitimize dance as high art. As an international celebrity who lived out her beliefs in the corsetless figure and in voluntary motherhood, Duncan is commonly held to be an exemplary feminist, although she never explicitly labeled herself as such.2

Duncan has been set forth as a symbol of the feminist impulse since Floyd Dell’s Women as World Builders: Studies in Modern Feminism. Published in 1913, this book was the first of many written by Dell, a radical intellectual and assistant editor of the Masses, the quintessential Greenwich Village magazine. He astutely realized that the woman’s movement was in large part a product of nineteenth-century evolutionary theory, “which, by giving us a new view of the body, its functions, its needs, its claim upon the world, has laid the basis for a successful feminist movement.”3 In his chapter devoted to Duncan and writer/crusader Olive Schreiner, he wrote that Duncan expressed “the goodness of the whole body.” This new view of the body, he believed, was “as much a part of the woman’s movement as the demand for a vote (or, rather, it is more central and essential a part); and only by realizing this is it possible to understand that movement.”4 Since Dell, scholarly and popular critics alike—many less perspicacious than he—have painted Duncan as the larger-than-life symbol (sometimes the caricature) of Woman, who is casting off her corset, taking on lovers as she chooses, bearing children out of wedlock, and generally flouting the last-gasp strictures of oppressive Victorian culture.

Duncan did, of course, invite her status as a feminist spokeswoman. She began to articulate a specifically female dancer very early in her career in her famous “The Dance of the Future” manifesto, delivered in 1903 to the Berlin Press Club. (It was here that she first encountered—and embraced—the extraordinary power of the reported word as a rhetorical adjunct to her dancing.) The following passage is one of the most often quoted in dance:

[The dancer of the future]...will dance not in the form of nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette but in the form of woman in its greatest and purest expression. She will realize the mission of woman’s body and the holiness of all its parts. She will dance the changing life of nature, showing how each part is transformed into the other. From all parts of her body shall shine radiant intelligence, bringing to the world the message of the thoughts and aspirations of thousands of women. She shall dance the freedom of woman. O, what a field is here awaiting her! Do you not feel that she is near, that she is coming, this dancer of the future? She will help womankind to a new knowledge of the possible strength and beauty of their bodies and the relation of their bodies to the earth nature and to the children of the future.

...O, she is coming, the dancer of the future: the free spirit, who will inhabit the body of new women: more glorious than any woman that has yet been; more beautiful than the Egyptian, than the Greek, the early Italian, than all women in past centuries: The highest intelligence in the freest body!5

Those words have become a large part of the Duncan mythology, which has grown as unwieldy as the woman herself. For a number of reasons—the lack of a
Blasis, Code of Terpsichore (London: James Bulcock, 1828; repr. Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1976). The phrase "decent voluptuousness" encapsulates the double bind in which women are placed as erotic/aesthetic objects: they must be erotic enough to titillate but distanced enough not to offend.


12. Ibid., 67.
14. See E. Ann Kaplan's development of the concept of the male gaze in her Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), 23–35. The pivotal concept of the "male gaze" arises from the structure of representation, in which the position of the spectator (the gaze) is encoded. Thus, women, too, under patriarchy can partake in the acculturated male gaze.
20. It is interesting to note an opposite stream in the gender conscious 1970s: dancers in some repertoires had the opportunity to be seen, to display a more pronounced, aesthetic line; yet women were still not permitted strength. This "androgyneous" approach maintained gender difference and asymmetry, it simply reapportioned the polarized attributes allowing men a much larger range of expression.

TO DANCE IS "FEMALE"

1. This symposium, part of the Movement Research Studies Project, was held 19 December 1988 at the Ethnic Folk Arts Center in New York City.
3. Hanna explicitly states her reasons "why gender is coterminous with sexuality in dance" (46)."

7. Feminist dance scholarship has become a regular feature of annual conferences of the Dance Critics Association, the Society of Dance History Scholars, the Congress on Research in Dance, and the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, whose Women and Theatre program holds its own pre-conference each year. Most of these organizations offer conference transcripts, proceedings, or audiocassettes.


DANCE HISTORY AND FEMINIST THEORY: RECONSIDERING ISADORA DUNCAN AND THE MALE GAZE

1. Drafts of this essay were delivered at the 1990 annual conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education as well as at a fall 1990 installment of the Women's Studies Research Seminars at the University of Texas at Austin. I appreciate the insightsful comments offered to me in those arenas. In particular, I would like to thank Mark Franko, Peter Helaimich, and Amy Koritz for their perceptive responses. Also, thanks to Lori Belllove, Julia Levien, and Hortense Kooluris for sharing their understanding of Duncan and her works. Any shortcomings in the essay, however, are my own.

2. Historically, the term and concept of "feminism" only began to supplant "woman movement," the nineteenth-century phraseology, in the 1960s. However, "feminism" (whose proponents distinguished it from "suffragism") was not entered into the Oxford English Dictionary until its 1933 supplement. Duncan spoke mostly in universal terms, rarely referring to specific political situations or movements such as suffragism. See Nancy E. Cott, The Grounding of Modern Feminism (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987).

3. Floyd Dell, Women as World Builders: Studies in Modern Feminism (Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1976), 44.

4. Ibid., 49.

5. Ibid.


7. Elizabeth Kendall's groundbreaking study of early American modern dance, Where She Danced: The Birth of American Art-Dance (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), and Nancy Lee Chaffin Ruyter's study of Delaunay, Reformers and Visionaries: The Americanization of the Art of Dance (New York: Dance Horizons, 1979), are notable exceptions. They mined important new historical evidence and made fresh connections between Duncan and American culture. Ironically, however, their originality has now become grist for the mill of recycled history.


10. That is not to say that the book is an untruth or useless. The work of Duncan's autobiography as historical evidence is not so much in the "truths" it imparts as in how Duncan constructs her vision of those "truths." Without the pretense of being a historical record, My Life offers us the seeds of a history, which we must take responsibility for sowing.


12. At the root of Heppenstall's elaborate objection to Duncan is a near-paranoid fear of female sexuality. Although Heppenstall faults Duncan for being transparently sexual, he builds his own supposedly disinterested theory of dance on implicit models of male versus female orgasm:

He [the dancer] commits rape and begets lovely forms in his own body, with continual increase of power. His material, the field of his creative experience, is his own muscular and nervous being. And his fulfillment is in the externalized joy of movement, the release, the building up of inherent tensions into a powerful system of release. This is the only true freedom. It is the kind of joy and freedom we call dancing. Not the joy of an inward, an unprotected ecstasy, which can only be communicated through erotic empathy and sympathy between the Dancer and the outooker. (Ibid., 288; emphasis mine)

13. The term "chorography" is a twentieth-century phenomenon. A very early, if not the earliest, use of the term was in an article on Duncan entitled "Emotional Expression":