Theologies of Modern Dance

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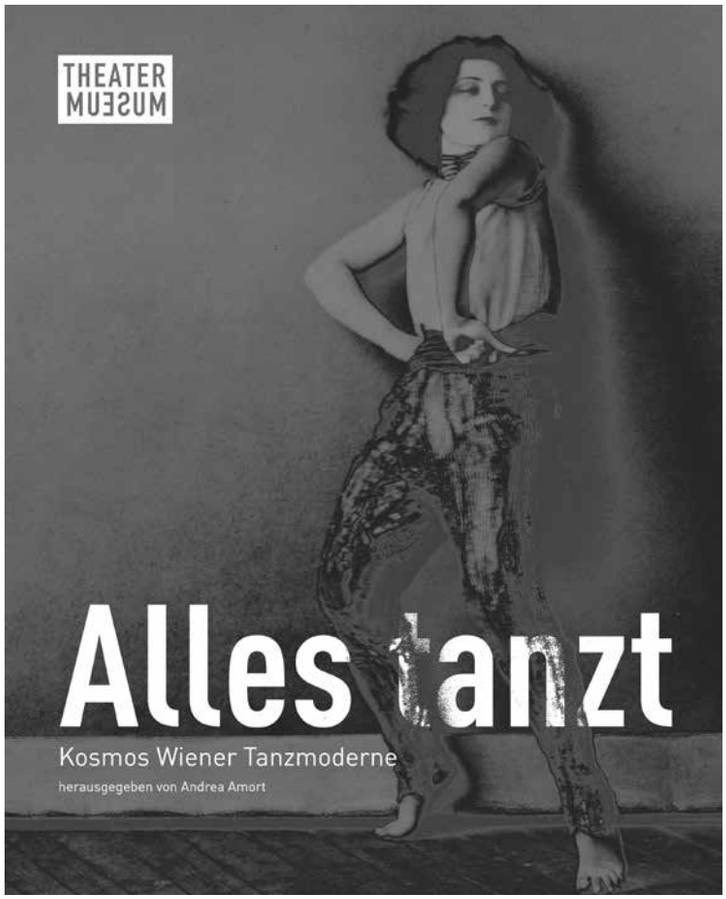

The current Viennese Theater Museum exhibition "Everybody Dances" welcomes back Jewish dancers into the Austrian dance canon including Hilde Holger and Gertrud Kraus who fled the Nazis, Gertrud to Tel Aviv. The Museum catalogue cover features Gertrud Kraus in her dance *Wodka* c. 1924. Photo Martin Imboden, courtesy of Theatermuseum © KHM-Museumsverband.

Dance as Religion

Many protagonists of modern dance, including Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Martha Graham, and Mary Wigman, understood dance movement in deeply religious terms and while escaping from the narrow boundaries of institutionalized Christianity on the one hand, they also developed a new religion of dance on the other. As part of the arts breaking free of religious domination, dance separated itself from the strictures of the Christian tradition, while simultaneously claiming a religious status for itself and promising its disciples a better life *through* dance (Schwan 2017, 28).

In this essay, I examine the interconnectedness between modern choreographers of the early 20th century (mid-1910s to mid-1930s) with religious thought of this period; this is the overarching theme in my current research as a dance historian and theologian. This project investigates aspects of implicit religion in modern dance, asking how religiousness, both Christian and Jewish, was visualized and evoked, specifically through dance aesthetics. How did the pioneers of modern dance make use of older and explicitly religious ideas when they conceptualized their dance practice, and with what movements, poses and dance techniques did they enact these religious notions? Finally, what was the role of the audience in reframing modern dance as a phenomenon that freely crossed the boundaries between the ostensibly separated social spheres of religion and secular culture?

Acknowledging that modern dance was developed against the background of secularization processes that treated religious and aesthetic practices as two parallel and autonomous options, I examine religiously charged modern dance as an aesthetic phenomenon rather than a form of liturgical or religious practice. Investigating implicit religious aspects in modern dance is connected to questioning how spirituality was visualized and evoked specifically through dance aesthetics. The term *spirituality* is here understood in the widest possible sense. *Spiritual* thus refers to any practice with which people relate to the largest possible context of the cosmos and position themselves to this relation in a self-reflective way. Beyond any too narrow and too emotional understanding of spirituality, this wide and abstract definition is free of any esoteric presuppositions (Schwan 2014).

The religious upbringing of many modern dancers often influenced their ideas about dance. This applies to dancers and choreographers from Europe and the U.S. and includes both the pioneers of modern dance like Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn as well as dancers from the second generation like Martha Graham or Mary Wigman. All of them came from Protestant backgrounds that can be further specified by denominational differences like the Lutheran tradition (the form of Protestantism that refers back to the German church reformer Martin Luther), or the Reformed or Calvinist tradition (tied to the theology of the French-Suisse theologian Jean Calvin). This Reformed branch of Protestantism is of particular importance for the U.S. since the American tradition of Puritanism with its strict lifestyle and religious beliefs originated from this very branch. Puritanism is connected to the so-called Pilgrim Fathers, faith-refugees from England who sailed to America in the early 17th century in the hope of finding a new country where they could live according to their reformed Protestant ideas. Another American specificity is the Protestant tradition of Methodism, which started as a movement within the Church of England and was later adapted to the U.S. as another branch of Reformed Protestantism characterized by its emphasis on individual responsibility, this-worldliness, and social commitment.

Most of the American choreographers of modern dance came from one of these religious traditions or denominations, and specific theological arguments of their different denominational backgrounds corresponded to facets of their dance philosophy and also their dance aesthetics. Both Ruth St. Denis (1879–1968) and Ted Shawn (1891–1972) had a Methodist background; Shawn even began studying Methodist theology before becoming a dancer and choreographer (Schwan 2017, 28). This Methodist upbringing was reflected in their concept of the dancing body and their ideal of self-enhancement, celebrating or even glorifying the human body

on the one hand and subordinating it to strict principles on the other. Their Methodist background was also problematically related to their "cultural imperialism" (Desmond 2001, 256) with which they colonized other non-Christian religions (with the exception of Judaism) under the umbrella of a universalist connection between religion and dance, yet all the while following presuppositions of the alleged supremacy of Christianity.

Martha Graham's (1894–1991) understanding of dance and her dance aesthetics had a decisively Puritan character (Schwan 2009). She could trace her American family history back to Miles Standish, one of the Pilgrim fathers who arrived on board the Mayflower ship landing in Massachusetts in 1620. Coming from a prominent family of Puritans and being raised in the Presbyterian tradition, another Protestant denomination of the Reformed branch, Graham developed an attitude towards dance that was clearly influenced by her Presbyterian religious upbringing. The appreciation of rigorous discipline and work, an ethic found in most denominations of the Reformed branch of Protestantism, is reflected in Graham's principles of dance training and in the discipline and execution of her movements. More strikingly, Graham even transferred the distinctive Calvinist doctrine of election to the realm of dance. According to this belief, faith is not a matter of your own choice but derives from the fact that you are elected by God to belong to the community of chosen people. Parallel to this important idea, Graham was convinced that certain people were chosen to be dancers and should therefore behave and move according to this elect status (Graham 1991, 5).

While reformed Protestantism was uniquely important for modern dance in the American context, modern dance in Europe was more significantly influenced by other religious traditions. Only a few choreographers came from Catholic backgrounds, reflecting the peculiar fact that modern dance education in Central Europe was mainly popular among Protestant and Jewish families and significantly less so in the Catholic cultural milieu (Zander 2001). An important exception is Charlotte Bara (1901–1986) who converted to Catholicism from Judaism at the age of 27. Bara trained with a student of Isadora Duncan and Alexander Sacharoff and undertook a famous European tour of her religious-themed dances before settling down in Ascona, a small town in the foothills of the Monte Verità in the Italian part of Switzerland. In her dancing, Bara used the Christian iconographic tradition of Gothic art and incorporated the pictorial traditions of Mariology, the Catholic theology around Mary, the mother of Jesus. She also focused her expressionist dance on predominantly Catholic topics such as purity, piety, and devotion.

Jewish Secularisms

With regard to Judaism the relation between dance modernism and religion is strikingly different from the various connections of modern dance with Christian denominations. This is mainly related to the fact that Judaism developed a positive attitude towards dancing, in contrast to Christianity that adopted the negative verdict of the Stoic tradition on dance that had been prevalent in Late Antiquity (Andresen 1961). Since the typically Christian pejorative and even punitive perspective on dance is not part of Judaism, Jewish modern dancers did not need to split from a hostile background against dance as their Christian contemporaries did. Consequently, the concept of movement in Jewish modernism was far less charged with an overcompensating religious idealization. It is not by chance that Isadora Duncan, who first conceptualized dance as a new religion and who influenced many of the Christian protagonists of dance modernism, did not leave a significant impact on modern dancers and choreographers in Israel.

Thus, Jewish-themed choreographies developed by Jewish modern dancers were situated in a remarkable connection of religiosity, political implications, and various forms of secularisms (Jakobsen/Pellegrini 2008). While none of the Jewish modern dancers and choreographers in British Mandate Palestine and later Israel were religious in an orthodox way, they still sought to express a form of Jewish spirituality through movement. Though being declaredly secular, their dancing celebrated specifically Jewish religious ideas of redemption, liberation, and spiritual renewal. This allows for an analysis of Jewish modern dance that moves beyond the narrow focus on solely religious Jewishness or new Israeli folk dances for Jewish holidays. Instead I focus on the connection between modernist body culture and Jewish spirituality in its broadest sense and try to explore how specifically Jewish-religious ideas fueled the concept of the New Jew and its connection with dance, sport, and movement in general.

In this perspective, the artistic cooperation of Moshé Feldenkrais with expressionist dancers, including Margalit Ornstein, Gertrud Kraus, and Debora Bertonoff (Buckard 2015: 96, 220-221), was more than a temporal coincidence in a shared Zionist context. Instead, this cooperation and the aesthetics of expressionist dance in pre-state Israel were based on a holistic and particularly Jewish understanding of body and movement that was different from Christian anthropological concepts. Modern ideas of bodily expression, renewal, and in the case of Moshé Feldenkrais even healing, matched with the Jewish appreciation for experiences of liberation, exodus, and recovery. Even though the dancers and choreographers in pre-state Israel understood themselves as secular, their dancing was strongly influenced by powerful Jewish religious ideas. Besides this general connection of modern body culture and Judaism, many of the ostensibly secular Jewish dance artists created works with direct references to the Hebrew Bible and Jewish religious dance traditions. Baruch Agadati (1895–1976) was one of the first modern Jewish artists who developed religiously-themed choreographies in a Jewish idiom. Agadati, along with other Jewish modernist dancers and choreographers such as Fred Berk, Else Dublon, and Gertrud Kraus, approached Hasidic dancing from the perspective of avant-garde aesthetics (Ingber 1984, 23; Manor 1978, 19; Manor 1986). Developed and performed in Europe and in British Mandate Palestine mainly from the 1920s until the mid-1930s, these hybrid embodiments of dance and Jewish religiosity onstage often had a decisively Zionist background and confronted two seemingly unconnected realms: the world of Jewish orthodox religion on one side, and the various intersections of modernism with new dance and body culture on the other. Adding to the paradoxical character of Jewish modern dance, these deliberately secular approaches to Hasidic dance aesthetics nevertheless included experiences of spirituality, mainly in the attempt to achieve a state of ecstasy through repetitive movement.

The modernist references to traditional Jewish dancing both referred back to Max Nordau's notion of the new muscular Jew ("*Muskel-judentum*", Nordau 2018) as well as to its counterpart, the weak and allegedly neurasthenic diaspora Jew of Eastern Europe. Nordau himself developed much of the negative imagery of the latter, precisely in order to then position his version of a strong New Jew against it. While modernist dancing emphasized muscularity, agility, and in the case of male dancers also virility, the embodiment of Hasidic Jews through avant-garde dance simultaneously confronted the affirmative physicality of modernist dance with stereotypical movement patterns expressing restriction, submission, and weakness. It is not without some irony that bodies already transformed into models of the New Jew through modernist body culture were again embodying the movement clichés of the old European Jewish world. Approaching Jewish religious topics from a decidedly non-religious perspective and through modernist expressionist movement, Jewish choreographers achieved a new form of spirituality characterized by both its muscularity and its paradoxical secularity.

Theologies of Dance

While many modern choreographers regarded dancing as a means of religious expression and sought acceptance for this vision, only a few theologians in the first part of the 20th century supported this view. One of them was the German-born Lutheran theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich, who immigrated to the U.S. in 1933 because of his socialist political commitment and, after teaching for several decades at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, became a professor at the influential Harvard Divinity School in 1955. Beyond the narrow concentration of a personal god, Tillich famously defined religion as the ultimate concern and embraced dancing as an expression of this ultimate concern (Schwan 2009).

Tillich saw art, and with it dancing, as an expression of this ultimate concern and, furthermore, even admitted that the experience of art and dance helped him to develop his specific understanding of religion. During the mid-1920s Tillich taught in Dresden, where Mary Wigman, the German expressionist dancer and choreographer was also based. The theologian and the dancer became friends before Tillich moved to another position in Frankfurt/Main in 1929 after which he emigrated to the U.S. while Wigman chose to stay in Nazi Germany. Tillich's wife Hannah described their unusual friendship of the 1920s in her autobiography *From Time to Time*, first published in 1974 in English: "Another group we were involved with was that of Mary Wigman and her students. We had lessons in gymnastics in our vestibule. Paulus [a.k.a. Paul] refused to bend down, proclaiming it would hurt his head." (Tillich 1973, 132). The peculiar term *gymnastics* adequately translates the German term *Gymnastikunterricht* used in the German version of Hannah Tillich's autobiography which was published only in 1993, five years after her death in 1988. In this German version, Tillich leaves no doubt that it was Mary Wigman herself who taught these movement lessons. It is hard to imagine any closer connection between modern dance and theology than this bizarre encounter of one of the most important choreographers teaching the most influential Protestant theologian of the 20th century in the techniques of expressionist dance.

Despite his hesitation over fully participating in this form of home dance training, Paul Tillich regarded his contact with Mary Wigman as so important that he referred back to this encounter some thirty years later in 1957, when the American publication *Dance Magazine* approached him and other philosophers, religious and political leaders to write an assortment of texts under the headline "The Dance: What It Means To Me". Tillich submitted the following lines: "The word 'dance' evokes in me the memory of the middle twenties in Dresden. At that time, Dresden was rightly called the 'capital of the dance.' I happened to be professor at the Technical Academy, teaching philosophy of religion, and I was connected with the school of Mary Wigman, who was then and still is acknowledged as one of the foremost creators of modern expressive dance. The expressive power of the moving body, the organization of space by dancers (individuals and groups), the rhythms embodied in visible movements, the accompanying sounds expressing the idea and the passion behind the dance: all this became philosophically and religiously significant for me. It was a new encounter with reality in its deeper levels. In unity with the great German expressionist painters, whose works and whom one frequently encountered in Dresden at that time, it inspired my understanding of religion as the spiritual substance of culture and of culture as the expressive form of religion. It also raised in me the unanswered question of how the lost unity could be regained between cult and dance on the hard and unreceptive soil of Protestantism" (Tillich 1957).

Tillich shared this assumption of an allegedly original unity of dance and religion, which after its loss had to be regained with many modern choreographers who approached dance in a perspective influenced by Christianity. Almost as a cliché, all of them sought to revitalize this unity through their own dancing. With the rootedness of *Ausdruckstanz* in the philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*) of the 19th century, and in its ideals of movement, nature and organic becoming, early modernist dance worked with this tripartite salvation-oriented scheme. Industrialization, urbanization and, paradoxically, modernity itself signified a decline from an allegedly pure past that was then necessarily followed by its amelioration and (self)redemption. On the background of this clearly biblical scheme – a paradisiacal state of nature, its decay and redemption – Isadora Duncan claimed that "dance was once the most noble of all arts – and it shall be again. From the great depth to which it has fallen it shall be raised" (Duncan 1903, 15).

Perspectives

I will end this investigation of religiousness in modern dance with an array of open questions: Baruch Agadati, Charlotte Bara, Martha Graham, Gertrud Kraus, Ted Shawn, Mary Wigman, – all of them, and each in her or his own way, sought for religious expression through dancing, yet each had a remarkable focus on the solely positive aspects of religion. Beyond the endless repeating of how dance should express religious feelings or how moving bodies ought to become vessels of the sacred, which theological arguments did modern choreographers deliberately or sub-consciously avoid? For in many aspects, theology, both Christian and Jewish, seems to me much more advanced than the often too simplistic equations between dance movement and religious experience, a more or less veiled variety of natural theology, with all its epistemological and soteriological abysses.

In striving for religious expression through dance, was early modernist choreography also capable of expressing the specifically modern experience of being abandoned by God, of being exposed to God's silence, absence, and lack of power? What could dance contribute to complex and theological problems like theodicy, the relationship of God to evil, or *Tzimtzum,* the Kabbalistic idea of a withdrawal of divine power? Is there more to dance and religion than the focus on embodiment, which unavoidably quotes Christian theologies of incarnation? How does dance reflect religious interpretations of human weakness, failure, and guilt?

Deeply irritated and challenged by the catastrophes of the 20th century, Jewish and Christian theologians developed radical questions about the legitimacy of religion and broke with the obsolete theology of theism as the belief in the existence of a personal God. Yet, where were these utterly modern frictions and breaks of theology visible in dance? How did modern dance reflect Jewish and Christian theologies in all their richness, complexity and contradictions? And since dance's ephemeral nature and its connection with the imagination unavoidably transcend the factuality of the here and now: Does this transcending character of movement correspond to a non-theistic theology of dance?

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