

'I dreamed of a different dance': Isadora Duncan's danced revolution

Modern dance innovator Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) truly moved beyond boundaries, both choreographically and politically. Born in San Francisco, then dancing with Augustine Daly Dance Theatre in 1896, she moved from London to Paris to Berlin in quick succession, performing in salons and achieving success before the age of twenty. In 1905 she established her first school in Germany, aimed at children of all classes, and in 1914 she went to the US and transferred her school there. Duncan founded a school for working-class children in Germany in 1915, and after the revolution in Russia she unsurprisingly moved there in 1921, where she felt she could bring her political and aesthetic vision to fruition. Her understanding of class politics was inseparable from her interpretation of other forms of oppression, and those different categories become intermingled in her interpretation of dance. She was a radical on more than one plane.¹

She returned to the West in 1925, and after a tour of Germany she settled in Paris. She died in Nice on 14 September 1927, when her shawl got tangled in the wheel of a car and she broke her spine.

Duncan's work was always entrenched in the social conditions of her time. Her reception, I will show, was intertwined with the tensions of a woman whose existence brought the dance of the future to the present, when the present wasn't always ready to fully comprehend her. Duncan lived her life between worlds; at the same time the main tool for intervention was her own body, thus she was never without a world. Isadora Duncan's performance arc is an instance par excellence of sic-sensuous and a clash between the weak and strong readings of political dance.

Ann Daly, who has written extensively on Duncan, divides her choreographic life into several periods. The first period (1908–11) centred around the image of Duncan as the young nymph, an image that endured

in her historiography. In this period she explored the fluidity of movement and based her dancing on physical release. The second period (1914–18) is characterised by her exploration of heroic and at times nationalistic themes, from Greek myth (*Iphigenia*, 1915) to her famous rendition of *Marseillaise* (1914). The third period, occurring around her time in the Soviet Union (1922–3), saw a monumental Isadora who was barely moving, exploring the movement of her stillness (Daly 1995).

Duncan's intervention, as well as its reception, is entangled in resisting the bounded spaces which were allocated for her. She was never afraid of saying no to aesthetic and social constraints. Her choreographic development is inseparable from her involvement in bringing her body to centre stage, creating a space in which it was perceived as legitimate and she is interpreted as a legible subject. Consequently she unravelled numerous spheres of resistance to those who followed her. Duncan's interpretation of her own embodiment in bringing her body to performance anticipates what will later be interpreted as radical feminism, understanding women's oppression and marginalisation as occurring in further and more clandestine ways than mere legal structures.² Let Isadora Duncan enter centre stage of the argument; I invite the reader–spectator to take their seat in a performance taking place on 7 October 1922.

'I am a revolutionary: all great artists are revolutionaries': Isadora Duncan's strong reading of political dance

Isadora Duncan performs in her homeland of America. She returns to the US after having spent a year in Soviet Russia. Before the tour starts she is detained with her husband, Serge Esenin, on Ellis Island. She is already famous across the globe and her relationship with Russia makes her both intriguing and threatening to American audiences.

The programme is danced to Tchaikovsky with his 6th Symphony (the *Pathétique*) and *Marche Slave*. Those are two of her more 'monumental' works, different from the evanescent Schubert and Chopin pieces which brought her fame in early phases of her career. In Boston, the performance ends in an explosive and rapturous way, retold in multiple narratives. The most recurrent one is that she waves her red silk scarf over her head and says: 'This is red! So am I! It is the colour of life and vigour. You were once wild here. Don't let them tame you!' From thereon we encounter a contradictory and problematic moment of reception. I pause here with some accounts of this performance which do not fully agree. Peter Kurth's biography presents a piece from the *Chicago Tribune* on 23 October:

in concluding one of the most amazing performances ever witnessed in Boston, Isadora Duncan, modern originator of the classical dance, waved a flaming red scarf which a moment before had been part of her costume ... and shouted 'This is red! That is what I am!' She shook the symbol of revolt in the faces of the spectators, most of whom were standing, and cried, 'don't let them tame you!' (Kurth 2002: 519)

Kurth also notes the disagreement over what happened in that exact performance: some claim she waved a red scarf over her head; some critics claim one of her breasts was revealed, either in dance or when she extended her hand to end the performance; some accounts, however, claimed she tore her tunic and revealed her breasts to the audience. Ilya Ilitch Schneider, who helped Duncan on behalf of the People's Commissar for Education to adjust to Moscow when she first arrived, notes this incident with no reference to nudity, merely to 'waving the scarf and shouting "I am red"' (Schneider 1968: 122). Irma Duncan quotes Isadora as saying 'this is red! So am I! it is the colour of life and vigour. You were once wild here. Don't let them tame you' (referencing only waving the scarf) (Duncan 1929: 164). Irma Duncan notes the offence caused by this statement and the fact that some people left the performance. Irma Duncan quotes the headline 'Red dancer shocks Boston. Isadora's speech drives many from Boston hall. Duncan, in flaming red scarf, says she's red' (Duncan 1929: 165). She notes the slippage in some accounts into tearing her whole dress off and delivering the entire speech in the nude. Colin Chambers, who has written extensively upon Duncan's politics, argues that she tore her tunic while denying deliberately mismanaging her garments (Chambers 2006).

Regardless of what exactly happened on 7 October 1922, there were two direct consequences of that performance. Isadora Duncan was banned from performing in Boston by the mayor, James M. Curley, under Boston's decency laws. At the same time Kurth notes that she responded to the discussion around this performance with the statement: 'if my Art is symbolic of any one thing it is symbolic of the freedom of woman and her emancipation from the hidebound conventions that are the warp and weft of New England puritanism' (Kurth 2002: 521). Through her offensiveness – on the grounds either of communist references or of exposing her body – Isadora Duncan was able to claim her space as a legitimate speaking subject by showing the intertwining of her political and choreographic goals. She carved this space in the action of waving that red scarf, far more significant than the lethal scarf that will be entangled in the memory of her death.

This performance in 1922 exemplifies what I read as sic-sensuous. Duncan performs her radicalism here; she is so radical that the mayor of Boston himself intervenes in her plans for performance. Moreover, the entanglement of seeing the performance as 'vulgar' and offensive because of her socialist convictions shows the entanglement of the aesthetic and the political. What is perceived as 'ugly' is seen so in proximity to, if not entanglement with, political offence. And all this was brought about by a clash of two sensuous bodies, the body of the spectator and the body of Isadora Duncan.

In a statement from 1922 Duncan says: 'I am not a politician. I am an artist. But I will try in my dancing to help America to understand the magnificent spirit of Russia' (Duncan 1994: 69). This statement, as well as the political controversy presented above, gains further meaning when read in the context of one of Duncan's essays, the 'Philosopher's Stone of Dancing':

There are ... three kinds of dancers: first, those who consider dancing as a sort of gymnastic drill, made up of impersonal and graceful arabesques; second, those who, by concentrating their minds, lead the body into the rhythm of a desired emotion, expressing a remembered feeling or experience. And finally, there are those who convert the body into a luminous fluidity, surrendering it to the inspiration of the soul. This third sort of dancer understands that the body, by force of the soul, can in fact be converted to a luminous fluid. The flesh becomes light and transparent, as shown through the X-ray, but with the difference that the human soul is lighter than these rays. (Duncan 1977: 51)

Ann Daly interprets the 'third dancer' as someone who expresses 'all humanity, something greater than all selves' (Daly 1995: 136). Duncan refuses to endorse a dancer who is committed to a remembered feeling, to an already known system of symbols. She prefers the sort of dance that gives motion to something radically new, going beyond known meanings and emotions. Chambers writes further: 'she believed in the culture of the body ... Politics for her was not a means to an end but an inspiration for the performer to question ceaselessly' (Chambers 2006: 93). I understand Duncan's choreographic intervention as a sic-sensuous between the three dancers. Her choreographic intervention enabled her to present the third dancer as opposed to the first dancer (who, as we will see, is based upon her reading of ballet). At the same time, the third dancer allows Duncan to dissent from the second dancer, who represents known feelings and ideas; in a political context that means reiterating ideologies and thoughts as articulated in words or

what we have described as the weak political reading of dance. In fact, she herself defended this reading of her work as enabling two worlds to collide when she was challenged about her musical choices: ‘When she was going to dance the “Marche Slave” (1917), she was told she could not because it contained extracts from the Tsarist national anthem. She won the argument that the (musical) piece itself was not important but her treatment was’ (Chambers 2006: 77). Dance for Duncan has a power independent of other means of communication and indeed can transgress those symbolic systems. She is committed to legitimising the strong political reading of dance.

After contracting into Duncan’s body as the ‘third dancer’ we release into the experience of being her spectator at that performance in 1922, sharing an embodied space with Isadora Duncan. Duncan’s reception as offensive – either as ‘red’ or as naked – shows where her political transgression lies. She presents her body as equal where it has no space yet to be received as such; moreover, in that act of dissent, she claims that space for other bodies to be received as equal. Duncan was offensive because in her embodied performance she dared to be equal; equal as a female body taking public space, and equal as a woman re-signifying perceptions of society in her treatment of all women and men as appropriate recipients of her choreographic revolution. Isadora Duncan’s relationship to equality cannot be understood by singular categories such as feminism or socialism; she demanded equality in every moment in which she performed and exhibited her radically new language of movement. Indeed, we must understand her revolution in categories that she constituted through dance. Let us once again contract into Isadora Duncan’s body in her moment of aesthetic revolution, which changed the world of modern dance as it is known to us today.

The woman who danced the chorus: intervention and inscription

I turn to two paragraphs from Isadora Duncan’s autobiography in order to examine her aesthetic break in her own language:

When the teacher told me to stand on my toes, I asked him why, and he replied, ‘because it is beautiful’, and I said it was ugly and against nature and after the third class left never to return. The stiff and commonplace gymnastics which he called dancing only disturbed my dream. I dreamed of a different dance. I did not know just yet what it would be, but I was feeling out towards an invisible world into which I divined I might enter if I found the key. (Duncan 1995: 22)

Further:

I spent long days and nights in the studio seeking that dance that can be the divine expression of the human spirit through the medium of the body's movement. For hours I would stand quite still, my two hands folded between my breasts, covering the solar plexus ... I was seeking, and finally discovered, the central spring of all movement, the creator of motor power, the unity from which all diversions of movements are born, the mirror of vision for the creation of dance – it was from this discovery that was born the theory upon which I have founded my school. (Duncan 1995: 58)

Isadora Duncan, the dance student, is told to imitate the prevalent aesthetic. Her teacher brings her into an embodied conversation with the 'first dancer'. Her body is becoming inscribed with the symbolic framework which defined what dance is taken to mean in her contemporary world – that aesthetic which she sees as 'commonplace gymnastics'. But she refuses to become fully inscribed with this language. She rejects the ethos of the beautiful as the rationale determining what dance is and, moreover, what it could be. Thus this is a double interruptive gesture: she interrupts the ballet class because traditional conceptualisation of dance galvanises her to find the third dancer, discussed above. She also interrupts the structure of authority in which she is supposed to abide by the logic and structure of dance provided for her by her teacher. The woman student says no to the male dance teacher. No categories which place Isadora Duncan's body in a demarcated space can be sustained for her. The third dancer provides Duncan with a new way to dance, arising from the body and speaking to the body, and unbound by previous aesthetics which are always rooted in the social and political conditions of her time. When Isadora Duncan says no to her ballet teacher, she refuses many structures of authority underpinning that relationship. She creates a moment of sic-sensuous in motion.

Further, Duncan's method of unravelling the dancer of the future within herself is to allow her body to experiment with various techniques of inscribing upon itself. Her process of emancipation of herself from the world of ballet in which her teacher is so deeply entrenched, as well as from the social and political world in which she experiences multiple inequalities,³ is to open up a world which draws upon her own body and elaborates her own independent aesthetic. This reaction was based on the discovery of the solar plexus as the centre of the body, a technical reinterpretation which was of prime significance for Duncan as well as for her students and audiences. The method by which Duncan extends her aesthetic break to others is to contract into her own body as a world,

inhabiting the space she occupies; the sharing with others begins by releasing the movement to those around her.

Duncan dancer Julia Levien writes about the process of preparation in the Duncan technique: 'place right hand over the solar plexus area' (Levien 1994: 2); 'it must be emphasised that every movement emerges both physically and emotively from the body centre – "the solar plexus" – and that radiates outward to become part of the surrounding space, both immediate and limitless' (Levien 1994: xii). She writes:

'all movements must come from the centre', Isadora taught. That centre is located physically in what we call 'the solar plexus'. Anatomically, it is the muscle belt of the diaphragm, which controls the breath and reacts, both by expanding positively and contracting negatively, according to the variety of emotions imposed on it. (Levien 1994: 1)

A Duncan technique class starts from what Irma Duncan calls 'a natural position' (Duncan 1970: 1). She continues that an opening position starts with a 'solar plexus drawn ... anatomically, all our muscles run obliquely towards a centre-point, the solar plexus' (Duncan 1970: 2, 11). Chambers also argues that Isadora Duncan created with her body from the solar plexus (Chambers 2006). This use of the solar plexus is understood as Duncan's clearest rejection of ballet technique. Her moment of dissent against ballet as a technique, crystallised by her embodied reinterpretation of the solar plexus, is communicated further: her students share her moment of dissent with her and communicate it to other students, and thus the embodied conversation continues. The Duncan dance student shares the process of investigating the solar plexus; the bodies of Duncan students are inscribed in Isadora Duncan's moment of dissent. The third dancer, Duncan's own body responding to ballet as a system of signification, discovers her solar plexus as the spring of the new symbolic system which is communicated to others. To return to Isadora Duncan's own writing: 'when I have danced I have tried always to be the Chorus: I have been the Chorus of young girls hailing the return of the fleet, I have been the Chorus dancing the Pyrrhic Dance, or the Bacchic; I have never once danced a solo' (Duncan 1977: 96). The third dancer is never alone. She contracts into her own body but at the same time releases into others. The boundaries of her body are porous to other bodies upon which she will inscribe; thus she creates a system of inscription that is also a shared embodied space. Isadora Duncan allows her moment of dissent – against politics articulated in words as well as against ballet as the prevailing aesthetic of her time – to transcend the boundaries of

her own body when she creates an ever-expanding chorus of movement. Duncan's intervention into the world of body is inscribed upon her body and is a response to other systems of signification inscribed upon her body; in the moment of interruption she creates her own method of inscription, released into a shared space inhabited by other bodies.

This moment of dance as sharing an inscribed embodied space transcends Duncan and her dancers. It is also of paramount importance for Isadora Duncan's conception of spectatorship. Mark Franko discusses the fact that through the solar plexus Duncan strived to create a connection between herself as dancer and the audience: 'it put her audience in direct and unmediated contact with meaning "in person"' (Franko 1995: 2). Ann Daly argues that the kinaesthetic appeal of Duncan dance involved the response of the whole body, not just the eye, and by so doing enabled the spectators to feel that they are participating in the performance, by 'moving' with Duncan (Daly 1992). Duncan opened up a moment of embodied sharing between herself and her audience; that moment of embodied sharing utilised the concept of the solar plexus, which has also been central in the moment in which she intervenes against ballet. Her moment of sic-sensuous is never without a space and is written upon her own body as well as other bodies into which she releases, whether those of her students or audience members. Duncan's dance was aimed at creating shared embodiment, and this was enabled through the exploration of the solar plexus. Isadora Duncan's dissenting body, discovering the solar plexus, inscribes this moment of intervention upon her students' bodies; those bodies in turn inscribe this moment of dissent through galvanising the solar plexus to create a focal point in the shared embodied space they unravel. When Isadora Duncan claimed she never danced a solo it is because her body was always aimed at an Other – student or spectator; it was galvanised to share her embodied space. Let us now contract once again into Duncan's space of intervention: her dancing body.

Musical Moment (circa 1907)

Music: Franz Schubert, Moment Musicale, D. 780, Op. 94, No. 3
(www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kq2GgIMMo6o)

One of Duncan's earliest works, this is a playful piece of movement which exemplifies her method of inscription. The dance as it is viewed here – faithful to the original version – is performed as a solo piece which constantly moves in space, shifting back and forth in a movement that creates

a slight circle on stage. The spatial configuration of the dance is circular and flowing, reflecting its choreographic language. The dancer's body releases into space-time only to contract back to where she had started.

Much attention is paid to hand gestures and their use to create the illusion of pause, whilst the movement itself never really ceases, adding to the feeling of circularity. The tension between the hops and hand gestures in the dance encapsulates the tension between repetition (repeating of hops) and interruption (in hand gestures). With the hand gestures and the movement in space the dancer never really stops. The flowing musicality of the piece guides its choreographic narrative, as the dancer echoes the shift between a resolution of a musical phrase and its consequent contestation. The music determines the language and logic of the piece.

The dance moves between hesitation and affirmation, lightness and decision. The dancer seems light, almost bodiless; she shifts in space with purpose disguised by ephemeral movement. The movement shifts towards the audience and back into upstage, the part of the stage furthest from the audience. Duncan dancer Sylvia Gold, who worked with both Elisabeth Duncan and Irma Duncan, writes about *Musical Moment*: 'This dance is probably the most difficult dance to perform well. The feeling of surprise must be present. Never anticipate the music. Make your change of direction very sharp. It was performed as an encore piece by Isadora, probably present in a playful and perhaps flirtatious manner' (Gold 1984: 59).

Duncan's method of inscription allows her to appear ephemeral and weightless. The music sets the narrative of the piece and the method of inscription allows its conditions of reception. The tension between apparent lightness as received by the audience and the technique used by the dancer to create the illusion of this lightness made this dance interesting to Duncan and Gold alike. At the same time it is her embodied space that allows her spectators to perceive her as light and it is her own intervention into her embodied space that creates this method of inscription.

Ann Daly describes this piece as 'lyrical, innocent youth' and argues that such pieces dominated the Duncan legacy (Daly 1995: 62). For Daly, Duncan had achieved her aim of letting the music move the dance and creating a holistic experience: 'Duncan's body was always moving from a single piece, the torso and limbs integrated seemingly' (Daly 1995: 64). The focus is on the discipline of the torso, which allows freedom in the limbs as well as the control of musicality. The awareness by the audience of the use of the solar plexus as the centre of the body, and the originator of movement, allows for the lightness of the perception of the piece.

This is a dialogue between the solar plexus of the spectator and the solar plexus of the dancer. By the use of hands and legs in a light,

weightless method, Duncan draws her dancer's attention to the mechanism that allows her to do so – the solar plexus – as the centre of movement, enabling the dancer to sustain that tension. Gold writes: 'the hand, although in a classical ballet position, points with the index finger, as if pointing at a person. This is done with great emphasis' (Gold 1984: 63). Thus this dance is caught in a tension. The dancer's body must mediate two contradictory goals: to make the audience perceive her as light while affirming her own body as present, working through its embodiment to discipline it so that it is perceived as weightless. Contracting deep from her solar plexus and investigating the spatiality of the dancer's body allows it to release into a shared space where it is received as weightless. The dancer is seeking her spectator. She is never alone; there is always someone watching, someone to be acted upon, a shared space to which the body is released. Duncan is aware of the need to pull in the audience members in her choreography of the piece. By pointing at the spectator it is as if she says: you are here. This is a solo which is actually not a solo; it is the dancer moving towards and away from her audience, Isadora Duncan's body spilling into a chorus. Dance for Duncan is always entrenched in a community, the community beyond the dancer performing a solo. Dance is always in search of the spectator, but at the same time it is always able to exceed contemporary communities, in much the same way that she was able to exceed ballet as the only legible method of expression. Duncan's body never ceases to contract and explore its registers; hence it releases different systems of inscription. Let us release into a different phase in Isadora Duncan's life, choreographically and politically.

Revolutionary (choreographed 1921; premiered 1923)

Music: Aleksandr Scriabin, Douze Etudes, Op. 8, No. 12
(www.youtube.com/watch?v=Poic5gNsNSM)

Revolutionary is one of Duncan's later pieces. We must start by noting that the choreographic style is radically different from that of Musical Moment. Musically we see Duncan searching for the beat, accentuating the heaviness of the étude, rather than playfully responding to lyricism in the music as in the earlier Schubert piece. Some of the choreography is against the music, off beat. The work is sombre and severe, and lacks the playful spirit we have seen in the earlier piece discussed above. The dancer uses the floor extensively. She kneels and rises several times throughout the piece, and finishes the dance kneeling. The piece shows the relationship between the solar plexus and its more distant periphery, the floor,

providing the dancer with her gravity and heaviness of movement and at the same time revisiting the connection with the audience, which provides the dancer with the impulse for the work – communication. Thus the space of release is extended from the audience to the floor. We should note that in the earlier piece Duncan did not make use of the floor at all; *Musical Moment* showed the search for ephemerality and lightness of the body by developing a strong core. *Revolutionary*, however, exposes the technique involved, and shows the indebtedness of the dancer to the floor as grounding her. Revisiting Duncan's rebellion against ballet as a system of movement, which we will recall started with her refusal to stand on her toes and aspire upwards, Duncan here accepts the search for the floor as a legitimate part of her choreography. This is where her stark intervention is at its clearest.

Revolutionary shows a tension between this use of the floor as a gravitational force and an openness of the chest upwards. This openness seems like a cry for help. It is very different from the playful use of hand gestures in *Musical Moment*. This dance is a plea for a response, for taking part in this danced shriek or angry yell. The dancer uses her hands as if in mourning; she is asking forces larger than herself: *why?* The heaviness of the movement gives the impression that at times it seems that the dancer is tied down by invisible chains. She always manages to break free, start the next movement despite the chains, by releasing into a new space of movement. That space is inhabited by her spectators, manifold sensuous bodies. We may note a technical thread connecting both dances: the use of the hands is central to the choreographic language. The dancer's interaction with the audience, her anger, pain and frustration are communicated through the hands alone.

The dance ends with a fist movement, showing both action and its continuation; there is a feeling that the fist movement has only just started the real action, which will continue when the dance has ended. Again, this fist movement creates a very different use of time and music to that performed in *Musical Moment*, which utilises circular themes. Here Duncan leaves us with no final statement ending the dance; it remains open-ended.

Nadia Nahumck writes:

It is truly amazing that in one, brief dance, a single human body can portray the terrible logic of directed anger as an antidote to curdling pain – an explosive finale to restrained endurance. From the first rebellious outcry through trembling emotional intensity to the ultimate defiant thrust of a clenched fist, we are reminded that tyranny begets violence. Evocative power in this dance resonates with the truth found in America's Declaration of Independence – that

when a governing body becomes oppressive 'it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it.'

First presented in 1921, four years after the Russian Revolution, this choreographic gem conveyed the emotional power of tradition-shattering conflict – an unmistakable call to action. (Nahumck 1994)

In reading the dance against the American Declaration of Independence Nahumck removes it from its specific historical context. I proceed to read *Revolutionary* as articulating in motion the human ability to rebel. Nahumck places an emphasis on the fact that the dance is a call for action, asking the spectators to respond to the dancer's plight and not to remain passive. Ann Daly writes: 'the soloist, representing the archetypical victim of oppression, unshackles her wrists and bangs on the door of the oppressor, finally freeing and empowering herself' (Daly 1995: 186). Daly resolves the tensions discussed above in a moment of freedom and affirmation, showing the heroine as an example of the human ability to overcome oppression. However, as I have shown, the dance alternates between tension with the floor and tension with the audience, and it ends with opening up towards the audience not the floor.

In Duncan's writing, the concept of the third dancer is constantly questioning and moving beyond a known set of meanings. Hence Daly and Nahumck both see this dance simply as an act of self-empowerment, ignoring this constitutive tension between the floor as the base of movement, providing her with constraints from which she is seeking to entangle herself, and the audience member as recipient of the dance. I propose reading this final gesture, of opening the chest and moving the fist in space towards the spectator, as an opening towards further communicative movement, further rebellion. My reading does not suggest a positive finality, showing there has been an act of self-empowerment, and that suffering has been overcome universally; instead I see the central message of this dance as encouraging further dissent from suffering and showing that this dissent is possible. *Revolutionary* is a request for the audience to contemplate their ability to dissent from oppression. My reading also undermines any reading of the dance as an unequivocal, universal message transmitted to the audience. I argue that reading this dance as choreographically open-ended pushes the onus of interpretation towards the spectator and encourages them to give the dance meaning within their own world. The dance unravels a world-in-becoming for the spectator. It is through human agency, extending the moment of dissent to others, that any conditions such as suffering and deprivation can be amended. The body is but a tool to improve the human condition.

Kimerer Lamothe offers a somewhat different reading of this dance from Daly's:

Duncan was a revolutionary in more ways than politically, and she was severely chastised, especially by the American public, for her ties to Russia. Thus, it is likely that in this dance she is also revaluing what it means to be a revolutionary and locating that potency in the act and the fact of her dancing rather than in politics per se. It is dancing that Duncan credits with actualizing a conception of life that affirms bodily becoming. It is dancing and not the Bolsheviks who will realize an alternative to the Christian morality that has permeated Western politics. It is dancing that will create not only a new art or a new politics, but a new religion. To be a revolutionary is to dance; to dance is to engage in revolutionary action, to resist the forces of 'inequality, injustice and brutality ... which had made my school impossible.' (Lamothe 2006: 140)

With Lamothe, I argue that the revolutionary spirit of this dance is in the dancing itself, not in the dance's connection to formal institutions or already established political entities with which Duncan engaged throughout her life. Revolutionary is an affirmation of the strong political reading of dance. It is not an affirmation of Russian, communist or American dance but of the transgressive nature of dance as a language. Duncan need not declare herself as 'red' or dance in the nude; her aesthetic revolution is radical in and of itself, in placing her as an equal interlocutor to those who came before her and saw her as an illegible subject.

At the same time, *contra* Lamothe, let us not leave the political frame of interpretation and choose a Christian frame of discourse as Lamothe does in her reading. This dance provides a choreographic interpretation of Duncan as always in movement, while affirming her consistent use of the body as her technical revolution and dissent against ballet. If we are to understand this dance as answering the question 'what does it mean to be revolutionary?', as Lamothe proposes, then the answer should be sought in the language in which Duncan operated, in dance. Her revolution occurs within dance itself, not in the relationship between dance and other systems of signification. Their political power is the ability to affirm a new kind of movement, a new kind of subjectivity, while drawing upon and responding to previous inscriptions on the body. Dance for Duncan is a method of enabling new articulations to be seen and heard. It is a way to affirm the third dancer, dancing unknown systems of signification, who trumps not only the first dancer, representing ballet, but also the second dancer. This reading shows Duncan as revolutionary, opening up shared spaces in which meanings that are yet unknown are for the audience member to decipher. This dance is a celebration of her sic-sensuous,

extending her aesthetic revolution towards other sensuous bodies which make of it what they will. It is also an affirmation of the strong reading of political dance, the power of dance to transmit messages independently of words. Let us release further and reflect upon some of the danced responses to Duncan.

Isadora / Duncan: haunting her own boundaries

The reception of Isadora Duncan's revolution is widely debated in dance theory and practice. Peter Kurth starts his biography of Duncan by distancing himself from her image as 'always dancing, always ridiculous, and always with her fatal scarf' (Kurth 2002: x). Mark Franko writes:

The paradox is that on the one hand, dance history has monumentalised her presence – her charisma, the Duncan myth – which depends on her own irremediable absence. She was unique, historically unrepeatable. On the other hand, her choreography itself, which had become undervalued (or perhaps one might say overpowered by her expressive theory and personal success), recovers Duncan's presence as would the relic of a material signifier with no strings to transcendence attached. (Franko 1995: 4)

Her choreographic intervention discussed thus far probes her spectators to think further; at the same time her revolution is too complex to be effaced by scarves.

In the winter of 1960, the journal *Dance Perspectives* devoted an entire edition to the legacy of Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, the renowned American choreographer who emphasised orientalism and exoticism through her language of movement, and collaborated with Ted Shawn in the Denishawn school (the alma mater of, among others, Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham, upon whom the next chapter will focus). This edition asks one question only: who was the real founding mother of American modern dance, Isadora Duncan or Ruth St. Denis? Thus this edition of *Dance Perspectives* becomes a fruitful point of reference for seeking seminal moments in the history of modern dance and the performers who created it.

The editorial introduction states that 'both Duncan and St. Denis wanted freedom from convention in order to pursue very positive ideals. And it is from their specific realizations of those ideals that American dance has developed' (Terry 1960a: 4). The similarity of their place within dance history not only refers to their seminal place in dance history but focuses upon the fact that both Duncan and St. Denis were founders in that they were dissenters. At the same time there is something very biased

in this discussion from its very beginning, as may be seen here: 'Is there a dancer or choreographer, on Broadway, on educational films or television or, shall we say, in the public eye who is exclusively or even mainly a Duncan dancer?' (Terry 1960a: 25). The journal begins with Duncan's disappearance not presence, questioning the reasons for her lack of existence in American contemporary dance rather than her contribution to it.

As a first step in the discussion, Ruth St. Denis is asked to compare her work to Duncan's. Asking an artist to compare herself or himself to another artist in the question of a true founding moment is a strange move indeed; even more so in a written contribution that seeks to compare the two. Even more so, when, as is the case with Duncan and St. Denis, the artist to whom the speaker compares herself is no longer alive. St. Denis shows some obligatory kindness in her description of her dead counter-exemplar, who cannot respond to this discussion:

Looking back on both the careers of Isadora and herself, Miss Ruth said: 'when I saw Isadora again (after first seeing her in London in 1900), years later, in California, she inspired me to do something by what she did not do. When she danced to symphonies, she reacted to them and danced when it pleased her to dance. If the music was too fast, she postured. This was all right for her because she was glorious. But for me, watching her, I thought that what I use in such a case would be a symphony of dancers moving to a musical symphony. Thus, my idea for the synchronic orchestra was born.' (Terry 1960b: 27)

Whereas the term 'Isadora' is mobilised to affirm the mythic aura of her rival, St. Denis engages with the aesthetics that Duncan set forth in her dance and critically reacts to them. This is a narration of dissensus articulated through dance. Further, Ruth St. Denis writes:

America, at the turn of the century, was ill prepared to follow Isadora. Only a few had the discernment to recognize her principles. The same, of course, was true of my work in the early days. But there was a difference between us. When Isadora taught, the most powerful thing students got was spirit, the outpouring of her spirit. In my case, students quite probably missed the purpose of my rituals but by leaning my way, they wound up with routines (the shells of what I stood for) perfectly usable in theatre. (Terry 1960b: 28)

Here St. Denis gives us a clear example of the relationship between technique as inscription and dance. At the same time, she discusses the contribution Duncan made to modern dance history in terms of spirit, not inscription. She constantly writes about her as Isadora, not Duncan. In this she highlights the split between the mythical Isadora and Duncan's embodied presence. This tension is clearly articulated in Charles Weidman's comment: 'we moderns actually revolted against both Isadora

and Miss Ruth but we also retained belief in both. For example, Duncan dance is not for me, but Isadora's principles and wonderful spirit are eternal' (Terry 1960b: 40). Weidman illuminates a tension between Duncan dance and Isadora's spirit. This tension is evident in many of the other contributions. The narrations that take Duncan seriously as an aesthetic innovator refer to her as Duncan.⁴ Those who argue that her danced innovation is no longer present on stage refer to her as Isadora.⁵ Isadora Duncan is a dual figure: there is the real Duncan, who danced and created choreography and whose body was received by other bodies in certain moments in history and by that reception lived on beyond its physical lifetime. The name Isadora carries no ontological weight within it.⁶ The name Isadora does not inscribe on a body and does not occupy a space in the world. The name Duncan has written its choreographic revolution upon many bodies, hence is still alive within the world of dance and has a spatial presence upon many bodies. It has been released to a shared embodied space. Those bodies reacted in their own method of inscription and by their contributions keep her very much alive and present in dance history. Their sic-sensuous with her is a lived image of Duncan's inscription upon their body; in their disagreement those spectators keep her presence alive. They legitimated her strong political reading of dance, affirming its independent communicative power. At the same time there is Isadora, the mythic founder, whose grandeur persists over us all, who can be there in spirit without being there in flesh despite the fact that her interventions are first and foremost embodied.

Isadora Duncan unravelled a world in which bodies that were equal responded to her body in a multitude of embodied languages. Her radical intervention was an entanglement of equality and difference; those who dissented from her were able to do so because of her interpretation of a shared space between equal bodies that were able to converse with each other without needing words. Duncan lived in bodies of dancers from the moment she refused to stand on her toes. She is never without a world and never without a body; Isadora Duncan's body has written upon numerous other bodies. The image of Isadora is entangled in scarves, but her spectators know better than to let those scarves hide the radical revolution introduced by Duncan.

Conclusion: 'you were wild once here, don't let them tame you'

I bring back the reader-spectator to Boston, 1922, watching a radically new interpretation of the body, presented in and through a woman who refused to abide by set categories. It was in this performance that Duncan

famously said 'you were wild once here, don't let them tame you'. She need not have stated that in words; her performance did so for her. Her performance is the quintessence of the celebration of the strong political reading of dance.

Isadora Duncan starts her aesthetic revolution by dissenting from her ballet teacher. She continues by continually transfiguring her way of thinking about both dance and politics. She never subscribes to a known system of meaning and does not impose an already known linguistic category on her spectator. She invites them to go ahead with her on a journey of questioning. This journey is enabled through her exploration of her own body, the discovery of the solar plexus as the origin of movement and her use of dance as a communicative tool which she had hoped would enable her to create a shared sensation with her spectators. Duncan is more than a revolutionary herself. The embodied space she unravels includes both moments of embodied sharing as well as opportunities to dissent from her in motion. The third dancer, who has the ability to articulate meaning as yet unknown to her, Isadora's moment of intervention (and its use of the solar plexus as communicative) and responses to Duncan in movement which occurred during her life and after her death are all closely intertwined. Isadora Duncan created a shared space of sic-sensuous between her dancers, spectators and herself. Meanings discussed within it are still elaborated. The one incontestable fact, though, is that her own body claimed a space of its own and elaborated that space in a system of inscription.

Duncan allows us to unravel the tensions between the weak reading of political dance, Duncan's shifting associations with various political ideas and institutions, and the strong reading of political dance, her quest to change the way dance is perceived in her day and the way it can be communicated. When we see responses to 'Duncan dance' there is no doubt of the power of her revolution; many people who followed her responded to Duncan dance and created their own moment of dissent, invented their own third dancer and inserted those dancers into the history of dance. Isadora Duncan utilised embodied and choreographic openness that allowed others to respond to her revolution. They do so still. This intervention invites her spectators to go beyond known and agreed upon meanings of political categories set in language.

We may not need to shift away from scarves in order to remember Isadora Duncan as the revolutionary she really was. We may need to shift our attention to the red scarf waved while asking her audience not to be tamed. That scarf, one and the same with her revolutionary body, bringing to the world her unique method of inscription, allows

her wild spirit to live on within manifold moving bodies. It is high time for this red scarf to take centre stage when discussing Isadora Duncan, and to allow her revolutionary spirit to be rejuvenated in conversation with the manifold moving bodies which responded to her. One of those interlocutors was another revolutionary, Martha Graham. She enters the argument next.

Notes

- 1 The only footage remaining of Duncan's actual performance is this very short clip: www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaFZbhhbcft0. The chapter will focus on reconstructions of her dances.
- 2 As Daly notes in *Done into Dance*, Duncan sees the power for social change in the individual rather than the state and yet champions social responsibility, exemplified by her use of the category of 'woman', especially in her essay 'Dancer of the Future' (1902/3; published 1909): 'oh, she is coming, the dancer of the future: the free spirit, who will inhabit the body of new woman; more glorious than any woman that has yet been; more beautiful than the Egyptian, than the Greek, the early Italian, than all women of past centuries – the highest intelligence in the freest body!' It should be noted that she was an early critic of the suffragette movement's focus on the vote and always argued – both in speech and in artistic practice – for a more overarching change to include various categories of class and gender. 'We women can get anything we want in the world without the vote. We doubtless wouldn't keep our names even if we had the right of franchise. We start in life with a man's name – we marry and take another man's name. Now, Isadora belongs to me – Duncan is my father's.' Quoted in an interview with Janet Vale, 14 February 1915, *New York Times*.
- 3 Duncan's relationship to social-economic reality is especially worthy of comment here. Her biographer Peter Kurth notes that the Duncan household was always on the hunt for money, and she did not complete her schooling as 'no one can learn on an empty stomach'. Nevertheless the Duncan household is described as full of music and poetry (Kurth 2002: 20). In 1905 she founded a school in Gruenwald, which was fully subsidised and aimed at children of all classes; later she extended this enterprise in her sojourn in Russia in 1921 where she dreamed of bringing her art to all and refused to accept money; as she writes in a letter to the People's Commissar of Education, Anatole Vasilief Lunatcharsky: 'I shall never hear of money in exchange for my work ... I am sick of bourgeoisie, commercial art. It is sad that I have never been able to give my work to the people for whom it was created. Instead I have been forced to sell my art for five dollars a seat. I want to dance for the masses, for the working people who need my art and have never had the money to come and see me' (Duncan 1929: 24).

- 4 Hanya Holm: 'for me Isadora was the first modern dancer in Europe. She broke down the conventions and opened new gates. When St. Denis came later, I thought of her as an Oriental, an ethnic dancer. It was Duncan who was really bold, the firebrand. Since then, I have come to realize that what Duncan did was to release the body and its emotions. Her offerings seem spontaneous, the inspiration of the moment' (Terry 1960b: 44). José Limón: 'Although Isadora is my special inspiration, not one day of my thirty years has gone by without one or the other, Duncan or St. Denis, poking me, inspiring me' (Terry 1960b: 47) Conclusion: 'Isadora bequeathed her great spirit, her lyricism and her passion for great music as a dance incentive for those who followed while Miss St. Denis bequeathed a spirituality, a theatricalism and a formal concept of danced drama to her successors' (Terry 1960b: 55). Helen Tamiris: 'In all my teaching ... I go back to Duncan's philosophic point of view. Her dance was expressive of human being, the person in his emotional, philosophic, psychological natures. When I was back in my teens, I saw her last performance in the New York area, in Brooklyn. One moment in particular stunned me. She was dancing the Pathétique. She started on the ground, lying close to the floor and – it took a long time – the only physical action was the very slow movement which carried her from prone to erect with arms outstretched. At the finish, everyone was crying and I was crying too, although it took me too many years to understand what she was doing – that she was living an action or an inner motivation and I was living with her. Years later, while teaching a class, the incident came back to mind. That movement made dance clear to me, that here was dance by and through the human being. Although the content of my own dances was different, this concept, I can say with truthfulness, made possible my career' (Terry 1960b: 42) Tamiris: 'For me, there is only Duncan as a source of historic inspiration but for many others, both Duncan and St. Denis exert their powers' (Terry 1960b: 43) John Butler: 'I lean more towards the theatrical, as Miss St. Denis does, rather than towards the lyrical, which Duncan represented' (Terry 1960b: 50).
- 5 'Today, I think, Isadora's influence is as strong in America. Form to her was unimportant and she left us no dance disciplines other than children's steps, skips, runs, hops and the like. There are no successors to her, yet the impact is present because Isadora was dedicated to dance and this sense of dedication stimulates our dancers to this day. Isadora symbolized a burning ideal' (Terry 1960b: 44). 'Isadora was unequalled in her spirit of freedom; she was but one person, non-transferable, who travelled on ether to the moon' (Terry 1960b: 44). José Limón: 'In California I read Isadora's *My Life* and I became incandescent with the desire to dance. She was my dance mother, the Dionysian, the drunken spirit of the soul. And today, when I compose, I try to capture that Dionysian ecstasy of Isadora's as she wrote about it in *My Life*' (Terry 1960b: 45). Agnes de Mille: 'Isadora cleared away the rubbish.

She was a gigantic broom. There has never been such a theatre cleaning!' (Terry 1960a: 25).

- 6 The interview Duncan gives in 1915, in which she claims her last name is her father's but her first name is her own, may help us to expose some misogyny and sexism intertwined within her reception; Isadora is sensational, evanescent, unimportant, as it is her own making; Duncan, her last name, inherited from her father, is her legitimate method of intervention into a world of dead masters (not mistresses).