

“Feeling” in Modern Dance Print Media: Loïe Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Maud Allan

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## **Abstract**

Between 1890 and 1920, modern dancers such as Isadora Duncan, Loïe Fuller, and Maud Allan presented a new performative aesthetic in dance. Breaking from the narrative storytelling that dominated nineteenth-century vaudeville and ballet, these dancers advanced non-narrative movement, thereby encouraging a new aesthetic engagement from the audience, namely, one that was rooted in notions of corporeal sensation rather than narrative telos or (melo)dramatic pathos. These new responses, this dissertation argues, are reflected in the new tactics for writing the dancing body, which at once render problematic the putative objectivity of journalistic criticism and reveal the limits of traditional dance criticism’s focus on intricate technique and plot line. This dissertation pursues its argument by studying over 300 print reviews of dances performed by Fuller, Duncan, and Allan between 1890 and 1920 culled from North-American archives and representing a spectrum of print media—from mainstream national media, such as *The New York Times*, to regional newspapers, to more specialized theatre magazines—to reveal compelling insight into hermeneutic entanglements of language and movement.

Informed by the work of recent performance studies (e.g. Phelan; Schneider; Taylor), this dissertation approaches this body of dance reviews from an inverse perspective from that represented by traditional dance history scholarship. That is, instead of reading reviews as documentation in order to understand these dances, the study explores how reviewers *perform* criticism, thus framing our understanding of modern dance in specific ways.

This dissertation engages with the correlation between media and performance as either documentary or performative, arguing that writing performance offers promises for both types of engagement with the live event. Collectively, these reviews reveal that dance criticism involved a metacritical reflection on the significance of the critical writing act itself, and advanced a style of synesthetic metaphor to describe novel kinesthetic experiences of spectatorship. Ultimately, the new tactics to modern dance criticism not only revealed a crisis in articulation but prompted a performative style of writing dance criticism that went in tandem with the development of the dance review genre itself, whose placement in popular print media was mounting to become a regular feature by the 1930s.