**Loie Fuller (b. 15 January 1862, Hinsdale, Illinois; d. 2 January 1928, Paris)**

**Summary**

After an early career in American vaudeville, Fuller moved to Paris where she became a founding figure of modern dance, creating a new genre that drew on popular cabaret motifs combined with free-flowing, more ‘natural’ movements done in bare feet and flowing robes, and—crucially—technology. Gaining acclaim for her incorporation of electric lights, mechanical stagecraft and her outsize silk costumes—all of her own design—she used her many patented inventions to transform herself onstage into whirling sculptures of colored light and floating fabric. Known as ‘the electricity fairy’, Fuller seemed magical to audiences and became one of the most famous Americans in Europe. In mid-career she assembled a troupe of young dancers, Les Ballets Loie Fuller, who toured the world performing with her. In her later years she experimented with cinema, becoming one of the first women filmmakers in the world. Prominent artists and writers such as Auguste Rodin, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and Stéphane Mallarmé were fascinated with Fuller and used her as a subject for their sculpture, painting, and poetry. Early photographers also found her compelling. Her fame was so great and the French embraced her so thoroughly, that at the 1900 Paris World’s Fair, Fuller was the sole performer to be granted her own theatre, designed for her by esteemed Art Nouveau architect, Henri Sauvage.

**Early Career**

Born Mary-Louise Fuller, Fuller changed her name to the more glamorous-sounding ‘Loie’ at the age of sixteen, moving with her mother to New York City to work in vaudeville and burlesque. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, she performed in light dramas and musicals, sometimes cross-dressing to play boys’ roles, often playing soubrettes. In 1883, Fuller joined ‘Buffalo’ Bill Cody’s traveling *Wild West Show*, playing ‘Miss Pepper’ in a vignette called ‘The Prairie Waif’ as part of a series of open-air melodramas about life in the western United States.

Fuller also appeared in a number of Orientalist entertainments complete with veiled dancing girls—a motif that she would transmute into the non-narrative, sculptural veil dances of her later years. In 1887, for example, Fuller appeared as the ‘singing slave girl’ Ustane in a production of H. Rider Haggard’s *She*. She also starred (cross-dressed) as Aladdin in *Aladdin’s Wonderful Lamp*, a pantomime adaptation of the classic *Thousand and One Nights*. This production featured dreamlike scenery created with a ‘magic lantern’, a cabaret device that projected light images onto gauze fabric. Fuller’s later work in stage lighting was clearly highly influenced by this technique. The Aladdin production also featured a series of dance numbers incorporating veils, twinkling jewel-like lights, and even a cloud of steam—permutations of which all found their way into Fuller’s mature work.

In 1889, Fuller formed her first dance troupe and travelled with them to Bermuda, Haiti, Jamaica, and the Antilles, presenting light plays and operettas. That troupe disbanded and later that same year, Fuller moved briefly to London, where she worked at the famed Gaiety Theatre, performing the slightly racy ‘Skirt Dance’, in which dancers would flip their skirts up over their head, exposing their legs. While Fuller would eventually cease showing any part of her body onstage, the manipulation of large fabrics overhead became a key aspect of her choreography and might be traceable, in part, to her early work at the Gaiety.

**Contributions to Modernism**

Fuller did not achieve her great fame and success until she moved to Paris in 1892, and commenced in earnest her experiments with light and stage design. She first captivated audiences with her *danses lumineuses* (luminous dances) at the Folies Bergères, going on to enjoy a thirty-year career in Europe as the ‘electricity fairy’, a living embodiment of the strange new power of electricity, a symbol of technology’s promise for the new, twentieth century and of American inventiveness and ingenuity. Unlike America’s two other leading modern dance pioneers, Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, Fuller did not showcase the physical body. Instead, her work was highly technological, relying primarily upon her own—often patented—innovations in costume and stagecraft, and keeping herself nearly entirely covered, save for her hands and face.

Subsuming her body beneath hundreds of yards of white Chinese silks, into which she sewed flexible rods, Fuller lofted the vast fabric veils high over her head and out, away from her body, sculpting them into ever-changing forms evocative of Art Nouveau motifs like lilies, orchids, butterflies, or rushing ocean waves. At the same time, Fuller’s patented rotating projectors beamed changing coloured lights onto her fabrics, turning her dancing body into a proto-cinema screen, which was sometimes patterned by stencils she designed herself—casting light images of fish skeletons, cancer cells, or even American presidents. Her stagecraft included a special pedestal lit from beneath, which created the illusion that Fuller was dancing suspended in midair, and her octagonal ‘mirror room’, in which myriad reflected images gave audiences the impression of watching dozens of identical Fullers dancing at once. She also borrowed from shadow puppet techniques to create her playful *Ombres Gigantesques* or ‘Gigantic Shadow’ performances, in which dancers hidden behind a screen were lit in such a way that they appeared to grow enormously tall or impossibly tiny.

Passionate about science, Fuller learned about radioactivity from Pierre and Marie Curie, and experimented with phosphorescent salts to paint her costumes, causing them to glow in the dark. (Unfortunately, the paints were toxic and sickened some of her assistants.) Fuller also befriended Thomas Edison, who showed her an early X-ray machine, and astronomer Camille Flammarion, who inducted her into the French Astronomical Society. Fuller’s fascination with light and shadow led her to experiment with cinema and she made a number of films, working with pioneers such as Pathé, Gaumont, and the Lumière brothers. (Only one of these films survives, *The Lily of Life* of 1921, with screenplay by Fuller’s close friend, Queen Marie of Rumania.)

Fuller’s work was distinctly modernist in its blurring of the boundaries of high and low culture. Borrowing themes and motifs from her vaudeville and cabaret background, she performed in popular venues like the Folies Bergères, where she was the first dancing woman considered modest and chaste enough for audiences of women and children. Yet she danced not to popular tunes but to classical music by composers like Wagner and Debussy (the latter composed especially for her). Also highly modernist was Fuller’s gradual move away from overt narrative themes and toward more abstract, visionary work. One of her most famous pieces, *Fire Dance*, for example, began as part of her 1895 *Salome*, a full-length, danced pantomime about the famous biblical dancing girl, but eventually Fuller performed the dance on its own. In the revised version, accompanied by Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries*, Fuller seemed to dissolve into a flickering red flame. Stripped thus of context and story line, this new, more abstract *Fire Dance* met with far greater success, and Fuller gradually relied more and more upon non-figurative work.

**Legacy**

Fuller’s experiments in electronic stagecraft influenced modernist theorists and practitioners of theatre and stage design like Adolphe Appia, Gordon Craig, and Pavel Tchelitchev; her multi-media productions and lavish use of colored light and dazzling costumes inspired Sergei Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes. Fuller’s merging of the mechanical and human onstage seemed also to echo the principles of futurism, and Filippo Marinetti mentions her in his *Manifesto of Futurist Dance*. At the same time, her reliance on enormous silk fabrics recalled more traditional, Orientalist ‘veil dancers’—women performers from colonial North Africa largely who gained popularity in France as erotic attractions—and early on she was known as a ‘modern Salome.’ However, Fuller’s ‘veil dances’ never ‘unveiled’ her body and were considered more enchanting than erotic.

Despite having choreographed at least 128 dance pieces and enjoying worldwide fame, after her death in 1928, Fuller faded into obscurity, although for a time her live-in companion of many years, French banking heiress Gabrielle Bloch (also known as Gab Sorère), tried to keep the company afloat. Nevertheless, Fuller’s ongoing influence on dance and modernist performance has made itself felt in the work of a variety of artists, including multi-media choreographer Alwin Nikolais, lighting designer Jennifer Tipton, puppet artist Hanne Tierney, and dancer and choreographer Jody Sperling and her Time Lapse Dance company, as well as in the popular club dance genre known as ‘flagging.’

**Rhonda Garelick**

**Selected Works**

*Serpentine Dance* (1892)

*The Firmament* (1893)

*Dance of the Lily* (1895)

*Fire Dance* (1895)

*Mirror Dances* (1897)

*Ballet of Light* (1909)

*Ultraviolet Dances* (1911)

*Nocturnes* (1913)

*Black Moth* (1914)

*Dance of Steel* (1914)

*Fireworks* (1914)

*Night on Bald Mountain* (1915)

*Magic Veil* (1920)

*Chimeras* (1922)

*Shadow Dances* (1922)

*The Sea* (1925)

**Writings by the Artist**

Fuller, L. (1913) *Fifteen Years of a Dancer’s Life*, Boston: Small, Maynard & Co.

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**Paratexts**

Loie Fuller, photograph by Samuel Joshua Beckett, Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Loie Fuller by Toulouse Lautrec; Bibliothèque nationale

<http://learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/wespress/traces/traces.html>

Loie Fuller, watercolor by Crozit; Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco

<http://learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/wespress/traces/traces.html>

Poster of Loie Fuller by Manuel Orazi for the Exposition of 1900 in Paris; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

<http://learningobjects.wesleyan.edu/wespress/traces/traces.html>