

Introduction

On Monday evening 4 December in 1933, Elsa Puolanne stands in the wings on the right corner of the stage at the Finnish National Theatre. The gymnastic and dance performance of Esteri Suontaa Movement School has proceeded to the dance session. The intermission after the gymnastic session, and three group dances are over, and a full house of 800 spectators are waiting to see a solo called *Loitsu*, a magic spell in English. According to the programme, *Loitsu* is performed and composed by Elsa Puolanne to the music of Finnish composer Erkki Melartin. The stage lights up and Elsa starts to walk

photo: Kari Hakli



Photograph 1 *Elsa Puolanne in 1992*

slowly along the back wall. The sound of drumming spreads into the space, the time is 5/4. But, how is she walking slowly? Does she place first her heel or the ball of her foot to the floor, as they do in women's gymnastics? Does she transfer her weight slowly to one foot and then have a little pause or does she slide without pauses in slow motion? Where does she focus her gaze, and what about her arms, are they moving along with the steps or staying stiff by her sides? Is her body lifted, tensed or relaxed during the walk? And does she follow the beats of the drum? Elsa reaches the centre line of the stage and turns towards the audience. But which part of her body starts the movement, her head, shoulder, centre, hip, knee or all them together? Does she change the focus of her gaze? A large tambourine is still played, and her walking continues towards the audience. Elsa arrives to the lit spot on the floor, and Minni Vaahtervaara-Karma begins to play *Loitsu* from Melartin's Six Piano Pieces, opus 118. Elsa starts her dance around the circle of light.¹

On Friday afternoon 27 July in 1990, sixty-six years after the premiere of *Loitsu*, I arrived at the flat of Elsa Puolanne, Eerikinkatu 26 in Helsinki. My MA dissertation, *A Struggle for a Survival - A historical and contextual study of Finnish free dance during the period 1945-1962* was in a progress. I was going to interview Elsa Puolanne (1906-1996) and Mirri Karpio (b. 1917). They had a

movement school in Helsinki between 1944 and 1982. These two tiny, old ladies shared their stories and memories with me on that afternoon. Elsa mentioned with a special devotion her short solo *Loitsu* and showed me beautiful old photographs of it. Some features in those photographs, such as Elsa's closed eyes, her body's sense of space and gravity, referred obviously to Mary Wigman in the mind of this eager, but young and arrogant, scholar. However, I could not ignore the special atmosphere and feeling transmitting through sensitive and individual postures, and through the commitment and seriousness of the dancer. I began to imagine that I could understand some meanings of the dance and see it performed again.

On Friday afternoon 15 December in 2001, eleven years after my first meeting with Elsa Puolanne and Mirri Karpio, Leena Gustavson and I were in the studio 512 at the Theatre Academy in Helsinki. My imagination and words about Elsa's *Loitsu* were not enough. I wanted to embody my imagination of it and create a new *Loitsu*, for

the articulation of writing bodies is different from the practice and performance of moving bodies, and is different from photographic representation and verbal commentary. Yet these different modes also intersect and interact.

Rothfield 1994, p 4.

So, we started to move, reach, pose and experience with our bodies the postures of Elsa Puolanne in the photographs of *Loitsu*. That was also a start for the process, which juxtaposes our danced versions of understanding of Elsa Puolanne's *Loitsu* and my linguistic and verbal understanding of her *Loitsu* as well as our constructions of it.

American dancer-choreographer and dance researcher Betsy Fischer had a public defence of her doctoral thesis *Creating and Re-Creating Dance Performing Dances Related to Ausdruckstanz* (2002) at the Theatre Academy during the Summer School *Dance in the Baltic Shores* in August 2002. I had previously seen her performances of the solos of *Ausdruckstanz*, Wigman's *Hexentanz II* among them, at the Theatre Academy. After seeing her dances, I was embarrassed since her dances did not match my view of *Ausdruckstanz*. For

example, her postures and movements in her *Hexentanz II* were almost the same as Wigman's in the film of *Hexentanz II* (in Tegeder 1986), but her dancing did not have the same effect on me as Wigman's dancing. What happened was what Fischer actually herself felt "reconstructing dances is intrinsically post-modern because one has to take the dance out of its time frame" (2002, p 17).

Betsy Fischer participated also at the Summer School at the Theatre Academy, and we had passionate and hectic discussions on dance reconstructions. In the final discussion of the Summer School she argued, as far as I recall, that "it is so wonderful that everything is in the dance". I did not totally agree with that view, and tried uncertainly to ask what about the contextual knowledge and conventions of performing dance. How are we supposed to read out those things from reconstructions if we do not juxtapose and intertwine a dance of the past (as it was) and the present (as it is) and be transparent about how we have made these (re)constructions.

It seemed to me that in order to understand and experience dances of the past I have to do much more than just find the movements and other components of dance. Everything might be in the movement as Betsy Fischer argues, but working just with movements is not perhaps enough, the past needs to be examined also contextually and intertwined to dance in the present moment. The past has existed, and it will never recur as it was, and Elsa Puolanne's *Loitsu* will never be danced and understood as it was. So, why bother with it and why bother at all with the past and history?

A 'PROPER' HISTORY VERSUS A 'POSTMODERN' HISTORY?

Many current books of theory or philosophy of history divide history into two. These are the so-called 'proper' history and 'postmodern' history.² And this division is shared both by representatives of 'proper' and 'postmodern' history. Especially this seems to happen in Britain, in which the empiricist tradition in history studies is very strong. Writers, such as Richard Evans and Arthur Marwick, defend 'proper' history against the threat of 'postmodern' history, and writers, such as Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow, prefer 'postmodern' history and consider 'proper' history completely outdated.

This polarised division is problematic for me and many other historians, as is revealed in Ewa Domanska's book of interviews *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism*, published in 1998. I am not able to identify myself only as a dusty 'proper' historian who would just sit in dark archives and find sources that would simply tell me how the past actually was. Neither do I recognise myself only as an adventurous 'postmodern' history writer who can live without the category of truth and tell historical narratives, which are part of literature. These two descriptions of historians are of course caricatures, but still, instead of declaring to be a 'proper' or a 'postmodern' historian I try to loosen this binary situation, which I find oppressive. My view of history includes contradictions, tensions and features from 'proper' history as well as from 'postmodern' history. As a historian I have multiple voices, and I am among those historians who according to Keith Jenkins

can (and many of us still do) exercise a bit of picking and choosing between the residues of old "certaintist" modernisms (objectivity, disinterestedness, the facts, unbiasedness, Truth...) and rhetorical, postist formulations (readings, positionings, reality effects, truth effects...) rather than going to one or the other. Consequently, I think it is here, between old "certaintist" and new rhetorical discourses, that the current "battles" over "what is history" and how historical knowledge is methodologically "made up" and to what end, live.

Jenkins 1997, pp 4-5.

Two years later in his book *Why History? Ethics and postmodernity* Jenkins has taken a more extreme position by stating:

Thus it will be my argument here that we might as well forget history and live in the ample imaginaries provided by postmodern type theorists (say, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, J.F. Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, Elisabeth Ermarth, David Harlan et al.), theorists who can provide between them enough intellectual weight to go forward *in* time but not *in* history.

Jenkins 1999, p 12.

So, what should I, as a historian, say to Keith Jenkins? Sorry, I cannot forget history. Forms of history writing as well as metanarratives of the past are changing, but human beings are not cows that are not worried about their past and identity, as Nietzsche (1999, [1864]) noticed. I have memory and I am curious, and I would like to have some knowledge and understanding of the past, not only ample imaginaries *in* time. My knowledge is bound to my knowing self, and partly to language, and that is not same as the reality which I experience. However, this reality is shaped, not determined, by various discourses, texts and representations.

THE TRUTH IN HISTORY

The most vivid discussion in recent theory of history has been around the question of the truth. The following questions and suggestions have been brought up:

Is there one absolute Truth of the past with capital letter T?

Are there many truths of the past, which are true according the time and place?

Is there one truth with many faces?

Is there an approximate truth of the past?

Are there only various interpretations of the past?

If so, how do we evaluate them?

Or are all interpretations equal, when it is up to you which one you believe or not?

According to the German historian Jörn Rüsen (1998) historical studies have three dimensions: cognitive, political and aesthetic. The political dimension includes also ethical considerations. These three dimensions are interrelated to each other, just as the question of truth in history studies is related to all these dimensions. This might be one reason why the question of truth has become so essential and fascinating for historians. It is not only a matter of cognitive knowledge, but also a matter of aesthetic forms, ethical and political commitments.

The past will never recur as it was. So, it cannot be explored directly as we do in natural sciences. We have no laboratories for the past and no permanent laws of the past. History is always a representation of the past. In history studies this representation happens mainly through language. During the last few decades, the relationship between language and reality has received a lot of attention. Our understanding of reality is affected by language - I would express it that we sculpture or shape reality with our words, but also the reverse. The reality, as we experience it, sculpts the language that we use. This means that language is not a neutral and objective vehicle for description or for research. Along with the so-called linguistic turn, the role of language in creating historical meanings has become central. The aesthetic dimension of history writing has been acknowledged even so far that historical narratives are seen to be comparable to fictional narratives.

In philosophy, as Alun Munslow (2000) presents, the truth is seen as a property of sentences, statements and propositions or beliefs. In a sentence, the speaker/writer states a proposition or belief that something is 'true'. This can mean the truth being the property of the linguistic representation, language, or that the truth is propositional and it is just expressed in our sentence. In the latter case there has to be a match between proposition and reality.

Here is an example. Isadora Duncan performed at the Finnish National Theatre in 1908. This is a statement which is true as a linguistic representation and as a real event. Nevertheless, often or perhaps always, a so-called fact, which is true based on the coherence theory, is not stated alone. Something else has already been taken into consideration. Of course it is nice to get facts right, but they are not enough for history. History is also a vehicle to understand, and then it seeks explanations, meanings and even values. I continue my historical narrative by stating that this visit of Duncan was remarkable for the development of Finnish dance art. Does this sentence, which is true as a linguistic representation, match the reality of the past? And how true can it be in that sense?

The events of the past are not even facts before someone chooses and names them as facts (Hutcheon 1989). Moreover, facts do not give meanings or

explanations by themselves. A historian does that. Therefore, it is I in the present moment that makes an interpretation of the past. Caroline Bynym has captured the paradox of the past by stating:

The only past we can know is one we shape by the questions we ask; yet these questions are also shaped by the context we come from, and our context includes the past...It is not only possible, it is imperative to use modern concerns when we confront the past...We must never forget to watch ourselves knowing the otherness of the past, but this is not the same as merely watching ourselves.

Bynym 1999, p 265.

There are many obstacles, which prevent me from understanding and representing the past as it was, but still, I desire to understand the past and even the truth in a relative sense, because I want to argue that my constructions and interpretations tell something about the past, not only something about the present and me.

I support the position that we have arrived in the situation, in which there is no single metanarrative explaining the past. Instead, there are today various metanarratives, paradigms and methods with which to make some sense of the past. However, tolerance of many interpretations of the past does not mean that every interpretation is equally valid. What might the criteria be for preferring one historical interpretation to another?

Fortunately, I am not alone discussing these issues and asking these questions. From the 1990s, many practising historians, for example Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob in their book *Telling the Truth about History* (1994), Mary Fulbrook in her book *Historical Theory* (2002) and Jorma Kalela in *Historiantutkimus ja historia* (History Research and History, 2000), have started to explore and discuss what implications theories, especially postmodern theories, have for their profession. Like me, they do not see these theories as a threat to history, but as a challenge or an opportunity for future research in history.

In historical writing, the New History has opened up the past to new kinds of questions, objects, sources, methods and problems, even before theoretical discussions of postmodernism. There is no simple and comprehensive definition of the New History. However, it can be seen as “history written in deliberate reaction against the traditional ‘paradigm’”, as Peter Burke writes (2001, p 2). The traditional history claims to be objective and essentially interested in politics and narrative events that are viewed from above. It is based mainly on written documents, and it is presented by professionals. The New History is relative and concerned with every human activity, both in narrative events and in structures. It underlines views of ordinary people and uses a variety of evidence. The appearance of new histories has fragmented the History into various histories. Historians as well as other people have to face the past, the present and the future without any grand metanarrative that would reveal us the final truth. There is one unattainable past of dance art in Finland, and we only have many histories of it.

THE THESIS

My own solution to the challenges of postmodernism is not to write a book about historical theory. The theory and the topic of research are considered in this research as connected and inseparable entities. Theories and methods have been created and developed for the understanding of human events and phenomena. Hence, I try to construct in my thesis an explicit and reflective forward backward movement between the practice and the theory of history. That is, between my research, written and other constructions of dance history, and my own changing methods and standpoints in the field of the theory of history.

When I in the autumn of 2001 started my PhD studies at the University of Surrey, I had already collected a data of 752 dance performances in Finland in 1917-1939.³ My idea was then to write Finnish dance history based on my data of the period 1917-1939, but I ended up constructing various histories, both written and danced around one particular dance solo, *Loitsu*. Hence, the thesis - a search for *Loitsu* and its meanings - reveals, describes and conceptualizes the process of interpreting *Loitsu* and creating new constructions of it. Many writers

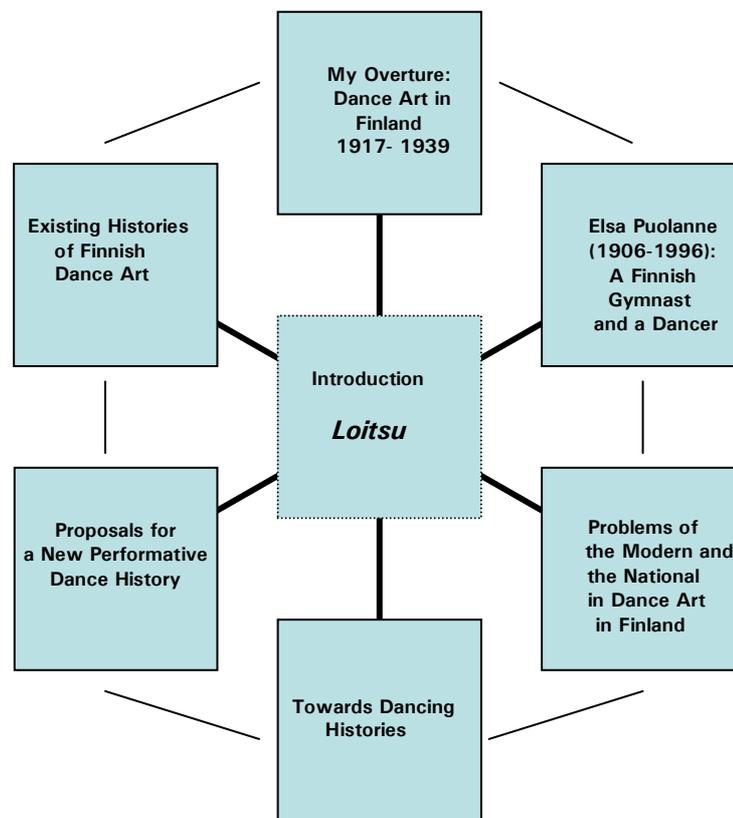
(e.g. af Hällström 1945, Arvelo & Räsänen 1987, Suhonen 1997) have sketched the past of Finnish dance on a quite general level in brief narratives. The construction of a detailed narrative and performative of one particular and specific dance and its past might open different, challenging and alternative views to Finnish dance.

The research process was fed and influenced, for example by the following factors: discussion on fact and fiction in history, knowledge and experience of movement and dance analysis, historical knowledge of choreographic conventions and an awareness of the construction of the past and of the present in dance and in culture. The constructed net of histories around Elsa Puolanne's *Loitsu* does not aim to give one coherent description and explanation of dance art in Finland. Instead, it corrects some inaccuracies that appear in the existing histories of Finnish dance and adds some previously unknown details to them, but above all, this thesis, by searching for various meanings of *Loitsu*, constructs multiple historical approaches toward dance art in Finland. Data collection, personal interests and concerns of the New History guided the choice of the topics of the thesis.

The thesis contains three parts, each of them containing two chapters. The titles of the parts, *A positivist approach to history*, *Cultural contexts* and *A post-positivist approach to history*, refer to my changing points of view on the research of the past. The six overlapping and interrelated chapters suggest some answers to the questions and challenges presented in this **Introduction**. Each chapter has different research questions and methods, but all chapters are to some extent linked to *Loitsu*.

The table of contents and the written thesis present the thesis in a linear form, but **Chart 1** on the next page gives another and better opportunity to comprehend and observe the structure and the dynamic of the thesis.

Chart 1 *The structure and progress of the thesis.*



The first chapter, **Existing Histories of Finnish Dance Art**, describes, examines and analyses how Finnish dance history, especially during the 1920s and 1930s, has been represented in existing written and visual histories. It deals with written, aural and visual representations, both academic and non-academic, that have already constructed both my own interpretation and understanding of Finnish dance history and that of other writers. *Loitsu* and its choreographer Elsa Puolanne are only briefly mentioned and dealt with in one written history, my own MA dissertation. The second chapter, **My Overture: Dance Art in Finland 1917-1939**, begins as, but challenges, a detached and objective history of events. It explores what happened in dance in Finland with the help of my data collection of 775 dance performances between 1917 and 1939. This chapter also sketches the dance context in which *Loitsu* appeared. In addition, it reveals how 'objective' history gives us some knowledge of dance in Finland and gives rise to more detailed and complex issues and questions. Tensions start to

emerge between factual and imaginary constructions, between found and made histories.

The third chapter, **Elsa Puolanne (1906-1996): A Finnish Gymnast and a Dancer**, at first presents a biography of dance artist Elsa Puolanne, who choreographed and performed *Loitsu*. The events of her life are dealt with in the context of Finnish cultural and political history. Later, wider and more specific issues, such as the relationship between dance and gymnastics, the spread of German body culture in Finland and the legitimisation process and development of professionalism, are considered from the view point of a particular dance artist. Some micro historical moments in her life, e.g. Elsa's participation in the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936 and her performance of *Loitsu* in the first dance performance of the Union of the Finnish Dance Artists (UFDA, Suomen Tanssitaiteilijain Liitto) in 1938, are presented in more detail. The fourth chapter, **Problems of the Modern and the National in Dance Art in Finland**, continues to discuss the cultural context of *Loitsu*. Constructs of the modern and the national as meanings of *Loitsu* are integrated as part of discussions on the national and the modern in dance in Finland, as they were constructed in dance writings during the 1920s and 1930s, for instance in *Tulenkantajat* (Firebearers) in 1929 and in some reviews of the performances of the Finnish National Ballet.

The last two chapters examine the possibility or impossibility of representing dances of the past as danced histories. In the chapter **Towards Dancing Histories** issues of dance reconstruction and other re-makings are discussed. I suggest the idea that we are able to dance history as well as to write history, if history is defined and understood as an interpretation of the past. A practical example of dancing histories is a new *Loitsu*, which has been constructed by using traces of *Loitsu* by Elsa Puolanne and contemporary modes of choreographing and dancing. New constructions of *Loitsu* have been created through co-operation with dancer Leena Gustavson and presented in live lecture demonstrations under title *Loitsu: Danced Histories?*. The last chapter, **Proposals for a New Performative Dance History**, presents *Loitsu: Danced Histories?* in the DVD format. The written part of Chapter 6 summarises the outcomes of the thesis

and argues for a dance history that would not only construct the past as written histories, but also as dancing histories. It returns to the issues and challenges that the recent theory of history has brought up. Dance historians and dance artists are challenged to make danced experiments with dances of the past and to be as transparent as possible in their theoretical and practical starting points and choices during the process.

NOTES

- ¹ The description of the first moments of *Loitsu* based on the material, reviews and programme leaflets, in the scrapbooks of Elsa Puolanne and interviews of Elsa Puolanne and Mirri Karpio.
- ² The term 'proper' history could be replaced with the term 'traditional' history. However, I decided to use term 'proper' for two reasons. Firstly, oppositions 'proper' versus 'postmodern' are used widely in the discussion of history, for example Richard Evans (1997) and Keith Jenkins (1999). Secondly, for me the term 'proper' characterises better than the term 'traditional' the aim and quality of historical research made by representatives of 'traditional' or 'proper' historians.
- ³ The checking of various sources increased the number of performances to 775 during the research for this doctoral thesis.