

Technology's Ghosts

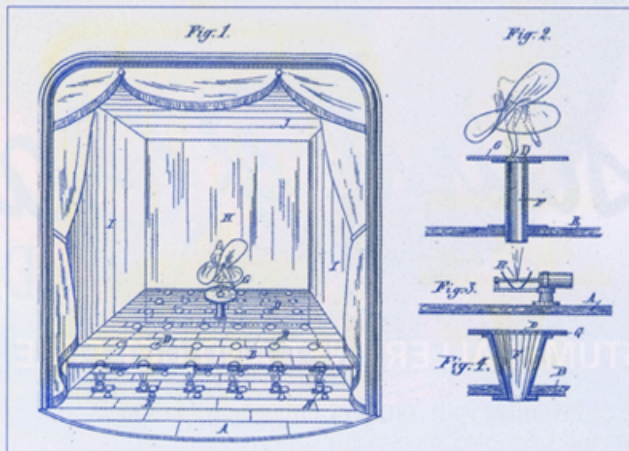
Loie Fuller & the Magic Lantern

BY JODY SPERLING

Before IMAX movies, webcasts, or motion-capture animation, there was Loie Fuller (1862–1928), a dancer who used her era's technology to create marvels. The predigital ingredients of Fuller's hypnotic spectacles included enormous silk costumes propelled into motion by her own dancing body, rays of multicolored light emanating from her specially engineered instruments, and magic-lantern projections. The magic lantern, a type of slide projector created in the mid-17th century, would cast images onto a screen or, in Fuller's case, moving costumes.

Technologies, new and old, allow performers to create the illusion of expanding, transforming, and even disappearing. With Fuller's clever use of fabric, electric lights, and lanterns, she conjured an ephemeral, morphing presence onstage. She never appeared as a woman, but always arose in some ethereal guise: an orchid, a ghost, or a fairy. Her iridescent evolutions mesmerized audiences from the 1890s to the 1920s and made her one of the era's most celebrated performers. An American from a suburb near Chicago, Fuller forged her career in Paris. Because of her remarkable success there, she established a precedent for later contemporaries like Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis.

The patent illustration for Loie Fuller's magic lantern, dated 1894.



Fuller achieved as much, if not more, recognition for her stagecraft “wizardry” than for her dancing. Her theatrical innovations were numerous. She draped the stage in black curtains and dimmed the houselights (not common practices at the time) so that she could emerge from pure blackness into her fiery apparitions. In her signature *Fire Dance*, Fuller used light from a trapdoor below the stage to give the effect of being gradually engulfed by flames. Another Fuller invention was a revolving disc of gels, which enabled a lighting operator to shift hues constantly like a modern-day color scroller. For *Mirror Dance*, mirrors created an infinite recession of “Loie Fullers.” She painted her costumes with phosphorescent pigments to create glow-in-the-dark effects in her *Radium Dance*. She traveled with her own entourage of electricians who were specially trained to execute elaborate choreographies of light.

But it was her magic-lantern projections that most eerily foreshadow 21st-century developments. Fuller allied herself with scientific advances by projecting photographs of the moon onto her swirling silks in *Le Firmament*. Later, she

used microscopic photographs of cancer cells, blown up to abstraction. Everything was fair game. In one dance, portraits of Presidents Washington and Cleveland flashed onto her skirts.

So many dancers tried to imitate Fuller's lantern effects that catalogs even sold special slides (such as angels, spiderwebs, or star bursts) for this purpose. Fuller always designed her own effects. And her lanterns worked in subtle conjunction with other illumination sources. Fuller was fiercely secretive about her methods. Often she experimented with flammable chemicals and once caused a laboratory explosion that singed her eyelashes, but left her otherwise unscathed.

An apotheosis of Fuller's lantern experiments came in 1908 with *Ballet of Light*, a work she had choreographed for her school. In this cinematic spectacle, images were projected onto “gauzes” hung at the front of the stage while Fuller's young “muses,” clad in draperies, waved scarves and danced behind the drop-screens as if amid the shifting landscapes. *Ballet of Light* took the spectator on a geographic journey—much like an IMAX movie—to experience the sea, the frozen north, a volcanic eruption, aurora borealis, falling stars, and finally a garden of butterflies. One critic described it as an “orgy of luminosity.”

In a full circle of technology, my recreation of *Ballet of Light* uses projections to simulate the effects that Fuller created, more magically, with lanterns. If you look between the pixels, maybe you'll find Fuller's ghost.

Jody Sperling is a dancer, choreographer, scholar, and artistic director of *TimeLapse Dance*.

Jody Sperling in *Dance of the Elements*, a solo based on Fuller's work.

