The Magdalene Sisters (2002) and Little Black Spiders (2012)

Submission to *Film International*

Article title:

The Magdalene Sisters (2002) and *Little Black Spiders* (2012): Liberation of the Body Along with Modernist Dancers Mary Wigman and Isadora Duncan

Author:

Katrijn Bekers

Author Bio:

Katrijn Bekers holds two master's degrees from the University of Antwerp (Belgium) – one in Theatre and Film Studies (Department of Literature and Linguistics) and the other in Film Studies and Visual Culture (Department of Communication Studies). Currently, she is working as a Ph.D. student at the same university on her project called "The Fourth-Wave Feminist Biopic: Representation, Production and Reception". On the side, she writes film criticism for the Flemish film magazines *Humbug* and *Fantômas*. Her bachelor's thesis has been published by the Oxford Academic journal *Adaptation*.

ORCID:

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9015-5449

Keywords:

The Magdalene Sisters, Little Black Spiders, Modernist Dance, Body, Mary Wigman, Isadora Duncan

Abstract:

This article closely examines the contrasting ways in which The Magdalene Sisters (Peter Mullan, 2002) and Little Black Spiders (Patrice Toye, 2012) portray their characters' bodily liberation from their oppressive Catholic environments. At its release in 2012, Little Black Spiders was presented as the Belgian counterpart to the Irish The Magdalene Sisters. Both films revolve around young women who have been sent to Catholic asylums after having committed 'bodily sins'. Given the pivotality of dance scenes to the portrayal of physicality in the films, this article constructively adopts a dance theoretical framework. As The Magdalene Sisters and Little Black Spiders respectively show a close affinity with the works of modernist dancers Mary Wigman and Isadora Duncan, these dancers' philosophies and theories on physicality will be applied to gain a deeper understanding of the representation of physicality in the films under discussion.

The Magdalene Sisters (2002) and *Little Black Spiders* (2012): Liberation of the Body Along with Modernist Dancers Mary Wigman and Isadora Duncan

When Patrice Toye's *Little Black Spiders* was released in 2012, many film critics and distributors presented the film as the Belgian counterpart to Peter Mullan's Irish feature *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002). While *The Magdalene Sisters* is set in the 1960s in Ireland, and *Little Black Spiders* in the 1970s in Belgium, the films tell comparable stories of girls who are hidden away in Catholic asylums for so-called 'fallen' women – women who lost their virginity or became pregnant out of wedlock, or were simply deemed too attractive. In *Little Black Spiders* the girls are sent to such an asylum to let their bellies grow out of the public eye. In the case of *The Magdalene Sisters*, the girls are sent to a similar asylum to atone for the 'sins' they have committed. By performing hard labor in an infamous 'Magdalene laundry' they are supposed 'purify' their souls. In both films, the girls' Christian families see these asylums – secluded from the rest of the world, amid forests and fields – as the ideal places to hide their daughters' shameful bodies.

Christianity's denial of female and sexual physicality is immediately auditorily and visually conveyed in *The Magdalene Sisters*' opening scene. The film starts with wedding festivities – Catholic wedding festivities, as emphasized by a close-up of a cross pendant –, during which Margaret, one of the film's main characters, is raped by her cousin in a small backroom. When returning to the dance floor after this horrific event, the traumatized Margaret tells another woman what happened to her – or that is at least what the viewer assumes she says since her voice is muted. The traditional Irish percussion music overrules her utterances. When the story is passed on to other family members, this happens completely inaudibly as well. By letting this Catholic music hush an account of bodily disgrace, the film instantly suggests that Christianity demands 'sins of the flesh' to be concealed. While all other wedding guests have piously conformed to the set pattern of the virtuous step dance, Margaret has broken the rules of decorum and – even though she could not help it – committed a bodily sin, which her Christian family cannot tolerate. Her parents see no other solution than to send their daughter away.

Whereas the traditional step dance in *The Magdalene Sisters* represents the prudish values of Christianity, the dance that is central to the film's Belgian counterpart *Little Black Spiders* represents the complete opposite. It is a mythical, ecstatic dance – a dance that celebrates rather than represses bodily freedom.

This article closely examines the contrasting ways in which *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Little Black Spiders* portray physicality. Given the pivotality of dance scenes to the portrayal of physicality in both films, it is fruitful to adopt a dance theoretical framework. More specifically, the philosophies on physicality and dance of modernist dancers Mary Wigman (1886-1973) and Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) prove to be extremely helpful to gain a deeper understanding of the workings of physicality in *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Little Black Spiders* respectively. Both Wigman and Duncan are generally known as feminist dancers who aimed at freeing the body from Christian moralities. In similar ways, the protagonists of the films under discussion also free their bodies from the rigor of the Christian ideals of physicality. Wigman's and Duncan's practices and ideas have been extensively theorized by academics, but they

themselves also published their philosophies. In the course of the article, I will refer to their writings as well as to academic analyses of their practices.

Important to note is that neither Toye nor Mullan has ever referred to having been influenced by these dancers. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate, Toye's work shows affinity with Duncan's work and Mullan's with Wigman's. Moreover, my original approach of comparing *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Little Black Spiders* to Wigman's and Duncan's philosophies on physicality and dance allows me to present new readings of these contrasting films, as well as to gain deeper insight into the ways these films portray the young bodies of their female protagonists – bodies that are vulnerable, pregnant, sexually abused, oppressed, tormented and/or sexually awakening. Throughout my analysis, it will be argued that even though they do so in substantially different ways, the protagonists in both films manage to liberate their bodies from physical oppression.

Mary Wigman and Isadora Duncan: Freeing the Body from Christian Restrictions

Modernist dancers Mary Wigman and Isadora Duncan both used dance to free their bodies from Christian morality. Kimerer L. LaMothe (2006: 111) reports that 'Duncan decried Christian teachings and practices that encourage hostility toward dance, human bodies, or the bodies of women' and accordingly developed a new theory and practice of dance that allowed her to revalue Christian values towards the (female, dancing) body (2006: 128). The term generally used to describe Duncan's novel type of dance is 'Freier Tanz', which points to her fascination with letting her body roam unrestrictedly in the realm of nature, dressing it in wide tunics, baring her feet and loosening her hair so that it could freely waver in the wind.

Alexandra Kolb (2009: 150) emphasizes that for Duncan's German colleague Mary Wigman modernist dance similarly was a 'necessary step towards [...] liberation from constraints of previous female dancing'. Wigman broke with ballet and social step dances by exploring the possibilities of a dance that eradicated Christian constrictions on the body (Kolb 2009: 149, Ragona 1994: 56). Even though Wigman's conception of dance as a way to reclaim her body was similar to Duncan's, the specific operationalizations of their shared conviction substantially differed. Rather than with graceful free movement, scholars relate Wigman's dance practices to the spastic movements that are typical of hysteria, the infamous physical and mental illness theorized by the German and French psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Jean-Martin Charcot in the early twentieth century (cf. Marshall 2020: 61-86). Kolb (2009: 158) is one such scholar who connects the symptoms of hysteria to Duncan's dancing which is characterized by 'the total loss of self-control' and 'wild frenzy'.

Through their respective interpretations of the body as free and the body as hysteric, Duncan and Wigman thus succeeded in revaluing the restrictive Christian ideal of non-physicality. Melissa Ragona (1994: 50) additionally accentuates the importance of the paradigm of the 'ecstatic', which empowered Wigman as well as Duncan to question the notion of female '(non)corporeality' that dominated their time.

The rest of this essay will argue that the notions of ecstasy, hysteria and bodily freedom are central to the ways the protagonists of *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Little Black Spiders* approach their physicality, and more specifically, how they resist the Christian asylums' repression of their bodies.

Dressed/Undressed

One of the most efficient ways for the asylums to repress their inmates' bodies is to clothe them. As Irena Makarushka indeed observes in *The Magdalene Sisters* (2012, 18), the Magdalene asylum's nuns completely cover and thereby hide and desexualize the Magdalene girls' bodies: '[f]rom the drab long brown dresses and blue work aprons to their high-necked long nightgowns, the clothes [...] mask the body. In an asexual culture where the body is seen as evil, the clothing [...] is designed to conceal even a hint of breasts'. Makarushka's description of the Magdalene girls' clothes is strikingly similar to Susan Manning's report of Mary Wigman's costume in her dance entitled *Witch Dance*: 'a length of cloth attached at neck, wrists, and thighs [...] In a sense, the costume functions to mask the body, to blur its female contours' (2006 [1993]: 41).

While in *The Magdalene Sisters* these wide dresses represent the girls' confinement within the institution (cf. Makarushka 2012: 17-18), for Wigman this way of dressing was not a way to repress her body (Manning 2006 [1993]: 41), but rather a means to resist the figurative and literal physical corset into which she was forced by society. Eventually, one of *The Magdalene Sisters*' main characters, Crispina, similarly (but more radically) uses her body-covering clothes – the only possession she still has in the asylum – to resist a bodily regime in which she does not feel comfortable. By wetting her high-necked nightgown with cold water before going to bed in the asylum's freezing attic, she hopes to never wake up again, and thereby escape from the bodily constraints that she cannot bear. Crispina thus appropriates the amorphous clothing that is meant to repress her body and turns it against the institution by converting it into a means to free her body.

Interestingly, Manning (2006 [1993]: 41) elaborates her description of Wigman's costume in *Witch Dance* by comparing it to the costume worn by Isadora Duncan in her *Ave Maria* dance. As opposed to Wigman who dressed in a shapeless piece of clothing, Duncan wore a 'long, loose dress gathered at the waist that identifies her as "feminine" and that simultaneously conceals and reveals the contours of her female body' (Manning 2006 [1993]: 41). This description of Duncan's clothing, in turn, can be brought into relation to the costumes worn by the protagonists of *Little Black Spiders*. Just like Duncan's dress, their uniforms simultaneously conceal and reveal the contours of their female bodies. Their light blue apron-like dresses conceal their pregnant bellies but are at the same gathered at the waist, revealing feminine shapes.

In *The Magdalene Sisters*, the girls' baggy and uniform asylum clothes subtract their bodies from any hint of personality, just as Mary Wigman's costume 'frames the dancer not as a persona' (Manning 2006 [1993]: 41); but the girls in *Little Black Spiders*, on the contrary, personalize their plain uniforms by adding their own accessories to them, such as their own jewelry and jackets. By personalizing their clothes, the girls can – in a similar way as Duncan (Manning 2006 [1993]: 41) – distinguish themselves from their surroundings as well as from each other. It is a way for them to show that they refuse to simply commit to the asylum's regime of bodily defeminization and anonymization.

The girls' costumes in both films are telling, but even more noteworthy is the girls' nakedness in a couple of scenes. A comparison of the settings in which these scenes occur reveals the core difference in the films' approaches to nudity. In *The Magdalene Sisters*, the

naked girls are seen shivering in a dark, dirty and cold shower room. Disturbing shades and stains on the walls and floor render the space extremely disagreeable. In *Little Black Spiders*, on the other hand, protagonist Katharina is seen taking a shower in an immaculate, bright and white room, from which a sense of purity emanates.

The appearance of the shower rooms is in line with the body images that are put forward. In *The Magdalene Sisters* emphasis lies on the ugliness of the girls' bodies. Twentieth-century, European beauty standards are absent: we see waists and bellies with bulges and breasts that are not the same size and hang down – which is completely normal, especially regarding the fact that many of them only just gave birth to their babies. The nun who supervises them, however, unabashedly exclaims: 'some of you could do with cutting down on the potatoes'. Further in the scene, the same obscene nun makes fun of the girls by letting them line up in front of her. Scrutinizing their completely naked bodies, she deeply humiliates them by pointing at their supposed imperfections and by deciding which one has the 'biggest breasts', 'littlest breasts', 'biggest bottom', and 'hairiest' pubic area. When one of the girls, Crispina, is 'awarded' the prize of the hairiest, she bursts out in tears. The hysterical features of her reaction, such as spastic contraction of her face and shortness of breath destabilize the nun's amusement, inciting her to waive the continuation of her 'game' by agitatedly screaming: 'Ah, put your clothes on, the lot of you'.

This humiliating bathroom incident later appears to form a reason for Crispina to attempt suicide twice. As discussed above, killing herself remains the only way for her to reclaim agency over her own body. After a failed attempt to freeze herself to death, she decides to hang herself. When she dangles on a towel knotted around her neck, the camera lingers on her red face for an uncannily long time. During these long minutes, the viewer sees Crispina displaying a broad variety of the symptoms of hysteria: writhing, spasms, shortness of breath, and convulsive fits. Whereas these sorts of hysterical traits are usually seen as signs of female repression and an unconscious female illness, in Crispina's case – just as in Wigman's philosophy (cf. McLary 2003: 364) – these traits originate in a deliberate, conscious choice for terminating repression. The nun intended the degrading game to be disempowering for the girls and their bodies, but the event eventually empowers Crispina to take ultimate agency over her physical existence.

Due to the obscene nun's game, the Magdalene girls feel dirtier after their shower than before. Remarkably, while it is suggested that they initially undressed to take a shower, we never get to see them cleaning themselves. In the shower scene in *Little Black Spiders*, contrastingly, Katharina's body – just like the shower room itself – looks immaculate and stands under an endless stream of warm water. Regarding the purifying quality of water in Christianity, one could argue that the water flowing over her head, arms, breasts, pregnant belly and legs metaphorically cleanses her body from the bodily sin she has committed – especially since the film attaches a sense of purity to Katharina's persona in multiple other ways. It does so by, for example, establishing a visual connection between Katharina and the Holy Virgin Mary. In one of the first scenes of the film, a close-up of a painting of Mary is followed by a shot of the pious-looking Katharina, clearly aligning the two with each other. According to Kirsten Kumpf Baele and Sofie Decock (2017: 109), the idea of Katharina's purity is even more strengthened as 'Katharina' means 'purity' and refers to Catherine of Alexandria, the Catholic saint who symbolizes chastity.

However, the idea of the shower purifying Katharina is opposed by the fact that the voice-over accompanying the shower scene reveals how intensely Katharina longs for a physical re-connection to the father of her baby. Furthermore, the idea of Katharina's purity is also challenged by director Toye's choice to show full-frontal nudity in this scene. In this way, Katharina no longer resembles the Holy Virgin or Saint Catherine, but rather the ancient goddess Venus: the portrayal of Katharina's naked body (Fig. 1) echoes Sandro Botticelli's renaissance painting *The Birth of Venus* – Botticelli is indeed known for painting 'pregnant Venuses' (cf. Dressen 2020: 114). Director Toye thus shifts the portrayal of Katharina as a paragon of purity to her portrayal as a goddess of sex and desire.

Notably, Isadora Duncan – who had a special fondness for Botticelli's work and ancient culture – has often been seen as the incarnation of Botticelli's Venus as well (cf. Brandstetter 2015, 118). Katharina's resemblance to Venus and Duncan is meaningful since just like Venus and Duncan (cf. Francis 1994: 33), she champions open sexual expression and believes in free motherhood. The shower scene shows that, along with her clothes, Katharina throws off the model of purity into which she is forced by her Christian environment. The water does not wash away her sexual desire, as director Toye might at first suggest, but reinforces it.

Mirrors as Means to Appropriate Beauty/Ugliness

At another point in *Little Black Spiders*, Toye's visualization of Katharina's body reminds of Venus again. Shots of Katharina looking into a mirror seamlessly inscribe themselves into the painterly tradition of depicting Venus together with her reflection. Standing in front of the mirror, Katharina washes her pregnant belly. Instead of shying away from her own nude body as she should according to strict Christian morality, she admires it. The act of washing is not a way to cleanse her body from its sins, as Christian symbolism would suggest, but becomes a way to reinforce her sexuality and pregnancy, as she lovingly touches her belly while washing herself. Katharina subverts Christian symbolism and appropriates the ritual of washing as a ritual of reconnecting with her bodily existence. By looking into the mirror while undressing and washing her pregnant body instead of shying away from it, she fully embraces the so-called 'sin' she has committed.

The Magdalene Sisters includes a very contrasting mirror scene, in which not beauty but ugliness is foregrounded. Every time the girls in the Magdalene asylum misbehave, the inexorable Sister Bridget shaves their heads. After a failed attempt to escape the convent, Bernadette, one of the film's protagonists, is deemed to receive this cruel treatment. The fierce-tempered girl does not merely obey, however, and hysterically protests. Sister Bridget, for her part, stays cold-blooded and does not shy away from hurting Bernadette with her scissors. Afterward, with shaved hair and a blood-covered face, Bernadette is obliged to look into a mirror, while hearing her superior's shrieking voice say: 'I want you to see yourself as you really are. Now that your vanity is gone and your arrogance defeated [...]'. Emphasizing how unattractive Bernadette has become, Sister Bridget assumes that she managed to break the girl's confidence and self-love.

I will use Wigman's philosophy, however, to argue that Bernadette's ugliness is not necessarily negative or disempowering. In her book *The Language of Dance*, Wigman describes a moment in her life at which she was intrigued by her terrifying reflection:

> When, one night, I returned to my room utterly agitated, I looked into the mirror by chance. What it reflected was the image of one possessed, wild and dissolute, repelling and fascinating. The hair unkempt, the eyes deep in their sockets [...]. (1966: 40)

This description seamlessly applies to Bernadette's mirror-reflected face. Her face looks equally savage and disgusting, her hair equally messy, and her eyes equally dark. Even though Wigman was initially shocked by her reflection ('I shuddered at my own image'), she reports that ultimately she felt empowered by her appearance, recounting that '[i]t was wonderful [...] to imbibe the powers which usually dared to stir only weakly beneath one's civilized surface' (1966: 40). She points out that most of the time people's true selves, their internal powers, are forcedly hidden underneath polite exteriors. Being ugly enabled Wigman to claim her exterior and to powerfully express her interior turbulence. This is exactly what happens to Bernadette. The savage appearance, clenched teeth and fierce, bloody eyes we see in the mirror's reflection reveal her internal anger and sense of revenge. Ironically, Sister Bridget's mutilation of Bernadette's body has not led to humility but has helped Bernadette to externalize her inner rage. The fact that Bernadette confidently stares into the mirror instead of shying away from her deformed appearance, shows that rather than being 'defeated' by her physical transformation, as is claimed by Sister Bridget, she appropriates her transformation and is empowered by it.

Empowered by Nature

Little Black Spiders does not only breathe the atmosphere of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, but it also seems to mirror his other celebrated masterpiece, *Primavera*. In front of dark silhouettes of trees through which a light background peeks, Primavera shows nine mythological figures: Mercury, the Three Graces, goddess of Spring Flora, the nymph Chloris, god of the west wind Zephyrus, goddess of love Venus, and Cupid. The round bellies of the female figures seem to indicate that they are pregnant. A similar idyllic composition of young pregnant women in a dark forest set against a light background appears in *Little Black Spiders* (Fig. 2).

This same *Primavera* painting was of great value to Isadora Duncan. A reproduction of the artwork hung above her bed, is known to have been an inspiration for her dances (Preston 2011: 158), and emanates her fascination with nature. For Duncan nature was the source of dance (Anderson 2008: 357), as she herself also emphasizes: 'I have not at all copied, as is believed, figures from Greek vases, friezes, or paintings. I have learned from them how to study Nature' (Duncan 1928: 102). Similarly, it was not so much the *Primavera* painting an sich that inspired Duncan for her art. Rather, the painting gave her a deeper understanding of nature, the powers of which would inspire her dances. Duncan's aim was not to imitate nature, but to feel it and to translate the impulses it evokes into movement (LaMothe 2006: 133). By indulging oneself in the wind breezing through leaves and the fluttering wings of birds, 'every fiber of [dancers'] bodies, sensitive and alert, responds to the melody of Nature and sings with her', she contends (1928: 82).

Similar to Duncan's dances, the mythical dance secretly performed by the girls in *Little Black Spiders* in the middle of the film originates from their connection to nature. The girls are regularly seen sitting and wandering in the forest that surrounds the asylum. By executing this

physical activity, they apply Duncan's method of gymnastics. This method encourages dancers to exercise and walk outside, surrounded by natural vegetation (cf. LaMothe 2006: 133). In *Little Black Spiders*, the girls truly indulge themselves in the forest, as Franco (2018: 24) notices, they 'merge into the landscape'. Their immersion into their natural surroundings is strengthened in two ways: auditorily, as the film's soundtrack foregrounds the tweeting of birds and rustling of leaves; and haptically, as the girls often lie down, touching high grass and autumn leaves.

The girls' mythical dance is not only conceived in a similar way as Duncan's dances (through a connection with nature), but its movements also closely resemble Duncan's. One of Duncan's characteristic movements is what LaMothe (2006: 135) describes as 'arms stretched upwards toward the sky' and 'fingers open to channel to rays of the sun'. These very gestures are included in the dance of the girls in *Little Black Spiders*. At various moments, the girls' wide-spread fingers reach to the ceiling, haloed by yellow candlelight.

Next to sun rays, also the natural element of the sea wave is a vital inspiration for Duncan's dancing. She writes that '[i]f [...] one seeks a point of physical beginning for the movement of the human body, there is a clue in the undulating motion of the wave' (Duncan 1969 [1928]: 78). LaMothe (2006: 105) poetically describes how Duncan's movements indeed

> evoke waves – the tide on the beach, the curl and crash of a rising force, ebb and flow. Forward and back, across the stage, right to left and left to right, cycles of movement, turning and returning, sweep the spectator into a world washed with enabling power.

It is exactly this type of movement that the girls in *Little Black Spiders* carry out. They move their bodies back and forth and turn in cyclical shapes. Whereas the girls are at first obliged to go for walks in the forest as a means to keep them quiet, they start appropriating nature after a while and use it as an inspiration for an ecstatic dance performance.

Liberating Hair, Tunic and Attic

In a similar vein as Duncan, whose ecstatic movements originated from 'a cascade of energy down through the body' (LaMothe 2006: 135), the girls in *Little Black Spiders* are impelled by an inner force, which moves them towards a Dionysian climax. Because of this state of ecstasy, the girls can, as Duncan does, 'free the body from a reifying of modern social hierarchies' (Ragona 1994: 50). According to Duncan, ecstasy was indeed not only a 'transformative' but also a 'transgressive' tool (Ragona 1994: 50). It was a way to resist the strictness and formality of ballet, the dominant dance form in her time.

Another way in which Duncan rebelled against the strictness of ballet, was her choice for 'open, streaming hair', which implied a radical 'counter aesthetic' to the tight chignon haircut of the classical ballerina, signifying 'discipline and clarity' (Brandstetter 2015: 149). Interestingly, the Mother Superior asylum in *Little Black Spiders*, Sœur Simone, wears her hair exactly as a ballerina: neatly tied in a chignon. The fact that the girls in *Little Black Spiders*, contrastingly, wear their hair loose and unkempt, and energetically shake it, is therefore meaningful: it represents their utter rebellion against the constraints of Sœur Simone's strict views on physicality and morality.

Towards the culmination of their performance, the girls' hair is wild and their rebellion most fierce. At this point, their performance adopts an explicitly sexual dimension. In

transparent plastic costumes that reveal their bodies – and are highly reminiscent of Duncan's translucent tunics – they heavily pant, sweat, stick out their tongues and uncover their breasts. Hence, the climax of the girls' dance is simultaneously the culmination of their physical and sexual liberation from the constraints of the asylum. Ironically, it is in the very attic where they are hidden to prevent them from conducting any further 'lewd' behavior, that the girls organize a sexual excess. Rather than being a place that deprives them of any sexual satisfaction, as it is meant to be, the attic is appropriated by the girls and they transform it into a place where they can, away from the outside world, fully experiment with their bodies.

By openly expressing their sexuality, the girls are in line with Duncan who 'advocated (…) sexual expression in the social realm' (Francis 1994: 33). By doing so while dancing, however, they deviate from Duncan's dance practice, as the latter 'rejected sexuality as a mode of expression in performance' (Francis 1994: 33). Duncan's reason for not implementing her sexual expression in her dances was that it would lead to an eroticization, assimilation and fragmentation of the female performer by the audience, whereas she strove to women's bodily wholeness and self-control (Francis 1994: 28, 33). As the dance in *Little Black Spiders* is performed by the girls only for their own amusement and not for a diegetic audience, they can, however, freely implement sexual expression in their dance without being eroticized. They only eroticize themselves. They fully claim their sexuality and their bodies for their pleasures.

Disrupting Mechanicalization

Whereas in *Little Black Spiders* the relation between the human body and nature proves to be fundamental, in the film's Irish counterpart, the relation between the human body and machine is centralized. Instead of being immersed in nature, the Magdalene girls are submerged in an industrial environment. In the semi-industrialized laundry where they are forced to work long hours, their bodies are surrounded by machines. The movements their arms and hands must execute are so quick, repetitive and mechanical that they seem to become part of these machines. This mechanicalization of the body is enhanced by the way the girls' bodies are put on screen: as Makarushka (2012: 18) notes, their hands are framed in a 'disembodied' manner. This highlights the nuns' aim to disembody the girls by turning them into machines.

The only moments during which the girls escape these mechanical movement structures is when they behave hysterically – we see many of the girls get hysterical attacks at some point in the film. They throw their bodies on the ground, clench themselves to beams, scream and shout. Rather than degrading, however, their hysterical attacks are disrupting. Herein the Magdalene girls show a resemblance with Mary Wigman, who was convinced that hysteria could be a feminine strength (McLary 2003: 364). After Wigman, feminist thinkers such as Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément would similarly understand hysteria as a feminist mode of expression as according to them, hysteria has an 'antiestablishment' quality and 'introduces disorder into the well-regulated unfolding of everyday life' (Cixous 1986: 25). Through their hysteric attacks, the Magdalene girls disrupt the mechanics of the Magdalene asylum. Their hysteric, spastic, uncontrolled and furious physical movements allow them to withdraw their bodies from their perpetual mechanical structures. Since the rigidness of the work in the laundry can be seen as metaphorically representing the Christian lifestyle (think of the many cross shapes that decorate the laundry), breaking free from the mechanics of the laundry equals breaking free from rigid Christian physicality.

The modus operandi of the Magdalene laundry, which is a combination of human handwork and industrialized techniques, recalls the ideology of Bauhaus, the early twentieth-century art and design movement that pivoted on a mixture of arts, crafts and industrialization. Interestingly, the decor of the Magdalene laundry presented in the film echoes a painting of one of this movement's renowned painters, Wassily Kandinsky's *Hard in Soft* (1927). Similarly to this artwork, the laundry's design consists of a composition of circles, arches, crosses, squares, grates, and horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines (Fig. 3). Also the bleak color scheme that predominates in Kandinsky's painting corresponds to the beige, brown, black and hints of blue, green and burgundy in the laundry.

Kandinsky's Bauhaus paintings portray 'the various invisible forces pulsating within our bodies' (Davidson 2009 [1988]: xi). Rather than conveying them by means of 'imitating the visible contours of the human body', however, Kandinsky preferred to represent them using an abstract 'point or line' (Davidson 2009 [1988]: xi). For example, in his work, a zigzag line signifies a feeling of discontinuity. Apart from its concrete execution, Kandinsky's idea of making inner forces and feelings visible in art can be connected to Mary Wigman's ideas about using dance to express inner feelings – as Mary Ann Santos Newhall has done, for instance: 'Through her excavations of meaning in dance, Wigman bears a resemblance to another Expressionist, the painter Wassily Kandinsky. She shares his belief that spiritual impulses could be made visible in art' (2009: 71). I argue that Kandinsky and Wigman's shared practice of externalizing inner forces reverberates in the (Kandinsky-like) laundry in *The Magdalene Sisters*.

At the beginning of the film, Mother Superior (Sister Bridget) makes clear to the girls that their work in the laundry has a metaphorical character: 'there are not simply clothes and bed linen. These are the earthly means to cleanse your very soul, to remove the stains of the sins you have committed.' Later in the film, it appears, however, that the girls themselves do not experience their work in the laundry as a means to 'purify' their souls. Rather, they use the forced labor to strengthen and channel their anti-Magdalene feelings and impious inner forces. This is exemplified by two scenes that show two of the Magdalene girls, Una and later also Bernadette, frantically toiling in the laundry after having been punished by Sister Bridget. By hysterically rubbing and brushing they externalize the anger that Sister Bridget aroused.

Furthermore, it is made explicit that Bernadette's inner turbulence is not only channeled through her physical labor in the laundry but is also metaphorically represented by the laundry's steaming and rotating machines. As discussed before, Sister Bridget forces Bernadette to look in a mirror after having shaved her hair. The subsequent close-up of Bernadette's reflection centralizes one of her angry eyes. Through a superimposition effect, the round shape of the eye iris then transforms into one of the laundry's spinning gears, implying that the inner rage we see through her eyes is exteriorized by the powerful machines – the circular shapes of which remind us of the circles that are prominently present in Kandinsky's *Hard in Soft*, which equally represent inner forces (cf. Davidson 2009 [1988]: xi). Just as Kandinsky tried to convey inner emotions using geometrical forms, so does *The Magdalene Sisters* director Mullan. Thus, whereas the nuns intend the laundry to be a space for the girls to purify their souls, the girls use the machines and their physical labor in the laundry for their own ends: not to cleanse their souls, but to vent and invigorate their immoral feelings.

Reclaiming Viscerality

In both *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Little Black Spiders*, the externalization of what is inside the body does not only manifest in a figurative sense (i.e. the externalization of feelings), but also in a literal sense. In both films, attention is paid to the various body fluids the girls excrete. In this way, Duncan and Wigman's philosophy of externalizing what is inside the body gets a visceral interpretation. Visceral physicality and body fluids have been theorized by Julia Kristeva in her seminal theory of the abject (1982). Alexandra Kolb interestingly connects Kristeva's theory of the abject to Wigman's philosophy of the body, since both 'deployed images of marginalized female figures to subversive ends' (2009: 149). Similar to Wigman and Kristeva who believed that marginalized female bodies have the power to subvert the established order, the girls in *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Little Black Spiders* subvert their asylums' ruling order by addressing and appropriating their stigmatized female body fluids.

Each biofluid that features in both *Little Black Spiders* and *The Magdalene Sisters* is connected to fertility and childbearing. Yet, the films portray these fluids in substantially different ways. The latter emphasizes their dirtiness and their character of decay, while the former links them to beauty and to the new life they generate. The films' contrasting connotations of these fluids are in line with the respective dancers with whom I connect them. Similar to *The Magdalene Sisters*, Wigman portrays the body in relation to ugliness, terror, grief and death (cf. Brandstetter 2015: 20, 217, 121). Contrastingly, comparable to Duncan who glorified the pregnant body and pictured it as the impeccable, perfect women with round bellies depicted in Renaissance art (cf. Duncan 1928: 98, Roseman 2004: 67), *Little Black Spiders* adorns its main characters' expectant bodies by strongly emphasizing their beauty rather than their unpleasant features. None of the bodily fluids in *Little Black Spiders* is presented as filthy or obscene.

Uterine blood is one of the body fluids that leave an impression in both *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Little Black Spiders*. A scene in the former shows two of the Magdalene girls in the laundry, Crispina and Bernadette, washing bed linens and sanitary wraps that are soiled with menstrual blood. Crispina offers to take over Bernadette's 'bloody ones', saying that 'a lot of the girls hate the bloody ones, but I don't mind'. Demonstrating the best way to tackle them, she explains 'you have to soak them in cold water first with a little bit of salt. Then rub it like that' – upon which we see her rubbing a dirty, bloodied towel. Rather than disgust, though, her face displays a sprinkle of pleasure. When the laundry's supervisor, Katie, subsequently reprimands Crispina for chatting (which is not allowed in the laundry) and asks 'what were you talking about?', Crispina explains that she was demonstrating how to wash bloodied towels, showing the items under discussion. Katie appears to be caught off guard and utterly abhorred, fiercely reacting 'get them away from me. You're a disgusting girl!' At this point, Crispina succeeds in (albeit shortly) undermining her superior's authority by foregrounding menstrual blood which is deemed sinful by the Christian church. In line with Kristeva and Wigman's theories, this scene illustrates that the crossing of the border between the physical inside and outside has the potential to disrupt the established order. By taking pleasure in touching menstrual blood, Crispina reclaims the viscerality of the female body that Christianity tries to hide at all costs.

Whereas the menstrual blood in *The Magdalene Sisters* hints at egg cells that failed to be fertilized, the uteral blood in *Little Black Spiders* is very much connected to the emergence of new life. After having given birth to her daughter, Katharina starts to bleed heavily. What starts as a fine trickle of blood running down her leg, leads up to an unsettling pool of blood surrounding her body. However, as opposed to *The Magdalene Sisters*, which frames blood in a disturbing way, the blood in *Little Black Spiders* is very much aestheticized. Kumpf Baele and Decock (2017: 108) observe that in this scene Katharina is dressed in a bright red sweater and her baby wrapped in a white blanket, and that 'through the choice of these stark colors Toye reinforces the film's themes of passion, pain, and purity'. Curiously, Kumpf Baele and Decock do not address the blood, nor the fact that its color complements Katharina's sweater. It is clear, however, that rather than disturbing the aesthetic composition, the deep-red fluid enhances the appealing artistic arrangement of the scene, as opposed to the brownish red that adds to the disturbingly bleak and unhealthy-looking color palette of *The Magdalene Sisters*. A point of resemblance between the blood in *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Little Black Spiders*, though, is that similarly to Crispina, Katharina touches the blood. By deliberately soaking her hand in this – for Christianity at least – abominable bodily excretion, she reclaims her bodily existence.

Breast Milk and Resurrection

Another maternal fluid addressed in both films is breast milk. In *The Magdalene Sisters*, the breasts of one of the Magdalene girls, Rose, lactate without having a baby to feed. Nearly fainting, Rose stumbles to the bathroom, where another girl – while sitting on the toilet – not very emphatically tells her: 'Don't touch. You'll start leaking all over the place. The nuns go crazy if you start leaking. Best just take the pain.' Rose is advised to keep her fluids within her body in order not to disturb the nuns' Christian codes of female non-corporeality. Since there is no baby to feed, in *The Magdalene Sisters* breast milk is associated with the notions of pain, grief and decay.

In *Little Black Spiders*, on the other hand, breast milk is put forward as a source of beauty, love and new life. The night before Katharina's best friend Roxanne begins to have contractions, milk leaks from her breasts. When Katharina wonders 'what would it taste like?', Roxanne answers: 'I don't know, try it.' Katharina reaches out her hand to Roxanne's breast to carefully swipe some milk from her nipple, after which she moves her finger to her mouth. Rather than hiding the breastmilk, as *The Magdalene Sisters'* Rose is obliged to do according to Christian propriety, Roxanne and Katharina disobey and appropriate their fluids.

After Katharina's death at the end of the film, Katharina's newborn baby girl drinks from Roxanne's breasts, the milk signifying new life – as opposed to *The Magdalene Sisters*, in which it is associated with decay. After the feeding, Roxanne goes to a government agency to officially register the child. Instead of saying that the child's mother died, however, she declares that the baby is her own daughter, and names her 'Katharina'. Doing this, Roxanne 'resurrects' her girlfriend (cf. Kumpf Baele and Decock 2017: 110). Throughout *Little Black Spiders*, Katharina's eventual rebirth is already anticipated by her tasting of Roxanne's milk, as well as by the film's aesthetic, which is reminiscent of Botticelli's paintings that breathe the emergence of new life. These paintings were not only painted during the 'renaissance' period (which literally translates as 're-birth') but also take birth as their subject, as is apparent from

their titles: The *'Birth' of Venus* and *Primavera*, which means 'spring', the season that each year fosters new life.

The idea of Katharina's resurrection is further reinforced by the fact that her body is shown to disconnect from the ground after her death. It floats in the air and ascends. Even though earlier in the film Katharina's physical appearance shifted from a Holy Virgin Mary to a Venus look, here, Katharina is again associated with the Holy Virgin Mary – not only because of her literal assumption but also because of her clothing. Paintings of the Assumption of the Holy Mary always portray Mary veiled in red and blue – the very colors of the sweater and dress Katharina is wearing.

It can thus be argued that throughout *Little Black Spiders* Katharina's body transforms a cyclical structure. In the beginning, she is presented as the incarnation of Mary. For the remainder of the film, she is put forward as the embodiment of Venus. At the very end, then, she is again presented as Mary. In this way, the film seems to convey Duncan's ideal of the 'rebirth of religion' (LaMothe 2006: 15). Duncan did not want an eradication of religion, she wanted a revaluation. She aimed to develop a religion in which bodies could be valued in a different way than Christian morality preached (LaMothe 2006: 108). By letting Katharina re-appear as Mary at its closure, *Little Black Spiders* suggests that such a religion is possible. The film shows how someone who committed multiple 'sins of the flesh' (such as having sex out of wedlock, tasting breast milk and dancing ecstatically), can still ascend to heaven. Thus, next to appropriating her body, Katharina also (posthumously) appropriates her faith. She is presented as the patron of a new Christianity in which bodily restrictions are eased.

Conclusion

In their respective filmic diegeses, the girls in both *Little Black Spiders* and *The Magdalene Sisters* succeed in rebelling against the regime of non-corporeality that dominates the Christian institutions to which they are confined. The protagonists of *Little Black Spiders* offer resistance in a way that resembles modernist dancer Isadora Duncan's revolt against the bodily constraints of Christianity. Similar to her, the girls reclaim their bodily existence by foregrounding their sexuality, femininity, fertility, personality, pregnancy, beauty and ecstasy. All these characteristics culminate in the mythical dance they perform.

The protagonists of *The Magdalene Sisters*, contrastingly, resist the regime of non-physicality through a Mary Wigman-like appropriation of the hysterical, the abject and the ugly. They appropriate the ugliness inflicted upon their bodies and use these features to revolt against their institution. If the prude society in which they live can metaphorically be described as a gigantic traditional dance, such as the one in the film's opening scene, then the girls deliberately refuse to follow its fixed dance steps. Instead, they appropriate the dance and devise their own, rebellious version. The disobedient body image put forward in *The Magdalene Sisters* seamlessly connects to director Peter Mullan's intention of making an indictment film. He wanted to 'poke a finger in the throat of theocracy and to let it be known that people shouldn't tolerate this anymore' (Dawson 2014). Moreover, by portraying the female body as repulsive, Mullan managed to deliver a destabilizing film that goes against the grain of depicting the (tormented) female body as attractive or as an object of desire for the spectator (as is usually the case).

In Toye's *Little Black Spiders*, on the other hand, the protagonists resist the regime of non-corporeality into which they are trapped within the filmic diegesis but remain trapped in the general cinematic trend of portraying the tortured female body as beautiful and erotic, which undermines the film's disruptive potential.

Toye stated, however, that she did not intend to make an indictment film such as *The Magdalene Sisters* (Ruëll 2012). The body image she presents in *Little Black Spiders* connects more to her wish to make a 'hopeful' (Kumpf Baele and Decock 2017: 105), 'honest' film about 'brave girls, friendship and solidarity', told in terms of 'lightness, humor, play and escaping reality' (Vlaamsefilm 2012, my translation). As such, her film subscribes to a broad range of contemporary, female-directed Belgian arthouse films, each of which centralizes the imagination and an aesthetic of the senses (Andrin 2013: 182).

Mullan, for his part, also joins a tradition of films in his national cinema that all 'enabl[e] their viewers to work through the legacy of Irish history in its more traumatic formulations' (Barton 2004: 131). Whereas the bodies of the girls in *Little Black Spiders* are canvases that reflect hope and new life, the bodies of the Magdalene girls reflect trauma and militancy.

References

Anderson, Elizabeth (2008), 'Dancing Modernism: Ritual, Ecstasy and the Female Body', *Literature and Theology*, 22:3, pp. 354–367.

Andrin, Muriel (2013), 'Women Directors in Belgian Cinema', in Marcelline Block and Jeremi Szaniawski (eds.), *Directory of World Cinema: Belgium*, Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, pp. 181–183.

Barton, Ruth (2004), *Irish National Cinema*, London and New York: Routledge.

Brandstetter, Gabrielle (2015), *Poetics of Dance: Body, Image, and Space in the Historical Avant-Gardes*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Cixous, Hélène (1986), *The Newly Born Woman*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Davidson, Scott (2009 [1988]), 'Translator's introduction', in Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, London and New York: Continuum, pp. vii–xiii.

Dawson, Tom (2014), 'Peter Mullan: The Magdalene Sisters. Interviewed by Tom Dawson', *BBC*, September, http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2002/11/21/peter_mullan_magdalene_sisters_interview.shtml. Accessed 10 November 2022.

Dressen, Angela (2020), 'Botticelli's Primavera and Contemporary Commentaries 1', in Berthold Hub and Sergius Kodera (eds.), *Iconology, Neoplatonism, and the Arts in the Renaissance*, New York: Routledge, pp. 136–168.

Duncan, Isadora (1928), *The Art of Dance*, New York: Theatre Arts Books.

Duncan, Isadora (1969 [1928]), *The Art of Dance*, 2nd edition, New York: Theatre Arts Books.

Francis, Elizabeth (1994), 'From Event to Monument: Modernism, Feminism and Isadora Duncan', *American Studies*, 35:1, pp. 25–45.

Franco, Judith (2018), 'The Difficult Job of Being a Girl: Key Themes and Narratives in Contemporary Western European Cinema by Women', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 35:1, pp. 16–30.

Kolb, Alexandra (2009), *Performing Femininity: Dance and Literature in German Modernism*, Bern: Peter Lang.

Kristeva, Julia (1982), *The Powers of Horror* (trans. Leon S. Roudiez), Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Kumpf Baele, Kirsten E., and Sofie Decock (2017), 'Pregnant Girls in the Attic – No Choices: An Analysis of Patrice Toye's Little Black Spiders', in Waltraud Maierhofer and Beth Widmaier Capo (eds.), *Reproductive Rights Issues in Popular Media: International Perspectives*, Jefferson: McFarland & Company, pp. 100–116.

LaMothe, Kimerer L. (2006), *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Makarushka, Irena S. (2012), 'The Magdalene Sisters: How to Solve the Problem of "Bad" Girls', *Journal of Religion & Film*, 16:2, article 1.

Manning, Susan (2006 [1993]), *Ecstasy and the Demon: The Dances of Mary Wigman,* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Marshall, Jonathan W. (2020), 'Traumatic Dances of "the Non-Self": Bodily Incoherence and the Hysterical Archive', in Johanna Braun (ed.), *Performing Hysteria: Images and Imaginations of Hysteria*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, pp. 61–86.

McLary, Laura A. (2003), 'Restaging Hysteria: Mary Wigman as Writer and Dancer', *Studies in 20th Century Literature*, 27:2, article 9.

Preston, Carrie J. (2011), *Modernism's Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Ragona, Melissa (1994), 'Ecstasy, Primitivism, Modernity: Isadora Duncan and Mary Wigman', *American* Studies, 35:1, pp. 47–62.

Roseman, Janet Lynn (2004), *Dance was her Religion: The Spiritual Choreography of Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham*, Chino Valley: Hohm Press.

Ruëll, Niels (2012), 'Little Black Spiders: De zwangerschapstest van Charlotte De Bruyne', *BRUZZ*, September, https://www.bruzz.be/culture/film/little-black-spiders-de-zwangerschapstest-van-charlotte-de-bruyne-2012-09-19.

Santos Newhall, Mary Ann (2009), *Mary Wigman*, Oxon and New York: Routledge.

Smith, James M. (2007), 'The Magdalene Sisters: Evidence, Testimony… Action?', *Signs* 32:2, pp. 431–458.

Vlaamsefilm (2012), 'PRIME reportage: Little black Spiders', *Youtube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGxrEeoznmQ.

Wigman, Mary (1966), *The Language of Dance*, London: Macdonald & Evans.