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## "They Never Dance": The Choreography of "Le Sacre du Printemps", 1913

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## "They Never Dance": The Choreography of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, 1913

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### Abstract

In this text, I discuss Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography of *Le Sacre du Printemps* (henceforth *Sacre*) as it appears in the light of primary source materials from 1913. By focusing on the unique challenges Nijinsky posed to his dancers in terms of movement style and composition, I contest many of the frequently-heard claims made about this work, particularly its danced component, and argue that Nijinsky's choreographic ideas challenged both dancers and critics by questioning the ontological qualities of (art) dance in contemporary discourse.

**Keywords:** *Le Sacre du Printemps*; Nijinsky; Stravinsky; choreography; dance.

### Some Premises for the Analysis

*The fact of the matter is that there has been far too much talk about theories and too little knowledge of the art of dancing. We talk of dancing in terms of painting, music, and even literature, instead of in terms of dancing. Nijinsky is endeavouring to evolve a new school of pantomime. That is quite enough. Let us try to take it on its merits and understand what it seeks to express. (The Nation 2.8.1913.)*

The critic of *The Nation* could be speaking about the current research on the work he describes. Although much has been said of the 1913 premiere of *Sacre*, not many authors have focused on the actual bodies performing on stage. While the musical score has been canonised as a masterpiece, the choreography was only performed nine times<sup>35</sup> before it was withdrawn from the repertory of the company, leaving only scattered remains of critical reception and reminiscences in the archive. In dance, where notation is not

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<sup>35</sup> There were six performances (as well as a public dress-rehearsal) in Paris, three performances in London.

standard practice, 'works' are understood as a living tradition, transmitted from one professional or a group of professionals to the next. This embodied practice is, to use Diana Taylor's (2003: esp. 16-52) term, the repertoire, an ephemeral social practice that can be contrasted with the fixed, hegemonic documents in the archive. In my Foucauldian reiteration of Taylor's argument, the repertoire becomes a re-enacted, constantly changing reiteration of the past in the present. It is embedded in complex interactions with the archive to which we can return but which also always-already limits what we can claim to know about past performances. Thus, the disappearance of a particular work from the active repertoire (of all dance companies) does not entail an actual loss of that work as much as its transformation on the level of archive/repertoire. In a sense, the 1913 *Sacre* figures prominently in both the archive and the repertoire, even if the specific choreography has not been performed since 1913.

However, this epistemological uncertainty of dance – simultaneously ephemeral and static, changing and fixed into a canon of masterworks – is an issue particularly pertinent to the 1913 *Sacre*. In 1987, the work was 'reconstructed' by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer who collected selected parts of the archive, forcing them together into a new saleable product for the repertoire. In the academe, this kind of re-making raised more questions about the processes of "archiving" repertoire and the epistemology of performance,<sup>36</sup> rather than provoked a critical discussion on how exactly this kind of reconstruction fixes the past by stabilising it both epistemologically and ontologically. That is how a large-scale (i.e. very expensive) reconstruction ends up *becoming a new original* and *becoming an archive*, suppressing the need to do critical research on a past work, research that is crucial to understanding the significance of the past in the present. Today, when dance audiences (including many researchers) think of "Nijinsky's *Sacre*" they actually think of Millicent Hodson's choreography, and they see this choreography as (relatively) unchanging and stable.<sup>37</sup> This means that even dance researchers disregard the huge potential for reimagining dance in 1913 – and in 2013 – still in the archive.

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<sup>36</sup> See e.g. Acocella 1991; and Fink 1999: esp. 305-312. On the problems with notions like 'authentic' and 'original' in dance, see Burt 1998; and Carter 1998.

<sup>37</sup> As in Hoogen 1997: esp. 49-53; Jordan 2000: 39-42; Launay 2003; Solomon 2011: esp. 76-77. In other words, despite their awareness of reconstruction as an *imagined* original, dance scholars tend to assert the hegemony of Hodson's interpretation in their actual *analyses* referencing her work as Nijinsky and taking what is shown on stage now as having also been there in 1913. What they miss is how Hodson (1985) builds elaborate arguments about choreography on select, mostly secondary sources, often relying on pure speculation that is obscured in the staged spectacle and by her numerous publications.

Despite its magnificent costumes and sets, a key issue with the so-called reconstruction of *Sacre* is that a source which describes movement does not necessarily describe *choreography*, understood as the spatial and temporal arrangement of movements and stillnesses, gestures and steps, rhythms and paces of a body or a group of bodies. Neither movement nor choreography require musical accompaniment, as these may not necessarily be 'dance' (Lepecki 2006: especially 1-2). In this article, 'choreography' is used in the specific sense of a composition of staged art dance, that is an aesthetic practice with a history and a canon of authors and masterworks, a practice with self-consistent form and temporally and geographically specific conventions acquired through education and practice. One of my points is that the limits of what is understood as 'dance' and how 'dancing' is defined vary; hence, any definitions of what is or is not dance at a given time contain value-judgements, often made in order to exclude certain movement practices from the definition of 'dance' (as with ragtime dances, see Järvinen 2012).

Indeed, one of the most intriguing aspects of the critical reception of Nijinsky's choreographic work is the frequency of this exclusion:

*Il n'y a pas, dans tout le Sacre du printemps, une seule ligne, un seul mouvement d'un seul personnage qui ait une apparence de grâce, d'élégance, de légèreté, de noblesse, de l'éloquence et d'expression: tout est laid, lourdement, platement et uniformément laid. Danseurs et danseuses, presque toujours serrés en groupes épais et compacts, demeurent tassés sur eux-mêmes, ne faisant que des gestes maladroits, raccourcis, rétrécis, étriqués, des gestes d'infirmes et d'ataxiques. Ils agitent leurs bras comme des moignons, et leurs jambes comme si elles étaient en bois. Ils ne dansent jamais: ils ne font que tressauter, trépigner, piétiner et trembloter convulsivement sur place; et lorsqu'ils ont commencé de faire un mouvement quelconque, ils le répètent indéfiniment, jusqu'à la satiété, jusqu'à l'ennui, jusqu'à l'agacement, jusqu'à l'irritation. (Pierre Lalo in *Le Temps* 3.6.1913.)*

Here, Pierre Lalo, the son of the composer Eduard Lalo, not only lists qualities expected of the kind of dance that claims to be art – "grace, elegance, lightness, nobility, eloquence, and expression" – but also describes the aesthetic qualities of *Sacre* – "ugly" – and even some aspects of Nijinsky's choreography – compact groups, repetition of movements, remaining in place – as 'not dancing'. This shows how our understanding of movement, including staged movement, is embedded in assumptions about aesthetic evaluations of beauty and ugliness as well as in codes of appropriateness (propriety and decency), political anxieties about encountering the other (particularly *en masse*), the historical specificity of bodies, affects and cultural signs. In short, it refers to what Reinhardt Koselleck (2004: 255-275) has called "the horizon of expectations" at a given time and place. For the Parisian audiences of 29 May

1913, this horizon of expectations also included (if reminiscences are to be believed) violent protests at the company's audacity of presenting this *thing* as dance.

Although Lalo is repeating a view about dance (graceful, harmonious movement) hegemonic amongst contemporary dance aficionados,<sup>38</sup> his indignation actually shows the novelty and importance of the kind of choreography he criticised. But Lalo, like so many people who have discussed *Sacre* since, never pauses to think *why* a Russian dancer known as a virtuoso in precisely this kind of graceful movement and lauded as a genius of his art form, would be interested in this kind of movement language or these kinds of choreographic devices. Moreover, he does not consider how a dancer, accustomed to the same hegemonic view about what they should be doing on stage, might react to the choreographer's demands.

### **Primitivism in the Russian Context**

In contemporary reviews, the most common justification for the movement qualities that Lalo lists – for better or worse – was that Nijinsky was representing primitive humans (e.g. Boschot in *L'Echo de Paris* quoted in Bullard 1971(ii): 12; Lunacharsky in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 9./22.6.1913). Leaving aside ridiculous claims about Nijinsky and his collaborators recreating a primitive ritual,<sup>39</sup> the question of the primitive clearly did not arise solely from the theme of the ballet, pagan Russia, but rather from the Western perspective on Russia as a primitive nation and on dance as a primitive practice.<sup>40</sup> The prevalence of this discourse is still evident in the research on *Sacre*.

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<sup>38</sup> See e.g. André Suarès in *La Nouvelle revue française* 1.8.1912; Crawford Fitch 1912: 24 on dance as joy; or how Johnson 1913: 186 and *The Dancing Times* August 1913 represent Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'Faune* (1912) as *unnecessarily* restricting dancers to a seemingly two-dimensional stage picture. Later, this kind of dance, "diametrically opposed to his potentialities and natural gifts" (Sert 1953: 125-126) has been represented as indicative of mental illness, because Nijinsky was institutionalised as insane in 1919.

<sup>39</sup> As in Hodson 1985 and 1985b; and Hoogen 1997. These interpretations rest on a theoretical tradition associating dance with primitive rituals that has been repeatedly and thoroughly discredited in dance anthropology – see Buckland 2001/2002: 415. Specifically, they owe much to the set designer of *Sacre*, Nicholas Roerich – in particular his interview in *Rech* 22.11./5.12.1912. Although both Stravinsky and Nijinsky seem to have respected Roerich as an authority on pagan Russia, Nijinsky specifically requested that he not be present at the rehearsals. Diaghilev to Stravinsky 20.12.1912/2.1.1913 in Stravinsky 1997(i): 398.

<sup>40</sup> See below on the Ballets Russes according to Jacques Rivière, who was merely following a trend in the reviews where the Russians were regularly discussed as the guardians of mystical memories of primitive ancestors (to cite *Le Figaro* 27 May 1909) and "the virile impulses of an untamed race" (Johnson 1913: 161). On dance as the primitive origin of art, see e.g. St.-Johnston 1906: 10-3; Fitch 1912: 15-9; Caffin & Caffin 1912: 21-5.

With *Sacre*, the generally positive tone of Russian reviews is also in stark contrast to the generally negative Russian view of Diaghilev's enterprise and the mixed opinion of Western critics (Järvinen 2013). For example, the future Commissar of Enlightenment in the Soviet Union, Anatoly Lunacharsky (in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 9./22.6.1913), discussed how this work overhauled traditional notions of beauty in ballet and, like the former Director of the Imperial Theatres, Prince Sergei Volkonsky (in *Apollon* 6/1913), emphasised that *Sacre* did not aim for archaeological accuracy or ethnographic authenticity in its representation of the primitive.<sup>41</sup> Although it never occurred to Lunacharsky that Nijinsky would have viewed primitive form (as well as primitivist developments in contemporary art) as beautiful *in and of itself*, he at least did not mistake Russians *for* primitives in the manner of many of the French critics praised in research as truly understanding *Sacre*.<sup>42</sup> As an example of the latter, in his first article on *Sacre* for *La Nouvelle revue française* (August 1913), Jacques Rivière claimed that the Russians had a kind of a primitive hive mind and he explicitly rested his appraisal of the new work on this presumed racial, that is, biological difference:

*Cette petite troupe d'hommes n'a pas été entamée. [--] Entre eux et nous il y a la distance d'une race à une autre. [--] S'il leur est impossible de communiquer avec nous, lorsqu'ils sont entre eux, ils ont une extraordinaire faculté de mêler leurs âmes, de sentir et de penser la même chose à plusieurs. Leur race est trop jeune encore pour que se soient construites en chaque être ces milles petites différences, ces délicates réserves personnelles, ces légères mais infranchissables défenses qui abritent le seuil d'un esprit cultivé. L'originalité n'est pas en eux cette balance fragile de sentiments hétérogènes qu'elle est en nous. Elle a quelque chose de plus libre, de plus rude, de moins facile à endommager. C'est pourquoi elle peut s'engager et se perdre un instant dans les autres.*

The fact that Rivière explicitly rests his praise of the new work on the inherent and irrevocable difference between the "untamed" Russians and the "cultivated" French is why it is so suspect that in his famous second article in

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<sup>41</sup> Both quoted in Järvinen 2013. Both critics also disliked Roerich's costumes: the former thought them unoriginal and the latter called them "рубення" (provincial). In contrast, the usual advocate of Diaghilev's enterprise, Valerian Svetlov (in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 23.5./5.6.1913) focused on Roerich's contribution, apparently because Nijinsky's choreography made him very uncomfortable.

<sup>42</sup> Such as Rivière - see e.g. Kirstein 1975: 144, 164-168; Garafola 1992: 69-70; Launay 2003. What truly indicates the remarkable Orientalism of research on the Ballets Russes is that familiarity with Russian materials or ability to read Russian are not deemed necessary for expertise on the company. Russian reviews are also conspicuously absent from the reconstruction materials Hodson uses.

*La Nouvelle revue française* (November 1913), he speaks of *Sacre* as a "biological" ballet. Indeed, this blatant racism of contemporary discourse, where race was a natural category, is rarely addressed in research on the Ballets Russes.

Primitivism – seeking aesthetic ideas in the products of contemporary cultures perceived as incapable of progress, eternally representing the past of humankind – certainly affected the choreographic ideas of Nijinsky who was commissioned to translate the libretto of the new ballet into a *misé-en-scène*. Although no notation of *Sacre* by Nijinsky has survived,<sup>43</sup> Nijinsky was highly interested in Cubism and even claimed that: "Моя новая формула движения подчеркнет механизм жеста и линий. Я применил к хореографии теорию живописцев-кубистов."<sup>44</sup> Also the fact that his contemporaries immediately associated particular kinds of gestures with the primitive and the savage – for better or for worse – attests to a shared understanding of what 'primitive' connoted in aesthetic terms.<sup>45</sup> However, the *significance* of primitive differed greatly between the Parisian spectators, who feared that the demise of their empire was already visible in the degenerative effects of over-civilization, and the Russian audiences, for whom the primitive was imbued with ideas about neo-nationalist revival.

The critics' own views on the role of this neo-nationalism in Russian art greatly influenced how they interpreted what they saw of it in *Sacre*. Regardless of whether they liked Nijinsky's choreography, Russian critics were inclined to see a connection between the danced gestures and old native Russian forms of art, notably icons and *lubki* (popular prints); but they simultaneously stressed the *interpretation* of these forms in the dance was inherently modern.<sup>46</sup> However, whereas both Lunacharsky and Volkonsky saw this modernism as a (more or less) positive tendency, Levinson clearly posited himself against the *narodnik* (Populist) tradition of neo-nationalism, where true Russianness stemmed from a connection to the soil and the

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<sup>43</sup> There are no hand-written notes to Stravinsky's piano score in the manner of Nijinsky's notes on Debussy's *Jeux* (Debussy & Nijinsky s.a.)

<sup>44</sup> "My new formula of movement emphasises the mechanism of gesture and line. I apply to choreography the theory of Cubist painters." Nijinsky quoted in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 15./28.4.1912 (quoted in Zilberstein & Samkov 1982(i): 448, my translation). His interview in *Comœdia* 18.4.1912 headlined "Nijinski va faire dans l'Après-midi d'un Faune' des essais de chorégraphie cubiste".

<sup>45</sup> However, see Berliner 2002: 7 on the distinction between the 'sauvage' and the 'primitif'.

<sup>46</sup> See Lunacharsky in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 9./22.6.1913 on *lubki* and primitive painting; Levinson in *Rech* 3./16.6.1913 on "icon-painting-like gestures" and "naïve *kustarnost*" (*kustari* being peasant manufactures, *kustarnost* means their products); Volkonsky in *Apollon* 6/1913 on "cubist icon-painting". All these stress the connection to painting (flatness, stylisation). More in Järvinen 2013: esp. 11-19.

(idealised) peasants.<sup>47</sup> This observation not only points to the co-existence of different nationalisms in Russia and their significance to the critical reception of a work seemingly about Russia's past (and its future), but also suggests caution in assuming that any critic (particularly a foreign critic) understood the "truth" of *Sacre*.

Although it is likely that the frequency of associating Nijinsky's choreographies with Cubism was due to the choreographer's published claims, it is also crucial to note that Russian and Western reviews differ in their reading of this Cubism. In the West, Nijinsky's stylisation – his choreographic focus on simple movements and idiomatic gestures – was usually deemed ugly, unsuited to dance as an art form, and, more specifically, a foreign tendency threatening the 'authenticity' of the Russians.<sup>48</sup> In Russia, these formal qualities were seen as imbued with national spirit, making the work *more* Russian as well as engaging with contemporary concerns in Russian art. This is why it is crucial that Nikolai Minsky (pseudonym of Nikolai Maksimovich Vilenkin) labelled Nijinsky's choreographic style 'neo-realism' – a word he used of the Acmeist<sup>49</sup> poets. For Minsky, Nijinsky's choreographies were a stylised form of everyday reality, a new kind of formalism misunderstood for the same reason similar modernist ideas of beauty were misinterpreted in other art forms. In his review of *Sacre* for *Utro Rossii* 30.5./12.6.1913, Minsky distinguished this neo-realism from realism, the style favoured by the *narodniki*, emphasising that in the former, reality was but a starting point: the goal was artifice, as in all great art. Since Minsky also chides Mikhail Fokine, Nijinsky's predecessor as the principal ballet master of

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<sup>47</sup> Like most advocates of the 'old ballet' of Petipa, Levinson was politically aligned with the *zapadniki* (Westernisers), for whom Russians imported Western cultural products to improve them for the greater glory of the nation. See Mikkeli 1999: 149-155; Vihavainen 1999: 168-169; Williams 1999: 3-18, esp. 11. Ballet was one of these 'improved imports' associated with the Petrine reforms. In contrast, *kustari* were the domain of the *narodniki* (Populists) who sought the Russian soul in the folk traditions of the peasants. Many of the *narodniki* embraced primitivism, which utilised the crafts of peasants to create designs for the modern consumer. Salmond 1996; also Rhodes 1994: 24-31. As a socialist, Lunacharsky would have been closer to the *narodniki* whereas Volkonsky, a Baltic nobleman, is a more complex case.

<sup>48</sup> This is particularly true of the French reviews, e.g. Gaston Carraud in *La Liberté* 31.5.1913 quoted below. Similar claims had already surfaced with Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* of 1912, and again with *Jeux*, also to Debussy's score, a fortnight before *Sacre*: see e.g. Camille Mauclair in *Le Courrier Musical* 15.6.1912. However, exceptions also exist: Octave Mauss *L'Art Moderne* quoted in Bullard 1971(ii): 72-76; and Jean Marnold in *Mercure de France* 1.10.1913, who shared Rivière's opinion of the Russian race as an atavistic collective. In England, where critics were less hostile towards Nijinsky's choreographies, some really made an effort to understand with *Sacre* – see Francis Toye in *The Graphic* 19.7.1913 (negative); cf. Toye in *The Bystander* 23.7.1913 (positive).

<sup>49</sup> The Acmeists were a loose group of poets including Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam as well as Minsky himself.



the Ballets Russes, with the words of Tolstoy, his point is clearly a modernist re-appropriation of the Russian realist tradition. Nijinsky's later interest in Tolstoy makes this connection almost too neat to be credible.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast, Western critics had a tendency to represent Nijinsky's works as "une phase nouvelle de la lutte de l'idéalisme contre le réalisme dans l'art scénique" (Vuillermoz in *S.I.M. Revue musicale* June 1913), as a new kind of *anti-realist* art. However, Minsky's reading of *Sacre* is plausible because what he says is also close to Nijinsky's (in *Le Figaro* 14.5.1913) insistence that dance should utilise contemporary movements:

*L'homme que je vois avant tout autre sur la scène, dit-il, c'est l'homme moderne. Je rêve d'un costume, d'une plastique, d'un mouvement qui seraient caractéristiques de notre temps. Il y a sûrement dans le corps humain des éléments qui sont significatifs de l'époque où il s'exprime. Lorsqu'on voit aujourd'hui un homme se promener, lire un journal ou danser le tango, on n'aperçoit rien de commun entre ses gestes et ceux, par exemple, d'un flâneur sous Louis XV, d'un gentilhomme courant le menuet, ou d'un moine lisant studieusement un manuscrit au treizième siècle.*

For Nijinsky, a man on the modern streets did not walk like a man from the seventeenth century, the dances of the 1910s were not minuets and a newspaper was not read reverentially. What is at stake, here, is more than period style, it is the aesthetic of grace and harmony: when movement is no longer something eternal, ideal or 'natural' in the manner of contemporary dance discourse, dance can no longer act as a 'cure' to modernity.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the role of the primitive in *Sacre* was to allow for experimentation with form, to find an excuse to do away with precisely those aesthetic qualities that were usually seen as *ontological*: grace, harmony, lightness, flow. For this reason, although meant as a joke, there is no actual contradiction in Alfred Capus (in a satirical front-page editorial to *Le Figaro* 2.6.1913) calling one of the characters "le type bien moderne de la femme de trois cents ans", a woman both modern and ancient.

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<sup>50</sup> During the war, Nijinsky began to plan a school of dancing. He drafted charters for the school, beginning each with quotations from Tolstoy - see Krasovskaya 1979: 326, 336. He also became a vegetarian, adopted Tolstoyan religious ideas and reinterpreted his life and career in his so-called *Diary* (Nijinsky 1999, written between 19.1.-4.3.1919 under the influence of psychoactive drugs administered by a sports doctor in love with Nijinsky's wife - see Ostwald 1991: esp. 174-175, 184), eerily similar at times to Tolstoy 1904.

<sup>51</sup> This relates to how, before the First World War, only *certain kinds of dance* were acceptable in the discourse. Ragtime dances or the tango that Nijinsky mentions were not; they were a "degenerate" form, the opposite of modern art dance (including ballet) in contemporary dance literature. See Järvinen 2012 for a discussion; also, first paragraph of the next section.

### Simple Movements, Stylised Gestures

What, then, were the specific movement qualities associated with *Sacre*? Based on the reviews, these could be labelled 1) pedestrian simplicity, 2) asymmetry, 3) repetition, 4) stillness, and 5) submission to gravity. As I noted in conjunction with Lalo's review, all these qualities were seen as refuting the ontological premises of art dance: in order to be art, dance was supposed to be graceful, harmonious, unique, flowing and light movement. In contemporary dance discourse, where the primitive was usually associated with ragtime dance (e.g. Caffin & Caffin 1912: esp. 255-279), introducing these qualities to a ballet about primitive Russians meant imitating the subject-matter too literally. Coming from Russians, moreover, it revealed the essential primitivity of the Russians themselves, their reversion to type.<sup>52</sup>

Since Nijinsky left no notes on *Sacre* – it being the only one of his four choreographies he does not mention in his so-called *Diary* (Nijinsky 1999) – some aspects of the choreography can be inferred from what is known of these other works. Ann Hutchinson Guest's and Claudia Jeschke's 1987 reconstruction of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1912, henceforth *Faune*), based on Nijinsky's notation for this choreography, should serve as an example of how and why contemporary opinions on movement qualities in Nijinsky's choreographies should be taken with a grain of salt. Setting aside the problems of recreating performance from the archive, this reconstruction has shown how the qualities of jerkiness and angularity that contemporary critics and later reminiscences and reconstructions have ascribed to this work (and Nijinsky's choreographic aesthetic more generally) are contingent upon a hegemonic assumption of what dance should be rather than any intrinsic qualities of the choreography.<sup>53</sup> For today's spectator, there is nothing stiff, constrained or unnatural about *Faune*, because we are accustomed to a different aesthetic. Similar responses of critics indicate that with the exception of the extraordinary dance of the Chosen Maiden in the second act of *Sacre*, there was little virtuosity in this work.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See e.g. Jean Perros in *La Critique Independante* 15 June 1913; Victor Débay in *Le Courrier Musical* 15.6.1913.

<sup>53</sup> See Guest & Jeschke 1991: 1, 17-18; Gerhard 2000: 32-33; *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* 1991. Particularly because the reconstructors stress theirs is an interpretation of a score, this work also shows the critical potential of reconstruction as a practice, as discussed by Franko 1989, even if in actual performance practice, such conditioning is only evident in the programme booklets, not on stage.

<sup>54</sup> Or, rather, the virtuosity is of a different order: it does not lie in physical bravado but in rhythmic precision, a subdued virtuosity of the professional dancer. See e.g. Volkonsky quoted in note 66 below.

In 1912-1913, it was self-evident that natural movement on stage was always learned and cultivated movement striving for beauty and grace. In the words of Louis Laloy (in *La Grande revue* 25.5.1913), the purpose of dance was to create “combinaisons inédites, plus belles et plus vraies que celles du quotidien usage,” meaning that which was *better than the real*. The stage was an improved reality, so any staged expressions had to be aesthetically pleasing. As in contemporary theatre (Hatt 1999: 251-253; Brewster & Jacobs 1997: esp. 93-96, 140-141), the imperfect, untrained and undisciplined body was offensive – in other words, on stage, 'natural' or 'realistic' movements did not aim at *verisimilitude*. Everyday movement (as in *Jeux*, Nijinsky's second choreography that Laloy here attacked) was not acceptable in dance that claimed to be art.<sup>55</sup>

Apart from adherence to grace and harmony, training was imperative because only the cultivated 'natural' body expressed emotion directly and without ambivalence. Gestures were a universal language that, if executed correctly, conveyed the desired message and affect of dance.<sup>56</sup> Nijinsky's predecessor as the principal ballet master of the Ballets Russes, Mikhail Fokine, thought awkwardness was always the result of poor training; hence, it was unnatural, ugly and suited only for sideshow material (Fokine 1961: esp. 251-254; Nelson 1984: 8). Together with the critics' concern over grace and 'plastique', these ideas greatly limited what was permissible on stage. It seems that Nijinsky was tired of these limits.<sup>57</sup> *Sacre* utilised precisely these 'unseemly' movement qualities to great effect.

Early silent films may give us an idea what 'natural' gestures and mimicry meant for turn-of-the-century audiences – for historical reasons, we see these expressions as excessive, even histrionic.<sup>58</sup> Ever since *Faune*, Nijinsky had been known for eliminating precisely this kind of acted expression:

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<sup>55</sup> These views were widespread amongst contemporary dancers as well: see Isadora Duncan quoted in Kinney & Kinney s.a.: 243; Duncan 1977: esp. 79. See also e.g. Koritz 1994: 70; Carter 2011.

<sup>56</sup> See Mikhail Mordkin's description of how to correctly represent affects on stage in *The Literary Digest* 10.2.1912; or Isadora Duncan quoted in Flicht 1912: 107.

<sup>57</sup> See Nijinsky in *The Daily Mail* 14.7.1913; also, Lady Ottoline Morrell 1963: 227 reminisced that: “Such ballets as *Le Spectre de la Rose* did not interest him; he said it was *trop joli* and was rather annoyed when people admired it.”

<sup>58</sup> Of course, any stage gestures have to convey emotional impact even for members of the audience sitting at the back row. As Brewster and Jacobs (1997: esp. 81-108) have demonstrated, particular concerns of the cinematic stage space (especially the close-up shot and larger-than-life screens which heightened the visibility of the smallest detail) induced reduced gesturing also in theatre. This new cinematic acting style gradually became the standard by which we now evaluate staged gestures as 'natural'.

*Once when a new girl had to learn Nijinsky's sister's part, in which the Nymph suddenly sees the Faune, turns away and walks off – he said to her: 'Why do you look so frightened?'*

*She said she thought she was meant to be. Thereupon, quite in a rage, he said that the movement he gave her was all that was required of her, he was not interested in her personal feelings.<sup>59</sup>*

Although Nijinsky's notation for *Faune* is impossible to execute,<sup>60</sup> it provides at least some idea on what his first choreography looked like. Clearly, Nijinsky did not do away with mimicry as much as stylised and conventionalised it, replacing the acted-out expressivity of an individual dancer with choreographed expressivity, set for all dancers dancing a particular role. Thus, in *Faune*, the dancers' fingers indicate the character's emotional responses (the Faun's thumbs, for example, went up to indicate interest and arousal), *no matter who danced this particular part*.

From the perspective of the dancers, only recently accustomed to the kind of theatrical acting Nijinsky opposed, the choreographer seemed to deprive them of precisely those qualities they would have associated with stardom (individuality and self-expression). In the 'new ballet',<sup>61</sup> although the corps de ballet was still the scenery for the main action, it was common for ballet masters to give the dancers in the corps the freedom to improvise their particular tasks for crowd scenes.<sup>62</sup> This not only broke the traditional uniformity of the corps, but also allowed greater liberties in interpretation for precisely the dancers traditionally deprived of such rights – a likely reason for Fokine's great popularity amongst the Ballets Russes corps-de-ballet dancers.

Nijinsky's choreographic practice of thinking over the smallest detail *before* rehearsing the work with the dancers deprived the dancers of the power to influence the end result to the extent to which they were accustomed. Hence, the dancers often referred to Nijinsky's choreography as 'unnatural' and 'constraining'; the choreography, they said, made them feel like they were made of wood or stone – as if they were materials shaped by the

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<sup>59</sup> Rambert 1983: 62. According to Marian Smith 2000: 35, 46-47, mime passages have been well-nigh eliminated in today's versions of nineteenth-century ballets.

<sup>60</sup> Guest & Jeschke 1991: especially 192-194 on compromises necessary for rehearsing the choreography from Nijinsky's notation, where Nijinsky "wrote the degree of bend and placement of each finger and thumb for holding the flute." Guest 1992: 424. Also e.g. Rambert 1975; Rambert 1983: 61-62 on Nijinsky's extraordinary demands for precision.

<sup>61</sup> In Russia, 'new ballet' was an early-twentieth-century choreographic style emphasising dramatic acting associated with Aleksandr Gorsky and contrasted with the 'old ballet' of Petipa. See e.g. Järvinen 2013, 10.

<sup>62</sup> See e.g. Karsavina 1981: 287; Rambert 1983: 61, 78; Nijinska 1992: esp. 286, 466 on Fokine. At the time, no choreography was expected to remain the same from one performance to the next: see Petipa quoted in Wiley 1985: 2.

choreographer (Nijinska 1992: 428; Sokolova 1960: 40-41). This indicates the emergence of the idealist view of dance composition, where the choreography is an abstraction in the head of the singular, new author of dance, the choreographer; and where the dancer is an always-already imperfect executioner of the will of this author-figure (Monni 2007: 39-43). This idealist view is, of course, close to the manner in which music is understood in formalist musicology (e.g. McClary 1995), but it is important that it emerges with Nijinsky's authoritative statements about his choreographic compositions, made possible because of his celebrity status as a dancing genius.<sup>63</sup>

### **Anonymous Asymmetrical Masses**

In dance, the concern with grace and harmony links these ideas of a 'natural' cultivated body language to asymmetry, the second movement quality I mentioned. Lalo's description of the infirm gestures of the ataxic dancers indicates contorted or jerky movements, but as with other Nijinsky choreographies, these qualities have been exaggerated out of all proportion in later research. The "jerkiness" in Nijinsky's choreographies seems to have been the quality of everyday movement that contemporary dance discourse deemed unfit for the stage, an indication of how the modern world was desperately in need for a cure to modernity (see e.g. Fritch 1912: 103-104 quoted in Järvinen 2009: 51).

However, asymmetry relates not only to the asymmetry of gestures or the line of an individual dancer's body but to how dance was arranged on stage. There is some evidence that audiences, unaccustomed to intentional asymmetry and arrhythmia in choreography, interpreted their appearance in Nijinsky's choreographies as the dancers' "mistakes".<sup>64</sup> In ballet choreography, the conventional manner of arranging dancers on stage was based on the principals. Fokine preferred diagonal and circular floor-patterns that emphasised the three-dimensionality of the stage and also skilfully utilised the corps de ballet to emphasise the principals.<sup>65</sup> The effect shows in a review in *The Lady* (3.8.1911):

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<sup>63</sup> See Järvinen 2009: 54-55; e.g. Chantavoine in *L'Excelsior* 30.5.1913 made a distinction between Nijinsky as dancer and Nijinsky as choreographer to disparage the latter.

<sup>64</sup> For example, *Pall Mall Gazette* 18.2.1913. When Nijinsky re-rehearsed *Faune* for the second North American tour of the Ballets Russes in 1916, after the critics had seen a memory-based version of the work, *The New York Herald* 25.10.1916 wrote that "The chorus seemed to dance not quite so smoothly as last season, but, no doubt, it was because of a lack of time for rehearsals." In actuality, the reverse was true.

<sup>65</sup> Jeschke 1990: 103-104. However, Russian critics complained that Fokine had lost sight of choreography as *composition*, his staging was "real, not represented, disorder" according to Volkonsky in *The Nineteenth Century and After* June 1913; similarly, Levinson in *Apollon* 9/1911; Homo novus [Aleksandr Kugel] in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 1/14 June 1912.

*I remember a circular movement, many figures running round and rising high in the air, and from their centre, as from the middle of a bright, glittering flower in the wind, a man rising head and shoulders above them, pirouetting in the air, resting on the air, a creature who has defied gravitation's laws – Nijinsky!*

Although Fokine and other 'new ballet' choreographers did away with some of the geometric rigidity of the 'old ballet', they retained the hierarchy of the dancers that emphasised the principals over the ballet 'crowd', the corps de ballet (see e.g. Svétlow 1912: 7). Contrary to what is often presented, this is true even of the Ballets Russes ensemble pieces like *Les Danses Polovtsiennes*, possibly the biggest success of the 1909 season, starring Adolph Bolm.<sup>66</sup>

Like the fact that dance was graceful and harmonious, the manner in which dance was set on stage was so self-evident that prior to Nijinsky breaking the rules, reviews said very little about *choreography*: how Fokine created or developed the ensemble effects on stage, what were the relationships of different dancers (men and women, soloists versus chorists), or how the choreographic devices expressed the plot or related to the music. Outside of Russia, Fokine was almost never interviewed, the star dancers received all the media attention.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, in Western reviews, dance was quite secondary to the plot, the visual design and the music: descriptions of the actions of even the *principal* dancers are rare. But Nijinsky's *Faune* shows such a drastic change in how dance was discussed that it actually belies the frequently-heard claims about the inability of Western critics to write about dance.<sup>68</sup>

However, like *Jeux*, which only had three dancers, *Faune* was a small work where critical attention could focus on detail. *Sacre*, in contrast, was a massive piece, involving most of the dancers of the company and a series of events flowing into one another and multiple dances happening simultaneously. Hence, the *Sacre* reviews were rather vague about specific choreographed moments outside of a handful of significant instances (notably, the dance of the Chosen Maiden in the second act). Instead of a detailed description of specific movements or choreographic devices, the texts contain general comments on the movement style. Having said this, many critics also noted

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<sup>66</sup> True ensembles, of course, should not have stars in this manner. See e.g. *Gil Blas* 20.5.1909; *Comœdia Illustré* 1.6.1909.

<sup>67</sup> For a rare exception, see *Gil Blas* 4.6.1912 where Fokine discusses period art and costuming as his "method" for transferring the story to stage.

<sup>68</sup> E.g. *The Times* 4.11.1911 said of Nijinsky that "His dancing, too, has new elements in it, wonderful, rhythmic patterns of the body which he has not shown us elsewhere." Although this was far more than was usually said, nothing followed to tell the reader what these new elements of Nijinsky's dancing actually were. Cf. the detailed description of the line of the nymph's body in Henri Bidou's review for *le Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* 10.6.1912, quoted in Järvinen 2009: 47.

similarities between the three works that can be used to infer other similarities on the level of choreography.

The choreographer of *Sacre* did not exactly facilitate the formation of this critical discourse. Himself a star of unprecedented magnitude, Nijinsky had a penchant not to give proper names to the characters in his works.<sup>69</sup> When it comes to *Sacre*, he claimed that,

*There are no human beings in it. It is only the incarnation of Nature – not of human nature. It will be danced only by the corps de ballet, for it is a thing of concrete masses, not of individual effects.*<sup>70</sup>

In an unprecedented choreographic move *Sacre* had no stars to dominate the attention of the spectator or principals whose story they could follow – none of the characters in the first act appeared in the second. This was not something designated by the libretto, let alone the programme notes (see *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: Saison Russe 2.6.1913*), which, in actuality, allow for a very traditional ballet about the kind of fanciful peasants that Lunacharsky ridiculed in his review.<sup>71</sup> This tradition is clearly also what the audiences expected, after the previous successes of Ballets Russes "ensemble" works like *Les Danses Polovtsiennes*. Sensibly, in casting the work, Nijinsky did not engage the top tier of the Ballets Russes roster of dancers, including himself and his partners in *Jeux*, Tamara Karsavina and Ludmila Schollar. Yet the fact that Nijinsky himself did not dance turned out to be a cause for further critical displeasure – in *L'Eclair* (31.5.1913 quoted in Bullard 1971(ii): 67-68), Paul Souday ended his rant about the ugliness of *Sacre* with an exclamation: "And M. Nijinsky did not even dance!" Similarly, Gustave de Pawlowski asked in *Comoedia* (31.5.1913) whether just one appearance by Nijinsky himself would not have brought the ballet back on track.

Again, the Russian critics, familiar with Petipa's ensemble effects and with the nationalist ideas of Russian spiritual community (соборность), saw nothing wrong in this emphasis on the crowd. Prince Volkonsky wrote for *Apollon* (6/1913) of how this brought forth the element of rhythm in the choreography:

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<sup>69</sup> Whereas Nijinsky would have danced "Count Albrecht" in *Giselle* or "Vaiu" in *Le Talisman*, in his four choreographies, the only character that had a proper name was "Till Eulenspiegel" in the eponymous ballet of 1916. In practice, this meant most dancers were not individualised in the programme notes, which again reduced their claim to stardom.

<sup>70</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette* 15.2.1913. This sounds curiously similar to the ideas of some of his Russian contemporaries: see Douglas 1986: 187.

<sup>71</sup> "знаменитыхъ пейзажъ въ шелковыхъ рубахахъ и плисовыхъ шароварахъ." I.e. "the usual peasants in silk shirts and corduroy trousers." Lunacharsky in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 9./22.6.1913, my translation.

*Надо сказать и то, что исполнено это было восхитительно, – ровно, однотонно: двигались не люди, двигалась вся линия, какъ нѣчто одно, само по себѣ живое, – человеческое ожерелье, связанное невидимою нитьвю ритма...*

*Большое воспитательное значеніе имѣетъ это подтвержденіе хористическаго начала въ томъ искусствѣ, которое до сихъ поръ было самое ‘солистическое’ изъ всѣхъ. Забвеніе своего ‘я’ – первое условіе искусства, и въ этомъ смыслѣ новое направленіе нельзя не привѣтствовать, какъ элементъ художественнаго здоровья.<sup>72</sup>*

The emphasis, here, on dance as an art of the individual and of the soloist was even more accurate in contemporary dance outside of ballet – most of the period's famed stars (Letty Lind, Loïe Fuller, Isadora Duncan) danced alone.

With *Sacre*, however, this lack of stars drew critical attention to choreographic composition. Hence, the critics spoke of how the masses were balanced on stage and how they played against and with the music and décor. They noticed associations between certain dancers and particular instruments; for instance, between the women and the oboes, also evident in Stravinsky's notes (1969: 39). Although the dancers would not have been aware of all of these correspondences until the final rehearsals in Paris in May 1913,<sup>73</sup> their execution struck several critics as wonderful. *The Times* (26.7.1913) admired how

*even the colours of the dresses are to some extent reflected in the orchestration – as, for instance, in the first scene, when a group of maidens in vivid scarlet huddles together to the accompaniment of closely-written chords on the trumpets. Movements, too, are mirrored in an equally realistic way, when, a little later on, the dancers thin out into a straggling line, while the orchestra dwindles to a trill on the flutes; then a little tune begins in the woodwind two octaves apart, and two*

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<sup>72</sup> “It must be said that the execution of this was wonderful – steady, monotonous; the people did not move, only the lines moved, as if no-one lived alone, on their own – a human necklace tied by the invisible string of rhythm...”

The great pedagogic significance [of *Sacre*] is this strengthening of the choristic foundation in an art, which up to now has been the most ‘solistic’ of all. The forgetting of one’s ‘I’ [is] the first imperative of art, and in this sense the new trend can only be welcome as an element of artistic health.” My translation.

<sup>73</sup> The dancers had first rehearsed on stage 18.5.1913 (after the premiere of *Jeux*), but the only rehearsals of *Sacre* with the full orchestra took place 26. and 27.5.1913, with the public dress rehearsal on 28.5.1913. Although by today's standards this seems like extraordinarily few rehearsals, it would have been normal for a touring company like the Ballets Russes, where the dancers rehearsed to a piano score over several months - see next fn.



*groups of three people detach themselves from either end of the line to begin a little dance that exactly suits the music.* (Similarly, ProPERT 1972: 79)

This kind of design where synesthesia (the mixing of sensory perceptions) is implicit, required an unprecedented amount of forethought on the part of the collaborators, complicated by the fact that Nijinsky did not have either the orchestration of the music or Roerich's designs at his disposal during most of the rehearsal process – the designer had sent the designs to the composer who, despite several requests, did not forward them to the choreographer.<sup>74</sup> The orchestration also proved to differ in several places from the piano score.<sup>75</sup> However, Stravinsky and Nijinsky must have discussed the orchestral colour for the effect to have been visible for the contemporary spectators to the extent that it seems to have been; and Nijinsky may have focused on it with the dancers as well. Despite his later claims, it seems that Stravinsky was quite willing to listen to the choreographer, although he was reluctant to live up to his promise to return to help with the rehearsals – and when he did – it proved somewhat counterproductive.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to the associations between groups of dancers and the music, the critics also commented on how the choreography utilised counterpoint, setting one group against another – one moving lightly, one heavily, the Elders moving twice as slow as the Adolescents, and so on.<sup>77</sup> In an attempt to

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<sup>74</sup> Writing to Roerich on 1./14.12.1912 (in Stravinsky 1997(i): 383-384), the composer scolded the designer for sending him the designs he had told him to send to Nijinsky. The régisseur of the company, Sergei Grigoriev, gave the lack of costume designs as the excuse for not beginning the rehearsals in a letter to Stravinsky 5./18.12.1912 (in Stravinsky 1997(i): 390). Diaghilev telegraphed Stravinsky 20.12.1912/2.1.1913 (Stravinsky 1997(i): 398) urging him to send the designs, but the costume designs for the second act were not delivered to Nijinsky until the end of March at the earliest, as on 10./23.3.1913 (in Stravinsky 1997(ii): 42) Diaghilev again told Stravinsky to send Roerich's books and designs. As Jane Pritchard and Lynn Garafola pointed out to me in conversation (20.4.2013), Nijinsky also could not have held on to the designs, as they had to return to St. Petersburg for Ivan Caffi's firm to actually make the costumes by May. The odyssey of the costume designs belies the reconstructors' extravagant use of the designs for the choreographic patterns: Hodson 1986: especially 77n31; Hodson 1996: especially 106, 116.

<sup>75</sup> “[Nijinsky] showed me certain passages in the piano score that are not in agreement with the orchestra score, and he told me that the orchestra score is correct.” Monteux to Stravinsky 22.2.1913 in Stravinsky 1984: 51-52.

<sup>76</sup> Stravinsky was in London in February 1913 and certainly conducted one rehearsal with the dancers in Paris 13.5.1913 (Stravinsky & Craft 1978: 95, 99), but the latter may not be the occasion when the composer managed to frighten the dancers, as Rambert (1983: 58-59) recalled.

<sup>77</sup> E.g. *The Times* 26.7.1913 wrote of the “curious mouse-like shufflings of the old woman against the rapid steps of the adolescents” (the ‘reminiscences’ of Beaumont 1951: 72 largely rest on this review). Similarly, Kirstein paraphrasing Rambert's letter in Stravinsky & Craft 1978: 513; and ProPERT 1972: 81, which Hodson 1987: 60 erroneously claims to be an observation “at the time of the première”.

describe the work for American readers, Carl Van Vechten (1915: 107) pointed to how some individuals counterpointed group movements and how these related to the orchestral score:

*At the beginning of the ballet the adolescents pound the earth with their feet, while a little old woman runs in and out between their legs, to the reiterated beat of a chord of F flat, A flat, C flat, F flat; G, B flat, D flat, and E flat, all in the bass (begin from below and read in order), while an occasional flute or a piccolo screams its way in high treble.*

When re-reading his *Sacre* notes in 1967, Stravinsky himself was surprised by:

*the principal choreographic accents and phrase units, which were seldom coterminous with the accents and phrases of the music. In addition, I cancelled the metrical units of the music on the assumption that to count beats instead of measures of irregular lengths would approximate ballet routine [-.] The dance is almost always in counterpoint to the music.<sup>78</sup>*

Here, Stravinsky shows an understanding of ballet routine – in 1913, he would have had experience of writing two other ballets – and directly contradicts his earlier reminiscences on Nijinsky's choreography. His cancellation of the metrical units created choreographic phrases that were (usually) easier for the dancers to remember. For example, “count the next six measures in 6/4”.<sup>79</sup>

This concern over how dancing keeps pace with the music is even more striking when one remembers that in the scenario, the only distinct choreographic movement is at the end of the first act: “Chacun piétine la Terre avec extase.” (*Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: Saison Russe 2.6.1913.*) Certainly, this stomping – both at the beginning and at the end of the first act – did receive more than its share in the reviews. It is connected to the third of the movement qualities, repetition, a quality shared by both the choreography and Stravinsky's musical score.

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<sup>78</sup> Stravinsky 1969: 35, see also 37. According to Hodson in *Les Printemps du Sacre* 1993, Nijinsky set five rhythmic elements over the two in Stravinsky's score, but actually it was Stravinsky who had marked the jumps for the dancers in the score – Stravinsky 1969: 36.

<sup>79</sup> Stravinsky 1969: 37, also 35, 37 on the surprising complexity. Stravinsky brought the piano score to Nijinsky in Berlin 27.11.1912. However, Nijinsky alludes to *Sacre* already in an interview to *L'Intransigeant* 13.6.1912.

### Beating and Falling

By all accounts, following the lyrical introduction, the first scene of the ballet shocked, because the dancers kept jumping in place, stomping the ground and, as Van Vechten notes above, *kept repeating* these movements. Indignant, Adolph Boschot (in *L'Echo de Paris* quoted Bullard 1971(ii): 12) wrote of how the dancers

*paw the ground, they stamp, they stamp, they stamp, they stamp and they stamp.... Flash! They break into two groups and salute each other. And they stamp, and they stamp, and they stamp.... Flash! A little old lady falls on her head and shows us her third petticoat. And they stamp, they stamp....*

The recurrence of the stamping motion, together with the musical recurrences in the score that accompanied them, created a strong sense of the work 'going nowhere' – for example, Gustave de Pawlowski complained (in *Comœdia* 31.5.1913) of having to suffer through two acts of primitives *doing nothing*.

It is tempting to see the process of how repetition becomes a non-event as parallel to European contemporary dance choreography half a century later – in other words, with dance that has rejected spectacle and hence required an ontological re-positioning for the audience (see Burt 2008) – however, doing so would easily lead us to read our attitudes into the responses of 1913. Such fallacious *post hoc* arguments aside, new critical dance and dance scholarship have drawn my attention to aspects of past choreography that cannot be fully addressed in this article. As André Lepecki (2006: esp. 63) has pointed out, repetition is a kind of a fall into temporality because it is "reiterating what is forever not quite the same". This "triggers the possibility for the secretion of a temporality which allows the body to appear under a different regime of attention and stand on a different, less firm (ontological) ground." Although Lepecki is discussing the still act of contemporary dance, I would say that the critical reception of *Sacre* – specifically, the need to deny the work the ontological status of dance – amply proves the sudden epistemological uncertainty created by and in the choreographed repetition.

Furthemore, the idea that repetition deducts from rather than adds to meaning cut likens *Sacre* to Nijinsky's earlier works, specifically his interest in circular, undramatic storylines that downgraded the importance of narrative to ballet as an art form:

*Un sujet de ballet, repris alors Nijinsky, doit être 'nul' ou connu de tout le monde. On ne réfléchit pas plus au cours d'un ballet que devant un tableau ou durant une symphonie.*<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Nijinsky according to Cahusac in *Le Figaro* 14.5.1913. The idea is curiously similar to what Cocteau later wrote to Stravinsky 4.2.1914 (in Stravinsky 1982: 74): "The dance must not express

Again, this is not to say Nijinsky's aim would have been a modernist abstraction – all of his choreographies had a theme if not exactly a conventional plot, and *Sacre* more so than *Faune* or *Jeux* – but they became more like contemporary free-form dance in their narration. The aforementioned replacement of 'natural' gestures with stylised movements required that the audience worked out their own interpretation of the events rather than assumed the kind of straightforward illusionistic mimesis of naturalist theatre for which Nijinsky's predecessor, Fokine, had striven.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, as I will shortly demonstrate, in Nijinsky's works, choreographic compositional devices, such as unisono or tableau, became part of the *narration*.

However, the dancers' stomping on stage is significant also because it went against the presumed quality of good dancing as silent and effortless: Nijinsky was famous for the noiseless landings of his leaps, which had given a quality of ethereal lightness to his dance.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, the dancers of *Sacre* beat out a complex rhythm that complemented the regular pulse of the orchestra. For example, in the *Auguries of Spring*, bar [13], when the music beat out tempo giusto 4/8, Stravinsky marked accents for the jumps of the young men as [3]: on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, [4]: none, [5]: 2<sup>nd</sup>, [6]: 1<sup>st</sup>, [7]: 1<sup>st</sup>, [8]: 2<sup>nd</sup> bar.<sup>83</sup> This thumping was read as "noise" – it was not the sound of one individual occasionally landing with a thud, it was an intentional and prolonged use of a physical action that was considered dangerous: several articles commented on how *Sacre* caused headaches, "shock[ed] the ear and assault[ed] the nerves"<sup>84</sup>, and *The Daily Telegraph* (26.7.1913) even claimed that Maria Piltz had been forbidden by her doctor to perform the Chosen One. Upon retrospect, it is remarkable that the dancers would agree to subject themselves to what would have seemed like outrageous demands of the young choreographer.

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anything. The [dancer's] body must arouse itself in a burst, becoming another instrument in the orchestra."

<sup>81</sup> One of the few to note the significance of specific mimed gestures was Louis Vuillemin in *Comœdia* 31.5.1913.

<sup>82</sup> E.g. Levinson 1982: 87; Bourman 1938: 10 on Nijinsky landing softly; also *The Athenaeum* 5.6.1912.

<sup>83</sup> Stravinsky 1969: 36. The section is reproduced in Hodson 1996: 3 who gives all the dancers different movements for this section – something not corroborated by contemporary sources which, if anything, stress the unisono.

<sup>84</sup> *The Fortnightly Review* September 1913; similarly, Victor Valter quoted in Taruskin 1996: 1026. The reminiscences of Beaumont 1951: 75; and the conductor Monteux (quoted in Schouvaloff 1997: 293) noted the work caused headaches.

Few of the critics were as flexible in their attitudes. A massive work lasting three quarters of an hour, *Sacre* clearly was meant to overwhelm the spectator, an experience Émile Vuillermoz (in *S.I.M. Revue musicale* June 1913) summarised as:

*vous êtes lié à cet orchestre comme Mazeppa à la croupe de son cheval et vous êtes bien forcé de galoper, bon gré mal gré, par dessus les monts et les plaines et d'aller où il lui plaît de vous conduire.*

Hurled along by the centrifugal force of the work, the poor critic is reluctantly hurled along by the centrifugal force onstage – the image of the cyclone in the orchestra emphasises his reluctance – Vuillermoz is an unwilling victim; he does not wish to lose himself in the work; he resists and fears its power. In part, his reaction may be attributed to the fear of the (racial, primitive) other or the fear of the crowd, likened to the idea of threatening otherness in much of the social theory of the period (see e.g. Ledger & Luckhurst 2000: 55-66). But like the Chosen Maiden, trapped by the unseen gods of her tribe, the off-stage victim also struggles in vain.

The last of the movement qualities listed above relates to the prominence of falling in the choreography. Like asymmetry and arhythmy, stumbling and falling were read as mistakes, as failures in and to dance.<sup>85</sup> In the Stravinsky and Rambert notes on *Sacre*, different kinds of falling occur in *Sacre*: for example, the Old Woman falls at the end of the Augurs of Spring [22] “with her little feet in the air”;<sup>86</sup> and during the The Games of Two Cities in [58] the three maidens throw themselves on the ground. In the second act, the Maidens prepare the ground for the sacrifice by falling down in [121] and [127]; and the Chosen One gets chosen because she stumbles and falls down on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> bar before [201].<sup>87</sup> These falls signify differently but all direct attention to the heaviness of the dancers' bodies, in stark contrast to how, in contemporary discourse on dance, “[d]ancing is not, on the other hand, a matter of leaping in the air, but a matter of annihilating weight and giving one the impression of spirit.” (*The Bellman* 29.1.1916.) Falling, in other words, was corporeal, drawing attention to the weight and to the bodies conditioned by gravity.

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<sup>85</sup> Hodson 1987: 58 notes this. However, her argumentation is simplistic – the significance of falling depends on the context. See Lepecki 2006: esp. 63.

<sup>86</sup> Hodson 1996: 19 quoting the Rambert score. This is apparently the moment Boschot (quoted above) describes.

<sup>87</sup> Stravinsky 1969: 36-38. Stravinsky is obviously not clear how long it will take the dancers to execute the dance – he writes “*if* the abduction is concluded here” (emphasis added) in bars 4-5 of [47]; Fink 1999: esp. 325 on Stravinsky’s variable tempi; Hodson 1996: 57-62, also 135, 148-153 on the other falls.

Geoffrey Whitworth (1913: 96) chose a scientific parallel to describe this quality in *Sacre*, which he deemed

*a studied demonstration of the attractive force of the earth and of the triumph of gravity. I have heard that if we were transported all at once to a planet like Jupiter, much greater in bulk than our earth, the sense of bodily weight would be so increased that we should find it difficult to walk upright. Such apparently is the feeling of the people in Le Sacre du Printemps. The earth seems like an enormous magnet which continually drags them downwards to itself and even leaps are purely ritual.*

Whitworth's use of the word 'ritual' to signify 'for the sake of convention or habit' again draws attention to the multivalence absent from 'ritualistic' readings of this choreography (such as Hodson's). More importantly, besides his interesting reference to physics, which recalls other scientific metaphors used to describe *Sacre*,<sup>88</sup> Whitworth's description points to the novelty of a dance that did not pretend to lightness.

In contemporary aesthetics, showing the actual effort of dance was unseemly: virtuosic movements such as an extended series of pirouettes (the 32 *fouettés en tournant* for a ballerina) or difficult leaps (such as *tours en l'air* for male dancers) had to be executed with both precision and apparent ease (again, a feature associated with Nijinsky's dancing).<sup>89</sup> Virtuosity, of course, emphasised *individual* skill, and unsurprisingly, the only part acknowledged as virtuosic in *Sacre* was the solo of the Chosen Maiden in the second act, where she was set in the middle of circles – first of maidens dressed in costumes identical to hers, then, during her sacrificial dance, of (the spirits of) the Ancestors (see pastels by Valentine Gross in Kahane 2000: 82-83). Her final dance, the only solo of the work, received a great deal of attention from reviewers, and even those disliking Nijinsky's choreography praised the efforts of Maria Piltz.<sup>90</sup> However, since the Chosen Maiden was separated from an identically dressed group only through her (choreographed) action, critics professed uncertainty as to what led to this dance (e.g. Johnson 1913: 204). In other words, the essentially choreographic selection of the Chosen Maiden may have led to the impression that her choosing was random, which

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<sup>88</sup> E.g. Vuillermoz in *S.I.M. Revue musicale* June 1913 spoke of the electrocution of the dancers; Rivière in *La Nouvelle revue française* November 1913 on *Sacre* as a biological ballet.

<sup>89</sup> See e.g. *Comœdia* 20 May 1909: "les difficultés techniques n'étaient que jeux pour lui"; *Comœdia* 15 June 1910; Flitch 1912: 155; Whitworth 1913: 25-6; Van Vechten 1915: 77-8. However, although new ballet choreographers tended to dislike virtuosity, Nijinsky ended Fokine's choreography in *Schéhérazade* (1910) by spinning on his head: e.g. Beaumont 1951: 36.

<sup>90</sup> See Jullien in *Le Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* 8.6.1913; *The Times* 26.7.1913; Johnson 1913: 204-206; Levinson in *Rech* 3./16.6.1913; Svetlov in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 23.5./5.6.1913.

would have made her death seem senseless – an interpretation that contributed to how *Sacre* became symbolic of the First World War.

### **Rehearsing the Dance**

With the kinds of movement qualities listed above, it is no wonder Nijinsky had difficulties with the dancers, even if they did not outright refuse to perform in the work. With his first choreographic composition, *Faune* (which had premiered in May, 1912), Nijinsky had already struggled to get the Ballets Russes dancers to understand what he required of them. Perhaps noticing that using ballet vocabulary caused dancers to fall back on what they already knew, he started describing the poses in Russian (see Nijinsky's notes in Debussy & Nijinsky s.a.). His notations show extreme precision in coordinating dance with musical rhythm,<sup>91</sup> an exponentially more difficult issue with the rhythmically complex score of *Sacre*. From contemporary accounts, it is clear that dancers and audience members alike seemed to expect dance to relate to the musical score in what can only be called simplistic manner: accents of danced movement corresponded with musical accents much like in social dances; accelerando or crescendo were reflected in identical changes in both the pace of movements on stage and the dancers' expansive use of the stage space. In one interview, Lydia Sokolova (1998: 146) expressed the view that her fellow dancers equated music with melody. "They played to sounds, to melodies," and added that her earlier musical studies helped her greatly to come to terms with Nijinsky's choreographic requirements.

The solution to the choreographer's dilemma was to hire someone to teach the complexities of musical rhythm to the dancers, and the obvious person to provide such a teacher was the Swiss composer and pedagogue, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950). Nijinsky and Diaghilev went to visit Dalcroze's school in Hellerau near Dresden (reported in *Comædia* 18.4.1912), possibly because Prince Volkonsky ([1914], 23-35) was a great advocate of Dalcroze's eurhythmics in Russia. Since this visit predates the premiere of Nijinsky's first choreography, *Faune*, it has become a common misperception that Dalcroze's method was crucial to Nijinsky's understanding of choreography.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Guest & Jeschke 1991: especially 20, 169-170 on timing. In a book edited by Richard Buckle, Sokolova 1960: 40 portrays Nijinsky as insane but nonetheless claimed *Faune* was a difficult work and cites the choreographer's instructions as "You must try to walk between the bars of the music and sense the rhythm which is implied." However, in an interview with John Drummond for his 1968 Diaghilev films for the BBC, Sokolova (1998: 146) recalled that "once you mastered it, and you could hear yourself, or feel yourself dancing in sound, it was the most delightful thing to dance in that you could possibly imagine."

<sup>92</sup> E.g. Barker 1982: 58 believes this so firmly she thinks Nijinsky's going against Dalcrozian principles was due to the fact that he composed the work to the piano score. However, her

Late in 1912, when the rehearsals of *Sacre* were due to begin, Diaghilev hired a Dalcroze student, Marie Rambert (Miriam Ramberg), as Nijinsky's choreographic assistant. Rambert was to teach musical rhythm and timing to the dancers so that they would understand Nijinsky's choreographic instructions – not to teach Dalcroze to Nijinsky. The fact that the choreographer thought the professional ballet dancers of the Ballets Russes would *need* classes in this subject indicates that he doubted their abilities to cope with what he planned for the choreography of a score of which only a piano rendering existed at this stage. Unfortunately, the dancers were so opposed to Rambert's classes that they were quickly discontinued.<sup>93</sup> Rambert also later claimed that Dalcroze was of no use to her with the music of Stravinsky, and (rather modestly) said she contributed little to Nijinsky's choreographic composition.<sup>94</sup>

This misperception of Nijinsky's choreography as "Dalcrozian" also owes something to a letter Claude Debussy wrote to Robert Godet, a French advocate of Dalcroze's system:

*Permettez-moi de comprendre parmi ces derniers [événements bien inutiles], la représentation de Jeux, où le génie pervers de Nijinsky s'est ingénié à de spéciales mathématiques! Cet homme additionne les triples croches avec ses pieds, fait la preuve avec ses bras, puis subitement frappé d'hémiplégie, il regarde passer la musique d'un œil mauvais. Il paraît que cela s'appelle la "stylisation du geste"... C'est vilain! C'est même dalcrozien, car je considère monsieur Dalcroze comme un des pires ennemis de la musique! Et vous supposez ce que sa méthode peut faire de ravages dans l'âme de ce jeune sauvage qu'est Nijinsky!*<sup>95</sup>

In what is clearly a tongue-in-cheek manner, Debussy attacked Nijinsky for doing a disservice to his own music – Nijinsky's choreography to Debussy's *Jeux* that premiered only a fortnight before *Sacre*. However, the composer

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apparent source, Valentine Gross in *Comoedia Illustré* 5.6.1913, *does not actually say this*. Similarly, Bullard 1971(i): 34-35; Pasler 1981: 178 cf. 194; and even Odom 1992: 75 attribute too much to Dalcroze and Rambert; cf. Buckle 1993: 317-318; and next two fn.

<sup>93</sup> Rambert 1983: 55-57; Rambert 1975. The company régisseur Sergei Grigoriev 1953: 81 claims it was his idea that Rambert's classes were combined with Nijinsky's rehearsals to save time – the dancers called them "arithmetic classes". Nijinsky's sister Bronislava Nijinska (1992: 450-457) professed her utter disdain of Dalcroze and of Rambert.

<sup>94</sup> Rambert quoted in Hodson 1985b: 37-38: "But Dalcroze's method, which is terribly simple, didn't help because Stravinsky didn't care a hoot if one bar was three-four and the next seven-eight, then from three-four to five-three. I mean it was absolutely impossible." Rambert told Buckle 1998: 327 that her only contribution to the choreography was to once suggest to Nijinsky that he would use several small circles instead of one big one.

<sup>95</sup> Debussy's letter to Robert Godet quoted Nectoux 1992: 62-63; also Odom 1992: 76.



certainly misinterpreted Nijinsky's use of stillness as Dalcrozian – nothing would have been more contradictory to Dalcroze's thinking than stopping still when the music suggested movement!

Based on contemporary reviews and illustrations, the choreography of *Sacre* did retain some of the uniformity and emphasis on group movements that characterised the Dalcroze system at this time, even if Dalcroze favoured much more symmetrical and harmonious groupings than are evident in the surviving drawings of *Sacre*.<sup>96</sup> Needless to say, Dalcroze intensely disliked Nijinsky's *Faune*, and complained that it lacked "continuity of movement and of plastic phrasing"<sup>97</sup> – qualities notably missing from *Sacre* as well. What Nijinsky's contemporaries usually meant by a 'Dalcrozian influence' was a schematic correspondence of danced rhythm and musical rhythm: "if real tears had been forthcoming one is sure that they, too, would have fallen in semiquavers." (Proper 1972: 78 on *Jeux*.) Nijinsky's sister, Bronislava Nijinska, who was originally meant to dance the Chosen Maiden, recalled

*one particular incident during the early rehearsals in Monte Carlo. Nijinsky demonstrated a pas-mouvement in the choreography to the musical count of 5/4. During his huge leap he counted 5 (3+2). On count 1, high in the air, he bent one leg at the knee and stretched his right arm above his head, on count 2 he bent his body towards the left, on count 3 he bent his body towards the right, then on count 1, still high in the air he stretched his body upwards again, and then finally came down lowering his arm on count 2, graphically rendering each note of the uneven measure.*<sup>98</sup>

To clarify the connection between music and choreography, Nijinsky counted beats out aloud to the dancers and he kept this up even during the performances.<sup>99</sup> According to Sokolova (1960: 42) and Piltz (in Krasovskaya

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<sup>96</sup> See Gross 1971: 132-141; Gross in Hodson 1996: *passim*, esp. 2, 8, 66; *The Daily Mail* 12.7.1913 on "twenty-four dances performed by twenty-four dancers to twenty-four different tunes played simultaneously"; Rivière in *La Nouvelle revue française* November 1913 on how the music and the choreography were both fragmented, their units distinctively free of each other, colliding, meeting, passing each other.

<sup>97</sup> Jaques-Dalcroze 1921: 267-268. In 1913, Dalcroze invited Stravinsky to visit his school and praised his music in the same letter where he scolded the Russian dancers who "do not yet understand music" and Nijinsky who "dances *next to* and *against* music". Dalcroze's letter to Stravinsky 7.1.[1913] in Stravinsky 1984, 77-79.

<sup>98</sup> Nijinska 1992: 460; cf. Hodson in Hodson in *Les Printemps du Sacre*. Hodson 1993: 168 used this for Act II, Scene 5, [144], dance of the Chosen Maiden where the musical count is 4/16 and 5/16, but Nijinska 1992: 460-461 clearly implies it was a *pas* in Act I: "I had been coming to Vaslav's rehearsals in Monte Carlo, even though he was *working with the artists of the first scene*".

<sup>99</sup> Nijinska 1992: 450; Rambert 1983: 64; also Cocteau 1918: 66; Stravinsky 1975: 45. However, Nijinsky certainly could not have shouted cues to *all* the dancers.

1979: 268), some of the dancers were close to panicking in the orchestra rehearsals when they heard what seemed like a different piece of music.

Although Nijinska's description of the pas-mouvement sounds a little like a Dalcroze exercise, as Selma Odom notes, relatively few critics mentioned Dalcroze in the reviews.<sup>100</sup> Even Prince Volkonsky did not claim Nijinsky was in any way emulating Dalcroze or that the end result looked 'Dalcrozian' – after all, Dalcroze himself was still modifying and refining his pedagogical ideas and would do so for years to come.

*Я видѣлъ незабываемую репетицію. Нижинскій проходилъ сцену съ одной изъ танцовщицъ, которая должна была замѣнить другую. Репетиція въ залѣ, - они двое и акомпаниаторъ, больше никого. Это была восхитительная работа переложенія музыки въ движеніе. Тактъ за тактомъ, нота за нотой, воспринимались ухомъ, усваивались сознаниемъ, отбивались въ ладоши и потомъ воспроизводились въ танцовально-мимическомъ движеніи. Только у Далькроза видалъ я такое тѣсное, до полной сляянности тѣсное, сочетаніе музыки и движенія. Какъ эта маленькая сценка, так былъ разученъ весь двухактный балетъ Стравинскаго «Священная Весна». Что меня поразило въ этомъ балетѣ, это, рядомъ съ ритмичностью задуманныхъ балетмейстеромъ картинъ, удивительная ритмичность исполненія. Кордебалетъ, который можетъ это, представляетъ собою изумительный ритмическій матеріалъ. И вотъ, когда видишь этотъ поразительный матеріалъ и при этомъ вспоминаешь нѣкоторыя наши балетныя постановки, спрашиваешь себя, какъ же это возможно, чтобы такой кордебалетъ осуществлялъ такія антиритмичныя картины, какія мы иногда видали? И приходится заключить, что дѣло не въ кордебалетѣ, а въ балетмейстерахъ.<sup>101</sup>*

<sup>100</sup> Odom 1992: 75. One example is Vuillermoz in *S.I.M. Revue musicale* June 1913. Dalcroze advertised profusely in this paper.

<sup>101</sup> "I saw an unforgettable rehearsal. Nijinsky went on stage with one of the dancers, who had to replace an other [dancer]. Rehearsal in the hall - only the two [of them] and the accompanist, no others. This was charming work of arranging music with movement. Bar by bar, note by note, receiving by ear, absorbing understanding, taken from his hands and then reproduced in dancing-miming movement. Only in Dalcroze have I seen such strictness, such complete fusion, combination of music and movement. Like this little scene, so all [dancers] would learn Stravinsky's two-act ballet "Sacred Spring". What struck me in this ballet, next to the rhythm of [stage] pictures conceived by the ballet master, it is their amazing rhythmic execution. A corps de ballet *that can [do this]* is capable of marvellous rhythmic execution. And so, when you see this amazing execution whilst recalling some of our ballet productions, you ask yourself, how is it possible that such a corps de ballet realised such anti-rhythmic [stage] pictures that we have sometimes seen? One must conclude that what is the matter [there] is not in the corps de ballet but in the ballet master."

In a description reminiscent of Nijinska's recollection of the rehearsals, Volkonsky mentioned his hero, Dalcroze, as the only one with a similar demand for precision. Praising the company, he thought that Nijinsky had whipped the Ballets Russes into shape, showing the dancers to their advantage. Volkonsky thus positioned himself against the 'new ballet' of Fokine in the contemporary Russian debate on the future of the art form.

What has confused some researchers is that in contemporary texts, the terms 'eurhythmics' and 'rhythmic gymnastics' that Dalcroze used to describe his system did not automatically connote the work of this particular theorist – eurhythmy simply means harmonious composition (as in Ferdinand Hodler's 1895 painting *Eurhythmy*, see Levinson 1982: 58). At the time, many theatrical practitioners were interested in rhythmic movement and gymnastics as means to self-improvement and creation of staged effects – from theatrical forms in the Delsarte tradition like those developed by Isadora's brother Raymond Duncan to Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanics. *The Sketch* (23.7.1913) associated *Sacre* with "Swedish-exercise-like movements", *Teatr i iskusstvo* with Meyerhold,<sup>102</sup> and Nijinsky alludes to the work of Raymond Duncan in one interview.<sup>103</sup> Although this is not to say Nijinsky did not take something from Dalcroze *as well*, it is obvious that he, like choreographers before and since, also had other sources for the ideas he wanted to stage – down to the wooden duck that the conductor Edwin Evans had given the choreographer (Pritchard 2010, 80-81 quoting Evans). In other words, to exaggerate the significance of Dalcroze is to downplay the originality of the choreography of *Sacre* and to simplify contemporary reactions to it. Therefore, it is good to keep in mind Volkonsky's point that, despite grumbling about hard work, the dancers managed to master a difficult and unfamiliar dance idiom and perform it to the hoots and whistles of an audience like the true professionals they were.

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*Apollon* 6/1913, my translation, emphasis in the original. Similarly, when *The Times* 26.7.1913 writes that Nijinsky "joins hands with such workers as M. Jaques-Dalcroze", the critic continues to speak of *Nijinsky's* theories on ballet.

<sup>102</sup> N.N. in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 26.5./8.6.1913. Minsky in *Utro Rossii* 24.5./6.6.1912 had already made the same connection.

<sup>103</sup> In *L'Intransigent* 13.6.1912. Minsky in *Utro Rossii* 24.5./6.6.1912 had also made this connection, which may imply that Nijinsky had read his review.

### The Still Tableau

Besides movement qualities, the choreographic composition of *Sacre* flaunted convention in other ways. The most notable of these was doing away with the principal means for making sense of dance narrative, the tableau (or stage picture). The libretto of *Sacre* and the programme notes let the audience expect a set of pictures from pagan Russia ("Tableaux de la Russie Païenne"), but the stage action did not fulfill these expectations. As one contemporary critic complained, "The incidents [--] cannot be called dramatic, for they follow each other without much feeling for rational sequence or climax."<sup>104</sup> This is one reason why critics deemed the authors incapable of communicating their ideas to the audience,<sup>105</sup> but one that has rarely been addressed in research on the work.

Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs have convincingly argued that in contemporary theatre and early cinema, the purpose of the tableaux was to divide the scene into easily manageable parts: they punctuated the action, stressed and/or prolonged a dramatic situation, and sometimes also gave allegorical or abstract significance to the events (emphasising the morality of the play, for example). The tableaux were marked by a change of scenery, and/or musical cue, and/or choreographic action, usually an exit/entrance pause that preceded the new scene (Brewster-Jacobs 1997: esp. 8-13, 29, 35-38.) As with Nijinsky's earlier choreographies, *Sacre* failed to follow this self-evident theatrical convention, and to provide the audience with the necessary cues to 'read' a change of tableau into the stage action. Stravinsky, too, was very proud of his smooth musical junctures between the different pieces of the libretto (Stravinsky to Roerich 13./26.9.1911 in Stravinsky 1997(i): 300).

As with *Faune* and *Jeux*, Nijinsky misplaced the expected choreographed stillness used for marking tableaux. The misplaced stillness 'read' wrong, which broke the 'flow' so integral to the meaning of dance for contemporary audiences. However, it also created choreographed counterpoints on stage by, for example, placing one still group against another moving,<sup>106</sup> a still individual amidst a moving group,<sup>107</sup> or a still group with one individual

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<sup>104</sup> *The Times* 26.7.1913. Also Taruskin 1995: 18-19 notes the Russian critics wrote of the music as immobility, disunity and disjunction.

<sup>105</sup> Bullard 1971(i): 205. This relates to the argument above about the presumed racial difference between the Russians and the French.

<sup>106</sup> E.g. in bar [135], according to Stravinsky 1969: 42; for 15 bars in the Cortège du Sage [67], according to Rambert quoted in Hodson 1996: 98.

<sup>107</sup> E.g. the Old Woman at [17] bar 3, falls on her knees amidst the young men (Hodson 1996: 11) and is apparently still until [19] where she "moves her head" (*op.cit.*: 13) just to fall in [22] (*op.cit.*: 19).

moving.<sup>108</sup> In the first act, stillness is marked at least for 2 bars of [22]; for 2 bars before [41]; in 4<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> bars before [47]; in the 5<sup>th</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> bar before [50]; and 1 bar before [72]. Similarly, in the second act, 1 bar before [101]; 1 bar before [102]; and 1 bar before [117].<sup>109</sup> Of these, the last one in the first act and the second to last one in the second are traditional tableau pauses, occurring just before the Dance of the Earth and at the moment of the choosing of the Chosen Maiden – the culminating points, respectively, of each act. Contrary to Hodson’s interpretation (based on the disparities between the Rambert and Stravinsky notes), it seems likely that at some of these points the entire ensemble stopped moving. Such a sudden, complete stillness onstage is a striking device that would also emphasise the stop-and-start beat of the orchestra. As Pasler (1981: 200) notes, the orchestra paused at [71] to allow the dancers to run and surround the Sage, contrasting rapid movement with silence, followed by stillness as the music resumed.

However, the most striking, unconventional use of stillness in the choreography precedes the solo of the Chosen Maiden. During the *Danse Sacrale*, precisely when the music seems to indicate rapid movement, this soloist stands absolutely still amidst other moving dancers.<sup>110</sup> According to the notes printed in the Stravinsky score,<sup>111</sup> her immobility lasts from [103] to [142]: “Jusqu’à la danse sacrale l’élue reste immobile.” (Printed on the musical score Hodson 1996: 137 uses.) Although Nijinsky by no means invented this device – it had even been used in cinema (Brewster & Jacobs 1997: esp. 51-52) – it was the direct opposite to the way things had been done – traditionally, the corps de ballet stood still, or at least moved to the sides, when the principals came on stage.

Moreover, the unprecedented length of this stillness – if the Stravinsky score is to be believed, nearly a fifth of the entire ballet – created a very specific experience for the audience. Some critics’ remarks reveal how this stillness extended the temporal experience of the audience: “it was oddly painful to

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<sup>108</sup> Apparently, the ancestors stand watching the Chosen One, and move when she tries to stop her dance from [159] to 2<sup>nd</sup> bar before [161]: “from here the Chosen One again dances”, and they move to catch her when she falls down dead in [201]. Stravinsky 1969: 42-43; also Krasovskaia 1971(i): 440-442 quoting Nijinska’s recollection.

<sup>109</sup> Stravinsky 1969: 36-41; cf. Hodson 1996: 19 writes *the men* do not move in [22], 47 notes five bars of stillness and 65-66 writes no-one *except* the three tall women move in [49] (as Rambert says they do). Also Pasler 1981: 106-206 on the close association between the musical organisation and the choreography.

<sup>110</sup> Fink 1999: 338. Several reviews noted this moment, usually to disparage Nijinsky’s choreographic choice: Gaston Carraud in *La Liberté* 31.5.1913; Adolphe Boschot in *L’Echo de Paris* 30.5.1913 quoted in Bullard 1971(ii): 10-15; *La France* 4.6.1913 quoted in *op.cit.* (ii): 94-99.

<sup>111</sup> If this was in any manner similar to how Nijinsky’s notes were transcribed on a piano score of *Jeux*, these were quite precise stage instructions. See Debussy & Nijinsky s.a. cf. Debussy 1912.

observe [her] standing in complete rigidity during (it seemed) ten minutes, in the trance which precedes her frenzied dance.”<sup>112</sup> Besides bringing in the critic's subjective, emotional reaction to the choreographed action (largely absent from reviews of Ballets Russes productions prior to Nijinsky's works), such remarks point to how *Sacre* created a sense of the work going nowhere, an inertia that the audiences read in conflicting ways.<sup>113</sup> As Taruskin (1995: 18) notes, Russian critics actually discussed Stravinsky's score as stillness – an impression that emerges from repetition.

Nijinsky's use of stillness in the choreography also explains the frequent complaints in contemporary press about the jerks and disturbing fragmentation of the action. As with *Faune* and *Jeux*, *Sacre* provoked complaints about excessive theorisation and 'cerebralism'. For Gaston Carraud (*La Liberté* 31.5.1913), Nijinsky

*s'agit, sous prétexte de "stylisation", comme disent les gens bien informés, de prendre pour modèle, non pas nature, ce qui serait trop simple, mais les interprétations que l'art a déjà fournies de la nature; c'est-à-dire de donner l'impression du mouvement par l'immobilité.*

Although meant as an admonishment, this is a striking claim: the impression of movement achieved through immobility. The critic may have thought of the contrasts between movement of certain figures and stillness of others, or the displaced stillness of the tableaux, but nevertheless he managed to point out that the still figure was not without movement but rather, as H.T.P[arker] wrote in his long interview with Nijinsky (*Boston Evening Transcript* 9.11.1916), stillness "intensified projection by subtler and keener means than action".

Just as Stravinsky's music accumulated towards the end of the first act, so did the choreography, until it created "a rhythm of unwearying persistence that throbs through all the festival, so that at last the whole broad earth seems to be throbbing, throbbing to the beat of it" (Whitworth 1913: 92). A similar accumulation took place in the second act (Taruskin 1996: 957-962), which culminated in the death of the only soloist. This accumulation, predicated on repetition, was yet another reversal of what and how dance signified: in contemporary discourse, dance was about life, not about death,<sup>114</sup> and the ending of *Sacre* lacked the kind of apotheosis that audiences expected of a ballet – an affective justification of the Maiden's sacrifice through some kind

<sup>112</sup> *The Daily Mail* 12.7.1913. Similarly, Svetlov in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 23.5./5.6.1913; Chantavoine in *L'Excelsior* 30.5.1913.

<sup>113</sup> See Johnson 1913: 206 on how the work does not bore; cf. Levinson in *Rech* 3./16.6.1913 on the work as boring. Also Pasler 1981, 313 on Debussy similarly using static moments and repetition in *Jeux*.

<sup>114</sup> For example, Fritch 1912: 24; Suarès in *La Nouvelle revue française* 1 August 1912.

of a resurrection or supernatural intervention (Acocella & Garafola & Greene 1992: 68-69; Scholl 1994: 73). Here, the sacrifice seemed senseless: even the ancestors in bear-skins could be understood as actors, as human beings dressed in ceremonial garb. The ballet ended in a pessimistic tone, emphasised by the lack of harmonic development in the music.<sup>115</sup>

In later interpretations, the death of the maiden became the symbolic death of a generation on the battlefields of the First World War – in the words of Jean Cocteau (1918: 63), writing in 1918, “J’y distingue les prodromes de la guerre”. In 1913, when fears of Russians as warmongers were on the rise,<sup>116</sup> the association was rather with the foreignness of the aesthetic of Nijinsky, whom Alfred Capus (in *Le Figaro* 2.6.1913) jokingly called “sorte d’Attila de la danse”, a leader of the invading Russian horde. For more xenophobic critics, such invasion was distinctly unwelcome (e.g. Jean Perros in *La Critique Independante* 15.6.1913).

After the war, *Sacre* became a symbol of the lost ability of the avant-garde to shock the audience into rioting: a work about youth, spring, and violent renewal rejected by the conservative audience and (felicitously) lost so quickly that no-one could ever dispute its shocking novelty (e.g. Vaudoier 1929: 710; Propert 1972: 81). However, in the process, certain aspects of *Sacre* had to be suppressed. The nature of *Sacre* as a stage spectacle, programmatic music fused with danced performance, became cumbersome as modernism moved towards formalism and its demands of ‘purity’ of art forms. Stravinsky did everything in his power to dissociate his music from Nijinsky’s choreography, and consequently, the ‘craziness’ in the *reception* of the work was ascribed to the *choreographer’s* mental illness.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, the ideas of abstraction as the highest goal for modernist art, the messianic Russian nationalism of *Sacre*, and its narrative structure had to be erased from the equation. The easiest way to do this was by forgetting the choreography.

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<sup>115</sup> E.g. Touchard in *La Nouvelle revue* 1.7.1913 commented he would have preferred the development.

<sup>116</sup> See e.g. Kern 2000: 261, 280-284 on this believed to be the last moment to stop Slavic invasion.

<sup>117</sup> Acocella & Garafola & Greene 1992: 69 on how Nijinsky’s insanity became associated with the loss of the ballet; similarly, Hodson 1996: x-xii (however, *op.cit.*, xix she predetermines madness as Nijinsky’s destiny). The first negative comments on the Nijinsky choreography appeared in 1920 in *Les Deux Sacres*, attributed to Stravinsky but in reality written by Michel Georges-Michel. Quoted in Lesure 1980: 53; see also Bullard 1971(i): 32-33; Stravinsky & Craft 1978: 511-512. Nijinsky’s madness both confirmed the destructive effect of the ballet and showed how the genius predicted the universal human destiny at the risk of his own life. Thus, for the defenders of Nijinsky, *Sacre* became important because it was the epitome of his martyrdom, a lost masterpiece, the transcendental truth of which went unnoticed.

### Some Concluding Remarks

Setting aside the riotous behaviour of the Parisian audience,<sup>118</sup> Nijinsky's *Sacre* provoked critics to reflect on choreographic elements, such as how the dances counterpointed the music, or how the groups were balanced on stage. There was no pre-existing vocabulary for the movements, no soloists to focus on, and the narrative made no sense. On the other hand, Nijinsky's previous works had already utilised a similar stylisation of gestures, a downplaying of virtuosity, an emphasis on structure and contrasts between stillness and movement, giving the works a signature style attributed to the new author-figure of dance, the choreographer.

Despite numerous hostile commentaries, in 1913, *Sacre* was clearly seen as a major work – even many of the negative reviews asserted this. But with two very young authors – Stravinsky and Nijinsky – the work was also seen as important more for the *potential* it showed than as a finished piece in and of itself. In some ways, of Nijinsky's 1912-1913 choreographies, the pagan primitives of *Sacre* were the easiest to accept, and the reputation of the work might have been very different had it remained in the repertoire of the Ballets Russes even for one more season. Yet, as I hope to have shown, the disappearance of the choreography from the repertoire or the changing meanings it has attained over time (and in various reiterations) in the repertoire do not preclude an analysis of what remains of it in the archive, even if the tendency to treat a much later invention (the reconstruction) as this archive is a fallacy that reduces the potential for such reimagining of choreographic practice.

By not dancing in his third choreography Nijinsky established himself in the traditional authorial role reserved for the composer of music – a creator *not* present on stage. Although it would have been impossible for him to assume this role without first having become famous not just as a dancer but as a dancing genius, Nijinsky's choreographic practice was changing how dance as an art form was defined on the fundamental levels of ontology – what was dance and who was its author – in ways that would have long-lasting repercussions for rehearsal methods and evaluation of works in the repertoire (his demands of accuracy) as well as the understanding of 'a work' as an abstraction that could be placed in an archive (his interest in notation) and resurrected at will. It is these repercussions, this coming together of the archive and the repertoire, that dance artists have struggled with far more

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<sup>118</sup> However, it is dangerous to read too much into the audience behaviour: not only were theatrical riots quite common in Paris (e.g. *La Nouvelle revue française* June 1912 review of *Faune* and Regnault's *Salomé* was titled "Deux récentes scandales"), but as Svetlov notes in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 23.5./5.6.1913, the protests began before the audience could have acquired a clear understanding of the work.



than the reputation of one man or works that were quickly dropped from active repertory.

Of course, new epistemes do not replace old ones overnight nor can one author-figure affect an epistemic change. Currently, contemporary dance artists seem to be moving away from this kind of idealist notion of choreography and engaging with the specificity of dancers and audiences alike.<sup>119</sup> It is in this sense in particular that the reconstructors have done a disservice to *Sacre*: by fixing it in terms of (ambiguous) authorial intention and (dubious) authenticity. The subsequent canonisation of the 1913 *Sacre* lends political and ethical impetus to contesting the now-hegemonic Hodson choreography and its (limited, c. 1987) understanding of 'dance'. Since many of the innovations in Nijinsky's choreographies were simply dismantling established conventions and thus gradually expanding the possibilities of staged movement, perhaps the most important legacy of his works lies in the manner they questioned the rules that were seen as *ontological* qualities of dance. This question of what, in fact, is dancing, offers countless possibilities of re-imagining dance by re-examining, critically, that which we have been told is true, universal and self-evident on and off stage.

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<sup>119</sup> See e.g. Solomon 2011; and Launay 2012 on how Nijinsky's choreographies figure in the repertoire as memories of citations where the imagined original is transformed in performance. As with the movement qualities of *Sacre*, this is a topic that merits an article of its own.

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