

"Great Horizons Flooded with the Alien Light of the Sun": *Le Sacre du Printemps* in the Russian context

Abstract:

Even a century after the premiere of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Russian contemporary sources offer a wealth of material on the Ballets Russes and particularly on Nijinsky's 1913 choreography that are rarely read and never really analyzed in detail. This paper will give an overview of some of these sources and their varied but generally positive discussion on Nijinsky's work in order to argue that these informed Russian spectators perceived *Sacre* in a manner that contests how this work has been represented in dance history.

The title of this paper is a quote from a letter the choreographer of what became *Le Sacre du Printemps* or *The Rite of Spring*, Vaslav Nijinsky, wrote to the composer of the music, Igor Stravinsky 12/25.1.1913. After complaining about lack of time for rehearsals, Nijinsky professed his faith in the forthcoming novelty:

Мне очень нравится как все шло. Если будет так дальше, Игорь, будет здорово хорошо.

Я знаю что из “Весенних празднеств” получится, когда все будет, как мы с тобой желали. Новое на обыкновенного зрителя потрясающее впечатление, а для некоторых откроет новые горизонты. Большие горизонты, залитые другими лучами солнца. Значит [они] увидят другие краски, другие жизни. Все другое – новое, прекрасное.¹

The metaphor of a sun enlightening the spectators of this new art was also an allusion to the libretto of the ballet, which dealt with sun-worship of pagan Russians. Both

¹ “I am very pleased with how everything went. If all will go like this, Igor, it will be awesome.

I know what will be born of “Sacred Spring”, if all will be the way you and I have wished it to be. New for the habitual spectator shocking impressions, as if someone had opened new horizons [for them]. Great horizons, flooded with an alien light of the sun. [They] will know new colours, new life. Everything is alien – new and beautiful.” Nijinsky to Stravinsky 12/25.1.1913 in Stravinsky 1997, ii:13.

Stravinsky and Nikolai Roerich, who was the designer of the sets and costumes and credited with the libretto, later claimed to have invented the idea of the ballet. Both wanted to ascertain the work – and the scandal it caused – was somehow the idea of an individual (themselves) rather than the collective creation emphasised in the initial reception of the work, particularly the famous riot at the Paris premiere. Writing after a World War, both also separated the work from the tradition of Russian art, specifically the neo-nationalist art that many Russian critics emphasised in their reviews. This downplaying of nationalism is the most significant change in representations of *Sacre* ever since, and relates to issues of authorship and modernism that I will address here.

As in any large production, who originated which aspect of the end product is, frankly, not a very interesting research question. The process of collaboration can be fraught with conflicts and creative disagreements invisible in the end result, and Nijinsky's letter alludes to these with the conditional “if all will be the way you and I have wished it to be”. As Nijinsky appraises the rehearsals with the dancers are going well, this hints at some other discord in the collaboration or within the company.² It is very tempting to read such conflict in terms of the modernist myth of the vanguard young creators separating their ties to academic conventions and the habitual spectator Nijinsky mentions. This view has dominated interpretations of Stravinsky's score, but not of Roerich's neo-nationalist sets and costumes, which lack the necessary signs of aesthetic break attributed to both the music and the choreography.

But although Nijinsky's letter offers a rare glimpse into the creative processes of the Ballets Russes, it also illustrates lacunae in previous research. Letters and telegrams

² Nijinsky wanted to see Roerich's designs as soon as possible: from the reviews of *Sacre* it is clear he had certain colours on stage correspond with musical themes in the orchestra. Roerich, however, had sent the designs to Stravinsky, with the result that on 20.12.1912/2.1.1913 (in Stravinsky 1997, i:398), Nijinsky's partner, the impresario Diaghilev, was still asking Stravinsky for the set designs, as well as issuing the ultimatum that were the composer not to show up in the rehearsals as Nijinsky requested, *Sacre* would not be performed. The company régisseur, Grigoriev gave the lack of costume designs as the excuse for not beginning the rehearsals in a letter to Stravinsky 5./18.12.1912 Stravinsky 1997, i:390; cf. Stravinsky-Craft 1978, 93. Diaghilev renewed his request 10./23.3.1913 (Stravinsky 1997, ii:42), which means Nijinsky still had not had the designs. In this letter, Diaghilev also told Stravinsky that the presence of Roerich was *not* required in the rehearsals, which may explain why Roerich was not credited with the *mise-en-scène* of *Sacre*, even though the libretto had been written by him in collaboration with Stravinsky.

are only necessary when collaborators are physically distant from each other. As such, they undermine the predominant idea that the Ballets Russes "masterpieces" resulted from close collaboration between peers, particularly as these sources also reveal hierarchies between collaborators: for example, Stravinsky (who was 31 at the time of the premiere of *Sacre*) and Nijinsky (who was 24) speak to each other in the familiar second person singular (ТЫ) but to Roerich (who was 39) in the polite form (ВЫ). In a sense, a letter in Russian also points to the extent that later narratives have dominated research on and interpretation of *Sacre*. Canons are retrospective discursive formations where everything is made to make sense post factum, and particularly with the choreography this has supported the assumption that contemporary reviews had nothing to say of a "lost" work of a presumed madman, Nijinsky.³

With the exception Millicent Hodson's pieced-together new "original" too often treated as such,⁴ discussion on *Sacre* has shied away from choreographic analysis. Of the four choreographies Nijinsky made for the Ballets Russes in 1912-1916, *Sacre* was the only one he did not mention in his so-called *Diary* (manus. 1919). Consequently, the tone of voice researchers adopt with *Sacre* has greatly differed from how the other Nijinsky choreographies have been primarily read as signs of the approaching mental illness of the choreographer or as declarations of his sexual proclivities.⁵ The missing retrospective interpretation by the choreographic author precludes an intentionalist reading of precisely the work for which he is best known as a choreographer. This absence cannot be explained either by Nijinsky's alleged trauma over the riot the work caused or by the Russian practice of attributing authorship in ballet to the composers of the libretto and the musical score.⁶ Unlike with *Faune* or *Jeux*, no notations of *Sacre*

³ E.g. Citron 1995, esp. 19-22; DeNora 1995, esp. 5-8, 186-191.

⁴ For insightful criticism of Hodson's work, see e.g. Acocella 1991; also, as Fink 1999, esp. 299-304 points out, the music used by Hodson was considerably different from the score of 1913. See also Franko 1989 for the potential of reconstruction as a practice to criticise canons, however Hodson has insisted only masterworks are of value to dance: McCarthy

⁵ As in e.g. Garafola 1992, 63, following Kirstein 1971, 199.

⁶ *Ezhegodnik* 1907-1908, ii:131: "Павилонъ Армиды. Балетъ-пантомима въ 3 карт., соч. А. Бенуа, музыка Н. Н. Черепнина." "Armida's pavilion. Ballet-pantomime in 3 ta[bleaux], lib[retto]. by A. Benois, music by N.N. Cherepnin." Even in programmes of the Ballets Russes, 'maître de ballet' should not be confused with 'choreographer' as the word is nowadays used.

by Nijinsky himself have surfaced, although Stravinsky's annotations designed to assist the choreographic process are well known.⁷

Considering how central *Sacre* has become to the history of dance as an art form,⁸ it is remarkable how little critical attention has been given to what the contemporary primary sources do say of dancing, choreography and modernism in this work, particularly as Nijinsky's choreographic works brought precisely this kind of detailed attention to the formal qualities of dance into the Western reviews of the Ballets Russes.⁹ It is not the purpose of this article to remedy this, but in the following, I outline some aspects of the choreography that provoked critical interest, particularly those that clearly held a very different significance for Russians than to their better-known Western colleagues. However, this requires a short foray into the nationalist concerns evoked by the theme of *Sacre*, primitive Russia.

The Russian Invasion

Commenting on the Balkan peace treaty of 30.5.1913, Alfred Capus wrote in the front-page editorial of *Le Figaro* 2.6.1913 that the Russian barbarians had formed their own state on the Avenue Montaigne, led by Nijinsky, "sorte d'Attila de la danse"¹⁰ – a characterisation that explicitly rendered the Russians as an invading horde. Capus then proposed a peace treaty could perhaps be negotiated between the French and these foreigners in their midst:

Nijinsky s'engagera, je suppose, à ne plus représenter de ballet dépassant un certain degré de beauté inaccessible à nos faibles intelligences et à ne plus produire sur la scène le type bien moderne de la femme de trois cents ans, ni des petits garçons à la mamelle, ni même de mamelle. Grâce à ces concessions,

⁷ Stravinsky 1969. Millicent Hodson also found Marie Rambert's annotations, but unlike she presents in Hodson 1996, xxi, these were created at least months and possibly years after the premiere. Neither has the choreographic accuracy even of Nijinsky's annotations to *Jeux* that I have discussed in Järvinen 2009b.

⁸ E.g. Noisette 2011, 142 begins his chronology of contemporary dance from *Sacre*.

⁹ See my previous articles in this journal, Järvinen 2009a and b.

¹⁰ *Le Figaro* 2.6.1913.

on continuera de lui dire qu'il est le plus grand danseur du monde, et le plus beau des hommes, et on le lui prouvera. Nous sommes à la paix.¹¹

The situation in the Balkans was similarly alluded to in *The Sketch* 23.7.1913, which described Stravinsky's use of different keys as: "relations between them are not, perhaps, very unlike those that exist between Servian and Bulgarian at the time of writing."¹² Even the positive reviews used the metaphors of warfare – for example, Jacques Rivière wrote of "les combats de ces étranges bataillons"¹³ in the work (perhaps an allusion to the fourth section of the first act, *Игра двухъ городовъ*, Games of two cities). As Modris Eksteins has discussed, a year later, *Sacre* was less humorously presented as a prime example of the nihilism that had caused the assassination of the Austrian Archduke and the following July crisis, and as something against which the healthy and sane would protest; and even in 1918, *Sacre* cropped up as an example of moral degeneration in French nationalist rhetoric.¹⁴

Such allusions reflect how, by 1913, a major war between European empires seemed a certainty, and it is important that with *Sacre*, only a little over a year before the declaration of war, Russians got positioned as the potential enemy.¹⁵ Capus's description of modernity in the shape of an impossibly old woman and of sex in the shape of (bare) breasts echo how choreographic choices distanced *Sacre* from the expectations of the audience regarding beauty; but they also reflect how aesthetics were inseparable from politics and the imagined future of the nation.

From their first season onwards, the Ballets Russes had been discussed as representing the true, semi-barbaric Russia - that is, as being the East, not only representing it. In

¹¹ *Le Figaro* 2.6.1913.

¹² *Sketch* 23.7.1913.

¹³ Rivière in *La Nouvelle revue française* November 1913, 721.

¹⁴ Eksteins 1989, 53-54 quoting *La Revue Bleue* 11.7.1914; Silver 1989, 20-22 quoting *La Baïonette* 18.4.1918.

¹⁵ Thanks to the crises in the Balkans, Russians had a reputation as war-mongers. Hobsbawm 1989, esp. 312-315; Kern 2000, 252. *Sacre* was not the first time the Ballets Russes stood in for Russian imperialism: see *The Punch* 24.1.1912 for "startling results of exotic influence of the Persian native", 13.11.1912 for "Our War Pictures" and 11.12.1912 for "The Balkan Pas-de-Quatre".

1912, the influential French critic Camille Mauclair illustrated what exactly this 'Russia' was:

La sensualité enragée qui, par instants, convulse l'ordonnance des miniatures persanes animées par la magie asiatique, la puérité, la cruauté, le luxe barbare, la souplesse féline des organismes, l'étrangeté des gestes et des faces, la violente bizarrerie chromatique des parures, le caractère spasmodique de certaines agrégations de cette foule ocellée qui sursaute et se distend en folie, tout cela devra rester le propre du ballet russe.¹⁶

Barbarous luxury, cruelty, Asian magic, otherness – this 'Russia' was a Russia as imagined by the Western audiences in the best traditions of Orientalism. Spatially, temporally and ideologically separated from the West, this imagined Russia was temporally located in the past and its aesthetic was that of the 1890s, not of the 1910s - in the same article, Mauclair expressly wrote of how the Ballets Russes were realising the dreams of the French Symbolists like himself, Lugné-Poë and Mallarmé. Only this kind of Russia - a Russia somewhere beyond civilisation or preceding it - could act as a revitalizing influence on Western culture,¹⁷ as Mauclair explicated when he attacked Nijinsky's *Faune* (associated with the French art of Mallarmé and Debussy) a fortnight later.¹⁸

Of the reasons contributing to the critical reversal that Mauclair's reactions here illustrate, two are particularly pertinent to the reception of *Sacre*: the choreographer's self-proclaimed "Cubism" and the assumption that the Russians' total works of art rested on their inborn, racial ability to think as one. For both reasons, it was significant that Diaghilev's enterprise had construed itself as a "revolutionary" company, in opposition to the Russian Imperial Theatres but also in opposition to all Philistines who did not understand Art (i.e. the Ballets Russes). Yet, by 1913, new artistic movements and up-and-coming artists disputed precisely the opulent fin-de-siècle aesthetic of the company and gave lie to their claims of being the vanguard in art.¹⁹ At

¹⁶ Mauclair in *Le Courrier Musical* 1.6.1912.

¹⁷ See e.g. Rhodes 1994, esp. 8; Barkan & Bush 1995; also West 1993, 131-138 on primitivism and revitalisation.

¹⁸ Camille Mauclair in *Le Courrier Musical* 15.6.1912.

¹⁹ See e.g. Acocella 1984, esp. 304-308, 352-359, 387-452.

the same time, these new movements lent credibility to the (nationalist) argument that any "revolution" in art was simply dangerous anarchy, a disregard for tradition and decency that undermined the very foundations of the nation.

In the nationalist atmosphere anticipating a war, many French critics identified new forms of art as foreign and alien influences, destructive, degenerate and altogether undesirable. To quote but one example of the indignation caused by the 1912 Salon d'Automne:

Cette invasion sans cesse grandissante de métèques, pour la plupart sans talent, qui viennent, non plus comme autrefois pour étudier le clair génie de notre race, mais pour nous imposer les brumes ou les extravagances du leur, est un véritable *péril national*. [--] Nos artistes les imitent, le mauvais goût pénètre à leur suite! [- -] Futuristes italiens ou 'fumée de pipistes' hongrois et slaves contaminent notre jeunesse française; ils sont la cause de ces folies ridicules dont nous donnons quelques échantillons ici.²⁰

As evident from this quote from *Le Monde illustré*, the new art of Futurists, Cubists and the like was seen as contaminating the impressionable French youth, especially if these foreigners were allowed to exhibit side by side with native talent (nationalist critics conveniently forgot Georges Braque was quite French). Similar voices were also heard in England in conjunction with the first Post-Impressionist exhibition.²¹ This is why Nijinsky's identification of his choreography as a kind of applied Cubism doubled the foreignness of *Sacre*:

Мое произведение в сущности не балет. Это совершенно новая ритмическая музыкально-хореографическая композиция. Моя формула – строгая пластика, связанная с музыкою. Моя попытка заключается в желании отметить новый, любопытный этап в хореографии. Моя новая

²⁰ *Le Monde illustré*, October 1912. The magazine calculated that 316 of the 709 exhibitors in the salon and nine of the jury of twenty-one were foreigners. Similarly, Léon Werth in *La Grande revue* 25.10.1912; cf. musical perils discussed by Jean Celte in *La Nouvelle revue* 15.5.1912.

²¹ Tickner 1997, 68; Stansky 1997, 214 quoting *The Times*: "Like anarchism in politics, it [Post-Impressionism] is the rejection of all that civilization has done, the good with the bad", also 220, 232-236; Hynes 1969, 324-348.

формула движения подчеркнет механизм жеста и линий. Я применил к хореографии теорию живописцев-кубистов.²²

Keeping in mind what was said of Cubism in other arts, it is hardly surprising to find *Sacre* represented as Orientalist excess unsuited to French culture, taste and morals: Vuillermoz compared Nijinsky's work to Metzinger and Picasso, whom he disliked,²³ and Reynaldo Hahn jokingly called *Sacre* "Ce Gauguin du Printemps",²⁴ which may also have alluded to the name of the loose group Gauguin was associated with, les Fauves.²⁵

In addition, by 1913, the Ballets Russes was in Paris for its fifth consecutive summer season (which was the eighth of Diaghilev's "Saisons Russe") and as Truman Bullard has noted, at the cessation of the indigenous theatre season in Paris, the Russians presented a recurring challenge to French art.²⁶ Victor Débay complained that enough was enough: "L'excès en tout est un défaut, n'est-ce pas? D'ailleurs, depuis quelque temps, les étrangers considèrent Paris comme un patient docile sur qui toutes opérations peuvent être tentées."²⁷ His colleague, Jean Perros, went a step further:

It is culture which makes for true superiority. If animals could paint and dance without doubt they would compose ballets like the Russians! [- -] the first

²² "My work is not, in fact, ballet. It is really a new rhythmic musico-choreographic composition. My formula [consists of] a rigorous plastique tied to the music. My attempt includes a welcome to signify new, interesting stage in the development of choreography. My new formula of movement emphasises the mechanism of gesture and line. I apply to choreography the theory of Cubist painters". Nijinsky in *Peterburgskaya gazeta* 15./28.4.1912 quoted in Zilberstein-Samkov 1982, i:448; similarly, Nijinsky in *Comædia* 18.4.1912.

²³ Vuillermoz in *S.I.M. Revue musicale* June 1913.

²⁴ Hahn according to Reiss 1960, 126; see also Blanche *La Revue de Paris* 1.12.1913; and Count Kessler to Hugo von Hofmannsthal 4.6.1913 in Kessler-Hofmannsthal 1968, 361.

²⁵ 'Fauve' was generally interpreted as meaning 'wild (beast)'. See also Carraud in *La Liberté* 17.5.1913; and Cocteau 1918, 64.

²⁶ Bullard 1971, 86-90, 191-193, 205-210.

²⁷ Victor Débay in *Le Courrier Musical* 15.6.1913.

moment of surprise having passed, we see clearly that we have no reason to ask them for lessons.²⁸

This anger had accumulated after what Nijinsky had made of the French art of Debussy and Mallarmé in *Faune*, and his *Jeux* added insult to injury, as it showed the choreographer had paid no heed to the criticism of the previous year. In many ways, *Jeux* prepared the ground for *Sacre*, performed only a fortnight later – most of the critics who had condemned the former also condemned the latter.

At the same time, *Sacre* not only confirmed Nijinsky's odd new style, it was a major work that engaged the entire company of dancers and a large orchestra, and lasted twice as long as most of the Ballets Russes works. Consequently, its success was imperative for the company and advance publicity began over a year before the premiere – in May 1912, Emile Vuillermoz already spoke of “le fameux Sacre”.²⁹ The first reviews of the novelty, based on the open dress rehearsal of 28.5.1913, illustrate these high expectations: *Le Figaro*, amongst others, ran a publicity story praising the Russians as great poets and their work as the “la réalisation la plus surprenante qu’ait jamais tentée l’admirable troupe de M. Serge de Diaghilew.”³⁰ The same was true of the London premiere in July: “Report said before the curtain rose on Friday night on the newest Russian ballet (“Sacré [sic] du Printemps”) that it was going to whip creation, and that all previous efforts of M. Serge de Diaghileff’s company were going to be eclipsed.”³¹

What is crucial to understand is that these expectations rested on the reputation of the Ballets Russes as an exceptional company whose spectacles were appraised for having realized the total work of art principle, which, simply put, meant a performance that created a seamless unity of the different arts involved. As an ideal, the total work of art

²⁸ Jean Perros in *La Critique Indépendante* 15.6.1913 quoted in Bullard 1971, ii:151-158; and *La dame au Masque* in the same paper, quoted *op.cit.*, ii:144-146.

²⁹ *S.I.M. Revue musicale* May 1912; similarly, *Grande revue* 25.6.1912. Also Bullard 1971, 11-13 and Stravinsky-Craft 1978, 90 quoting *La France* 12.11.1912.

³⁰ *Le Figaro* 29.5.1913; also Bullard 1971, 132 on this notice being printed in several papers. Vuillemin in *Comoedia* 31.5.1913; and Johnson 1913, 201 noticed the anticipation was eager, however, see Järvinen 2009b, 219n9 for similar advance publicity for *Jeux*.

³¹ C.M. in *The Lady* 17.7.1913.

was imbued with social as well as aesthetic impact: it was believed that rediscovering this lost unity would elevate the social prestige of (theatrical) arts in contemporary society and that it would facilitate transcendental experiences through synaesthesia, the mixing of sensory perceptions (hearing colours, for example).³² In the nineteenth century, the German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) advocated the dominance of one creative individual – the artist-genius – over the entire production of what he called 'Gesamtkunstwerk', and from the first, the Ballets Russes was positioned in opposition to this Wagnerian ideal (and German influence more generally) through stressing the collectivity of the creative process in this company.³³ For many of the French critics disappointed with Symbolist efforts - like the aforementioned Camille Mauclair - the total work of art could not be achieved by individuals but only by a collective, atavistic genius, determined by race.

This is why, despite their praise, these authors never suggested that the lost bodies of the Western spectators could be recovered if only they took up dancing. Ballet – originally a Western art form – could be a perfect vehicle for Russian art because of the racial atavism of the Russians: the Russians' dancing was a reversion to type that was also a reversion in time - their inspiring vitality could only serve other races in arts more suited to refined tastes of civilized people. Hence, critics lauding the Russians simultaneously rescued the Western sense of cultural superiority by arguing that the only reason for the Russians to have achieved the total work of art is biological and inherent, dependent on race:

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

³² On Greek drama as Gesamtkunstwerk and this as exemplified by the Ballets Russes see e.g. Kinney & Kinney s.a., 249-251; Austruy in *La Nouvelle revue* 1.7.1912; Touchard in *La Nouvelle revue* 15.7.1912. On synaesthesia, Classen 1998, esp. 109-137.

³³ See Ghéon in *La Nouvelle revue française* August 1910; similarly, Cocteau 1918, 65.

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.³⁴

The author of this quote, Jacques Rivière, is the most often cited defender of *Sacre* and one portrayed in dance research as the sole critic who really understood its modernism.³⁵ This is, in itself, a remarkably Orientalist claim considering the lengthy analyses of the work in the Russian press, but particularly so because in this excerpt from the first of the two pieces Rivière wrote of *Sacre*, he not only uses the familiar juxtaposition of us and them (nous, les Occidentaux vs. eux, les Russes) but explicitly rests his appraisal of the new work on this presumed inherent racial difference. The representation of primitivity in *Sacre* is thus successful because the Russians, despite outward signs of civilization, were primitives who could think the same thing simultaneously like some kind of a hive mind.

Rivière was hardly original in thinking thus: racial difference had for years justified both what the Russians presented onstage and how they went about presenting it.³⁶ It can be found also in English sources:

The real truth about the Russians is that they are expressing themselves, so that we get a sincerity and a unity of purpose hardly possible under the usual operatic conditions in this country. This is specially true of the ballets,³⁷

wrote *The Graphic*. A few years earlier, *The Lady* found this self to be the “Tartar element”,³⁸ a misperception that would have been particularly insulting to Russians, as Ta(r)tars were Muslim descendants of the Mongol invaders who had occupied Russia

³⁴ Rivière in *La Nouvelle revue française* August 1913.

³⁵ Rivière's second essay on *Sacre*, published in the November issue of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, has been cited as the best or most important discussion on the ballet. See e.g. Kirstein 1975, 144, 164-168; Garafola 1992(a), 69-70; Hodson 1996, xi; Lepecki 2000, 340-342. See Nochlin 1989, xvi on canon formation and colonialism.

³⁶ See e.g. Abel Bonnard in *Le Figaro* 18.6.1910; Jean-Louis Vaudoyer in *Revue de Paris* 15.7.1910; Touchard in *La Nouvelle revue* 15.7.1912; Marnold in *Mercure de France* 1.10.1913.

³⁷ *The Graphic* 12.7.1913.

³⁸ *The Lady* 20.7.1911; likewise *The Graphic* 13.7.1912.

until the fifteenth century.

This ideological Othering of the Russians and the emphasis on racially defined collective creation in particular affected how reviews of the spectacles rarely analysed what took place on stage. For example, *The Graphic* spent several paragraphs describing the plot of *Petrouchka* (1911) and then dismissed the dancing with: “Of the performance nothing need to be said.”³⁹ When what the dancers did on stage receded to the background in texts that focused on the emotional impact of the total work of art, the finished product just magically appeared at each performance and the labour that went into the actual creation of these spectacles was excluded from the discourse, including much of the later research. In contrast, Russian critics used this apparent disinterest of their Western colleagues to justify their own critical view of the Ballets Russes company, although these critics actually did engage with choreography in unprecedented detail with Nijinsky's choreographies.⁴⁰

The Old vs. the New Ballet

For most Russian critics, the Ballets Russes was not a revolutionary company – on the contrary: Russian audiences had got used to ‘new ballet’ choreography since Gorsky’s *Don Quixote* of 1900 - a style originally opposed by both Diaghilev's *Mir iskusstva* group⁴¹ and by Fokine and the ballet strikers of 1905.⁴² Moreover, the majority of the works performed during the 1909 and 1910 visits of the Imperial Theatres to Paris had already been seen in St. Petersburg, and their sets were in the neo-nationalist style familiar to Russian critics from productions of the Krotkov (or Mamontov) Private Opera (1885-1887, 1896-1903) and the Moscow Arts Theatre (est. 1898) as well as earlier productions of the Imperial Theatres. Thus, when Yakov Tugenkhold reported

³⁹ *The Graphic* 22.2.1913.

⁴⁰ See my articles in this journal Järvinen 2008 and 2009a.

⁴¹ See Benois in *Mir iskusstva* 2-3/1902 attacking the “ожесточенными верчениями массъ” (“wild whirling masses”) Gorsky staged - cf. Benois in *Rech* 19.6./2.7.1909 praising Fokine for the same.

⁴² Unlike e.g. Garafola 1992a, 4-5, 7 presents, the 1905 'Ballet strike' at the Maryinsky was against the reforms instigated by Teliakovsky that included replacing the aging Petipa and his old ballet with the new ballet of Gorsky. Cf. Telyakovsky 1990, 42-46; Souritz 1999, 104-108; Krasovskaia 1971, i: 46-50, 107-151.

in *Apollon* 8/1910 that Bakst's scenery was a revelation to the French, he implied there was little that was new in it for the Russian spectator. It is true that the costumes broke some of the rules of decency of the Imperial Theatres - a fact that became cause for Nijinsky's 1911 dismissal - and some of the themes (like suicides) were expressly forbidden on the Imperial stage. But these qualities were also associated with "low" forms of the variety stage and credited to Diaghilev's ideas on marketing, his "барышники искусства"⁴³ seen as unfit for Artists of the Imperial Theatres and detrimental to the reputation of ballet in Russia.⁴⁴

Against this background, the reception of all of Nijinsky's choreographies, and of *Sacre* in particular, was rather exceptional. For one, in comparison to previous reviews, the Russian critics seemed to lose interest in what their Western colleagues wrote of *Sacre* - the reviews included far fewer quotations from the French press than before. Also, many of the critics who had disparaged the company also markedly changed their opinions with *Sacre*, and found in it evidence of the truth of their particular aesthetic agendas, even though these agendas were mutually exclusive.

To begin with, in the Russian dance discourse, tradition was one of the points of contestation between the faction defending the old ballet - critics like André (Andrei) Levinson - and the advocates of the so-called "new ballet" of Aleksandr Gorsky and his followers - critics like Valerian Svetlov. The gist of this strife between the old and new ballet was that the defenders of the former claimed that the latter had introduced to dance a dilettantism that undermined the value of dance training, technique and skill in favour of expressive acting;⁴⁵ whilst the latter argued that the former were so stuck in their ways they caused the entire art form to stagnate.⁴⁶

⁴³ I.e. "huckster art". *Obozrenie teatrov* 30.5./12.6.1909. Baryshniki was a name for people selling (black market) tickets to the performances of the Imperial Theatres at exorbitant prices.

⁴⁴ More on Diaghilev's image in Russia in Järvinen 2008. See also Benois quoted in Wiley 1979/1980, 177 using the "immorality is in eye of the beholder" argument to justify his costume, the one that got Nijinsky dismissed.

⁴⁵ See Akim Volinsky quoted in Rabinowitz 2009, 6 on Fokine destroying the greatness of Pavlova, Karsavina and Nijinsky; or Levinson on Fokine's *Les Préludes* in *Rech* 2./15.4.1913.

⁴⁶ Svétlow 1912, esp. 6-12.

Therefore, it is remarkable how Levinson, despite his apparent dislike of Nijinsky's choreographic principles, appreciates the choreographic composition of *Sacre* and how he praises Maria Piltz's dance as the Chosen One as "очень увѣренно, мужественно, почти красиво".⁴⁷ In contrast, the usual Russian advocate of everything the Ballets Russes did, Valerian Svetlov, was unusually quiet about both the choreography and the music of *Sacre* in his review for *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 23.5./5.6.1913. However, this review, too, ends with an appraisal of the solo of the Chosen One:

Дѣвушка начинаетъ танецъ, который длится четыре минуты.

Вещь вельханная въ лѣтописяхъ хореографіи, и остается удивляться выносливости и мужеству молоденькой Пильць, которая выдерживается эту хореографическую пытку, обезсиливая лишь по требованію либретто, а не на самомъ дѣлѣ.⁴⁸

Although he does not explicitly state it, Svetlov implies he was very uncomfortable with Nijinsky's choreography. He concluded his review:

Весь этотъ актъ полонъ какого-то славянскаго мистицизма и въ великолѣпной декорации Рериха чувствуется какая-то стихійная жуть.⁴⁹

Together with the description of the choreography as torture and the emphasis on Roerich's costumes over music or dance this points to how *Sacre* provoked such strongly emotional reactions from critics - in praise and in blame - that it seems it genuinely expanded the affective possibilities of dance, and it did so precisely by challenging previously expected aesthetic qualities of beauty and grace.

⁴⁷ I.e. "very certain, brave, almost beautiful." Levinson in *Rech* 3./16.6.1913.

⁴⁸ "The girl begins a dance that lasts for four minutes.

The piece is unprecedented in the annals of choreography, and one remains puzzled/astonished by the stamina and courage of the young Piltz, who kept to this choreographic torture, without giving up, only because it was required by the libretto and not actually."

Svetlov in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 23.5./5.6.1913.

⁴⁹ "All of this [second] act is full of some kind of Slavic mysticism and in Roerich's magnificent scenery [i.e. set design] one feels some kind of primal terror." Ibid.

With a very different emphasis, the former Director of the Imperial Theatres, Prince Sergei Volkonsky wrote in *Apollon* 6/1913 of *Sacre* as a ritual, because he saw it as so disconnected with anything the word 'ballet' could evoke. However, he did not claim that Nijinsky would have emulated a ritual capable of creating some kind of a mystic experience in spectators or dancers, or aimed at something that was not ballet.⁵⁰ In fact, he chided Roerich's décor and costumes for reducing the impact of the choreography:

іератичность танцевъ нѣсколько разбавлялась этнографичностью Рериховскихъ костюмовъ, – слишкомъ чувствовалась ‘губернія’ подъ этимъ доисторическимъ славянствомъ.⁵¹

The "provincial" costumes similarly displeased Anatoli Lunacharsky, writing to the theatrical paper *Teatr i iskusstvo*. Just like the prince, the future People's Commissar of Enlightenment (NARKOMPROS) under Lenin argued that *Sacre* did not aim for archaeological accuracy or ethnographic authenticity, and he dismissed Roerich's contribution as belonging to a wrong kind of primitivism, an unoriginal fashion in the wake of Gauguin. Despite his reservations, Lunacharsky thought *Sacre* "сталь (sic) въ уровень вообще хорошихъ спектаклей."⁵² More importantly, however, Lunacharsky analysed how *Sacre* overhauled traditional notions of beauty:

Но Стравинскій и Нижинскій [--] хотѣли воскресить примитивныя пляски художественно, во всеоружіи современной музыкально-оркестровой, балетной и декоративной техники. Обыкновенно въ тѣхъ случаяхъ, когда режиссеръ старается дать "красоту", поднявъ до ея условий обрабатываемую имъ дѣйствительность - онъ дѣйствуетъ по образцу тѣхъ своихъ предшественниковъ, которые въ "Жизни за Царя" выпускали на

⁵⁰ Krasovskaya 1979, 241-244 quotes Volkonsky and claims Nijinsky insisted that his work was ballet, neither Dalcrozian, nor ritual, in essence. Cf. Levinson 1982, 53: “[I] can believe that the spring rites of pagan Russia were, down to the smallest details, just as they were on stage at the Champs Elysées.”

⁵¹ I.e. “the hieratic dancing was somewhat diluted by the ethnographic accuracy of Roerich’s costumes, which felt too provincial for this prehistoric Slavism.” Volkonsky in *Apollon* 6/1913.

⁵² "It was on the level of the very great spectacles." Lunacharsky in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 9./22.6.1913.

сцену знаменитых пейзажей в шелковых рубахах и плисовых шароварах. Постепенно лишь просачивается даже в оперу и балет сознание, что *прекрасное* далеко не цѣликомъ сводится къ красивому, а тѣмъ болѣе къ *красивенькому*. Стравинскій и Нижинскій давши художественное и *современное* произведение, имѣющее своею цѣлью возсоздать еще младенческую красоту, которая въ необработанномъ видѣ не можетъ не показаться намъ уродствомъ, не пошли ни по пути научной точности, ни по пути балетнаго обсахариванья матеріала.⁵³

Lunacharsky speculated that this kind of middle ground was perhaps the only one possible for ballet, but it is obvious that he had his doubts. What was at fault was the sources Nijinsky had used for his primitivism:

При этомъ однако забывается одно обстоятельство. Прimitивный танецъ изображался примитивнымъ же художникомъ. Въ этомъ случаѣ изображение должно было быть столь же непохожимъ на оригиналь, какъ не похожъ на ребенка имъ самимъ сдѣланый автопортретъ. Затемъ, танцевальный стиль пропускался въ этомъ случаѣ сквозь живописный стиль.⁵⁴

In other words, Lunacharsky resorted to a claim similar to those made of Nijinsky's *Faune* in Western Europe - that Nijinsky was mistaken to imitate in dance the conventions of a two-dimensional picture.⁵⁵ Lunacharsky did not even consider the

⁵³ But Stravinsky and Nijinsky [--] fully equipped with the techniques of contemporary musical orchestras, ballets and decoration, wanted to revive primitive dances *artistically*. Usually in the cases when the director labours to make "beauty", they heighten the reality to fit their conditions like their predecessors who in "Life for the Tsar" bring on stage the usual peasants in silk shirts and corduroy trousers. Only gradually the knowledge seeps even into opera and ballet that the beautiful is not entirely limited to beauty, much less to the pretty. Stravinsky and Nijinsky gave an artistic and contemporary work that has childish beauty, [a work] that in its refined guise cannot seem to us but to be ugly. They did not take the road of scientific accuracy, nor the road of balletic sugaring of the material.

⁵⁴ "This, however, means forgetting one thing. Primitive dance was depicted by equally primitive artists. In this case, the image has to be as different from the original as a child himself from his self-portrait. Thus, in this case, the painting style conditions [lit. shows through in] the dance style." Lunacharsky in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 9./22.6.1913.

⁵⁵ See e.g. *Pall Mall Gazette* 18.2.1913; Johnson 1913, 186.

possibility that Nijinsky would have taken to the primitive form *as* something beautiful in itself, and although he thought the dances created interesting effects, he condemned what he thought was its method of creating these effects. Also, as with his *Faune* review,⁵⁶ instead of detailing his critical view of the choreography, he veered to condemning the audience behaviour.

Volkonsky, too, pointed out that primitivism - or as he called it, archaism - was problematic for dance:

Архаичность въ движеніяхъ – опасный элементъ. Рѣдко ей вѣрится на **сценѣ**; она всегда кажется чѣмъ-то дѣланымъ, исканымъ, нарочнымъ. Но я долженъ сказать, что здѣсь, съ перваго мгновенія вѣрилось, ни разу не было ‘нарочно’. Я долженъ сказать, что въ первый разъ я повѣрилъ наивности на сценѣ.⁵⁷

What is interesting in this quote is, that Volkonsky states he believes in the action on stage precisely when it does not seem connived or intentional. A page later, Volkonsky went on to explain what he found to be the most important qualities of Nijinsky's choreography:

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

Большое воспитательное значеніе имѣеть это подтвержденіе хористическаго начала въ томъ искусствѣ, которое до сихъ поръ было самое ‘солистическое’ изъ всѣхъ. Забвеніе своего ‘я’ – первое условіе

⁵⁶ Lunacharsky in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 15./28.6.1912.

⁵⁷ I.e. "Archaism in movement [is] a dangerous element. Rarely is it believable on stage – it always looks like it has been made, searched for, intentional. But I should say that here, from the first moment it is *believable*, not once did it become ‘intentional’. I should say that for the first time I believed in the naïveté on stage." Volkonsky in *Apollon* 6/1913.

искусства, и въ этом смыслѣ новое направление нельзя не приветствовать, какъ элементъ художественнаго здоровья.⁵⁸

Thanks to his interest in Dalcroze's eurhythmics, Volkonsky believed the "primitive" form – the choreographed repetition and mass movement, the de-individualization of the dancers – could bring something new to the art of dance. His reference to how ballet was the art of great individuals could well be extended to dance more generally as the notable personalities of contemporary free-form dance, like Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan, figured prominently on the pages of Russian theatre magazines.

Primitive Rhythm

E. Pann, writing for the theatre periodical *Maski*, found *Sacre* the most convincing work the Diaghilev company had ever produced:

можно разматривать какъ самое крупное событіе въ молодой пока исторіи Дягилевскаго предпріятія: она ознаменовала собою рѣшительное вступленіе на путь Ритма. Оба молодыхъ новатора; одинъ въ области музыки, другой въ области хореографіи, дали крупное и убѣдительно художественное усиліе.⁵⁹

In a manner reminiscent of Volkonsky, he went on to discuss this rhythm and the new form of choreography that he had not seen as necessary in Nijinsky's *Jeux* but found very suiting to the music of *Sacre*. Lunacharsky agreed: although he found

⁵⁸ "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." Volkonsky in *Apollon* 6/1913.

⁵⁹ "must show as a great event in the so-far short history of the Diaghilevian enterprise: it signifies its determined stepping onto the path of Rhythm. Both young renovators, one in the area of music, the other in the area of choreography, give great and convincing artistic effort." Pann in *Maski* 7-8/1913-1914.

Stravinsky's score filled with "дикихъ и грубыхъ монотонныхъ и неуклюжихъ ритмовъ",⁶⁰ he commended how:

Нижинскаго прежде всего приходится похвалить за то, что движеніе на сценѣ съ великой точностью и замѣчательнымъ искусствомъ подчинено талантливой звукописи Стравинскаго. Для того же, чтобы обрѣсти ключъ къ особенностямъ примитивнаго жеста или стаднаго порыва - Нижинскій обратился къ вышивкамъ, очень старымъ лубкамъ и вообще разнаго рода примитивной живописи.⁶¹

That is, Lunacharsky appraised the tight connection between the sounds of the orchestra and the movements on stage as Volkonsky and Pann.

In contrast, André Levinson, who preferred the "old ballet" qualities of *Jeux* to the primitivism of *Sacre*, wrote against this excess of rhythm:

Я не знаю ничего изысканнѣе этой готтентотской музыки.

Но въ томъ, какъ воспринялъ эту музыку балетмейстеръ, въ томъ, какъ онъ подчинилъ ей исполителей - роковая ложь и очень поучительная ошибка этой постановки.

Единственная цѣль придуманныхъ имъ движеній - осуществленіе ритма. Ритмъ - такова здѣсь единственная, чудовищная сила, обуздающая первобытную душу.

Танчовщики воплощаютъ относительную длительность, силу звука, ускореніе и замедленіе темпа схематической гимнастики движеній, сгибаютъ и выпрямляютъ колѣни, поднимаютъ и опускаютъ пятки, топчутся на мѣстѣ, съ силой отбивая акцентированныя ноты. При

⁶⁰ "wild and coarse, monotonous and clumsy rhythms." Lunacharsky in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 9./22.6.1913.

⁶¹ "Above all, Nijinsky has to be praised because the movement on stage subordinates itself to Stravinsky's talented sound signals with great accuracy and excellent artistry. In order to find the key to the special features of primitive gestures or the herd's impulses, Nijinsky turned to embroideries, very old lubki [i.e. woodcuts or engravings] and in general to all kinds of primitive painting." Lunacharsky in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 9./22.6.1913.

ускореніи они бѣгутъ другъ за другомъ, точно кони на хордѣ; - пусть простятъ мнѣ это спортивное употребленіе. Это - весь привычный педагогическій арсеналь преподаванія ритмической гимнастики. Разумныя сами по себѣ и цѣлесообразныя эти двигательныя схемы, лишены здѣсь своего первоначальнаго прикладнаго значенія, оправданнаго опытомъ.

По какому-то непостижимому уклоненію вкуса и пониманія этими вспомогательными формулами движеній подмѣнено пластическое и психологическое содержаніе танца.

Но ведь ритмъ - только голая форма, только мѣра движенія во времени, лишенная содержанія. Неблагоразумно было приносить ему въ жертву пластику. И вотъ, всюду, гдѣ хаотическія метанія одержимыхъ весной и опьяненныхъ божествомъ дикарей, обращались въ нудный показательный урокъ ритмической гимнастики, когда шаманы и бѣсноватыя начинали “ходить ноты” и “дѣлать *accelerando* или синкопы”, - тамъ начинался психологическій провалъ всего замысла, самое законное и самое комическое недоумѣніе зрителя. Наивная кустарность приѣма отталкивала.

Новый ритмическій формализмъ не по праву подавляетъ самодовлѣющую пластику; къ тому же онъ пусть и мало впечатляетъ самъ по себѣ.⁶²

⁶² “I know nothing more researched than this Hottentot music.

But in the manner the ballet master has understood this music, in the way he submits the executors to it – here lies the fatal lie and the very instructive error of this performance.

The sole aim he has invented for the movement [is] to realise the rhythm. Rhythm – here it is the only thing, a monstrous force that harnesses the primitive soul.

The dancers embody the relative length, volume, speeding up and slowing down of the tempo in schematic gymnastic movements, bending and straightening, rising and lowering their heels, stopping still, as the force beats the pace of accented notes. While it is faster, they run together like horses in a herd – if you forgive me the sportive metaphor. All this [is] familiar from the pedagogic arsenal for teaching rhythmic gymnastics. Sensible in themselves and purposeful, these motor schemes are here deprived of their original practical significance that has been justified by experience.

In this remarkable review, Levinson seems torn between his own preference for the graceful old ballet, its taste, elegance and refinement, and the lure of the new, alien formalism of *Sacre*. His assessment of the music as both "Hottentot" and "refined" illustrates an emotional response similar to Svetlov's that has him search out "the fatal lie" in the choreography - the fact that Nijinsky follows the musical structure too closely, which is precisely the quality that Lunacharsky and Volkonsky praised in *Sacre*. But paradoxically, Levinson both complains that rhythm "leaves no impression in itself" and yet pays a lot of attention to *how exactly* the dancers embody this rhythm. In the end, he nonetheless praised *Sacre* for its bravery, its dazzling failure that, either despite or because of its downfall, was worth appreciation – it was only years later that he modified his opinion, writing that he had been “carried away”⁶³ by it all.

When contrasted with the review by Volkonsky, one can discern shades of another important dispute in contemporary Russian dance: the question about the relationship between ballet, free form dance and other forms of contemporary body culture such as eurhythmics. The rhythmic gymnastics that Levinson alludes to are a direct reference not only to Dalcroze but other forms of body culture with which also some Western critics associated *Sacre*.⁶⁴ For Volkonsky, a Russian advocate of Dalcroze's rhythmic gymnastics, rhythm was the vital principle upon which the art of the future would be built, and hence, *Sacre* was a fine example of this art of the future. Levinson thought Dalcroze was only good for pedagogical purposes, not for the stage, and in his opinion,

In some kind of unfathomable evasion of all taste and understanding, these additional formulas of movement replace the plastic and psychological foundations of the dance.

But rhythm [is] only naked form, only the measure of movement in time, devoid of content. Unwisely used, bringing it in sacrifices the plastic. And this is where, as the savages everywhere chaotically throw [themselves] around possessed by the spring and drunk from the godhead, the circulation turns into a boring exercise lesson in rhythmic gymnastics. When the shaman and the possessed began to “walk the notes” and “divide the *accelerando* or the syncope” there begins the psychological collapse of the entire attempt, its legality and [to] the comic bafflement of the spectator. Naïve kustarnichestvo repels the reception.

The new rhythmic formalism should not crush the self-sufficient plastic; by itself it is empty and leaves little impression in itself.” Levinson in *Rech* 3./16.6.1913.

⁶³ Levinson 1982, 54. This is a translation of Levinson's 1918 book. In addition to significantly rearranging the text and changing quite a few of his wordings, in 1918 Levinson also makes a specific reference to Dalcroze's system.

⁶⁴ See e.g. *The Sketch* 23.7.1913 on "Swedish-exercise-like movements", a reference to Nils Bukh's gymnastics.

Sacre had erred precisely because it relied too much on rhythm. The 'plastic' that Levinson requires of dance refers to statuesque poses, slow, harmonious and, most importantly, graceful movement. As such, plastic refers to both the pictorialist style of theatrical composition and to an aesthetic of grace, both of which Nijinsky had set out to oppose already in his previous choreographies.⁶⁵

The second important word in Levinson's review is "kustarnost". This means the style of Russian peasant manufactures, the most famous of which were Elizaveta Mamontova's *Abramtsevo* and Maria Tenisheva's *Talashkino*. Roerich was something of a protégé of Tenisheva's, but this is not why Levinson is alluding to the *kustari* - rather, Levinson indicates a political difference between his own nationalist alignment and what he presumes is that of the makers of *Sacre*. Like most advocates of the "old ballet", Levinson was politically aligned with the *zapadniki* or Westernizers, for whom Russians imported Western cultural products to improve them for the greater glory of the nation.⁶⁶ In contrast, *kustari* were the domain of the *narodniki* or Populists, who sought for 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.⁶⁷

The genealogy of *why* Diaghilev's enterprises have so often been misrepresented as straightforwardly opposing the *narodniki* ideals of the 'generation of the 1860s' is too complex to go into, here.⁶⁸ However, it is crucial to understand how important it was for Russian reviewers that *Sacre* could be interpreted in this very different aesthetic

⁶⁵ See Nijinsky in *The Daily Mail* 14.7.1913; for stage pictorialism, see Järvinen 2009a.

⁶⁶ 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.

⁶⁷ Salmond 1996; also Rhodes 1994, 24-31.

⁶⁸ I.e. Diaghilev's family ties to merchant estate, to *narodniki* politics and to the *kustar* revival, his navigation of Russian nationalist politics and the importance of these to all of his enterprises were edited out of the 'revolutionary' narrative of Diaghilev's private ballet company (1911-1929). In this narrative, the *Ballets Russes* and its central figures both oppose everything in semi-barbarian Russia and represent a 'truer' version of this Russia for the connoisseur audiences in the West. The importance of *zapadniki* authors like Aleksandr Benois, Walter Nouvel and Valerian Svetlov (of whom more below) to the canonization of Diaghilev and the *Ballets Russes* has ensured that dance history continues supporting this narrative, despite critical historiography by authors like Roland John Wiley and Tim Scholl.

and political tradition than any ballet before it. Ballet as an art form was closely tied with the figure of the tsar, his court and the supporters of autocracy, and had been bypassed by the nationalist reformers of the 'generation of the 1860s' and their Populist ideology. The references to *kustarnost*, to native old forms like *lubki*, and to primitivist art in the reviews of *Sacre* all show how, despite being set in ancient Rus, *Sacre* was the first Ballets Russes work that could be aligned with contemporary political and aesthetic changes in Russian art at a time when the Social Realism of the 1860s and the Symbolism of the 1890s were coming together in new forms of Russian Modernism.

Realism and Modernism

In the West, Nijinsky's works had been seen as “une phase nouvelle de la lutte de l'idéalisme contre le réalisme dans l'art scénique”,⁶⁹ a new kind of anti-realist art. In part because of the importance of Realism to Russian arts and national identity, the reverse was true with Russian critics, who connected *Sacre* with contemporary changes in Russian arts. One of Nijinsky's greatest admirers was the poet Nikolai Minsky (pseudonym of Nikolai Maksimovich Vilenkin), who had begun his career as one of the first Russian symbolists in the beginning of the 1890s. Minsky had written to *Mir iskusstva*, the arts journal Diaghilev edited from 1898 to 1904, but by 1912-1913, when he wrote of Nijinsky's choreographies, Minsky had embraced the new Russian formalists known as the Acmeist school - the loose group that included Osip Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova, authors who eschewed the florid language and flights of fancy of the Symbolist generation.

In an effort to connect this new style to what was already called the 'Golden Age' of Russian art - the social realism of the *peredvizhniki* painters and music of the *kuchkist* composers, the works of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy - Minsky labelled it 'neo-realism'. For Minsky, Nijinsky's choreographies were examples of neo-realism in dance, a contrast to the heady overdose of Symbolism that he himself had left behind (of which another implication lies in the manner Minsky chided Fokine with the words of

⁶⁹ Vuillermoz in *S.I.M. Revue musicale* June 1913.

Tolstoy.)⁷⁰ As in the West, Russian modernism of the 1910s disavowed the opulent legacy of Symbolism in favour of simpler forms, many of which were taken from *kustarnost* as well as from urban popular culture.⁷¹ It was this new art in theatre as well as in painting and poetry that most of the Russian critics connected *Sacre*.

In striking contrast to how Western critics tended to portray simplification and stylisation as ugly, unsuited to dance as an art form, and, more specifically, as a foreign tendency,⁷² the Russian audiences of *Sacre* could immediately make the connection between this work and their native forms of avant-garde art - the work of the Russian Cubo-Futurists in particular. This shows particularly well in Volkonsky's description when he states:

Одинъ изъ нашихъ критиковъ, изъ дружественно расположенныхъ, охарактеризовалъ именемъ 'иконописнаго кубизма' ту архаическую угловатость движеній, которая развертывается передъ нами подъ звуки 'славянскаго Пана'.⁷³

Once again, this was also immediately apparent to Andrei Levinson, who similarly noted the "иконописныхъ жестовъ"⁷⁴ of the girls in the round dance of the second act. Although Levinson does not create the connection between ancient traditions and contemporary painting, the fact that he interprets the aesthetic of *Sacre* in a similar manner to Volkonsky indicates how the Russian critics' shared cultural context influenced their understanding and analysis of the novelty.

Notably, in Russia, the qualities of stylization and simplification were thus seen as inherently national and as such, positive qualities in the choreography. Nationalism was in no way exclusive of modernism - rather on the contrary. This familiarity of the

⁷⁰ Minsky in *Utro Rossii* 30.5./12.6.1913.

⁷¹ See e.g. Rhodes 1994, 46-50 on Russian art and primitivism; Gray 1971.

⁷² Exceptions include Mauss *L'Art Moderne* quoted in Bullard 1971, ii:72-76; and Marnold in *Mercure de France* 1.10.1913.

⁷³ "One of our critics in all amity favourably described it as "cubist icon-painting" where the archaic angularity of the movement unravels itself in front of us to the pipes of Slavonic Pan." Volkonsky in *Apollon* 6/1913.

⁷⁴ Levinson in *Rech* 3./16.6.1913. For some reason (perhaps stage lighting?), Levinson spoke of these girls as dressed in red.

modernism in *Sacre*, is apparent references to native forms and contemporary concerns in Russian art, explains also the critics' indignation at the manner in which the work was derided in France. For example, one anonymous critic explained at length the indignation of the French audiences and admitted it was hard to tell if they were right about the stylistic qualities of the work. Nonetheless, he ended the review by suggesting that: “Но, можетъ быть, здѣсь идетъ дѣло о стилизаціонныхъ опытахъ à la Мейерхольдъ. И тогда – такъ ли уже виноваты французы?”⁷⁵ It seems the critic himself would have liked to see it thus.

The French Barbarians

For the Russian critics, the outrage *Sacre* provoked proved the superiority of Russian art and that Russian critics had been correct in their earlier assessment of their Western colleagues' ineptitude. Nikolai Minsky revelled in this when he wrote in *Utro Rossii* 30.5./12.6.1913:

Любопытно то, что европейская критика провозгласила Дягилева смѣлымъ новаторомъ и преобразователемъ хореографіи какъ разъ тогда, когда онъ ставилъ старыя, романтическія по содержанію и классическія по технику балеты, прикрашенные, пришпоренные темпераментомъ Фокина, вкусомъ Бакста, вдохновеніемъ Бородина и Римскаго-Корсакова. Но какъ только Нижинскій, а вслѣдъ за нимъ и Стравинскій задались цѣлью кореннымъ образомъ преобразовать технику и содержаніе балета, публика озвѣрѣла и критики заговорили о сѣверныхъ варварахъ.⁷⁶

Minsky went on to note how Nijinsky's *Faune* had already anticipated this reaction, the loud protests that greeted his *Jeux* being but a prelude to the uninterrupted chorus

⁷⁵ “But maybe this is just stylisation à la Meyerhold. And in that case – blame the French?” N.N. in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 26.5./8.6.1913.

⁷⁶ “It is curious that European critics acclaimed Diaghilev as a bold innovator and reformer of choreography all the time when he was staging old ballets with romantic plots and classical technique, adorned, quickened by Fokine's temperament, Bakst's taste, inspired by Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. But as soon as Nijinsky, and Stravinsky in his wake, set themselves the task of radically transforming the technique and content of ballet, the public fled and the critics began to speak of northern barbarians.” Minsky in *Utro Rossii* 30.5./12.6.1913.

of whistles in the premiere of *Sacre*. Conveniently, the critic forgot how he had complained of the French use of words like 'barbarian' in conjunction with the Russian Ballet already in 1910, when the company's repertory had been precisely the kind of old-fashioned stuff "quickenened by Fokine's temperament, Bakst's taste, and inspired by Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov" mocked here.⁷⁷

Similarly, Anatoly Lunacharsky spent almost half of his review disparaging the behaviour of the French audiences:

[Парижская публика] просто бессмысленно и идиотически хохотала и свистала, потому что то, что ей показывали, было совсѣмъ не похоже на то, къ чему она привыкла. [--] Скажутъ - все это русскіе, иностранцы, но это фразеологія такихъ французовъ, которые убійственно напоминаютъ тѣхъ русскихъ, которымъ повсюду мерещатся "жидомасоны".⁷⁸

Unlike Minsky, Lunacharsky noted that the worst insults came from nationalist French critics, and claimed that later performances of *Sacre* were received better. Yet, his indignation at the behaviour of the audiences is more than clear. Valerian Svetlov found evidence of premeditation in how exactly the audiences reacted to the work:

Мнѣ показалось страннымъ, что хохотать начали при первых-же тактахъ увертюры, когда публика не могла еще судить о самой вещи, такъ что вся демонстрація носила характеръ какъ-бы заранѣе подготовленной,⁷⁹

Svetlov concluded that this, of course, meant that the audience also gave no chance for the artists to prove themselves, and claimed Roerich had said Diaghilev had planned

⁷⁷ Minsky in *Utro Rossii* 1./14.8.1910.

⁷⁸ "[The Parisian audience] quite senselessly and idiotically guffawed and whistled because that which they saw was utterly not alike that which they were used to. [--] It will be said - all this is Russian, foreign, but this is the phraseology of those Frenchmen who murderously remind that Russians everywhere are "Yid-Masons"." Lunacharsky in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 9./22.6.1913.

⁷⁹ "To me it seems odd that the laughing/guffawing began before even the first bars of the prelude, when the audience could not yet have evaluated the work, so that the whole demonstration had the character of being prepared in advance." Svetlov in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 23.5./5.6.1913.

the uproar.⁸⁰ Yet, Svetlov predicted that like *Faune*, all of Paris would want to see the work for themselves, simply for the scandal value.

Because of the riot at the premiere of *Sacre*, Russian critics could see it as a revanche – an example of a Russian ballet that upset the French snobs rather than catering to them an unacceptable view of Russia as a nation. This was because - regardless of whether anyone had thought of this in advance - the theme of a re-birth, of spring ritual ensuring the return of the sun, could be understood as explicitly propagating the idea of a Renaissance of Russian culture. This made *Sacre* far more nationalistic a work than anything previously shown by the Ballets Russes.

In his review of the choreography for *Russkaia molva*, Vyacheslav Karatygin pointed out how:

Every age has its art, and it is better to value it than to mourn lost forms of creative expression. Neither in architecture, nor in sculpture, nor in painting (at least in the classical varieties of the latter) can we compare with our predecessors. But in the area of decorative fantasy, not only in the theater but in life itself, our time has spoken a new word, and in this realm we Russians have turned out to occupy the first place. This is an undeniable strength and we can only take pride in it.⁸¹

Here, Karatygin separates *Sacre* from the Symbolist lament that the present can never aspire to the greatness of past civilizations. Writing for the "thick journal" *Rech* 16.2./1.3.1914, Karatygin further aligned *Sacre* with modern inventions - automobiles, the cinema, telephone, aeroplanes and radio, and although he denied any sympathy for the futurists,⁸² his emphasis on this work as an indication of this change in both arts

⁸⁰ Roerich was interviewed about this in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 26.5./8.6.1913, but said only that he had heard Astruc ask Diaghilev whether there might be protests and Diaghilev had replied: "Who would think that there would be?" This left the proverbial barn door open and *Novoe Vremia* 28.5./10.6.1913 ran with the implications, accusing Diaghilev of engineering the scandal, in collaboration with Nijinsky, drunk on his success as a dancer.

⁸¹ Karatygin in *Russkaya molva* 24.5./6.6.1913 quoted in Taruskin 1996, 1010.

⁸² "Я далекъ отъ солидарности съ 'футуристами'." I.e. "I am far from having solidarity towards the 'futurists'." Karatygin in *Rech* 16.2./1.3.1914.

and society also separates it from the concern that Russia's modernity was somehow belated and dependent on Western advances in science and technology.

All in all, if the purpose of *Sacre* had been to reassert the company's connection with Russia, this certainly succeeded: Richard Taruskin quotes a review of the first concert performance of Stravinsky's score in Russia in which the critic paraphrased Pushkin's *Ruslan i Ludmila*: "Zdes' Rus' zhiviot; zdes' Rus'yu pakhnet."⁸³ Rus, the ancient Russia, was the imagined community of "motherland" (родина), not the "fatherland" (отечество) of the state,⁸⁴ which may explain why Nijinsky, who was not ethnically Russian, could identify with the subject matter.

Unlike Stravinsky, who was seen as denying his debt to Russian traditions,⁸⁵ Nijinsky never represented himself as misunderstood or maltreated by the Russian audience or dance critics – only by the bureaucrats of the Imperial Theatres, who had, by dismissing him, deprived him of the chance of ever performing in his native country.⁸⁶ Nijinsky's alleged revolution also seemed more sincere than Stravinsky's simply because it bore less of a resemblance to his known predecessors. Consequently, the reviews of his works were generally positive - with *Sacre*, the notable exceptions were Binshstok in *Rampa i zhizn* 9./22.6.1913, who thought the work was "музыкальная и хореографическая чепуха,"⁸⁷ and the critic of *Novoe Vremia*, who concentrated on the French reaction and thought that "Нижинский долженъ оттанцовать свое

⁸³ I.e. "Here lives Rus, this has the scent of Rus." My translation of *Peterburgskii listok* 14./27.2.1914 quoted in Taruskin 1996, 1024. Taruskin does not note the distinction between Russia and the mythical, ancient Rus.

⁸⁴ Medvedev 1999, 19-20; also Hellberg-Hirn 1999, 52-53.

⁸⁵ In *Birzhevyye vedomosti* 14/17.2.1914 quoted in Taruskin 1996, 1024, Koptyayev called *Sacre* "a modernised Serov"; cf. Stravinsky 1975, 6 calling Serov a "second rank" composer. In an interview to *The Daily Mail* 13.2.1913, Stravinsky had claimed that "Russian musical life is at present stagnant. They cannot stand me there." As Bullard 1971, 54-57 notes, some Western critics saw Stravinsky's debt esp. to Rimsky-Korsakov, but only the Russians saw the young composer's statements as denying this link. Also e.g. Sabaneyev in *Golos Moskvi* quoted in Stravinsky 1997, ii:484-486, esp. 485.

⁸⁶ See Wiley 1979/1980; Nijinsky 1999, 160-161, 204-205 was perfectly aware of this.

⁸⁷ I.e. "musical and choreographic treachery". Binshstok in *Rampa i zhizn* 9./22.6.1913.

покаяніе, чтобы вернуть прежнія симпатія парижанъ..."⁸⁸ However, neither of these texts is actually a review as the authors had not seen *Sacre*.

For the nationalists, Nijinsky's choreographies provided a more wholesome image of Russia: despite the accusations of pornography (or even because of them) Nijinsky's work was seen as quintessentially modern, and hence, waging war with the ideas of Russia as seeped in Oriental decadence present in Fokine's works for the Ballets Russes. Decadence was a downfall from an achieved level of civilization, so obviously Russians preferred to see Russians represented as a mass of stomping primitives because primitive Russia, especially when joined with the idea of spring, held promise of a glorious future. For those who desired to see in *Sacre* an 'authentic' depiction of how the ancient Slavs behaved, the primitivism of the work was not a problem, because as modern Russians they knew exactly how much Russia had progressed, what great art it had produced since. For others, the uses to which native art forms - both 'primitive' *kustarnost* and contemporary Cubo-Futurism, ballet and stylized theatre - were put in *Sacre* implied recognition that Russia was capable of producing art that no longer depended on either Western conventions or Western opinion. The reaction *Sacre* provoked served a similar purpose: it attested the Western critics could no longer follow the vanguard Russian art.

However, in its references to Russian art *Sacre* implied that national colour was not simply an exotic addition or piquant setting for entertaining dances. The work was sufficiently different from the Russia that had previously existed on ballet stages that a desired revolutionary force – whatever that would be for the critic in question – could be read into its stylised form. However, the same was true in reverse: for foreign audiences *Sacre* was not as much a continuation of the established agenda of the Russian company as an escalation of barbarian excess that became a threat, even a danger to social order itself, a premonition of a coming war.

Conclusions

⁸⁸ "Nijinsky should dance out his repentance, and perhaps the previous sympathies of the Parisians would return..." *Novoe Vremia* 28.5./10.6.1913.

For the past century, *Sacre* has functioned as an agent in a discourse of power where Russia is something through which the West defines itself. The discourse has transformed the Ballets Russes into a company performing Russianness, culminating in the barbaric novelty of *Sacre*; the Orientalism inherent in much of the repertory of the Ballet has been written into a characteristic of the Russian Other, much in the manner that *Sacre* has been represented as a quintessentially Oriental work, an orgy of violence of unruly, atavistic masses. In other words, *Sacre* was canonised in part because it confirmed existing stereotypes about dancing Russians in a manner that Nijinsky's other choreographies did not.

Years later, when the musical score became all there was, its modernism became a formal abstraction that would have been recognised by the Western experts already in 1913 were it not for the unruly bodies of contorting dancers directed by the madman Nijinsky. However, this diluted and almost erased the nationalist (and overtly racist) bias for and against the work, and the important local differences in how audiences responded to it. For example, as Ramsay Burt has recently discussed, the British reception was not riotous at all - the critics seemed more confused than angry, and some of them even reversed their earlier published opinions after seeing another performance.⁸⁹ The Russian reviews I have here illustrated provide even sharper contrast to the French outrage.

Of all the choreographies performed by the Ballets Russes, *Sacre* was the first one that was seen as quintessentially Russian in Russia – and it was liked precisely for the qualities that disturbed contemporary Western critics. Although the choreography was never performed in Russia, the Russian reviews indicate a cultural context shared by the Russians performing the work that explains something of the possible ideas of the authors as well. The frequent allusions to Russian arts past and present, the interpretation of modernism as a positive and national quality rather than something threatening and foreign, and the lack of references to warfare all speak of a familiarity with the principles of the work that is absent from even the most enthusiastic appraisals by French or British critics. Although the list should include Volkonsky, Karatygin and Lunacharsky as well as numerous others, one can agree with Taruskin's

⁸⁹ Burt 2009. See e.g. Francis Toye in *The Graphic* 19.7.1913, cf. in *The Bystander* 23.7.1913; similarly, Propert 1972, 81.

assertion that: “No artist could hope for a finer appreciation than Nijinsky (“and, following him, Stravinsky”) received from Messrs. Levinson, Minsky, and Kostilyov.”⁹⁰

Finally, I want to briefly return to the choreographer's letter with which I began this piece. Although Nijinsky never extrapolated on whether *Sacre* did become what he and Stravinsky wanted, the opposition within the company did triumph and the work was withdrawn from the repertory. *Peterburgskii Listok* 25.6./8.7.1913 wrote:

Изъ Парижа намъ пишутъ, что у Дягилева съ Нижинскимъ послѣ провала балета постановки послѣдняго начались крупныя недоразумѣнія.

Нижинскій продолжаетъ держаться мнѣнія радикальнаго модернизма и только при условіи сохраненія этого направленія соглашается ставить дальнѣшнія новинки.

Дягилевъ же наоборотъ, бьетъ [sic?] отбой по своей линіи и намѣренъ ставить впредь классическіе балеты.

На этой почвѣ импрессарио грозитъ порвать контрактъ со своимъ увлекающимся балетмейстеромъ.⁹¹

Diaghilev was running an enterprise and deeply in debt. He had repeatedly borrowed money from Nijinsky to finance the company⁹² and although scandals sold tickets,

⁹⁰ Taruskin 1996, 1013.

⁹¹ "It is written to us from Paris that the disagreement between Diaghilev and Nijinsky has become noticeable after the failure of the latter's ballet performances.

Nijinsky continues to hold the opinion of radical modernism and only on the condition of retaining this direction consents to future novelties.

Diaghilev on the contrary keeps to his line and is going to henceforth retain classical ballets.

On this ground, the impresario threatens to break the contract with his easily excitable ballet master."

⁹² Diaghilev apparently persuaded Nijinsky to lend him 100,000 francs before the South American season of 1913 to cover the debts from the 1912 and 1913 seasons. Stanislav Drobecki told Haskell 1955, 263 that the impresario had previously borrowed (and paid back) 17,000 francs for a similar purpose. In a letter to Stravinsky of 26.11./9.12.1913 quoted in Stravinsky 1997, ii: 181–82, Nijinsky claimed Diaghilev never paid him for his dancing in the company or for his three choreographies of

most of Diaghilev's rich backers did not appreciate the kind of attention *Sacre* (and Nijinsky's choreographic work more generally) was getting in the press. The appraisal of Russian critics who reviled both the foreign audiences and the repertory of the company did more harm than good. Also, *despite* the responses *Sacre* elicited in Russia, Diaghilev could not run a touring company that never performed in Russia on Russian funding, particularly as Nijinsky could not return there.⁹³

Diaghilev pleaded with Stravinsky and urged Nijinsky to plan a ballet to the music of Bach, but the dancer's sudden marriage during the company's South American tour became the last straw for the impresario, who dismissed him. Hearing the news, Stravinsky was devastated:

Разумеется, это переворачивает все – буквально все в нашем деле – да Вы и сами можете предвидеть все последствия этого – для него все кончено, для меня же, быть может, надолго отнята возможность увидеть что-либо ценное в области хореографии и, что *еще важней*, увидеть мое детище, с такими невероятными усилиями получившее хореографическое воплощение.⁹⁴

After complaining of Diaghilev turning his coat, Stravinsky blamed this on financial pressure on the impresario, with whom he could no longer collaborate. Nijinsky did return, briefly, to work for Diaghilev in 1916, although not on *Les Noces*, the work

1912–1913. Nijinsky 1999, 164-165 also speaks of Diaghilev asking him for money; also, Nijinska 1992, 486–487.

⁹³ After being fired from the Maryinsky, Nijinsky was called to armed service, which the Artists of the Imperial Theatres got to serve nominally. He had become a military deserter in September 1911 and left to live in exile. See e.g. Nijinska 1992, esp. 324, 382-383, 390-391.

⁹⁴ “This [Nijinsky's marriage and dismissal], of course, will turn everything – literally everything that concerns us – upside down; and You can predict for Yourself all the consequences – for him everything is finished, for me the possibility has been taken away, perhaps for a long while, of seeing something worthwhile in the realm of choreography, and what is even *more important*, of seeing my child, whose scenic realisation had cost such incredible effort.” 20.9./3.10.1913 Stravinsky 1997, ii:146-147; cf. what Stravinsky-Craft 1978, 106, 512, 515-518 says of Diaghilev's musical taste. According to *op. cit.*, 511-512 in 1914, Nijinsky was “the only choreographer whom Stravinsky would consider as a collaborator for new works”; Stravinsky 1975 totally passes over Diaghilev's break-up with Nijinsky.

Diaghilev used to lure Stravinsky back to the fold.⁹⁵ But the decision to withdraw *Sacre* after only nine performances did mean that the choreography disappeared for good: no effort was made to restage it prior to Nijinsky's institutionalisation in 1919. For the development of dance in the twentieth century, the myth of the radical novelty of *Sacre* quickly became more important than Nijinsky's choreographic ideas, which should be discussed in more detail in another article.

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⁹⁵ “Пластика же в “Свадебке” – дело Нижинского, [но] и сговариваться с ним мне, думаю, не придется.“ I.e. “In *Les Noces*, the plastic is for Nijinsky to do, [but] to reach an agreement with him [now], I think I do not have to bring it up.” Diaghilev to Stravinsky 12./25.11.1914 in Stravinsky 1997, ii:297.

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