

**‘The Russian Barnum’<sup>1</sup>: Russian opinions on Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes,  
1909-1914**

This article discusses the little-known Russian reviews of Sergei Diaghilev’s ballet company. It argues that Diaghilev’s reputation and social position in Imperial Russia affected how his troupe and the works famous in Western Europe were regarded in the Russian press. In Russia, Diaghilev was accused of exporting a false image of Russia as a semi-Oriental nation of barbarians. Russian critics found evidence for this from the predominantly Orientalist reviews appraising the Ballets Russes in Paris and London. They also judged their Western colleagues incompetent for not corresponding to the Russian idea of what was important in ballet as an art form.

Little has been written about how Russian dance critics responded to the Ballets Russes; this is surprising in view of the hegemonic position this company has been afforded in the discourse of early twentieth century dance. One reason for this lack of interest may be the belief that, as an ensemble touring outside of Russia, the company somehow was not of interest to Russians writing on dance and had no influence on Russian dance in general – indeed, this excuse can be found in some Russian dance research.<sup>2</sup>

Yet Russian critics saw the same performances in Paris and London as did their better-known Western colleagues. What they had to say of them was, however, rather significantly different. Indeed, the content of the Russian reviews is at

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<sup>1</sup> *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 11./24.2.1910 quoted in Zilberstein & Samkov 1982, i:212.

<sup>2</sup> Roslavleva 1966, 182-183 excluding Nijinsky’s choreographies on the grounds that they were not performed in Russia. Cf. Levinson writing of *L’Après-midi d’un Faune* in *The Yearbook of the Imperial Theatres* 1913, i:7.

odds with much of what is said of the Ballets Russes in the canonised narrative of dance – and not because the Russians were aesthetically backward or conservative in their arguments. These reviews stem from the same cultural background as did the Ballets Russes, and highlight significant differences between the Russians and their Western audiences.

Moreover, it could be argued that the Russian reviews would have been more important to the Ballets Russes as an organisation, particularly in the years preceding the First World War, than reviews abroad. The members of the company (and their families) closely followed what was said of them at home, particularly if they had not severed their ties with the Imperial Theatres: even some of the star dancers, including Tamara Karsavina, continued to perform in the Imperial Theatres, or were on prolonged leaves of absence. Furthermore, Diaghilev's reputation as an impresario affected the kind of patronage he was able to secure for his private enterprise, and not even Léon Bakst, the most famous of the set designers, could make a living from the commissions of this one company.

The Russian reviews highlight questions that have received little attention in previous research on the Ballets Russes: issues such as nationalism, the role of art in creating an appropriate image of the Empire, or questions of what was meant by modernity and modernism. However, they also require an understanding of how ballet as an art form was situated in the Russian cultural field.

In Russia, art had always existed in close conjunction with politics, and ballet was no exception. Although ballet was also popular entertainment outside the Imperial Theatres,<sup>3</sup> it had come to Russia as a courtly entertainment, and was closely associated with the court and the person of the ruling monarch. Consequently, ballet was, to quote the reminiscences of the last Director of the Imperial Theatres, Vladimir Teliakovsky, “regarded as a serious matter, a national, almost state matter, a source of the country’s pride”.<sup>4</sup> Partly because of this social status, ballet held a prominent place in the press, including in the turn-of-the-century aesthetic dispute over the role of realism in the theatre arts, an issue identified with the experiments of the Moscow Art Theatre (est. 1897).

Since ballet had aligned itself with the politically conservative Imperial court, the social realism of the 1860s and 1870s bypassed ballet until 1900, when Aleksandr Gorsky created his first ‘new ballet’ choreographies. Influenced by the Moscow Art Theatre and supported by Teliakovsky (if not by all of the other bureaucrats of the Imperial Theatres), Gorsky advocated bringing a degree of realism to ballet. Although this did not extend to political concerns, Gorsky nonetheless desired to increase the ethnographic accuracy in sets, costumes and character dances, and created more naturalistic choreographic groupings

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<sup>3</sup> Ballet was performed in provincial theatres, fairs, marketplaces, circuses and popular theatres such as the St. Petersburg Narodny Dom. This is attested e.g. by Nijinsky’s childhood in touring circuses. Nijinska 1992, 4, 9; also Swift 2002, 30-32, 135-136, 154-156.

<sup>4</sup> Telyakovsky 1994, 44. Similarly, Benois 1945, esp. 284-285. Cf. *Rech* 19.6./2.7.1909, where Benois represents the Russians as barbarians who in conquering decadent Rome gave birth to a new, vital civilisation (Christianity). In conjunction with all the military metaphors Benois uses, this reiterates the myth of Russian holy empire (Russia as Third Rome), destined for a great future. It does not mean, as e.g. Acocella 1984, 330 or Berg 1988, 15 have represented, that Benois would have advocated primitivism, barbarism, or even the Eurasianism (Scythianism) that he alludes to in his reminiscences (Scythianism was a nationalist movement that embraced the Asiatic aspects of Russian culture, but it did not yet exist in 1909). This is to say the creators of the Russian Ballet generally thought of ballet as a Russian jewel polished from French stone and saw themselves as culturally superior to their Western audiences: see also Nijinsky in *Musical Courier* 7.12.1916 on there being “something crude in the West”.

as well as a more naturalistic dance style that used the whole body and required the dancers to improve their acting skills.<sup>5</sup> By 1905, Russian ballet was divided into the proponents of the 'old ballet' of Marius Petipa, the principal choreographer of the St. Petersburg company since 1870, and those favouring the 'new ballet' of Gorsky, now heading the Moscow company.

What makes Gorsky's work interesting – apart from the fact that his innovations are now generally credited to Mikhail Fokine (1880-1942), the main choreographer of the pre-war Ballets Russes seasons – is that it was fiercely opposed by some of the future creators of the Ballets Russes. Diaghilev and his friends from the *Mir iskusstva* (1899-1904)<sup>6</sup> circle had been attracted to ballet precisely for its anti-realist qualities, allusions to romantic dreams and transcendent realms, to distant times and far-away places. For them, as for the Silver Age<sup>7</sup> symbolists in general, ballet was a world apart, "cleansing the soul from dreary mundanity," in the words of Iakov Tugenkhold (in *Apollon* 8/1910). *Mir iskusstva* attacked Gorsky's realism in much of the same terms as it criticised the Moscow Art Theatre.<sup>8</sup> It took some years and the emergence of

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<sup>5</sup> Gorsky also introduced a new subject to the curriculum of the Imperial Ballet School: "theory of ballet art", which included teaching in dance notation. Wiley 1978, esp. ix-xi; Roslavleva 1966, 156-157; Krasovskaia 1971, i: *passim*, esp. 230-237.

<sup>6</sup> 'World of Art', an arts journal edited by Diaghilev, and the associated exhibition society of the same name, modelled after Western Secessionist groups.

<sup>7</sup> In Russian art, 'Silver Age' means the Symbolist art of the 1890s and 1900s, particularly as juxtaposed to the 'Golden Age' of the preceding generation: the national romantic music of the *moguchaia kuchka*, the (Mighty) Five or kuchkist composers (Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Musorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov) and the *peredvizhniki* social realist painters (the Wanderers), including Kramskoy, Repin, Kuindzhi, Shishkin and Surikov. Whereas much of the 'Golden Age' art had an affinity with a forward-looking, revolutionary political ideology (Russian Populism), much of the 'Silver Age' art was nostalgic, retrospective and introspective. See e.g. Spector 1969, esp. 227-239; Bowlt 1982; and Pyman 1994.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Briusov in *Mir iskusstva* 3-4/1902 on the Moscow Art Theatre; Benois in *Mir iskusstva* 2-3/1902 on all that was at fault with Gorsky's *Don Quixote* (namely, the excessive dancing). Cf. Scholl 1994, 33 who claims balletomanes disliked anything taking attention away from the dancing.

another kind of theatre – the modernism of directors like Vsevolod Meyerhold – for the *miriskusstniki* to change their views and begin to fuse the old and the new into what became the Ballets Russes. For example, Fokine apparently began his experiments in the new style after dancing in Gorsky's *Don Quixote* in 1906 – the previous year he had been demanding the return to the old ballet and to Petipa in the so-called 'ballet strike' of 1905.<sup>9</sup>

Since the new ballet was part of Vladimir Teliakovsky's project to renew the Imperial Theatres, it is also hardly surprising that when the Imperial Ballet was to perform in Paris in 1909, the repertory would focus on 'new ballet' choreographies. It is also likely that the sorry state of the art form in the West was well known in Russia – after all, Russian dancers had appeared on Western stages and the upper-class ballet audience in Russia regularly travelled abroad.<sup>10</sup> However, in 1909, Diaghilev did not believe ballet alone could succeed in Paris, and insisted on including opera in the season, which ended in his bankruptcy.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In the West, (e.g. Garafola 1992, 4-5, 7; following Fokine 1961, *passim*, esp. 115, 125-126) this strike has been explained as the young, radical, future stars of the Ballets Russes demanding higher aesthetic standards – through the reinstatement of the 82-year-old Petipa. Notably, the *Yearbooks of the Imperial Theatres* 1903-1908 make no note of a dismissal or retirement of Petipa, but 1906-1907, ii:24 states Fokine danced the role of Basil in *Don Quixote* that *op.cit.*, i:147 clearly identifies as Gorsky's choreography. However, as Wiley 1986/87, 33 notes, there was a marked shift to works by Gorsky in the repertory; see also Wiley 1985, 27-28, 61. For Fokine's 'Five Principles', see *The Times* 6.7.1914, where, however, Fokine does not yet dare to take credit for inventing the 'new ballet'.

<sup>10</sup> Russian papers tended to write of the Ballets Russes and other touring companies under headings like 'our ballet in the West' or 'our ballet abroad'. A number of such visits of the Imperial Theatres were arranged, particularly after the 1905 Revolution and the loss of the Russo-Japanese war. See Byckling 1995, 202; and Laakkonen 2003 on Edward Fazer's 1909 troupe – to call this company "Pavlova's" (Garafola 1992, 173-4) or "Bolm's" (Carbonneau 1999, 221) would be to call the Ballets Russes "Nijinsky's". For examples of other visits by Russian dancers, see Guest 1992, 76-80, 112, 136-143; Garafola 1992, 417-418fn8; and Parmenia Migel Ekstrom's note in Diaghilev 1979, 54n1.

<sup>11</sup> Astruc Papers; Buckle 1993, 152-157.

Unfortunately, the attention given to ballet in Russia, particularly since the emergence of the 'new ballet' of Gorsky, also meant that Russians were accustomed to dance reviews addressing the form as well as the content of the spectacles. It was standard practice to compare, for example, different castings of the same work. I say 'unfortunately', because this meant the Russians expected the same of the Western reviewers of the 1909 season. Consequently, for the Russians, the Western reviews of the Ballets Russes – for all their laudatory clichés – simply indicated a lack of interest in both choreographic form and its execution by different dancers.<sup>12</sup> This translated as a failure to comprehend ballet as an art form, and the ire of the critics grew year by year. André Levinson complained that the so-called success of the Ballets Russes:

has been reported back to us rather one-sidedly, simply as a wave of enthusiasm that seized the artists and aesthetes of Paris. But one can assert that the 'Saisons Russes' captivated the likes of Auguste Rodin, Maurice Denis and Jacques-Emile Blanche, primarily as a revelation of a painterly-decorative order, as an avalanche of unbridled and farfetched colors. The living scenic action receded into the background.

(Levinson 1982, 33)

This is not to say that the Russians would not have been flattered by the extraordinary amount of attention the Ballets Russes received in Paris, and later all over Europe and even in the Americas. Even during the war, Russian papers

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<sup>12</sup> Western critics tended to review only the first performances of each work, which peeved their Russian colleagues. See e.g. *Obozrenie teatrov* 3./16.6.1909; *Teatr i iskusstvo* 31.5./13.6.1909.

followed their tours, even if long reviews were rare.<sup>13</sup> Yet, the Russians also saw through all the superlatives and realised that in this Ballet, ballet was quite secondary. In fact, the stars of the Imperial stages might as well have performed to animals and fur-clad natives as in this image from *Peterburgskaia gazeta* (14./27.3.1913). IMAGE 1. The caption reads: "Apotheosis of the reputation of the Russian Ballet! First spectacle on the North Pole!" The man erecting the flag is identified as Fokine.

It is impossible to say whether this image can be interpreted as a criticism of the use of ballet in advancing imperialist concerns or whether the joke is more on the dancers dancing just about anywhere, regardless of material conditions or the sophistication of the audience. In either case, the image points to how exporting art was seen as exporting an image of Russia.

From the Russian point of view, the works selected for the 1909 visit of the Imperial Theatres to Paris were presenting the history of ballet in a very Russian nutshell. *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, originally from 1907, had rather more to do with Peterhof than with Versailles.<sup>14</sup> Based on the Tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann (sometimes called the "father of Russian Symbolism") *Armide* was set in the baroque glory days of ballet, also seen in Petipa's *La Belle au bois dormant* (1890), the work that had brought Diaghilev to ballet (at least according to Benois 1945, 120-132, see also fn 29 below). But if *Armide* represented the interests of the *zapadniki* or Westernisers, the *divertissements* of *Le Festin* were

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<sup>13</sup> E.g. during the American tours, the Russian papers had to rely on second-hand evidence gleaned from local papers and telegraphed by local agents. In Paris, Rome, or Berlin, they would have had their own correspondents writing on the spectacles.

<sup>14</sup> Vaudoyer 1929, 709 on Peterhof; also Scholl 1994, 61-66.

set in a medieval Muscovite hall reminiscent of Slavophile fantasies. *Les Sylphides* was adapted from Fokine's *Chopiniana* (1907) to look more like Gorsky's *Valse Fantaisie* (1901), where the long white tulle skirts had been a tribute to Petipa's favourite 'white acts' and to French Romantic ballet, the second heyday of the art form.<sup>15</sup> Nijinska (1992, 227) and Krasovskaia (1971, i: esp. 237) claim that the decadent Oriental work of the season, *Cléopâtre*, was also based on Gorsky's reworking of Petipa's *La Fille du Pharaon* (1862) in 1905. It certainly reproduced the other major trend in Romantic ballet,<sup>16</sup> and the idea of the Imperial Theatres as an original and innovative culmination of centuries of tradition.

However, in terms of the aesthetic of the Parisian seasons, there was little that was actually new for the Russian critics. In 1909, there were no novelties in the repertory since versions of all of the works had already been performed in Russia. As with national romanticism in Russian lyrical theatre in general, much of the music of both the 1909 and the 1910 seasons comprised familiar tunes by Russian composers, cut and rearranged with little concern over whether the imagery represented on stage fitted the action ascribed to the music (e.g. the orgies of *Schéhérazade* (1910) took place to the music of Sinbad in a storm). The décors and costumes followed the style established on the Imperial stages in the wake of the Krotkov (Mamontov) Private Opera (1885-1888) – brilliant

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<sup>15</sup> Krasovskaia 1971, i: *passim*, esp. 132-133 on *Valse fantaisie*. *Le Festin* included both Gorsky's czardas to Glazunov's music and the Blue Bird pas de deux from Tchaikovsky's and Petipa's *La Belle au bois dormant* (1890). Original works increased in number from the 1910 season onwards, but *Carnaval* (1910), for instance, was first performed in St. Petersburg, and both the 1910 season in Paris and the 1911 London autumn season included shortened versions of familiar 'old ballets' (e.g. *Giselle* (orig. 1841), *Le Lac des cygnes* (1877, 1895)).

<sup>16</sup> On the two trends (the Gothic and the Orientalist) in Romantic ballet, see Arkin & Smith 1997.

colours by painters such as Konstantin Korovin and Aleksandr Golovin, whose reputations had been, by and large, established prior to the first Russian revolution of 1905.<sup>17</sup>

For a touring organisation, this would have been just business as usual. However, because the 1909 and 1910 seasons were official visits by the Imperial Theatres, sponsored by members of the Imperial family, the reception of these works caused much consternation in Russia. Neither the Russian impresario, the artists responsible for creation of the works, nor the members of the audience escaped blame for what the Parisian papers wrote of the spectacles.

The problem was that instead of recognising the might of Russia and the history of ballet in the performances of 1909, the French seemed to think Russia was some sort of Oriental backwater inhabited by naturally dancing barbarians.

Restés barbares dans une Europe qui est, si l'on peut dire, civilisée jusqu'à la corde, les Russes sont au moment le plus fécond, le plus beau, de leur développement intérieur. Très neufs, avides et sincères comme des enfants, ils se donnent tout entiers et se cherchent avec fièvre. Ils ne sont pas entravés comme nous par les formules, et l'incrédulité ne les a pas énervés; ils ignorent la satiété occidentale.

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<sup>17</sup> When Tugenkhold reported in *Apollon* 8/1910 that Bakst's scenery was a revelation to the French, he implied there was little that was new in this for the Russian spectator. Levinson 1982, 33 stated this aloud; similarly, the London correspondent of *Teatr i iskusstvo* 1./14.6.1912; and E. Pann in *Maski* 6/1912-1913. Also Schouvaloff 1997, 225. As for the music, critics usually complained of orchestrations or the use of the music as not corresponding with the composer's intention: see e.g. Zilberstein & Samkov 1982, i:220-222, 437-442 on the Rimsky-Korsakov affair. However, in *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* 12.6.1910, Adolphe Jullien thought Rimsky-Korsakov deserved what he got after mutilating Schubert (for *Carnaval*).

(J.-L. Vaudoyer in *Revue de Paris* 15.7.1910)

Although for Vaudoyer, barbarism was a positive notion, the whole idea of a vitality lost through the civilising process rested on the logic of cultural progress. Whereas Western cultures had passed their apex, Russians were refreshingly new only because they had not yet attained civilisation. Indeed, later in the same article, Vaudoyer refers to what is happening in Russia now as that which happened in Italy in the fifteenth century, thus implying that Russia was only now experiencing its Renaissance.

Similarly, Abel Bonnard lamented in *Le Figaro* 18.6.1910:

Nous ne savons plus qu'est la danse. Nous ne sommes plus assez sauvages. Nous sommes des gens trop civilisés, trop policés, trop effacés: nous avons perdu l'habitude d'exprimer notre sentiment par tout notre corps; à peine se nous le laissons se produire sur notre visage et transparaître dans nos paroles; et il ne lui reste bientôt plus que nos yeux où se réfugier. Nos gestes mêmes sont appauvris, limités, réduits et tombent de nous comme les branches d'un arbre qu'on émonde. Nous sommes tout en tête. Notre corps est pour ainsi dire abandonné,

and so on, one paragraph after another. In this manner, the difference between the civilized French and the still barbarian Russians is constituted as an irrevocable racial (i.e. biological) divide.<sup>18</sup> Apart from illustrating the dichotomies typical of contemporary cultural rhetoric (body versus mind, culture versus barbarism, high versus low, and so on), and reinforcing stereotypical Western views of Russia at the time, this characterisation fixed the aesthetic of the

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<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Pierre Lalo in *Le Temps* 11.6.1912; Jacques Rivière in *La Nouvelle revue française* August 1913.

company in ways incompatible with modernity and modernism. Russian dancers did not merely represent something remote in space and time, they became themselves fixed in the exotic and in the past, incapable of civilized behaviour, rational analysis or modernity.<sup>19</sup> The Russians may have thought of themselves as Orientalists, but in the eyes of their Western admirers, they were simply Orientals.

Particularly in the light of the Russian discussion on realism in theatrical arts, none of this made any sense to Russian dance critics. Indeed, considering that most dancers of the Ballets Russes were graduates of the academic training programmes of the Imperial Theatre Schools (or its provincial equivalents), this emphasis on their natural and barbaric qualities should really strike us as odd. As the critic of *Teatr i iskusstvo*, one of the most prominent theatrical papers in Russia, complained:

I have not encountered a single review in which, amidst all the compliments, there would not suddenly appear “furious, hoarse, wild, exotic, barbarian” or some such expression.

(*Teatr i iskusstvo* 17./30.5.1909, author’s translation)

For Russians, expressions such as ‘wild’, ‘exotic’, or ‘barbarian’ had nothing to do with Russia or Russians, let alone ballet, the favoured art of the Imperial court

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<sup>19</sup> I.e. in the Fokine ballets, overt sexuality was always safely placed in the body of the Oriental other: none of the Russian works of the Ballets Russes (such as *L’Oiseau de Feu*) reversed the traditional gender positions of classical ballet. However, these works were discussed in exactly the same terms (i.e. as self-representation) as were the Orientalist representations of the barbarian Polovtsy of *Danses Polovtsiennes* (1909), the Oriental harem of *Schéhérazade* or the Caucasian femme fatale of *Thamar* (1913). Cf. how Tugenkhold writes of *Thamar* in *Apollon* 7/1912.

and the *zapadniki*. Indeed, as the same critic pointed out, the reception of the ballet season quite surprised the Russians:

Last year not one critic dared speak of “amusing” Russian art in this patronising, back-patting tone. Then all spoke of the “deep nationalism” in Russian art. By this was meant a lofty nationalism that made it [the art] pan-human, allowing it to transcend national borders and encompass the whole world.

(*Teatr i iskusstvo* 17./30.5.1909, translation mine)

Through reiterating Herder’s belief that nationalism would promote understanding and peace between sovereign nations,<sup>20</sup> this remark illustrates what in the Western reception was so problematic. The Western critics’ attitude was condescending as well as enthusiastic and encouraging, and ballet was merely something amusing, rather than representative of the superiority of Russian culture and of the Russian people.<sup>21</sup>

Things got worse when Diaghilev founded his own, private company late in 1910. In the subsequent propaganda for the new company, events such as Nijinsky’s dismissal from the Imperial Theatres early in 1911, were actively used to create a definitive (political as well as aesthetic) breach between the Diaghilev

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<sup>20</sup> I.e. in Johann Gottfried von Herder’s (1744-1803) idea of nationalism, where the nation state was a cultural unity of shared language and traditions rather than the racial (biological) unity it became in the nineteenth century. See e.g. Wilson 1973; also next fn.

<sup>21</sup> In the national romantic tradition, the people (‘narod’) guarded the mystical Russian soul (‘dusha’) that would, in the near future, guarantee the world-wide triumph of Russia and Russian culture. Russian artists turned the crude expressions of this soul by the uneducated people into real art that would then bring forth this future greatness. Both the ‘Golden Age’ realists and the ‘Silver Age’ symbolists subscribed to this nationalist ethos, even if they diverged in their interpretation of how the greatness of Russia was to be achieved. See Bowlit 1982 and Pyman 1994 on the *Mir iskusstva* and the Symbolists; Chulos 2001, 117-124; and Pursiainen 1999, 75, 91 on the construction of ‘narod’.

company and the Imperial Theatres that had trained the star dancers, employed most of the stage decorators, and facilitated the creation and staging of many of the works of the first seasons.<sup>22</sup>

This re-positioning of the new private company vis à vis the Imperial Theatres was necessary for Diaghilev to ensure the financial success of his troupe. Increasingly dependant upon Western patrons of art, the impresarios had to protect their sense of cultural and political supremacy vis à vis Russia. In the nationalist rhetoric that pervaded contemporary discourse on culture, admitting that Russians were capable of producing original, total works of art would have amounted to admitting their political system – regarded as medieval despotism at best – had succeeded where Western liberal democracies had failed. Fortunately, this was not the case, as J. E. Crawford Fitch assured his readers in 1912:

For it is a great misapprehension to suppose that the Russian ballet as it has been seen in Paris and London is typical of the official ballet at St Petersburg and Moscow. When the Diaghilew company first appeared at the Theatre du Châtelet, the republican convictions of Paris received a shock. Could any good thing come out of Tsardom? Had autocracy succeeded where the alliance of liberty, fraternity and equality had failed?

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<sup>22</sup> This division was even marketed in Russia by Diaghilev's closest supporter amongst Russian dance critics, Valerian Svetov (author of *Svétlow* 1912 as well as numerous (always laudatory) articles on the Ballets Russes). To prove his point, Svetlov quoted the French composer Reynaldo Hahn, at a performance of the (blatantly imperialistic) children's ballet *The Little Hump-Backed Horse* (orig. 1864), in *Teatr i iskusstvo* 18.9./1.10.1911: "And this is the famous Russian ballet? – he asked. – But this is what we have, albeit even worse! Therefore Diaghilev's ballet – is a deception? Wonderful, noble, enchanting – but a deception? And we thought that in Russia... and reproached our poor old Grand Opéra." (Translation mine.) Goldman 1977/1978, 1 compares Hahn's reported reaction to Strauss's love of *Don Quixote* to show how the latter was interested in old-fashioned works – but forgets what Strauss saw was probably Gorsky's 'new ballet' version.

Was it then true that venerable tradition, assisted by a bureaucratic regime, was a kinder nursing mother to the arts than the revolutionary spirit? Little by little the truth leaked out. The Russian ballet, which had been welcomed as the most modern manifestation of theatrical art, was not traditional but revolutionary. It was not the child of the official art of St Petersburg but the outcast. Its leaders were dangerous innovators whom the intransigent conservatives had expelled as hastily as if they had been political agitators. Paris was reassured.<sup>23</sup>

In this remarkable passage, Flicht provides an important insight into why even favourable Russian reviews were silenced in Western histories of the Ballets Russes. It flattered the Western audiences to see the Ballets Russes as revolutionary *only if* the Russians themselves could not appreciate their art. But this rhetoric was useful not simply because it created a definite break between the Diaghilev company and the Imperial Theatres. It also confused the genealogy of the Ballets Russes repertory, made the works seem unprecedented and more innovative than they seemed to Russians familiar with the 'new ballet'. This benefited the Western careers of key figures in the company, who clearly sided against the Russian critics, and on whose reminiscences most of the Western research on the Ballets Russes has relied. For example, as Richard Taruskin has noted, Igor Stravinsky bolstered his

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<sup>23</sup> Flicht 1912, 129, see also 123-130, 154. Similarly, e.g. *Comoedia* 14.2.1911 using Nijinsky's dismissal as proof of this. Also, Diaghilev's earlier dismissal from the Imperial Theatres (Svétlow 1912, 59-60) and Bakst's problems with St. Petersburg authorities (e.g. *The New York Times* 3.11.1912, 24.11.1912) were used to create the myth of the Ballets Russes as a 'revolutionary' organisation.

Western fame through interviews that ultimately resulted in a backlash against his work and his person in Russia.<sup>24</sup>

Through representing the Russians as incapable of appreciating the true novelty of the Ballets Russes works, Diaghilev and his cohorts strengthened the stereotypical view of Russia as a political and aesthetic backwater where art was still a natural process free of aesthetic theories and untainted by urban modernity. This flattered the Western audiences, who could perceive themselves as the true connoisseurs of the art form whilst enjoying what were essentially nostalgic reminiscences of their youth in the 1890s. However, the influence of this nostalgic attitude upon the terms in which ballet was discussed was not positive, because it led contemporary critics to think of dance as a natural phenomenon always-already escaping analysis.<sup>25</sup>

As if by accident, this discourse on dance also discredited the Russian critics, now the representatives of a mummified tradition. This was very convenient, since what these critics said was sometimes very unflattering for Diaghilev and his *coterie*:

The idea of the “Diaghilevshchina” is to demonstrate a barbaric Russian art to the *raffiné* Parisians. That Russian art might in fact not be barbaric

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<sup>24</sup> See e.g. Stravinsky in *The Daily Mail* 13.2.1913. Taruskin 1996, 906, 978-987, 1018-1031. Nijinsky's similar comments in e.g. *Comoedia* 25.4.1911 (republished e.g. in *The Dancing Times*, June 1911) never resulted in a similar reaction, probably because Russian reporters felt Nijinsky, recently dismissed from the Imperial Theatres, had every reason to complain. See e.g. *Rech* 29.1./11.2.1911; *Novoie Vremia* 28.1./10.2. and 31.1./13.2.1911; Wiley 1979/1980, 176-177 quoting *Peterburgskaia gazeta*, and 243-244 its illustrations.

<sup>25</sup> According to Fitch 1912, 24, dance “can contribute neither message nor criticism. It seeks not to reform us but only to please. It recalls us to the joy of life which the other arts had almost persuaded us to forget. It has but a single purpose – to quicken our pulses with beauty and to renew our life with its own untiring ecstasy.”

at all, that it might be just as refined as the French – this is something Diaghilev either does not know or does not wish to know. Russian art must be barbaric – period!

(Sabaneev in *Golos Moskvi* 8./21.6.1913 quoted in Taruskin 1996, 1016)

Like many of his countrymen, Leonid Sabaneev found the idea of a barbaric Russian ballet a contradiction in terms and attacked Diaghilev's export policy as providing the jaded sensibilities of the French with an incorrect image of Russia and Russian art. Even the quintessentially 'Russian' works of Stravinsky changed familiar stories of Russian folklore so as to make them more like Western ones: *L'Oiseau de Feu* (1910) assembled bits and pieces of several (in Russian opinion *incompatible*) fairy tales, and *Petrouchka* (1911) turned the traditional puppet show bully into a suffering, romantic Pierrot.<sup>26</sup> Only *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) brought about a change in the Russian attitude of which more will be said shortly.

Another anomaly perceived by the Russian critics lay in the Western focus on the male dancers, Nijinsky in particular. Nijinsky had a special position in the advance publicity of the first season that was out of scale with his billing – he was the only male dancer in the series of biographical sketches that appeared in *Comoedia* as part of the publicity campaign (*Comoedia* 11.5.1909). Although

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<sup>26</sup> Benois 1945, 324-330; Taruskin 1998; and Taruskin 1996, 662-737 on *Petrouchka*; also Wachtel 1998 on its relation to Commedia dell'Arte. Notably, *Petrouchka*, set in the 1860s, was seen as depiction not of past but of present-day Russia: *The Graphic* 22.2.1913 believed it to be what one could have seen in Nizhni Novgorod fair to the day; "yet it is all sufficiently fantastic, sufficiently remote from us to make the action credible". Calvocoressi in *The Musical Times* 1.8.1911: "It consists of realistic scenes from everyday life in Russia and describes the adventures of Petrushka (a popular type akin to Pierrot or Harlequin) during carnival."

never publicly discussed, Diaghilev's relationship with Nijinsky was apparently well known in St. Petersburg (Krasovskaya 1979, 120-123 quoting Teliakovsky's diaries). *Rampa i zhizn* jested:

Of Nijinsky all the papers  
All the Parisian aesthetes  
Sing hymns and sonnets  
But portraits? Oh, portraits  
have pride of place in every display case!  
My God! During the summer  
Three-hundred and thirty three portraits  
Of the star of the Russian ballet!...  
What did all this add up to –  
Only Diaghilev knows!

(Lolo [L. G. Munshtein] in *Rampa i zhizn* 5./18.9.1910, author's translation)

“What did all this add up to” could also be translated as “how much did this cost?” Publicity did not come cheap in the arts capital of the world: Sophia Fedorova, feeling slighted by the impresario, told the Muscovite newspaper *Utro Rossii* (14./27.7.1910) that Parisian papers charged 1,000 francs for a picture on the cover, less for a less prominent location, and complained Diaghilev reserved these for his favourites.<sup>27</sup>

The cost of Parisian publicity drew attention to Diaghilev's financial means, and to his social position as the grandson of a provincial vodka merchant. Diaghilev's

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<sup>27</sup> According to Slonim 1963, 135-136, the Moscow Art Theatre did not extend its tour to Paris in 1906 partly because the publicity would have cost so much.

success as an impresario was in part due to his good relations with the merchant estate, but this tarnished his enterprise in aristocratic Russia much like support from rich Jews did in the West.<sup>28</sup>

In Russia, Diaghilev's publicity strategy was criticised as loud, reminiscent of the advertisements for cafés chantants and circuses. That is, Diaghilev was accused of distorting the image of Russian art, contaminating art with urban popular culture, unworthy of serious attention. He was blamed for garish lack of taste, for introducing second-rate dancers as stars of great renown, and so on. IMAGE 2. *Peterburgskaia gazeta* (25.12.1912/7.1.1913) even depicted Diaghilev incubating little ballerina eggs with the gas flame of "advertisements". Diaghilev, in short, was seen as selling the high art of the Imperial Theatres on the cultural market place of Western Europe and the Americas.

As Nijinsky told *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 6./19.10.1909, this cultural market-place was "no place for an artist of the Imperial Theatres, who values his reputation" (quoted in Krasovskaia 1971, i:394, translation mine). This was, of course, a rather snide remark considering how many famous Russian dancers appeared on variety stages, and indeed, Nijinsky later signed a contract with The Palace, a West End music hall.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The aristocratic prestige of prince Nemirovich-Danchenko had been crucial to the success of the Moscow Art Theatre, although Stanislavsky's merchant family ties actually paid for the enterprise. Slonim 1963, 103-127. Similarly, in 1898, the *Mir iskusstva* was funded by Sava Mamontov and princess Maria Tenisheva, and later, the significance of the patronage of the Grand Duke Vladimir Aleksandrovich had to do with his power to grant titles to rich manufacturers. See also Garafola 1992, *passim*, esp. 199, 277-284, 311 on Jewish patronage and anti-Semitism.

<sup>29</sup> When Diaghilev announced he would no longer employ Nijinsky after the South American tour of 1913, *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 3./16.9.1913 published a cartoon depicting Nijinsky flying to America's dollars with Diaghilev roosting behind in Europe. The caption explains how "Mr.

Russians also disliked the Western focus on the virtuosic stunts of the star dancers, particularly in conjunction with the 'new ballet' aesthetic. V. A. Binshtok complained that: "As for the jumps of Nijinsky and Fokine, they are much more fitting for the circus than for ballet; and they have very little to do with art." (*Rampa i zhizn* 15./28.8.1910, translation mine). Contemporary cultural rhetoric used the artificial division between highbrow and lowbrow, art and entertainment, to define what was art and worthy of serious attention and what was not. The division defined the position of a cultural product; which forms were appropriate for it; who could be called its author; and how products and producers were situated in the temporal axis of past, present and future. However, because the high/low division was somewhat arbitrary, Diaghilev's enterprise could be either defended or attacked irrespective of the number of virtuoso turns included in the spectacular Imperial ballet productions.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, it seems that after the 1909 ballet and opera season had ended with Diaghilev's personal bankruptcy, the Imperial Theatres required him to secure stronger support for the 1910 season (financial and social) from private patrons in Russia and abroad; and it may even be that they insisted on a more respectable venue for the season – the Opéra, rather than the Châtelet. The Châtelet, where the Ballets Russes appeared in 1909 and again in 1911-1912,

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Diaghilev is angry and demands that Mr. Nijinsky alone peck the American gold", i.e. Diaghilev is represented as foolish to let his star dancer go and make a profit alone.

<sup>30</sup> The reference to Diaghilev as the Russian version of a circus impresario (see fn1 above) was ambiguous at best: Barnum was very successful, but in Russia, ballet in touring circuses was the 'low' form to the 'high' of the Imperial Theatres. See e.g. Levine 1988 on high vs. low in art; Swift 2002 on the situation in Russia. *Obozrenie teatrov* 30.5./12.6. and 3./16.6.1909 called Diaghilev's campaign "bariishniki iskusstva" ("horse-cheater art", my translation). In *Le Figaro* 29.5.1909, Jacques-Émile Blanche similarly recollected a Russian spectator apologising to him for the 'circus décors' admired by Maurice Denis.

was a well-known variety theatre. Its large stage and stage technology were adequate for the purposes of the kind of ballet spectacle produced on the Imperial stages, but it is notable that much of the publicity around the 1909 season strove to dissociate the company from the reputation of the particular venue. Much was made, for example, of the redecoration of the theatre by the Russians and the expansion of the orchestra pit – the latter was significant because music was considered the highest art form (e.g. *Comoedia* 11.5.1909; *Rech* 13./26.5.1909).

Certainly, the 1910 season included more works that made visible the group's tie to the esteemed tradition of 'the old ballet', and it should be borne in mind that in accordance with the aesthetic theories upon which the Ballets Russes had been built, new art was always evaluated by appealing to the tradition of the art form. Although Diaghilev's admiration of and love for classical ballet seems to have been quite genuine, the financial and legal difficulties in exporting grand ballet classics from the Mariinsky were enormous, and in view of their similarity to the much derided traditional form of ballet in the West, the profits were anything but secure.<sup>31</sup> Publicly, Diaghilev justified his choice of repertory and the necessary cuts in the old ballets by claiming that either the great works by Petipa and Tchaikovsky had already proved unsuccessful (at least, the excerpts of them performed in music halls) or they were not really Russian, "ne possède aucun élément national qui puisse justifier l'idée de donner à Londres cette

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<sup>31</sup> See fn 16 above; Diaghilev quoted in Lifar 1945, 95-98; Brigdman 1988, 26-31 on Miriskusniki respect for tradition including the previous generation; Goldman 1977/1978, 44 on Diaghilev's praise of Vsevolozhky and classical ballet in Russia; also e.g. Krasovskaia 1971, i:16.

féerie franco-italienne.”<sup>32</sup> Ironically, in 1921, Diaghilev almost bankrupted himself by bringing to the West precisely this “féerie franco-italienne”, *La Belle au Bois Dormant*. Also, despite his professed love for the new, from the first ballet season to the last, Diaghilev actually kept certain excerpts of old ballets in the repertory, most famously the Blue Bird *pas de deux*, included already in the first season as *L’Oiseau de Feu*, and subsequently renamed, for example, *L’Oiseau d’Or* (1911), *L’Oiseau et le Prince* (1912), and *La Princesse Enchantée* (1916). This apparent discrepancy between Diaghilev’s recorded statements and his actions has puzzled both his contemporaries and researchers.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, in view of the Russian context of the enterprise, this was merely good strategy. For the Russian dancers, the classical ‘old ballet’ works no doubt counterbalanced the predominantly Orientalist ‘new ballet’ spectacles and created a sense of familiarity within the new company, a continuum between it and the Imperial Theatres. Classical roles provided a yardstick for a dancer’s reputation: at the Mariinsky, dancers were classified either as classical or character dancers, but only the former could take principal roles.<sup>34</sup> Also, Russian

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<sup>32</sup> *The Times* 10.3.1911. Excerpts from e.g. *Le Lac des Cygnes* had been presented in music halls by visiting Russian ballerinas: see Laloy in *La Grande revue* 25.6.1910; and *The Times* 24.6.1911 contrasting the Ballets Russes with Pavlova’s Palace engagement. Also Macdonald 1975, 17-25. E.g. *The Lady* 22.6.1911; *The Athenaeum* 21.10.1911 reminded audiences of the Russian Ballet of Karsavina’s previous visits; also Karsavina 1981, 240-248 on other impresarios luring her with offers.

<sup>33</sup> As noted, Benois 1945, 120-132 claims *La Belle au Bois Dormant* was Diaghilev’s first experience of ballet. Haskell 1955, 65, also 154, 280, 296, 316-319, 345 on Diaghilev’s love of and respect for classicism, 286-287 on the distinction between classical technique and classical ballet; Stravinsky 1975, 96-100 on classicism and *La Belle* as supreme art. Roslavleva 1966, 113-115 attributes the *féerie* to Vsevolozhky’s interests, claiming Petipa disliked Manzotti; cf. Wiley 1985, xiii, 95-101 notes how the personal interest of the Director of the Imperial Theatres for ballet was a crucial reason why the collaboration came about, also 276 on Diaghilev as influenced by Petipa.

<sup>34</sup> Russian reviews always distinguished between classical and character dancers, although both could dance character roles. On the Russian dancers’ respect for their alma mater, see e.g. Karsavina 1998, 84; Lopokova informing Kinney-Kinney s.a., 257-264, esp. 259.

ballet critics paid more attention to the works by Petipa, in which dancers could display their technical refinement. Without the respect of the critics, Diaghilev could not get the best dancers to join his company. Diaghilev was well aware of these considerations. Furthermore, classical ballet was aristocratic, associated with St. Petersburg rather than the mercantile Moscow where Gorsky created most of his 'new ballet' works, and as such, it appealed to Diaghilev's more conservative collaborators such as Benois.<sup>35</sup>

The relationship of the Ballets Russes to the tradition of realism was far more problematic. Most Russian modernists of the early twentieth century saw themselves as realists, following the tradition of the 'Golden Age' artists, in opposition to whom Diaghilev and his friends from the *Mir iskusstva* had positioned themselves. (See fn 7.) The question of whether ethnographic accuracy combined with ballet technique could even be called 'realism' assumed a crucial importance in 1912-1913, with Nijinsky's choreographic works, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, *Jeux* and *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Particularly *Jeux*, set in an urban garden in the near future, was a far cry from the exotic and escapist spectacles of the Ballets Russes and of the 'new ballet' in general. Many of the old *miriskusstniki*, including Diaghilev, never came to terms with this kind of aesthetic, and neither did many of the critics who had praised the Fokine works.

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<sup>35</sup> The aristocratic association may be why Diaghilev included more classical works in his first full-length London season (following the Coronation Gala performances) in the autumn of 1911 than he did in the seasons in France. Also, had his plans for a season in St. Petersburg in 1912 been realised, one of the four works to be performed would have been *Giselle*. Astruc papers; Garafola 1992, 195; Schouvaloff 1997, 116n1.

As I have argued elsewhere (see Järvinen 2003), Nijinsky's new dance rested on a re-thinking of the ontology of dance (i.e. what was understood as dance and what was no longer dance but something else) that was not easily comprehended by his Western audiences unfamiliar with the Russian background from which these ideas arose. The Russian critics, however, loved them. Whereas Fokine had been chided for repeating his old successes and for ruining the great classical dancers that starred in his works,<sup>36</sup> Nijinsky's works were praised as more truly Russian, contemporary, and highly original (even if not always fully polished). His choreography represented a new kind of realism that was fully in accordance with contemporary Russian fine art, theatre and literature.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the outrage Nijinsky's choreographies caused in the West merely served to prove that Russian art was now, for the first time, truly in advance of Europe (e.g. Karatigin in *Russkaia molva* 24.5./6.6.1913 quoted in Taruskin 1996, 1010). Thus, the negative Western reviews still provided evidence that Russian audiences alone *really* understood ballet as an art form. As Nikolai Minsky put it:

It is curious, that the European critics acclaimed Diaghilev as a bold innovator and reformer of choreography as long as he was staging old ballets, with romantic plots and classical technique, adorned, quickened by Fokine's temperament and Bakst's taste; and inspired by Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. But as soon as Nijinsky, and Stravinsky in his wake,

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<sup>36</sup> Volinsky according to Volkov 1996, 324-325; also Fokine 1961, 74-76.

<sup>37</sup> In *Utro Rossii* 30.5./12.6.1913, Nikolai Minsky scolded Fokine with the words of Tolstoy and called Nijinsky's works 'neo-realism' – the same term he used of the works of Acmeist poets.

set themselves the task of radically reforming 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, translation mine)

Although Minsky rather creatively forgets that he had himself viciously attacked Diaghilev for propagating the Western stereotype of Russia as a barbarian autocracy (in *Utro Rossii* 1./14.8.1910), the quotation indicates how, in Russia, ballet was seen as an art form of the future, capable of change and of modernity. Furthermore, *Sacre* in particular was seen as a seamless fusion of the newest trends of contemporary art and ancient Russian traditions. The former Director of the Imperial Theatres, Prince Volkonsky, wrote:

One of our critics in all amity favourably described it as “cubist icon-painting” in which the archaic angularity of the movement unravels itself in front of us to the pipes of a Slavonic Pan.

(Volkonsky in *Apollon* 6/1913, translation mine)

The Nijinsky works thus reasserted the company’s connection to Russia – something that had been cast into doubt by the increasing internationalisation of the troupe.<sup>38</sup> In Russia, this reassertion of national identity was not limited to *Sacre*, for Nijinsky’s *Jeux* was, in effect, a modern version of a ‘ballet blanc’, a term coined by André Levinson. Levinson, the most vociferous opponent of the new ballet and of the Ballets Russes, wrote of *Jeux*:

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<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Mauclair’s tirade against *Faune* in *Le Courrier Musical* 15.6.1912: “il est impossible qu’un danseur slave, même si intelligent, pénètre une œuvre de ce genre”; cf. Levinson in *Rech* 25.6./8.7.1913 on how little that was Russian remained in the Russian Ballet.

These sportive “jerseys”, balls and rackets – trophies of classical tennis against a faceless architectural background – perhaps they somehow embody in material symbols, naïvely, elements of contemporary life. And in the breaks and groupings of tense bodies one clearly senses some kind of contact with the newest tendencies of painting that seek depth and synthesis by way of geometrical simplification. In the work of Mr. Nijinsky there is some of this abstraction, his composition is not banal, but his approach towards this abstraction lacks creative strength and conviction.

(Levinson in *Rech* 3./16.6.1913, translation mine)

Although Levinson scolded Nijinsky for not going far enough with his new ideas, he nonetheless preferred them to Fokine’s works (see e.g. Levinson in *Rech* 2./15.4.1913: “The new ballet ground to a halt with ‘Pavillon d’Armide’ and ‘Carnaval’; I have already written of these ballets.” Author’s translation). Levinson, like many others, noted that *Jeux* strove to depict modern life using the means of contemporary art. This, in itself, was novel in ballet, where the narratives had, for the past fifty years, tended towards both temporal and geographical escapism (some music-hall spectacles excepted). It is also notable that in Russia, the appraisal of Nijinsky’s works took place across the political spectrum: the person praising Nijinsky’s pieces in *Teatr i iskusstvo* (15./28.6.1912 and 9./22.6.1913) was none other than A. V. Lunacharsky, who became the Commissar of Enlightenment (Narkompros) in the Soviet Union.

Paradoxically, the Nijinsky works also changed the way in which ballet was seen and written about in the West. Apparently overnight, the critics began to pay attention to the poses and movements of the dancers, the placement of groups on stage, the general structure of the events, and the counterpoint between various elements of the spectacle:

Ces nymphes marchent, s'arrêtent et demeurent immobiles. Comme les gestes, les actions sont nettes et nues. Le temps qui les sépare n'est pas occupé de transitions inutiles, et le passage de l'immobilité au mouvement est soudain. Soudain une troisième nymphe paraît, toujours en glissant de gauche à droite, comme dans les scènes d'ombres. Cette troisième figure a la tête et le corps de face, mais les jambes de profil; ces jambes sont pliées, les genoux à droite; le bras droit fait une ligne brisée au-dessus de la tête; et dansante, la nymphe rejoint en bondissant ses compagnes.

*(Journal des débats politiques et littéraires 10.6.1912.)*

Besides detailed description of what the dancers did on stage, the critics also paid attention to their own affective responses to this new dance – to how it created in them feelings other than joy and delight: anger and uncertainty, yes, but also deep sympathy, sadness, elation, and even fear. Moreover, they felt compelled to express such emotions and to share them with their readers. Dance became an art that produced not only a wide variety of emotions but food for thought, for reflection, and for analysis (as [Leonard] [nkster]. noted in *The New Statesman* 19.7.1913). Consequently, even negative reviews richly

illustrate what 'dancing' signified and what was to be expected of dance as an art form:

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 groups épais et compacts, demeurent tassés sur eux-mêmes, ne faisant que des gestes maladroits, raccourcis, rétrécis, étriqués, des gestes d'infirmités 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)

Lalo's reactions are actually very informative as to both the qualities and of the significance of this new 'not dance', which was so very frustrating and annoying for not fitting into the critic's expectations while, at the same time, provoking thoughts and engendering emotions and reactions that had to be shared.

In effect, these reviews undermined many of the prejudices of Russian dance experts, particularly the insistent claim that Western critics were incapable of analysing dance. (It is more likely that Western critics saw technical terms as stylistically inappropriate, particularly for describing the 'natural' dancing style of

the Russians: see *Le Figaro* 20.5.1909; or Fitch 1912, 10.) Yet it is also true that Diaghilev never hesitated to feed the prejudices of his Western audiences – after all, he was running a business. It was profitable to obscure the troupe’s relationship to the Russian ballet tradition and to Russian culture in general, so that the works performed by the Ballets Russes could appear more innovative and avant-garde, even politically progressive than they were. Novelty sold, but only up to a point: the few Cubist accents in *Parade* (1917) were received far more easily when Cubist style was a decade old than in the works of Nijinsky, who had professed in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* (15./28.4.1912 quoted in Zilberstein & Samkov 1982, i:448, translation mine) that he “applied to choreography the theory of Cubist painters”, and that this, to the horror of the interviewer, made his works no longer ballet but “a new rhythmic musico-choreographic composition”.

But after Nijinsky’s dismissal in 1913, and his subsequent committal to a mental institution in 1919, this choreographic cubism could be forgotten or conveniently re-interpreted through the author’s insanity. Ballet reasserted that dance was about joy, delight and escapism as in the pre-war Ballets Russes ‘hits’, and that the Russians had simply been representing their racial characteristics in these canonised masterpieces. This is an Orientalist interpretation that simplifies the complex contemporary responses to the Russian Ballet by audiences coming from different cultural backgrounds. Careful archival research alone is insufficient for this inquiry; we have to learn to question our own role as historians, our own disciplinary formation as authorities of dance.

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#### IMAGE 1



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