Critical Silence: The Unseemly Games of Love in *Jeux* (1913)
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Unlike his début, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1912), Vaslav Nijinsky's second choreography for the Ballets Russes, *Jeux* (1913), is a work often bypassed in histories of the company and of the art form. While some of the central ideas of this work have been appreciated as somehow 'modern', *Jeux* has been overshadowed by the notorious reception of Nijinsky's other choreography for the season, *Le Sacre du Printemps*. *Jeux* failed to rouse the ire of Parisian critics like *Faune* had and *Sacre* would; like these, it was dropped from the repertory after the impresario Diaghilev fired his erstwhile lover later in 1913.[1] Based largely on a few sentences in Nijinsky's so-called *Diary*, it has been assumed that *Jeux* was meant to illustrate Diaghilev's homosexual fantasy, and that the pious choreographer, feeling disgusted by the topic, also had too much to do with *Sacre* to finish *Jeux*.[2]

One of the peculiarities of history is that what is left out and not said in a historian's source materials can sometimes tell us more of a particular period than what an individual source might seem to be saying. Of the three meanings of 'games' embedded in the title (jeux de tennis (tennis game) – jeux d'amour (flirtation) – jeux d'esprit (witticism)) the second one offers a fascinating case for looking at the silences that surround *Jeux*. Beginning from what was and was not written about in the reviews, I delve into the marked differences between the choreographer's manuscript notes on the stage action (Debussy & Nijinsky s.a.) and the published, translated and edited version of the narrative in Debussy's piano score (Debussy 1912).[3] I then I trace why a game of

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[1] According to Diaghilev's telegram to Astruc 28.4.1913 in NYPLDC Astruc Papers and Grigoriev 1953, 82, *Jeux* was pushed forward in the 1913 season because the Russian singers for the planned opera performances could not arrive on time. This left Nijinsky only three weeks for the rehearsals, since both ballerinas dancing in it were in the employ of the Imperial Theatres: Ludmila Schollar replaced Nijinsky's sister Bronislava Nijinska when she became pregnant. Nijinska 1992, 461–462, 465; Rambert 1983, 58. Unlike Nijinska, neither Karsavina nor Schollar were familiar with Nijinsky's choreographic style. Karsavina, a classical dancer par excellence, felt that what Nijinsky was asking her to do was simply <u>wrong</u> – she recollects that in the rehearsals "our collisions were worse and more ludicrous than ever." Karsavina 1981, 286, also 285–286 on *Jeux*, 265–266 on a similar situation in the *Giselle* rehearsals; also Rambert 1983, 69.

[2] I.e. Nijinsky 1991, 123; cf. Nijinsky 1999, 206–207 complained *Jeux* was not entirely finished by its first performance. On Nijinsky's claim that *Jeux* was Diaghilev's homosexual fantasy, see the discussion below, in the subchapter "Aesthetics and Morality".

[3] No choreographic notation of *Jeux* in Nijinsky's hand appears to have survived, but Debussy & Nijinsky s.a. includes notes on stage action, reproduced and translated in McGinness 1996, part II Appendix 2, 86–98; and McGinness 2005, 575–584. I am grateful to Professor McGinness and composer Anneli Arho for their help in solving my problems relating to the various versions of the Debussy score. To avoid confusion, I have referred to Debussy 1912 solely with page numbers. My bar counts refer to the manuscript, <u>not</u> to either the piano score (i.e. Debussy 1912) or the final version of the published score (Debussy 1988) that McGinness uses. In the manuscript, I only counted in those changes Debussy had made at the time, which include the new ending of the ballet as [657–683] (cf. bars [662–688] in Debussy 1988) as an unnumbered additional page on 22-stave paper that therefore replaces pages 41–42 (where Nijinsky had not

lawn tennis made for an excellent 'modern' setting, and one already associated with flirtation. I argue that for the majority of the critics, this translated as aesthetically inappropriate, which was possibly more crucial for the future of *Jeux* than its failure to create a scandal. In other words, regardless of its possible artistic merits, contemporary life as depicted in *Jeux* brought the Russian Ballet too close for comfort for the audiences of the company.

The almost invisible unease in what is said of *Jeux* in 1913 also explains something of why of Nijinsky's choreographies only *Faune* was later revived by the Ballets Russes. *Sacre* and Nijinsky's 1916 *Till Eulenspiegel* were large works requiring a big orchestra and a great number of dancers, which made them difficult to mount for the smaller post-war touring company. But *Jeux*, like *Faune*, was a relatively short work that did not require much in terms of numbers of dancers or complicated stage technology. Yet, no attempt at restaging *Jeux* was made by the Ballets Russes, not even with both Bronislava Nijinska – replaced in the final casting by Ludmila Schollar – and Tamara Karsavina in its employ.[4] So, what exactly in *Jeux* was best forgotten?

Staged Narrative

Jeux premiered in Gabriel Astruc's new Théâtre des Champs-Elysées on 15 May 1913 as the first novelty of the fifth consecutive ballet season organised by the impresario Sergei Diaghilev.[5] The audience of the opening night would have had high expectations for this work, if only because it was the first ballet score by one of the greatest living French composers, Claude Debussy. As with *Faune*, the sets and costumes were designed by Léon Bakst, best known for his Orientalist fantasies in ballets that had made the reputation of the leading dancer of the company, its new ballet master, Nijinsky.

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written anything in any case). With the exception of the ending, the difference to the published score is only 5 bars, but some of my interpretations as to what is said in the Russian and where differ from McGinness's interpretation. I have found no reference to these manuscript notes in reminiscences and they certainly are not amongst the materials of the most influential and comprehensive secondary sources on *Jeux* to date, from Richard Buckle to the "reconstruction" by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer (see the YouTube video of a 2003 performance http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkZhDcB-OfA; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=774MfmVqMmw; and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1SU5ZTkiVA [8.4.2009]; and Hodson 2007).

[4] Nijinsky did not include either *Faune* or *Jeux* into the first programme of his 1914 Palace Season, perhaps because the venue was a music hall, although Nijinska 1992, 494-507 blames Romola Nijinsky for the decision. The second programme and the rest of the season were cancelled after Nijinsky fell ill. Jacques Rouché (1862-1957) apparently wanted to revive *Jeux* when he offered Nijinsky the position of ballet master at the Paris Opèra in 1914. *Variety* 26.6.1914 took it as given that Nijinsky would accept the three-year booking, but he did not. After the exclusive rights to stage presentations of *Jeux* expired, there were plans to revive *Jeux* in 1917 and again in 1919. Orledge 1985, 175. 1920 finally saw a new choreography to the music by Jean Börlin, when the Ballets Suédois created their version. Häger 1990, 15, 74. Nijinska 1992, 469 claims that of her brother's works, *Jeux* inspired her the most. She danced a tennis-player in her *Le Train Bleu* (1921), which had an aeroplane flying over the set, as originally planned for *Jeux*.

[5] *Comœdia Illustré* 5.6.1913 souvenir programme of the season declared this the eighth of Diaghilev's Russian seasons, as the impresario counted in his 1906 art exhibition and the music and opera seasons of 1907 and 1908.

The outline of *Jeux* involved three dancers, one man (danced by Nijinsky) and two women (danced by Tamara Karsavina and Ludmila Schollar), who encounter in a twilight garden or park, ostensibly looking for a lost tennis ball but engaging in games of love.[6] Bakst's set portrayed a large, plain city house surrounded by trees and flowerbeds, but his costume designs were not used. Instead, the ballerinas were dressed by the couturier Paquin in what looked like contemporary sportswear, with Nijinsky wearing a version of his rehearsal clothes.[7] According to some sources, the work was set in the future – perhaps in 1920 or 1925.[8]

The temporal orientation of *Jeux* is intriguing, and I shall be returning to it shortly. However, let me begin with a quotation that illustrates how critics transformed the danced act (performance) into a written narrative (text). This longish excerpt is from the review by Adolphe Jullien, the music critic for *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 23 May 1913:

> Ce sont, dans un parc, jeux de coquetterie amoureuse entre un joueur de tennis et deux jeunes filles: à peine celles-ci, l'une brune et l'autre blonde, ont-elles trouvé un endroit propice aux douces confidences qu'elles y sont dérangées par cet importun visiteur qui court après une balle de tennis. Il leur fait la cour, bien entendu, et s'irrite de leur résistance; elles veulent fuir, mais il les rattrape. Il danse avec l'une, et l'autre en marque une grande jalousie. Il danse avec la seconde, et la première n'en éprouve pas un chagrin moindre. Elles se rapprochent quand même et tombent dans les bras l'une de l'autre; alors intervient le jeune homme: "Qu'elles regardent autour d'elles, leur dit-il; la beauté de la nuit, la joie de la lumière, tout leur conseille de se laisser aller à leur fantaisie." Et ses conseils les persuadent à ce point qu'elles l'admettent en tiers dans leurs confidences et dans leurs jeux: ils danseront désormais tous les trois ensemble et s'abandonnement si bien à leur plaisir favori qu'à la fin "le jeune homme, dans un geste passionné, réunit leurs trois têtes et qu'un triple baiser les confond dans un extase…". Une balle perdue de tennis tombe à leurs pieds, et les voilà qui prennent leur vol vers les profondeurs nocturnes du parc.

Most of this description, including the "spoken" lines of the characters on stage, derived from the publicity materials of the novelty: Jullien was citing the notes on stage action printed in Debussy's piano score of the ballet, published in April 1913 as a part of the advance press campaign for the ballet.[9] Like a libretto, these notes on stage action

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[6] *L'Excelsior* 15.5.1913 reported the 'argument' as: "Dans un parc, au crépuscule, une balle de tennis s'est égarée; deux jeunes filles et un jeune homme s'empressent à la rechercher. La lumière artificielle des grands lampadaires électriques qui répand autour d'eux une lueur fantastique leur donne l'idée de jeux enfantins: on se cherche, on se perd, on se poursuit, on se querelle, on se boude sans raison. La nuit est tiède, le parc silencieux baigné de clartés douces." In essence, *Le Temps* 16.5.1913 repeated this, but shortened the phrases and set the action in a garden ("un jardin").

[7] Based on the images of Bakst's designs, the artist seems to have mistaken tennis for football. See Krasovskaia 1971, i: illustration [64] following 432. See also e.g. Lieven 1973, 55 on how Russians found London architecture strange because it was so bleak.

[8] *The Sketch* 21.5.1913 stated the work was "dated 1925"; Jacques-Émile Blanche in *La Revue de Paris* 1.12.1913 reminisced about how the collaborators, in planning the ballet, "imaginait des choses inouïes, le passage d'un aéroplane sur la scène, des costumes de tennis pour 1920".

[9] As with *Sacre*, *Jeux* had been advertised in Parisian papers an entire year in advance – that is, before either score had been completed or choreography entered rehearsal. See e.g. M. C[alvocoressi]. in *Comœdia illustré* 15.6.1912. Because Debussy was far more

focused on the narrative events on stage and on the motivations behind the characters' actions. Particularly the latter imposed certain authorial meanings onto the events on stage – meanings composed by the choreographer, as evinced by the more extensive Russian notes in the manuscript version of the score.[10]

But for the first time in his numerous reviews of the Ballets Russes, Jullien was dissatisfied with what he had been told the work represented. Having repeated this description of the action, he continued the review by claiming that Nijinsky:

> [a] présenté là trois personnages qui se meuvent avec la raideur de marionnettes, puis s'arrêtent tout à coup comme si le ressort cassait, restent alors fixés dans quelque posture bizarre et reprennent enfin leurs mouvements par un déclic mécanique? Quel plus mauvais service pouvait-il rendre à la brillante Karsavina, à la pétulante Schollar, à lui-même enfin, dont l'agilité nous émerveille toujours, que d'observer strictement un pareil programme, au moins jusqu'à la scène finale où tous les trois consentent enfin à s'animer, à courir, à danser comme gens de notre époque et retrouvent, avec tous leurs avantages, leur succès habituel?

By posing these claims as questions, Jullien attacked the 'bizarre poses' and 'stiff' movements of *Jeux*, which he claimed lacked any playfulness altogether. (This was a common complaint at the time: see e.g. *The Lady* 3.7.1913; *The World: A Journal for Men and Women* 1.7.1913).

But herein lies the paradox of the review: had the brilliant dancers been offered the opportunity to run and dance with the 'customary' lightness and grace, the critic would have bypassed their dancing altogether. This was the standard practice of reviewers like Jullien, whose specialty was not dance as much as music criticism. As long as the aesthetic of dancing was a given, how the dancers conveyed the plot – the specific qualities of their movements or the choreographed structures on stage – were barely mentioned in the reviews of the Ballets Russes spectacles. Only his discomfort at the face of specific movement qualities lets the formal aspects of the dance invade Jullien's textual convention (the evaluation of the plot), and leads to a naming of these disturbing, un-dancelike qualities. Importantly, Jullien's argument also prescribes the man to blame was Nijinsky the choreographer, whose authorship was thus ascertained as his work was attacked. Like the sudden need to describe the offending movement qualities of *Jeux*, this accusation made visible the importance of the choreographic author to the design of the dance on stage.

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famous a composer than Stravinsky at the time, and *Jeux* his first ballet score, even the press across the Atlantic showed sizable interest in this work. For example, *Musical America* wrote of *Jeux* 7.6., 14.6., 21.6. and 19.7.1913, but of *Sacre* only in one small comment 14.6.1913; also *New York Tribune* 18.5.1913 cf. 1.6.1913; *Boston Evening Transcript* 5.6.1913 cf. 26.7.1913. Also the Paris correspondent of *The Dancing Times* forgot to live up to his promise to discuss *Sacre* after a lengthy piece on *Jeux* in the June 1913 issue.

[10] Debussy & Nijinsky s.a. cf. Debussy 1912. As McGinness 1996, 52-84, 115-120 has established, both the unparalleled speed with which Debussy, a notoriously slow worker, finished the score, and the apparent convergence of the music with Nijinsky's choreography (down to specific dramatic gestures) attest that the composer was working from an existing libretto. See also Orledge 1985, 164-165 quoting Debussy's correspondence; Diaghilev's letter to Debussy quoted in Nijinska 1992, 468; Blanche in *La Revue de Paris* 1.12.1913; *The Times* 28.6.1913.

Moreover, just as his aesthetic discomfort becomes a critique of movement qualities of the dancers and of the restrictive role of the choreographer, Jullien's pick from the notes on stage action ends up demonstrating a disparity between the performance and the expectations created in the advance publicity, between what the critics anticipated and what took place on stage. Notably, words like "ecstasy" in the Debussy piano score aroused expectations that were not realised in performance – or at least not realised in the expected manner. But this, of course, could not be directly addressed in the reviews.

Let's Talk About Sex

In the roles Nijinsky had danced since his Western début in 1909, his body had been put on display in unmistakably erotic ways – he danced the willing slaves of Oriental mistresses and the sensual dreams of young girls. Even his private life was filled with innuendo, particularly for those who knew of his relationship with his impresario, Diaghilev. In 1912, the scandal of *Faune* only enhanced the reputation of this young man who had been dismissed from the Imperial Theatres the year before for wearing an 'indecent' costume.[11] In *Le Figaro* of 14 May 1913, *Jeux* was assured to be "une révélation sensationnelle".[12] Following the sensational *Faune*, the explicitly erotic nature of this promised revelation did not pass unnoticed.

Jullien's manner of quoting the press material focuses on the moments in the work that he ambiguously claims "me laissent un peu rêver", allowed him to dream a little (Jullien in *Journal des débats* 23.5.1913). This indicates a major silence in the narratives about the ballet: as with the masturbatory act of the Faun in *Faune*, the explicit representation of non-normative sexual acts in *Jeux* could only be alluded to in the reviews through euphemisms, absences and negations, usually accompanied by expressions of discomfort. "Ce ne sont pas des jeux tout à fait innocents," deemed Henri Quittard (in *Le Figaro* 17.5.1913), making an explicit reference to the programme notes that had spoken of the childish games of the three players. *The Observer* (29.6.1913, quoted in Macdonald 1975, 94) pointed to the "perverse charm and fascination" of *Jeux*. In *La Grande revue* 25.5.1913, Louis Laloy even used the suggestive actions of the dancers to repudiate the young choreographer had followed his own theories about dance:

> Enfin, et surtout, on voudrait bien demander à M. Nijinski pourquoi, puisqu'il répudie le geste, il a cependant agrémenté son ballet de tant d'unions de mains, d'entrelacements de jambes et de frictions de joues, de tant de caresses, de baisers, d'attouchements si bien imités qu'on se sent un peu de honte d'en être l'indiscret témoin. Comment ne pas être tenté d'expliquer cette infraction au principe par une intention de scandale?

Especially the emphasis Laloy places on being ashamed at the face of gestures that are meant to provoke a scandal speaks volumes about what exactly offended him.

The more forthright Russian press were in agreement that the French had rejected *Jeux* as "pornographic":

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[11] The reports of Nijinsky's dismissal by the correspondent of *Berliner Tageblatt* (NYPLDC Nijinsky Clippings, unattributed) or *Le Gaulois* 14.2.1911 differ from the interpretation in e.g. *Le Figaro* 14.2.1911; or *Comœdia* 14.2.1911 that followed the information put out by Astruc's office. On the latter, see NYPLDC Astruc papers Diaghilev to Astruc and vice versa 12.2.–14.2.1911. The Russian gossip is admirably summed up in Wiley 1979/1980.

[12] *Le Figaro*, 14.5.1913.

> Балетъ Нижинскаго “Игры”, несмотря на превосходную музыку Дюбисси, провалился послѣ перваго-же представленія. Порнографическій сюжетъ этотъ пришелся совершенно не по вкусу парижской публикѣ.[13]

The title of *Jeux* played on the strings of sex and suggestion, and the published notes on stage action make the sexual play between the characters more than clear by contemporary standards. For example, after the young man repeatedly asks for a kiss from one of the girls (Debussy 1912, 16), the musical instruction becomes “Passionnément” as they pause in their “amoureuse extase” (*op.cit.*, 19), perhaps because this has aroused the jealousy of the other girl (six bars before). The relationship between the three players is non-normative, but this is only apparent towards the end of the score, where the three characters end up dancing together until “Le jeune homme, dans un geste passionné, a réuni leurs trois têtes… et un triple baiser les confond dans une extase qui dure jusqu’au 3/8” (*op.cit.*, 41, the change of rhythm takes place at the turn of the page.)

However, according to Nijinsky’s notes, the implications of ‘kissing’ and ‘caressing’ would have been rather more obvious in performance. The two girls arrive at the same time on stage at [84-89], which indicates they know each other at least somewhat (perhaps from the tennis game they have been playing prior to entering the stage). The young man, seen briefly leaping across the stage at the beginning [74-77] (Debussy & Nijinsky s.a., 5, the copyist’s note in French), enters as an unwelcome distraction at [204-207] (*op.cit.*, 13): he interrupts the game of seduction that the girls have been playing since their first embrace at [129] (*op.cit.*, 8). The kissing between the girls and between them and the boy features very prominently in the notes: kisses occur at least in [129, 155, 168-171, 174-177, 276-279, 422-423] – excluding several references like “какъ наверху” (“as above”, in [445]) or “тоже” (“the same” e.g. in [515]). Moreover, these are interspersed with embraces (e.g. above bars [434-435]), caresses (at [196-9], [442], [444]), coquettish dancing ([312/313-316]), expressions of jealousy ([282-285]), and different games of seduction such as the hide-and-seek in [373-387] (*op.cit.*, *passim*). Based on the manuscript notes, the stage action ends in a last, passionate kiss, followed by the three dancers’ limbs intertwining in the horizontal position “like a basket” (“изобр. корзну”, written in the left margin next to [672] in *op.cit.*, additional page).[14]

All the same, the critic of *The Dancing Times* (June 1913) wrote that in *Jeux*:

> Nijinsky makes love to each in turn, with an extraordinary amount of osculatory play, to the evident dissatisfaction of the neglected one, then bravely he takes on the task of making love to both girls together, to avoid all jealousy, and the fall of the ball in their midst puts an end to this extraordinary amount of violent flirtation just in time to prevent the audience from showing <u>how bored they were</u> in an unmistakable manner.

What is strikingly anomalous about this attack is the allusion to the audience reaction. Why did an audience that adored the sexual innuendo of the Orientalist spectacles of the company from *Cléopâtre* (performed repeatedly since 1909) to *La Tragédie de Salomé* (1913), reject similar allusions in Nijinsky’s tennis ballet? In other words, why was sex suddenly boring in *Jeux*? Had the sexual play truly offended the audience, a scandal like

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[13] “Nijinsky’s ballet “Games”, despite its excellent music by Debussy, sunk after the first performance. Its pornographic plot was not at all to the taste of the Parisian public.” V.L. Binshshtok in *Rampa i zhizn* 9.6.1913.

[14] This pose (or perhaps something else) was illustrated by Valentine Gross in *Comœdia Illustré* 5.6.1913.

that following *Faune* would have ensued. Therefore, some researchers have assumed that the audience simply did not realise non-normative sex was being depicted on stage.[15] Obviously, this was not the case, or accusations of obscenity would not have emerged to the extent they actually did. The discrepancy between what seems to have been meant to satisfy the voyeurism of the spectators and the actual reaction of the same spectators indicates that Nijinsky had overstepped some other line than that between the normal and the pathological.

Aesthetics and Morality

In research literature, *Jeux* is so often interpreted as evidence of Nijinsky's (or Diaghilev's) sexuality,[16] that any critical discussion on the work seems incomplete if it does not address the claims the choreographer made, with the benefit of hindsight, in 1919. That this is the case rests on what Linda Nochlin (1995, 149) describes as:

> the naïve idea that art is the direct, personal expression of individual emotional experience, a translation of personal life into visual terms. Art is almost never that, great art never is. The making of art involves a self-consistent language of form, more or less dependent upon, or free from, given temporally defined conventions, schemata, or systems of notation, which have to be learned or worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation. The language of art [- -] is neither a sob story nor a confidential whisper.

In other words, authorial intentions are never sufficient to explain a work of art, and even less so when these authorial claims derive from a manuscript written after the author's religious conversion. Although there is a personal element in the making of a work of art, this personal element is never independent of the society that produces both the individual and contemporary ideas on what is and is not art, the institutional controls, moral codes, cultural prejudices, etc.; and these social conditions, more than anything else, define who and what gets canonised as 'great' and when. In the case of *Jeux*, these cultural norms may explain more of the work's failure to please than any hidden thematic subtext. The audiences of 1913 would not have been aware of Nijinsky's Tolstoyan interpretation. Rather on the contrary, the accusations levelled against *Jeux* had much to do with the lack of just such a moral message.[17]

In his two articles in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* (12./25. and 13./26.5.1913), Valerian Svetlov claimed the French had found Nijinsky's depiction of typical (!?) springtime behaviour of young people in *Jeux* "too pornographic", although he stressed how, with its 'cold' formal qualities, the choreography was anything but. Although Svetlov liked certain moments in *Jeux*, many of his colleagues simply noted that *somehow*, these formal qualities made *Jeux* reminiscent of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. For example, *The*

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[15] Romola Nijinsky 1980, 201, 210 first insisted the audience simply did not see the sexual subtext. Perhaps because of her reputation as an unreliable observer, e.g. Barker 1982 dismisses the sexual content altogether; cf. e.g. McGinness 1996, 83-93 believes the sexual content indeed went unnoticed, which leads him to counterfactual claims of Diaghilev "warning" Nijinsky of his dispensability with *Jeux*.

[16] E.g. Hanna 1988, 184-185; and Garafola 1992, 50-75 follow Kirstein 1971, 199 in representing Nijinsky's choreographic œuvre as his erotic autobiography; similarly, Ostwald 1991, 57-76.

[17] On Russian understanding of the relationship between social class and morality, and on modernist art as pornography, see e.g. Engelstein 1992, esp. 369-404.

Daily Telegraph famously called Nijinsky "a faun, and a faun in flannels is curious."[18] Yet, in *Jeux*, the stage space was not limited in the manner of *Faune*; and although both works were accused of being too "angular" to be dance, contemporary illustrations of the gestures of *Jeux* bear little resemblance to those of *Faune*. (See e.g. *Comoedia* 17.5.1913; *Comœdia Illustré* 5.6.1913.) However, Svetlov's definition of *Jeux* as not dancing in the conventional sense (*Peterburgskaia gazeta* 12./25. and again 13./26.5.1913) hints at the precise qualities that made *Jeux* seem so alike the two-dimensional picture of *Faune*.

In both *Faune* and *Jeux*, Nijinsky apparently used momentary still poses or tableaux like musical pauses that created particular effects within the whole. These pauses, and particularly their placement outside of conventional moments of staged stillness, could be responsible for both the alleged similarity of *Jeux* to *Faune* and the claim that *Jeux* lacked the movement qualities of a game.[19] In the manuscript notes, Nijinsky placed great emphasis on when the dancers do *not* move – such as [109] "вторая стоитъ" (the second girl stands), [112] "недвигаясь" (without moving) (Debussy & Nijinsky s.a., 7). This seems to indicate the dancers would not have otherwise halted at these points – in other words, that these instances fell outside the conventional uses of the tableau. Besides directing the spectators' attention to culminating moments and heightening the dramatic tension, the stillness of a tableau now functioned as counterpoint or emphasis within the composition of a dance. For example, according to the manuscript, short pauses and moments of stillness accentuate the movement that precedes or follows, as in [100]–[106], when one of the girls first stops and then runs forward. Immediately after this, the stillness of one dancer counterpoints the movement of another when, in [106]–[110], one of the girls dances her joy and the other watches. (Debussy & Nijinsky s.a., 6.)

In this complicated passage, stopping still also provides impetus for the narrative: in [114] and at the end of [220] the girls stop because they "can no longer run anywhere" ("больше некуда бѣжатъ", *op.cit.*, 7, 12). In effect, this keeps them on stage, which leads to them flirting with the young man, who enters at [204]–[207]. Not using the short stillnesses to draw attention to this entrance also makes perfect sense: the young man is not welcomed to the girls' game, he steals the attention of the girls (and the audience) only when he interrupts the scene. In this way, both the stillness and lack of it heighten the affective intensity of the moment. In [116], one of the girls inspects the spot where she is standing when she cannot, as noted, run anywhere else. She hesitates, seems uncertain where she should go, what she should do, so she stops. However, which affects are portrayed through such momentary pauses change as the characters change and the narrative develops. In [384]–[387] (or [388]–[391]), the jealous girl "садится какъ грибъ" (idiomatic, literally "sits down like a mushroom"), angrily sulking as the boy dances with the other girl (Debussy & Nijinsky s.a., 24.) Although the emotional quality here is very different from hesitation, in both cases the affect in question gets highlighted because contemporary audiences would have been

[18] *The Daily Telegraph* 17.5.1913; also quoted in *The Illustrated London News* 24.5.1913; and *The Sketch* e.g. 25.6.1913.

[19] See e.g. Brewster & Jacobs 1997, esp. 29–38; and Singer 2001, 41–42 on immobility as heightening device; also McReynolds 2003, esp. 275–276 on choreography, pauses and Russian cinema. As researchers from Guest & Jeschke 1991 to McGinness 1996, esp. 59 have attested, all of Nijinsky's choreographies seem to have connected the dance elements extremely closely to the musical score. However, the notes in the *Jeux* manuscript give little indication as to what the actual effect of this kind of treatment of music might have been or how the dancers executed particular musical relationships in practice.

conditioned to take note of staged stillness as indication of importance of events to come.[20]

In the repertory of the Russian Ballet, *Jeux* was incongruous because the narrative lacked both melodrama and supernatural or mythical elements. After the premiere, Nijinsky explained that the idea of a tennis ballet had come to him the previous summer in Deauville, or perhaps in Monte Carlo, when watching the movements of tennis players.[21] This was again in striking contrast to the melodramatic spectacles that dominated the repertory of the Russian Ballet. In contrast to stories of exotic royal femmes fatales, rose-spirits, magical puppets, and Hindu gods, *Jeux* dealt with anonymous characters, ordinary people, whose passions were petty and inconsequential rather than matters of life and death. Unlike Nijinsky's notes on stage action, the French scenario was also written in apparently neutral passive tense, which emphasised the impersonality of the characters. As Roland Huesca (2001, 99) suggests, this pushed the margins of tolerance, and "[l]es norms de l'acceptable se déploient à l'ombre du non-dit."

Yet, despite all the curious silences and contradictions in what was publicly said of *Jeux*, I would not presume, as Huesca does, that *Jeux* illustrated a male homosexual threesome. Despite his reservations, McGinness's musicological analysis seems to support this: Debussy's composition comes close to resolving its inner conflicts only when the three characters finally embrace, which would indicate the threesome as a happy and desirable solution to their emotional dilemmas. (McGinness 1996, 80–85, 110–111.) In Nijinsky's notes, the only instance that seems to support his later condemnation of the lustful action is the word "грѣхъ" "they sin" in [630] and [649]. (Debussy & Nijinsky s.a., 39–40.) However, considering the limited discursive range of how sex could be represented at the time, little can be conjectured from this one word. Nijinsky did not indicate moral condemnation of the characters' actions in any other published documents – in interviews, he spoke of *Jeux* only as a "dainty trifle" (interview in *Pall Mall Gazette* 15.2.1913).

Unlike in the story that has become popular in research literature, none of Nijinsky's accounts of the origin of his idea mention an elitist garden party at Lady Ottoline Morrell's garden.[22] I wish to stress this difference between the author's interviews and the popular story of *Jeux* as a "Bloomsbury ballet" (Hodson 2007) because it illustrates what bothered audiences about a tennis ballet in 1913 and what has made *Jeux* difficult to fit into the narrative of the Ballets Russes. Like the canonised narrative of the company, the 'Bloomsbury ballet' trope derives from reminiscences rather than contemporary evidence. It associates *Jeux* with the private pastimes of the upper-class audience of the Ballets Russes, with the specific, well-known patroness (Morrell) and her artist friends (such as Duncan Grant). This ballet is of a class and has class in a manner lacking in the anonymous players at a seaside resort that the choreographer spoke of as his inspiration in 1913.

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[20] Nijinsky used this device very effectively in *Sacre*, where the Chosen One stands immobile for nearly a fifth of the entire work, from [103] to [142], according to the manuscript notes reproduced in Hodson 1996, 137.

[21] Nijinsky interview with Émile Deflin in *Gil Blas* 20.5.1913 quoted in Kahane 2000, 179; cf. in the interview in *L'Intransigeant* 17.5.1913 he explained he had had the idea in Monte Carlo. See also Nijinsky in *Le Figaro* 14.5.1913 quoted below.

[22] I.e. Morrell 1963, 228. This epithet is used by e.g. Jacobs 1992; and Hodson 2007. I would like to stress that Nijinsky had had ample opportunity to watch (and play) tennis in St. Petersburg – see fn 33 below.

The circular structure of the composition in both music and dance framed the events of *Jeux* as something ongoing of which the audience sees but a small fraction: the dancers arrive on stage running after a ball and they also exit under a similar pretext. Because the characters are simply young people, not figures of myth or Commedia dell'Arte, anything can happen. Their motivations for their actions and their relationships with each other are both unpredictable. Moreover, they are also not resolved during this fragment: although musical structure points to the threesome as a happy solution to the emotional dilemma of the characters, this passage precedes an ending that returns to the opening theme of the tennis ball.[23] This open ending left the characters off the hook, so to speak: their behaviour was not exactly approved but neither were the figures punished for a clearly non-normative sexual act. Unlike in Orientalist spectacles like *Schéhérazade*, where the unfaithful Sultana kills herself before she is killed, the tennis players of *Jeux* faced no consequences for their actions – their sin went unpunished.[24] Even the word "pornography" used in the Russian press to illustrate the plot of *Jeux* seems to indicate a lack of moral message rather than the opposite: pornography does not pass judgement or moralise sexual behaviour.

The aesthetic of the Ballets Russes relied heavily on fin-de-siècle theories of art and specifically, the Aesthete credo of art for the sake of art. Many key figures in the audience of the company had fought in their youth against 'philistine' values that accused the art of the 1880s and 1890s of degeneration and sexual deviation. From the first, the rhetoric around the Russian Ballet had thus sheltered the company from accusations of immorality that might otherwise have surfaced at the face of the skimpy costumes and apparently naked limbs of the dancers. In a famous letter to Robert Godet, Debussy admitted that this final embrace was improper, but justified this with: "when it is a question of ballet, immorality escapes through the legs of the female dancer and winds up in a pirouette."[25] Art, in other words, was judged by aesthetic, not moral, standards.

However, this belief that art was beyond morality effectively limited what the critics could say of *Jeux*. Several reviews began by noting that artistic merit had nothing to do with the content or subject matter of a work of art, and/or that there was nothing wrong in the subject of *Jeux* (e.g. Jullien in *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* 23.5.1913). Yet, critics found much to criticise in the approach the choreographer had taken to this subject. Henri Ghéon (pseudonym, Henri Vangeon, 1875-1944) accused Nijinsky of 'abstraction':

> La partition de M. Debussy est toute grâce, toute courbe, et elle joue vraiment; les jeux de M. Nijinski semblent tracés sur une épure: ils se coupent à angles vifs; l'abstraction, plus que le sentiment, les mène; ici le chorégraphe nous donne, avant son art, les préconceptions de son art; il les applique encore à une

[23] McGinness 1996, esp. 110-111. This reminds me of what Sparshott 1995, 125 says of the difference between starting a work with a 'blackout' vs. opening of a curtain.

[24] As I have argued earlier in this journal, *Faune*, too, had a circular structure, the ending distinctly echoing the beginning as the opening theme of the music returns. The scandalous act of masturbation, seen as normal behaviour in Russia but as urban degeneration in the West, appeared at the last moment of a work that had baffled the spectators by its new aesthetic and strange two-dimensionality.

[25] Debussy to Durand 12.9.1912, according to Orledge 1985, 165; also quoted in e.g. Buckle 1993, 250. Cf. Leonard Inkster in *The New Statesman* 5.7.1913 criticised that in *Schéhérazade* "the heavy and voluptuous are treated, and treated perhaps without that last touch of aloofness to produce the art which leaves one's moral sense untouched by the subject-matter."

> matière neutre: ce qui l'intéresse le moins c'est le sujet, là où résidait justement la force poétique de l'art de M. Fokine.[26]

Although the critic finds the choreography at odds with the musical score, our ears, attuned to the formalist cry for art striving for the essence of its medium, would like to read this as high praise. But for Ghéon, abstraction is the preconception, the origin from which thematic development leads to an emotionally and aesthetically viable work of art. What is plotless and morally neutral cannot signify as art should. A game of tennis needs grace and curves to be playful; a ballet needs a clear story. *Jeux* was too stylised, too 'abstract', and therefore a failure.

Again, Ghéon's reference to Mikhail Fokine, the ballet master who had preceded Nijinsky in the Ballets Russes, underlines how only the changed aesthetic of Nijinsky's choreographic work revealed to the critics that dancing had always relied on a certain aesthetic and on particular narrative and spatial forms. As long as these forms remained constant, there had been no need to analyse the compositions performed by the Ballets Russes *as compositions*. How and what the dancers danced corresponded with contemporary notions of 'natural' dramatic expression and 'graceful' dancing.[27] This shows in some of the advance notices about *Jeux* as well, for example when *The Times* (23.5.1913) wrote:

> The dance of the three fantastic tennis players, which is the central feature of the ballet [*Jeux*], seems to us one of the most lovely things M. Debussy has recently written [- -] the whole thing flows with an easy spontaneity which must have made it as delightful for the performers to dance to as for the audience to hear.

Dancers, that is, simply followed the music, a little like in ballroom dancing. Moreover, phrases like 'easy spontaneity' speak of aesthetic expectations regarding how the dancers danced – expectations that do not seem to have been realised in the angular dances of *Jeux*. But why would a ballet about flirtation be set near a tennis court?

A Modern Sport

Obviously, *Jeux* had little to do with a game of tennis, although this was a common and perhaps deliberate misperception, particularly in satirical responses to the choreography.[28] In late nineteenth-century culture, young people of opposite sexes had relatively few occasions for informal socialising without chaperoning adults. Lawn tennis, played in garden parties and summer resorts, associated with the upper classes, mixing the sexes, and requiring a moderate amount of exercise, provided one such opportunity.[29] In 1889, *The Spectator* "considered the charge that young men were

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[26] *La Nouvelle revue française* August 1913. Jacques Rivière had condemned Nijinsky's *Faune* on much the same grounds in *La Nouvelle revue française* in July 1912.

[27] Notably, outside of Russia, Mikhail Fokine was never interviewed for the press, and what he actually did received little analysis in reviews, where choreography was sometimes even attributed to the dancers.

[28] E.g. the cartoons of *The Graphic* 31.5.1913 and *The Sketch* 2.7.1913; or the parodies of *The Punch* 16.7.1913; and especially *The Bystander* 25.6.1913. Some researchers (Buckle 1998, 328, 341; and Barker 1982, 57 heading the list) have made much of opinions that Nijinsky's ballet did not include "proper" movements of a tennis game, even claimed that Nijinsky would have mistaken the game for golf (!), which is quite silly.

[29] Wouters 1995(a) and (b); and Pearsall 1973, 71-73 on etiquette; also *op.cit.*, esp. 226 on the elitism of tennis vs. lawn-tennis. Also next fn.

becoming 'softs' – playing 'ladylike' games such as tennis", which the writer defended by claiming that "tennis, while offering opportunities for trivial flirtation, demands considerable exertion." (Quoted in Sinfield 1994, 95.) At the turn of the century, tennis as a serious sport was increasingly coming to be seen as distinct from lawn tennis. Tennis became an Olympic sport from 1896 to 1924, and tennis championships were widely reported in the newspapers of the day. The temporal closeness of the Ballets Russes season in May to the major tennis events of the French Championships (est. 1891, first played on red clay surface in 1912) and Wimbledon (est. 1877) meant that the popular press exhibited Nijinsky's tennis players side by side with the champions of the day.[30]

Pierre Scize, writing after seeing the Ballets Suédois version of *Jeux* in 1920, recollected that Nijinsky's choreography had been: "a vast and violent canvas on which charm was partially submerged beneath I know not what barbaric, oriental cruelty. The nocturnal setting contributed still further to this almost sadistic, at all events extremely voluptuous interpretation."[31] Although the memory of this critic may have exaggerated a little, this example illustrates how dusk was widely associated with erotic license, particularly in the Symbolist aesthetic from which the Ballets Russes sprung.[32] However, for Nijinsky, twilight also provided an illuminating excuse: according to Marie Rambert (1983, 69), Nijinsky wanted the stage lit with electric arc lamps, and in the reviews, this was mentioned as a specifically modern feature (e.g. *The Spectator* 28.6.1913). Although in the years preceding the First World War, few private homes had installed electricity, street lighting and electrically lit advertisements were transforming the city at night into a magical realm of light quite distinct from the daytime city. Although gas lighting had already extended hours of leisure after dark, electrical lights signified urban modernity. On stage, electricity was safer, brighter, and easier to use for different types of effects than gas, as the career of Loïe Fuller in particular attested, but also contemporary art and architecture were increasingly thinking in terms of nightscapes. (Nye 1988, 11–16; Kern 2000, esp. 185–186.) The lighting of *Jeux* effectively associated the events on stage with contemporary urban modernity.

Although in his *Diary*, Nijinsky associated *Jeux* with Diaghilev, he had actually learned the game from his first patron and lover, Prince Pavel Dmitrievich Lvov.[33] Through Lvov's interest in the joys of urban modernity – sport, sex, motoring and theatrical entertainment – Nijinsky may have come to associate tennis with all that was new in contemporary life and with the speed that characterised modernity. Originally, *Jeux* was supposed to include an aeroplane flying over the scene, which would have brought another 'modern' pastime into the narrative. Actually, of the sports specifically associated with modernity, few allowed the kind of variety of movement that tennis did: whereas cycling or 'motoring' (with cars, aeroplanes, or motorcycles) did symbolise modernity, the mechanical apparatus controlled the sportive actions and the physical

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[30] E.g. *The Sketch* 25.6.1913 mixed images of contemporary tennis players with those of *Jeux*. On sports and modernity in Russia, see McReynolds 2003, *passim*, esp. 95, 107; on sport and social class, Bourdieu 1991.

[31] Scize according to Häger 1990, 74.

[32] E.g. Dijkstra 1986, *passim*, esp. 340–341. For instance, Konstantin Somov, a member of Diaghilev's Mir iskusstva circle, often set his scenes of lovers and masquerades at twilight.

[33] Unlike e.g. Buckle 1998, 328, 341, and Barker 1982, 57 claim, Nijinsky did know how to play tennis, even taught it to his sister: Nijinska 1992, 240; cf. Nijinsky 1980, 335–336 (and following her e.g. Buckle 1998, 438, also fn†) reverse causality by claiming *Jeux* taught Nijinsky to "instinctively" play tennis in the United States in 1916.

body remained almost still. Also, whereas tennis could be played with two rackets and a ball in a park or a backyard, an expensive apparatus of mechanics was necessary for the motored vehicle to move at all, and in 1913, the dangers that motor vehicles posed for other traffic and the noise they made were still a cause for heated dispute.[34]

A modern ballet in a contemporary setting that would relate to the experiences of the upper-class audience of the Ballets Russes also called for informal dress and occasion, youth and vigorous movement. The attraction of both sports and dancing related to the contemporary emphasis on the healthy body and the transfigurative qualities of the right kind of movement. Unfortunately, this discourse seemed to be curiously incongruous with the Russian Ballet. In June 1913, *S.I.M. Revue musicale* published the following prediction of the influence of *Jeux*:

> Sports d'été: plusieurs lecteurs nous demandent les règles du tennis russe qui fera fureur, cette saison, dans tous les châteaux. Elles peuvent se résumer ainsi: la partie se joue la nuit, sur des corbeilles de fleurs, éclairées par des lampes à arc; elle n'admet que trios partenaires; le filet est supprimé; la balle est remplacée par un ballon de foot-ball; l'usage de la raquette est interdit. Dans une tranchée, creusée à l'extrémité du terrain, on dissimule un orchestre qui accompagne les ébats des joueurs. Ce sport a pour objet de développer une extrême souplesse dans les articulations des poignets, du cou et des chevilles. Il a reçu l'approbation de l'Académie de médecine.

A joke points out what is inconceivable: what the Russians do on stage is (mis)taken for healthy exercise and emulated by the fashionable French spectators. The allusion to the Academy of Medicine underlines how contemporary experience of modernity was inextricably linked with health issues, a (re)invention of a body transformed through physical movement as in the discourses of free-form dance or sport, or the physical danger of modernity like in the degeneration debate or shock journalism.[35]

Much of the allure of the Ballets Russes had rested on youth, both in terms of the young bodies dancing on stage and as nostalgic revival of the aesthetic of the 1890s, the aesthetic of the spectators' youth. But Fokine's works never aimed to transform the bodies of the spectators – their 'health' lay in the narratives, where immorality was always appropriately condemned. Although many Western critics tended to include Russia in the Orient, even represent Russians as prone to precisely the kind of excess in which they indulged on stage,[36] the Occidental and Oriental narratives of the Russian Ballet tended to differ in the treatment of gender roles and sexuality. Ferocious sexual desires and reversed gender roles were prominent only in works set in the Orient – Egypt, India, the Near East, or the Caucasus. The Occidental and Russian works in the repertory – from *Carnaval* and *Le Spectre de la Rose* to *L'Oiseau de Feu* and *Petrouchka* – vied away from erotic violence and represented conventional gender roles, spiced at best with fairy-tale elements. Overall, what took place on stage had no links to the ordinary lives of the spectators. In his book on Nijinsky, Geoffrey Whitworth noted that

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[34] The noise of the engines, the dust motored vehicles stirred up, and the frequent accidents they caused led to countermeasures from speed limits to exclusive quarters forbidding motoring altogether. Kern 2000, esp. 113-114; Pearsall 1973, 59-63, esp. 63; Horrall 2001, 65-100 on automobiles and aeroplanes in popular culture.

[35] Corbin 1990, esp. 596-8, 609, 662-667; Vigarello & Holt 2005; Singer 2001, esp. 61-99.

[36] E.g. *The Graphic* 22.2.1913; or Calvocoressi in *The Musical Times* 1.8.1911 on Petrouchka's "realism". Similarly, e.g. Guest 1992, 138 on the "realism" of Moscow scene of *Round the World* (1909).

Faune had been acceptable because of its setting in Ancient Greece, but *Jeux* did not have a similar mythological mattress to fall back on.[37]

Set in an urban garden or park lit with modern electric lights, its performers commoners without either great destinies or sensational passions, *Jeux* became too close for comfort. Its sexual trespasses were dangerous because the subject did away with the safe Othering of non-normative behaviour, collapsed the distance between the stage and the auditorium. The anonymous characters made it difficult to separate dancer from role, reality from fiction – some reviewers invented descriptive names for the characters to avoid speaking of them with the proper names of the dancers.[38] As with *Faune*, the absence of virtuosic feats of seemingly effortless dancing also served to focus the attention of the critics on other qualities of the work, qualities that seemed both familiar and strange. The strange movement qualities of the performers, not dancing but not acting, either, did not seem to fit the aesthetics of beauty, grace and joy expected of ballet as an art form, although it was clear they should be considered art and not sport. Like the silences in the reviews that do not speak of sex, the prominence of *Jeux* in the cartoons and other jokes made of the Ballets Russes in 1913 reflects a curious unease about this work that has not been addressed in research literature. The fact that *Jeux* dealt with contemporary life was 'obscenity' in the grand narrative of the Russian Ballet.

Tennis and the Variety Stage

Tennis, as the critic of *The Daily Telegraph* put it, "seems the last theme in the world on which a ballet could be built."[39] Why? After all, three years before Nijinsky took up the theme, Henri Ghéon (in *La Nouvelle revue française* 1.8.1910) had written that:

> Je distingue une grande beauté dans la boxe, en dépit de ses fins sanglantes, dans le cricket, dans le tennis, dans tous les sports qui mettent les formes viriles en action: il importe que nous n'y demeurions plus insensibles. Et je ne vois pas, quant à moi, que le jeu gratuit de la danse se doive priver en principe de telles ressources.

Also the Italian ballet master Luigi Manzotti had utilised the theme of sport as a setting for ballet in *Sport* (1897) – the sponsor of this event even printed a series of trading-cards of the various scenes of the ballet spectacle (see Levy & Ward 2005, 329-331). However, the Russian Ballet had always been synonymous with an escape from real life. By 1913, this was beginning to bore some members of the audience. After expressing considerable scepticism about *Jeux*, the critic of *The Bystander* (25.6.1913) wrote:

> if I am right, it is a great pity. For the most obvious shortcoming of the Russian dancers hitherto has been that they failed to translate into terms of the dance any of the more ordinary aspects of life. It has been held, and I think with reason, that this is why their popularity already shows signs of waning. You cannot be satisfied even with Nijinsky's leaps, Bakst's colours, Stravinski's grotesques for

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[37] Whitworth 1913, 86-87; e.g. Lieven 1973, 189 complained that *Jeux* had no content whereas in *Faune* there was at least the Greek context.

[38] Whitworth 1913, 73: ""Come for a romp," cries Scarlet-tie. "I'll cut you a caper!"" Similarly, *Musical America* 21.6.1913.

[39] *The Daily Telegraph* 17.5.1913; also e.g. Pann in *Maski* 7-8/1913 disliked *Jeux* because of its theme, sport, was not ballet-like; cf. *Variety* 31.5.1913 claimed "the effort to present modern life without the usual bright or fantastic dress seen in the Russian ballets, did not appeal to the audience."

> ever. Perfect as these all are in their way, we long for something a little simpler, a little more human. In so far as *Jeux* would seem to be an attempt to meet some such criticism it is very welcome. But I am afraid that the English are too athletic a race to put up with a too aesthetic translation of their favourite amusements.

This fear of *Jeux*'s failure turned out very true, but not solely because the English liked sport – after all, *Jeux* was not about sport as much as it was about modernity and sexual games. The trouble was not just the tennis – critics generally doubted whether contemporary dress and manners were altogether fit for a ballet. As *Les annales du théatre et de la musique* (1914, 321–323) pointed out, sixty years before, Théophile Gautier had insisted that ballet should remain fabulous and impossible for it to be credible that the individuals on stage express themselves with pirouettes and rondes de jambe. The question of the extent of verisimilitude on stage, the anonymous author stated, deeply divided the audience, although both factions apparently loved Debussy's score.[40]

But the verisimilitude (or lack thereof) of the tennis setting implied another, deeper cultural anxiety. For the self-appointed guardians of high culture, Nijinsky's choice of topic seemed dangerously slim. A ballet about modern bodies and modern manners did not have the *lasting* value of true art, art that was not tied to a specific place and time. The representation of the present in *Jeux* did not seem sufficient to provide this lasting significance, particularly because the inspiration for the work had been popular culture and 'meaningless' pastimes like flirting and sport. *Jeux* appeared too tied to the shifting concerns of the present, and as such, it stank of the music hall – sporting events, seaside resorts, and house parties belonged to the variety stage side by side with military pageants, allegories of the empire, world fairs, and parodies of contemporary political events.[41] The music hall, then again, was not a place for self-respecting artists, or so Nijinsky had publicly claimed.[42]

Much of the disillusionment with the project of the Russian Ballet coincides with Nijinsky's choreographies of 1912–1913, but accusations of the Ballets Russes as nothing but empty entertainment surface with vehemence only *after* Nijinsky and particularly his choreographic œuvre, had been dismissed from the company. Although most of the 1914 reviews praised the Ballets Russes season, and although Nijinsky's appearances at the *Palace* music hall in London were a failure, the audiences seem to have missed the arguments about art that the 1913 season had provoked. The aesthetic void underneath all the surface glitter that Nijinsky's works had been accused of revealing, did not disappear with the expulsion of these works from the repertory – on the contrary. In 1914, both those critics who had disliked and those who had approved of the modernism of *Faune*, *Jeux*, and *Sacre* (or any of them) used the accusation of 'lowbrow' vaudeville to smear the Ballets Russes. Diaghilev was even accused of

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[40] French papers generally praised Debussy's new score, whereas across the Channel, many reviews expressed their dislike of the music – see e.g. *The Lady* 3.7.1913.

[41] See e.g. Guest 1992, *passim*, on various up-to-date topics in music hall ballets; Horrall 2001, esp. 237–243; cf. Swift 2002, esp. 6–8, 205–231 on Russian popular repertories; Poesio 1994, 121–124 on Russian opinion on Italian virtuosi as music hall entertainment. Also Tickner 1997, esp. 69–76 on avant-garde and popular culture.

[42] In *Peterburgskaya gazeta* 6./19.10.1909, quoted in Krasovskaya 1971, i:394, Nijinsky claimed music halls were "не место артисту императорских театров, дорожащему своей репутацей", i.e. "no place for an artist of the Imperial Theatres, who values his reputation". See also Nijinsky quoted in J.E. Crawford Flitch 1912, 157; in *Musical Courier* 27.4.1916; also Calvocoressi 1978, 216–217. On the Russian cultural politics that such statements illustrate, see Swift 2002, esp. 4–8, 39–46, 162–166.

cowardice in dropping Nijinsky's works, and the outbreak of the World War further placed the frivolity of the pre-war favourites into question.[43]

Actually, the explicit dismissal of anything smacking of variety entertainment in the propaganda for the Ballets Russes leads me to think that perhaps the company had to build its image as 'high' art not so much because several of its stars appeared in variety theatres but because the Ballets Russes spectacles were structurally very similar to the riskier variety-stage numbers. Claims of spiritual or intellectual content and aesthetic excellence did little to alleviate the practical fact that the repertory comprised of short and melodramatic works with lots of dancers in skimpy costumes. Since negative contemporary comments on the Ballets Russes have been by and large ignored in research, I take the opportunity to cite one of the most vehement condemnations of the company, published in *The Modern Dance Magazine* during their American tour of 1916:

> "Schèhèrazade," [sic] with its Parisian Orientalism, had not a single dramatic moment that was above the mark of a ten-twenty-thirty melodrama. It was not the art of stage decoration. Bakst's costumes and scenery, interesting as they are to look at in a book, seldom carry across the footlights. It was, above all, not dancing – not dancing was we have found that dancing can be – not the expression of significant moods of the soul through bodily gesture. [- -] It was a marvelous exhibition of technique – vaudeville in excelsis. Only as vaudeville it was marred by an excess in numbers. Two trick dancers in "Chin-Chin" were more effective than a hundred trick dancers at the Century, except to a Hippodrome taste. It was a fourteen-ringed circus, staggering, dazzling, bewildering in its stupendous aggregation of unparalleled effects, and one longed for a bag of peanuts and some red lemonade.[44]

Because the line between 'high' and 'low' culture is artificial, it was more or less inevitable that sooner or later the Ballet's critics and competitors would attack it as providing for the rich the same kind of passing and empty pleasure as the popular 'low' entertainments of music halls and cinema.[45] However, the topic of *Jeux* actually saw the variety stage accusing the Russian Ballet of plagiarism: one American paper jumped to

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[43] Besides Rivière in *La Nouvelle revue française* 1.7.1914; and Inkster in *The New Statesman* 4.7.1914; in July 1914, *The English Review* pointed out that complaints during the 1913 season had been mistaken as to the cause of grievance: "What was attributed before to the absence of M. Fokine cannot now be ascribed to the absence of Nijinsky, who with his sister is a real loss." N.G. Struve wrote to Stravinsky from Berlin 3./16.3.1914 that Nijinsky's absence was sorely felt. Stravinsky 1997, ii:235; similarly, Harry Kessler wrote to Hofmannsthal 15.3.1914 in Kessler & Hofmannsthal 1968, 375; and Lady Ripon to Misia Sert, quoted in Sert 1953, 123-124, that the company was simply not the same without its male star and that Diaghilev should put business before personal grievances. Blanche 1918, 62-63 quoted Madame de Thann as a summing up of the 'Good Friday' sentiment at a December 1915 performance of the Ballets Russes: "Ces cochonneries-là, a-t-elle dit, étaient bonnes pour avant la guerre. Laissez donc ces turpitudes contre-nature pour Ferdinand de Bulgarie..." In other words, the Ballet was still perverse, alien, foreign, and decadent, but these had ceased to be positive qualities at a time of international conflict. Similarly, *The Bellman* 30.12.1916.

[44] *The Modern Dance Magazine* November 1916. The following issue (December 1916/January 1917) included a review lamenting the absence of Karsavina and Nijinsky from the altogether "average" troupe. Like the reference to "ten-twenty-thirty melodrama" (i.e. shows costing 10, 20 or 30 cents at most - Singer 2001, 2-3) above, this was clearly meant as an insult.

[45] E.g. *Le Temps* 3.6.1913: "le ballet russe, c'est le cinématographe du riche".

the conclusion that Nijinsky had stolen the idea of a tennis ballet from Voegtlin's new show, *America*, because "every sensational effect which was used in the big musical shows in England or France was stolen from former Hippodrome shows."[46] Although the statement may be coloured by the critic's chauvinism, the immediate association of tennis with variety theatres was not. However, the similarity to variety theatre entertainment was problematic only because *Jeux* was supposed to be 'high' art. But could beauty be found in contemporary everyday life?

Beauty of the Present

Unlike the piquant urban life of *Petrouchka*'s 1860s, the present was quite simply not beautiful. Although Nijinsky consistently professed he was in search of Beauty,[47] most of his contemporaries did not see what he could see as beautiful in contemporary everyday life. At the time, it was widely believed that general taste had only worsened ever since the industrial revolution, when the factory-made product and the cheap copy seemed to invade the market place. Propagated by the Arts and Crafts movement, this belief in the ugliness of modernity was very influential also in the aesthetic of Diaghilev and the *Mir iskusstva* circle, where the models of what was beautiful were always taken from the distant past. (See e.g. Bakst 1990, esp. 176-180 on how today cannot aspire to the greatness of the past.) As Leonard Inkster put it in the first of a series of articles on Nijinsky's choreographies for *The New Statesman*, "People talk of the drabness of modern life; modern life is soaked in colour, and most of it bad." Yet, in the sequel, after pointing out how Nijinsky "has been at pains to put choreography itself on a true artistic level", Inkster actually dismissed the claim that true art should be beautiful:

> Go to Rembrandt and ask yourself for how long his paintings of ugly old women will be things of beauty and a joy. Had they been paintings of beautiful women there had been another and a different joy added to them, but from the dead painting of a beautiful woman you quickly turn. In *Jeux* Nijinsky uses the toe-dancing[48] of marionettes, the gestures of French dolls dressed in white, a magnified tennis ball, conventionalised flower-beds and grass-plots (none of which things are yet considered beautiful in themselves), and with the motives of quarrel, reconciliation, childish impulsiveness and restlessness, weaves his poem of pattern. ([Leonard] I[nkster]. in *The New Statesman* 5.7.1913.)

The emphasis I have placed here on the elements of the work being of the present and therefore ugly underlines how radical was Nijinsky's claim that ballet could only have relevance to the modern spectator by turning towards contemporary experience.

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[46] *New Jersey Review* 23.5.1913, reprinted *New York Star* 23.8.1913. Both from NYPLDC Nijinsky Clippings.

[47] "Et de cette étude j'ai rapporté cet espoir que notre temps serait caractérisé, dans l'avenir, par un style tout aussi expressif que ceux que nous admirons le plus volontiers dans le passé." Nijinsky acc. to Cahusac in *Le Figaro* 14.5.1913. Nijinsky quoted in Whitworth 1913, 100: "La Grace [sic], le Charme, le Joli sont rangés tout autour du point central qu'est le Beau. C'est pour le Beau que je travaille*."* and by H.T. Parker in *Boston Evening Transcript* 9.11.1916: "C'est pour le Beau, en maintes formes, aspects, visages, que je travaille."

[48] Nijinska 1992, 468 famously wrote that: "Debussy did not write valses for *Jeux*, and Nijinsky did not dance on toe." In actuality, both can be found in Debussy & Nijinsky s.a., the first in e.g. [178] and [560] (as well as in Debussy 1912, 21), and the second in e.g. [511], [526], [644-645]. On the significance of night-time dancing, see McReynolds 2003, 223-230; also McGinness 1996, 151 on the motivations for the waltz in *Jeux*.

Whereas Manzotti had turned dancers into mythical symbols of modernization, Nijinsky simply let them be themselves and thereby modern. He explained this to Hector Cahusac of *Le Figaro* (14.5.1913):

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

Nijinsky, like the Russian critics of *Jeux*, knew that Russia had no lack of modernity – at least not in St. Petersburg. Russian critics had, from the first ballet season onward, attacked their Western colleagues as not understanding ballet as an art form. The 1913 season brought this to new heights – as the Nijinsky works were condemned abroad, the choreographer acquired the halo of a vanguard artist whose radically Russian works were not understood by the Parisian public. Nikolai Minsky complained in *Utro Rossii* (*The Dawn of Russia*) 30.5./12.6.1913:

> Любопытно то, что европейская критика провозгласила Дягилева смѣлымъ новаторомъ и преобразователемъ хореографіи какъ разъ тогда, когда онъ ставилъ старые, романтическіе по содержанію и классическіе по техникѣ 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.[49]

Minsky went on to note how Nijinsky's *Faune* had already anticipated this reaction, the loud protests that greeted *Jeux* being but a prelude to the uninterrupted chorus of whistles that greeted *Sacre*. In advocating Nijinsky's works as the new Russian art, Minsky conveniently forgot that already in 1910, he had complained of the French use of words like 'barbarian' in conjunction with the Russian Ballet (*Utro Rossii* 1./14.8.1910).

One of the few Russian critics who discussed *Jeux* at length and appreciated its modernity was, surprisingly enough, Andrei Levinson – perhaps the staunchest opponent of the 'new ballet'[50] in Russia. Levinson actually scolded Nijinsky for not having the conviction to go as far as he should have with his new style:

> Такъ въ этихъ спортивныхъ "джерси", мячѣ и ракетѣ – трофеяхъ классическаго tennis'a, въ безличномъ архитектурномъ фонѣ, – какъ бы воплощены въ символахъ вещественныхъ и наивыхъ нѣкоторыя стихіи современной жизни. А въ изломахъ и группахъ напряженныхъ тѣлъ явственно чувствуются какія-то

[49] "It is curious, that the European critics acclaimed Diaghilev as a bold innovator and reformer of choreography every time when he was staging old ballets, with romantic plots and classical technique, adorned, quickened by Fokine's temperament, Bakst's taste, and inspired by Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. But as soon as Nijinsky, and Stravinsky in his wake, 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." Nikolay Minsky in *Utro Rossii* 30.5./12.6.1913.

[50] I.e. "новый балетъ", developed by Aleksandr Gorsky (1870-1924), whose *Don Quixote* is still regarded by Russian researchers as "the dawn of a new era" in ballet. Souritz 1999, 104; Krasovskaya 1971, i: 46-50, 107-151, esp. 116-128 on *Don Quixote*.

> касанія съ новѣйшими устремленіями живописи, ищушей углубленія и синтеза на путяхъ геометрическаго упрощенія. Въ произведеніи г. Нижинскаго есть что-то отъ этой отвлеченности, его замыселъ не баналенъ, но подходъ его къ этому замыслу лишенъ творческой силы и убѣдительности.[51]

Levinson concluded that in *Jeux*, there was something genuinely new, something that should be appreciated despite the rejection of the work by its Parisian public:

> Конечно, "Игры" тоже неудача. Публика отвергла ихъ. Но въ нихъ, въ жесткой, бѣдной и нарочитой формѣ обнаружена подлинная новизна концепціи, новизна, быть можетъ, не вовсе безплодная.[52]

In comparison to the harsh words Levinson had used of Fokine's works, this was extraordinarily generous. Levinson, in effect, admitted the form of Nijinsky's composition was genuinely novel, and he seems almost to say he is expecting its development with interest. Similarly, Svetlov (in *Peterburgskaia gazeta* 12./25.5.1913) surmised that Nijinsky's choreographies just needed time for the public to realise their significance. Although like Levinson, he disliked much of *Jeux*, Svetlov thought the work would be appreciated in the near future, just as *Faune*, scandalous in 1912, had become a masterpiece by 1913.

Many of the critics who reviewed Nijinsky's choreographies were perhaps cautious in their critique because they had already seen intense changes in aesthetics taking place, remembered how their parents' generation had laughed at the works of Wagner. Some members of the audience also felt the need to protest in public against what they saw as a too hasty dismissal of something genuinely groundbreaking in dance. "One of the Public" wrote in praise of *Jeux* to *The Times* 1.8.1913:

> For the first time we are here treated to an employment of dancing as an absolute medium. At one bound the ballet is removed from its time-honoured surroundings of unusual circumstances and is carried into the midst of life as everybody knows it. The dance presents a parallel to emotional experiences without imitating the actions which accompany them in real life.

This anonymous writer explained that in *Jeux*, dance was no longer restricted to situations where dancing could take place (such as fairs, festivities, or exotic locations) but accepted dancing as a convention of the art form, just like singing had been accepted as the convention of opera. This, in turn, allowed for any topic to be treated through the means of dance, and any range of feelings to be expressed. Interestingly, Levinson had a very similar point when he criticised Fokine for placing too much importance on ethnographic authenticity (in *Rech* 2./15.4. and 25.6./8.7.1913).

Conclusions

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[51] "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 which 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 power and conviction." Levinson in *Rech* 3./16.6.1913; cf. Levinson 1982, 57–58.

[52] "Of course, *Jeux* also failed. The public rejected it. But it, in its hard, poor and intentional form, reveals a genuine novelty of conception, a novelty which, perhaps, is not entirely fruitless." Levinson in *Rech* 3./16.6.1913; cf. Levinson 1982, 57.

Jeux was an anomaly in the repertory of the Russian Ballet because it was set in the present and in the context of popular pastime; and it also became incongruous with the canonised narrative of a 'revolutionary' and 'modernist' impresario, who dropped it from the repertory. Nijinsky's story about *Jeux* as moral condemnation of Diaghilev's private desires has been convenient to explain why Diaghilev would later choose to commission new works that share the themes of *Jeux* – like *Le Train Bleu* – rather than revive *Jeux,* the score of which alone had cost him a considerable sum.[53] Yet, trusting the choreographer's claim has also effectively obscured why audiences not aware of any private subtexts in a novelty would dislike it.

Denying seeing anything immoral, hiding behind ridiculing the work, or simply not speaking of the piece altogether were strategies used to avoid confrontation with what was disturbing in *Jeux*. Yet, it would be dangerous to attribute the critics' negative comments or jokes made at the expense of a sport ballet solely on their rejection of the aesthetic of the work, the non-normative sexuality depicted, or simple misunderstandings as to what *Jeux* was supposedly about. All of these certainly played their part in the reception, because the reception of any work of art is always heterodox and shifting in unexpected ways, which is why we create generalisations and categorisations to make sense of the past. But more than anything, *Jeux* points to a discrepancy between the image of the Ballets Russes propagated in dance research and the actual contemporary context of the company. By bringing contemporary life into the Ballet, *Jeux* set in high relief how escapist and fantastic the Russian Ballet had been, and how little of what had been praised in it was aesthetically vanguard in 1913. Realising this discrepancy exists has allowed me to look for new narratives of *Jeux* in my source materials, ideas that may be more relevant for us today, when art dance no longer subscribes to the melodramatic dance theatre aesthetic lauded by fans of the Symbolist pre-war Ballets Russes.

I have argued here that in an urban, modern and ordinary setting, the tennis players of *Jeux* became too much like the members of the audience. *Jeux* did not shock, it was altogether too familiar to be truly shocking. Its thematic similarity to topical variety stage entertainment, the 'meaningless' narrative, and the choreographer's insistence that this was supposed to be beautiful brought the work too close to the non-art of 'lowbrow' masses. For the Ballets Russes to remain harmless entertainment, this 'obscenity' of *Jeux* in a way had to go unseen – for the rest of the century.

But what, then, is the relevance of *Jeux* today? Why return to a past fantasy of a future that never was? Regardless of how aesthetically successful Nijinsky's formal inventions were – and of these, little can be said with any certainty based on the sources that remain – the themes of *Jeux* really are strikingly modern: sport and flirt would figure prominently in ballets of the 1920s. But 'doing justice' to a long-dead historical individual by claiming to know what they *really* meant, felt or thought has little place in academic discourse. On the contrary, history is always written in the present and for the present – and we are at liberty of choosing what to pick from what remains of the past. The narratives we use to construct our identities as heirs of a particular tradition of dance therefore have direct relevance in the present and for the future. *Jeux* illustrates how the current narrative about the Ballets Russes limits our interpretations to particular elitist stories of success and, in the case of Nijinsky in particular, of great personal tragedy. If history were this simple and straightforward, it would be extremely boring and irrelevant to the present.

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[53] Debussy apparently received 2/3 of the takings on *Faune* during 1912 and one half in 1913, and a similar arrangement was made with *Jeux*. Nectoux 1990, 41n22; Orledge 1985, 173.

On the other hand, it could be said that as a choreographic process, *Jeux* counterpoints *Faune*, which was composed to an existing music; and as John McGinness has shown, the notes in the manuscript of the work also reveal how many of the ideas appreciated as radical in the musical score derive from the demands of the stage action. However, concentrating solely on the choreographer's notes would ascertain the authorist view whereby the 'text' of dance is something singular and stable and composed by the choreographer. Although there is no denying the choreographer of *Jeux* thought in these terms – after all, he went as far as developing a notation system for *his Faune* – it is important for us to notice how this idea is itself something historically specific.

Rather than focus on what the author meant, I hope to suggest that the limits of our knowledge about past performances make possible more than they inhibit. What was written of dance works that did not fit the grand scheme of the canon and contemporary aesthetic – works that failed, for example – can open up the complexity of the past and point to similar variety of opinion in the present. *Jeux* is a particularly interesting case, because we still have to pay attention to what is allowed on stage and why, what is considered aesthetically appropriate for dance as an art form and by whom. Success and popularity are still very important in art: art that arouses the passions of the many is still more likely to be regarded as important and thus receive a place in the canon, although popularity *per se* is regarded irrelevant to canonisation. True, *Jeux* can remind us that innovative works are not always successful, but it can also serve as an example of a work remembered more for the sake of who its choreographer was than for the work's potential in the discourse of the art form. As such, works like *Jeux* can prompt us to rethink the possibilities of dance, of dance history and of our own genealogy as people in love with dance.

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