Georgia Patterson

A Globalized “Dionysian Orgy”

ABSTRACT

On May 29th of 1913, the collaborative efforts of composer Igor Stravinsky, choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky, and artist Nikolai Roerich came to a head with the Paris premiere of their ballet, *Le Sacre du printemps*. Little did they know, this premiere would set in motion countless renditions and reconstructions of the ballet all over the world. "What" exactly thrust this ballet into the limelight is unknown; was it the famous riots of the first showing? The contemporary movement vocabulary marking a shift on choreographic patterning? or the sheer spectacle of the subject of the ballet? The "what" is unclear, but how the ballet circulated and how *Le Sacre du printemps* was affected by globalization can be traced. Globalization has shaped *Le Sacre du printemps* and thrust it into the canon because of its effects on the ballet's subject matter, movement vocabulary, and setting. By tracking four versions of this famous ballet, the infamous premiere choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky in 1913, Mary Wigman's construction in 1957, Pina Bausch's performance in 1975, and Martha Graham's premiere in 1984, and comparing the four versions, we can unearth how globalization has affected the ballet canon.

GLOBALIZATION

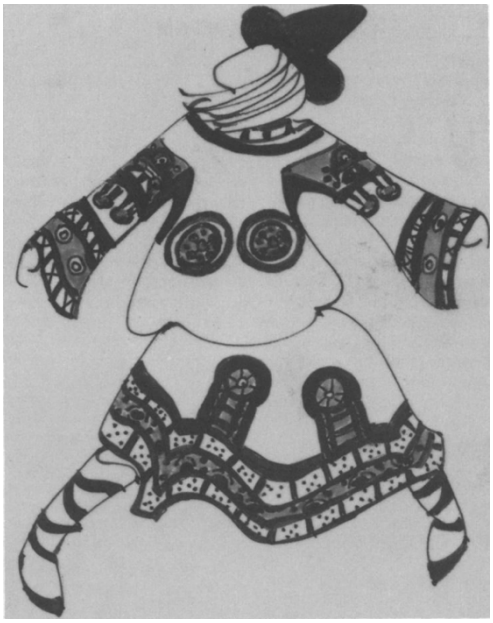
To explore how *Le Sacre du printemps* has evolved and changed in response to globalization, we must first understand globalization as a framework. For this study, I will be using J. McGregor Wise's analysis that globalization is not simply being aware of others in other parts of the world, "but there is a sense of simultaneity and interconnections, that events and decisions made in far-off places can have consequences for many others a world away" (29). Analyzing four versions

of *Le Sacre du printemps* can trace a global awareness from choreographer to choreographer, showcasing the ebbs and flows of artistic interest in tandem with each individual historic moment.

VASLAV NIJINSKY: 1913

As previously stated, on May 29th, 1913, the Russian choreographer and dancer Vaslav Nijinsky and his collaborators, composer Igor Stravinsky and artist Nikolai Roerich brought the Ballet Russe to the Theatre de Champs-Elysees in Paris for their debut ballet. This premiere would become a pivotal moment in the history of Modernism and a momentous shift in dance making on the concert stage. Nijinsky came to this ballet after years of training and many successful ballets already under his belt. He wanted to explore something new, or at least something new to ballet as it was in 1913. Nijinsky's choreographic method started with reimagining the posture and gesture of the dancer. Counter to previous concert ballet's, Nijinsky's dancers moved with an angularity that had not been shown on a Parisian stage ever before. Bent elbows, buckled knees, and turned in feet marked only three of Nijinsky's choreographic decisions. Nijinsky and his sister Nijinska devised a choreographic method that "freed the body of classical restrictions but channeled its energy through equally rigorous disciplines of design" (Hodson 11). Split into two acts, *L'Adoration de la Terre (The Kiss of the Earth)* and *Le Sacrifice (The Sacrifice);* the ballet tells a relatively straightforward narrative: a pagan ritual sacrifice of a virgin to the fertility god Yarilo to guarantee a good harvest (Weir 114).

Nikolai Roerich had a long-held interest in pre-Christian Russia, which influenced Nijinsky's choices, and Stravinsky drew his score from Russian folk music. Nijinsky and Roerich costumed dancers in brightly colored, patterned fabric that hung loose and heavy around the dancer's bodies. *(fig. 1)* The women in the work sported long, thick braids, and all the dancers wore big black hats. On closer inspection, this vision of an ancient Russian tribe bore a striking resemblance to Central Asian folk dances and traditional dress elements. Lucy Weir concludes that "the headwear was strikingly reminiscent of traditional Kyrgyz hats (known as kalpak); the fabric of the clothing similar in color and pattern to Uzbek dress; and braided hair was also a feature of classical Uzbek dance (Ferghana dance, in particular, tends to feature a special cap or 'crown' and long braids of hair)" (116). *(fig.2)* Set on an ancient Russian hillside, one can assume that this ritual depicted is based in reality; however, as scholars and researchers have searched for proof of this ritual's existence, they have come up empty-handed. There are loose traces to pagan Russia, visual sources from Uzbekistan, and Aztec rituals. It appears that Nijinsky had no interest in the authenticity of the source material, but in the meanings, a "primitive" ritual sacrifice, and the meaning it evoked in a modern context.



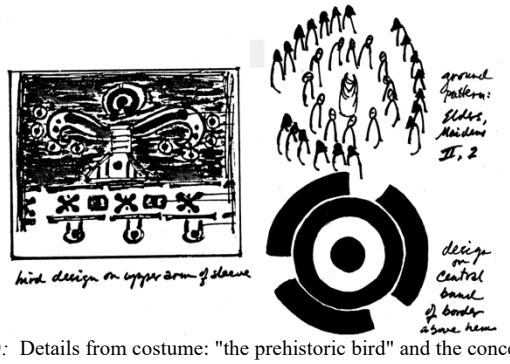
(fig.1): Costume by Nicholas Roerich for Young Man in Sacre

(fig.2): Zhulitska, Ramberg, Zhezherska, Boni, Boniecka, Faithfull as maidens in Le Scare, 1913

Unfortunately, the debut of their hard work wasn't exactly what they expected. Contrary to previous ballets in which the music and movement align in perfect harmony, putting the audience into a state of dreamlike wonder, *Le Sacre* creates a fragmented and uneasy environment in its delivery. The score is far more aggressive, and stranger than its predecessors, and the movement directly contradicts that before it. The choreography trades traditional beauty standards for individual artistic expression, taking the once graceful ballerina and turning her into a mover focused on patterning and geometric shape rather than elegance and beauty. Nijinsky severed ties with the old form of ballet, and to be frank, the Parisian audience was not having it. Riots broke out before the curtain even opened. Whether it was the music, the sacrilegious plot, the set and costumes, or the movement itself that upset people, audience members were deeply disturbed. The music was dismissed as just noise, and the dance was seen as such a disgrace to ballet because of its divergence from the classical. The enraged audience became just as much of a part of the show as the actual performance. It is claimed that riots roared so loudly, drowning out Stravinsky's score, and forced Nijinsky to stand on a chair in the wings shouting counts at his dancers (115). However, it is interesting to note that there was growing anxiety over France's slow descent in world hierarchy and Germany's growth in power in 1913. *Le Sacre* became a symbol of lost morality and violence to come. During the July Crisis, nearly a year later, the French critic Maurice Dupont called *Le Sacre* a "Dionysian orgy dreamed of by Nietzsche and called forth by his prophetic wish to be the beacon of a world hurtling towards death." During this time, throughout Europe and particularly Germany, the birthplace of Friedrich Nietzsche, Nietzsche's ideas about the destruction of modern society through a violent rebirthing period to create a new, better life were bubbling to the surface. The first World War began a little over a year after the ballet premiered, which only showcases these

destructive attitudes fleshed out. This desire for a violent rebirth is apparent in four versions of the ballet in this study, but Nijinsky's is the only version here that violence was enacted by the audience.

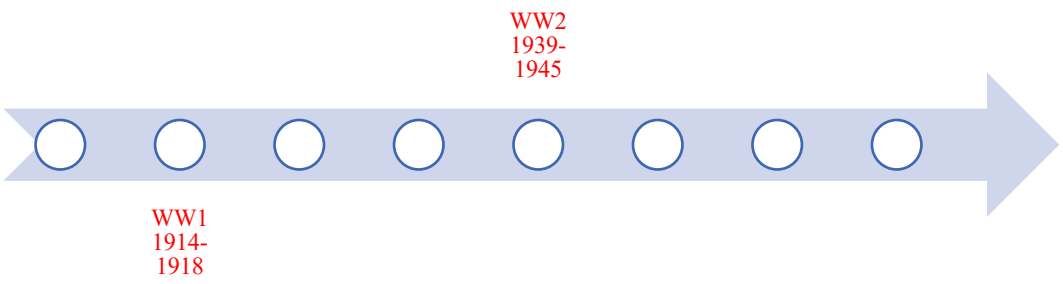
With his *Sacre,* Nijinsky chose to embrace notions of primitivism by forcing his classically trained dancers to embody an almost pedestrian form of movement. Inverted toes, stamping, jumping, and circular patterning (as seen in ritual dance) filled Nijinsky's work. *(fig.3)* Nijinsky's appropriation of other cultural dances and potential rituals displays a pivotal moment in the global art scene. Nijinsky has now been crowned "the father of modern dance" in that he was the first choreographer to put inverted foot positioning on the Western stage. However, did he really invent anything new? Noël Carrol argues that most early modern dance "looked to the choreography of other cultures as a way to liberate and to distinguish itself from the dominant tradition of ballet" (Carrol 134). Thus, in analyzing the ballet subject matter combined with the setting (a ritual constructed by Nijinsky set on an ancient Russian hillside), appropriated costuming, (traces to Uzbek folk dance), and a "new" movement vocabulary, not to mention the historical moment, Nijinsky's Sacre was the embodiment of a globalized ballet. It would be this very complex ballet that would be re-envisioned for years to come.



(fig.3): Details from costume: "the prehistoric bird" and the concentric circles. Ground pattern: Act I, Scene 2

MARY WIGMAN: 1957

Mary Wigman, born Carolyne Sofie Marie Wiegmann in 1886, was the eldest child of a solidly middle-class Hanover family, coming to dance in her early twenties. After training in the Eurhythmics method, she sought to develop a technique of her own, one distinctly against the classical ballet tradition. Her dances were typically performed to spoken word or silence, emphasizing the dancer's improvisation and freedom from traditional constraints (Weir 118). While Wigman would not have seen Nijinsky's *Sacre,* she would have been familiar with Stravinsky's score and the ballet's original reviews, keeping in mind that there were many re-imaginings of the ballet by 1957. (*fig.4)*



(fig.4): Timeline of world wars and ballets referenced

By then, Wigman had become very interested in ritual, exploring repetition, and flocking on the stage quite heavily (two markers of Wigman's own conceived ritual). However, it was not until after WW2 that Wigman decided to set her own version of the ballet. During the Third Reich, Stravinsky's score was banned altogether and labeled as "Modernist" and "primitivist," not to mention setting a ballet in which the subject matter is human sacrifice in a time where so many lives were already being sacrificed, for anyone who dared acknowledge the "barbarism of the ideology's modus operandi was dropped and disgraced" (Weir 119).

Thus, in 1957 Wigman and her dancers premiered her *Le Sacre du printemps* in Berlin. Like Nijinsky's, her choreography was sharp and angular, with flexed hands and feet scattered throughout. Unlike Nijinsky's, her *Sacre* alluded to no real point in time, a trend of post-war choreography. Her ritual was set in an abstract world yet maintained the circular patterning Nijinsky and Roerich had constructed. The constant shifts between clockwise and counterclockwise rotations created a hypnotic effect, illuding to ritual in that way. Again, like Nijinsky's, there was not any genuine interest in grounding the ritual in reality. Wigman made no effort to trace this story to the source; instead, she embraced the ambiguity and depicted ritual as an abstract idea structured within the plot Nijinsky presented. However, she did look to pan-Islamic culture for costuming, as would have been popular at the time, as there was a growing interest in Western Europe in the Middle and the Far East. She, like Nijinsky, took inspiration from Uzbek folk dances, and designed costumes accordingly. Like Nijinsky's, Wigman's Chosen One (the virgin) wore a red dress. Wigman had the rest of her dancers in rather minimalist costuming compared to Roerich's bright patterns, but similarities are still there. *(fig.5)* Instead of long thick braids, Wigman had her female dancers crowned in headdresses with long pieces of fabric hanging down, resembling said braids (121). Overall, Wigman's ballet was far less overtly violent than Nijinsky's. While the Chosen One was still bound and chosen against her will, Wigman's chosen one was sacrificed in an almost heroic act of self-sacrifice. In analyzing Wigman's *Le Sacre du printemps* as a whole, an abstracted ritual

(fig.5): Restaging of Wigman 2014

sacrifice set in an abstract world (a clean slate after WW2), appropriated costuming (Like Nijinsky's), and the further exploration of contemporary movement, Wigman took on the challenge of *Sacre* as a ballet filled with globalized effects and made it her own in her own time.

PINA BAUSCH: 1975

The famous German choreographer, Pina Bausch, premiered her re-imagining of *Le Sacre du printmeps* to conclude a trilogy of dances; Wind von West ('Wind from the West') and Der zweite Frühling ('The Second Spring) in 1975 (Weir 126). The most notable difference in Bausch's *Sacre* from her predecessors is the setting in which Bausch's ritual takes place. Drawing upon Lester Horton's version of *Sacre* (1937), set in the Western United States and drawn from Native dances, Bausch embraced the wild terrain, covering her stage with dirt. In doing this, Bausch placed the dancers in a sort of apocalyptic wasteland. As they performed, much closer to the audience than ever before, the dancers grew exhausted in the choreography, thus breathing hard and sweating. By the end of the dance, audience members were witnessing a mass of muddy, depleted bodies in an almost frenzied ritual, really creating a sense of Bausch's conception of "primitive" (126).

Bausch's Chosen One wore a red mesh shift dress, and the rest of the women on stage wore nude; the men were bare-chested. With all the dancers' bodies on full display, Bausch brought sex and gender to the forefront of her ballet. *(fig. 6)* While the ballet has always been gendered, as most ballets are, this *Sacre* "became a frightening ritual of male dominance which turned the culminating fertility dance into a predatory and terrifying form of erotic warfare" (127).

As the dancers coupled and uncoupled, jumped, and stomped, in never a never-ending cycle causing exhaustion in the mass, it felt almost as if there was some kind of outside force controlling the group, "almost akin to mass possession" (126). As the dance came to a close, the dancers' costumes soiled with sweat and mud, "the overall appearance of the massed performers began to resemble a group of concentration camp inmates" (130).

(fig.6): Restaging of Bausch 2012

Overall, Bausch's *Scare* depicted an almost inhuman affair. Animalistic, unremitting repetitions consumed the choreography (Price 325). Bausch's depiction of fear and death was in direct contrast to her predecessor Mary Wigman. While both women were German or at least identified as such, but they came from different generations, grappling with the fallout of postwar Germany in their own ways. Bausch was of the generation that questioned the generation before her, accusing (whether explicitly or implicitly) of collusion and sympathy with fascism. Wigman was of that generation accused (131). In looking at the two women's ballets side by side, Wigman's seems calm and almost celebratory, while Bausch's work is fueled by rage and urgency. Like Wigman and Nijinsky before her, Bausch was inspired by her conception of "primitivism." While Nijinsky constructed his idea through appropriation, and Wigman followed suit, Bausch embraced a new idea, depicting people as animals if left to their own

devices, as was showcased in Nazi and postwar Germany, thus premiering a ballet globalized in a new way. *(fig.7)*

(fig.7): Restaging of Bausch 2012

MARTHA GRAHAM: 1984

Martha Graham, the famous American choreographer, premiered her version of *Le Sacre du printemps* in New York in 1984. After spending her career devising a new modern dance method, combining the classical principles of ballet with floor exercises designed to promote elongation and spirals through the spine, Graham decided to make her own version of the infamous ballet. Graham's *Sacre* would be the last of her complete choreographies. Graham herself had performed the role of the Chosen One in Lèonide Massine's version in 1930, so revisiting this work felt like the end of a chapter for Graham. *(fig.3)* Her premiere at New York State Theater was an incredible success. Anna Kisselgoff, in her New York Times review of the premiere, praised Graham claiming it was "a treatment of Stravinsky's score unlike any other" (2).

Graham's *Scare* was relatively calm compared to the other three, resembling Wigman's more than Bausch's or Nijinsky's. While the underlying ritual still made the ballet a rather unsettling work, the violence depicted in Bausch's and Nijinsky's was subdued. Like all of her predecessors, Graham embraced contemporary choreography, exploring flexed feet, inverted

positions, and lots and lots of repetition. However, counter to previous works, Graham played with time to create an uneasy atmosphere, with long moments of minimal movement paired with the frenzy of Stravinsky's original score (Weir 138). While Nijinsky set his work on an ancient Russian hillside, and the two German chorographers embraced an abstract setting in their exploration of postwar Germany, Graham set her ballet a little closer to home. Again, drawing from Lester Horton's ballet in 1937, Graham set her ballet in an abstract world with appropriated imagery from Native American cultures. (*fig. 8)* Graham drew her inspiration from a constructed ritual of pre-invaded and colonized Native American cultures that, like Nijinsky's ritual, had no basis (139), thus reinforcing the effects of globalization on the ballet.

(fig.8): Restaging of Graham 2018

CONCLUSION

From Vaslav Nijinsky's premiere in 1913 to Martha Graham's premiere in 1984, there have been numerous versions of the infamous ballet, all embracing conceptions of ritual in their own way. Because of globalization, this ballet has transformed and evolved from choreographer to choreographer, taking a new shape a meaning each time. The very notion of putting rituals (no matter their origin) and calling it ballet challenged audiences worldwide. Globalization has shaped *Le Sacre du printemps* and thrust it into the canon because of its effects on the ballet's subject matter, movement vocabulary, and setting. In analyzing these four versions of *Sacre,* we can trace a global awareness from choreographer to choreographer, showcasing the ebbs and flows of artistic interest in tandem with each individual historic moment. Back to

Wise's summary of globalization, each of the four choreographers was very aware of other constructions of the ballet and embraced their differences given each historical moment, making the timeline of this ballet not a timeline, but a complex web or origin stories and inspiration.

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