MICHELLE DUFFY AND PAUL ATKINSON

Unnatural Movements: Modernism's Shaping of Intimate Relations in Stravinsky's Le Sacre du Printemps

Introduction

The emotions aroused in response to the 1913 premiere of *Le sacre du printemps* are well recorded. The complex percussive and rhythmic elements of Igor Stravinsky's score and their embodiment in Vaslav Nijinsky's angular and earth-bound choreography were received by hisses and catcalls so loud the members of the orchestra could not hear one another, and nor could members of the ballet corps hear the orchestra and remain in sync. While such responses could be attributed to the shock of the new—that is, the shock of a dance that did not conform to expectations of what constitutes a traditional (romantic) balletic performance—this paper suggests that this reaction is also attributable to the ballet's modernist aesthetic. This aesthetic created affective movements that constituted a new form of absolute dance, one that focuses on the body as the source of dramatic tension, and moves beyond ballet's traditional representation of emotional and narrative content. We suggest that in Nijinsky's realisation of the ballet there is an affective relationship in the movement of bodies that exceeds the representational and programmatic structure of the work as well as the assumed boundaries of the dancers' bodies.

Much of the notoriety of the premiere can be attributed to the choreography, for Stravinsky's music was well received in subsequent musical performances and there was certainly no uproar at the revival of the work in Paris in 1920 with new choreography by Léonide Massine (the principal choreographer for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes between 1915 and 1921). Despite its reputation, Nijinsky's choreography was only performed seven times and what was known of the ballet throughout most of the twentieth century largely came from eyewitness accounts and publicity photographs, none of which depicted the

arrangement of dancers on the stage.[1] The actual performance has only recently become accessible due to the reconstruction by Millicent Hodson,[2] performed by the Joffrey Ballet in 1987, which used the notes appended to the score by Nijinsky's assistant Marie Rambert.[3] The choreography's modernist aesthetic marked a significant break with the tenets of romantic ballet but also with the much more expressive choreography of Mikhail Fokine who had made a significant contribution to the success of the Ballets Russes.

The ballet's modernist aesthetic also presented new ways of thinking about the affective relationship between the movement of music and the movement of the body, and more specifically how the dancing body is constituted as a means to represent and communicate emotional and affective ideas. The dancing body is simultaneously embedded within an affective and aesthetic network—of dancer, choreographer, composer, audience member—as well as the material conditions of the performance; that is, the physicality of the dancers' bodies, the floor, stage, costume and the unfolding of the event through time. To understand this

---

[1] Lincoln Kirstein, *Nijinsky Dancing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 143.

[2] See *Rite of Spring*, perf. Joffrey Ballet, chor. Vaslav Nijinsky and Millicent Hodson (1987): www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF1OQkHybEQ&feature=related; and *Stravinsky and the Ballets Russes: The Firebird/Le Sacre du Printemps*, perf. Mariinsky Orchestra and Ballet (2009 dvd).

[3] Peter Hill, *Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000), 106. There have been critiques of Hodson's reconstruction of this work, particularly with regards to how the movement of dance can be inferred from static archives; see, for instance, Joan Acocella, "The Lost Nijinsky: Is it Possible to Reconstruct a Forgotten Ballet?" *The New Yorker*, 7 May 2001: www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/05/07/010507crda_dancing; accessed 30 July 2012. Hanna Järvinen critiques such formalist approaches to dance, arguing that "dance is no more ephemeral than any human action and it leaves the same kinds of traces in the archive that are habitually used in the writing of so-called new histories"; see "Performance and Historiography: The Problem of History in Dance Studies," in *History in Words and Images*, ed. Hannu Salmi (Turku: University of Turku, Department of History, 2005), 141. In addition, some musicologists have noted that the score used in 1913 differs considerably from standard versions used today, including different orchestrations of key moments, and that individual conductors will respond to tempo and expression in different ways, hence raising further issues with regards to Hodson's reconstruction; see Robert Fink, "'Rigoroso (♪ = 126)': *The Rite of Spring* and the Forging of a Modernist Performing Style," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52.2 (1999): 299-362.

requires reference to the historical context of *Le sacre* and its radical modernism, as well as the particular artistic sensibility of Nijinsky and his contribution to the shift in the aesthetic of dance away from a narrative characterisation of interior states to the exploration of movement as a thing in itself. The close reading of the affective networks of (Hodson's 1987 reconstructed) *Le sacre* and Nijinsky's idiosyncratic balletic language—of constraint, tension, restriction and strain—is fundamental to understanding how modernist dance came to develop a non-individualised affective dimension. It also raises questions as to the manner in which affect is localised in dance. Should we look for the expression of affect in the gestures, signs and movements from which we can infer a virtual movement of affect? If so, how do we move from the seen (the choreography) to the affectual unseen?

Romantic and Modern Ballet

As with other movements in the avant-garde, modern ballet was characterised by a break with the principles of romanticism, which had reached its apotheosis in Russia in the middle to late nineteenth century when many of the most famous works, such as *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker,* were choreographed by the Frenchman Marius Petipa at the Maryinsky theatre.[4] This is a period in which the ballerina became the principal focus of the performance, and there was a consequent decrease in the quality of male parts—in many productions, the male dancers served as little more than supports for the ballerinas in their virtuosic displays—and the loss of male leads, which were increasingly played by women.[5] In Petipa's work, there was a controlled gracefulness to the performances that:

> combines finesse with technical virtuosity. A delicate use of torsion in the body—the opposition between shoulder and leg called *épaulement*—large, clear gestures alternating with tiny, swift footwork, fully rounded arms, and jumps that cut through space.[6]

[4] Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 37.

[5] Kirstein, *Nijinsky*, 20.

[6] Reynolds and McCormick, *No Fixed Points*, 37.

By the end of the nineteenth century, ballet had lost much of its artistic credibility in most of Europe. Even in Russia, where interest was highest, ballet was predominantly organised around formulaic dances that appealed to audiences due to their familiarity rather than developed according to clear artistic or expressive principles.[7] The plots were often awkward and overly long, with standardised costumes that did not necessarily suit the story being told.[8] The arrival of modernism was not just a break with romanticism, but a break with a particular type of romanticism in ballet—where the refinement of movement and the use of convention lessened the dramatic import of the narrative—an aesthetic that was clearly already in decline. The interpolation of modernist ideas reinvigorated ballet in Western Europe and began the process of establishing dance as an artform comparable to music and painting. Indeed, it was the modernist aesthetic of the Ballets Russes that significantly increased the popularity of ballet in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century and this contrasted with the reception of modernism in the other arts, particularly music.

Much of the success of the Ballets Russes can be attributed to the impresario Diaghilev, not an artist in any strict sense, but someone who was able to bring together Russian composers, set designers and artists in his productions, and also create a space in which "virile male dancing" became a part of ballet.[9] One of the most important choreographers that Diaghilev brought to the West was Mikhail Fokine.[10] Fokine strove to create a new type of ballet that differentiated itself from nineteenth-century Russian romanticism, but which, in doing so, acquired some of the characteristics of romanticism in the other arts. These included naturalism in movement and the application of the principles of Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*.[11] Fokine wanted the dances, costumes and gestures to closely correspond to the plot, which meant not including stock dances, classical positions and virtuosic expressions that were such key features of ballet at this time.[12] He also developed a form of expressivity that involved the "whole

[7] Kirstein, *Nijinsky*, 20-21.

[8] Reynolds and McCormick, *No Fixed Points*, 37.

[9] Reynolds and McCormick, *No Fixed Points*, 34.

[10] He was also known as Michel Fokine after his arrival in France.

[11] Kirstein, *Nijinsky*, 30.

[12] Reynolds and McCormick, *No Fixed Points*, 38, 49.

body" or was spread across a group of dancers rather than the type of expressivity that is limited to the hands and face of the individual dancer.[13] In restricting expression to the face, romantic ballet disconnects the various moods of the character, and the associated narrative function, from virtuosic displays of bodily movement and physical ornamentation. There is a formalism to romantic ballet that precludes any emotional or affective evaluation of many of the standard movements, for it makes no more sense to ask what emotion is invoked by a *fouetté* or an *entrechat* than to enquire as to the emotional meaning of an isolated trill in music.

In exploring the expressive potential of the whole body, Fokine's choreography marks one step towards modernism's relocalisation and differentiation of affect and emotion in the corporeality of movement. However, the popularity of Fokine's work within the Ballets Russes was not strictly attributable to these broad aesthetic principles. There was also the development of primitivism in the form of pagan activities, barbarism, warrior-inspired and erotic dances all of which were "calculated to inspire in the spiritually depleted Parisians a reverence for the naive primitivism of the untamed Russian soul."[14] Fokine's most successful ballet with the Ballets Russes was *Schéhérazade*, which employed the rich colours of the Middle East, included orgy scenes and even culminated in an orgiastic climax.[15] Nijinsky performed the lead in this 1910 production and his performance was celebrated for its erotic qualities, but Fokine also remarked on the animalistic movements that infused the whole of Nijinsky's body.[16] This reference to animalism is noteworthy because it describes a type of expression, and the term is used broadly here, in which the body and the mind cannot be easily separated. The interior and the exterior are always interwoven because what is known of animalistic feeling is only evinced in the animal's behaviour rather than through an articulation of the contents of consciousness.

It is in this context that Nijinsky's work must be placed, for he was trained at the Maryinsky theatre, the centre of Russian romantic ballet, and enjoyed his greatest

[13] Kirstein, *Nijinsky*, 29.

[14] Kirstein, *Nijinsky*, 48.

[15] Reynolds and McCormick, *No Fixed Points*, 51.

[16] Kirstein, *Nijinsky*, 99.

success as a dancer while at the Ballets Russes, in particular in Fokine's productions. In many respects, *Le Sacre* is both a response to and a product of these influences, although it was not his first choreographic work. He had already written and performed in *L'après-midi d'un faune* (1912) and *Jeux* (1913), both of which employed Claude Debussy's music even though the composer did not like the choreography.[17] In addition to Debussy's objection to the overt sexual themes, his response to this work may have been due to the creation of new types of movement that radically departed from both the works of the Ballets Russes, with its spectacular exoticism, and the broader tradition of romantic ballet. Joan Acocella states that in Nijinsky's ballets:

> The lovely, noble three-dimensional shapes of the academic ballet, the five positions of the legs and arms, the turned-out feet: all were gone. Under Nijinsky's direction, the dancers moved in profile, slicing the air like blades (*The Afternoon of a Faun*), or they hunched over, hammering their feet into the floorboards (*The Rite of Spring*). The approach was analytic, the look "ugly," the emotions discomforting. Of these works, only one, *The Afternoon of a Faun*, survives today, but it is enough to show that Nijinsky ushered ballet into modernism.[18]

Nijinsky, with his "analytic," "ugly," and "discomforting" "emotions" and movements, created a form of ballet in which the physicality of movement supplanted an aesthetic in which grace, lightness and flow had come to define the beautiful.

Jacques Rivière, in the most famous review of Nijinsky's *Le sacre* in 1913, praised the physicality of the dance and the fact that all the movements are clearly visible: "The work is presented whole and in its natural state; the parts are set before us completely raw, without anything that will aid in their digestion."[19] In this emphasis on clarity and the rawness of the work, Rivière argues that *Le*

[17] Joan Acocella, introduction to *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky: Unexpurgated Edition*, trans. Kyril FitzLyon, ed. Joan Acocella (London: Allen Lane, 1999), xiii.

[18] Acocella, introduction, xi.

[19] Jacques Rivière, "Le sacre du printemps," in *What is Dance?: Readings in Theory and Criticism*, ed. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 115-22 (115).

sacre is a riposte to the indistinct and blurred forms of the "Impressionists," and praises Nijinsky's work for having surpassed the "vagueness" of Mikhail Fokine's choreography.[20] Rivière bemoans Fokine's "arabesques" which purport to express an emotion but which, along with the indistinct movements that characterise his works, in effect dilute the emotional intensity.[21] In contrast, Rivière argues that Nijinsky brought the expression of emotion into the foreground with his clear and concise gestures:

> By breaking up movement and bringing it back to the simple gesture, Nijinsky caused expression to return to the dance. All the angles, all the breaks in his choreography, are aimed only at preventing the escape of emotion. The movement closes over the emotion; it arrests and contains it; by its perpetual change in direction, it deprives emotion of every outlet and imprisons it by its very brevity.[22]

For Rivière the problem with Fokine's choreography is that it diffuses the energy that is generated by the movement in the process of its embellishment, whereas the choreography in *Le Sacre* retains the energy by collecting and linking together "concise" movements that remain grounded in the body without recourse to artifice.[23] This argument is remarkably prescient, for it recognises in 1913 what was to become one of the principal features of modern dance: the containment of emotion in the physicality of the body. Unlike Fokine, who was drawing out the last breath of romanticism in ballet, as symbolists such as Gustave Moreau did in painting, Nijinsky was sketching out the first steps of modern dance with an analytical approach that can be likened to cubism, where the body and its movement is broken down into distinct planes and separated from natural or quotidian expression.

[20] Rivière, "Le sacre du printemps," 115, 117.

[21] Rivière, "Le sacre du printemps," 119.

[22] Rivière, "Le sacre du printemps," 120.

[23] Rivière, "Le sacre du printemps," 118-19.

The Desubjectification of Emotion in Modernism

Rivière's analysis highlights the importance of emotion in understanding the shift from romantic to modern ballet. In romantic ballet, emotion is extrinsic in the sense that it is directed away from the body, from the soul outwards, which is in part due to the focus in romantic narrative on the individual and their capacity for expression; often in the form of a tragic lead (for example *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*), who is constantly called on to clearly articulate emotional states. In most nineteenth-century ballets this emotion is displayed through the use of formal facial and bodily gestures. Later in the work of Fokine emotion is broadened to include the expressive gestures of the whole body as well as that of group dances. This advance in choreography can be explained through "expression theory," which Mark Franko argues has had a long history in dance, from fifteenth-century dance instruction through to modernism. In its simplest form "classical expression theory" describes how music invokes feeling in the "soul" and this impressed feeling is then outwardly expressed in the body's movement:

> The body is not responding directly to its own sensations of harmony but rather imitating those of the soul, which cannot move of itself. For classical expression theory, the body does not move in a way that could characterize its unique nature as a body.[24]

It is important that the soul is posited as an intermediary because the dancer not only expresses an emotion but must do so by linking the external form of music to an interior state before it is expressed in movement, that is, the broad affectual textures of the music are condensed into an anthropocentric notion of feeling that can be understood as emotion. Emotion is therefore grounded in the music and a conception of interiority that accompanies it; the body only has value in terms of its capacity to express this emotion. The development of expressivity in dance is therefore clearly tied to the development of the expressive or emotional range of music rather than in terms of the development of dance's own subject matter, the body in movement.[25] This explains to some degree the increase in the

[24] Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 76.

[25] This relationship between expression, music, and dance is considered by authors such as Franko to be integral to the long history of the medium and should be distinguished

expansiveness of movement from the baroque through the romantic period to the Russian late romanticism of Fokine's choreography.

If dance had followed this progression, one would expect that there would have been a heightening of emotional expression in the course of the twentieth century, however, modernist dance constituted a break with romanticism rather than a continuation of its principles. This does not mean that emotion would not play a role in modern dance, but rather that it would not take the form of a broadening of expressivity. Louis Horst, an important figure in the development of modern dance in the United States, argues that romanticism exhausted its aesthetic principles by the end of the nineteenth century and that modernism arose as a means of rethinking the role of art that comprised a rejection of romantic ideals of beauty:

> The moderns repudiated romantic formulae with violence. Bluntness was exulted, and the artist set out to demolish the existing prejudices about beauty and ugliness. Paint went onto canvas straight from the tube; music became more percussive; the dancer moved with a conscious awkwardness; writing grew more terse, more abrupt. The artist had recovered a primitive attitude.[26]

The cultivation of this "primitive attitude" is the means by which modern art could reject classical principles of beauty and its emphasis on "proportion and symmetry," but also provide the means by which to elicit raw "emotion" rather than the contrived modes of expression favoured by the romantics.[27] Underlying

---

from modernist expressionism and expressionist dance. Expressionism in painting had a German lineage that drew some inspiration from the philosophy of Nietzsche and sought to bring to the surface of the work the psychological state of the artist. The German dancer Mary Wigman adapted some of these ideas, in particular the making visible of discordant and subconscious emotions, through her association with artists from *Die Brücke* movement in what was referred to as "expressive dance" or *Ausdruckstanz*; see Mary Anne Santos Newhall, *Mary Wigman* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 16. However, it must be noted that not all practitioners of *Ausdruckstanz* actually work with or endorse expressionist principles.

[26] Louis Horst and Carroll Russell, *Modern Dance Forms in Relation to the Other Modern Arts* (San Francisco: Impulse, 1961), 53.

[27] Horst and Russell, *Modern Dance Forms*, 52.

this modernist approach is the belief that primitive cultures had direct access to the emotions unlike those in the Western tradition.[28] This approach also suited the Ballets Russes, which found its inspiration in a Russian cultural history that differed from Western Europe because it did not pass through the Renaissance and therefore did not have a "preoccupation with individual sensibility."[29] If the latter can be attributed to Russian romanticism, it may be due to the strong Francophile aspirations of the upper classes in Russian culture.

Modernism, however, is not restricted to an interest in the primitive for across the arts there was a reconsideration of the materials and structures of each medium. The arts sought an understanding of the material limits of expression rather than the invocation of ideas that transcend the canvas, paint, language, and, in the case of dance, the movement of the body. As Franko points out, modernism's aesthetic is of "the reduction of art to the essence of its own formal means."[30] Modernism's project of the 1920s, with its motion-process premise,[31] broke apart the relationship between emotion and expression such that it was the body's movement that was privileged rather than its capacity to convey meaning. This project was supported by primitivism in dance because

> Early twentieth-century primitivist choreography initiated claims to universal authenticity through purging subjectivism (emotion) and privileging the moving body's "presence" (expression). Thus, aesthetic modernism instituted a split between emotion and expression.[32]

This argument supports Horst's premise that primitivism marks a return to emotion, because the emotion that Horst refers to is "raw" and not mediated by the constraints of romantic aesthetics nor, one would expect, by subjective states or individual sensibility. The rawness of emotion derives from the fact that it is of the body and grounded in the very substance of dance, that is, in muscular

---

[28] Horst and Russell, *Modern Dance Forms*, 57.

[29] Kirstein, *Nijinsky*, 22.

[30] Franko, *Dancing Modernism*, x.

[31] See Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History*, (New York: Norton, 1948).

[32] Franko, *Dancing Modernism*, x.

movement.[33] It is only in this broader historical and cultural context that the relationship between Nijinsky's *Le sacre* and modernism can be truly understood.

Nijinsky's Modernist Aesthetics

If the story of *Le sacre du printemps* is removed from its choreographic context it could be quite easily described as a tragedy for it concerns a young girl who is chosen by her community as a sacrifice to the earth and must dance to her death. If the narrative were situated in romanticism, one would expect that the narrative would focus on the changes in her emotional state as she battles her fate. However Jacques Rivière states that it was the first main balletic work of "desubjectified emotion," a form of absolute dance that tore emotion from its expression.[34] In *Le sacre* the emotional states of characters are not presented to the audience through either facial expression or the individuation of expressive movement and therefore it is difficult to apply terms such as angry, sad, or upset to describe them. According to Kirstein, this can, to a certain extent, be explained through reference to Nijinsky's artistic sensibility, for he was described by many of his colleagues as lacking in affect and indeed lacking in personality. His incapacity, or unwillingness, to project an individual personality onto his works meant that he was able to extract "gestural movement to delineate something telling and inherent in human nature, past all personalism."[35] If Kirstein's argument is accepted, then Nijinsky's personality, or indeed lack of it, is aligned with a tendency in modernism, highlighted by Clement Greenberg, that each medium should find its own mode of articulation through a process of abstraction. In dance the personality of the performer should be eschewed as

[33] When Horst refers to "emotion" in his treatise on modern dance, it is closer to our use of the term affect than it is to emotion. Emotion is cognitive insofar as it is the expression of particular emotional states whereas affect is non-cognitive because the artist/dancer is not representing an emotional state in the movement of their body, which means that they need not be fully aware of how their movement affects the audience. Importantly, affect does not require a relationship of expressivity because it is diffused throughout the whole artwork in the movement and discourse of dance and therefore the same affects do not necessarily bring about the same dance movements each time, rather the influence of affect on the body is constituted within that particular moment.

[34] Quoted in Franko, *Dancing Modernism*, x.

[35] Kirstein, *Nijinsky*, 16.

more attention is drawn to the very substance of dance, that is, the formal properties of bodily movement. For Nijinsky, there is an interest in the capacity of the body to invoke emotional states but without drawing upon principles extraneous to dance, such as appealing to an audience by provoking sympathy with the characters or through dramatic ideas such as pathos.

The other most important influence on the aesthetic form of the ballet with respect to emotion came from the philosophy of sound, rhythm and movement promoted by Emile Jaques-Dalcroze. Nijinsky's choreographic assistant, Marie Rambert, was a pupil of Dalcroze who recognized the importance of his work for dance, and one of the main reasons she was asked to assist in the preparation of *Le Sacre* was to bring some aspect of Dalcroze's principles to the production. Rambert and Nijinsky, in line with Dalcroze's teaching, sought to strip the ballet of expressive gesture and the overemphasis on theatricality including the facial expression of emotion.[36] Dalcroze's eurythmics was also important insofar as it "attempts to alleviate the performer's self-consciousness by minimizing the reaction time between musical stimulus and bodily response."[37] It is not a question of an individual dancer responding to the music and developing an emotional dialogue but rather of becoming coincident with its movement. This context explains why Rivière regarded Nijinsky's work as akin to a "scientific demonstration," where all the parts are revealed and there is no recourse to shadowy, veiled artifice. It also explains Rivière's belief that the emotional intensity of the work can be found in the "absolute precision" of Nijinsky's "choreographic machinery."[38] There is further desubjectivisation of emotion due to the utilisation of ritual dance. Nijinsky was familiar with Russian folk dances and would have drawn upon this knowledge for some of the rhythmic themes. Moreover, it is common in ritual to dance directly to the rhythm of the music,

[36] Kirstein, *Nijinsky*, 144.

[37] Marshall Cohen and Roger Copeland, "The Dance Medium," in *What is Dance?: Readings in Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1983), 103-111 (110). See, also, John McGinness, "Vaslav Nijinsky's Notes for *Jeux*," *The Musical Quarterly* 88.4 (2005): 556-89.

[38] Rivière, "Le sacre du printemps," 116-17.

where the following of the ostinato theme can lead to hypnotic states.[39] This is evident in the *Augurs of Spring* section where there is driving rhythm that *propels* both the audience and the dancers forward and where the insistence of the beat and the movement of bodies is representative of a primitive vital force. Peter Hill argues that the most successful aspect of Nijinsky's choreography was that he "understood the 'pitiless' quality of Stravinsky's music, moving the dancers in impersonal blocks."[40] It may seem odd to use the words "pitiless" or "impersonal" when describing emotional states but it suits the description of the particular type of emotion that marks the beginning of modern dance, where there is greater emphasis on the intensity of individual and collective movement than the depiction of subjective states.

Affect, Emotion, and Bodies

The difficulty with using the term emotion to describe *Le sacre du printemps* and the development of modern dance is that it is not easily disengaged from subjectivity or applied to physical movement. It is therefore worthwhile to distinguish between *affect*—in the way that it is used in the humanities—and emotion when analysing the intensive states of the dancing body. The word emotion can be restricted to psychological states such as anger, disappointment, resentment, and so on, that are at least partially contained by the subjectivity and consciousness of an individual. In dance these states can be deduced by the audience from gesture and facial expression and in this one can refer to the work of Silvan Tomkins, and indeed Charles Darwin, who sought emotional categorisation in similar outward expressions (although Tomkins would call these affective states). This is quite different to the analysis of affect, which in most contemporary accounts outside of the field of psychology can be understood as the bodily capacity to act and to be acted upon. In this ostensibly simple definition there is significant complexity, for it refers to a range of processes from the affected states of bodies, to the relaying of movement by individual bodies and the connection between bodies. Even so, the meaning of affect is further complicated by its association with terms such as emotion,

[39] See Millicent Hodson, "Ritual Design in the New Dance: Nijinsky's Choreographic Method," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 4.1 (1986): 63-77 (71-3).

[40] Hill, *Stravinsky*, 117.

feeling or sensation. Disciplinary accounts as to how affect acts (and is acted on) reflects its complexity; affects are biological, neurological, social and psychological.[41] As Teresa Brennan argues, affect and its transmission is not generated solely from within an individual, rather it is a social construction, even as its impact is biological and physical in effect.[42] Thus affect cannot be limited to the description of interior psychological states, for it resists localisation insofar as it is relational and integral to an "emergent and transforming experience."[43] It moves *between*, "as a vehicle connecting individuals to one another and the environment, […] connecting the mind or cognition to bodily processes."[44]

The importance of using the term affect with respect to dance is that it can encompass the complexity of the medium, where the choreography's affectual movements draw together music, bodies, stage and audience. The contrast with emotion is not only a difference of location (that is, the individual dancer's body compared to the integration of the audience with the performance) but also a fundamental qualitative difference; affect always involves a transcorporeal movement that both exceeds and yet incorporates the individual. This is not to propose that affect, during any one period of time, is the same for all participants, for there are specific differences in the constitution of the affect depending on perspective, body, position, and most importantly the relationship to becoming. The relationships that constitute affective movements are not contained by a body or group of bodies but pass *between and through* bodies. Within this set of relations, the dancing body is constituted as a means to represent and communicate both emotional states and affective processes, that is, to express meaning in dance *and* to have an impact upon other bodies (be that of other

---

[41] See Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, ed., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Elspeth Probyn, "Teaching Bodies: Affects in the Classroom," *Body & Society* 10.4 (2004): 21-43; Silvan Tomkins, "The Quest for Primary Motives: Biography and Autobiography of an Idea," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 41.2 (1981): 306-329.

[42] Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 19.

[43] Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2008), 176.

[44] Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 19.

dancers or the audience). In thinking through the relationship between the dancer's body and its affects, the term emotion can be considered one type of affectual relationship, a circuit of feeling within a broader circuit of affect. In relation to Nijinsky's choreography and the development of modernism in dance, there is a shift, if we are to turn to philosophical genealogy, that is analogous to the progression from Descartes's positing of a mechanical body animated by the soul to Spinoza's proposition that the body is coextensive with thought and is understood in terms of its capacity to act and be acted upon. In emphasizing the capacity of the body to feel without reference to a subjective centre, Nijinsky's influence on modern ballet marks a break from romantic ballet and ushers in a type of modernism in which feeling is dispersed through the body and across bodies and can best be understood as affect.

Angularity, Broken Rhythms, and the Circuits of Affect

Le sacre du printemps tells a story of the coming of spring, but its presentation is an unusual one in that the characters relinquish their individuality for their bodies, and the movements of these bodies come to represent the particular pulse, beat, and rhythm of the seasons.[45] There is some debate as to the origins of the story. Stravinsky claimed a fleeting vision of a pagan rite in which a young girl dances herself to death while completing *L'Oiseau de Feu* in 1910,[46] yet the artist Nicholas Roerich, who designed *Le Sacre*'s original scene, had already written a scenario when Stravinsky approached him in 1913.[47] Roerich, an expert on Slavic folklore, drew on a mythic narrative of a young maiden's sacrifice, interpreted as a marriage with Yarilo, the sun deity of pre-Christian Slavic tribes. As Millicent Hodson notes in her study for the reconstruction of Nijinsky's ballet, Roerich's archaeological knowledge made a significant contribution to the Diaghilev production, and in turn influenced Nijinsky's choreography.[48] The

[45] Although Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer argue that the choreography in Act 1, scene 7, *Dance of the Earth*, is composed of 44 simultaneous solos. See Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer, "Seven Days from Several Months at the Mariinsky" *Ballet Magazine* (July 2003): http://www.ballet.co.uk/magazines/yr_03/jun03/kirov_rite_diary.htm; accessed July 30, 2012.

[46] Hill, *Stravinsky*, 4.

[47] Millicent Hodson, "Nijinsky's Choreographic Method: Visual Sources from Roerich for *Le Sacre du printemps*," *Dance Research Journal* 18.2 (1986-1987): 7-15 (7).

[48] Hodson, "Visual Sources," 11.

work is in two parts—Part I *L'Adoration de la Terre* (Adoration of the Earth) and Part II *La Sacrifice* (The Sacrifice)—and the main theme is of the sacrifice made to ensure the return of spring to the world. What we are offered by Nijinsky is an account of spring that is about the renewal of the earth and the cycle of spring, but presented within a dance vocabulary of mostly restriction and constraint, a framework that emphasises affect and the impact this has on a body and minimises a dance language based on categorisations of emotion and associated body positions.

Typically we may think of spring in terms of growth, renewal and abandonment, and these themes are certainly present in the score and choreography, but Nijinsky offers a very different vision to the bucolic spring of late romanticism. Elements of Nijinsky's over-wrought vision of nature can be traced from the 1790s *Sturm und Drang* period through to late romanticism's emphasis on the emotions of apprehension, horror and terror, particularly when confronted by the sublime. These themes are very much present within Stravinsky's score, with the composer referring to the "eruption of rhythm": the "annual cycle of forces which are born again, and which fall again into the bosom of nature, is accomplished in its essential rhythms."[49] The influence of Dalcroze's theories on the relationship between movement and music, particularly that "music specifically composed for the ballet could be developed organically from the music, the stylistic base, and the idea," are integral to the choreography.[50] The dancers and the music combine in common rhythmic movements—broadly characterised as seasonal changes—that change in form and intensity, yet this relationship cannot be fully explained by expression theory because there is no mediation or tempering of the music by the soul or any other conception of an interior psychic state. *Le sacre*, more so than earlier ballets, focuses on group movement with the steps of the dancers incorporated into the percussive aspects of the score. The modernist aesthetic is grounded in shifts in the "eruption of rhythm" where the vital movement of the earth extends itself from low to high (as the earth pushes up through the bodies). Modernist dance located within primitivism is a means of extending balletic movement beyond emotional

[49] Igor Stravinsky, "Montjoie!" (1913), in Hill, *Stravinsky*, 93-5 (94, 95).

[50] Susan L. Hargrave, "Choreographic Innovations of Vaslav Nijinsky: Towards a Dance-Theater," PhD diss., Cornell University, 1980, 66-7.

affectation and in doing so reconnects the body with its physical and material foundations. Nijinsky's goal was to "remind the public of the fundamental relationship between humans and the earth."[51] The earthly aspect of the dance is evinced in the use of flat-footed steps (emphasising the connection of the body to the earth), the asymmetrical balance between upwards and downwards movements, which is confirmed in the score with the shifting of accents to the second beat of the bar. The accentuation of the earth, and movement that is grounded in points of contact, creates a condition in which the body functions as a node in the circulation of affective energy rather than a vehicle for the expression of emotion.

Nijinsky developed his choreography for the ballet through first placing himself in a fixed pose and then deriving a series of movements from it.[52] This reveals the influence of Isadora Duncan but also an interest in abstraction in the visual arts where Nijinsky sought to remove many of the distractions from dance, such as elaborate costumes and sequences that were extraneous to the main narrative.[53] The two dimensional aspects of *L'après midi d'un faune* are in part derived from an impulse in modernist dance to reproduce the forms displayed on ancient urns or in primitive art. This impulse can be found in the work of Ruth St Denis and Isadora Duncan—who Nijinsky saw perform—and to a lesser degree Fokine. This approach placed the dancers under much strain, and in the Joffrey Ballet's reconstruction it is noticeable in the way that the feet of the dancers are actually held and placed in a manner that constrains movement—for example, the men jump onto the outer edges of their feet while the girls are pigeon-toed. As Hodson and Archer note, Nijinsky's approach to choreography completely shifted the balletic technique with which dancers were familiar. Despite the reference to primitive themes and the natural rhythms of spring, the dancers'

[51] Carly DeMeo, "*Le sacre du printemps*: The Use of Human Movements to Advance the Dance World" (Research Paper, University of California, Irvine, 2011), 4: http://hcc.humanities.uci.edu/humcore/Student/UROP/S11/Carly%20DeMeo%20Research%20Paper.pdf; accessed August 1, 2012.

[52] Hodson notes that Nijinsky also developed his choreography from observing Roerich's archaeological documents and primitive Slavic paintings, as well as asking his sister, Bronislavah, who was originally given the role of the Chosen One, to "visualize certain Roerich paintings" (Hodson, "Visual Sources," 7).

[53] Hodson, "Nijinsky's Choreographic Method," 67-8.

steps and stances are often unfamiliar and "unnatural" and, in this, can be regarded as an early form of the analytical experimentation with the limits of the body that was to come to characterise modernism. In making the dance movements disjointed and constrained, Nijinsky defamiliarises the various components of everyday movement, that is, how we would normally expect to interact with the world and others; as artist Willem de Kooning tells us, "Nijinsky does just the opposite of what the body would naturally do."[54] Hodson argues that this unnatural movement of the body, the strain inherent in the dancer's moves, is what drives the "drama" of the ballet.[55] These "unnatural movements" are not contained by the dancers' experiences but affect the audience because we are attuned to conventional movement and can imagine the "drama" of the strain and tension through a process of bodily mirroring—we observe and feel the dancing body's constraints.

Nijinsky's choreography emphasizes "the value of primitivism as a reminder of man's essential nature" by focusing on action rather than emotion.[56] One way to consider this bodily movement is to think about it in terms of a basic tension that gives way to other tensions in the multiplication of affect. The tension in the stance of individual dancers extends outwards to become a tension in the collective movement of the groups and in the audience's perception of that movement. Tension is part of the very substance of corporeal movement in this dance, which is characterised by a change in intensity but without the qualities usually associated with emotion. Horst argues that the body is able to convey a sense of "intimacy" to its audience that is not available to the other arts because it is founded on the dancer's thoroughgoing understanding of the body's musculature:

> The pioneers in modern dance and their successors recaptured the relation that the primitive has to his body—an intimacy with the muscle tensions of daily movements which had been lost to modern men. This is not at all the ballet dancer's awareness of line, of speed or balance, and dramatic portrayal of a role. It is, rather, an inner sensitivity to every one of the

[54] Quoted in Hodson, "Nijinsky's Choreographic Method," 67.

[55] Hodson, "Nijinsky's Choreographic Method," 67.

[56] Hargrave, "Choreographic Innovations," 104.

> body's parts, to the power of its whole, and to the space in which it carves designs.[57]

Moreover, Horst claims that the emphasis on "tension" and "speed" are two of the factors that separate modern dance from earlier forms of ballet, which choose to hide such tension from the audience.[58] It is only the thorough exploration of the corporeal aspects of movement in tension and speed that modern dance can fully develop as an art in its own right, and in this return to the substance of movement there is also a shift from emotion to affect; a shift from accepted traditional forms of balletic gesture to the immediacy of response to bodily constraints.

While there is some differentiation of individuals within Nijinsky's choreography, such as the Sage, Old Woman, and the Chosen One, their story is not told over multiple scenes and the emphasis is on affective variation in the score's rhythms, which pass in and through these different bodies. The bodies induct the rhythms without reference to a soul's (or the interior state of a character) sensitive or emotional response to the music because the individual dancers are not attributed volition or even, for that matter, desire. The bodies are a means of moderating, amplifying and directing intensity through the different states of affecting and being affected. The use of restriction and constraint is noticeable in the dancers' movements and the way in which the Old Woman and the Sage hold their bodies in relation to the ground, indicating their differing affective roles. What is significant to the choreography is the use of these characters as a means of instigating and connecting circuits of affect, as we see in the first scene of Part I, *Augurs of Spring*. Here the men ritually pound the earth with their inward turning feet, "warming it, making it ready for the rays of the sun" as well as attempting to foretell the future by leaping over twigs.[59] They are exhorted to continue by the Old Woman, as she scuttles across the stage. The Old Woman's body position is very angular; her pivotal centre, while originating from the waist, is contorted with knees and toes bent in, head held at an angle, and her arms folded inwards at the elbow. Her movements are a distorted reflection of those of the other dancers, over-emphasised so that her body

[57] Horst and Russell, *Modern Dance Forms*, 17.

[58] Horst and Russell, *Modern Dance Forms*, 19.

[59] Hodson and Archer, "Seven Days."

appears grotesque; for example, in the way she rolls onto the ground or squats before leaving the stage. Her movements are important as they add an affective intensity insofar as they impel the men in the opening sequence to take on the rhythmic qualities of the music. The Old Woman's role is reiterated in her visual presence, for she connects the bodies of the other dancers to the earth through the diagonal her body forms between dancer and ground, a bodily gesture that draws attention to the relationship between high to low or low to high, depending on the direction of the angle.

The Old Woman's angularity and movement maintains tension within the dance and her performance is not individualised unlike those of the principal dancers in romantic ballets, whose outward gestural movements are often designed to directly appeal for applause from the audience or draw attention to the character's intention or emotional state. There are few expansive gestures in *Le sacre* and the dancers often move with their backs to the audience. This focus on the continuity of movement desubjectifies the dance, for any suggestion of an interior state soon evaporates as the dance evolves into repetitive and increasingly abstract movements. It is possible to argue that an audience member develops a sympathetic relationship with the action on stage but only in the sense that their body responds to the movement. Even so, this sympathy is one based on ritual repetition rather than grace. In *Le sacre* there are few graceful arcs or flowing rhythms, and flow from one movement to the next is often disrupted. [60] However, it is in the contraction and prevention of legato flow that the affectual intensity is amplified. This presages later modernist dance, including the work of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey who "experimented with formulaic repetition as a means of release: jumping in place, running in circles and spinning on an axis to transform energy states."[61] In this framework, the body is always an instigator of movement and through repetition there are not only changes in intensity but a consequent change in the quality of affect.

[60] However, defending Nijinsky's ballet in 1913, Rivière stated that "There is a grace here, one more profound than in *Spectre de la Rose*" (quoted in Hodson and Archer, "Seven Days").

[61] Millicent Hodson. "Ritual Design in the New Dance: Nijinsky's 'Le Sacre du Printemps'," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 3.2 (Summer, 1985): 35-45 (38-9).

The Old Woman's role is to bring all the dancing bodies into one coherent group, and while she dances on a different rhythmic figure to that of the young men, her movement across the stage (re)unites the dancing bodies. Therefore, in thinking of the Old Woman as the instigator of affective networks, Part I of *Le sacre* starts with this bodily and affective relationship to the ground/earth. When the Old Woman leaves the stage, this bodily and affective relationship continues in various ways (for example, there is a real heaviness of the bodies so much so that they collapse to the ground),[62] but woven within this is a different orientation introduced by the young women, who enter with a "lightness" and hence a different spatial orientation that is expressed through the use of extended legs and the quickening of the tempo. Indeed, the notion of affect cannot be separated from the perceived inertia and weight of the dancers' bodies and in this attention to the physicality of the body *Le sacre* is a key moment in the development of modernist dance.

Following the preparatory movements of the young women, the figure of the Sage is introduced, who, in contrast to the Old Woman, links the group to the sky. This is again established through a vertical movement where he first kisses the ground so as to release the forces of spring then directs the dancers' and the audience's attention upwards.[63] The way in which he enters possibly reflects his age (he is helped onto the stage by a group of priest figures) but could also be read as *his* lightness—his skyward focus could just lead to him drifting away. The appearance of the Sage occurs at a key point in the ballet when the "energy" generated by the earth and released by the Sage finds an outlet up through the dancers' bodies. The frenzied movements (and energy) that erupt just prior to his entrance, a frenzy that includes the young men fighting, needs to be rechanneled/refocused/realigned because it threatens the unity of the group. The Sage becomes the focus of the community's energy, and his role is to turn the group's attention away from the body-ground relationship to one joining the

[62] For a different approach to modernism and notions of lightness and heaviness, see Isabel Capeloa Gil, "Heaviness and the Modernist Aesthetics of Movement" (paper presented at the VI Congresso Nacional Associação Portuguesa de Literatura Comparada / X Colóquio de Outono Comemorativo das Vanguardas, Universidade do Minho, 2009/2010): http://ceh.ilch.uminho.pt/publicacoes/pub_Isabel_Capeloa_Gil.pdf; accessed August 1, 2012.

[63] Hodson and Archer, "Seven Days."

body to the sky. Hence, while the Old Woman activates the group's awareness of the vital energy of spring, the Sage channels this energy so as to return to/maintain group coherence.

Nijinsky's choreography emphasises verticality, achieved through the posture and grouping of the bodies, such that the eye is often directed down toward the feet and by extension to the ground, which is often accentuated by quick movements of the head and the rapid stamping of the dancers' feet. The line of movement, change or flow issues from the ground and often extends towards the sky, and thus accommodates the vital metaphors of springtime. Here the movement of life is *open*, an important feature of affect as proposed by Massumi, for nature is not separated from culture but passes in and through bodies in a process of continual affective variation.[64] To understand the affective dimensions of the performance cannot be separated from the asymmetries of the performance space—the movement from low to high is fundamentally different from that of low to high—and how this relates to the dancers' movements and positions. In short these affective movements must be understood in terms of the open and vital movements of seasonal change rather than contained in the existential dramas of any one individual even if such a drama should exist for the girl sacrificed.

Part II opens with the young women circling, facing outwards with their arms holding their heads at a tilted angle while moving on the edges of their feet. This alternates with a shift in head and hand position, as they continue circling while on their toes. The circle soon becomes a game of chance, in which the Chosen One is identified when she falls twice. Until this point, there is no way to distinguish one girl from another yet, once chosen, this young woman's bodily movements are no longer in sync with that of the group; she is marked out by the others, spun round within their circle until dizzy and then she remains completely still. The women respond to fate's choice through quite aggressive stamping movements that draw on that of the men in their earlier fighting scene, and this aggression serves to reinforce the music's duple rhythm at this point. Throughout all of this aggressive display, the Chosen One remains motionless—pigeon-toed, eyes down-cast, hands over her thighs—an inertia that lasts for approximately six

[64] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 11.

and a half minutes, as the women are joined by the men and shamans who all dance round her. Hence, it should not be assumed that affect is only related to the augmentation or diminution of rhythm for the act of standing still increases tension as the audience waits for, expects and prefigures the movement of the dancer.

This final section of *Le sacre* escalates the tensions and physical restrictions present in Part I. For example, the asymmetrical balance between upwards and downwards movements is now more closely located within individual bodies, as both men and women limp round the Chosen One, one step flat-footed, the other on the ball of the foot. There is now also one central focus—that of the Chosen One herself—and the entire ballet company concentrates its energies around her stilled body. This is in contrast to Part I of the ballet, in which different foci emerge at differing points as energy and its associated movements of affect travel round the dancers' bodies. One way of interpreting this scene is that the Chosen One absorbs the energies directed at her, a means to represent in dance the mythic idea of sacrifice. When the Chosen One eventually moves, it is within the circle of shamans who, having goaded her to move, limp to an exhausted kneeling position. At this point she leaps, wide-eyed and muscles tense, and much of her final dance emphasises this vertical movement. We can also see echoes of both the Old Woman and the Sage in these movements, yet she is not hindered by the bodily constraints they had, rather her body's intensified range of movement—in terms of vertical leaps, falling to the ground, as well as in the angles created between limbs, head and torso—reconnects earth and sky. However, as she continues her body is pushed to contain these extreme tensions, for we see the precision of her initial movements blur and she struggles to remain rhythmically attuned to the music. Her momentary pause, albeit one in which the body cannot relieve its tension for she is bent over and trembling, soon gives way due to the ponderous circling of all the men. She returns to her dance but is now beyond physical endurance; there is no release for her—and for the affective forces her body now holds—but exhaustion and the total inertia of death.

This dramatic point of the ballet is disturbing in its resolution because it describes nothing more than the exhaustion of intensity in ritual and affect without reference to the subjective states of the dancers. This is something

Nijinsky intended, for it was integral to his choreographic method, as Rivière explains:

> He works on [the dancers'] bodies with unpitying brutality as if they were things; he demands of them impossible movements and seemingly deformed poses. But this is done to tear from them all they can give in expression. And in the end they do speak. Out of all these bizarre and violated forms arises an indefinable clarity; they distinctly convey a thousand difficult and secret things which we have only to observe.[65]

In this conclusion the audience is not asked to sympathise with the character's fate, for the excessive tension initiated by the ritual simply ends when movement on the stage stops, but the movement of affect now shifts into the bodies of the audience. As one present at the 1913 performance remarked, "When, at last, [the Chosen Maiden] collapsed in simulation of death, the spectators showed the relaxation of the emotional tension produced in them by her dancing by giving involuntary sighs of relief."[66] Yet even more than a relaxation in the audience, for some critics and observers of *Le sacre* in 1913, the ways in which the choreography's network of affect circulated within and through the performance meant one could not do anything but riot given "the existence of kinaesthetic sympathy."[67] We as the audience are incorporated into the affective network initiated by Nijinsky's choreography, and this supports the approach to thinking about dance as operating within an affective dimension in that it moves away from the individual subject towards the affective gesture/movement circulating through the group.

Conclusion

The importance of using affect in the analysis of dance is that it assumes that there is a temporal unity in the work and in this sense can be compared to the analysis of music. The audience may watch the individual dancers on stage but

---

[65] Quoted in Janani C. Lee, "The Myth of *Le Sacre du Printemps*: A Study of Three Choreographers," Honours thesis, Wesleyan University, 2009, 18.

[66] Quoted in Hanna Järvinen, "Kinesthesia, Synesthesia and *Le Sacre du Printemps*: Responses to Dance Modernism," *Senses & Society* 1.1 (2006): 71-91 (79).

[67] Järvinen, "Kinesthesia," 79.

always with an eye to their connection in movement. The notion of ritual and primitivism is central in understanding Nijinsky's modernism because it assumes that all the participants are joined together in a rhythmic repetition before any breakdown into parts and this is what invokes the affective states—both within the ballet's unfolding and in the audience's reception of the ballet's physical movement. *Le sacre* is distinctive insofar as it was one of the first modernist ballets to truly fuse music and dance into a rhythmic whole and for most of the ballet the focus is on group movement. Consequently, affective variation cannot be attributed to individuals for in those few moments when a dancer separates from a group it is only for the purpose of amplifying and connecting other movements. In other words, these "individuals" serve as points of transition rather than figures of subjective or emotional depth. Even the key figure of the Chosen One who dances to her death does not bear with her any of the elements of tragedy. Her death is not mourned; she simply dies and the ballet ends. This is one of the clearest expressions of the modernist impulse in dance, where movement and the intensification of affect need no external justification and the only way for it to end is in (ritual) exhaustion. In this way, *Le sacre*, as Rivière points out, exemplifies early modernism in dance insofar as it privileges the moving body and the immediacy of its affective power.

Monash University