

Samm Wesler

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History and Philosophy

Final Triangle

Le Sacre Du Femme

Bronislava Nijinska, dancer and choreographer for the Ballet Russe, and her piece *Les Noces* has long been under represented in dance history. However, Nijinska's piece, frequently considered a sequel of some sorts to Vaslav Nijinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, may actually serve as a response to his piece, rejecting the patriarchal undertones and sexist treatment of the docile female seen in Nijinsky's piece, and representing the ritual of marriage as a ritual of female sacrifice.

German Tanztheatre choreographer Pina Bausch, and her take on the *Rite of Spring*, also shows a clear rejection of the ideals of marriage as a subjection of women.

Through the lens and usage of mimesis, one can place both Nijinska's *Les Noces* and Pina Bausch's *Rite of Spring* as allegories discussing the sacrifice of a woman and her livelihood through the ritual of marriage.

The intersection of mimesis and dance is vast and encompassing. Mimesis, with Greek roots stemming from Plato and Aristotle, is defined as the re-presentation of nature. It is not originally given a dance context, its origins lay with visual art. However, it is well established that dance follows in the footsteps of art, following its trends and structures. Dance has long been inspired by nature, as seen in the work of artists such as Isadora Duncan and Loie Fueller. Even

stripping mimesis of its literal nature connection, dance so frequently utilizes re-presentations of “natural” things; sex, love, betrayal, or marriage.

Mimesis provides a lens, or tool, through which choreographers are able to speak about literal issues, through a more abstract lens. This greatly impacts the performer-audience relationship. When content is not spoon fed to the viewer, there is active thought and processing that is required. This draws in the viewer to the issue or concept being spoken about through movement. By utilizing mimesis, choreographers are able to speak to ideals and ideas that the general public is familiar with, but repackage them in a format that is artistic and universal.

Feminism, particularly feminism through movement can also greatly benefit from utilizing mimesis. Belgian poet Luce Irigaray commented on women using mimesis saying, “ To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it (Desmond 102).”

Mimesis can allow for female artists to comment on issues of objectification, subjection, and the like but without claiming those as major factors in their identification. It is so common for women to be played as the victim, even within female generated work. We tend to try to speak about issues faced by the female community by trying to evoke sympathy for the female plight. This sometimes just reinforces the stereotype of women as weak, and unable to handle their own issues. However, with the utilization of mimesis, there is a strong encouragement to speak about the circumstances where women are put into the position to be victims, but then reject that title and substitute it with fight.

One of the clearest users of mimesis as a choreographic lens is Bronislava Nijinska, who created work that stood far beyond her time, a factor that may have led to under appreciation of work when it was created. Bronislava Nijinska was a dancer and choreographer for the much revered Ballet Russe, but was long overshadowed by the presence and work of her brother Vaslav Nijinsky. However, her piece *Les Noces* has developed fame and reputation of its own. *Les Noces*, or The Wedding is generally considered companion piece to Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring*, due to its dealings with Russian peasant folklore, and similar choreographic vernacular. However, if viewed through the lens of Nijinska as a protofeminist, *Les Noces* begins to feel more like a rebuttal. Nijinska appears to reject ritual of sacrifice as a normal aspect of society. She likens it to the ritual of marriage, and then fights against the treatment of women in both. *Les Noces* takes place in the same world, but is effective for its own reasons.

“The combination of Stravinsky's score, with its discordant choral and percussive effects, the sombre grey and browns of Goncharova's designs, and Nijinska's abstract choreographic interpretation of the customs of a rural community in ‘ancient Russia’ provided the harsh, primitivist coloring and stark emotional authenticity for a modernist interpretation of the marriage ritual(Jones 120).”

If one was to situate *Les Noces* in its historical place on the women's right canon, it falls within the same year as the Seneca Falls Convention, 1923, where the Equal Rights Amendment was introduced by Alice Paul. This Equal Rights Amendment asked not for more rights, but to

simply be put on the same level as men. The demands laid out by the women of the Seneca Falls Convention were not outrageous, yet this women were treated as criminals by society.

Many women struggled to accept that they deserved more rights. They had so long been taught by society to quietly accept their domestic roles. The patriarchy in America was overbearing, and was no better overseas. Women were beginning to take a stand and this influence is clear. Nijinska is making a case for the rights of females to have choice, whether that is voting or the choice to marry or not, and to a partner of their own choosing. 1923 represents a year of gained strength for women, and a push for consideration of equality(ERA).

Les Noces depicts the preparation, the ceremony, and the life of marriage but shows it as a ritual of reluctance. The women lose themselves in the ritual of braiding weaving in and out of each other on pointe, perhaps not with its traditional religious connotation but with a representation of women as fragile delicate beings, teetering on their respective pedestals. This braiding also serves as a preparation for the marriage, and perhaps as a representation of girlhood innocence.

Whilst this is occurring the bride seems to have resigned herself to marriage. Though not in a stereotypical fashion, this feels as though Nijinska is making a comment on the sacrifice of a women in marriage. There is no overtness to her message. In fact, one could potentially take this piece as a celebration of young marriage. We observe the respective wedding parties of the bride and groom, where the real allusions and use of mimesis lie within Nijinska's treatment of the bride, and the messages she is pushing through her overall choreographic structure. She showcases the innocence and naivety of young women, as if to prepare the audience for it's eventual dramatic loss.

By placing emphasis on the docility of these girls, she is placing them into roles as objects, to be traded and commodified. By utilizing the lens of mimesis, Nijinska is able to present the role of a woman in marriage, with an ever looming air of what waits the young woman after the ceremony. Nijinska states that she noticed the lack of agency awarded to a young girl in marriage.

“ I saw a dramatic quality in such wedding ceremonies of those times in the bride and groom since the choice is made by parents to whom they owe complete obedience...The young girl knows nothing at all about her future family nor what lies in store for her...the soul of the innocent is in disarray...from this understanding of the peasant wedding, and this interpretation of the feelings of the bride, and groom, my choreography was born. From the very beginning I had this vision of *Les Noces*(Banes). ”

Nijinska treats marriage as though the female is sacrificing her youth, her agency and her autonomy in order to appease society. There is an expectation for women to be silent, docile and compliant, despite their own wishes. By using choreography as her medium for the discussion of the role of young females in marriage, Nijinska is able to start a conversation in a non-hostile way. Audiences are unknowingly being exposed to way more than just a dance. There is vast and important social commentary being presented through a seemingly innocent package.

“ Nijinska applied a radically modernist treatment of dance vocabulary in her use of fragments or phrases of choreographic material, symbolic forms, and minimalist, two-dimensional choreographic effects, focusing on the idea of subsumption of individual identity to the will of a patriarchal community(Jones 120).”

Nijinska displays the use of mimesis through select choreographic elements such as the use of the “death mask.” This lack of facial expression is seen on all the dancers, yet feels especially unnerving on the face of the bride. It feels like a facial expression painted on along with her elaborate make-up, with a sick stillness to her gaze. The glazed over nature of the eyes, feels like a woman to whom life is being thrust upon. She has no agency within this. It feels like a woman who has resigned herself to a future she neither desired nor asked for. This is the physical expression of a reluctant bride; sentenced to a life she did not chose, sacrificing herself, shows more human nature than could be expressed by words.

Bronislava Nijinska’s protofeminist treatment of the ritual sacrifice of women in marriage laid the groundwork for future feminist choreographers to portray the consequences of the historical and current commodification of women. Nijinska began to present this work in a time of turmoil for women. In America one such choreographer was Pina Bausch. The influence of Nijinska on Bausch is clear. Without Nijinska’s choice to buck the normative roles of women in dance, there is no stance for future choreographers, including Bausch to develop.

German Tanztheatre choreographer Pina Bausch utilizes mimesis to showcase the struggles of women. “...the mimesis found in the work of...the german choreographer Pina Bausch is based on a principle of repetition or analogy which is not one of identical reproduction

or simple imitation (Desmond 101).” Bausch creates minimalist but powerful statements by creating abstract situations that we are all somehow aware of. “Bausch situates her mimetic portrayal of fear, despair, desire, and exploration in a context where time and space are constantly challenged (Desmond 103).”

Bausch created her own take on Nijinsky’s *Rite of Spring* in 1975. Her rite is aesthetically minimalist, but highly visceral.

“This is an intense modernist version of this iconic score, throwing a 1970s feminist “fuck you” to Nijinsky’s original(Abrams 50).”

Similarly to placing Nijinska’s piece in the women’s history canon, Bausch’s piece has clear historical context. 1975 was declared by the United Nations to be “Women’s Year.” This included a charter declaring that there would be a push for global human rights, without gender discrimination (UN). This echoes in the re-emergence of feminist choreographers, and female centric twists to pieces, exemplified by Bausch’s *Rite of Spring*.

This is potentially in reaction to the ideas suggested by Nijinska; that women do not have to go gently into that goodnight, there is maybe autonomy within sacrifice, there feels like there is an element of “taking one for team,” giving yourself over so others do not need to. Her dancers, women clad in white slips, men in simple pants, dance on dirt. They are eventually covered in it, staining themselves visually, and with the burden of sentencing a woman to death via sacrifice.

This literal mimesis that involves placing natural elements on stage, coupled with the mimesis of condemnation and isolation showcases the power resulting from incorporating mimesis with dance.

One of the strongest visual moments of this piece features the ensemble doing a repetitive phrase with gestural work whilst watching the chosen sacrifice dance herself to death. The lack of expression on their faces is similar to Nijinska's utilization of the death mask, but is coupled with more drama in the moving body. This shows the difference in what is happening in the dance community at the time. German Tanztheatre is exploring the boundaries between drama and subtlety, what is too much and what is not enough. The dancers hold clear tension and emotion with their bodies. They self flagellate, and contract as though they are in despair and not in control of what is occurring. The outside force of society's expectations in conflict with the ensemble's feelings creates a tension and anxiety. Coupled with Bausch's repetition, the result is heart wrenching. There is a strong sense of wanting to be able to remedy the situation, yet accepting that it is a necessary act.

There is a sense of martyrdom with the chosen woman, but yet a feeling that if it was not her it would be someone else. She is chosen, but not necessarily special. This is an interesting connotation to put upon the soloist. She is pushed into movement of despair, yet starts from the same emotional state as the rest of the ensemble. Whilst they stay the same, with some gradual growth of their emotional tension and state, she is forced to grow exponentially within a short amount of time. The initial core of the movement is ensemble work, wherein she does not stand out until later in the piece. Through the repetition of gesture we begin to see the essence of her body change, as she hits the ground, and heads toward the culmination of her sacrifice.

“Repetition is a favorite Bausch device. Certain actions are performed over and over, until— perhaps sped up and increasing in violence—they become ordeals (Jowitt).”

The whole piece feels like an ordeal, a heavy situation from which you do not walk away the same. The impact on the society is palpable.

Bausch introduces an element of romance and tenderness that is not seen in Nijinska's work. The dancers are treated less two dimensional, they are full fledged beings, capable of relating both to each other and to the world around them.

The relationship between men and women is complicated and rich; more than tribal elders pointing a condemning finger. As opposed to a decision handed down from, this feels like a societal vote, or perhaps more of a societal push. There is also an intimacy between these heteronormative couplings. There is a tenderness unexpected in a piece centering around the sacrifice of an innocent woman, who moments before was just part of the crowd. Couples fall to the dirt together, intertwined and intimate (Abrams).

Through Bausch's choice to have the chosen one change her garb to a red slip, there are inferences to loss of innocence and virginity. She is branded like a harlot in red, as though her slip is a scarlet letter, marking her as a physical representation of the sins of their community. She is the one who must give in order for the community to receive. It is interesting that something with pagan and archaic connotations has religious allusions as well. This ties in to the coital allusions of post marriage in *Les Noces*.

Post choice of the sacrificial lamb, as the ensemble dances in shame, pity, and perhaps celebration of their own escape; a man falls to the dirt face down, as his lover dances to her death. This is an element of natural humanism that we have not seen before; this is more than Nijinska's death mask acceptance, this is contentious objection.

The comments on the loss of autonomy for women in marriage are sadly timeless. There are still expectations for women even in contemporary America, to marry a man, take his name, cook his dinner, and bare his children. Women sacrifice so much in marriage, and not of choice but of expectation. For young girls to be taught, and then pushed into archaic ideals of femininity, shows the lack of growth within our gender expectations.

Two pieces, created over 50 years apart, boil down to the same essential bones. They are mimetic portrayals of the ritual sacrifice of women ordered by societal norms and ideals. By utilizing dance, Nijinska and Bausch are able to make connections between ritual sacrifice and marriage. Women are so frequently pushed into submissive roles, and not the ones that come with a consensual relationship, wherein their agency is compromised by the inherent need to comply with time and traditions have told them to expect.

Mimesis is a lens through which feminist choreographers can shine. It allows for room to speak about issues of autonomy, identity, sacrifice and societal exception without being overt or overdone. The use of allusion and analogy is so much more powerful than making the outright statement. This is exemplified through Nijinska's work, *Les Noces*, and Bausch's *Rite of Spring*.

- +Take out ERA
- + dig on russian women's rights
- + grammar, girl get you some
- + exchange rate of marriage
- + exchange between diagehliv
- + what is death mask
- + lack of expression that expresses so much
- + Use the Bausch article, through bausch we can see nijinskas
- + time/length of pieces, condensing of time and tradition
- + FIX YOUR WORKS CITED
- + traditional/classic format, not a traditional statement
- + used to enhance the statement
- + use of marriage plot, look at bane's language

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- + february 8th 1:30