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Esteban Buch

The Scandal at *Le Sacre*:

Games of distinction and dreams of barbarism

The Archives of the Préfecture de Police in Paris preserve the record of interventions by the forces of order in the face of "tumultuous manifestations," to borrow the vocabulary in use on the eve of the Great War. It is therefore disappointing to note the disappearance of file Cb.29.47 relating to the district police station of the Champs-Élysées between February 1913 and April 1914. This dossier would perhaps have allowed us to resolve one of the questions still open with regard to the first performance of *The Rite of Spring* on 29 May 1913 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, namely the role of the police themselves. In fact, this is not mentioned in any newspaper of the time, but several people close to the Ballets Russes later asserted that the police were called to re-establish order.¹ According to Thomas Kelly, this arrival of the police was never anything but a rumor or a desire, or even a pure fantasy.² And in his pioneering study on the first performance of *The Rite*, Truman Bullard is just as skeptical about the reality of this intervention.³

It cannot nevertheless be concluded from this that no representative of the forces of order was on the spot. Perhaps the witnesses exaggerated the role of the actual police, rather than invented imaginary ones. At the time, a police superintendant had to attend all performances at the main Parisian theatres, and police officers or uniformed republican guards would hold themselves at his orders in the foyer.⁴ This was the case here, if we are to believe the theatre manager, Gabriel Astruc: "That evening, in spite of the Guard, the corridor of the dress circle boxes had been taken over by fifty or so 'Young Russians' and Stravinsky extremists in *chapeaux mous*, yelling: 'Throw them out! Tarts of the faubourg!'"⁵

¹ Sergei L Grigoriev: *The Diaghilev Ballet 1909 - 1929* (London: Constable, 1953), p.83; Doris Monteux: *It's All in the Music: The Life and Work of Pierre Monteux* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1965), p.92.

² Thomas Forrest Kelly: *First Nights: Five Musical Premieres* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 292.

³ Truman Campbell Bullard: "The First Performance of Igor Stravinsky's 'Sacre du printemps'" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1971), Vol. 1, p.148n.

⁴ Règlement général du service ordinaire de la police dans la ville de Paris, 1887, Chapter II, Art 21-1, Archives of the Préfecture de Paris, Cote D824; and personal communication from Jean-Marc Berlière, 21 March 2012.

⁵ Gabriel Astruc: *Le Pavillon des fantômes : Souvenirs* [1930] (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2003),p. 371.

The question of the police goes to the heart of the *Rite* riot, since it is the issue of its categorization by the State in its role of guarantor of public order.⁶ Astruc's remarks reveal the powerlessness of the official machinery, and the political resonances of the event, even allowing for the fact that in 1929 his memory of 1913 is coloured by the presence of emigrés from the October Revolution grouped under this label "Young Russia." But in the absence of a police report, it is hard to know whether or not the confrontation between the opponents and the admirers of *The Rite*, which may suggest the confrontation on stage of the "jeu des cités rivales" in the first tableau of the work, was perceived by the State as a genuine threat to public order. The event, in any case, inspired a number of analogies of this kind, by one journalist deploring a performance which "practically degenerated into a political meeting,"⁷ of a kind at which at that time the candidates would confront one another verbally under the close eye of the police; or another invoking the disputes of parliamentary deputies: "Just as in the Chamber, there were interruptions, violent interpellations, between the public, guardian of choreographic and musical tradition, and the young modern school of composers."⁸

Now all this leaves no doubt in the mind of the Préfecture archivist: if dossier Cb.29.47 has disappeared, it is precisely because of the riot of 29 May 1913, thanks to a careless researcher or an avid collector. The disappearance of the record seems to him to flow naturally from the importance of the event. One can understand this reaction. For a century, the riot has pursued *The Rite* like a shadow, or like some strange alter ego. Between them they came to signify the end of the world of yesterday, the triumph of modernity, even the first fruits of the Great War or totalitarianism: "It turned out opportune that the century of abominations to come was thus symbolically consecrated by some such eulogy of barbarism in sound."⁹ Between them they were able to sum up, on a more technical level, the unstable alliance between music, dance and painting, made by the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* and unmade into the multiple fragments of the avant-garde. Or again to construct, together with Schoenberg's *Skandalkonzert* in Vienna a few weeks earlier, a scandalous double portico for the whole history of twentieth-century music.¹⁰

⁶ See Jean-Marc Berlière: "Du maintien de l'ordre républicain au maintien républicain de l'ordre? Réflexions sur la violence," *Genèses* 12 (1993), pp. 6–29.

⁷ Gustave Linor: "Au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Le Sacre du Printemps*," *Comoedia* (30 mai 1913).

⁸ N.N.: "La première du *Sacre du Printemps*," *Comoedia Illustré* (5 June 1913).

⁹ Dominique Jameux: "*Le sacre du printemps*: modernité, archaïsme," *Le Sacre du printemps de Nijinsky*, catalogue d'exposition (Paris: Cicero, 1990), pp. 25–33, quote on p.26.

¹⁰ See Esteban Buch: *Le Cas Schönberg: Naissance de l'avant-garde musicale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), and Hermann Danuser: „Abschaffendes Schaffen: Zur Poetik kreativer Zerstörung," in *Musiktheorie im Kontext: 5. Kongreß der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie Hamburg 2005*, ed. Jan Philipp Sprick, Reinhard Bahr, Michael von Troschke (Berlin: Weidler 2008), pp. 127–44.

From the learned study to the informal commentary, by way of scholarly books, record sleeve-notes, music criticisms and various other media in which the enjoyment of art intersects with its actual history, the shared background of the original riot insists on a discreetly jubilatory tone which invites the reader to look to his own virtue. Who does not feel, in fact, a retrospective desire to have been present? And who does not tell himself that he would that evening have been on the right side of history, that is in the camp of the applauders fascinated by a novelty of genius, rather than in that of the hissers repelled by a barbarous spectacle: the *Massacre du printemps*?¹¹

Faced with the reality of such fantasies, it is not very helpful to claim that the work's importance owes nothing to this story. Better to start by emphasizing that the episode, so famous, remains nonetheless poorly known. Richard Taruskin, judging it impossible to reconstruct, has pointed up the contradictions between important eye-witness accounts that tend to be reeled off as facts: while Marie Rambert, Nijinsky's assistant, relates that Maria Piltz's performance of the *Danse sacrale* marked the climax of the riot, Bronislava Nijinska, the choreographer's sister, explains that on the contrary that was the only moment of calm in the evening. Strangely enough, this leads Taruskin to deplore the "overdocumented" character of the event.¹² The contrary is true, that the available sources are insufficient to paint a complete and trustworthy picture of the event. Beyond, of course, the global and convergent description of a performance disrupted from start to finish by displays of hostility such as laughter, shouting, hoots, hissing, as much as by signs of approval, just as noisy, provided by another section of the public, including friends of the performers. And the general assertion that because of the racket in the auditorium it was very difficult to hear Stravinsky's music, and still harder to listen to it.

Plots and plotting

The story, though, was too good not to be written, which means to be marked out in time and space. In isolating the "*Danse sacrale*", Rambert and Nijinska agree at least in sketching a dramatic curve which, climaxing at the end, stays close to that of *The Rite* itself. For a minute-by-minute reconstruction, however, detailed evidence is not plentiful, still less the conclusions one can draw from it. Several witnesses note that the incidents began during the introduction,

¹¹ G[ustave] de Pawlowski: "Le Sacre du Printemps," *Comoedia* (31 May 1913), repr. in *Igor Stravinsky: Le Sacre du printemps: Dossier de presse*, ed. François Lesure (Geneva: Minkoff, 1980), pp. 18-20, quote on p. 20: "Ce ne fut pas le Sacre, mais Le massacre du Printemps"; Henri Postel du Mas: "Un entretien avec M. Stravinsky," *Gil Blas* 25 (4 June 1913).

¹² Richard Taruskin: *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works through Mavra*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 1006, see also Marie Rambert: *Quicksilver: The Autobiography of Marie Rambert* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), and Bronislava Nijinska: *Early Memoirs* [1934], transl. and ed. by Irina Nijinska and Jean Rawlinson (London: Faber & Faber, 1982).

that is before curtain-up; that does not prove that the music was the main target of the demonstrators, as has sometimes been asserted. Another marker happened between the two tableaux, when they tried in vain to calm tempers by turning on the lights in the auditorium. The end was greeted with an ovation. For the rest, the rhythms of this mixed spectacle for performers and audience are not easy to articulate, except by the little vignettes which recur in the accounts, even though one often does not know at what moment they happened, or even whether they happened. And the cumulative view that emerges from the available sources always remains partial, for while the performers and their admirers have left a good number of accounts, no one responsible for the disturbances seems to have explained his or her behaviour or motivations.

Stravinsky's story of having gone swiftly to the wings, where Nijinsky was calling out numbers to help the dancers keep the rhythm, is regularly quoted.¹³ This tells us about the difficulty of hearing the music anywhere in the theatre, and of course about the state of mind of the performers, but says nothing about the reactions in the auditorium, and with good reason. Certainly, the composer himself is speaking, and the first performance of *The Rite* is a central episode in his biography. But we know that his memories evolved over time, which does not prevent what he says from being the true version, while in telling the real truth he found himself at odds with the mythified versions of his own story, even at risk of contributing to them in good faith in his turn. Thus it was that in 1959 he claimed to re-establish the fact of a Diaghilev enchanted by the riot, as opposed to the "legend" put about by Jean Cocteau in 1918, who had it that the impresario and the composer spent the night of 29 May in the Bois de Boulogne weeping and reciting Pushkin.¹⁴

For her part, Valentine Gross-Hugo, who in 1913 made a number of invaluable sketches of the production, made none of the actual riot, and only delivered her account of it in 1951. At that time she stated, in a radio interview, that "everything that has been written about the battle of *The Rite of Spring* remains inferior to the reality. It was as if the theatre had been gripped by an earthquake."¹⁵ Well, almost forty years after the event, the writings may have remained inferior to the reality, but the reality of which Valentine Gross-Hugo could at that time avail herself was that of a memory that had meanwhile probably been modified by all kinds of experience, beginning with those same writings.

In fact, since the day after 29 May no journalist has reported with any precision on what took place in the auditorium; at most we find in their texts some phrase intended, as it might be, to justify the reactions of the spectators to the extravagances of the work, or to shout them down

¹³ Stravinsky (1935), *Chroniques de ma vie* (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1935), p. 103..

¹⁴ See Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft: *Conversations* (New York: 1959), p. 46; Jean Cocteau: *Le Coq et l'Arlequin: Notes autour de la musique* [1918] (Paris: Stock 2009), p. 96.

¹⁵ Richard Buckle: *Diaghilev* (Paris: J.-C.Lattès 1980), p. 301f.

in the name of the work's merits, or to deplore the liberties taken, on one side or the other, with good manners. Moreover, no single artist seems to have illustrated these scenes of disorder, so that there are even fewer images than there are contemporary accounts; in fact one has to wait almost a century before two fictional films, Andy Wilson's *Riot at the Rite* (2005) and Jan Kounen's *Coco et Igor* (2009), give any real sight of the event.¹⁶ This relative poverty of contemporary sources, in contrast with the profusion of written and iconographic records of the Schoenberg *Skandalkonzert* of 31 March 1913, suggests that for professional commentators the importance of the *Rite* affair only imposed itself in course of time. Or more precisely that it needed time to become a story, since comparisons with the battle of *Hernani* of 1830 and the scandal of *Tannhäuser* in 1861 abound from the start, in the first accounts, which straightaway places the episode of *The Rite* in a historical perspective.

This evolution appears clearly in the series of three long articles published by the critic Pierre Lalo in *Le Temps*, of respectively 3 June 1913, 5 August 1913, and 21 April 1914. In the first, which came out just after the first performance, Lalo, very severe on the music and the choreography, makes only fleeting reference to the “*tapage*” (“uproar”), deploring the audience's rudeness.¹⁷ In the second, he embarks on a re-evaluation of Stravinsky's music precisely because of the “noise and dust” and the “passionate discussions” linked to the performance of 29 May: while continuing to make fun of Nijinsky, he is now ready to praise, in Nietzschean terms, a music “harsh and violent, animated by an inner energy that reveals itself in the incisive and powerful rhythms, in the intense colour and vivid richness of the orchestration, finally in the harmonies, which aroused so much rebellion and so much enthusiasm.”¹⁸ But it is only in April 1914, writing about the revival of Stravinsky's score in a concert performance at the Casino de Paris, that Lalo talks about the actual riot:

It reminds me that on the evening of the first performance, seated in the balcony of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, I was placed below a box full of elegant and charming ladies, whose jocular remarks, joyful cacklings, shafts of wit uttered with voice loud and shrill, and finally their high-pitched, convulsive laughter, created a din comparable to that which deafens one when one goes into a bird-house; the men who were with them backed them up to the best of their ability with more substantial vociferations, to which they would suddenly add, when their indignation became too strong, the strident noise one gets by blowing through a key. But on my left I had a group of aesthetes in whose souls *The Rite of Spring* aroused a frenetic enthusiasm, a sort of ejaculatory delirium, and who responded incessantly to the occupants of the box by admiring interjections, furious “Bravos,” and the running fire of their hand-clapping: one of them, who had a voice like a horse, from time to

¹⁶ Andy Wilson: *Riot at the Rite*, TV film. (London: BBC, 2005); Jan Kounen: *Coco Chanel et Igor Stravinsky*, Film. (Paris: Eurowide Film Production, 2009).

¹⁷ Pierre Lalo: “La Musique. Au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées [...]”, *Le Temps* (3 June 1913).

¹⁸ Pierre Lalo: “La Musique. Considérations sur le ‘Sacre du Printemps’”, *Le Temps* (5 August 1913), repr. in *Dossier de presse* (see note 11), pp. 31-34, quote on p. 34.

time, without otherwise addressing himself to anyone, neighed an “A la po-o-rte!” [“Throw them ou-out!”] whose agonizing vibrations echoed throughout the theatre. The defenders of *The Rite of Spring*, or its opponents: which were better, Lord? Doubtless neither the ones nor the others; and only the aesthete with the equine voice was right: they should have put all these people to the door, and him first of the lot.¹⁹

In the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the balconies were above the boxes, not below. No doubt that was a misprint, but in other respects the author seems only to have placed the groups side by side the better to invoke an ethics of the happy medium. Yet, despite its *parti-pris*, the passage gives precious information about a controversial aspect, that is the social homogeneity between the two camps. This shows through here in objective elements such as the comparative prices of tickets of admission and a similarity of, shall we say, uncomplicated behaviour. Now, Jean Cocteau distinguishes as a priority among the malcontents “the public of the boxes,” which conveys the same sense as the “tarts of the faubourg.”²⁰ But this in turn is moderated by the reminiscence of Romola Nijinsky, the choreographer’s wife: “One beautifully dressed lady in an orchestra box stood up and slapped the face of a young man who was hissing in the next box. Her escort rose, and cards were exchanged between the men. A duel followed next day.”²¹ Hard to say if this duel really took place, but it is clear that the three people here described are socially close. With Lalo, too, only the distribution of roles between men and women introduces into the haute bourgeoisie an internal differentiation based on its two characteristic attitudes toward art: the aesthetes versus the *élégantes* – the women of fashion.

The observation about the bird-house relates no doubt to a banal form of sexism that one finds again with that other journalist who proposed “ejecting the feminine element” in order to limit the uproar in future.²² But in fact there were in attendance that evening more than two thousand people, and we know that in spite of all the incidents the fall of the curtain was greeted by a long ovation. For the rest, all was back in order for the ensuing programme, Weber’s *Le Spectre de la rose* and Borodin’s *Polovtsian Dances*. It is hard to reconcile this with the image of a confrontation between a small group of more or less poverty-stricken artists and a crowd of more or less reactionary *femmes du monde*.

Nevertheless, a number of friends and partisans of the Ballets Russes have been happy to stress the lines of division between the two camps. Thus, the phrase “Sale juif!” (“Dirty Jew!”) thrown at Maurice Ravel by a “belle mécène” (“beautiful patroness”), according to his friend and

¹⁹ Pierre Lalo: “La Musique. Le ‘Sacre du Printemps’ au concert,” *Le Temps* (21 April 1914), repr. in *Dossier de presse* (see note 11), pp. 48-51, quote on p. 49

²⁰ Cocteau, *Le Coq et l’Arlequin* (see note 14), p. 95)

²¹ Romola Nijinski: *Nijinski* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934), p. 203.

²² See Emile Raulin: “Le Sacre du Printemps,” *Les Marges* (Summer 1913), pp. 105-7.

biographer Roland-Manuel,²³ in the middle of an account several lines long, is enough to associate the opponents of *The Rite* with the antidreyfusards, indeed, if one takes the innuendo to its limit, to delegitimize them as antisemites – which seems to go too far, notwithstanding the fact that at the time Astruc and his theatre were indeed the object of antisemitic attacks. Thus also the phrase “Taisez-vous, garces du seizième” (“Shut up, you sluts of the sixteenth [arrondissement]”), which according to Stravinsky the composer Florent Schmitt hurled at a group of well-to-do ladies, permits the deduction that the riot of *The Rite* illustrates a form of “class warfare.”²⁴

Hard to know today what Schmitt really said that evening. Astruc attributed the same phrase about the “tarts” (“grues”) to the entire cohort of “Stravinskyites”, while according to Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft, Schmitt had not said it himself, but rather had outbid it by hurling at the same individuals: “They are ripe for annexation.”²⁵ This latter expression, which a journalist attributes, without naming him, to “a well-known French musician”, remains a little mysterious, beyond the apparent nationalist allusion to Alsace-Lorraine.²⁶ Perhaps this modestly-born Lorrainian, accustomed to all those Parisian salons in which the careers of the day were made and unmade, was so exasperated by the worldly game that his trade imposed on him that the attacks on *The Rite* inspired in him this extreme form of revolt against his protectors.²⁷ Whatever the case, the two phrases are consistent with Schmitt’s squibs in the press against “this nation of so-called ‘worldly’ people – the world of Dr. Moreau – incapable of seeing, hearing and feeling for themselves.”²⁸

The world of Dr. Moreau: the allusion to the fantasy novel of H.G. Wells refers to monsters half-human, half-animal, living the simulacrum of a human existence. The portrait is not flattering, but it does no more than revive a critical snobbery that at the time had become as current as snobbery itself. From this point of view, the riot at *The Rite* is in itself a small comedy of distinction, in Bourdieu’s sense, in which, as the great snob Cocteau put it, “one would have to indicate a thousand nuances of snobbery, super-snobbery, counter-snobbery.”²⁹ But, to go back to the phrase about “grues” or about “garces,” it remains compatible with the existence of internal fractures in the diverse groups attracted by the Ballets Russes, including musicians,

²³ Roland-Manuel: *Ravel* [1938] (Paris: Editions de la NRF/Mémoire du livre, 2000), p. 100.

²⁴ Alex Ross: *The Rest Is Noise: A l’écoute du XXe siècle, la modernité en musique*. Actes Sud. p. 117

²⁵ See Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft: *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 100.

²⁶ N.N.: “La première du *Sacre du Printemps*,” *Comoedia Illustré* (5 June 1913). In the English-language literature Schmitt’s phrase, “Ils sont mûrs pour l’annexion,” is often translated as “They are ripe for colonization!”

²⁷ See Myriam Chimènes: *Mécènes et musiciens: Du salon au concert à Paris sous la IIIe République* (Paris: Fayard 2004), *passim*.

²⁸ Florent Schmitt: “*Les Sacres* [sic] *du Printemps*, de M. Igor Strawinsky,” *La France* (4 June 1913), repr. in *Dossier de presse* (see note 11), pp. 23-25, quote on p. 24

²⁹ Cocteau, *Le Coq et l’Arlequin* (see note 14), p. 93f.

critics, patrons, socialites, the demi-monde, tourists...³⁰ The picture is more nuanced than the myth implies, and perhaps also than at the time those who brought up the question of self-contained groups meant to suggest. Thus Léon Vallas, writing from Lyon:

The Parisians gave to this occasion a striking proof of their stupidity and their reactionary spirit. It is true that the Parisian public is made up, for a good half, of people who are strangers to France as much as to art, and, for more than a quarter, of socialites incapable of being moved by an audacious artistic endeavour.³¹

Or again René Chalupt, stigmatizing “a cosmopolitan crowd of rich immigrants and dagoes [*de mètèques et de rastaquouères*] who have made their money in tinned pork and peanuts.”³²

Added to the discrimination games was the professional connection, for example in the case of Ravel or Schmitt, both personal friends of Stravinsky and admirers of his art, but also both authors of ballets produced by Diaghilev. Obviously their commitment to *The Rite*, anchored as it was in a shared musical sensibility at the heart of the Russophile group, the Apaches,³³ for that very reason obeyed the logic of the network which, in a general way, will have played a considerable role in the incidents. Two days before the première, Stravinsky had received a note from Ricciotto Canudo asking him to procure from Diaghilev twenty seats “to provide an avant-garde corps for Thursday evening”.³⁴ Canudo was the director of *Montjoie!*, the recently founded “organ of French artistic Imperialism” which allied the cult of the artistic avant-garde with antisemitism and the rejection of democracy.³⁵ It was here that Stravinsky, who had got to know Canudo through Florent Schmitt, would on the very day of the première publish the article “Ce que j’ai voulu exprimer dans *Le Sacre du Printemps*”, which he would then subsequently disown.³⁶ Thus the first performance of *The Rite* was a tactical opportunity for those groups of artists and writers who conceived the artistic scene in its totality as a sort of public arena. And this metaphorical stage could in the space of an evening turn into a real stage, not that of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées but precisely the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées itself as a stage, this “temple of art” of a new kind, in which it was possible to circulate without

³⁰ See Lynn Garafola: *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), p. 273-299.

³¹ Léon Vallas: “Le Sacre du Printemps,” *La Revue française de musique* (June-July 1913), repr. in *Dossier de presse* (see note 11), pp. 27-30, quote on p. 27

³² René Chalupt: “Le mois du musicien,” *La Phalange* 8 (20 August 1913), pp. 169-175, repr. in Bullard, “The First Performance of Igor Stravinsky’s ‘Sacre du printemps’”, quote on Vol. 3 p. 206.

³³ See Jann Pasler: “Stravinsky and the Apaches,” *The Musical Times* 123 (June 1982), pp. 403–407.

³⁴ Philippe Rodriguez: *L’Affaire Montjoie!: Canudo et Stravinsky* (Fassano: Schena, 2000), p.15.

³⁵ See Noëmi Blumenkranz-Onimus: “‘Montjoie!’ ou l’héroïque croisade pour une nouvelle culture,” in *L’Année 1913: Les Formes esthétiques de l’œuvre d’art à la veille de la première guerre mondiale, vol. 2: Travaux et documents inédits*, ed. Liliane Brion-Guerry (Paris: Klincksieck 1971), pp. 1105–16.

³⁶ Stravinsky and Craft, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents* (see note 12), p. 522-523; Taruskin, 1996, p. 999; Francesco Parrino: “Alfredo Casella and the *Montjoie!* Affair,” *Repercussions* 10 (2007), n°1, pp. 96-123. See the essay by Stephen Walsh in this volume.

hindrance between the parts of the auditorium³⁷ – even take them over, like Astruc’s commandos in *chapeaux mous* challenging the Republican Guard itself.

Canudo’s remark about the avant-garde corps and Astruc’s on the Stravinskyites show clearly that certain of the composer’s associates had seen the riot coming, had even actively contributed to it. They say nothing, however, about the motivations of the people who demonstrated against the work, and who throughout the accounts remain strictly anonymous – with the single exception, a glorious one, it’s true, of that Countess de Pourtalès who, according to Cocteau, shouted out: “This is the first time in sixty years that anyone has dared make fun of me.”³⁸ As for Diaghilev, he has sometimes been suspected of having organized the whole thing, especially in distributing tickets to a well-coached claque.³⁹ This claque remains quite mysterious; was it the *Montjoie!* group? Stravinsky said in 1959 that at the end of the evening in the Bois de Boulogne, rather than weeping over Pushkin, Diaghilev had confided to him: “Exactly what I wanted!”⁴⁰ Legend or truth, it is certain that the publication on the actual day of the first performance of *The Rite* in several Parisian newspapers (*Le Petit Journal*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Gaulois*) of the identical announcement promising “impassioned debates” amounted to openly gambling on polemic. It described the work’s subject: “We shall find powerfully stylized there the characteristic attitudes of the Slav race becoming conscious of beauty in the prehistoric age and awakening to rhythm and the primal emotions of the pantheist faith.”⁴¹

The barbarism of the other

The aggressive confrontation of opinions in a theatre auditorium during a riot at once prolongs and denies the reasoned confrontation of arguments that is the proper ground of a controversy. And it is just such a controversy that seems to have taken shape apropos of *The Rite* at the time of the dress rehearsal on 28 May, at which Diaghilev, ever attentive to opinion-formers, had invited the critics and prominent artists, plus a number of subscribers for whom it was a statutory privilege.⁴² This had the side effect of excluding from the première certain journalists who as a result would have to review the work without knowing its effects on the audience.⁴³ Now if on the evening of the dress rehearsal the atmosphere in the theatre was peaceful, the critics

³⁷ Roland Huesca: “Le Théâtre des Champs-Élysées à l’heure des Ballets russes,” *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d’histoire* 63 (July-September 1999), pp. 3–15.

³⁸ Cocteau, *Le Coq et l’Arlequin* (see note 14), p. 96.

³⁹ François Lesure: “L’accueil parisien du *Sacre*,” in *Le Sacre du printemps de Nijinsky* (see note 9), p. 15.

⁴⁰ Stravinsky and Craft, *Conversations* (see note 14), p. 46.

⁴¹ “Le sacre du printemps,” *Le Figaro*, 29 mai 1913.

⁴² See Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes* (see note 30), p. 293.

⁴³ See Gaston Carraud: “Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Le Sacre du Printemps*,” *La Liberté* (31 May 1913).

nonetheless exchanged divergent opinions as they left, to the point where one among them would retrospectively trace there the beginnings of the next day's riot.⁴⁴

Between the controversy of 28 May and the riot of 29 May there is therefore the articulation between the freedom of expression of artists and that of the audience, traditionally regulated through the alternation of silence and applause, which was here blown to pieces. To hiss at the end of a work is to exercise a form of criticism. To hiss during a work, and still more to interrupt it, is comparable to an act of physical violence against an object that exists only in so far as it is perceived – all the more so if it is its first performance. This is no doubt why Diaghilev and/or Astruc could throw into the midst of the tumult “At least let the work get to the end,” and Diaghilev could enjoin the conductor Pierre Monteux to go to the end “whatever happens.”⁴⁵

In the face of such outbursts, naturally the question of control arises: the fantasy of the police invoked above, but also the act of lighting up the auditorium in order to restore calm. It was no doubt thought that the lighting would expose the shameful behaviour to the general gaze, starting with those involved. But it had no effect, or very little. Many were therefore content to show their discontent, and the same thing happened, with less intensity, at the following performances.⁴⁶ Perhaps this casual attitude was linked, in the minds of some connoisseurs, with a form of historical consciousness which, nourished by stories of the troubles of *Hernani* and *Tannhäuser*, allowed them to experience riot as a sort of ritual. In any case it amounted to saying that the end justified the means. But why, and why that particular work?

The conflict of opinions, at once in the controversy and in the riot, goes back to the fact that *The Rite of Spring* is itself the expression of a conflict between norms. It is even the paradox of legitimate transgression that retrospectively justifies its inclusion in the canon of modern art. For those who admired it the most, *The Rite* was an irreducible singularity called to become a new law, that of the Messiah or that of the Revolution. For those most hostile to it, it was not exactly a bad work, but a work which, by a sort of passage to the limits of the bad, interrogated the criteria of evaluation of the bad itself. With his costumes and scenery, Nikolai Roerich, who in himself alone embodied the alliance between art and archaeology, contributed to the creation of an authentic scene shared by performers and audience. But Stravinsky's music and Nijinsky's choreography, for their part, tended to bring to a crisis the modes of representation of cultural otherness.

⁴⁴ See Louis Vuillemin: “Le Sacre du Printemps,” *Comoedia* (31 May 1913), repr. in *Dossier de presse* (see note 11), pp. 20-22.

⁴⁵ Monteux, *It's all in the music* (see note 2), p. 92.

⁴⁶ See Gustave Linor: “Théâtre des Champs-Élysées,” *Comoedia* (3 June 1913).

This could well be one of the keys to the riot. *The Rite of Spring* has as its subtitle *Pictures of pagan Russia*, and its theme is assuredly an “elementary form of the religious life,” as Durkheim (1912) was at that time describing totemism.⁴⁷ This interest in primitive society appears in force in the reviews, which speak respectively of “prehistoric times,” “history of primitive humanity,” “the early age,” or “the primary epoch.” According to Florent Schmitt, “it was a question of translating the atmosphere of a profoundly rudimentary epoch, the prehistoric epoch of a savage, burbling humanity” – which leads him to say that the dancers, rather than being bedecked in these “too rich, too vivid” costumes, should have been clad in “primitive materials of neutral colour, or best of all mammoth or diplodocus skins, or still more simply with magnificent hair, flowing beards and fine limbs.”⁴⁸ And according to the critic Adolphe Boschot “They wish to show us the dances of prehistoric Russia: so they present us, for *primitive effect*, with the dances of savages, Caribs and Kanaks... All well and good, but one can’t help laughing.”⁴⁹

But what prehistory is in question? Roerich’s costumes hardly resembled current images of the Stone Age, but were not without links to those of the Bronze Age, which Parisians had had the chance to appreciate in the form of *tableaux vivants*.⁵⁰ Now, while this meant a difference of thousands of years, it was still remote from the history of modern nations. Richard Taruskin has emphasized the role of Russian “neonationalism” in the conception of *The Rite*, against the line taken by Stravinsky, who from the twenties onwards never ceased to repudiate his folklore sources and to play down the role of Roerich. Yet this very convincing argument has always to do only with the work’s production, never its reception, nor the actual riot. Garafola and Taruskin brush away the hypothesis of an Aztec source for the idea of the sacrifice of the chosen girl,⁵¹ that human sacrifice which Stravinsky will later claim to have dreamt, but which does not appear in Roerich’s sources. Now this Aztec tradition was well known at the time thanks to the international success of James Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, one of the first anthropological bestsellers. And this book’s success was part of a veritable infatuation with primitive societies of every type, as part of the search for the key to social psychology, as with Freud, or else for the origins of art.⁵² While the Ballets Russes newspaper announcement speaks of “Slav race,” the

⁴⁷ Emile Durkheim: *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1912).

⁴⁸ Schmitt, “*Les Sacres du Printemps*” (see note 28), p. 25.

⁴⁹ Adolphe Boschot: “Le ‘Sacre du Printemps’”. Ballet de MM. Roerich, Stravinsky et Nijinski, “*L’Echo de Paris* (30 mai 1913), repr. in *Dossier de presse* (see note 11), pp. 15-16, quote on p. 16 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁰ Hélène Lafont-Couturier et al.: *Vénus et Caïn: Figures de la préhistoire 1830-1930* (Bordeaux: Catalogue d’exposition au Musée d’Aquitaine, 2003), p. 157.

⁵¹ See Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes* (see note 30), p. 426, and Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, p.881n

⁵² Claudine Cohen: *L’Homme des origines: Savoirs et fictions en préhistoire* (Paris: Seuil 1999) ; Philippe Dagen: *Le Peintre, le poète, le sauvage: Les Voies du primitivisme dans l’art français* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).

critics, if they mention it at all, never dwell on the “Russian” identity of this primitive society. On the other hand, its anthropological significance interests them a great deal. Jacques Rivière praises a “sociological ballet” which showed, like an echo of Durkheim, human beings “devoted to the god that they form together”, and which is also a “biological ballet” in which there appears that “something profoundly blind” in the species.⁵³ From the encounter between sociology and biology there thus emerges the representation of a human community that is *generic*.

Now at the time the current images of prehistory were abundantly conveyed by fictional works such as Rosny Aîné’s *La Guerre du feu* (1909), but also by a popularizing literature which makes too much of “ethnographic comparatism” with contemporary societies, beginning with those of the far North.⁵⁴ Boschot compares the personages in *The Rite* with Caribs and Kanaks.⁵⁵ Pierre Lalo, for his part, assures us that “the dances we see in *The Rite of Spring* remind one irresistibly of the choreographic exercises displayed to us by assorted Eskimo, Fuegian, or Maori tribes on the lawns of the zoological gardens.”⁵⁶ This proves not so much a real resemblance between the gestures of the one and the other, which were after all unverified, as the fact that part of the audience of the Ballets Russes preserved a memory of the universal expositions and “human zoos” in the Bois de Vincennes, where these communities had been exhibited since the 1870s.⁵⁷ This memory had nourished as much the knowledge of human otherness and the human condition as it had individual nightmares and racist commonplaces. Although directed at their impersonations rather than their persons, the malicious laughter at the jerky gestures and “turned-in” feet of Nijinsky’s dancers was close to that other laughter which mocked those indigenous dances reproduced under the colonialist whip just a few kilometers from the Avenue Montaigne. Thus the sciences and the arts of elsewhere converged in the invention of the primitive and the staging of its ritual.⁵⁸ For Boschot, for Lalo, for many others as well, it went without saying that these exotic dances were ridiculous and that it was therefore permitted, and even inevitable, to laugh at their supposed imitation on the stage of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. From then on, the causal link between the ballet and the riot was not only established

⁵³ Jacques Rivière: “*Le Sacre du printemps*,” *Nouvelle revue française* (November 1913), pp. 706-30, repr. in *Dossier de presse* (see note 11), pp. 38-48, quote on p. 47.

⁵⁴ Noël Coye: *La Préhistoire en parole et en acte: Méthodes et enjeux de la pratique archéologique, 1830-1950* (Paris et Montréal: l’Harmattan, 1997), p. 172.

⁵⁵ Boschot, “Le ‘Sacre du Printemps’” (see note 49).

⁵⁶ Lalo, “Considérations sur le ‘Sacre du Printemps’” (see note 18), p. 33.

⁵⁷ See Annegret Fauser: *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair* (Rochester N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2005), and *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales: 150 ans d’inventions de l’autre*, ed. Pascal Blanchard et al. (Paris: La Découverte, 2011).

⁵⁸ See Gabriele Brandstetter: “Ritual as Scene and Discourse: Art and Science Around 1900 as Exemplified by *Le Sacre du Printemps*,” *The World of Music* 40 (1998), pp. 37–59; Martin Zenck: “Ritual or Imaginary Ethnography in Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*?” *ibid.*, pp. 61–78.

but also justified: “This is a strange spectacle, of a laborious and puerile barbarism which the Champs-Élysées audience greeted without respect.”⁵⁹

However, the people hostile to *The Rite* were not the only ones to dream about barbarians. Its admirers, too, were ready to see in their hostile conduct the signs of a relapse into barbarism, even into the subhuman. This is Schmitt’s implication with his allusion to *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Here is what Vallas says: “There is less coarse stupidity and animal doltishness in the rhythmic and prehistoric crises imagined by the Russian dancer than in the howling, slobbish indignation of a civilized twentieth-century audience faced with a new spectacle.” Each in turn was the other’s barbarian; in the space of an evening, everyone had dreamt of a new barbarism. This was equally true of those who reserved judgement on the work without nevertheless joining in the disturbances, and who rejected both sides, the better to despise them as a whole. That is why the riot at *The Rite* can be described as a little social drama on the fate of civilization itself.

For the adversaries of *The Rite*, certainly, the denunciation of a category error in the representation of otherness could go a very long way, as was shown by those who often repeated little phrases that made fun of the chosen one as personified by Maria Piltz, who had been instructed by Nijinsky to hold her hand motionless on her face at mandible level, then to mime tremblings throughout her entire body: “Call a dentist! Two dentists!”, then “A doctor!”⁶⁰ According to this hostile interpretation of Nijinsky’s inventions, it was a matter of representing madness in its pure state, that other otherness of civilized man; but above all of doing it in an inherently mad, hence ridiculous and/or unsettling, way because contrary to all “stylization” of bodily gestures, in a word contrary to the art of the dance. For them the chosen one was a freak, scarcely more; and freaks have no place in a temple of art.

In fact, this radical rejection was in proportion to the divergence from the current forms of corporeal, sonorous and pictorial exoticism practised by the classical ballet, opera, and art in general. For this form of primitivism, anthropological investigation implied a transformation of the codes of representation, as well as the calling into question of the beautiful and the forms of temporality associated with it. Hence the embarrassment of moderate critics like Gustave de Pawlowski, who thought that, while displaying primitives was not in itself without interest, *The Rite of Spring* made a mistake in spinning it out for too long.⁶¹ Hence also the unprovability of the question of what, the music or the dance, was the main reason for the riot. The *Rite of Spring* score is the music for a ballet about a rite of spring, and that is how Stravinsky conceived it. “But

⁵⁹ Henri Quittard: “Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Le Sacre du Printemps*,” *Le Figaro* (31 May 1913), repr. in *Dossier de presse* (see note 11), pp. 17-18, quote on p. 17.

⁶⁰ Maurice Touchard, “Ballets russes et français,” *La Nouvelle Revue* (1 July 1913), pp. 116–25, esp. 119.

⁶¹ Pawlowski, “Le Sacre du Printemps” (see note 11).

in the desire, it seems, to *be primitive*, prehistoric,” – Boschot wrote – “he has worked at *taking his music closer to noise*. To this end, he has applied himself to destroying all sense of tonality.”⁶² The originality of this score and of the rejection it aroused, on the evening of 29 May and subsequently, is intimately bound up with its dramaturgical intention. To the extent that, despite everything, the orchestra remained audible, the dissonances of *The Rite*, starting with the celebrated chord of the “Augures printaniers,” amounted to a shock. They went beyond the quantitative and dynamic threshold, the horizon of expectation of the day, and above all they did it in a sort of legal void, between unclassified chords and ungrammatical progressions. In the absence of a reliable conceptualization of atonality, this could only be understood as an *anti-grammar*, as by Pierre Lalo decoding the language of *The Rite* as a systematic transgression:

From the first bar of the work to the last, whatever note one expects, it is never that note that comes, but the note next to it, the note that ought not to come; whatever chord may seem to be implied by the preceding chord, it is a different chord that one hears, and that chord and that note are written on purpose in order to give the impression of an acute, almost atrocious falsehood.⁶³

Arnold Whittall has seen in the role of these dissonances the translation of a conflict that was none other than that of *The Rite* itself, in the form of a “portrait of human savagery”.⁶⁴ In saying this, he took his place in the debate between musical analysts in which Daniel Chua, in his turn, managed to perceive a *riot* – at risk of failing to draw the distinction between a controversy and an uproar.⁶⁵ This quarrel, engaged in by Allen Forte, Pieter van den Toorn, Richard Taruskin and others, bears on the organization of pitch, which had already in 1913 captured the attention of specialists, rather than on the rhythm which later, by contrast, became the topos of Stravinskian innovation. But Whittall’s intuition of making conflict the axis of the musical content of *The Rite* can be redirected towards the entity formed by the work together with its initial reception. To what extent was *The Rite of Spring* of 1913 the representation of a conflict, to what extent does that conflict bear a relation to the actual conflict on the evening of its first performance?

It turns out that from the thematic point of view there is *no* conflict in *The Rite*. The chosen one does not resist being put to death, and nobody seems moved by her fate – at least in the synopsis in the programme and in what one knows of the gestures of Nijinsky’s dancers.⁶⁶

⁶² Boschot, “Le ‘Sacré du Printemps’” (see note 49), p. 16 (emphasis in original).

⁶³ Lalo, “Au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées,” (see note 17).

⁶⁴ Arnold Whittall: “Music Analysis as Human Science? *Le Sacré du Printemps* in Theory and Practice,” *Music Analysis* 1 (1982), pp. 33-53, quote on p. 50.

⁶⁵ Daniel K. Chua: “Rioting with Stravinsky: A Particular Analysis of the ‘Rite of Spring’,” *Music Analysis* 26 (2007), pp. 59–109; see also the essays by Jonathan Bernard and Andreas Meyer in this volume.

⁶⁶ See Millicent Hodson: “Puzzles chorégraphiques. Reconstitution du Sacré de Nijinsky,” in *Le Sacré du printemps de Nijinsky* (see note 9), pp. 45-73 ; idem: *Nijinsky’s Crime Against Grace* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1996), Dominique Brun, Sophie Jacotot et Juan Ignacio Vallejo: *Projet Dziga autour du Sacré du Printemps de Vaslav Nijinski*. Rapport de recherche, inédit (Paris: Centre National de la Danse, 2012).

“Nothing individual is painted on their faces. At no point in her dance does the chosen young girl betray the personal terror of which her soul must be full”.⁶⁷ This would scandalize Theodor W. Adorno, who based his controversial interpretation of the elective affinities between Stravinsky and fascism on the idea that “the music identifies not with the victim, but with the annihilating authority.”⁶⁸ No conflict therefore, only ritual violence in its pure state. From this point of view nothing connects the stage and the auditorium, except perhaps the metaphor that makes of *The Rite* itself a chosen one sacrificed by riot on the altar of the religion of art.

With one exception, however, the fourth dance of the first tableau, *Jeux des cités rivales* (“Ritual of the rival tribes” in the current English translation), where one finds a number of those “next-door notes” that so bothered Lalo – for example, at rehearsal no. 57⁺⁴, where the fortissimo trombone G sharp serves brusquely to undermine the arrival on the fundamental *A* of the principal motive, thereby introducing a recurrent conflict of uncertainties. The piece is an artistic representation of the ritual setting of a confrontation; in the history of music, it is second cousin to the ancient musical genre of the *battle*. Except that the usual identification of the two camps by characteristic musical motives, for example the national melodies used by Beethoven in *Wellingtons Sieg*, is here anything but unambiguous. Without linking each tribe to a particular motive, Stravinsky has indicated the scenes of struggle between the men (respectively rehearsal nos. 57 and 59⁻¹), separated by a moment of truce (rehearsal no. 59⁻⁴), then associated with motives specific to the men and the women (rehearsal no. 60).⁶⁹ For his part, Robert Craft has distinguished the two tribes by two motives present from the opening bars (respectively rehearsal nos. 57 and 57⁺³), then a superposition of the two presumed to signify the struggle itself (rehearsal no. 57⁺⁵).⁷⁰ In his turn, Peter Hill has deduced from the sketches an identification of the two tribes which associates the first with the motive that Craft allocated to the second, and the second to the motive that Stravinsky associated with the women.⁷¹ Finally Millicent Hodson has explained that according to Nijinsky the *Jeux des cités rivales* has as its theme “the differentiation of the sexes,” and that “the women try to distract the men from their war-games by seducing them.” And she adds that, when at one point the dancers turn to face the public, “the

⁶⁷ Rivière, “*Le Sacre du printemps*” (see note 53), p. 47.

⁶⁸ Theodor W. Adorno: *Philosophie de la nouvelle musique* (Paris: Gallimard 1962), p. 151, quoted from the English translation by Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Philosophy of New Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 110.

⁶⁹ Igor Stravinsky: “Appendice III : La chorégraphie de Stravinsky-Nijinsky,” in *The Rite of Spring / Le Sacre du Printemps: Sketches, 1911-1913: Facsimile Reproductions from the Autographs* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1969), p. 39.

⁷⁰ Robert Craft: “The Rite of Spring: Genesis of a Masterpiece,” *Perspectives of New Music* 5 (1966), pp. 20–36, esp. p. 29f.

⁷¹ Peter Hill: *Stravinsky. The Rite of Spring* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 69.

spectators of 1913 must have asked themselves at that moment whether they – the subscribers, no less – were not the true rival tribe to this suddenly united group.”⁷²

Each of these interpretations holds, and moreover they are not incompatible. Yet not one of them imposes itself on a contemporary hearing to the exclusion of the others. In this the battle of *The Rite* and the battle around *The Rite* resemble one another, if only in their hermeneutic exposition. Today, the event seems very much like a game between rival cities or tribes whose contours and precise motivations never cease to arouse debate. In the auditorium of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, one scorching spring evening, to the smothered sound of Igor Stravinsky’s music, between the cupola of Maurice Denis and the décors of Nikolai Roerich, in reaction to the propositions of Vaslav Nijinsky, men and women stir, confront, appeal to one another, express themselves, get angry, enjoy themselves as well, and in so doing they weave, together with the performers, a knot of art history that a century later has not ceased to make its point. In *The Rite* of Stravinsky, Nijinsky and Roerich, the two minutes of the rival tribes are followed by the procession in which the reunited community comes to greet the kissing of the earth by the great ancestor. In the theatre, that 29 May 1913, the conflict of the rival tribes, which perhaps lasted three quarters of an hour, would dissolve with Nijinsky’s return to the stage to dance *Le Spectre de la rose*, then with Diaghilev’s warhorse, the *Polovtsian Dances*. The following year, on the other hand, a bloodier game of rival tribes would dominate the world stage: that of the Great War. The prophetic nature of the connection between the two events remains, however, a metaphor.

⁷² Hodson, “Puzzles choréographiques” (see note 66), pp. 69f.