

The Electric Body Ecstasy, Spasm and Instability in Dance: Movement Notation from Vladimir Stepanov to Vaslav Nijinsky

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Abstract The relationship between the discovery and application of electricity and the human body in the 19th and 20th centuries is complex and multifaceted. Used to stimulate nervous and muscular reactions in the fields of medicine and biology or to record the more intimate movements of the body (cf. the electrocardiogram), electricity established the basis of what today we might call the modern electric – or digital – body. Another aspect, hitherto little explored, is that of the relationship between the electric body and the aesthetics of movement in dance. Visionary choreographers – those who anticipated ‘modern dance’ – such as Vaslav Nijinsky realised that the involuntary movements, often spasmodic and out of control, which electric stimuli could incite (Luigi Galvani comes to mind), could also suggest totally new ideas to the dancer. On the other hand, this kind of movement, syncopated, spasmodic and often uncontrollable, also elicited somewhat morbid analogies with mental disease – a field of research as much ambiguous and equivocal as the new European dance itself wherein hysteria mingled with ecstasy and schizophrenia with emancipation from all conventions. The focus of this essay is on Nijinsky’s choreographic concepts vis-à-vis ecstatic or ‘lunatic’ movement, for his, indeed, was a modern ‘electric body’.

Keywords Theatre and performance. Russian ballet. Dance notations. Body movements. Nijinsky. La Salpêtrière.

Summary 1 Incontri. – 2 Verso la maschera. – 3 Finzioni letali. – 4 Intorno a Cadaqués. – 5 A Parigi.

The relationship between the discovery and application of electricity and the human body in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is complex and multifaceted. Used to stimulate nervous and muscular reactions in the fields of medicine and biology or to record the more intimate movements of the body (cf. the electrocardiogram), electricity established the basis of what today we might call the modern electric – or digital – body. Another aspect, hitherto little explored, is that of the relationship between the electric body and the aesthetics of movement in dance. Visionary choreographers – those who anticipated ‘modern dance’ – such as Vaslav Nijinsky realised that the involuntary movements, often spasmodic and out

of control, which electric stimuli could incite (Luigi Galvani comes to mind), could also suggest totally new ideas to the dancer. On the other hand, this kind of movement, syncopated, spasmodic and often uncontrollable, also elicited somewhat morbid analogies with mental disease – a field of research as much ambiguous and equivocal as the new European dance itself wherein hysteria mingled with ecstasy and schizophrenia with emancipation from all conventions. The focus of this essay is on Nijinsky’s choreographic concepts vis-à-vis ecstatic or ‘lunatic’ movement, for his, indeed, was a modern “electric body”.

In this context the *Rite of Spring* which premiered at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysée on 29



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted	2019-07-23
Accepted	2019-09-20
Published	2019-12-11

Open access

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Citation Nicoletta, Misler (2019). “The Electric Body. Ecstasy, Spasm and Instability in Dance: Movement Notation from Vladimir Stepanov to Vaslav Nijinsky”. *Venezia Arti*, n.s., 28, 63-72.



Figure 1 Robe wore by Vaslav Nijinsky, in his "Marriage avec Dieu" at the Hotel Casa Suvretta in Saint Moritz, 19 January, 1919. Collection V. Nijinsky. Curatorial Assistance, Pasadena, California. © Curatorial Assistance, Pasadena (CA)

May, 1913 is a fundamental milestone, a choreography to which the comment "A stone full of holes whence emerge all kinds of unknown beasts"¹ seems to be particularly appropriate. But the *Rite of Spring*, with its bewilderingly barbaric sources, owed its *succès de scandale* not only to the consternation of the Paris audience, "brutally pushed into the presence of an especially unusual piece of art"² (to quote another observer). Rather, its wild reception also depended upon the dissonances between three different approaches to the world of the primitive which came together in this single ballet: that is to say, of Nicholas Roerich, Igor

Stravinsky and Nijinsky. Perhaps not always observing a rigorous philological methodology, Roerich immersed himself passionately into ethnographical sources; Stravinsky, on the other hand, if indifferent to scientific or historical truth, still expressed a modern 'interior resonance' with the world of the primitive;³ while Nijinsky linked the 'ecstatic' physiology of the artist with the 'bodily' reality of the primitive as if this were his own condition. In the end, Nijinsky, profoundly influenced by Roerich's descriptions of prehistorical cults, proved to be a genuine shaman - if, as anthropologist Romano Mastromattei has asserted, "to merit his title, the shaman must be capable of confronting an ecstatic journey which may be without return and which may end in madness".⁴

Undoubtedly, the most celebrated movement in Nijinsky's career, is the spectacular - and recorded - instant of his leap, a moment of stability in the instability of the leap which his sister Bronislava described as follows: "Throwing his body up to a great height for a moment, he leans back, his legs extended; he beats an *entrechat-sept*, and, slowly turning over onto his chest, arches his back and, lowering one leg, holds an *arabesque* in the air. Smoothly in this pure *arabesque*, he descends to the ground".⁵

Much later, Nijinsky, incited by Serge Lifar, performed his leap for the last time on 15 June, 1939 for Jean Manzon, photographer of *Match* (no longer an *arabesque*, but a simple, upward jump).⁶

The pharisaic cruelty of this shot brings to mind a number of considerations concerning the application of photography, but, in any case, this was the first and last time that Nijinsky was captured in a still image, which, for us, remains a metaphor for the dancer's control of the instability of his body (and soul) in the movement of the dance. Here is the static registration contrary to the ephemerality of the soul, the mind and the heart, a collision between sense and sensibility, a fission which may well allude to the schizophrenia with which, 'officially', Nijinsky was afflicted, but which today is widely discredited. Certainly, Nijinsky concluded his personal and ecstatic journey of the dance in madness, but he did so via a ritual which still possessed an inner and systemic logic.

¹ Jaques Rivière, *La nouvelle Revue Française*, 1913, novembre, in Kahane 1992, 83.

² Louis Schneider, *Comoedia*, 31 May, in Kahane 1992, 84.

³ For an analysis of Stravinsky's ethnographic sources see Richard Taruskin, "The Great Fusion: Le Sacre du Printemps", in Taruskin 1996, 849-966.

⁴ Mastromattei 1995, 18

⁵ Nijinska 1981, 270-1. Nijinska is referring to *Pavillon d'Armide* which premiered in Paris 19 May, 1909.

⁶ The nine photographs by Jean Manzon, published on 15 June, 1939, in *Match*, provide vivid and moving testimony to this meeting. Kahane 2000, 106-7; Buckle 1971, 425.

To maintain the metaphor, Nijinsky's definitive "leap into madness", according to Peter Ostwald, the psychiatrist who wrote a book on this subject, came about on 19 January, 1919, when he performed his last delirious, but amazingly modern, 'solo' at the Hotel Casa Suvretta in Saint Moritz, for which he wore a 'Tolstoyan' robe and shirt and which he identified as a costume for a *Mariage avec Dieu*⁷ [fig. 1]. As Richard Buckle mentions, on the drive to the Casa Suvretta he told Romola: "This is my marriage with God"⁸ According to contemporary descriptions, Nijinsky remained seated on a chair gazing at the audience, then spread out two pieces of long, narrow velvet in the shape of a cross, one white, the other black like his 'costume', on the floor, and then threw himself into a desperate and exhausting solo. But before doing so, Nijinsky explained to the audience (the performance was being sponsored by the Red Cross) that his performance was all about the war which 'they' had done nothing to impede. But surely, what Nijinsky was offering the audience was not the Great War, but the finale of his 'own' interior conflict.

Indeed, for Nijinsky this 'act' was the end of dance; thenceforth he turned to painting and drawing with ever greater intensity and over six and a half weeks (between 19 January and 4 March, 1919) accompanied his drawings with handwritten texts (his so called diary) which he edited feverishly, day and night, like some uninterrupted stream of consciousness or a long colloquium with God. Moreover, we can trace the same tendencies in Nijinsky's series of notebooks concerned with movement notations to 1918-19, when his mental disease was still in abeyance, a preoccupation which, surely, indicates an earnest endeavour to impose a rational control upon the instinctiveness of movement: for example, the choreographic notation for *Les Papillons de nuit* is entitled: *Uprazhneniia v notakh, znakakh, kliuchakh i polozheniakh normal'nykh i dr.* (Exercises in notes, signs, keys, and poses, normal and others)⁹ [fig. 2]. Perhaps the 'other poses' are the inexpressible ones, i.e. the poses which can be transcribed not by 'sign' or notation, but only within the expressivity of the drawing itself or in the automatic gestures of the body in its totality. Or take the frontispiece to one of the other notebooks bearing the pretentious title: *Nizhin-*

sky's Theory of Dance Notation of All Human Movements and Poses according to the System of V. Nijinsky and dated 1 March, 1918.

Significantly, Nijinsky had already tried to devise a system of dance notation in 1915, while confined to 'house arrest' at his mother-in-law's home in Budapest, a rather intolerable and claustrophobic situation which seemed to anticipate his future confinements in various psychiatric hospitals.

Unfortunately, until we have a fuller understanding of Nijinsky's contribution to the field of ballet movement notation and an accurate, detailed dating of the notebooks, much is left to conjecture. Certainly, page two of the above mentioned 1918 notebook *Theory of Dance* promises much:

*Tanets est' iskusstvo dvizhenii. Tanets zapisyvaetsia i chitaetsia s odinakovoi legkhost'iu kak chtenie i pis'mo slov, kotorye proiznosim. Dlia togo, chtoby chitat' tanets nado izuchit' znaki i zakony, posredstvom kotorykh zapisan tanets. Izuchenie zakonov i znakov est' predmet 'Teorii tantsa.'*¹⁰

Dance is the art of movements. Dance can be recorded and read like the reading and writing of the words which we pronounce - and with uniform ease. So as to read dance we must study the signs and laws as a result of which dance can be recorded. The study of the laws and signs is the subject of the *Theory of Dance*.

However, if we leaf through the notebook (which is only a part of a corpus now preserved at the Bolshoi Theatre Museum), we see that what we have is a version of the movement notations compiled by his venerable predecessor, Vladimir Stepanov teacher of the Theory and Notation of Dance from September, 1893 until 1896 at the Imperial Theatres in St. Petersburg. The coincidence between Nijinsky's enrolment at the Imperial Theatre, first as student and then as *artiste*, the debate which followed the publication, and the application of Stepanov's movement notation system, propel us towards new ideas about Nijinsky's activities as theorist and teacher of dance.

While still a student at the St. Petersburg Theatre Institute, Stepanov never ceased to wonder why sound and word possessed their own alphabets, whereas the body lacked them and why an alphabet of movements based upon anatomical

⁷ The costume is now in the Nijinsky Collection of Curatorial Assistance in Pasadena, California.

⁸ Buckle 1971, 406.

⁹ Nijinskij Choreographic score for *Papillons de nuit*, 1918. Curatorial Assistance, Pasadena, California.

¹⁰ Nijinskij 1918, 2.

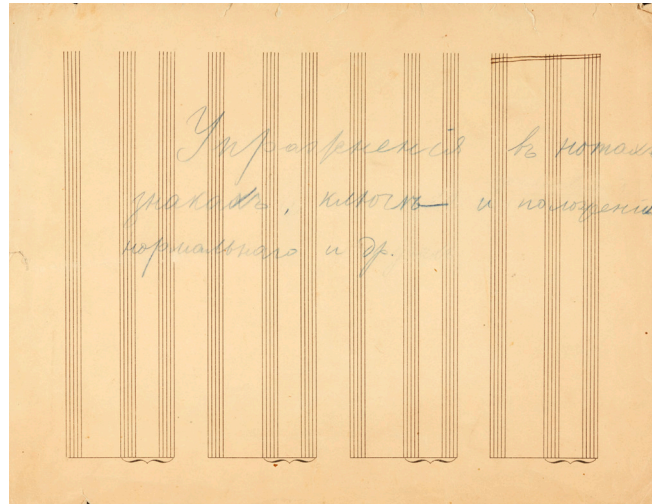


Figure 2 V. Nijinsky, choreographic notation for *Les Papillons de nuit*. 1918. Collection V. Nijinsky. Curatorial Assistance, Pasadena, California. © Curatorial Assistance, Pasadena

data could not be compiled. To this end, in 1899, Stepanov requested permission from the Imperial Theatre Institute to follow an extra-mural course in anatomy and anthropology under the aegis of Professor Petr Frantsevich Lesgaf (1837-1909)¹¹ at the University of St. Petersburg. Lesgaf was deeply interested in the study of movement inasmuch as he was the founder of a scientific approach to Russian gymnastics and an active promoter of the need for general physical education. With Lesgaf's assistance, Stepanov - the diligent student of human anatomy - perfected an alphabet of movements, taking into consideration every single element of the body.

In turn, thanks to Lesgaf, Stepanov obtained a letter of recommendation to attend the classes of Jean-Martin Charcot, teacher of pathological anatomy at La Salpêtrière psychiatric hospital in Paris. After winning a scholarship from the St. Petersburg Theatre directorate in 1891, Stepanov moved to Paris so as to continue his researches where, after consultations with Charcot and Joseph Hansen, the premiere *maître* of the Ballet de l'Opéra, he published his treatise in French in 1892, i.e. *Alphabet des mouvements du corps humain; essai d'enregistrement des mouvements du corps humain au moyen des signes musicaux* (An Alphabet of the movements of the human body. A study in recording the movements of the human body by means of musical signs), translated into English in 1958 only. Returning to St. Petersburg, Stepanov presented his notation system to the administration of the Imperial Theatres which, after careful examination by two commissions on 4 February, 1891, and on 14 April, 1893 (the latter including Mari-

us Petipa, one of Nijinsky's teachers), was deemed to be suitable for institutional instruction: beginning in the fall of 1893, knowledge of Stepanov's system was required of all ballet students and in one form or another was used right up until 1916.

Nijinsky was accepted as a student in the Imperial Theatre Institute in 1898 and, therefore, was well aware of the Stepanov system. True, Stepanov left St. Petersburg for Moscow intent upon introduction his system to the Bolshoi Theatre, but his sudden death - on 16 January, 1896 - dashed these hopes. Aleksandr Gorsky, then at the Bolshoi and one of Stepanov's ardent disciples, reviewed the *Alphabet des mouvements du corps humain*, reworking the notation system into a Russian language version under the title *Tablitsa znakov zapisivaiia dvizhenii chelovecheskago tela po sisteme artista Imperatorskikh S.-Peterbusgskikh Teatrov V.I.Stepanova* (Table of signs for recording the movements of the human body according to V. Stepanov's system) and compiling a primer in choreography, both of which were published in 1899. In this way, Gorsky made the practical application of Stepanov's methodology to classical ballet more accessible to students, in spite of their complaint to the effect that such a system was too complex and, ultimately, fruitless.

Anyway, Nijinsky joined the Imperial Theatre Institute in St. Petersburg in 1898 (just when Stepanov was beginning to study anatomy under Lesgaf), staying there until graduation in 1907. In 1898 Gorsky moved from St. Petersburg to stage the Petipa version of *Sleeping Beauty* at the Bolshoi in Moscow for which he used the Stepanov notations, completing the commission (or so he says) in

¹¹ Lesgaf 1968.

just three weeks. In 1900 he was appointed Maître de Ballet at the Bolshoi delegating his teaching curriculum with its focus on the Stepanov system to one of his pupils, i.e. Nikolai Sergejev – an unpopular mentor whose emigration in 1918 put an end to the promotion of the Stepanov system, at least, in Russia.¹²

Suffice it to compare the Stepanov/Gorsky notations with those of Nijinsky to recognize that Nijinsky's 'system' was not very different from that of his more qualified predecessors! Yet, although any interpretative hypothesis would be premature, given the lack of technical details, it might be fruitful to ponder upon the 'circumstances' of the period 1915-18 when Nijinsky himself wished to take 'control' of his own body, especially of his own movements. After all, not by chance does he describe his notations as 'lessons', stipulating certain 'exercises', which, like those of Stepanov and Gorsky, are based on musical signs.

It is also important to remember that Charcot was mentor to Sigmund Freud (whom, incidentally, Romola contacted regarding her husband's mental health, but to no avail) and to Eugen Bleuler (inventor of the term 'schizophrenia' in 1911), both of whom collaborated with him at La Salpêtrière. Bleuler then returned to Zurich to take up directorship of the Burghölzli University Psychiatric Hospital, a post which he occupied for many years, working closely with Carl Gustav Jung. On 6 March, 1919, Bleuler received the ailing Nijinsky there, diagnosing him as 'catatonic'. After three days, Nijinsky was sent on to the Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzlingen where he stayed until 29 July and whither he would return later. Directed by Ludwig Binswanger, one of the founders of existential therapy, the Bellevue at Kreuzlingen was also a progressive psychiatric hospital and, in the 1920s, at least, was frequented by many luminaries of the arts and sciences – from the painter Ludwig Kirchner to the art historian Aby Warburg who was a patient there between 1921 and 1924.

Hitherto, scholars have overlooked the crucial role which Charcot played in the formation of Stepanov's creative biography, not only as a specialist in anatomy, but also, and above all, in the development of modern psychiatry. All this is to say that we can trace a complex, if subtle and indirect, thread linking Stepanov to Nijinsky and La Salpêtrière and, the errors of positivist psychia-

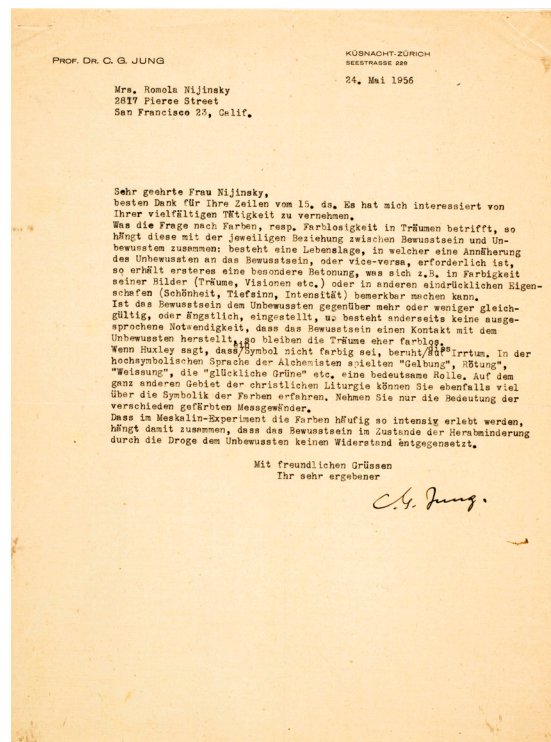


Figure 3 Carl Gustav Jung, letter to Romola Nijinsky. 24 May, 1956. Collection V. Nijinsky. Curatorial Assistance, Pasadena, California. © Curatorial Assistance, Pasadena

try notwithstanding, to the progressive psychologists and psychoanalysts who, in one way or another, were in contact with Nijinsky – making for yet another chapter for us to explore in Nijinsky's chequered career.

By the end of the nineteenth century Positivists were already experiencing a certain anxiety vis à vis irrational psychic phenomena.¹³ This manifested itself in the researches on hallucinatory experience being conducted by Viktor Krizanforovich Kandinsky, noted psychiatrist and uncle of the celebrated painter, who died while experimenting with hallucinatory drugs.¹⁴ Indeed, it was thanks to the effects of mescaline that Carl Jung elaborated private archetypical images in his so called *Red Book* (the secret, heavily illustrated tome which he created between 1913 and 1930, but which he showed to no-one) and in which he inserted pictures of his own dreams as archetypes of the collective unconscious. In a letter to Romo-

¹² On the other hand, Sergejev did much to promote Stepanov and the Russian ballet abroad. His invaluable collection of Stepanov materials is preserved in the Nikolai Grigorevich Sergejev File at the Harvard Theatre Collection, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Call No.: bMS Thr245).

¹³ Mangiarotti 2008.

¹⁴ Misler 1993, 41.

la Nijinska of 24 May, 1956, Jung speaks of the perception of colours under the influence of mescalina and of their relationship to the unconscious state of dreams, referring, apparently, to the colours in Nijinsky's drawings [fig. 3].¹⁵

Although testimony regarding their personal encounters in Switzerland is still unclear, we may still hypothesize that Jung encouraged Nijinsky to record his hallucinatory fantasies pictorially, i.e. to transcribe what Jung defined as "phantasy thinking". In any case, the 'therapeutic' and strictly private application of imagery or decorative geometry, whether in the case of Jung or of Nijinsky, bears close analogies to the drawings of the mentally disabled which, throughout that decade in particular (1915-25), was attracting the attention of both art historians and psychiatrists.

Returning to the deep 'psychiatric anxiety' surrounding the tools of the trade in the early 1900s, we should mention that the systematic use of hypnotism as a panacea for mental illnesses was being greeted with particular enthusiasm at La Salpêtrière, even if this kind of remedy brought medical research dangerously close to the magic of charlatans. Indeed, we see a hysterical woman, hypnotized and cataleptic, in André Brouillet's painting called *Une leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière* of 1887, the only surviving pictorial image which we have of Charcot's famous 'Tuesdays' [fig. 4] – which gives us some idea of the ambience in which Stepanov, the young scholar who had come from from St. Petersburg to Paris to study anatomy, not mental disease, now found himself.¹⁶

That Stepanov had misgivings about involving himself in the study of mental disease is clear from his brief introduction to the *Alphabet* where he mentions having participated in the celebrated *Mardis* or open evenings which Charcot, director of La Salpêtrière, was wont to host in a private house at no. 21 on the Boulevard St. Germain. All the Paris *beau monde* attended these evenings, from the architect Charles Garnier to the writer Alphonse Daudet and the local chief of police. The evenings were a way of 'theatricalizing' and, thereby, promoting, the scientific results which Charcot had obtained from his identification and study of mental diseases, especially epilepsy and female hysteria. He had described, analysed and documented these diseases with punctilious (and positivistic) compunction,

making recourse to drawings and, above all, to photography. In this respect, the long quotation which we find in Stepanov's introduction to the *Alphabet* assumes particular significance:

Les savants les plus compétents eux mêmes sont très embarrassés quand il s'agit, par exemple, de décrire les mouvement complexes d'un malade. Voici par exemple, une description de mouvements choréiques, faite par M. Charcot, l'éminent maître de la Salpêtrière: 'Les bras simulent le jeu d'un joueur de tambour, le jeune fille frappe sur le parquet à des intervalles régulier comme si elle battait la mesure, en même temps la tête tourne rapidement de droite à gauche'. (Charcot: *Leçons du mardi*, p. 150).¹⁷

The term choreic, designating the illness known as 'Huntington chorea' or 'St. Vitus's dance', is very appropriate to this context. In fact, Charcot's clinical report sounds almost like a description of the obsessive stomping of the maidens in the *Rite of Spring* as they follow the syncopated rhythms which Nijinsky had invented for the choreography. – reminiscent of Marie Rambert's colourful recollection of Nijinsky madly beating time behind the wings of the stage.¹⁸ Indeed, one of the pages of Nijinsky's notations notebook for 1915 is all about syncopated movement, a category missing in both Stepanov's and in Gorsky's notations:

O sinkopakh (Syncope). 215. Sinkopa (syncope) est' dvizhenie, kotoroe pomeshchaetsia ili slabym vremennem ili na slaboi chasti odnogo vremeni i prodlenie na odno sil'noe vremia ili na sil'noi chasti odnogo vremeni.

On Syncopation (Syncope). 215. Syncopation is movement which is accommodated either by weak time or within the weak part of a single time together with its continuation on to a strong time or on to the strong part of a single time.¹⁹

Expanding his analysis of choreic movements, Stepanov concluded that their description:

pleine d'expressions métaphoriques montre bien l'impuissance de notre langage pour décrire les mouvements du corps humain. Dans ce cas les

¹⁵ The letter is now in the Nijinsky Collection of Curatorial Assistance in Pasadena, California.

¹⁶ Didi-Huberman's topical study (2008) is fundamental to this discussion.

¹⁷ Stepanow 1892, "Introduction", III.

¹⁸ Hill 2000, 28-30, 106-7. For a detailed description of Rambert's recollection on the choreography see Hodson 1996.

¹⁹ Nijinsky 1915, unpaginated.

appareils enregistreurs ne disent pas non plus grand-chose. Ils ne font que constater certaines régularités, un certain rythme et c'est tout. Dans d'autres cas, les représentations graphiques ne fournissent aucune formule précise; le tracés sont absolument irréguliers, sans logique, si je puis ainsi dire.²⁰

Apart from photography, recording apparatuses also included the electrocardiogram, a scientific instrument which had just been discovered. Inevitably, choreographers were fascinated by the electrocardiogram, the more so since many were now cultivating a particular interest in the recording of movement, the beating of the heart being perhaps the most mysterious and inaccessible of all.

Stepanov went on to add that:

M. Charcot ajoute que pour dépeindre mouvements de cette nature [i.e. of the insane], il faudrait être maître de danse à l'Opéra'. La-dessus, nous ne sommes pas d'accord avec l'illustre professeur. Un maître de ballets pourrait sans doute facilement imiter les mouvements d'une choréique, mais il lui serait impossible de le décrire mieux que M. Charcot lui-même, par manque d'une langue spéciale et indispensable à cette description.²¹

It could be suggested at this juncture that the 'other' kind of Nijinsky notations might well indicate the 'other' experimental movements which he had already developed in *Petrouchka*, *L'Après-midi d'une faune* and, above all, in the "Rite of Spring". Here, for example, the feet turned inwards, a position absolutely unthinkable in the Stepanov *Alphabet*, as we can see from this page illustrating leg movements. In his orthodox dance language the *piéd en dedans* denotes feet straight and parallel and not turned inwards, in spite of the force of the word 'dedans' (inwards).

Stepanov himself feared to tread this delicate path, although, somewhat unexpectedly, in a later footnote of his *Alphabet*, he seems to be contradicting himself when he declares enigmatically:

Nous ne faisons que mentionner nos essais d'enregistrement des mouvements pathologiques (en particulier, ceux des choréiques et des hys-

tériques) faites dans les hôpitaux - nos expériences à ce sujet n'étant pas nombreuses.²²

Evidently Stepanov did take an active part in the Charcot experiments, preferring to maintain silence on this issue, lest the administration of the Imperial Theatres learn about such unorthodox experiments. Once again we cannot help thinking of the allegedly hysterical movements of a shamanistic seance reproduced in the *Rite of Spring*.²³ Still, the Stepanov quotation does contain other key components supplemental to the issue - first and foremost, the reference to "technical instruments" (recording apparatuses) for registering movement, such as an electrocardiogram registering heart movements, but photographic instruments as well. As a matter of fact, La Salpêtrière was equipped with a special photographic studio, supervised by Albert Londe,²⁴ a close collaborator of Étienne-Jules Marey, who had invented a seven and then twelve lense camera capable of taking fast, but accurate, snapshots of the impetuous and uncontrollable movements of the mentally ill. Every clinical case was photographed in closed sequence, thus allowing for a systematic visual documentation in real time. Sometimes this was preceded by a graphic sequence which standardized and synthesized the dynamic evolution of an attack - for example, we can see the table for an epileptic attack, disturbingly close to Muybridge's shots of human dance movements in which female adept wore transparent clothes. But another, no less harrowing, paragon concerns the tables, graphic or photographic, with their detailed elements - and certain poses from the Dance of the Chosen One in the *Rite of Spring*. Once again we recall Nijinsky's encounters with these kind movements in relationship to his brother Stasik, mentally ill, who died in a lunatic asylum. We also think of the epileptic crisis of Dmitriy Kostrowsky (Dmitrii Kostrovsky),²⁵ mentor to Nijinsky in his 'Tolstoyan' conversion, and one of the *Ballets russes* dancers on the south American tour.

Charcot published the results of the researches, including the visual amendments which were conducted at La Salpêtrière, in a well received series of monographs - from Désiré Magloire Bourneville's *Iconographie photographique de la Sal-*

²⁰ Stepanov 1892, "Introduction", III-IV.

²¹ Stepanov 1892, "Introduction", IV.

²² Stepanov 1892, "Introduction", VII footnote.

²³ Russian ethnographers had long noted a connection between the shamanistic seance and epileptic attacks. See: Seroshevsky 1896.

²⁴ Londe 1893

²⁵ Buckle 1971, 387.

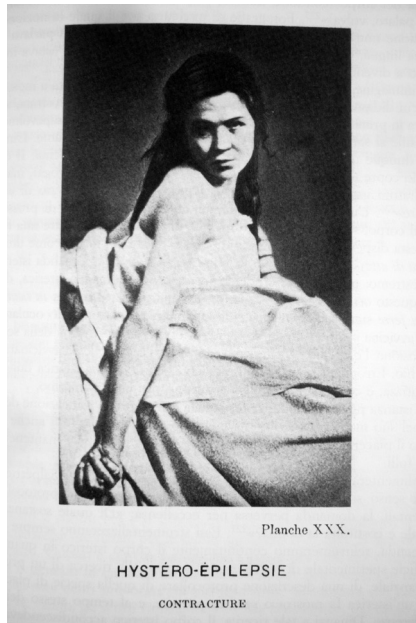


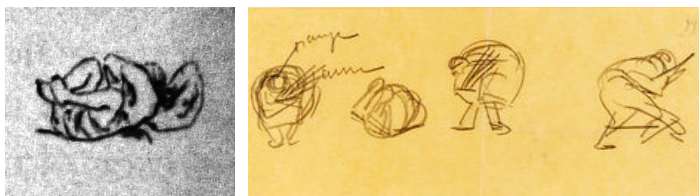
Figure 4a Charcot et al., *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, Planche XXX, *Hystero-Epilepsie. Contracture*. Paris, 1888



Figure 4b Nikolai Roerich, costume design for the ballet *The Rite of Spring*. 1912. Gouache on cardboard, 25.1 × 15.3 cm. © State Central A. Bakhrushin Theatre Museum, Moscow

Figure 5a Richer, *Études cliniques sur la grande hystérie*. Plate V, *II Période épileptoïde*, Detail. Paris, 1881, 62

Figure 5b Valentine Gross, *Rite of Spring*. 4 Personages bent and folded over 1913. Pencil on paper, 11.1 × 19.2 cm. London: V & A Museum (Theatre Museum). © V & A Museum. Museum number: S.191-1999



pêtrière and Paul Regnard's study of epilepsy and hystero-epilepsy to the multi-volume series *Nouvelle iconographie de la Salpêtrière. Clinique des maladies du système nerveux* which appeared between 1888 and 1918.

With his multiple lense camera, Londe, 'official' photographer for La Salpêtrière, could create a sequence of twelve pictures on a single plate for durations between one tenth of a second and several seconds, even if the single shots had to be than re-separated into the 'planches' which broke down

each single movement of the action. In this case, fluidity of movement was fragmented and even if the researcher claimed to be recording movement in its continuity, to a certain extent chronophotography still forced the subject to pose before the lens, i.e. to freeze the pose or at least freeze it in a sequence of moments or instant poses - which impacted both Stepanov's and Gorsky's systems.

This kind of temporal discontinuity raised doubts concerning the authenticity of the experiments which were conducted on the poor hysterical



Figure 6 Karl Strauss, V. Nijinsky in "Till Eulenspiegel".
New York, 1916. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale
de France, Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra.
© Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux



Figure 7 Vaslav Nijinsky, *Dancer or The God of Dance*.
Undated. Pencil and colored pencils on paper,
34.3 × 24.5 cm. Dance Collection John Neuberger.
© Dance Collection John Neuberger

or epileptic women at La Salpêtrière, who, in one way or another, were often obliged to 'stage' their own illnesses manifest in the horrifying pictures of hystero-epilepsy wherein the involuntary contraction (contracture),²⁶ of the hand is literally turned upside down from the wrist down, or wherein the position of the head is squeezed into the shoulder (as in the *Rite of the Spring*) [figs 4a-b].

If we look at the Paul Richer's sketches illustrating the 'scientific' discoveries at La Salpêtrière - for example the 'fetal' position during an hysterical attack,²⁷ then what one reviewer of the premiere of the *Rite of the Spring* asserted would seem to be entirely appropriate "The Chosen one looked like 'a knocked out idiot contorted by paralysis, before she abandons herself to a massive attack of epilepsy'"²⁸ [figs 5a-b].

The fact that, so as to attain maximum academic verisimilitude, a doctor needed to stop time by freezing the result, can be judged from plaster casts taken from a live patient and displayed at La Salpêtrière Museum of Plaster Casts (also called the Charcot Museum) along the lines of the late 19th century plaster casts taken from Greek and Roman masterpieces. Similarly, never able to apprehend continuity, not even of a *Pas*, dance photographers were also forced to stage the poses of their dancers. Such hysterical and epileptic movements, so difficult to transcribe or standardize into an alphabet, were very close to the unexpected and 'clumsy' movements in the brilliant choreographies which Nijinsky composed for *Petrouchka* in 1911 or *Till Eulenspiegel* in 1916 [fig. 6], the latter receiving a very cool response from the audience.

²⁶ Charcot 1888, planche XXX, *Hystero-Epilepsie. Contracture*, unpaginated.

²⁷ Richer 1881, 62.

²⁸ Gaston Carraud, "Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Le Sacre du printemps". *La Liberté*, 31 May 1913. Cited in Hodson 1987, 56.

This context brings us back to La Salpêtrière and to the experimental course of treatment involving electroshock therapy wherein the stimuli which Galvani had applied to frogs were now extended to the living body – an ‘invented’, electric remedy utilized for ‘invented’ diseases such as hysteria. Conversely, the contractions and spasms of electroshock resembled those of hysteria. Even

so and in spite of his historical and grotesque contortions in *Till Eulenspiegel*, Nijinsky glimpsed the ecstatic moments of sublimation in the elegant vortices of the dance [fig. 7] – a sublimation which takes us back to the whirling dance of the Chosen One, to the shamanic tradition²⁹ – and to the requisite of the shamanic rite that the body be abandoned to a cosmic consonance with nature.

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²⁹ Taruskin 1996, 886-7.