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Juliet Bellow, *Modernism on Stage: The Ballets Russes and the Parisian Avant-Garde*. Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. xviii + 280 pp. \$119.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 1409409112.

Review by Danijela Špirić-Beard, University of Nottingham.

In her monograph *Modernism on Stage: The Ballets Russes and the Parisian Avant-Garde*, Juliet Bellow uses four relatively unexplored productions—*Parade* (1917), *Cléopâtre* (1918), *Le Chant du Rossignol* (1920) and *Le Bal* (1929)—to forge an alternative narrative about the Ballets Russes and to restore the company's central position within the Parisian art world of the 1910s and 1920s. Bellow's focus on designs by Pablo Picasso, Sonia Delaunay, Henri Matisse and Giorgio de Chirico highlights the complex relationship between Diaghilev's troupe and the Parisian avant-garde, and spotlights the fascinating and challenging process of transferring two-dimensional artwork (paintings/sketches) to the three-dimensional space of the stage (stage designs/costumes). *Modernism on Stage* analyses these transformations, tracing forms and ideas as they migrated from painting to stage and back again, and then considers the impact such collaborative ventures had on the artists' outputs as a whole. In doing so, Bellow prompts new readings of each artist's oeuvre and of the Ballets Russes in the context of Parisian avant-garde experiments with cubism, simultanism, fauvism and surrealism.

The book comprises five main chapters, with a short introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter contextualizes orientalism and the commercial nature of Diaghilev's pre-war enterprise (*Schéhérazade*, the *Firebird*), offset by subsequent radical experiments in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* and the *Rite of Spring* (especially Nijinsky's choreography). The subsequent four chapters demonstrate a shift from the commercial exoticism of pre-War ballets towards more committed artistic experiments in *Parade*, *Cléopâtre* (the 1918 revival, not the original 1909 production), *Le Chant du Rossignol* and *Le Bal*. Chapter two, on *Parade*, taps into wider debates about modernism and the body, and the liberating versus alienating effects of modern technologies and the great War (for example, Cocteau's enthusiastic embrace of early cinema versus Picasso's dystopic vision of technology, as reflected in Picasso's and Massine's "de-corporealised" figures). Chapter three, on *Cléopâtre*, focuses on Delaunay's 1918 re-design of Bakst's 1909 *Cléopâtre*, which transforms her from a pre-War oriental heroine to a post-War chic Parisienne; here Delaunay's art is situated within discourse on New Women and growing anxiety about the role of women in modern societies. The fourth chapter, on *Le Chant du Rossignol*, examines Matisse's changing attitudes to decoration and his shift from "the 'dazzling richness of colors' Diaghilev requested" to a more "restrained" exoticism derived from the simplicity of Chinese porcelain and French *chinoiserie*, through which he hoped to achieve a rapprochement between occidental art-forms (painting) and oriental decoration (p.15). Lastly, chapter five, on *Le Bal*, provides a meta-commentary about the continuing relevance of the classical tradition: dubbed "skeptical neoclassicism," *Le Bal* both revives and undermines faith in the classical tradition, with Balanchine's "starchy" choreography and designs that overload the stage and bodies with a jumble of broken classical debris (p. 16). Bellow reads *Le Bal* as an apocalyptic last work that suggested the intellectual bankruptcy of Ballets Russes experiments in the context of more radical dance productions in the early 1920s by the Ballets Suédois and Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadisches Ballett* (1922).

Bellow's *Modernism on Stage* re-thinks the conventional view that the Ballets Russes was a "Right Bank phenomenon" with implied politically and aesthetically conservative associations derived from Diaghilev's links to French and Russian elite patronage. By contrast, through her four case studies, Bellow highlights the political and cultural diversity of the company, and demonstrates how these

works function as sites of critique and contestation of aesthetic, political and gender norms. She argues that the troupe “confounded traditional divides of left and right, popular entertainment and elite culture, the commercial and the disinterested or the oppositional” (p. 4). She also re-evaluates persistent scholarly readings of the company as overwhelmingly subject to Diaghilev’s dictatorial command. In her quest to grapple with the collaborative nature of the Ballets Russes’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Bellow eschews the impresario’s authoritarian role and instead pursues a bottom-up enquiry that places the artists’ individual and collaborative contributions at the centre of each production. She claims to reject narrow disciplinary perspectives in favour of an intermedial focus on interactions among sets, costumes, choreography and music, emphasizing that these “multimedia works demand a cross-disciplinary interpretative approach—the invention of a critical vocabulary adequate to describing the complex ways in which these spectacles mixed artistic forms” (p. 5). This raises the expectation of an interdisciplinary study, but a few sentences later Bellow hints that the primary goal of her book is to gain an “understanding [of] what *plastic artists* of the period hoped to gain through a confrontation with other arts” (p. 5). The consequence of this contradiction is that, from the very start, Bellow’s intentions are unclear. Moreover, the promised “critical intermedial vocabulary” fails to materialize and the reader is continually frustrated by the lack of genuine dialogue between art, music and dance.

If this is an interdisciplinary study, a disproportionate amount of space is given to art and, to a lesser extent, dance. Music certainly gets the short straw. Her observations on music are very short and superficial, with music analyses taken from very general and outdated sources from the 1960s and 1970s (by writers such as Eric Salzman, William W. Austin, and Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca). It is unclear why Bellow does not refer to more recent musicological studies, for example by Albright, Caddy, Joseph or Levitz, and this amounts to a significant oversight.^[1] The exception is perhaps chapter 4 on *Parade* where we are treated to an informative paragraph regarding a section of Satie’s score (based on Gillmore, p. 109), but even here the discussion of music amounts to tokenism. More importantly, throughout the book music is not brought into *dialogue* with the other art forms, and this is a major failing of *Modernism on Stage*. Of course, as an art historian, Bellow is not necessarily expected to become a music specialist herself, but it would certainly have been beneficial to have had a musicologist proofread her text (as indeed, she does with the eminent Ballets Russes dance scholar Lynn Garafola, and a few others). Most worryingly, Bellow makes some serious errors in her discussions of music. For example, she does not question Laloy’s comment that there was a “lack of string instruments in *Le Sacre*” (p. 83, fn 174), she talks about “highly dissonant, polyphonic chords” (p. 63; polyphony refers to melody not chords), and she makes a misleading assumption about the score of *Le Chant du Rossignol*. Bellow gives the impression that *Le Chant du Rossignol* sounds more like the *Rite of Spring* (p. 174), but in fact *Le Chant du Rossignol* combines the magic-realism and subtly blended impressionistic sonorities of the *Firebird* with brash harmonic and rhythmic contrasts derived from *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*. Bellow also makes a point about a melody and counter-melody in *Le Chant du Rossignol* as if there were only two such figures in the entire twenty-minute piece, and neither of the outdated sources she relates these observations to make any such claim.

Interdisciplinarity aside, the other major issue is that the book is haunted by the spectre of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the total artwork), which Bellow strictly confines to Wagnerian synthesis, a cohesive fusion of a singular grand vision. Grafting Wagnerian ideas onto the Ballets Russes is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, Diaghilev’s preoccupation with the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was dually indebted to Wagner and to a specific kind of Russian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which fostered more collaborative ventures, as embodied in Savva Mamontov’s Abramtsevo Colony.^[2] Diaghilev and Benois, who were a part of Mamontov’s circle, were directly influenced by Mamontov’s ideas (including his early operatic endeavours), which they advocated in their journal *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art), (1889-1904). Secondly, the nature of Wagner’s total artwork (which refers specifically to his music dramas) is very different from the collaborative approach of the Ballets Russes: unlike Wagner’s authorial voice, the Ballet Russes productions function as modernist collaborative hybrids. It is only through reconfiguring the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a form of hybridity that we can understand the Ballet Russes philosophy, and thus accommodate the creative friction intrinsic to their productions, whether stoked up by Diaghilev or instigated by different

members of the creative teams themselves. Another related problem is the inherent conflict between Wagner's totalizing gesture of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and a modernist insistency on the autonomy of the arts, as illustrated by cubism, Russian constructivism, or neo-classicism in music, with its focus on the "materiality" of form over emotion or programme. The hybrid model potentially solves some of these issues, but the shifting balance between the different elements became increasingly precarious for the Ballets Russes throughout the 1920s.

Modernism on Stage highlights a universal problem with interdisciplinary studies and raises the question whether such projects can ever be undertaken by a single scholar in a satisfactory way, especially when a non-musicologist deals with (or in this case, largely avoids) the highly specific language of music. *Modernism on Stage* reveals the necessity for art-historians, dance scholars and musicologists to combine forces, not merely as co-editors but as co-writers, when dealing with the Ballets Russes. In other words, these truly collaborative ventures ultimately necessitate truly collaborative analyses. That said, the book introduces many stimulating themes, such as the role of the modernist body, the changing role of women in post-war society, and the question of national identity in post-War France. Bellow effectively spins a trajectory of radical experiments in dance, from Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan in early twentieth-century Paris, via Fokine's and Nijinsky's early Ballets Russes choreographies (*Firebird*, *L'Après-midi d'un faun*, *Rite of Spring*), which set up the foundation for further choreographic experiments in *Parade*, *Cléopâtre*, *Le Chant du Rossignol* and *Le Bal*. She examines the relationship between ballet and mounting anxieties about the regenerative potential of healthy bodies and "primitivist" dance; growing tensions between elite and popular culture; utopian versus dystopic visions of new technologies and the effects they have on human bodies; and the questionable relevance of classical heritage in the context of French post-war culture.

Such discussions are complemented by reception examples from the French press. Whilst this is highly welcome, Bellow at times loses her critical compass and offers a reception survey rather than a critical appraisal of these sources. The absence of Bellow's critical voice is also noticeable in other parts of the book in which the moments of scholarly research are tinged with an overreliance on and acceptance of secondary accounts: for instance, her own views and opinions are often tucked in endnotes, and the scholarship on body in chapter one shows a heavy overreliance on two sources (Kennel and Järvinen). This, combined with her musical oversights, raises questions about the thoroughness of Bellow's scholarly endeavour, to which answers will be gleaned from reviewers in other disciplines, such as dance.

In conclusion, if the intention of this book is to produce a truly intermedial study, then it must be judged a failure. If, however, the intention is to bring new insights on the role of art and design in Bellow's four chosen productions, then from this perspective the book has merit. Stated reservations aside, there is a great amount of original insight into the visual dimension of the Ballets Russes, which challenges existing scholarship and brings welcome new perspectives on the role of art and design in these four chosen productions. The Ballets Russes offered Picasso, Delauney, Matisse and De Chirico (and their collaborative colleagues) a forum in which to test out key stylistic and conceptual properties of their painterly practice, and these are explored intelligibly and supported by a good number of helpful illustrations. These new perspectives on Diaghliev's troupe are invaluable to anyone interested in the Ballets Russes, the plastic arts and design, or the interaction between the arts and ballet in early twentieth-century Paris.

NOTES

[1] None of the following are referred to in *Modernism on Stage*: Elaine Brody, "The Legacy of Ida Rubinstein: Mata Hari of the Ballets Russes," *The Journal of Musicology* 4/4 (1985): 491-506; Daniel Albright's chapter on *Parade* entitled "Cube" in *Untwisting the Serpent* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 198-215; Charles Joseph, *Stravinsky and Balanchine: A Journey of Invention* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), especially chapter three entitled "An Early Encounter: *Le Chant du Rossignol*," pp. 55-72; Tamara Levitz, "The Chosen One's Choice"

in *Beyond Structural Listening: Postmodern Modes of Hearing*, ed. Andrew Dell'Antonio (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 70-108; Nikolas Fehr, "Critical Cosmopolitans Commandeer the Parade," *Musicological Explorations* 10 (2009):1-31; Susan Calkins, "Modernism in Music and Erik Satie's Parade," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 41/1 (2010): 3-19; Charles Joseph, *Stravinsky's Ballets* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011); Davinia Caddy, *The Ballets Russes and Beyond: Music and Dance in Belle-époque Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[2] For more on this see Andrew Wachtel, "Petrushka in the Context of Russian Modernist Culture" in *Petrushka: Sources and Context*, A. Wachtel, ed. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

Danijela Špirić-Beard
University of Nottingham
d.spiric-beard@nottingham.ac.uk

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