

Violence and Light in the *Rite of Spring* of Marie Chouinard

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Abstract

Since the original 1913 version, there have been many different interpretations of Le Sacre du Printemps. Yet, all have commonality in bringing their dancers to the edge of an extreme physical, mental, and emotional effort. Movement in these choreographies is not an abstraction. Rather, it is an experience of life captured in physical challenges and emotional complexity that refers to the meaning of human existence, or Dasein, which translates literally from German as 'being there.' Martin Heidegger conceptualizes Dasein as both noun and verb: as a state of being and a process of becoming that occurs over history and time. It is interconnected with being, essence, existence, truth, and beauty. Consequently, this paper develops a line of thought around Dasein in Le Sacre du Printemps by exploring the following questions: How is Dasein performed in Marie Chouinard version? How is beauty conceptualized within violence and performed through the movement and the musical score? And, finally, what is the relation between truth and beauty in these two choreographies? This paper intertextualizes dance studies, philosophy, and critical theory.

Introduction

Light violently penetrates my eyes as I look at images; these moving images are the work of Marie Chouinard in her choreography, *Rite of Spring*. These images look otherworldly, like dreams transported into reality. The more I watch them, the more the light penetrates, the more these images become my own oneiric reality.

Darkness...Darkness surrounds a body, a body showered in a beam of light. This body, this dancer's body, with its knees bent, stands up strongly in parallel position, Yet its arms are bent like broken wings, pushing its head towards the light; like a bird hatching from an egg, a butterfly emerging from the cocoon, a plant sprouting out of the surface of the earth. The creature-dancer violently stomps and pushes itself from ground to sky; from dark to light, like a birth, it comes into the world, into presence, into Being.

A succession of images passes quickly in front of my eyes. I see dancers moving from darkness into light, evoking Plato's Cave in my mind. For me, the analogy between Plato's Cave and the work of Marie Chouinard is most apparent when considering how both works conceptualize the relation between shadows and light. In Plato's Cave, prisoners in darkness are facing a wall, only able to see shadows projected from a small fire situated behind them –shadows that are formless, that do not construct a reality. As a man escapes from the cave, he is blinded by the violence of light. For Plato, the exploration of shadows and light is an allegory of the light of intellectual contemplation. It is the ideal forms perceived in the world of incorporeal light that occupy the highest reality – and not the material world perceived by our five empirical senses.

To the philosopher, these forms represent ideas. However, Chouinard's choreography is not a mere allegory. Rather, it can be understood as Platonism against Platonism. In her *Rite of Spring*, the visceral physical experience of bodies is in opposition to the incorporeal light of Plato. Wherein there is a perversion of the idealism in Platonism, similar to the way Nietzsche overturns Platonism. Hence, I propose a reading of Chouinard's *Rite of Spring* as an unleashing of forces, as an anti-platonic philosophy, through the language of George Bataille in connection with Martin Heidegger.

The movement of Chouinard's choreography accentuates two planes: the vertical, and the horizontal. The staccato stomping of feet and crawling define the earth, while the frenetic jumping and reaching of heads and arms up accentuates the verticality towards the sky. So what is it precisely below the ground? Below the ground there is darkness where dancers -- as flowers -- emanate into the zone of light. The flower images created in the choreography echo George Bataille's idea from *Visions of Excess*, "Flowers themselves, lost in the immense movement from earth to sky, are reduced to an episodic role, by breaking the monotony, to the inevitable seductiveness produced by the general thrust from low to high." (13) What then is visible and invisible in this world of darkness and light? For Bataille, visible parts of the flower are nobly elevated while sticky roots wallow in the ground: the 'favorable impression' made by the flower is unavoidably tied to the "[...] impossible and fantastic vision of roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin. What is evil is necessarily represented [...] by a movement from high to low." (13) Following this line of thought, Marie Chouinard's work of art, framed by opposing movements, from down to up, could be interpreted as the violent experience of coming into light, into knowledge, like spring coming from the darkness of winter, erupting into the equinox, where light reaches its maximum and unveils the truth.

There is an obvious metaphor in the relation between winter and spring: darkness and light. It is a metaphor of the place of emergence brought to present. It is the Being, which Martin Heidegger, defines as coming into the presence rather than the stable substantial presence. In Chouinard's work, Being is characterized as the space of oscillation between coming and not coming, between the visibility and the non visibility of dancers on the stage. Being is welcoming to lightness. Being, the coming into presence is depicted and experienced by the movement of dancers who turn around while they simultaneously move their head and pelvis in a circular pattern under a fulminating spotlight. Dancers are constantly moving in and out of illuminated areas of the stage; meaning, moving from the space of concealedness or invisibility into a space of unconcealedness, or visibility.

It is in this space of light that *aletheia* -- the name Heidegger gives to the unconcealedness of the truth -- presents itself. *Aletheia* emerges out of shadows. Consequently, using Heidegger's language in regard to *Rite of Spring*, the truth of an entity has set itself to work. The unity of the art work in relation to truth, parallels the idea of integrity, which Chouinard describes: "When a movement has integrity, then shape and spirit are in unison. When there is a relation between that and the backdrop, you could say, of life and of reality, when there is a relationship with what is beyond." (56) This truth in Chouinard's *Rite of Spring*, happens as an open space occurs. In other words, there is clarity, lighting, a cleansing that mirrors Chouinard's concept of integrity

with Heidegger's concept of *aletheia*. Heidegger develops the concept of *aletheia*, or the unconcealedness of the truth in "The Origin of the Work of Art," --where he states that art grants and guarantees to humans a passage to those beings that they are not, and access to the being that they themselves are." In Chouinard's *Rite*, this unconcealedness can be understood as happening where the ordinary becomes extraordinary -- the uncanny spring. This uncanny spring is highly eroticized -- almost as a bacchanal -- an orgy of nature which embraces spring as an open space of fertility. The choreography generates surreal images that suspend traditional notions of gender in a constant movement of ambiguity. As a spectator, I see a Minotaur or a Bacchus performed by men and women.

While spring traditionally revolves around earth and women, in Chouinard's piece there is gender equality in terms of the performance of the relation between fertility and earth. The movements are androgynous, and each can be performed by a man or a woman. However, since bodies on stage are almost naked, a close up reading reveals female qualities, such as breasts. Chouinard women are powerful and strong. They also move between darkness and light, from moon (traditionally viewed as feminine) to sun (masculine). But one can also read it as a movement between Hell and Heaven, as in the poem "The Possessed" by Charles Baudelaire.

The Sun has draped black crepe on its fires,
Moon of my life, wrap yourself like it
In shadow; and sleep, and smoke, if you like,
Be silent or dark, plunge in Boredom's Abyss;

I love you like that! Yet today if you wish,
Like a covered star coming from twilight,
To strut in the space crammed by Madness,
It's all good! Fine knife, unleashed from your case!¹

Baudelaire's Poetry, like Chouinard's choreography, reveals truth as a violent rupture in Bataille's sense.²

Nudity, already previously mentioned, is highly aestheticized by Chouinard. But nudity can be also conceptualized as the visible open space of light. Female and male dancers appear on stage with naked torsos, only covering their genitals with black minimalistic shorts. The choreographer uses nudity in most of her pieces as an allusion to the classical concept of beauty. But rather than just following the classical concept of beauty based on the proportions of the body, Chouinard develops her own concept for nudity and beauty;

It is more in line with what Greeks were doing 3000 years ago. They were creating absolutely wonderful sculptures and most of the times presenting the body in the nude. [...] One part of me wants to show the movement as much as possible but at the same time I am trying to complement the body or put an extension to the body so the costume becomes another manifestation of the piece itself. We're trying to bring the spirit of the piece over the body with a small a costume as we can (57)

For me, as an emancipated spectator, the beauty in the *Rite* of Marie Chouinard is a conceptual one, relating to the unconcealedness of the truth. In her choreography, she references a surrealist concept of beauty, where the unconscious, the psychic, the sexual, and the perceptual are bound together. A beauty which is defined as a convulsive beauty that according to Hal Foster, “Not only stresses the formless and evokes the unrepresentable, as with the sublime, but it also mixes delight and dread, attraction and repulsion: it too involves ‘a momentary check to the vital forces’, ‘a negative pleasure’.” (28)

The concept of the Spring as coming into light is a violent one. Spring is not conceptualized in Chouinard’s choreography nor in this paper as an idyllic landscape. It is rather an outburst, an explosion of violence, an excess of movement in nature: flowers and leaves popping out from their buds; rivers and lakes overflowing from rain and melting snow; animals moving, migrating, and mating. Everything moves. There is an unchained process of movement, energy, and emotions. Therefore the truth of the spring is a violent one, and so is the truth in Chouinard’s choreography. Movements become sharp and agitated; a continuous pelvic movement evokes sexuality, an eruption of nature. Moreover, in Chouinard’s *Rite* there is no sacrifice per se -- there isn’t, for instance, a virgin who dances herself to death. But, there is an excess of movement and a constant compulsive repetition of movement which evokes death. Birth is a violent movement; it is the rupture towards light and the predominant motive of spring. But, along with birth, death is omnipresent in spring as darkness surrounds the space of light. The question for the choreography is, when does this repetition of the movements serve binding life, and when diffusion of death, or when is the repetition driven by desire, and when by death? Since I frame this *Rite of Spring* by the dissident surrealism of Bataille, I draw upon Hal Foster’s theory that, “It is precisely at these points of greatest difficulty -- where pleasure and death principles appear to serve one another, where sexual and destructive drives appear identical -- that surrealism is at once achieved and undone.” (11) Right here, where sexual and destructive drives appear together is the point of intersection between Chouinard’s piece and surrealism.

Death not only shows itself through the movement, but it also appears in the symbolism of the costumes. Spikes are a principal component of the dancers’ costume. They are attached as extensions in their arms, as horns in their heads, and finally as a phallus in their pelvises. The spike signifies a violence full of contradictions, because it is the phallus which pushes, penetrates, gives life, but also cuts, and gives death. This ambiguity also appears in the use of mask by dancers. It is a bull mask. Looking at the dancers wearing the bull mask, Pablo Picasso’s words come to mind: “It looks to be a picture that the viewer invents herself: it is a bull, but the viewer asks herself, what makes it so.” (Levy 119) And what I see in Chouinard’s piece is that female and male dancers become Minotaurs by wearing these masks; as Asterion equally shares its aggressive components in females and males. And, there is a moment in the choreography where dancers gather together forming a compact group. They move slowly but in opposition; up and down creating a wave where the bull’s presence comes into visibility from the darkness or invisibility. At this precise moment, the mask becomes intensified; the mask evokes opposing concepts of war and love, death and desire, physically representing the conflict or confusion between principles of death and life, which renders the moment so tensely ambiguous.

The beauty in Chouinard's *Rite* is the truth of the spring, which in her work is framed in a quasi oneiric reality; a truth attached to the irrationality of dreams; a truth which is full of ambiguities and violence. The question then, is how does this violence, which emanates from the images of the choreography, relate to the truth. Here, I refer to French philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy, who effectively connects the concept of Being to the violent aspect in the images. For Nancy, the image is a *monstrant*: "It is what takes the thing out of its simple presence and brings it to *praesentia*," (22) to being out-in-front-of-itself, turned toward the outside. The images in this choreography act like a *monstre*, emerging from its unity and force. The force itself lies in the unity that joins them together in order to bring them to light. The choreography tirelessly searches for this force, constantly renewing and reinventing its approach. Force is connected to forms to deform or transform them. And, as Nancy points out, "Image is always a dynamic or energetic metamorphosis; it begins before forms and goes beyond them." (22) By applying this idea to Chouinard's *Rite*, I see that the images of her choreography not only exceed the form, the aspect, the calm surface or representation, but that they draw upon the groundless; the groundless which is defined by excessive power; the excessive power generated by the energy of the movement. Therefore, Chouinard's choreography is a work of art which from the excess of power touches the real; in one word, it is groundless.

The choreography is about violence, where spring operates as an element of transgression; a transgression and a being that are carried away beyond the signs. In this beyond, violence and truth are mutually engaged in an act of self-exposure. Both, the core of this act and its realization take place in the images of Chouinard's choreography. Violence, by its nature, is full of ambiguities but this is especially evident in Chouinard's piece, about the violence of the spring. Additionally, when one considers the spring in the context of community and nationhood, a question emerges: where does violence begin, and where does it end? Or better, what right justifies violence of nation? In posing these questions, I am going beyond the meaning that Chouinard assigns to the interpretation of the *Rite of Spring*. I am becoming an emancipated spectator, one who does not get seduced by images in a passive voyeuristic way; one who sees, feels and understands something, forming my own intellectual inquiry into violence, light, beauty and truth in Chouinard's piece. As Jacques Ranciere powerfully describes it and I translate:

"I" the emancipated spectator, observe, select, compare, interpret. "I" link what "I" see to a host of other things that "I" have seen on other stages, in other venues. "I" participate in the performance by refashioning it in my own way –by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which "I" had read or dreamt, experienced or invented.³ (13)

On the other hand, I must confess that I get seduced by Chouinard's *Rite*. I get fascinated by its violence, by the energy created from the movement, by the energy, a light, an aura that emanates from the choreography.

Nevertheless, the aura that this piece produces is a truth which is inextricably linked to my own intellectual inquiry. In this aspect even if Marie Chouinard does not

have a sacrificial virgin in her choreography I see a sacrifice without sacrifice. I see life and death intertwined through the acts of transgression and violence. Seeing, for me is knowing, and I see the rapture of spring as the metaphor for the rupture of an extreme violence like the revolution of a community and nation. I relate this in the choreography of Marie Chouinard to Bataille's interpretation of Heidegger's Being. "Being is not simple identity, but rather a rupture or disequilibrium, the sudden change of levels: being is a violent *difference*, precariousness and heterogeneity in relation to a given stable group." This means there is a rupture, an opening to let out the "excess of an unmaintainable, delusive unity, whether that unity is consciousness, the body, community or a nation."⁴ (xxi)

At the end of the *Rite of Spring* by Marie Chouinard, dancers reach the light by standing up in a complete vertical position -- as human beings -- by extending their arms and heads towards the light. The extreme violence of the movement, the excess of energy, has exploded bringing verticality towards light. I pause and ask, does this represent the end of successions of catastrophes in the human history? Maybe, but perhaps the finale of the choreography could be understood and conceptualized as the end of violence, a revolution which changes the world, but also time.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to especially thank Prof. Brian Grosskurth from the Visual Art Department at York University. Through his seminar "Violence and Light" I found inspiration and base for my conceptualization in the above writing. I would like to express gratitude for the support of Prof. Norma Sue Fisher-Stitt and Prof. Patrick Alcedo of the York University Dance Department.

Notes

1. "The Possessed" by Charles Baudelaire. Trans. Brian Grosskurth
2. For Bataille's reading of Baudelaire, see *Literature and Evil*.
3. Text verbatim from *The Emancipated Spectator* of Jacques Ranciere, except I substitute (my) first person for (his) third person, whereby assuming the role of the emancipated spectator empowers my own reading and conceptualization of Marie Chouinard's *Rite*.
4. From Introduction to *Visions of Excess* by Alan Stoekl

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