

## Chapter 7: The multiple choreographies of the Ballets Suédois' *Relâche*<sup>1</sup>

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In 1920, Rolf de Maré, a well-off arts patron from Sweden, founded a dance troupe. Like Sergei Diaghilev before him, he named the troupe after his national origins – the “Ballets Suédois”, or “Swedish Ballets” – but selected Paris as its home base. In the next few years, the troupe produced and performed more than 20 works in Paris and abroad, implicating an international selection of artists. Choreography was the domain of Jean Börlin, also lead dancer of the Ballets Suédois; de Maré's librettists included Paul Claudel, Luigi Pirandello, Blaise Cendrars, and Jean Cocteau; his ballets' sets were signed by, among others, Fernand Léger and Giorgio de Chirico; music was composed by artists including Darius Milhaud, Georges Auric, and Cole Porter. In 1925, the Ballets Suédois were dissolved – although de Maré's dance activities did not cease, as indicated by his foundation of the *Archives Internationales de la Danse* [International Archives of Dance]. A few months before its dissolution, the company performed its last choreographic production: *Relâche*.

Like other Ballets Suédois works, *Relâche* had enviable credits: Börlin choreographed, Erik Satie composed its music, and René Clair directed a film – *Entr'acte* – that became part of the ballet's performance. This collaboration was meant to be based on a libretto by Cendrars; however, the project was transferred to ex-Dada artist Francis Picabia,<sup>2</sup> who wrote both the ballet's script – possibly in reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Le Grand verre* (1915–1923)<sup>3</sup> – and

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1 This chapter is an elaboration of Leon, Anna: Vielfältige Konzepte des Choreografischen in Tanz und Film. Die Ballets Suédois und ihr Stück *Relâche*, in: *Montage AV* 24/2 (2015), pp. 17–35; see also Leon, Anna: Now and Then. Contemporary and Historical Instances of Intermediality on the Choreographic Stage, in: Haitzinger, Nicole & Kollinger, Franziska (eds.): *Überschreitungen: Beiträge zur Theoretisierung von Inszenierungs- und Aufführungspraxis*, Munich: epodium 2016, pp. 14–21 (e-book).

2 Boulbès, Carole: *Relâche. Dernier coup d'éclat des Ballets Suédois*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel 2017, p. 91.

3 Baker, George: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris*, Cambridge: MIT Press 2007, p. 302.

a loose scenario for the film. Picabia's ballet benefited from a wide publicity campaign; the piece, though, was performed merely thirteen times, the last of which was followed by a further short stage work by Picabia, *Cinésketch*.<sup>4</sup> In the approximately 40-minute-long work, the Parisian audiences of *Relâche* were treated to an introduction and intermission filled by Clair's film, on-stage action that ranged from a firefighter pouring water into buckets to a partial striptease, and Picabia and Satie in a Citroën car in the finale.

*Relâche* is part of the historical cannon of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century dance modernity and representative of multiple tendencies of the period. It exemplifies the innovations and experimentations of modern ballet – including incorporating non-classical technique, interdisciplinarity, and scenographic elements that accentuated the plastic/visual dimensions of the stage. It displays early-20<sup>th</sup>-century choreography's challenges towards institutionalised dance practices; its inclusions of, and penetrations by, mass media and popular culture; and its relations with the historical avant-gardes in the visual arts – branching out, beyond dance history, to performance art. In parallel, the piece deepens and heightens several of the period's tendencies; for example, a dephysicalisation of the body is found in several works of the time, and in Picabia's ballet the body is confronted with its quasi-replacement by the inorganic medium of film. Here, the performative implication of scenography takes centre stage and, at times, undermines the presentation of dance. In these ways, *Relâche* – just like other radically-experimental modern ballet works, such as the Ballets Russes' *Feu d'artifice* (1917) – both exemplifies and intensifies aspects of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century dance modernity relevant to expanded choreography.

Although no original film recording of the ballet exists, available primary sources on the Ballets Suédois' last ballet include: photographs of the stage and the performers (however, these were not shot during the performances and do not certainly represent "final" versions of material);<sup>5</sup> notes and correspondence between de Maré, Picabia, Satie, Clair, and other collaborators, available at the archives of the Stockholm *Dansmuseet*; the entirety of Clair's scenario and film,<sup>6</sup> Satie's music, and Picabia's basic scripts for *Entr'acte* and for the ballet as a whole. An invaluable secondary source is art historian Carole Boulbès' book-length study, based on her research as a contributor to the ballet's reconstruction by the Ballet de Lorraine (2014). The reconstruction itself is a further valuable source, even though it includes (founded, but creative) conjectures by choreographers

4 Boulbès: *Relâche*, pp. 12, 126.

5 Ibid., p. 115.

6 For a version of the film in circulation today, see: Clair, René: *Entr'acte*, in: Clair, René: *A nous la liberté* [DVD]. The Criterion Collection 2002 [1924], 20:17.

Petter Jacobsson and Thomas Caley.<sup>7</sup> *Relâche* is mentioned in several dance-history studies of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century, and is analysed from the perspective of art, film, and performance history.<sup>8</sup> Here, the Ballets Suédois' last ballet is explored from the perspective of expanded choreography.

From such a perspective, *Relâche* responds to multiple conceptions of choreography at once – some associated with dance-making and embodied motion, and others expanded beyond them. Adopting an “expanded” viewpoint allows *Relâche* to exemplify early-20<sup>th</sup>-century dance modernity’s questionings and multiplications of its own choreographic models. At the same time, *Relâche* feeds back into reflections about the historical inscription of expanded choreography itself. Thus, ideas around the proximity of dramaturgy and choreography, or the development of intermedia choreographic assemblages – as seen in Olga Mesa [Chapter 5] and Saint-Hubert’s [Chapter 1] works – crop up again, in different configurations, as fragments of an expanded choreographic history.

## Of dancing in a ballet

Its unconventionality notwithstanding, *Relâche* was presented as a ballet, produced by a ballet company, and danced by classically-trained dancers of the Ballets Suédois. An initial conception of choreography is indeed found in Picabia’s piece’s relationship with the world of ballet – particularly in Paris, where de Maré’s company was based. In the French capital, ballet was primarily construed as a dramatic genre – as the danced representation of a (more-or-less elaborated) narrative. In the words of Hélène Laplace-Claverie, who has thoroughly studied the history of French ballet libretto:

*[o]n admet sans trop de peine aujourd’hui qu’une oeuvre chorégraphique est une création hybride, située au confluent de plusieurs disciplines artistiques. Mais à l’époque, les*

7 Jacobsson, Petter & Caley, Thomas : *Relâche*. Ballet instantanéiste en deux actes, un Entr’acte cinématographique et *la Queue du chien* (Reenactment of the 1924 ballet by Francis Picabia), Nancy : Ballet de Lorraine 2014, 32:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNmxvRt4Rg8> (October 2018).

8 For example, see Brandstetter, Gabriele: *Poetics of Dance : Body, Image and Space in the Historical Avant-Gardes*, New York: Oxford University Press 2015 [1995, trans. Elena Polzer & Mark Franko], pp. 375–384; Suquet, Annie : *L’Eveil des modernités : Une histoire culturelle de la danse (1870-1945)*, Pantin : Centre national de la danse 2012, pp. 120–124; Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, chapter 5; Bouchard, Karine: *Les Relations entre la scène et le cinéma dans le spectacle d'avant-garde: Une étude intermédiaire et in situ de Relâche de Picabia, Satie et Clair*, MA thesis, Montreal: Université de Montréal, 2009; Goldberg, RoseLee : *Performance : Live Art 1909 to the Present*, New York: Harry N. Abrams 1979, pp. 59–62.

conceptions sont plus rigides et pour la plupart des spectateurs, un ballet doit se contenter d'être une pièce de théâtre dansée. Les goûts et les attentes en la matière évoluent lentement. La scène chorégraphique française reste tributaire de la tradition noverrienne du "ballet d'action" [we admit without issue today that a choreographic work is a hybrid creation, situated at the intersection of multiple artistic disciplines. But at the time, conceptions were more rigid and for most spectators, a ballet must settle for being a danced theatrical piece. Tastes and expectations on this matter evolved slowly. The French choreographic scene remains tributary of the noverrian tradition of the "ballet d'action"].<sup>9</sup>

Choreography, therefore, was associated with dance-making, and it bore traces of a narrative/dramatic focus – although it was not strictly equated with narrative, unlike Edward Nye's reading<sup>10</sup> of the *ballet d'action*. In this framework, choreographers in ballet companies often based their dance-making on the work of a librettist. But, the early-20<sup>th</sup> century was a transitory period. The ballet world included highly-institutionalised performance venues – such as the central(ising) Paris Opera – and practitioners who adhered to a movement aesthetics of virtuosity and grace, using a highly-codified and relatively-stable vocabulary; but it also coexisted with a diversity of alternative dance models – some emerging within the ballet realm itself – and popular dance forms. Similarly, the libretto and its narrativity gradually fell out of use, largely through the work of companies such as the Ballets Russes and the Ballets Suédois.

Against this transitory background, when Picabia was asked to direct a ballet for de Maré's company, he initially expressed hesitation:

*J'avais pris la résolution de ne jamais faire de ballets mais la collaboration de Satie dont j'admire le talent et auquel je porte beaucoup d'amitié m'a fait revenir sur cette décision et j'ai accepté avec grand plaisir [I had made the resolution to never make ballets, but the collaboration with Satie, whose talent I admire and for whom I feel strong friendship, made me change my mind and I have accepted with great pleasure].<sup>11</sup>*

Reflecting this hesitation, *Relâche* undermined the codes and contexts of classical dance – although it was presented as a ballet. It attacked established ballet institutions and subversively targeted a ballet-habituuated audience. For example,

9 Laplace-Claverie, Hélène : *Les Ballets Suédois sont-ils des ballets? Petit dictionnaire des idées reçues en matière d'art chorégraphique*, in : Mas, Josiane (ed.) : *Arts en mouvement: Les Ballets Suédois de Rolf de Maré. Paris 1920-1925*, Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée 2008, p. 21.

10 Cf. Nye, Edward : 'Choreography' is Narrative: The Programmes of the Eighteenth-Century *Ballet d'Action*, in : *Dance Research* 26/1 (2008).

11 Boulbès : *Relâche*, p. 85.

the second act was danced before a backdrop painted with the names of its creators alongside phrases such as 'Aimez-vous mieux les ballets de l'Opéra? Pauvres malheureux [Do you prefer the ballets of the Opera? You poor wretches]'.<sup>12</sup> De Maré sold whistles and encouraged noise, shifting reception attitudes away from ballet-theatre codes.<sup>13</sup> This attack of ballet institutions was exacerbated by *Relâche*'s insistence upon bridging the gap between ballet and popular dance forms, such as the music hall. Its title expressed, according to Picabia, 'une trêve à toutes les absurdités prétentieuses du théâtre actuel, je ne parle pas du music-hall qui seul a gardé un côté vivant [a truce with all the pretentious absurdities of contemporary theatre, I am not referring to the music hall, which is the only one to have kept a lively aspect]'.<sup>14</sup> In his composition for the ballet, Satie – who had worked as an orchestra conductor in a cabaret – made use of popular themes and, even, army songs; according to a reviewer of the time, this risked disrupting the performance by provoking sing-along-moments by the audience.<sup>15</sup> Finally, although danced by professionally-trained classical dancers, *Relâche* defied classical dance aesthetics and technique. The ballet included acrobatic movements, refused *pointe* work, and the lead female dancer appeared in high-heeled shoes. The Ballets Suédois' previous choreographies had also experimented with the non-virtuosic, the non-technically spectacular, the folk influence – so much so that certain critics were persuaded the company lacked skill.<sup>16</sup>

*Relâche*, then, was presented by its creators as a ballet; nevertheless, it attacked the ballet genre in various ways. A similar ambivalence is identifiable in its treatment of a libretto-based choreographic model of dance-making. On the one hand, *Relâche* reflected – reproduced, even – this model. For example, Picabia drafted a scenario for *Relâche* in which he roughly described its action sequences and indicated the points where dances were to be composed by Börlin;<sup>17</sup> the ballet's actions can be understood as flirtations between a woman

12 Ibid., p. 345.

13 Ibid., p. 351.

14 Picabia, Francis: Interview by Rolf de Maré, undated, Archives of Les Ballets Suédois, Dansmuseet, Stockholm, Sweden: *Relâche*/Ballet librettos and descriptions.

15 Boulbès: *Relâche*, pp. 197, 224; Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, p. 298. While de Maré's troupe's audience remained largely limited to the Parisian bourgeoisie, its insistence upon popular culture did not go unrecognised; critic Emile Vuillermoz has written about the Ballets Suédois' "Bolshevik" programme while other writers – less reticent to respect the music hall than one may imagine – recognised the Ballets Suédois' possible contributions to the genre through *Relâche*. Boulbès: *Relâche*, pp. 316, 180, 558.

16 Laplace-Claverie: Les Ballets Suédois sont-ils des ballets?, p. 23; Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 63; Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, p. 298.

17 Libretto reproduced in Boulbès: *Relâche*, pp. 112–113 and Bouchard: *Les Relations entre la scène et le cinéma dans le spectacle d'avant-garde*, pp. 131–132. See also Boulbès: *Relâche*, pp.

and a group of men, in a (possible) wink to love stories often encountered in ballet libretti. Mirroring the importance of certain librettists of the time, Picabia is recognised as the main author of the project; de Maré referred to his last dance production as '*un ballet de Francis Picabia* [a ballet by Francis Picabia]'.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Picabia's scenario has no coherent narrative or plot development beyond a series of actions, no named characters, and no apparent desire to make sense. Börlin noted that the ballet he produced dances for had '*pas de sujet: le scénario tient dans cette feuille* [no subject: the scenario fits in this sheet]'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the scenario troubles a libretto-based choreographic model by shifting towards non-narrative (or even a-narrative) dance-making; it does not tell a story to be staged in dance, but provides the basis for a staging without story – and thus illustrates the format's non-narrative turn at a time when it was still in use, but also rapidly overcome. In effect, Picabia's script was not given to the public as a support for understanding – it was not a textual aid for making sense of the ballet – but, rather, was a tool in the production process.

Through Clair's contribution, the intersection between ballet and film was centrally important to subverting a ballet-based and dramatic/narrative-oriented choreographic model. To an extent, this concerns film's contribution to the ballet's turn towards popular art forms; Picabia held that

[...] *Cinéma est devenu le théâtre essentiel de la vie moderne, et cela parce qu'il s'adapte aux individus de toutes les classes de la société et aux caractères les plus divers* [Cinema has become the essential theatre of modern life, and that is because it adapts itself to individuals of all classes of society and to the most diverse of characters].<sup>20</sup>

But most importantly, *Entr'acte* accentuates the work's attack upon coherent plot development and narrativity – and therefore the choreographic model associated with them. Indeed, while the film contains some light narrative aspects – notably in its second part, which includes Börlin's character's funeral procession – it is not based on a coherent plot and its cinematography is not organised around dramatic development; both Picabia and Clair have referred

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118–119 for a fuller description of the ballet's action sequence, from which the following draws.

18 Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 128.

19 Ibid., p. 132.

20 Quoted in Bouchard: *Les Relations entre la scène et le cinéma dans le spectacle d'avant-garde*, p. 94. Moreover, instead of elevating film to the artistic status of ballet, Picabia looked back to a "proletarian" era of cinema; the inclusion of Clair's film was an explicit reference to the earlier 20<sup>th</sup>-century *café-concert* custom of film interludes between acts, while parts of *Entr'acte* have been read as references to early cinema's comical gags. Cf. Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, p. 306; Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 426.

to it as pertaining to the realm of dreams.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Clair ignored Picabia's recommendation to include written projections between scenes,<sup>22</sup> preferring unexplained and uncommented action flow. Fernand Léger's laudatory review of *Relâche* notes that:

*Le cinema va naître [...] du ralenti au rapide, du gros plan à l'infini petit, toute la fantaisie humaine bridée dans les livres et le théâtre va se déchaîner – le scénario s'envole loin et inutile [cinema will be born [...] from slow motion to fast, from the close-up to the infinitely small, the whole of human fantasy restrained in books and theatre will unleash itself – the script flies away, useless]<sup>23</sup>*

– just like the libretto. In this way, Clair's work contributed to the marginalisation of narrative as an organisational principle – underlining Picabia's treatment of the libretto model – and thus linked choreography-related considerations with developments in other arts.

*Relâche* subverted the choreographic model of a libretto-based dance-making process even beyond questioning its potential narrativity; in a choreographic expansion, it questioned the primacy of dance-making itself as a goal. Apart from staging non-classical dance within a ballet – thus challenging the limits of the ballet genre – the work also moved towards choreographed versions of everyday actions. For example, the female protagonist gathered up discarded clothing after a collective partial striptease in the 'Dance of the wheelbarrow'; there were also actions such as smoking a cigarette, lying on a stretcher, or pouring water in a bucket. And, despite its inclusion of several dances, *Relâche* also included moments of immobility, explicitly differentiated from dance in the script. Reflecting the ballet's flirtation with the limits of dance, de Maré recounted that '*les danseurs se voyaient, dans ce ballet, réduits au rôle de figurants, ils ne pouvaient comprendre ce que l'on attendait d'eux* [dancers in this ballet saw themselves being reduced to the role of extras, they could not understand what was expected of them].'<sup>24</sup> In these ways, *Relâche* embodies a conflict with dance while becoming relevant to a contemporaneity stretching its limits; it embodies expanded choreography's widenings of, and distances from, dance-making.

Certain "danced portions" of the ballet – to refer back to Marina Nordera's expression [Chapter 1] – had attention drawn to them by being presented with-

<sup>21</sup> Picabia, Francis: Untitled, in: *La Danse* (November-December 1924), unpaginated; Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 395.

<sup>22</sup> Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 391.

<sup>23</sup> Léger, Fernand: Review of *Relâche*, in: Damase, Jacques (ed.): *Ballets Suédois*, Paris: Jacques Damase/Denoël 1989 [1924], p. 253.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 521. Although unsigned, the text this quotation is drawn from is attributed to Rolf de Maré.

out music; but, while this underlines a possible choreographic and dancerly autonomy, it was counterbalanced by an equal musical autonomy, in sections where music played without dance. And, in effect, *Relâche* displayed a Saint-Hubesque treatment of ballet, in which different art forms were equally valourisable. In this framework, different media could disrupt the ballet's stage actions – both dancing and actions that challenged the centrality of dance. The background scenography consisted of a multitude of reflectors that resembled automobile headlights and lit up intermittently, thus blinding the audience and fragmenting their visual experience of dance.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Clair's *Entr'acte* interrupted the stage action – notably, presenting content that contained ironic gestures towards dancing. Ornella Volta reads Börlin's character's death in Clair's film as a symbolic death of dance in the company's works; Boulbès reads *Entr'acte*'s famous scene featuring a bearded ballerina – danced by an actual Ballets Suédois ballerina with a fake beard – as an ironic cinematographic gesture towards the realm of dance.<sup>26</sup> In *Relâche*, therefore, Börlin's dance coexisted with Satie's music, Clair's film, and a complex lighting and scenographic design. These media affirmed their own presence, instead of framing dance as a primary element – often to the detriment of offering the audience a smooth dance experience. The Ballets Suédois' last work thus expands ballet towards a spectacular framework not solely focussed on presenting dance.

This decentralisation of dance in the ballet was partly determined by the very element meant to ground dance-making in a libretto-based choreographic model: the scenario. Not a mere basis for dance invention, Picabia's scenario provides information about other media activities. For example, it indicates the duration of musical and cinematographic passages and gives descriptions of certain costumes; it prescribes how to stage the lighting and suggests elements of scenography – thus placing its treatment of dance on par with that of other media. In this way, *Relâche* retains a scenario written by a "librettist", but expands this script's function beyond the specific teleology of (non-)narrative dance-making. If Picabia's scenario betrays the libretto's role as a basis for dance-making, then, this is because it leads to a multimedia (expanded) choreography instead of the sole choreography of dance. Inversely, if the ballet's choreographic model can be disengaged from the primordial imperative of (non-)narrative/dramatically-inclined dance-making, *Relâche* is an example of the libretto's expansion, rather than its failure or betrayal. This use of the libretto –

25 Ibid., p. 301. For journalists' accounts of this "blinding" by the lights, see pp. 300, 307, 620.

26 Volta, Ornella: La Dernière séance des Ballets Suédois, in: Mas: *Arts en mouvement*, p. 191; Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 402.

shifting away from its textually-based dramaturgical role – prefigures contemporary approximations of choreography as an expanded, multimedia practice and dramaturgy as a non-essentially-textual one.

Through institutional, dramaturgical, intermedia, technical, and stylistic shifts, the Ballets Suédois' last work attacked ballet codes while remaining a ballet – indeed one of its publicity slogans invited spectators to a '*Ballet, qui n'est pas un ballet, ni un anti-ballet* [ballet that is neither a ballet, nor an anti-ballet]'.<sup>27</sup> In the same way, *Relâche* also performed a choreographic model inherited from ballet while simultaneously subverting it; if its choreography is related to a libretto-based process of dance-making, the work troubles narrativity, betrays classical dance, challenges an even-wider conception of dance, casts doubt on dance as the privileged ingredient of ballet, and shifts the role of the libretto as the foundation of dance-making. In other words, *Relâche* was both a script-based ballet and a non-narrative work which expanded beyond dance in a multimedia framework. In this way, it indicates the ways early-20<sup>th</sup>-century dance modernity may have critiqued its own choreographic models – and reminds that historiographic tools are needed to acknowledge the period's expansions of choreographic practices. These expansions, manifested through decentralising dance in intermedia spectacle – a tendency that was also, albeit differently, pursued by court ballet [Chapter 1] and contemporary expanded choreography [Chapter 5] – place Picabia's work and the avant-garde world of modern ballet-making in transhistorical choreographic relationships that are not founded upon their being-ballet or even being-dance.

## Of motion in the body

While *Relâche* was defined as a ballet and responded to a choreographic model inherited from ballet history, it also responded to modern, 20<sup>th</sup>-century appreciations of dance and choreography attached to the centrality of motion. Such appreciations reflected the notion of perpetual movement as a central, and sometimes idealised, characteristic of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century society.<sup>28</sup> This is easily identifiable within modern dance, which was associated with continuous flow of movement, as opposed to the codified unit of the ballet step; movement for movement's sake, replacing the illustrative role of dance; and a body presented as liberated from classical discipline, to be unleashed in a flux of motion. But it was also, as *Relâche* exemplifies, identifiable in modern ballet. In parallel, choreographic motion was physicalised, "corporealised"; nine years

27 Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 153.

28 On the status of dance within this era of motion, see Brandstetter: *Poetics of Dance*, p. 21.

after *Relâche*, John Martin wrote of modern dance choreographers' 'discovery of the actual substance of the dance' – movement – which he presented as 'the most elementary *physical* experience of human life'.<sup>29</sup> In a context closer to *Relâche*, French writer Jacques Rivière responded to the Ballets Russes' *Sacre du printemps* (1913) by opposing motion as a 'sauce' in which the dancer's body is lost; in the *Sacre*, inversely, movement is '*sans cesse ramené au corps, rattaché à lui* [continuously brought back to the body, attached to it]':<sup>30</sup> movement was incorporated. *Relâche*, then, appeared at a time when motion was not only centralised and essentialised, but also anchored in the dancer's moving body – thus underlining dance's specificity through its attachment to human corporeality.

*Relâche* fully responded to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century (dance) modernity's preoccupation with motion. Picabia presented his work as an "*instantanéiste* [instantaneist]" ballet; instantaneism '*ne croit qu'au mouvement perpétuel* [believes only in perpetual movement]'.<sup>31</sup> He also wrote of the ballet as '*le mouvement sans but, ni en avant ni en arrière, ni à gauche ni à droite* [movement without a goal, neither forward nor back, neither left nor right]'.<sup>32</sup> Through such expressions, the piece expands choreography from the delimited domain of artistic dance to a wider world of movement. For Cécile Schenck, its choreography is found

*dans l'impression d'un "mouvement perpétuel", sans finalité autre que celle d'exalter la vie dans ce qu'elle a et de chaotique et de spontané. [...] La danse n'est dès lors plus sur scène mais dans la salle, sur l'écran, dans la rue, les gestes du travail et le roulement infini des machines: désormais "tout est danse"* [in the impression of a "perpetual movement", without other end than to exalt life in its chaotic and spontaneous aspects [...] Dance is, from that point, not on the stage anymore but in the performance space, on the screen, in the street, the gestures of work and the infinite rolling of machines: from now on, "everything is dance"].<sup>33</sup>

In other words, everything is movement and movement becomes essentialised as the choreographic medium, in a process literally staged by *Relâche*.

Consistent with a choreographic model of human bodies in motion, a great deal of movement in *Relâche* was embodied by the Ballets Suédois' dancers, with Börlin creating gymnastic, acrobatic steps that filled the stage with activity. A

29 Martin, John: *The Modern Dance*, Princeton: Dance Horizons 1989 [1933], pp. 6–8, emphasis added. (This text was published in 1933 but was actually written for a series of lectures in 1931–1932 – therefore it emerged seven years after *Relâche*.)

30 Rivière, Jacques: *Le Sacre du Printemps*, 1913, <http://sarma.be/docs/621> (August 2020).

31 Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 443.

32 Picabia, Francis: *Relâche*, in: *La Danse* (November–December 1924), unpaginated.

33 Schenck, Cécile: *La Danse inhumaine, fonctions de la chorégraphie dans l'œuvre d'art totale des Ballets Suédois*, in: Mas: *Arts en mouvement*, p. 61.

striking performance of embodied movement – fully responding to the incessant motion of urbanised, speedy 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernity – is found in a short dance choreographed for the female lead dancer (Edith de Bondsdorff) and one of the leading male characters (Börlin), titled 'Dance of the revolving door'. According to contemporary historians' reconstructions of the ballet, this was a waltz-inspired choreography in which the two dancers circled through a revolving door.<sup>34</sup> In the context of increasingly-mobilised modes of life, including experiences of automated motion in *automobiles*, the 'Dance of the revolving door' literally staged the kinetic experiences reflected in choreography's pre-occupation with the motion of bodies. Crucially – although it is not certain whether this was planned – the revolving door itself was not present on stage as a scenographic element,<sup>35</sup> and was therefore referred to through the dancers' motions – the kinetic experience of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century European modernity was literally absorbed into the body.

While *Relâche* reflected a choreographic model of embodied motion, the emerging notion of a movement-based choreography is also extremely pronounced in Clair's *Entr'acte* – the very element that disrupted a dance- and body-based choreographic format. The approximately-20-minute film includes some dance movement – for example, there is a beautiful scene of a dancer jumping, filmed from below, through a glass floor. Overall, however, *Entr'acte* is not a film representing dancing bodies so much as a celebration of motion in diverse manifestations; the camera follows everyday "choreographed" scenes such as car traffic in an urban environment, and in Börlin's character's funeral procession there is a finely-choreographed kinetic sequence including a frenetic roller-coaster ride.

Beyond its representation of motion, *Entr'acte* is an internally-choreographed piece itself – movement effects, such as slow motion and fast-forwarding, are extensively used; the camera's own being-in-motion is made apparent; images are inverted and superposed, multiplying viewpoints and spatial relations; the film's editing makes rhythm one of its main organising principles as it moves through images. George Baker identifies in the film

an endless motivating of the arbitrariness of the montage between images through the shared revelation of cinematic motion, the gift that film imparts to all things. Objects are connected in *Entr'acte* because they are "like" one another, in motion, or in speed, or in direction; the film also utilises motion to align the dispareteness of shape and texture.<sup>36</sup>

34 Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 118; Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, p. 299.

35 Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 289.

36 Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, p. 319.

In his annotated script, Clair indicated the motional effects – slow motion, increased speed – he introduced,<sup>37</sup> while his more-theoretically-construed vision of cinema also reflected his kinetic focus:

*S'il est une esthétique du cinéma [...] Elle se résume en un mot: "mouvement". Mouvement extérieur des objets perçus par l'œil, auquel nous ajouterons aujourd'hui le mouvement intérieur de l'action. De l'union de ces deux mouvements peut naître ce dont on parle tant et ce que l'on perçoit si peu souvent: le rythme* [If there is an aesthetics of cinema [...] it is summed up in one word: "movement". External movement of objects that the eye perceives, to which we will add, today, the internal movement of action. From the union of these two movements can be born that which we talk so much about and that which we perceive so rarely: rhythm].<sup>38</sup>

If choreography is about motion, *Entr'acte* is not only part of a choreographic work, but an (expanded) choreographic work in itself; motion expands beyond the human body and towards other c/kinematic media.

Through a common logic of movement, the ballet's choreographed film forms a basis for understanding the porosity between choreography/dance and film. Clair – who had experienced earlier dance-film experiments by acting in Loïe Fuller's *Le Lys de la vie* (1921, with Garbielle Sorère) – illustrated a motion-based understanding of choreography by incorporating and exemplifying movement as a cinematographic mode of thinking. Movement on stage and on screen, in bodies and in film: *Relâche* creates a kinetic parallel between different media. Underlining their continuities, at the end of *Entr'acte*, Börlin's character breaks through a – filmed – curtain, as if jumping out of the film screen, only to be actually found on stage in the ballet's second act.

The choreographic expansion performed by *Entr'acte* can, however, also be read as an antagonism between media that embodied 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernity's kinetic focus. Indeed, the choreographic aspects of *Entr'acte* can also be read as staging the *replacement* of embodied motion by cinema's mediating technology; critic Paul Dambly wrote that *Relâche* was '*avant tout le triomphe du cinéma, dont la pantomime, médiocrement chorégraphique n'a d'autre but que d'encadrer les films* [above everything else the triumph of cinema, [its] poorly choreographic pantomime has no other goal than to frame the films]'.<sup>39</sup> Reflecting a possible antagonism with an organic/corporeal view of dance, the de-physicalisation of the body on the film screen was paralleled by Picabia's research on the mechanisation of the body. This is coherent with his portraits of *Relâche*-related actors Clair and de

37 Boulbès: *Relâche*, pp. 416–417.

38 Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 429–430.

39 Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 574.

Maré – depicted as machines made up of curly wires – and Börlin – as an amalgam of lines and circles.<sup>40</sup>

Picabia's project, then, included aspects of a nascent antagonism *and* continuity between different media responding to the kinetic focus of the time. Indeed – and as the aforementioned motional activity illustrates – Picabia did not fully efface physicality in favour of cinema. In his own words, '*il est certain que le cinéma [...] ne pourra jamais avoir les possibilités tactiles d'un ballet* [it is certain that cinema [...] will never be able to have the tactile possibilities of a ballet]';<sup>41</sup> his animated stage was not completely replaced by a mediated version of dancing bodies. Neither fully "organic" – including cinematically-mediated and -performed motion – nor fully technologised – insisting upon the liveness of tangible dancers moving in front of an equally-tangible audience – *Relâche* performs neither a modernist autonomisation of choreographic movement through its corporeality, nor the complete effacement or replacement of human physicality through the embodiment of motion by non-corporeal, technological media. Just as it responded to a choreographic model of dramatic/narrative dance-making while also upsetting it, *Relâche* performs a choreographic model of embodied motion while also expanding beyond it. In this way, it makes visible 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernity's conflicts about the place of the body in a choreographic format centred on motion, along with its expansions beyond such conflicts. Once again, it becomes an invitation to historiographically acknowledge practices performing *and* troubling modernism's tendencies. In doing so, it relativises choreographic modernism's grip upon the very period that saw its emergence – and calls for a more-plural understanding of the choreographic history inherited from the historical avant gardes, framing it as a period relatable to both anterior and posterior quests to dephysicalise motion and establish parallels between different media on stage.

## Arranging (expanded) choreography

Picabia's ballet cannot be reduced to any single medium; in Baker's expression, it expressed an 'utter [...] rejection of the modernist imperative of medium specificity'.<sup>42</sup> In the piece, different artistic media collaborate with, support, and penetrate each other – a point most prominently illustrated by the association of music and film. Satie wrote the music for *Entr'acte* after the film and its

40 Reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 136, 141, 144.

41 Picabia: Interview, Archives of Les Ballets Suédois, Dansmuseet, Stockholm, Sweden: *Relâche*/Ballet librettos and descriptions

42 Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, p. 330.

editing had been completed, basing his composition on a meticulous, shot-by-shot timing of the film images.<sup>43</sup> The result was what Baker reads as a musical “revelation” of cinematographic editing, where the music points to the effects of the *montage* cut:

Satie’s music often cadences and thus underlines the cuts and montage in Picabia and Clair’s film, bringing things to a rhythmic stop when the film images seem rather to push connectedness between scenes [...] If montage is the invisible force within cinema that creates a film’s rhythm – one of the qualities that the temporal art of film could conceivably “share” with music – then it is precisely the invisible “rhythm” of montage and cutting to which the music is attracted, and that it must reveal.<sup>44</sup>

Given that *Entr’acte* was presented with live accompaniment by an orchestra, this relation between film and music was literally performed in the *Théâtre des Champs Elysées*, with conductor Roger Desormière adjusting segments of Satie’s music – including elements of repetition that were included for this very reason – in order to synchronise it with the film.<sup>45</sup> A further relation of mutual support – of blending, even – is identifiable between the set and certain costumes of the ballet; according to Boulbès, the brightness of the background flashing lights was meant to merge with the sparkling dress of the female protagonist.<sup>46</sup> The continuity between film and stage action through Börlin’s screen-tearing cinematic jumps, described above, also adds to this construction.

While avoiding modernist medium specificity, *Relâche* cannot be fully characterised by the additive accumulation, or fusion, of different media in a *Gesamtkunstwerk*-manner. In effect, as much as diverse media in the ballet related through mutual support, blending, or continuity to one another, they were equally interrelated by carefully-orchestrated disruption and opposition. This is the case between dance and music which, at times, alternated; in particular, in a beginning passage of the ballet, music played but the lead dancer remained still, smoking a cigarette, only to start dancing when the music stopped. Dance and music thus avoided and gave space to each other. (The dissociation of dance and music had been a long-time interest of Satie.<sup>47</sup>) Comparable oppositions also emerged between dance and scenography, as the background lights interrupted dance’s kinetic action; according to Baker, the lights were correlated

43 Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 411.

44 Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, pp. 325–326.

45 Ibid., p. 325.

46 Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 322.

47 Ibid., p. 214.

with the music,<sup>48</sup> and this was where the set-dance clash originated. Rather than a unified, autonomous piece, *Entr'acte* similarly both interrupted the ballet – by being inserted mid-way through – and was itself interrupted – by the stage action, between the prologue and the rest of the film. Through this series of disruptions, *Relâche* points to an aesthetic of abruptness, or even aggression.

Support, revelation, blending, continuity, interruption, disruption: *Relâche* makes different media meet, interact, and, at times, conflict with each other. Neither modernist nor *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Picabia's ballet was an intricate construction that relied as much on its multimediality as on the specific ways in which its different media crossed one other. This reading of *Relâche* is associated with practices that are highly relevant to Dada art, such as collage, montage, and assemblage. Such practices are, like *Relâche* – and like Mesa [Chapter 5] and Saint-Hubert's [Chapter 1] work – not necessarily medium-specific; Georges Didi-Huberman explicitly notes how montage in the 1920s was a notion '*transversale à tous les arts de la représentation* [transversal to all arts of representation]'.<sup>49</sup> Such practices are also – like *Relâche* and *Solo a ciegas* – primarily focussed on juxtaposing elements and developing (oppositional or continuous) relations between them; they do not focus on singularised contents, but on the effect of their co-appearance. *Relâche*'s film, music, set, and dances acquire their full significance in their interaction. If the ballet is seen as an expanded choreography, then, this is because – beyond just questioning the place of dance and the fundamental physicality of motion – it is the result of assemblage-like media associations that include the dancing/moving body. In this way, *Relâche* relates to other assemblage-based choreographic endeavours – be they later, like Mesa's, or earlier, like Saint-Hubert's – while contributing a Dadaist variation to the diversity of historically-distinct types of choreographic assemblages.

In addition to juxtaposing the ballet's media, an assemblage-like approach operated within the ballet's contents; while the actions *Relâche* presented may have seemed absurd, in many ways they constituted responses to, or reflections of, other actions. This relationality of content primarily took the form of symmetry between the ballet's two acts.<sup>50</sup> Thus, in the first act Börlin – lead male dancer – enters the stage in a wheelchair, in the second, de Bondsdorff – lead female dancer – enters on a stretcher. In the first act, de Bondsdorff strips off her dress, in the second it is a group of male dancers who take off their

48 Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, pp. 295, 305.

49 Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Quand les images prennent position: L'Oeil de l'histoire*, 1, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit 2009, p. 85. Here, Didi-Huberman is referring to the practice of montage in Russia and Germany, but allows this point to be expanded to Dada in general (cf. p. 124).

50 Cf. Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, pp. 299–300.

evening clothes to reveal tight-fitting unitards. While the first act starts with a solo part for the woman before she is joined by a group of men, the second act starts with a male group that is joined by a woman, who, by the end, will be left alone – thus coming full circle. Picabia's script demands that the female character is pulled off of the stage through a fly system [*cintres*] at the end of the first act, only to be lowered to the stage through the same system in the second. This was accompanied by a 'mirror composition' (*composition en miroir*) of the music,<sup>51</sup> as well as a site-specific title for the cinematographic part of the ballet;<sup>52</sup> *Entr'acte* means "intermission" in French, relating the film's title to its dramaturgical position within the ballet. Just as Mesa created, beyond media associations, relations between ideas, times, spaces, and characters [Chapter 5] – and like Saint-Hubert's notion of the subject that concerned not only media of representation, but also themes and narrative lines [Chapter 1] – the contents of Picabia's ballet can be understood relationally, supplanting the narrativity of the libretto by an assemblage-based dramaturgy.

*Relâche*'s spectators were exposed to these disruptions and fusions, these symmetries and interruptions, between media and contents of Picabia's construction. But, the role of the audience in the *Théâtre des Champs Elysées* was not confined to the external observation of actions on stage. Instead of treating them as mere observers, *Relâche* literally reached out to its spectators by directly addressing itself to them and, at times, even attacking them – in truly Dada-style: in the beginning of *Entr'acte*, a canon fires towards the camera (and, thus, the audience); the film's script prescribes that a spectator be staged to intervene in the film's action;<sup>53</sup> in the beginning of the piece, the Ballets Suédois dancers sat among the spectators and, towards the end, they distributed props to an audience member, before (in a further symmetry) returning to their seats; the light reflectors on the stage blinded and lit up the audience,<sup>54</sup> reminding spectators of their own presence in the theatre. Picabia and his colleagues also connected the theatre space with the work that was performed in it: certain scenes of *Entr'acte* were shot on location at the theatre building; the complex electric installation required for the light-reflecting scenography rendered the piece difficult to export for touring, thus keeping it grounded within its initial spatial context; the scenography of the second act – including anti-Opéra slogans and the names of the ballet's creators – functioned as publicity for the work it would frame.<sup>55</sup> Just as *Solo a ciegas* was constructed from media,

51 Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 219. (Boulbès is here referring to an argument by Robert Orledge.)

52 Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, p. 290.

53 In Boulbès: *Relâche*, p. 417.

54 Baker: *The Artwork Caught by the Tail*, p. 295.

55 Boulbès: *Relâche*, pp. 298, 343.

content relations, and an assemblage that incorporated the position and gaze of its spectators [Chapter 5], *Relâche* also established site-specific relations between the work itself, the specific space in which it was presented, and the audience there to watch it. In this way, *Relâche* was a performance inscribed in the specific moment and space of co-presence with its audience, developing an event-like quality – characteristic of many avant-garde works of its time – while also (preposterously<sup>56</sup>) appearing as a relational, expanded choreography that orchestrates links with its audience.

Thus, as an avant-garde ballet – and as an expanded choreography – *Relâche* displayed an assemblage-like intermediality, dramaturgy, and relation with its audience. Picabia was the author of this complex construction. But, despite being an author-figure, it is possible he did not physically create anything for the ballet; for example, he did not even participate in the construction of the second act's set, delegating it to a professional painter-decorator from the Parisian suburbs.<sup>57</sup> The praxis of Picabia can therefore not be seen as the *poiesis* of an object, but, rather, as an orchestration of different media, persons, and content elements. Such a process seems to have been recognised by spectators; Léger wrote:

[T]out est réglé, voulu: minuterie du geste, du mouvement, des projecteurs. Plusieurs mois, Picabia a réglé les temps, les demi-temps, les dixièmes de temps – un monde entier en petit où tout fonctionne avec discipline, exactitude, raideur, mécaniquement – et toujours ça n'en a pas l'air... [Everything is regulated, deliberate: timing of gesture, of movement, of the projectors. During many months, Picabia regulated the times, the half-times, the tenths of time – a whole world in small size in which everything functions with discipline, exactitude, rigidity, mechanically – and always does not seem to do so...]<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, while Börlin was the choreographer of the ballet's dances, and Clair can be considered choreographer of its film, Picabia was the choreographer of a relational work; authorship being associative with the choreography of dance (or film) as well as the expanded choreography of a complex entity. In this way, Picabia's role joins Saint-Hubert's master of order [Chapter 1] and Mesa's *praxis* [Chapter 5] by acknowledging choreographic creation that is not-necessarily attached to a specific, tangible product, but that focusses on intermedia arrangements.

56 Cf. Bal, Mieke: *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press 1999.

57 Boulbèrs: *Relâche*, p. 353.

58 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 594.

*Relâche* displays, apart from the libretto-based or movement-focussed choreographic models of its time, an early-20<sup>th</sup>-century response to these very models. It does this by being a non-medium-specific, assemblage-based work in which the juxtaposition of media – including the (non-)dancing and (non-)moving body – acquires equal, if not more, importance than their actions; by developing a dramaturgy based on relations between actions and actors, rather than narrative; by inscribing the performance in the event of its co-presence with an audience; by having a creator who was more attached to a minutely-timed orchestration of different elements than to grounding dance-making. The links between Picabia's ballet with contemporary expanded choreography (in general) and Mesa's [Chapter 5] work (in particular) show that early-21<sup>st</sup>-century, non-medium-specific, relational choreographic strategies do not constitute a rupture with the choreographic past, but a contemporary reconfiguration of elements inherent in that past. The links with an expanded view of Saint-Hubert's ballet [Chapter 1] further show that if contemporaneity can engage in undoing dancerly essentialisms in order to re-read the “pre-choreographic” past, this undoing is an operation whose tools are contained within choreographic history itself.

## Conclusion

With its classically-trained dancers and its anti-dramatic development, *Relâche* responds to a libretto-based, ballet-sourced choreographic model while also subverting its narrativity and focus on dance. With its on-stage action that transfers the motion of modern lifestyles into the dancing body, its kinetically-constructed cinematographic prologue and interlude, and its discursive insistence upon movement, *Relâche* reflects choreography's passage towards an era of motion – and the conflicts arising in this passage; it thus acts as an incubator of modernist dissociations between a body-centred dance and other movement-mediating art forms. With its continuities and juxtapositions, fusions and oppositions between dancing bodies, music, scenography, costumes, lights, film, and its constant links between the work and its audience, *Relâche* is an assemblage-like, non-medium-specific expanded choreographic entity that unfolded as an event. *Relâche* thus forms a *nexus*<sup>59</sup> – a territory of multiple, coexisting understandings of choreography between narrative, motion, and expandedness.

By remaining in such an interstitial choreographic territory, the piece reflects early-20<sup>th</sup>-century (dance) modernity's oscillations: oscillations between narrative and motion as a creative model in film or choreography; oscillations between classical and modern ballet/dance; oscillations between how motion is

59 Cf. Leon: *Vielfältige Konzepte des Choreografischen in Tanz und Film*, p. 32.

incorporated by dancers while overflowing into other arts (e.g. film) and the urbanised experience of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century life; oscillations between medium specificity and interdisciplinary collaborations. These oscillations are partly mediated by shifts and frictions between, and expansions of, diverse choreographic models – of danced narrative, of body, of motion – thus making choreography a realm in which the period's ambivalences are translated. In this way, the choreographic multiplicity of the Ballets Suédois' last ballet suggests that historiography should focus on the complexity of simultaneous choreographic models, but also on these models as agents in a process of negotiation between different dance genres, different arts, and their porosities.

Apart from the horizontal axis of simultaneity, this reading of *Relâche* also proposes that historiography consider the vertical axis of transhistoricity.<sup>60</sup> Along this axis, Francis Picabia's ballet – a multimedia assemblage developed through the work of a creator approximating choreographic authorship and a non-linear dramaturgy – relates both to Mesa's *Solo* [Chapter 5] and Saint-Hubert's *La Manière de composer* [Chapter 1] and thus points to the necessity of interrogating potential links between choreographic models of the baroque, historical avant-garde, and contemporary periods. In its performance of an assemblage-like choreography, *Relâche* displays aesthetic, stylistic, institutional, and artistic features that are not assimilable to the 17<sup>th</sup> century's 'disposition of things put in their place'<sup>61</sup> nor to early-21<sup>st</sup>-century Deleuzeian-Guattarian views. In other words, if the vertical axis of transhistoricity demands that a history of choreography-as-assemblage be told, it also points to the variety of choreographic models contained within this history. In this sense, an expanded choreographic perspective of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century modern ballet allows for more plurality in a historical specimen, and at the same time it refines expanded choreography's own historical inscription.

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60 A methodological discussion of these axes' interaction is to be found in Foster, Hal: *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge/London: MIT Press 1996, p. xii.

61 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 1694, <http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/node/45> (August 2020).

