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The Pornographic Afterlife of Vaslav Nijinsky

On May 29, 1912, the world's first male ballet star launched an assault on the proprieties of Paris' cultural elite. For three years, Vaslav Nijinsky had garnered international acclaim for his unparalleled virtuosity and emotive performances. He had also earned a degree of "lilac-hued notoriety"¹ for a rather public affair with his director, Serge Diaghilev. But on this late spring evening, Nijinsky's queer eroticism began to outstrip his technical prowess in the public imaginary. For on this night, he abandoned the pirouettes and *grand jetés* for which he was famed and feigned masturbation on the stage of the Théâtre du Châtelet.

Inspired by Mallarmé's poem of the same name, Nijinsky's daring choreographic debut, *Afternoon of a Faun* featured a forest-dwelling satyr entranced by a passing nymph. Ineluctably drawn to the disrobing Nymph, he attempts to seduce her, but she escapes, leaving behind only a scarf, which he spirits away to his lair. In the final moments of the dance, the Faun thrusts himself suggestively upon the abandoned token.

Despite the scandal of Nijinsky's simulated autoeroticism, the premiere of *Afternoon of a Faun* was and is widely recognized as the first modern ballet and as such created a new paradigm for viewing bodies in motion. By dispensing with traditional ballet vocabulary, minimizing movement, and choreographing almost exclusively in two-dimensional planes, Nijinsky engineered a thoroughly novel mode of bodily display. Audiences were confronted with the spectacle of the body in and of itself, rather than the spectacle of physical virtuosity to which they were accustomed. Critics deemed Nijinsky's reinvention of the ballet body obscene because grace and movement were

marginalized at the expense of full visual access to the dancers' bodies. In short, viewers sensed something we might call pornographic lurking behind Nijinsky's spectacularization of the body.

Indeed, it was not long before this pornographic innuendo crystallized into full-fledged pornography. During the his company's South American tour, *Faun* captured the imagination of an anonymous Argentine filmmaker, inspiring him to produce one of the earliest surviving stag films, *El Satario (The Satyr)*. Film historian Joseph Slade has argued that *El Satario* parodies *Faun*; whereas Nijinsky's creature is forced to release his "sexual frustrations" into the scarf of an escaped nymph, the filmic satyr snares his prey and performs a decidedly more graphic duet with her.² While Slade's assessment is entirely plausible, I want to suggest that *El Satario* was more than an isolated spoof. Rather, it was the first of many sexually explicit reimaginings of both Nijinsky and his Faun. In the century since *Faun* premiered, Nijinsky's body has become a metaphor for ambiguous sexuality, mobilized and molded for various creative ends by queer observers who read in his autoerotic gesture a refusal of the heteronormative strictures of ballet. Among these creative descendants was the pioneering gay porn director, Wakefield Poole. With this lineage in mind, I want to sketch a preliminary genealogy of gay film pornography, and I want to suggest, not uncontroversially, that we can locate its genesis in the person of Vaslav Nijinsky.

Nijinsky made a career of testing and transgressing the limits of conventional masculinity and sexuality. Under the direction of Serge Diaghilev, he developed an androgynous presentational style, which fused "male power and strength [with] female sensuousness."³ He appeared onstage in costumes that defied gender norms—jeweled

bras, short skirts, harem pants, tunics, body stockings, bared midriffs and low necklines. But if Nijinsky's stage persona experimented with homoeroticism, his publicity photos hypostatized it.

Dance scholar Lynn Garafola recently exposed Diaghilev's practice of circulating boudoir-style photos of his male leads, beginning with Nijinsky. These photographs feature his protégés posing seductively in effeminate costumes and heavy makeup. Diaghilev published the subtler images in magazines and programs, reserving the more overtly sexualized ones for limited edition albums that circulated among gay Parisian elites, the likes of Jean Cocteau and Marcel Proust.

What is perhaps most intriguing about these photos, as Garafola notes, is that they appear to be “only marginally concerned with dance, using it as an excuse for displaying the attractions of a physically active body in motion.”⁴ **[Show 1910 *Shéhérezade* photo.]** Whereas dance photography generally either captured the dancers in motion or frozen in poses from the dance, the only trace of balletic stylization in this image is Nijinsky's *relevé* stance. The image seems to exist solely to display a bare-waisted Nijinsky reveling in a show of effeminacy. **[Show 1911 photos from *Le spectre de la rose*.]** In this photo, we can almost imagine Nijinsky shifting languorously from pose to pose. But again, the limp wrists and the supple arch of the torso break with the rigid, symmetrical frame of the ballet body. Faithfulness to the stylization of the dance here is secondary to the inscription of queer lust upon Nijinsky's body.

The hyperfeminine portrayal of Nijinsky finally reached its apex in non-photographic media. **[Show Lepape advertisement.]** This 1912 gouache by Georges Lepape effaces any lingering trace of masculinity from Nijinsky's body. Lepape's

Nijinsky is cat-eyed and high cheek-boned, painted in eyeshadow, blush, lipstick, and nailpolish, bedecked with earrings and bangles. He sprawls decadently beneath a gold-tassled canopy amidst piles of floral pillows. The effete lustfulness attributed to Nijinsky saturates every detail of the painting—he is half-naked, stretching suggestively on the edge of the bed, his arm extended across the empty half, begging the viewer to join him.

Despite the absence of overt sexual activity in these images, I think we can see in them the seeds of a gay pornographic tradition, akin to the post-WWII popularity of muscle films whose homoeroticism was thinly concealed behind a façade of physical education.⁵ Moreover, the very illicitness of the more explicit images—that they were created for and distributed to a select audience for private enjoyment—does seem to reek of the pornographic. But I would like to go one step further and suggest that the frisson of queer eroticism embodied by Nijinsky gave rise to the modern market phenomenon that is mainstream gay film pornography.

In 1971, director Wakefield Poole released the first feature-length gay porn, *Boys in the Sand*. It was the first pornographic film ever reviewed by *Variety* and advertised in the *New York Times*. Preceding *Deep Throat* by a year, it was the most commercially successful pornography in the history of cinema to that point, grossing more in its opening week in L.A. than *A Clockwork Orange*.⁶ At a moment when dirty movies were confined to arcades and porn theaters, when video and internet had yet to revolutionize home access to pornography, when sexual performers were anonymous actors rather than household names—in short, when porno had not yet become chic, Poole brought porn to the masses. Not incidentally, his entree into filmmaking succeeded his career in dance,

several years of which had been spent with Nijinsky's Ballets Russes, and *Boys in the Sand* is almost certainly an homage to *Afternoon of a Faun*.

Poole's film is divided into three independent segments. The first section in particular bears striking parallels to *Afternoon of a Faun*. "Bayside" opens with a man, played by Poole's lover at the time, Peter Fisk, wandering through the woods of Fire Island. The emphasis on nature here and throughout the segment evokes *Faun*'s lush, elaborate woodland clearing scenery, and the soundscape reinforces the connection. Although the final cut of *Boys in the Sand* was set to Debussy's "Nocturnes," Poole had originally scored it with a medley that included the prelude to *Afternoon of a Faun*. As a former Ballets Russes dancer, it seems unlikely that this reminiscence of Nijinsky's ballet could have escaped him. The wandering man in "Bayside" eventually reaches the beach, spreads a blanket on the sand, strips, and sits down to wait. A nude Adonis materializes out of the ocean, played by Casey Donovan, who subsequently became the first gay porn star on the tails of *Boys in the Sand*'s popular success. Peter fellates Casey briefly then follows him into the woods, where they have sex on the blanket. At one point, Peter lowers his prostrate body onto Casey's mouth; the position perfectly replicates the Faun's masturbatory descent upon the scarf. At the close of "Bayside," however, Peter leaves Casey with his blanket and evanesces into the water. Despite the appropriation of Nijinsky's choreography for an explicitly gay sexual representation, Poole's character, like Nijinsky's, is left with only a fetish.

The film's second section, "Poolside," seeks to rectify this absence by inventing a partner for Casey. After responding to an ad in *Gay* newspaper, a package arrives for Casey containing a mysterious tablet which, upon submersion in a swimming pool,

transforms into a rather strapping naked man. What is most significant about “Poolside” as an homage to *Afternoon of the Faun* is that it is totally unpreoccupied with the standard conventions of pornographic visibility—that is, with what the porn industry calls money and meat shots (close-ups of ejaculation and penetration, respectively). Rather, Poole appears more interested in the metamorphosis of shapes produced by intertwined bodies in motion. From a dancer’s perspective, the performers in “Poolside” create a kaleidoscopic array of aesthetically pleasing shapes as they shift from one position to the next. To cite just one example, at one point, the pair engage in anal-oral contact as one man stands on his shoulders with his legs wrapped around his kneeling partner’s head. Poole films this position from multiple angles, capturing its multifaceted visual interest. From the side, their bodies form a rectangle; from the front, they form an X. The camera focuses on this position for several long minutes, yet the insistent close-ups on genital action, so typical of stag and video pornography, are all but absent in this scene, and in “Poolside” as a whole. Even in the positions that would normally provide visual access to penetration, the genitals are largely obscured by the shadows of surrounding trees. Rather than zoom in, the camera consistently maintains sufficient distance to keep both performers’ full bodies within the frame. Thus, “Poolside” formally inverts *Faun*’s approach to the body. The dance, as I mentioned earlier, is concerned with the pure spectacle of bodies unadulterated by excessive, virtuosic movement. The explicitly pornographic film, in surprising contrast, is more interested in mediating the spectator’s view of bodies transformed by movement.

The film’s final episode similarly inverts the formal structure of *Faun*. “Inside” opens with Casey flashing a telephone repairman he spies through a bedroom window.

His interest unrequited, Casey masturbates to fantasies of sex with the repairman. We witness the revision and elaboration of this fantasy through spatial and temporal disjuncture. In one shot, the repairman's penis is exposed; in the next, Casey is unzipping his pants. In one shot they are in the hallway; in the next, they are in bed. At the end of the film, Casey examines each of the locations in which he had imagined being with the repairman, presumably to verify that it was indeed just a fantasy. As he heads downstairs, he finds the repairman standing in his doorway, this time "for real." Poole grants his viewer direct access to the protagonist's inner fantasies in this segment, and this calculated attention not only to the film's status as fiction, but to the status of the sex within this fiction as fantasy, stands in contradistinction to the play between fantasy and reality in Nijinsky's work. Poole situates his portrayal of "real" sex within a fantastical context; Nijinsky presents a fantasy that threatens, through the simulation of a sexual act, to become real.

Poole's experimentation with the construction of fantasy in *Boys in the Sand* both inverts and reflects the structure of fantasy in *Afternoon of a Faun*. It unflinchingly represents what Nijinsky could only intimate—a man having sex with another man—and yet it constantly calls its own authenticity into question. A partner materializes out of water in "Bayside," out of a pill in "Poolside," out of imagination in "Inside," leaving open the possibility in each case that what is presented as real sexual action is actually entirely fictitious. Poole's appropriation of *Faun* thereby opens itself to further appropriation, interpretation, and interpolation by its viewers. Indeed, I'd like to close with the suggestion that *Boys in the Sand* became the template for widely distributed, star driven, highly lucrative gay porn. Poole's effort to, in his own words, "promote it like a

regular movie,”⁷ was the first in a series of moves by the industry to bring pornography, gay and straight, aboveground.

Ironically, Poole marked his departure from the industry he helped to create by vowing celibacy in the wake of the AIDS crisis. “There is life after sex,”⁸ Poole affirmed in his 2000 biography. There is also, it seems, an afterlife for sexual representation. Pornography, I have argued, is the legacy of Nijinsky’s.

¹ Kevin Kopelson, *The Queer Afterlife of Vaslav Nijinsky* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997) 4.

² Joseph Slade, “Eroticism and Technological Regression: The Stag Film,” *History and Technology* 22, no. 1, (March 2006): 34.

³ Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1995) 84.

⁴ Garafola, “Iconography,” 74.

⁵ Tom Waugh, “Homosexuality in the Stag Film,” *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004) 137.

⁶ Wakefield Poole, *Dirty Poole: The Autobiography of a Gay Porn Pioneer* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2000) 172.

⁷ Poole 163.

⁸ Poole 286.

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