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Male Gaze Theory and Ratmansky:
Exploring Ballet's Ability to Adapt to a Feminist Viewpoint

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Born in the court of Louis XIV, ballet originally developed from the connection between the French aristocracy and the codification of royal performance. Jennifer Homans, former professional dancer and current dance critic and director at New York University, narrates the film *American Ballet Theatre: A History* and describes how “ballet was created in order to express masculinity, power, strength, physical precision, control.”¹ In the late 18th century, the French Revolution upended the relationship between ballet and noble masculinity, devaluing the aristocracy in order to usher in the ballerina.² The rise of the Romantic ballets in the early 19th century featured the beginnings of the ephemeral ballerina *en pointe*. Through technological and technical development, the pointe shoe brought about thematic change in ballet, creating elusive femininity as ballerinas floated on their toes. This ballerina flirts with the male gaze, just out of reach in the plots of Romantic and Classical ballets. Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey coined the term male gaze when she wrote: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.”³ Combining Mulvey’s theory with *The New York Times* dance critics, Apollinaire Scherr’s dance criticism in *Financial Times*, *Dance Magazine* articles, and ballet videography on YouTube and Rutube, the Russian equivalent, this paper will analyze the persistence of the male gaze theory in current ballet choreography, focusing on the work of acclaimed choreographer, Alexei Ratmansky. When male choreographers craft ballets according to balletic tradition, the female ballerina is subject to and dominated by the male gaze, even when she may appear to have agency.

In June 2016, *The New York Times* returned to 20th century ballet legend George

¹ Ric Burns, *American Ballet Theatre: A History*, Documentary (PBS, 2015).

² Ibid.

³ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1, 1975): 11.

Balanchine's famous quote, "Ballet is woman," with two articles discussing the persistence of gender inequality in ballet choreography and leadership.⁴ Michael Cooper's article counters Balanchine's statement: "But if women are still the symbols of ballet in the popular imagination, chances are it is as ballerinas performing dazzling, demanding steps that were devised for them by men. When it comes to choreography, at least at most major companies, ballet remains overwhelmingly a man's world."⁵ Under the direction of male choreographers, the ballerina dances at the will of a man and for the view of a man. In the second article, critic Gia Kourlas interviewed contemporary choreographer Pam Tanowitz, who comments, "Well, it's a woman made by a man."⁶ Current ballet choreography continues to reflect this idea; just this year, *Dance Magazine* covered Les Grands Ballets Canadiens creation of a season of works advertised as "an ode to woman," featuring a woman-themed ballet choreographed by three men and a lone female choreographer throughout the entire season.⁷ The male gaze permeates balletic plot lines, creating heteronormative partnerships and codified gender roles. These permeations have a direct correlation to the persistence of male choreographer and director, found in the hierarchy of the ballet workforce. Today, Alexei Ratmansky is one example of a male choreographer existing in and benefiting from the male gaze preference in ballet.

Male domination has its origins in ballet history. In her article "Sexual Exploitation Was the Norm for 19th Century Ballerinas," Erin Blakemore describes the history of sexual harassment and objectification of young ballerinas in Paris Opera Ballet during the 19th century.⁸

⁴ Michael Cooper, "Breaking the Glass Slipper: Where Are the Female Choreographers?" *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 23, 2016.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gia Kourlas, "Dance Luminaries Weigh in on the Conspicuous Absence of Female Choreographers," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 23, 2016.

⁷ Martha Schabas, "The Problem With Les Grands Ballets' Male-Choreographed 'FEMMES' Program Goes Beyond Fairness," *Dance Magazine*, March 7, 2018.

⁸ Erin Blakemore, "Sexual Exploitation Was the Norm for 19th Century Ballerinas," HISTORY.com, January 5, 2018.

Sponsored and ogled by abbonés, wealthy aristocratic men, the young ballerinas were shamed by society for their skimpy clothing and sensuous bodily performance, but exploited by a select group of male patrons. The persistence of the abbonés established a precedent of aristocratic male control, which trickles down into the gendered divisions in ballet still existing today. These power imbalances can lead to abuse, evident in the recent clash of the #MeToo movement and the ballet world and most notably seen in the change in leadership at New York City Ballet.

In early 2018, Peter Martins resigned from his position of Ballet Master in Chief at New York City Ballet after numerous accusations of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse.⁹ His accusations span all ages and genders, but his position of ultimate power arises, in part, from ballet's insistence on hierarchical leadership. In 2016, Martins was interviewed by *The New York Times* for the articles regarding the lack of female ballet choreographers, and his response states, "Listen, I've lived in a women's world my whole life. The last thing we are is sexist here."¹⁰ He continues on to become a bit more understanding: "I wish I had an answer. My own speculation is that to become a female dancer, it's a little more demanding than for a male."¹¹ Still, in Cooper's same-day article regarding female choreographers, he is unwilling to blame ballet's history for "the paucity of works by female choreographers at major companies"¹² He points to the recent "explosion of new work — but at the big companies, most has been by men."¹³

Ratmansky fits into this group of rising male choreographers. Currently, Ratmansky is an Artist in Residence at American Ballet Theatre, and he has choreographed and recreated ballets

⁹ Alastair Macaulay, "History Is About to Change at New York City Ballet. How?," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), January 2, 2018.

¹⁰ Gia Kourlas, "Dance Luminaries Weigh in on the Conspicuous Absence of Female Choreographers," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 23, 2016.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Michael Cooper, "Breaking the Glass Slipper: Where Are the Female Choreographers?," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 23, 2016.

¹³ Ibid.

for companies around the world, including New York City Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, Bolshoi Ballet, Royal Danish Ballet, and Dutch National Ballet. Ratmansky's ballet choreography still exists in the male gaze template provided by ballet history, and his opinions regarding ballet and gender merely cement the presence of the gender binary. Last October, *Dance Magazine* cited a post from Ratmansky's Facebook page, in which he writes "sorry, there is no such thing as equality in ballet: women dance on point, men lift and support women. women receive flowers, men escort women off stage. [sic] not the other way around (I know there are couple of exceptions). [sic] and I am very comfortable with that."¹⁴ Previously, *The New York Times* interviewed Ratmansky, Justin Peck, and Christopher Wheeldon about their positions as choreographers, and when asked about the lack of female choreographers, Ratmansky responded, "I don't see it as a problem. Besides Crystal Pite, Jessica Lang and Annabelle Lopez Ochoa are among the very best now. And Graham and Nijinska are still performed. I'm sure that if new, interesting talent arrives and is a woman, she will have equal opportunities."¹⁵ Ballet's gender divisions struggle to manifest when the dominant choreographers cannot grasp the breadth of the inequality. A few successful women do not make up for the hundreds of male choreographers who continue balletic tradition through the male gaze.

Ratmansky does not hide his infatuation with ballet tradition; in fact, ballet history and the ballerina's pointework continue to fascinate the choreographer. In the same interview, he states: "But I would say that deep inside me I sensed quite recently what my main interest is — and that would be dancing on pointe and classical technique. I would love to experiment, but at the same time I have learned that there is such richness in the classical vocabulary that my whole

¹⁴ Lauren Wingenroth, "Ratmansky Just Said There's 'No Such Thing As Equality in Ballet,'" *Dance Magazine*, accessed January 23, 2018.

¹⁵ Roslyn Sulcas, "A Conversation With 3 Choreographers Who Reinvigorated Ballet," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 20, 2017.

life would not be enough to explore that alone.”¹⁶ Ratmansky’s dedication to the history of ballet reveals his own fascination with the ballerina figure and her abilities en pointe. This perspective fuels his restaging and his creation of ballet choreography. Although American Ballet Theatre’s video promotion for Ratmansky’s 2016 World Premiere describes his work as “cutting edge and dynamic...poetry of movement,” Ratmansky creates new works within the existing gender structure, through the lens of the male gaze.¹⁷

Ratmansky’s devotion to ballet history manifests in his recent recreations of ballets. To choreograph *Sleeping Beauty*, Ratmansky “taught himself to decipher a long-obsolete form of dance notation used to record Petipa’s choreography around the turn of the last century, and spent countless hours studying notebooks of ‘The Sleeping Beauty,’ taken out of Russia after the revolution and now kept at Houghton Library at Harvard.”¹⁸ This feat is valuable, even essential, to the practice of ballet. The fleeting nature of dance makes preservation of choreography and choreographic tradition paramount, especially for the many ballets created before the advent of video technology. Apollinaire Scherr notes Ratmansky’s revitalization of Heinrich Kröllner’s lost ballet *Whipped Cream*, whose “plot - in this case, a boy making himself so sick on sweets that he begins to hallucinate - is an excuse for colourful dances amid spectacular effects.”¹⁹ American Ballet Theatre Principal Dancer Stella Abrera performed the lead role for the premiere in April 2017, and her flirtatious *bouffées* and playful *pas de chevaux*

¹⁶ Roslyn Sulcas, “A Conversation With 3 Choreographers Who Reinvigorated Ballet,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 20, 2017.

¹⁷ American Ballet Theatre, *In the Studio: Alexei Ratmansky’s 2016 World Premiere* (YouTube 2016), accessed April 8, 2018.

¹⁸ Michael Cooper, “Ratmansky’s New ‘Sleeping Beauty’ Looks Back to 1890,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), February 27, 2015.

¹⁹ Apollinaire Scherr, “With Dance This Dazzling, Who Needs a Plot?,” *FT.Com* (London, UK), May 24, 2017.

accentuate her hallucinatory qualities.²⁰ Yet again, woman becomes a figment of male construction and imagination. Even so, Ratmansky does not simply regurgitate old ballets, and Marina Harss describes his newest *Romeo & Juliet* as “poetic and human-scaled, focusing more on the young lovers’ attraction than on the oppressive circumstances of 14th-century Verona. Personal suffering is emphasized over hatred and revenge.”²¹ Ratmansky demonstrates his attention to detail by fleshing out the characters of the corps, allowing individual movement motifs to identify the suffering of each character.²² Ratmansky changes the inflection of existing ballets, but cannot escape the gendered history when he recreates these productions.

Featured in *American Ballet Theatre: A History*, footage of Ratmansky’s *Firebird* appears to juxtapose the romantic idealism of women found in ballet.²³ ABT Principal dancers Herman Cornejo and Misty Copeland perform the work in the film, and Ratmansky’s recreation of Michel Fokine’s original choreography emphasizes the struggle between the wild female and the man who tries to tame her. Although Copeland begins the work wild and free, she still acts as a bird who must be tamed by her male partner, thus removing the agency from the ballerina. Other productions of Ratmansky’s *Firebird* feature interesting deviations from Michel Fokine’s original. Scherr notes how Ratmansky inserts “‘a little change’ in the libretto: the maidens are no longer innocents. Now they are monsters like their deathless leader.”²⁴ The corps de ballet achieves a semblance of agency with their ferocity. When Natalia Osipova defiantly dances the lead for ABT, Scherr emphasizes, “The pas de deux runs counter to many a ballet seduction,

²⁰ Works & Process at the Guggenheim, *American Ballet Theatre: Whipped Cream by Alexei Ratmansky* (YouTube 2017), accessed April 14, 2018.

²¹ Marina Harss, “Opening Wide: The Bolshoi’s New, More Poetic ‘Romeo and Juliet,’” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), January 16, 2018.

²² Vesti-Moscow, *Ratmansky’s “Romeo and Juliet” at the Bolshoi* (Rutube 2017), accessed April 14, 2018.

²³ Ric Burns, *American Ballet Theatre: A History*, Documentary (PBS, 2015).

²⁴ Apollinaire Scherr, “Resurrection Days,” *FT.Com* (London, UK), March 24, 2012.

where the woman's limpness is meant to signify her joy.”²⁵ Like *Romeo & Juliet*, the agency of Ratmansky's lovers rings true, as “[t]he pathos and delight of his Firebird lies in the fact that this Ivan and Maiden are not destined to fall in love; they decide to.”²⁶ These subtle changes give ballet an additional perspective, even if still filtered through the male gaze.

Ratmansky integrates slight variations in gender roles in his original choreography, but nothing strong enough to subvert the traditional gender roles. In “Serenade after Plato's Symposium,” Ratmansky features seven male dancers as an allusion to Plato's Symposium, where seven men discuss the nature of erotic love. According to Alastair Macaulay, Ratmansky appears to defy balletic convention with same-sex partnering that displays “affection and mutual supportiveness.”²⁷ Although same-sex partnering does not appear often in ballet choreography, Ratmansky's occurs within convention, as a conversational element in a narrative where men discuss heteronormative love and the eroticism of women. Later, it is no surprise that the ballerina returns as a symbol of that unattainable love so entrenched in the tradition. Similarly, “Namouna, a Grand Divertissement” acts as it is named: a great diversion. Ratmansky's choreography maintains the transcendence and seductive nature of women, albeit giving the three ballerinas varied personalities.²⁸ In “Namouna,” NYCB Principal Sara Mearns describes her solo as “the hardest two minutes I have ever performed on stage,” but Ratmansky empowers her to feel as if she can do anything.²⁹ Indeed, her physicality is pushed to the limit, within the constraints of her role as a daring ballerina destined for her male partner. Again in “Odessa,”

²⁵ Apollinaire Scherr, “Firebird, American Ballet Theatre, New York,” *FT.Com* (London, UK), June 12, 2012.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Alastair Macaulay, “Review: In Gala, American Ballet Theater Is Open to Debate,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), May 17, 2016.

²⁸ Gia Kourlas, “At New York City Ballet, Hits, Misses and Daring Dancers,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), March 6, 2018.

²⁹ NYC Ballet, *Anatomy of a Dance: Sara Mearns on Ratmansky's Namouna, A Grand Divertissement* (YouTube 2018), accessed April 8, 2018.

Ratmansky carefully constructs three ballerina personalities where the solos of the female leads vary in kind and quality.³⁰ Scherr notes the underlying violence, which culminates when Sterling Hyltin slaps Joaquín De Luz; this marks a difference in balletic romance from the male-saves-female trope, but continues another troubling form of abuse.³¹ Still, De Luz describes his role in the ballet as “intense,” while Hytlin is overwhelmingly still “delicate,” and the traditional gender binary persists.³²

Ratmansky flips gender roles briefly at the end of “Piano Concerto No. 1” from “Shostakovich Trilogy,” when women partner the men in pirouettes and the male dancers balance in positions generally designated for women.³³ The whole cast wears grey unitards with red hues, save for one lead ballerina in a simple red leotard. Both the men and the women manipulate this lead ballerina, danced by Yuan Yuan Tan for San Francisco Ballet.³⁴ Though abstract, “Shostakovich Trilogy” pays tribute to balletic tradition with its lead ballerina, dainty and swept away by the forces of the corps de ballet. Like “Piano Concerto No. 1,” Ratmansky’s “Songs of Bukovina” demonstrates what Scherr calls “attentiveness to the past - a constant for Ratmansky” as he integrates choreography that alludes to Vaslav Nijinsky.³⁵ Knocked knees and parallel assemblés complement hunched prancing, reminiscent of Nijinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. Through his historical excavation, Ratmansky revives old ballets and presents new choreography with attention to pedagogy and tradition.

³⁰ Alastair Macaulay, “For the Couples in This Alexei Ratmansky Ballet, Love Is Not Enough,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), May 5, 2017.

³¹ Apollinaire Scherr, “Ratmansky Premiere, Lincoln Center, New York - Tremendous,” *FT.Com* (London, UK), May 5, 2017.

³² NYC Ballet, *Anatomy of a Dance: Joaquin De Luz on Odessa* (YouTube 2017), accessed April 8, 2018.

³³ Alastair Macaulay, “Of Women, Men and Ballet in the 21st Century,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), January 12, 2017.

³⁴ San Francisco Ballet, *SF Ballet in Ratmansky’s “Shostakovich Trilogy”* (YouTube 2014), accessed April 14, 2018.

³⁵ Apollinaire Scherr, “Ratmansky Premiere, American Ballet Theatre, New York - Jiggy Feet, Swoopy Phrasing,” *FT.Com* (London, UK), October 19, 2017.

This dedication to ballet history precludes Ratmansky's ability to create ballet choreography that adapts with increasing social awareness about the construction of gender roles. Editor and ballet choreographer Leigh Witchel questions Ratmansky's motives in his blog post "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Alexei?," ultimately concluding "Ratmansky's facility and strength as a ballet choreographer comes from understanding and buying into these conventions."³⁶ In this view, trapped by tradition and convention, Ratmansky is no more misogynistic than ballet is itself. If preserving the authenticity of ballet is key, ballet and Ratmansky must look to support female choreographers and agency. New York City Ballet Principal Ashley Bouder writes about her struggle with Ratmansky's choreography and her identity as a feminist. On the one hand, she finds the "gang rape scene" in *Odessa* thrilling to dance and enjoys doing men's choreography in *Namouna, A Grand Divertissement*.³⁷ On the other hand, "In order to move forward socially, and, yes, artfully, we must be willing to break from tradition."³⁸

When pointework glorifies the ballerina as magical and ballet choreography centers around women supported by men, the ballerina struggles to be feminist. Alistair Macaulay explores this idea in his article "Of Women, Men and Ballet in the 21st Century," concluding the only way to make ballet feminist is to eliminate the male gaze by demanding creative opportunities for women which would lead to ballets created from a female, and hopefully feminist, point-of-view.³⁹ This begins by dismantling the dictatorial hierarchy of the ballet master model. In Peter Martins' absence, the quartet of leaders (Craig Hall, Johnathon Stafford,

³⁶ Leigh Witchel, "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Alexei?," *Dancelog.Nyc*, June 1, 2017.

³⁷ Ashley Bouder, "It's Time For Ballet To Embrace Feminism," *Dance Magazine*, April 9, 2018.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Alastair Macaulay, "Of Women, Men and Ballet in the 21st Century," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), January 12, 2017.

Justin Peck, Rebecca Krohn) pushes toward a more democratic, less domineering leadership of ballet.⁴⁰ Still, Courtney Escoyne's article *Dance Magazine* points out the need to continue to empower women in ballet, for many act "as though one Bronislava Nijinska makes up for all of the other voices we might still be missing in the ballet world today without systemic change."⁴¹ Ballet may not be able to lose its pointe shoes or heteronormative partnerships, but by putting women in charge of companies and choreography, the pointe shoe can be reclaimed as feminist.

Female ballet choreographers currently push toward a new view of ballet. San Francisco Ballet's 2018 festival of new works, titled *Unbound*, features two female choreographers among twelve total. In a promotional video, choreographer Cathy Marston stages a love story based on Edith Wharton's 1911 novella *Ethan Frome*. She follows balletic tradition with the heteronormative love story, admitting the plot advances "fairly unoriginally," but she implements the corps de ballet as the elemental nature of snow.⁴² Marston says this allows the all dancers, regardless of gender, to play with opposing qualities, becoming light flurries and heavy blizzards.⁴³ The second choreographer, Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, discusses how she began ballet because she was a tomboy and her mother wanted her to be "elegant and feminine."⁴⁴ Inspired by her Colombian heritage, Ochoa created a work based on Picasso's cubism, integrating salsa and flamenco to address today's violence with her artistic choices in lines, shapes, and strength.⁴⁵ Across the country in Minnesota, St. Paul Ballet's Artistic Director Zoé Emilie Henrot collaborated with the director of the boxing studio where the company shares

⁴⁰ Alastair Macaulay, "History Is About to Change at New York City Ballet. How?," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), January 2, 2018.

⁴¹ Courtney Escoyne, "Can We All Please Acknowledge Ballet's Sexism Problem Already?," *Dance Magazine*, April 24, 2017.

⁴² "Cathy Marston," *San Francisco Ballet* (2018), accessed April 14, 2018.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ "Annabelle Lopez Ochoa," *San Francisco Ballet* (2018), accessed April 14, 2018.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

space to create a work exploring the strength of ballerinas and the delicacy of boxers.⁴⁶

Other choreographers are addressing gender and ballet with more explicit attention. Principal Dancer and choreographer Lauren Lovette's New York City Ballet 2017 premiere *Not Our Fate* featured a romantic same-sex partnership between Preston Chamblee and Taylor Stanley.⁴⁷ Previously, Lovette also choreographed a duet for herself and Patricia Delgado, set to the spoken word of genderqueer poet Andrea Gibson. Lovette talks about the process: "Out of all the projects that I have going on and all the ones I have done this is the one I am sure I'm doing for the right reasons."⁴⁸ The work of these rising choreographers begins to tackle the lack of representation in ballet, opening the door for the art form to progress. Ratmansky's work will always have a place in ballet, but it may be challenged and overturned by the boundary-pushing work of rising female choreographers. When women create ballet choreography, they eviscerate the presence of the male gaze, allowing them to use ballet history to look toward ballet's future.

⁴⁶ Madeline Schrock, "Here's What Happens When Boxers and Ballet Dancers Share the Stage," *Dance Magazine*, April 6, 2018.

⁴⁷ Gia Kourlas, "Lauren Lovette Isn't Afraid To Send Shock Waves Through The Ballet World," *Dance Magazine*, February 16, 2018.

⁴⁸ Andrea Gibson, *Andrea Gibson at Vail Dance Fest Feat. Lauren Lovette* (YouTube, 2018), accessed April 15, 2018.

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