



## Ballet's Influence on the Development of Early Cinema and the Technological Modification of Dance Movement

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### Abstract

*Dance is a form of movement that has captured the attention of cinema spectators since the medium's inception. The question of the compatibility between dance, particularly ballet, and cinema has been fiercely debated since the silent era and continues to be discussed by scholars and practitioners in the twenty-first century. This topic was of particular interest in the Russian cinema industry of the 1910s, in a country where ballet was considered to be among the most prestigious of the art forms. This article explores ballet's influence on the development of silent cinema in pre-revolutionary Russia and the ways in which cinema technologies alter dance as an art form. This topic is discussed through the career of Vera Karalli, Imperial ballerina of the Bolshoi Theater turned Russia's first film star. I question the legitimacy of the argument that film can only preserve a disfigured image of a dancer's body in motion. Many critics of Karalli's cinematic performance fail to take into consideration the direct influence of the cinematography, editing style, and overall conditions of the Khanzhonkov Studio of 1914-1917 on the finished product. This article explores the cinematic rendition of the moving (dancing) body, taking into account the technology responsible for producing the final image. The study draws upon primary sources found in Moscow's libraries and archives.*

**Keywords:** Dance in cinema; film history; Russian cinema; silent cinema; Vera Karalli.

The final years of the Czarist era were a fruitful time period in the history of Russian ballet that included a combination of both innovative and classical choreography. Vera Karalli, prima ballerina of the Imperial Bolshoi Theater turned Russia's first film star, was one of the pre-revolutionary period's most popular dancers with a fan following that made her a genuine star within the ballet world (Fig. 1). Karalli was a dancer who looked towards the future of ballet since she performed choreography that strayed from that found in the classical repertoire. The choreography and roles for which she was best known often included a vast amount of pantomime and mimicry, and lacked traditional ballet technique and steps. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the new style of dance that Karalli performed is still considered to be within the realm of classical ballet. It simply did not adhere to the traditions of Russian ballet and its rigid rules. Karalli grew up in a time of developing industrialization and urbanization, a factor that may have influenced her to break with the past in her beliefs about art, and not only in the realm of ballet. In 1914 when the ballerina was at the peak of her ballet fame,



**Fig. 1** Vera Karalli's official Bolshoi Ballet photo. This photo often appeared on the cover of theater and film journals during the 1910s.

leading film entrepreneur Alexander Khanzhonkov recruited Karalli to become a cinema actress in his company, the Khanzhonkov Studio. His decision to transform Karalli, a ballet dancer, into the first Russian cinema star was a calculated choice. He understood that her popularity would attract audiences, but he was also aware of the special position that ballet held in Russian culture. Karalli was a direct link to the Imperial Theaters and would bring prestige and legitimacy to the cinema that was attempting to establish itself as a respected art form. Ballet itself, the most popular Imperial art form, should be considered a true star of early Russian cinema. The merging of ballet and cinema allowed dance to influence cinema acting as well as the overall style of the early films that were centered on it.

In this article, I draw attention to both the benefits and limitations of using film to capture and preserve ballet. This history reveals the similarities between ballet and the silent cinema as well how balletic pantomime helped to develop a screen acting style than leaned more towards realism than exaggeration. The conclusions presented in this study are based on primary research from pre-revolutionary publications as well as an analysis of films of the period. This essay examines Karalli's ballet training and career alongside of the debates regarding the benefits of filmed dance, concluding with an analysis of her most celebrated film, *The Dying Swan* (1917) and a discussion of Karalli's role in the development of early Russian cinema style (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2** Vera Karalli: the first Russian film star.

Contemporary ballet and the cinema developed side by side and were arguably two of the most novel art forms in pre-revolutionary Russia.<sup>1</sup> Thus, they received much backlash from cultural, artistic, and political critics who feared change that was indicative of the society of rapidly increasing industrialization and urbanization in which they found themselves. While the cinema was a new medium, classical ballet had been an integral part of Russia's cultural heritage for over one hundred years. Therefore, ballet's modernization was especially disturbing to some critics who were strong proponents of traditional classical ballet that represented the old world. During the 1910s, both classical and contemporary ballets that were created through the modification of classical ballet were regularly performed on the stages of the Imperial Theaters, an institution that was directly connected to Czar Nicholas II and the Romanov family, and

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike classical ballet, the contemporary style of ballet for which Alexander Gorsky was known was indeed novel during the 1910s.

therefore the State. Given this situation, it is not at all perplexing that the Administration of the Imperial Theaters used its power to retain artistic tradition and forbade its artists, technically the Czar's employees, from appearing in the lowbrow cinema that was not yet even considered an art form by many. Just as Nicholas II preferred classically pure balletic works to those of contemporary ballet choreographers Mikhail Fokine and Alexander Gorsky, he did not wish for his artists to be associated with a medium that he felt had the potential to harm the public. Nonetheless, some of the most culturally and artistically significant dance films starring Imperial Ballet Artists were made in pre-revolutionary Russia during this decade. These films were produced largely due to the collaboration between film entrepreneur Alexander Khanzhonkov, Bolshoi prima ballerina Vera Karalli, and choreographer Alexander Gorsky, a group of artists who looked towards the future and were unafraid to challenge the stagnant artistic and social protocols of the late pre-revolutionary period. Karalli's unique ballet acting style that she learned from Gorsky was very suitable for the screen and made her an ideal cinema actress.

The dance film, especially those featuring Imperial ballet dancers, was an ideal artistic vehicle for directors of the period. The period of 1900-1918 was a unique time in Russian ballet history in that pantomime and mimicry were privileged over actual dancing. Pantomime and mimicry had always been an integral part of classical ballet; however, at the turn of the century these elements were limited and overshadowed by virtuoso technique. Gorsky's original ballets, such as *Evrika and Petroni* and *Salambo*, did away with traditional dance movements and replaced them with lengthy sequences of pantomime. Pantomime in ballet is the use of gestures made by the arms and upper body, accompanied by music, that express meaning to the audience and other actors. In Karalli's letters, 'Letters to Galina Kradinova,' located at The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, she recalls studying the movement styles of Isadora Duncan, the celebrated American dancer who broke away from traditional ballet technique by privileging free and natural movements in dance, and mentions that Gorsky did not make efforts to teach the traditional ballet technique that was emphasized in the training of her colleagues that came before and after her.<sup>2</sup> Karalli described her early lessons with Gorsky: "He included in our classical classes arm movement, body movement, running, walking, braking, taking much from Duncan."<sup>3</sup> In 1908 Karalli was interviewed about Isadora Duncan by *Theater Moscow*. Here she explains that Duncan's artistry had influenced her to drastically change the entire third act of the classical ballet, *La Bayadere*, explaining that only the free-flowing movements of Duncan's style and pantomime "create feeling that connects the dancer to the storyline (Fig. 3)."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this statement resonates with Duncan's own artistic style in that the dance was freed from an emphasis on technique and superfluous movements that only hindered the drama of the dance.

Even Gorsky's version of a classical ballet, such as *Giselle*, included only a very minimal amount of traditional dance steps according to Karalli and pre-revolutionary critics. He had ties with Konstantin Stanislavsky, the seminal actor, director, theorist and a founder of the Moscow Art Theater, who created a system that was based in psychological realism and improvisation. Gorsky believed that a theatrical ballet needed to feature a high level of acting and pantomime in order for the performers to communicate the story and emotions to the audience. In his opinion, too many dance movements only cluttered the production and took away from the dramatic

<sup>2</sup> Vera Alekseevna Karalli, "Letters to Galina Kradinova (19-8-64)," RGALI, 994/6/24, pp. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Karalli, "Letters to Galina Kradinova (24-11-64)," pp. 34.

<sup>4</sup> S.Y., "Our Conversations. V.A. Karalli On Isadora Duncan," *Theater Moscow*, #165, 20 January 1908, 17.

element. Therefore, it is not surprising that the ballet artists of this period who had extensive experience with pantomime captured the attention of film directors who made narrative films. Directors such as Evgeniy Bauer and Peter Chardiynin centered some of their most successful films, such as *The Dying Swan* and *Chrysanthemums* (1914), on stories that took place within Russia's ballet world and featured a famous Imperial dancer (Karalli) who performed famous balletic variations as well as the style of pantomime for which she was celebrated on stage.

In her letters Karalli recalls her working relationship with Gorsky: "I began a new epoch of mimetic ballets where I did not perform like a typical ballet dancer. It would have been very difficult for Gorsky without me. He said this himself."<sup>5</sup> She goes on to explain that Gorsky and the composer Andrei Arends created the ballet *Salambo* specifically for her; however, the powerful rival Ekaterina Geltser, a prominent Bolshoi prima ballerina, demanded the lead role and Karalli was forced to dance the second female lead, the goddess Tanit. Nonetheless, when Geltser went abroad in 1913 the director of the Imperial Theaters, Vladimir Telyakovsky, seized the moment to finally allow Karalli to dance the role of Salambo. She received high praise for her portrayal and Geltser was never again to dance this part. Karalli saved another one of Gorsky's original works, *Evrika and Petroniy*, after the poorly-received ballet with Geltser in the lead was in danger of being removed from the repertoire. Karalli was again extremely successful, which shows that only a ballerina who was trained proficiently in Gorsky's style could grapple with his pantomime and gesture-based ballets that relied so heavily on dramatic skill. Another important example of an original Gorsky work that Karalli references here is Glazunov's *Fifth Symphony*. "I asked Gorsky if I could exchange my ballet slippers for sandals," she writes. "It was unnecessary to dance on my toes in this type of ballet. And he agreed with this. I was a real Greek shepherdess, rather than a ballerina on her toes."<sup>6</sup> This final example shows Karalli and Gorsky's desire to avoid sacrificing realism for traditional ballet movements and costumes. Karalli herself perfectly understood her strengths and weaknesses as a ballet dancer and in 1916 spoke to a critic regarding her St. Petersburg audiences: "They should not expect head-turning passages and numerous fouettes: although I am a classical dancer my genre is made up dances that evoke mood, my roles in ballets have dramatic tone with emotional expression."<sup>7</sup>

In *Ballet Artist: Mikhail Mikhailovich Mordkin*, ballet scholar Elizaveta Surits recalls another drama ballet, *Noor and Anitra* (music by A.A. Ilinsky), which Gorsky staged specifically for Karalli in 1907. Surits describes this ballet as a series of mimetic scenes that included dance, and was stylized in an Oriental fashion:

Although Anitra and the other female dancers performed on pointe, their inwrought arm movements, inflections of the body, and groupings of the corps de ballet went beyond the borders of the academic canon [...] The central moment of the ballet was their (with Mikhail Mordkin) duet. It did not have anything to do with a traditional pas de deux; rather it was built on gallant communication between partners, lifts where they connected only with their arms and never with their bodies.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Karalli, "Letters to Galina Kradinova (21-2-63)," pp. 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "Theater Courier," *St. Petersburg Leaf*, #1690, 12 December 1916, 3. Cited in Vera Krasovskaya, *The Russian Ballet Theater At the Beginning of the 20th Century: Dancers* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1972), 180.

<sup>8</sup> Elizaveta Surits, *Ballet Artist: Mikhail Mikhailovich Mordkin* (Moscow: URSS, 2006), 108-9.



Existing photos from this ballet reveal that the choreography was not structured on the geometry of classical lines of classical lifts, but in a way that produced movement that was realistic to life. Surits notes that the type of pathos, mimicry and pantomime that was present in the performances of Karalli and Mordkin in *Noor and Anitra* would soon become the norm of silent cinema. "It was no coincidence that Mordkin<sup>9</sup> (and to a greater degree Karalli) would soon begin to appear in films."<sup>10</sup>

Although Gorsky's works that starred Karalli were popular on stage and he was highly praised by many for his modern choreographic innovations, he was nonetheless considered an outcast in much of the ballet world, especially in St. Petersburg, that wished to adhere strictly to tradition. One example pertains specifically to Karalli's artistry. Commenting on *Giselle*, one reviewer from 1915 writes: "Her 'Mad Scene' is too realistic. The ballet meaning (due to a lack of actual dance steps) is lost. She looks like she is performing a sort of drama divertissement. She is too much about drama."<sup>11</sup> This critic was clearly an advocate of tradition and his comments help to explain Karalli's high praise as a dramatic actress. Like many of the period, he could not come to terms with the loss of balletic tradition, and therefore understood Karalli's dramatic talent, although praised by many, in a negative light. Even during the Soviet period ballet historians had similar opinions regarding Karalli's portrayal of *Giselle*. In 1971, the year before Karalli's death, Vera Krasovskaya wrote about Karalli in a largely negative fashion in *The Russian Ballet Theater At the Beginning of the 20th Century: Choreographers*. This is especially evident in regards to *Giselle* as Krasovskaya recognizes the praise Karalli received from proponents of "mimodrama," she simultaneously derides their opinions that, according to the historian, do not respect the more traditional choreography and staging of *Giselle* as a masterpiece belonging to the international ballet theater.<sup>12</sup>

Due to his teaching system that emphasized communication through pantomime and mimicry over dance, Gorsky unintentionally created artists who were remarkably suitable for the medium of silent cinema. Indeed, many dancers with whom Gorsky worked would eventually follow in Karalli's footsteps, making their way into the cinema. For example, Bolshoi ballerina Maria Reizen appeared in Peter Chardynin's *On the Bed of Death and Love* in 1915, showing that this director, like Bauer, understood the benefits of working with classical ballet dancers who collaborated with Gorsky.<sup>13</sup> Bolshoi dancers Vera Pavlova and Vyacheslav Svoboda appeared in Bauer's *If Only It Could Be Expressed in Sounds*, to rave reviews by critics: "Now it is an absolute fact. Ballet artists bring much more to the screen than their talking counterparts. Maybe this is because even on the stage they are without words and 'speak through mimicry'."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> According to Surits, Mordkin, along with other former Imperial ballet dancers, appeared in the film *Aziade* in September, 1918. This film was not simply a depiction of a stage ballet; rather it was a silent fictional film with a storyline similar to that of the ballet. Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Surits, *Ballet Artist: Mikhail Mikhailovich Mordkin*, 36-37.

<sup>11</sup> A.A. Cherepin, "Ballet. Giselle," *Theater Newspaper*, #49, 6 December 1915, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Vera Krasovskaya, *The Russian Ballet Theater At the Beginning of the 20th Century: Choreographers* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1971), 243.

<sup>13</sup> "Khronika," *Theater Moscow*, #1829, 20-21 March 1916, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Ermech, "Kino-theater," *Theater Moscow*, #1942, 27-28 November 1916, 10.

By 1918 Reizen and Bolshoi dancer Leonid Zhukhov went on to appear in the popular *Love Desecrated, Strangled, Broken*. Both Bolshoi artists were highly praised for their acting skills.<sup>15</sup>

As domestic stars became the norm in Russia by 1915, important film and theater entrepreneurs, such as Alexander Drankov, reportedly went on to establish their own studios for young cinema actors.<sup>16</sup> A significant example of such a school was Mikhail Mordkin's Studio of plastics for drama, opera, classical and ballroom dance. This school trained cinema actors, theater actors, opera singers and dancers of all levels and ages to improve the plasticity of their stage/screen movement and body language. Mordkin's endeavor is unsurprising as he was one of Karalli's dance partners at the Bolshoi and worked extensively with Gorsky throughout his career, dancing the lead male roles in the choreographer's original works. A 1915 notice announcing the opening of Mordkin's school states that other ballet dancers will serve on the faculty.<sup>17</sup> Like Karalli, Mordkin worked closely with Gorsky and therefore the two dancers' style of pantomime was very similar. It is unsurprising that Mordkin was an important figure behind schools that trained cinema actors and appeared on screen in his own right. This is an example of how Gorsky dancers were well known for a pantomime style that was ideal for the screen. While Karalli never opened such a school in Russia on her own, her Gorsky-influenced style of ballet and pantomime was felt through Mordkin and other ballet artists who worked at these schools.

The new film schools that focused on the training of cinema actors naturally employed ballet dancers and other artists with a background in pantomime, gesture and mimicry. The Gorsky School and artistry of Karalli and her colleagues had influence on the curriculum in these schools, and can be seen by the number of Gorsky-era dancers who were employed at these institutions. This influence only increased with Karalli's first cinema appearances in 1914 and accompanying showcase of Gorsky's drama-based choreography. These institutions, primarily located at the heart of the film industry in Moscow, can be compared to the Denishawn School that opened its doors in 1915 and was located in the center of the American film industry. D.W. Griffith was well known for sending his actors to the school, such as Lillian and Dorothy Gish, and featured the Denishawn dancers of the school in the "Babylon Ballet" in *Intolerance* (1916). While the Denishawn School was a dance studio in its original sense, it had much in common with the Russian institutions that developed around the same time in that choreographic methods were used to produce and train cinema actors. Karalli and Gorsky may not have ran or taught at such an institution as did Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn; however, their influence was nonetheless strongly felt in the operations of these schools. Mordkin's involvement in such an institution is one way that Gorsky's influence reached the schools. Like St. Denis, Gorsky and Karalli were at least to a degree influenced by the teachings of Francois Delsarte, a French musician and teacher. Delsarte emphasized an emotional mind-body connection when creating and executing movements and dance steps. All parties mentioned considered this a higher priority than technique for technique's sake, making their styles of choreographic movement particularly applicable to the screen.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> S. "Kino-theater," *Theater Moscow*, #2097, 16-17 April 1918, 7.

<sup>16</sup> "Theater and the Cinema," *Theater Moscow*, #1748, 11-12 October 1915, 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> "Khronika," *Theater Moscow*, #1636, 18-19 January 1915, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Erin Brannigan, *DANCEFILM: Choreography and the Moving Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 87-90.



**Fig. 3** Vera Karalli and Mikhail Mordkin in the Gorsky's version of the ballet *La Bayadere*. Karalli's angular poses and lack of turnout were trademarks of Gorsky's contemporary ballet choreography.

**Fig. 4** Karalli frolics outdoors in her point shoes, showcasing her free style of movement that was influenced by Isadora Duncan's artistry and broke with classical ballet tradition.





The influence that Gorsky's dancers had on the schools that catered to both aspiring cinema actors and stage performers demonstrates their deep understanding of connections between balletic pantomime and the type that was conducive for the screen. During the 1910s Karalli was a strong advocate of filmed dance and publically expressed her opinions regarding the similarities and differences between the stage and screen in *Theater Moscow* in 1915. Karalli's observation that a cinema actor needs to know the exact place and position of each movement as the camera sees it is similar to stage dance where it is necessary to predetermine the speed and movement of every gesture and dance step so that it is accurately and effectively carried out in a particular part of the stage and does not interfere with the other dancers or scenery. Karalli argues that in the cinema "movements need to be simple and honest" in order to be believable, an idea that undoubtedly sprouted from exposure to Gorsky's style that called for the eradication of any superfluous movement that did not help to advance the dramatic storyline (Fig. 4).<sup>19</sup>

The debates surrounding the cinema, screen acting, and the compatibility of dance, movement, and film were discussed by leading artists of the 1910s.<sup>20</sup> Comparisons were often made between the two art forms, and in 1914 a critic for *The Cinema Herald* used ballet as an example to argue the importance of music in the silent cinema since the two art forms operated similarly.<sup>21</sup> While the famed director Vsevolod Meyerhold, known for his nontraditional theater settings that featured symbolism and the idea of physical being, had much less of an influence on the artistry of Gorsky and Karalli that took after Stanislavsky's psychological realism, his comments regarding movement and cinema acting are relevant to this discussion. Shortly after completing his film *The Strong Man* (1916), he emphasized the importance of rhythm and movement onscreen: "The performance of the actor, along with personal expressiveness, must be reserved with great will through the direction of the actor."<sup>22</sup> This statement also accurately describes the stage acting of a ballet artist, such as Karalli, who was trained to be expressive in her bodily and facial communication while adhering to a strict choreographic plan that would limit her movement to a controlled space, preventing it from appearing hysterical or sloppy.

Celebrated Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova held an extremely negative opinion of the cinema despite her appearances in the medium. As one of the most important pre-revolutionary dancers her words that she shared with *The Cinema Herald* in 1914, regarding the artistic debate on filmed danced, are worth quoting here in full:

In many cities I have been asked to perform in the cinema. I do not have time to act in an entire drama of mimicry in the style of Asta Nielsen,<sup>23</sup> dancing under the imperfections of the cinema

<sup>19</sup> O.T., "The Great Silent. V.A. Karalli On Acting In the Cinema," *Theater Moscow*, #1697, 19-20 June 1915, 3.

<sup>20</sup> It was common for critics to critique screen dance without explaining why it was not aesthetically appealing. Their vocabulary for such a discussion was not yet developed. In a review for the film *Tango-Fever*, the critic simply states that the "tango dance looks terrible on screen." "News Variety," *The Cinema Herald*, #1/81, 1 January 1914, 38.

<sup>21</sup> A. Kursinsky, "The Sceen's Capabilities," *The Cinema Herald*, #1/81, 1 January 1914, 13-15.

<sup>22</sup> N., "Our Conversations. V.E. Meierhold On the Cinema," *Theater Moscow*, 7-8 August 1916, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Asta Nielsen was a Danish film actress who became one of the most important film stars of the early twentieth century. She was especially known for her expressive pantomime and mimicry.

comes across as square on the screen. I once made an exception and agreed to be filmed for The Berlin Literary Society in Rubenstein's *Night* with its smooth movements. I forced the society to give me its word that the picture would only be shown under special circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

These statements demonstrate Pavlova's great distrust of filmed dance along with her knowledge that large, sweeping movements were less apt to be distorted on the screen than those that feature intricate details.

Another opposing opinion from the period, especially by the "King of the Screen" Ivan Mozzhukhin, argued that the cinema not only lured cinema actors from the theater, it also ruined them.<sup>25</sup> Some critics believed that the situation was so dire that his less than stellar stage acting, which supposedly worsened with his cinema experience could potentially destroy his image as a cinema star, or "the best actor on the screen."<sup>26</sup> It is unsurprising that these critics made their case for dramatic actors rather than ballet dancers. While balletic pantomime and acting styles suitable for the screen were similar, a theater actor would need to make significant modifications to his or her movement style for it to appear realistic on screen. Indeed, a dramatic actor who brought his or her screen acting skills to the stage would likely not come across as expressive and communicative in a large auditorium. These actors demonstrated exaggerated, histrionic pantomime that greatly differed from the style of ballet dancers who were trained to "speak" gracefully with their bodies.<sup>27</sup> Dramatic actors needed to modify and economize their acting style so that it would be closer to balletic pantomime that worked well on the screen. A dramatic actor who worked in the theater and film simultaneously needed to be flexible with his or her style of acting, unlike a ballet dancer whose style transferred over much more naturally.

Famed movement theoretician Prince Sergei Volkonsky contributed to this discussion by arguing that: "Film acting is all in movement. One must be able to decipher between good and bad movement for the screen. This can be done by looking in mirrors."<sup>28</sup> His statement accurately describes the training and choreographic processes of dancers who work in large studios that are completely covered with mirrors. This setup insures that choreographers and dancers will have a complete picture and understanding of each and every movement from all angles. Volkonsky argues that this situation is just as necessary for the training of cinema actors. The theoretician's works published during Karalli's career, such as *The Expressive Person: Stage Training in Gesture According to Delsarte* (first published in 1913), undoubtedly influenced the understanding of gesture and movement for stage and screen actors. This guide included the first Russian publication of the system of Francois Delsarte who connected the actor's inner emotions with a system of gestures, mimicry, and plastic poses that were based on human interaction. While quite different from Stanislavsky's psychological realism that influenced Gorsky's work to a greater degree, Volkonsky's teachings based on Delsarte forced actors to consider the idea of meaning behind movement, rather than movement for movement's sake. In this work, widely read by actors of the 1910s, Volkonsky analyses the meaning behind

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<sup>24</sup> "Pavlova and the Cinema," *The Cinema Herald*, #92/12, 21 June 1914, 23.

<sup>25</sup> V. Gorsky, "The Tendency Towards the Cinema," *Theater Moscow*, #1963, January 10 1916, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Tom and Billy, "Backstage," *Theater Moscow*, #1994, 23 March 1917, 7.

<sup>27</sup> In 1914, it was thought that Russian dramatic actors were not ready for the screen since they were trained only for the stage. "The Russian Cinema," *The Cinema Herald*, #88/8, 20 April 1914, 15-16.

<sup>28</sup> Prince Sergei Volkonsky, "Silent Danger," *The Cinema Herald*, #88/9, 7 May 1914, 25-27.

movements and gestures that can be performed on stage to convey particular emotions, and gives a practical set of exercises intended to encourage an actor's plasticity. These exercises pertained to the eyes, nose, mouth, head, body, arms, gait, turns, bows, sitting, articulation, genuflection, falling, contrast, use of a flag, and breathing.<sup>29</sup> Volkonsky's immense knowledge that is illustrated in this work demonstrates his expertise in the realm of movement, an important factor when considering his articles that regularly appeared in film and theater journals in the 1910s. Volkonsky's (in turn Delsarte's) influence on Gorsky and his dancers, including Karalli, helps to explain why ballet professionals were often touted as the most proficient screen actors within the debates on filmed dance. The value that Volkonsky placed on understanding the meaning behind each movement was important for screen acting.

Many of the above debates demonstrate the issues connected with attempts to pristinely film classical ballet; however, it is important for this discussion to separate this art form into two major elements: technical dance steps and pantomime/mimicry. Although the problems associated with capturing classical dance on film are legitimate, this does not take away from the fact that ballet dancers were often touted by film directors, producers and critics as the best models for screen actors of dramatic films. In his analysis of the problem of the actors' loss of speech on the silent screen, critic V. Volin compares ballet and screen acting in order to argue that effective communication without the spoken word is possible. He writes:

There is already stage art without words. Dance and ballet do not need words for aesthetic effect; Pavlova and Geltser are understandable without words, and it does not seem as if ballerinas have their tongues cut out when they strengthen their dance through mimicry; it does not seem like this because they have expressive bodies and faces that convey to the audience the necessary material (meaning) for the dance [...] Ballet dancers are capable of expressing life through dance, rather than words.<sup>30</sup>

Other critics reiterated the importance of symbolic gesture in silent cinema: "The absence of speech forces artists of such films to make use of gesture, and finally, to create a special symbolic system of gesture."<sup>31</sup> Such a system of gesture and pantomime had long been in place in classical ballet, and it was therefore natural for ballet artists to utilize this language of movement in the cinema. Yet, another critic took ballet as an example for cinema acting, focusing specifically on the paramount element of rhythm in pantomime: "In a drama of mimicry movement is always a symbol. The rhythm (of the pantomime movement) symbolizes one or another emotional tension of the main character, and creates contact between the stage and the audience."<sup>32</sup>

Karalli was the most prominent example of a ballet dancer who affectively communicated without words on the screen. Unlike dramatic actors, she did not need to modify her stage pantomime to a significant degree since the Gorsky style was already similar to how acting needed to occur on the screen. Khanzhonkov, Bauer and film director Peter Chardynin were eager to work with her for this reason. While Khanzhonkov was anxious to hire Karalli for the

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<sup>29</sup> Sergei Volkonsky, *The Expressive Person: Stage Training in Gesture According to Delsarte* (St. Petersburg, Moscow and Krasnodar: Planeta Muziyki, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> V. Volin, "Stage and Screen," *Theater Newspaper*, #24, 12 June 1916, 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Krinsky, "Screen. The Task of the Screen," *Theater Newspaper*, #36, 6 September 1915, 17.

<sup>32</sup> V. GE-G, "Two Rhythms," *Theater Newspaper*, #4, 22 January 1917, 10-11.

connection that she would bring to the most popular form of the legitimate theater, Bauer and Chardynin sought to work with her as they knew that they would be able to choreograph her movements in a way that would speak to audiences. It is unsurprising that leading pre-revolutionary cinema director Evgeniy Bauer was known for calculating every movement, paying careful attention to each action of the actor. Bauer's psychological style of cinema was slower paced than the typical Russian film that was already much slower than its western counterparts. The director created an ideal setting for the showcasing of dancers as "models and props," and where movement could be highlighted against a static backdrop. In *Silent Witnesses*, Russian film scholar Yuri Tsivian, with the aid of primary sources, explains that Bauer meticulously examined each scene through the camera lens while the actors were in place. The director was especially careful to avoid any superfluous movement by the actors that could potentially disturb the scene as a whole. Tsivian argues: "Bauer's experience with photography showed in his style of posing the actors." Bauer treated his actors like models and had a pianist present during filming "to intensify the mood."<sup>33</sup> This is likely the result of his work with numerous dancers on stage and screen. For Bauer, a single actor in a film was never paramount, rather the "collective," which included both human "models" and props, took precedence.<sup>34</sup> The situation was similar in classical ballet where the dancers are manipulated like models by the choreographer, and the principal dancers are understood as only a part of the ever important collective.

In "Choreographing Space, Time and Dikovniki in the Films of Evgeniy Bauer," Alyssa DeBlasio explores Lev Kuleshov's idea of "dikovnika" in its pre-revolutionary form in *The Dying Swan* (Fig. 5).<sup>35</sup> This Bauer psychological melodrama (sometimes referred to as one of the first horror films), named after Karalli's famed balletic variation, tells the story of the deaf ballerina Gizella (played by Karalli) who becomes a famous dancer, attracting the attention of an insane aristocratic artist who eventually murders her. According to DeBlasio, Bauer's work the term dikovnika refers to an object that is central to the mise-en-scene in a film. "Placed in the foreground," she observes, "the dikovnika assumes symbolic significance, highlighting aspects of character or theme."<sup>36</sup> These objects often take the form of busts and statues for Bauer, and play integral roles on both the diegetic and nondiegetic levels: "Though always pointing beyond themselves to ideas or concepts and thereby aiding in the narration of the film, dikovniki are physical objects within the mise-en-scene that serve as concrete signs throughout the film."<sup>37</sup>

In *The Dying Swan*, the dikovnika is the swan whose symbolism simultaneously invokes three important ideas: Karalli, the actress who performs the lead in this film, Fokine's popular

<sup>33</sup> Yuri Tsivian, *Silent Witnesses: Russian Films, 1908-1919*. Edited by Paolo Cherchi Usai (Pordenone: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 1989), 550.

<sup>34</sup> Boris Zyukov, *Vera Kholodnaya: For Her 100th Birthday* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1995), 38.

<sup>35</sup> Lev Kuleshov was a Soviet director and theorist who made his most significant films, such as *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924), during the 1920s. He worked as a set designer for Evgeniy Bauer during the pre-revolutionary period, and went on to further develop his mentor's ideas regarding rhythm and movement, actors as models and props, and the importance of the collective over the individual star.

<sup>36</sup> Alyssa DeBlasio, "Choreographing Space, Time, and Dikovniki in the films of Evgenii Bauer," *Russian Review* 66.4 (October 2007): 675.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

ballet, and the legend of the swan in Russian folklore. As DeBlasio states, Bauer deprives Gizella of her voice for the sake of art both on stage and in Glinsky's studio where she is murdered when posing as a swan, reinforcing, DeBlasio argues, the "privileging of the dead body over the living one as in *After Death* (another Bauer-Karalli vehicle that took up this same theme). In *After Death* and *The Dying Swan*, Bauer's dikovniki—all of which represent the artistic ideal—incarnate an absent individual or idea."<sup>38</sup> Gizella acts as a living dikovnika and the ultimate prop for Bauer as she is posed like a doll by her murderer Count Glinsky, guided by Mikhail Fokine's choreographic structure, and manipulated by Bauer off screen.<sup>39</sup> This analysis of the role of the dikovnika in this film helps to further explain why Bauer found classical ballet dancers to be the most suitable screen actors. Traditionally, classical ballet dancers have no say in how they will move their bodies on stage and are physically manipulated and dictated to by the choreographer and ballet master. While some choreographers give dancers room for artistic and stylistic freedom, more often than not they expect their dancers to conform to their wishes right down to the most intricate details. Just as in Bauer's film, it often takes physical manipulation of the dancer's body by the choreographer to achieve the desired results.



**Fig. 5** Karalli's final pose in Evgeniy Bauer's *The Dying Swan*.

Bauer's collaboration with cinematographer Boris Zavelev factors into this analysis. The cinematographer is an especially significant figure in the discussion of the dance film as he, rather than the director or choreographer, ultimately determines exactly how the audience views

<sup>38</sup> DeBlasio, "Choreographing Space, Time, and Dikovniki in the films of Evgenii Bauer," 678.

<sup>39</sup> DeBlasio, 671-692.



the dance. The cinematographer's role is similar to that of the choreographer since he controls exactly how the dance steps and movements will appear before spectators. For example, a choreographer might attempt to draw the audience's attention to the arm movements in a dance sequence by making them more pronounced than the footwork. However, the cinematographer can take this same sequence and create a close-up of the feet, obviously predetermining the audience's focus and overriding the choreographer's artistic wishes. The cinematographer is in a position to make the final artistic choices regarding filmed dance. In this way the camerawork itself is an alternative type of choreography. Even today the art of accurately filming classical ballet has not been perfectly mastered despite the many innovations that have occurred in the cinema industry over the past century. Tracking movement with the camera, especially that of classical ballet, is particularly difficult due to the art form's ephemeral and fleeting nature. Completely capturing classical ballet's choreographic nuances on film is impossible since the cinematographer has the complicated task of deciding from which angle to film the performer and on which details of the dance to focus.

*The Dying Swan*, shot by Boris Zavelev, is considered to be Karalli's most well known work. In his important and rare essay on pre-revolutionary cinematographers, Philip Cavendish argues that, "the exact division of responsibility between director and camera operator during this period was fluid."<sup>40</sup> Due to his theatrical background, Bauer was proficient in production aspects, such as lighting, and took great active interest in the "visual composition" of his films.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, it is logical to believe that Bauer shared the role of cinematographer with Zavelev to a degree.<sup>42</sup>

Although variation of the "The Dying Swan" that Karalli frequently performed on the stage of the Bolshoi is the most recognizable choreographic example in this film, it is perhaps more revealing to examine the nightmare sequence in which Gizella has a disturbing premonition regarding her collaboration with the artist Glinsky who is consumed with capturing death in his paintings. This pantomime sequence is carefully choreographed and is reminiscent of the choreography that Gorsky created for her in his drama ballets. This sequence is especially telling since it should be understood as a collaboration between Karalli, Gorsky, Zavelev and Bauer. The director took the opportunity to combine his famed three-dimensional style of mise-en-scene with movement. The scene begins with Gizella lying in bed with her pointe shoes visible on her dresser. She is initially filmed in a medium shot, and then the camera tracks out to produce a long shot that shows the entirety of the carefully arranged bedroom that is the stage for lightning and a blowing curtain. Like the princess Aurora in the classical ballet *Sleeping Beauty*, an inanimate Gizella in her bed is nothing but a prop in the overall picture of the mise-en-scene that creates its three-dimensional effect through multiple layers of decorated space. This space includes the area behind the bed that contains the dresser with the pointe shoes, Gizella's bed,

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<sup>40</sup> Philip Cavendish, "The Hand That Turns the Handle: Camera Operators and the Poetics of the Camera in Pre-Revolutionary Russian Film," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 82.2 (April 2004), 225.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> For information on Bauer's theatrical career and his application of this experience in cinema, see Oksana Chefranova's doctoral dissertation "From Garden to Kino: Evgenii Bauer, Cinema, and the Visuality of Moscow Amusement Culture, 1885-1917" (New York University, 2014).

and the space in front of the bed in which the curtain, blowing plants, and the lightening in the window make their marks.

The film then cuts to a long shot (representing Gizella's dream) of Glinsky's corridor, depicting a frightened Gizella hovering near the window and a woman in white slowly moving towards her with an outstretched arm. The two women who are framed by the high ceiling (a device often used by Bauer to create the allusion of additional space) and the columns of the corridor communicate with each other through their bodies and pantomime. The woman in white uses slow arm movements to beckon Gizella who answers through her own crouched arm movements that she would like to be left alone. The woman clearly has an unearthly influence over Gizella as she raises her arm in the direction that she would like the latter to go and her demands are met. The two women walk extremely slowly out of the frame in single file and the film cuts to a staircase that leads them into a dark, cryptic room. The woman points to Gizella's crown that Glinsky had previously given her, explaining that she too will die in this spot just like all of the other women that the Count had previously murdered. This is a place in the film where the intertitles detract from the acting as the woman's arm motions and Gizella's hysterical reaction through facial expression, grabbing of her head, and calculated fall to the ground in a trance-like state while examining her hands relay the story in a way that words cannot.

The film then cuts to a medium shot of Karalli in which her wide eyes and crazed demeanor become more visible. The many hands of the slain women circle Gizella and reach towards her face as she clenches her body and places her hands on her face, attempting to protect herself. Again, her effective and frightened facial expressions in conjunction with her accompanying pantomime and gesture give an idea as to what her famed performance in "The Mad Scene" of *Giselle* at the Bolshoi must have looked like as the character suddenly becomes fully aware of her fate and imminent demise. The scene closes by cutting back to the bedroom in which a deeply disturbed Gizella has now awakened, clutching her face in fear. The pedestrian nature of this sequence's choreography, pantomime, movement, and mimicry undoubtedly has the marks of a Gorsky ballet.

In *DANCEFILM*, Erin Brannigan describes the period, in which *The Dying Swan* was made as a "transitional period" in early cinema that is "categorized by a gestural mediality that draws attention to the performing body."<sup>43</sup> During this period new technologies and techniques formed a cinema where "the performing body and cinematic mise-en-scene combine in a choreographic staging that exceeds narrative imperatives and is fascinated with the inassimilable, expressive potential of the moving body."<sup>44</sup> This discussion of Karalli adds to Brannigan's analysis in that Karalli's dance and movement style that she incorporates into her cinematic performance can be understood as a new technique that best makes use of the filmic space and surroundings. This is evident in Bauer's films, particularly *The Dying Swan*. In this film Karalli acts as both character and prop, simultaneously advancing the narrative and embellishing the mise-en-scene with the placement of her movement. Indeed, at times Karalli's performance as a dancer exceeds narrative necessity and the film does seem to be obsessed with the abilities of a body in motion.

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<sup>43</sup> Brannigan, *DANCEFILM: Choreography and the Moving Image*, 65.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Brannigan cites Lillian Gish<sup>45</sup> as an example of an early film star whose screen acting is ideal for analyzing the period's gestural performance where "actors and directors combined existing performance methodologies such as Francois Delsarte's system of expression with new corporeal performance modes such as modern dance, psychological realism, and experimentation with observation and improvisation."<sup>46</sup> It is probable that Karalli serves as an even stronger example than Gish when illuminating Brannigan's argument. While Gish (who had, as previously mentioned, trained at the Denishawn School) was certainly an expressive actress who was well-known for her sophisticated and effective pantomime and mimicry skills in films such as D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), it is arguable that Karalli is likely a more significant example in this respect since every category listed above influenced her screen performance. Through her training with Gorsky she was introduced to Delsarte's system, Stanislavsky's psychological realism, modern dance (ballet), including the teachings of Duncan, and improvisational skills that she developed through the artistic freedom that Gorsky sometimes offered her.

In conclusion, this analysis of Vera Karalli, Russia's first cinema star, reveals much about the age-old question of the compatibility between the cinema and dance. The contents of the pre-revolutionary dance film include classical ballet dance steps as well as balletic pantomime sequences, both integral components of classical ballet as an art form. The case study demonstrates that film is incapable of fully capturing classical ballet's fleeting nuances in the way that they appear on stage. This observation should not be understood negatively since filmed dance has the potential to become an interesting, new work that differentiates from stage dance. However, it is important to consider this difference and acknowledge that restaging a choreographic work based solely on a filmed performance or evaluating a dancer's artistry based entirely on her appearance on film present major issues. Filmed dance will never appear identical to the live performance, calling its authenticity into question. Nonetheless, the recording of dance in cinema poses a different type of authenticity that showcases the collaboration between choreographer, dancer, director, cinematographer and editor.

Later in life, Karalli agreed with her contemporaries like Anna Pavlova, Ekaterina Geltser, and St. Petersburg prima ballerina Mathilda Kshesinskaya that the medium could distort and misrepresent the memory and the artistry of a dancer.<sup>47</sup> This is true as even today one would be hard-pressed to find a classical ballet dancer who trusted the medium of cinema in isolation to accurately preserve her artistry. However, such dance films are valuable and necessary documents for recording the images of influential dancers and preserving choreography that in rare instances may have become lost to memory, as there is still no universal notation system to record dance. This statement may, at first, seem contradictory. The existing dance films of Karalli and her contemporaries, although they do not reproduce all the details of the dance as they were experienced by Bolshoi audiences, are superior to no visual record at all. It is known

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<sup>45</sup> For information on Lillian Gish's style of gesture and performance in D.W. Griffith's Biograph Films, see Roberta Pearson's *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> Brannigan, 65-66.

<sup>47</sup> "M.F. Kshesinskaya refused the offer of one St. Petersburg film firm to perform two dances for the screen." "Moscow Chronicles," *Theater Newspaper*, #36, Sun., Sept. 6, 1915, 19.

that even celebrated dancers, such as Isadora Duncan,<sup>48</sup> who would have been well aware of the faults of filmed dance, nonetheless learned to operate the camera and used film to illustrate her dances in her teaching.<sup>49</sup> Although Duncan's use of filmed dance for instructional purposes is different from the fictional works in which Karalli appeared, both types of films were concerned with the cinema's ability to capture dance's fleeting movements and details. This complicated task was just as necessary for films that were used to instruct as it was for fictional films that showcased the art of ballet as entertainment. In the instance where a particular choreographic work is completely lost a filmed document proves most valuable. However, the cinematic images can be fairly and accurately interpreted only when the time period's filmic and historical conditions are closely analyzed, considered alongside of primary written accounts of the performances and artists, and discussed with the aid of dance practitioners and scholars who have a sound knowledge of ballet's technical evolution. Although filmed dance shares similarities with the choreographer's original version, it is necessary to understand it as a new and unique work that results from the collaboration of a cinematographer and choreographer, and is determined by technological processes. In this way, filmed dance becomes a valuable showcase of movement that can only result from the merging of stage art with cinematic technology.

This argument is supported by the theory of film and dance scholar Douglas Rosenberg who states that, "the site of screendance is actually a system of screendance, built on numerous sites, with the nuances of production and output all contributing to its eventual specificity."<sup>50</sup> Rosenberg explains that filmed dance is an intricate system that includes many different steps and factors (or sites) within the preproduction, production and postproduction processes, and all of these steps need to be recognized when attempting to decipher and evaluate the finished product. The final outcome of filmed dance (that is to say, the finished film) should never be examined in isolation from the various points found within these processes. For example, in *The Dying Swan* a number of factors contributed to the finished product that is viewed and evaluated by audiences and critics. These included: the preproduction rehearsals (or lack thereof), the overall conditions of the Khanzhonkov/Bauer set, the time (and breaks) allotted to the variation filming, the choices made by the cinematographer, the adjustments made by the editor during postproduction, and the site and space of the film screening. It is incorrect to make an assessment of filmed dance without taking these factors into consideration. The filmed variations discussed here have their own specificity that resulted from unique filming, production and editing processes that determined the end result. The venue, location and circumstances of the film's demonstrations also factor into this equation.

Pantomime sequences that are a fundamental part of classical ballet are particularly conducive to the cinema, and the acting style that stemmed from ballet had great influence on Russian silent cinema at large. The pedestrian-like movements in pantomime sequences do not depend nearly as much as technical ballet dance on the flow of continuous, intricate movements, and it is more natural for a cinematographer to include a close-up of the face and medium shots of other sections of the body without fearing that he is missing the dance's important parts. In

<sup>48</sup> According to this source, Duncan spent a great deal of time learning the mechanics behind the film camera. "Abroad," *Theater Newspaper*, #36, 6 September 1915, 19.

<sup>49</sup> "About Everything," *Theater Moscow*, #1726, 1 September 1915, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Douglas Rosenberg, *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.

*Approaches To Carpalistics: Movement and Gesture In Literature, Art and Film*, Yuri Tsivian reminds readers about the struggle for the right of control between pre-revolutionary cinema actors and directors during the second half of the 1910s: “The weapons of the actors were mimicry and gesture, the weapons of the directors-montage. The fans of Kholodnaya<sup>51</sup> and Mozzhukhin, and the critics from Ermoliev’s *Projector* were supporters of the first group while experience and the popularity of American cinema worked in favor of the second.”<sup>52</sup> In addition to placing extreme importance on the gesture and mimicry of Karalli and her contemporaries, he argues that their acting style significantly contributed to the aesthetic of the slow-paced film for which the pre-revolutionary Russian cinema was known and criticized by many, especially after the Revolution. While this cinematic trait has been attributed to the technical deficiencies of the Russian cinema industry Tsivian explains, “The Russians were not behind the others, they simply did not participate in the race.”<sup>53</sup> This explanation is important to keep in mind since it suggests that the screen gesture styles that were a part of classical ballet dance and performed by Imperial dancers were so significant that they helped to define pre-revolutionary Russian cinema’s overall style.

The artistic debates that raged in pre-revolutionary Russia in the 1910s over the compatibility of dance and cinema are not unlike those being discussed by contemporary scholars over one hundred years later. The debates from this period offer valuable information and insight for current scholars since the critics and artists who participated in them were present for the early years of the development of cinema and the way that classical and modern ballet evolved parallel to that development. They witnessed the simultaneous development of these two art forms, an experience that gave them a perspective unmarred by the influences of contemporary cinema (arguably a very different art form than its silent predecessor) and present-day dance and ballet that often forgoes the dramatic element in favor of virtuoso technique. A deep understanding of the relationship between the two art forms is achieved through a return to its roots and consideration of the artists, notably Vera Karalli, who helped to establish their marriage.

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<sup>51</sup> Actress Vera Kholodnaya was one of the most popular cinema actresses of the pre-revolutionary period. She is remembered today as the “Queen of the Screen” in most scholarly and popular literature.

<sup>52</sup> Yuri Tsivian, *Approaches to Carpalistics: Movement and Gesture In Literature, Art and Film* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010), 254-60. Note: Tsivian does not specifically mention Karalli in this discussion.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



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