These two notes are about two encounters between film history and the history of dance, or, more narrowly, between Russian ballet and American silent movies. The two stories are not mutually connected. The only reason why I pair them here is their common timeframe (the events they tell of happened between 1916 and 1920) and a sense of directional symmetry that I tried to convey in the title above. One of them tells how a dance choreographed for a film was taken up and reenacted by a dancer in Russia; the other, how a filmmaker picked up a dance from a Russian dancer and reenacted it. Both encounters were brief and random events in the careers of four great men, and both brought something new to film and dance.

**Encounter 1: Griffith and Balanchine**

The earlier of the two movies I am going to look at is David Wark Griffith’s *Intolerance* or, to be more specific, one of its four stories. When Griffith shot it in 1916 perhaps the largest film set in Hollywood’s history was built under his supervision. This was the city of Babylon as it might have looked in 539 B.C. Griffith worked from a variety of sources, ranging from relatively reliable (archaeological books or *The History of Herodotus*) to wholly visionary (nineteenth-century painters – Georges Rochegrosse, Edwin Long and John Martin – and, of all things, oriental-style interiors of a luxury restaurant in New York). As the action unfolds, the viewer is taken to various places: Babylonian slums where rough but ready Mountain Girl milks a goat and thinks of Prince Belshazzar with whom she is secretly in love, and Babylon’s banquet hall (over a mile in length, an intertitle proudly specifies, and the set lives up to the size) in which Prince Belshazzar celebrates Babylon’s short-lived victory over the Persian troops that besiege his beloved city.

There are many descriptions one can find of this grandiose hall left by different people – crew members, film historians, of course, and also art historians.
historians - but as the theme of these notes is film and dance, it is helpful to look at it through the eyes of a dance historian, Elizabeth Kendall:

D. W. Griffith created his epic *Intolerance* about four different civilizations, and populated Babylon, the most magnificent of these, with festive, Fokine-like crowds. Griffith's Babylon represented the kind of ritualistic culture that all art and fashion adored in those years, especially American fashion, which was trying to shake off the stylistic traces of the Puritans. In Babylon, dancing was part of life; dancing was in fact the focus of the movie's most awesome scene - the long pan down the gigantic Babylonian steps where rows of dancers were celebrating the city's victory with hieroglyphic motions. . . . It is striking how closely Griffith's Babylon matched the look of Orientale discovered simultaneously in America by such figures as Ruth St Denis and in Europe by people like Paul Poiret, and echoed and elaborated by Gertrude Hoffman in vaudeville and by the various Russian dancers on the concert stage.  

This passage comes from Kendall's book on Ruth St Denis, a pioneer of modern American dance (as opposed to the European tradition of classical ballet) and the co-founder (together with Ted Shawn) of the dance school in Los-Angeles whose students Griffith hired to perform on the steps of his colossal set. St. Denis and Shawn were on the set, too, coaching the dancers whose movements are very much like what people write about the school's style: restrained, minimalist, hieratic.

I am sure these terms yield more to people who know about choreography than they do to a non-specialist like me, but it is only after I put stills from *Intolerance* side to side with depictions of dances performed by Ruth St Denis that I felt I get a sense of what Elizabeth Kendall calls hieroglyphic motions and ritualistic culture of Griffith's crowds. Large (more than life-size!) oil by Friedrich August von Kaulbach (1907/1908) represents St Denis in profile, a sacrificial vessel in her right hand, the wrist of her left hand bent back almost parallel to the ground - and similar wristwork-and-profile poses appear to dominate the movements on the Babylon steps. Dance historians point to the art of Ancient Egypt (the first encounter with which St Denis remembers happened through a poster "Egyptian Deities: No Better Turkish Cigarette Can Be Made" which she saw in a drugstore in Buffalo, N.Y.) whose profile figures and rigid postures served as a model for Ruth St Denis' choreogra-

2. Elizabeth Kendall, *Where She Danced* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979) p. 120.