# Dance-Specific Aspects in the Tradition of the Symbol Theory of Nelson Goodman

## Kristina Soldati[*]
*University of Berne – Zurich University of Arts*

ABSTRACT. This paper tries to reset bodily motion into the center of a theory of artistic dance. It argues against the partialistic tendency in the science of dance and uses two basic thesis of the symboltheoretician Nelson Goodman. According to the first a typical feature of artworks and so for dance, too, is repleteness. Repleteness means the high number of relevant aspects of artistic dance. My paper tries to show that the high number is largely derived from the basic category bodily motion. The second thesis of Nelson Goodman sees in the dense, that means gradual aspects of artworks, so in my case of dance, an indicator for the artistic. It is in my eyes again the bodily motion which is responsible for this second symptom of the aesthetic. A systematic account of dynamics, Rudolf von Laban's so-called effort cube will demonstrate gradual movements paradigmatically.

## 1. Introduction

In times of increasing partialization (Jeschke, 1999, pp. 36-37) of the science of dance (historiological, sociological, gender-specific, discourse theoretical, performance theoretical etc.), in methods as well as in its domain, I want to redress the focus on the elementary dance-specific aspect: the bodily motion. Instead of adding here the symboltheoretical methodology, I use rather two basic theses of Goodman to define the import of motion in (science of) artistic dance: 1) his emphasis on the broadness of the spectrum ('repleteness') of syntactic aspects of a work of art and 2) his emphasis on the respective elementary perceptual aspect (with its 'density'). My claim is that it is this combination of the two basic theses, which indicates the artistic genre. Whilest their combination was indicative for pictures in *Languages of Art* (*LA*), here, it indicates dance.

---

[*] Email: kristina.soldati@itw.unibe.ch

The broadness is what we lose by partializing. A dance piece or a specific style makes a deliberate choice out of the available broad syntactic spectrum. The particularity of the piece can be (on the one hand) characterized by the comparison between the choice that was made and the vast spectrum. Without knowledge of the broadness we cannot understand the dance in question. Without knowledge of the broadness any interpretational or scientific analysis is incomplete. A partial knowledge of the entire spectrum of dance-specific aspects may perhaps not harm coherence, but definitely accuracy, of critics and scientists alike. On the other hand, the particularity of a given dance piece or style consists of the deliberate interrelations of the 'chosen' aspects. In the end, these are what build meaning: relational and syncategorematic aspects derived from motion.

## 2. Key Notions for Key Aspects

In order to distinguish aesthetic properties, according to Goodman, we can only refer to symptoms: syntactic density and repleteness as well as semantical density. These three together with exemplification are indicators for artworks, or rather, a symbol in aesthetic function (*LA*, pp. 552-553). In *Reconceptions in Philosophy*, Goodman added a fifth symptom: the mediate and indirect reference (Goodman/Elgin, 1988, p. 71).

Let me introduce Goodman's key notions: density and repleteness. A picture can be considered dense as its characters are perceptually hard or impossible to differentiate. The case of paintings, for example, one of Rothko's red pieces, differs from a verbal case with characters of an alphabet. Whilst the twentysix characters of the alphabet are easy to distinguish, in the case of the painting we have the following: though different shades of colours constitute the elements of the family colour (semiotically speaking, the characters of the scheme colour), we cannot clearly differentiate Rothko's red from another (or even within its own modulations). This is what density means: between every two shades there is a third, even if they seem already indistinguishable for us.

A red graphic representation of heartbeats however, an electrocardiogram, has no colour aspect whatsoever. Not one which is syntactically relevant. This latter system has two dense aspects: first, how it represents the amplitude (the electrical activity of the heart) and secondly, the

continuous time. These two aspects are what constitute the syntax. Goodman would say this system is just *not replete*. Both aspects are dense as the slightest modulation represents modulation in heart activity or time. Its syntactic density is telling and useful for us as it indicates proportionately the semantical aspects electrical activity and time. They, too, are dense.

In opposition to the meagre syntactic potential of the cardiograph, a painting is not restricted. Everything may be relevant - colours present in the painting, its thickness (multiple layers included), forms, lines if present etc. These different aspects are what Goodman calls syntactic repleteness of the painting.

The key notions 'density' and 'repleteness' have their origins in Goodman's early work *The Structure of Appearance* (*SA*). I would like to argue that by applying the original sense of these notions to artworks, we will find that on the syntactic level repleteness turns out to be a symptomatic property of the art work as a whole, while density proves to be symptomatic for basic phenomenal aspects in the first place.

Let us deepen our understanding of the terms and follow the roots laid down in *SA*. Here, the constructivist account of phenomena, such as colour, is paradigmatical and offers three important insights:

1. The elements of a phenomenal category belong to it upon their being graded and joining one another by a chain of pairwise apparently matching[1] elements. This leads to the criterion of matching (= necessary criterion).

2. Matching elements may be ordered in different respects. Colours may be concatenated along the light-dark aspect, the saturation or chroma aspect. These aspects are what Goodman calls dimensions.

3. The number of dimensions exhausts and specifies the category, in the case of colour three (= sufficient criterion).[2]

---

[1] Goodman considers two elements matching oneanother iff they are not distinguishable on direct comparison. But typically by exchanging one of the two by a third undistinguishable, the first and the third element may show off a distinguishable difference if compared directly.

[2] Nothing in the course of my arguments should depend on the existence of alternative colour systems.

Let us transfer these insights to artworks as understood in *LA*:

Ad 1. The notion of 'matching' in *SA* corresponds to 'dense' in *LA*. A chain of matching pairs is in fact dense. In *LA,* Goodman talks about *schema* instead of categories. A schema whose elements (characters) can be filed up densely fulfil the criterion of matching and can be seen as a category. Goodman demonstrated density using a number of images whose heights were representative of the tallness of men (*LA*, p. 226). This means that the higher the image of a man in a picture, the taller the depicted man. In this respect, the pictures in question belong to a dense representational system.[3]

Ad 2. The density is ordered along dimensions just as the matching elements were ordered in a category. Dimension is a notion present in both *SA* and *LA*.

Ad 3. The number of dimensions which specify and characterize a category corresponds to the way how a scheme provides for density. (This latter description is, in short, 'dense ordering' or the structure of the category, *LA*, p. 227).

Now despite Goodman's reasonable distinction that artworks belong syntactically to dense systems[4], I will show in the next section why by far not all their syntactic aspects are dense.

The term repleteness introduced in *LA* refers to the symptomatic high number of pictorial aspects (categories included) of a painted symbol. Notwithstanding the inner structure of each pictorial aspect (categories included) and their dimensions, several aspects present in a work of art constitute the dimensions of the piece as a whole. And one step further I would add: Several aspects possible in a work of art of one genre constitute the (spectrum of the) dimensions of the genre as such: "the symbols

---

[3] "According to the representational system, any difference in height among these images constitutes a difference in height of man represented." (*LA*, 226) Though Goodman compares man-images in *different* pictures, the 'meaning' (how tall the represented man is) is related to the 'scale' of the schema applied in the system. Hereby, it is irrelevant if the compared images belong to the same or different pictures.

[4] Verbal systems are an exception here. (see *LA,* chapt. VI).

in the pictorial scheme[5] are relatively *replete.*" (LA, p.230) and "[...] relative syntactic repleteness in a syntactically dense system demand such effort at discrimination along, so to speak, *more dimensions.*" (*LA*, p. 253, my italic). Let me spell this out for the genre of dance.

## 3. Dance-Specific Aspects: Repleteness of Artistic Dance

The example for repleteness used in *Languages of Art* is a picture. Thus, its (in *LA* unsystematically) presented syntactic aspects are pictorial. My thesis is that these aspects are what account for the specificity of an artistic genre (such as painting or dance). These aspects distinguish the differences between pictures and dance.

The symptomatic high number of dance-specific aspects is what makes a simple dance into a (danced) work of art. Let me call this high number a *broad spectrum* to use a more illustrative notion than repleteness. By using this term, I accentuate the fact that artistic dance pieces typically have a broad variety of (syntactic) aspects. This variety is what makes artistic dance distinct from community dance or a dance-sport event. Community dance has less perceptive formal aspects relevant in the arts. It is compensated by social aspects instead. A dance-sport event in contrast is thoroughly focused on virtuoso and perceivable aspects. But these virtuoso aspects are selected and conventionalized (i.e. declared as the relevant ones) in order to be comparable. A more replete presentation would not be honoured in a competitive rating.

Before outlining the broadness of the spectrum in dance, the spectrum of aspects Goodman considers to be pictorial can be listed as follows:

(1)  the colour (also its 'intensity', *LA*, p. 229)

(2)  the colour at several places (ibid. p. 42)[6]

---

[5] "The familiar full pictorial scheme comprises whatever we take as a picture, and may be enlarged to include sculptures and some natural objects." (*LA*, VI,2 p.232.)

[6] "An elementary pictorial characterization states what color a picture has at a given place on its face. Other pictorial characterizations in effect combine many such elementary ones by conjunction, alternation, quantification, etc. Thus a pictorial characterization may name the colors at several places, or state that the color at one place lies within a certain range, or state that the colors at two places are complementary, and so on. [...]

(3)  their relations: a) range of colour, b) complementarity, (ibd. p. 42)

(4)  thickness of lines (ibid. p. 229)

(5)  its modification ('any thickening or thinning of line', ibid. p. 229)

(6)  height of figure representations (ibid. p. 226) (see also 'its size', ibid. p. 229)

(7)  relations between heights (ibid. p. 226)

(8)  'contrast to background' (ibid. p. 229)

(9)  'qualities of the paper' (ibid. p. 229)

In *Structure of Appearance,* properties of the sort (3-8) were called derivative relational properties. This term is explainable on the constructivist's account as follows: Granted that the elementary property is a category like colour, typically you can derive from it properties which relate its elements. Chromas related to oneanother in a certain way (like blue and yellow), called complementary (3b), would be an example. We have seen that the structure of the category colour is specified by three dimensions. So another possible example would be (c) contrasting qualia being on the opposite ends of a dimension (like light and dark ones). A neighbouring relation would be (3a) a selection of a range (e.g. only dark colours). I would like to call these derivative relational properties of a category specific *structural features.*

   Now these structural features do not seem to be dense. Features of a dense scheme are not necessarily dense: 'being contrastive' is a feature of dense colours but not dense itself.

   In these structural features Goodman sees 'sizes' or 'shapes': (3a) a range of colour is an example of size:

> Obviously, individuals may be compared in size with respect to any other category of qualia as well, even though the vocabulary that ordinary language supplies for the purpose is often very meagre. For

---

And the properties correctly ascribed to a picture by pictorial characterization are its pictorial properties." (*LA*, p.42.)

example, just as an individual containing many places is spatially bigger than an individual containing one place, so a multicolored individual is 'bigger in color' than a uniformly colored individual (*SA*, p. 183).

A colour shape is "the configuration, that the colors of that individual mark out in the total array of colors" (*SA*, p.185).Example 3 b) and c) are such structural shapes. Goodman explicitly points out that such shapes may be derived from any elementary category, including the category of time. As an example of temporal shape Goodman cites the morse code characters, though he could have turned to music citing rhythms, too.

   *SA* offers another relational property, the syncategorematic aspect. 'Colour at a certain place' is an example: It combines the colour with the place category (*SA*, pp. 187-188).[7] The specific combination may be very telling: 'red in the foreground' is essentially different from 'red in the background'.

   Let us sum up the broadness of pictorial aspects presented in the listed examples. The first is our basic phenomenal category. The second, if not meant as a mere enumeration of the colours present, is a syncategorematic aspect pinning down colours *to a certain place*. Aspects numbers (3)-(7) are derived in various ways from the basic category becoming relational properties. Point (9) seems to be a different kind of aspect. Let us assume it is understood purely physically. In this case, the elementary syntactic aspect, our fundamental category, is not basic for all aspects. Point (9) suggests that relevant physical aspects may be considered and count as syntactic aspects. This is of extreme importance with regard to dance, which will be discussed in the following section.

## 4. The Broad Spectrum of Dance-Specific Aspects

Depending on what we consider to be the elementary category in dance we are able to derive relational and syncategorematic categories accordingly.

---

[7] See also Goodman's habilitation *A Study Of Qualities* : "Two units exhibit the same colours in the same spatial arrangement, they have the same color-spot-shape" (Goodman, 1940. p.375).

However, no matter what we consider as the elementary category, it does not preclude constitutive physical aspects such as 'quality of paper' forementioned. In the case of dance, an example of physical aspects of this sort is the stage: for example, the inclined floor in Renaissance theatres or the leaf covered floor of Pina Bausch. These are constitutive not merely because they are different to look at but because these physical aspects make a difference on the dynamics of the dance. Another example to keep in mind is the muscular tonus: a physical aspect not perceivable as such and not phenomenal in the first place.

I would suggest to take bodily motion[8] as elementary category. It can be related syncategorematically to the objective space[9] and (musical) time present in the actual dance piece. By relating motion to objective space, like the stage, we get aspects like floor pattern, related to the backwall of the stage we get changing silhouettes or shadows, related to other bodies accumulative configurations or distances, related to the dynamics of other moving bodies a group dynamic, related to the space as volume: a sequence of sculptural forms, related to space together with time: a fourdimensional trace of a volume. They all constitute our mentioned broadness of the spectrum of dance-specific aspects.

All these aspects may be, if relevant, pinned to certain stage-places or time/music units. As was the case of our 'picture with red', it makes a difference if a big jump is done at the front of the stage or somewhere further back, if it is on a musical accent or highlight or just in between.

## 5. The Density of the Elementary Category Bodily Motion and Laban's Dynamics as a Category

Some of the most comprehensive and systematic concepts of bodily motion are those of Rudolf von Laban (1879–1958). These are not elaborated in the first rate for the purpose of didactic or technical perfection, but rather, they give a survey of the aspects of movement and their interrelations. To start off, Laban took movement for granted by not taking motion

---

[8] Intended motion of an active proper body part I will call movement.

[9] Objective space is considered to be antagonistic to the kinesphere of Laban which surrounds a dancer and represents his movement radius.

into account. This is not unusual, as he understood dance essentially as a psychophysical expression of a state or intention. The intentions[10] of his category are focused on three aspects: coping with gravity, space and time. He defines how one can maximally or minimally cope with these factors. The movements vary accordingly by grades. They vary along the following dimensions:

- Gravity orders movements between (g) = light and (G) strong ones.

- Space orders movements between (s) = indirect and (S) direct ones.

- Time orders movements between (t) = sustained and (T) sudden ones.

Having found these three dimensions it is not surprising that Laban called the representation of this system the 'effort-cube' [FIGURE 1]:
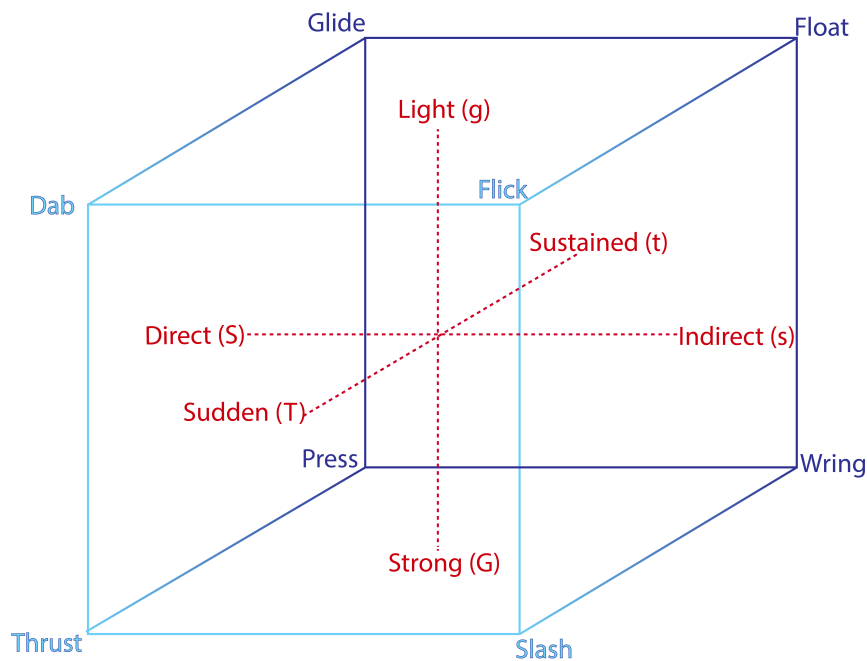


FIGURE 1. Rudolf von Laban, *The Effort Cube.*

---

[10] The intentions do not need to be conscious as such. Apart from explicit exercises (still in use in Laban-Bartjeneff-movement-analysis), they are more so implicit.

The dimensions are passing through the center horizontally, vertically and from back to forth. In the effort cube Laban distinguished the polarity of its dimensions according to some effort criterion.: which extreme of an effort-dimension is written in capitals depends on the involved intensity[11]. So an intense stemming against the gravity (to stamp, press etc.) is a captial G. To execute a movement in the quickest possible way is T and to use the space through a direct concentrated movement is likewise S.[12] Consequently, the capital letters do not represent objective amount of space or time involved in an action. They rather represent the amount of effort involved.

Light movements are represented on the top of the cube, sudden movement in the front, direct movements on the left. A movement which incorporates an extreme factor from the end of each of the three dimensions is situated logically in the corners of the cube. On the depicted effort cube you find in each corner a typical movement which serves as an example.

For two decades, Laban considered the three-dimensional structure to be sufficient. In the forties, he added a fourth dimension called *flow*. Increasingly, he noticed that movements, which were already considered to be variable in the three mentioned ways, could still be effectuated in a fourth way: either free (f) or bound (F). Free movements cannot be interrupted.

### 5.1 Structural Particularities

Apart from the (amount of) dimensions there are yet other particularities of the category to be found: The use of time and space in movements is in the medium range of usage not so obvious. If we move at a normal speed our attitude towards time as such does not become apparent. Only fast

---

[11] To assume a common criterion for all three dimensions seems to me too strong a constrain on the category. We do not have a common criterion for the colour dimension polarities either. See the resulting problems with respect to space in footnote 12.

[12] Laban's understanding of (S) is in my eyes a weak point of his effort cube : How can we relate intensity to the use of space ? To execute a multidirectional movement with the same intensity as a direct one demands in comparison more effort and could count equally well as capital S. Or put it differently : if various limbs execute simultanously a punch in contrary directions, is it increased intensity or diminished being indirect? An answer has to reflect on (rules for) complex movements.

or slow movements make the time aspect perceivable as such. Equally, if we spread our movement in multiple directions or concentrate it[13], only then does the use of space[14] become apparent. Accordingly, only heavy or lightweight movements draw our attention to gravitation. But this feature of the category is not different from the colour category: were we only confronted with colours of the medium range of light we would not discover the involved dimension. We need to vary the colours in its perceivable extremes to make an implicit dimension explicit.[15]

*5.2 Derivative Aspects.*

If we accept that Laban's effort system accounts for dynamics, covering the dense category of bodily motion, we can easily find derivative aspects. A dance piece using mainly heavy gravitation accentuating movement would have a limited dynamical range of the (g) −(G) dimension. Goodman would say the dance is dynamically small in size. This is a specific structural feature of the dance piece in question. If we affirm Laban's notion that the extreme ends of a dimension are the most conspicuous, the alternations of contrasting extremes (featherlight and heavily strong) would be another structural feature, and even a very striking one. Goodman would say the sequence has a certain dynamic shape: a contrastive one.

*5.3 Syncategorematic Aspects.*

A dynamic aspect becomes syncategorematic if it is combined with an objective space (e.g. 'in the background') or a partner or a musical category. Having a glide repeated in a musical sequence is as syncategorematic as having it repeated over places as a synchronous corps de ballet movement.

## 6. Exemplification in Dance

A dance piece instantiates quite a few of this broad spectrum of dance-

---

[13] Laban calls the minimal use of space direct.

[14] Here, space is understood as a kinesphere (the close surrounding of a body), which I will refer to as subjective space.

[15] See for the elaboration of elementary sensorial categories Clark, 1993.

specific aspects (repleteness). It exemplifies only those that it 'shows forth'. This is a crucial calling for sensitivity from spectators. There is no convention as in the case of samples, or if so, artists seek to override it. But are we not trapped by following the meaning of dance in the path of *Languages of Art*? If exemplification is showing forth syntactic aspects, and syntactic aspects are those being semantically relevant, then it would be circular to infer the meaning of a dance piece by coming back to our exemplified dance-specific aspects. However, in my opinion, this circle (known as a hermeneutic circle) is not vicious. The solution lies in the way an artistic symbol 'shows forth'. The subtle and multiple interrelations together with direct and indirect references[16] is what create a network, a specific structure of the dance in question. All spectators follow this network more or less consciously. Our spiralling along the circle from syntactic indicators to hypothetical referents, back and forth, weaving and following the net is part of the captivating semantics of dance. The broader our knowledge of aspects, the broader our interpretational facilities become.[17]

## 7. Conclusion

My paper tried to outline why the bodily motion as the basic category is an elementary syntactic aspect of artistic dance. It constitutes with all its relational properties derived from it the broad spectrum of various dance-specific aspects. This variety Goodman called repleteness and it is symptomatic for the aesthetic. Thus the artistic specificity of a dance cannot be grasped without its elementary category. The second symptom for the aesthetic is density. The density of the genre dance is granted by the bodily motion. Laban's system of movement dynamics, the effort cube, showed paradigmatically how movements can be considered to be gradual and therefore the category dense.

---

[16] Though it is not the topic of the present paper it should be kept in mind that Goodman considered artworks functioning in a threefold way: representing, expressing and exemplifying. (Usually this is understood equivalently that they can denote, express feelings and be formal or 'abstract'. Though this simplified understanding is not quite accurate). I considered in this paper only pure exemplification without any additional denotational or expressiv function.

[17] See to exemplification in dance also Elgin, C. 2010.

## References

Clark, A. (1993), *Sensory Qualities.* Oxford, : Clarendon Press.

Elgin, Catherine. (2010). "L'exemplification et la danse" in: *La philosophie et la danse*, Julia Beauquel/Roger Pouivet (eds.), Rennes.

Goodman, N. (1990) *A Study of Qualities,* New York; London, Garland Publ.

— (1951). *The Structure Of Appearance.* Dordrecht/Boston.

— (1968). *Languages of Art.* Indianapolis, N.Y., The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc.

— (1981). "Afterword – an illustration". in: *What Is Dance?* Roger Copeland, Marshal Cohen (eds.), Oxford, 1983.

Goodman, N., Elgin, Catherine Z. (1988). *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences.* Indianapolis.

Jeschke, Claudia. (1999). *Tanz als BewegungsText : Analysen zum Verhältnis von Tanztheater und Gesellschaftstanz (1910-1965).* Tübingen.

Kulvicki, John. (2006). *On Images: Their Structure and Content.* Clarendon Press.