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Meaningful Exemplification — On Yvonne Rainer's 'Trio A'

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Abstract. Exemplification, one of the most important symptoms for art in Nelson Goodman's aesthetics, is meaningful without denotation or expression. This paper shows how exemplification constitutes meaning of formal artworks. I illustrate on the example of *Trio A* by Yvonne Rainer how pure exemplification generates an intriguing meaning of *Trio A* as a constructionist dance. Given that exemplification is at the basis of representation and expression, my semantics in the tradition of Goodman can, and will, explain how *Trio A* might express ordinary everyday-life movement. However, any interpreation overriding (the network of) purely exemplifying aspects does not do justice to formal art.

1. Preliminaries

Dance, like the other arts, has a specific basic perceptual category, which is typically *dense*. I have argued in Soldati 2013 for the bodily movement and its dynamics to be this basic category. Most of dance's syntactic aspects are derived in one way or another from this basic *fundamental category*. I will call them, according to Goodman, *derivative* or *syncategorematic* aspects. In their entirety they constitute the broad variety of syntactic aspects of dance. The broadness of variety is what accounts for the *repleteness* of the art form in question. In analogy to the *pictorial* aspects of a painting presented in *Languages of Art* (Goodman, 1968, p. 42, pp. 226-229), I would like to outline such aspects specifically for dance. A dance piece is a single selection from the broad variety. *Languages of Art* calls these two features (density and repleteness) *symptoms* of the aesthetic. Any property an artwork has needs to be highlighted to count as syntactic. That is, to be semantically relevant. This is the function of *exemplification*, a further symptom, namely to show an artwork's property forth, to highlighten it (what should not prevent art to be subtle). Due to *exemplification*, Goodman's aesthetics provides semantics suitable for non-representational as well as non-expressive art. The present article shows on the dance piece *Trio A*, how this symbol-theoretic semantics is applicable to the interpretation of formal art.

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2. Introduction to the Piece *Trio A* by Yvonne Rainer

Trio A is a dance piece by Yvonne Rainer, one of the artists collective of the Judson Church in New York. The piece premiered the January 10, 1966, performed by Steve Paxton, David Gardon, and Yvonne Rainer. Conceived as a solo, the three dancers performed it simultaneously but not in unison. The avant-garde artists of the sixties became famous for their experimental reflections on fundamental issues, like the format of performance, or "mediality and materiality" (Fischer-Lichte/Roselt, 2001, p. 238). I have chosen this dance piece to illustrate Goodman's aesthetics as it is a formal art work whose aspects are comparatively easy to access.[1] Second, Trio-A is known in non-dance circles and has entered philosophical debate. Third, for matters of reference, Trio A is available online in an historical version: performed by the choreographer Yvonne Rainer in the Merce Cunningham Studios in 1978.[2] Due to the piece's short length it is uploaded without any cuts, so I can refer for details to the seconds of the timeline.

Approximately five minutes in length, it is striking that the piece has *no* structural characteristics whatsoever. Besides its 'frame' – it finishes as its starts, in a relaxed pose turned away from the audience – the content lacks formal as well as dramaturgical structure: The ongoing movement sequences have no phrasing and no development, either in respect of a story, expressions or form.

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[1] Formal dance pieces with interrelated ensemble work are more intricate (see Soldati 2014).

[2] Film recorded under the direction of Sally Banes the 14th August 1978 in the Merce Cunningham Studio (Trio A. 1978).

3. "Aboutness" of *Trio A*, a Philosophical Debate

A commonly held position claims that *Trio A* is about ordinary movement. I concentrate on those authors whose subsequent line of argument is in the tradition of Nelson Goodman. The philosopher and choreographer Jill Sigman suggests various options that differentiate the basic claim: “that ordinary movement could be beautiful or is the stuff of concert dance or is important and interesting in its own right.” (Sigman, 2000, p.508) The claim seems so obvious to Sigman that she continues: “*Given* that *Trio A* is a work of art dance, and that it says something about ordinary movement, *how* does it do it?” (ibid., p. 502).

The answer follows Goodman's symbol theory, which has been refined over the course of time. By referring to a supplementary symptom of the aesthetic, the mediate and indirect reference Goodman worked out in *Reconception* (Goodman/Elgin, 1988, p. 71), Sigman suggests a chain of reference:

> (C1) And sometimes it is through these mechanisms of exemplification and expression that they [works of art] are able to represent what they represent. We’re seeing something Goodman has always stressed – that works of art work through chains of reference. (Sigman, 2000, p. 521)

Sally Banes and Noël Carroll, based on the same claim, offer a similar line of reasoning, the following chain of reference:

> (C2) For the postmoderns did not intend to be offering highly stylized representations of ordinary movement on stage, but rather, samples of it, that is, actual ordinary movement that, in turn, exemplifies the walking, running, and working that comprise everyday life. (Banes & Carroll, 2006, p.66)

Both chains of reference offered by Sigman, as well as by Banes and Carroll depend on the following assumption (A).

> Assumption (A): There is “actual ordinary movement” in the piece.

If (A) is the case and ordinary movements are part of the piece, they can serve as samples.

Walking, running, and even carrying mattresses were common devices used in the performances of the avant-garde Judson Dance Theatre choreographer, Yvonne Rainer. That is why these dancers were called pedestrians in the art scene. However, I insist, we do not see these activities in *Trio A*. In fact, there is not one casual movement from head to toe, even for a second. There is a walk, though it is on the spot and without arms (47"). We find the accompanying arm (swings) two minutes later (2:47"). This time the legs are still. We mostly find *parts* of ordinary movement.

If it is not the case that *Trio A* has samples of ordinary-life-movements, then Sigman still has a suggestion of how the dance could signify ordinary movement:

> (C3): „[...] *Trio A* signifies through chains of reference. In particular, it represents ordinary movement through the exemplification of *certain* properties we *associate* with ordinary movement." (Sigman, 2000, p. 524, my emphasis)

How exactly do we associate certain properties of *Trio A* with ordinary movement? What exactly is this association in a semantics based on the tradition of Goodman? I suggest, as Sigman is not very precise on it, the following answer.

Let us enumerate the properties which Sigman attributes to the piece: lumpy, sloppy (ibid. p. 512), monotonous, distracted averted gaze. I add some motoric or mechanical movement involved in the piece like dangling, fanning flies, and to wipe a surface. (We keep 'repleteness' in mind, that is: how varied the syntactical aspects may be). Subsequently we list all possible human activities, a *realm* in the sense of Languages of Art (Goodman, 1968, pp. 72-74), on a scale representing the involved dynamics, beginning by low energy to high energy activities. The scale begins with unconscious or sleep-like movements, then passes casual activities, followed by more ambitious (e.g. professional) tasks, then competitive ones such as can be found in sports, or actions linked to extreme feelings (fear/escape, aggression/attack etc.) The attributes mentioned by Sigman we all find instantiated in the scale segment where unconscious or casual movements are situated. That is monotonous, sloppyness, distracted averted gaze etc. belong to the casual movements' *range*. We could therefore state that *Trio A* exemplifies a specific dynamic that it shares with (most) casual activities.[3] Even if there are some "accents" or "staccato" movements in our ordinary everyday life, nevertheless we do not take them to be typical:

> But unlike we thought at first, it [Trio A] doesn't exemplify ordinary movement *per se*; it exemplifies properties which we take to be properties of ordinary movement. These properties - like uninflectedness, even pacing, lack of performative focus, and seeming lack of effort - are properties we associate with ordinary movement. [...] rightly or wrongly we take them to be properties typical of the sort of movement we commonly see. (Sigman, 2010, p. 521)

As I understand Goodman, instead of 'associate' he would say: *Trio A* does not literally exemplify ordinary movement but metaphorically. The structure of the original realm, namely to have ordinary movement listed among the low energy activities, is transferred to the artwork. A transfer of structure is how Goodman defined expression.

4. Constructionist Aspects of *Trio A*, an Alternative Approach

I will present in the following a counterproposal to the approach described above as 'aboutness'. I consider *Trio A* as a purely formal artwork, not being 'about', only exemplifying some of its features. My approach restrains from considering contextual features or art historical assumption as did Sigman, Banes, and Carroll, but above all Susan Leigh Foster in *Reading Dancing* (Foster, 1986, p. 188). Without taking aesthetic programmatic statements of the artists (like the No-manifesto)[4] into account, my approach concentrates on pure movement analysis. I therefore follow a method of movement analysis which has recently been elaborated upon, the *movement inventory procedure* (MIP) by Claudia Jeschke (Jeschke, 1999). Its focus is on the motoric, mechanical process of the body in dance, and so on my basic category. It aims to collect movement aspects that can count as typical for a dance piece under investigation. This movement profile Jeschke calls motoric identity (Jeschke, 1999, p. 152). What MIP considers thus to be specific for a dance piece can safely count as syntactic, i.e. relevant for meaning, in my semantics, too.

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[3] Without going here into details, the term 'share' is to be understood as the term 'overlap' Goodman used in Structure of Appearance: "Instances of a color may be discrete in time or space or both, but they still have the color as a common part. The similarity of these instances to one another is thus construed as involving literal part identity, ie. overlapping." (Goodman, 1977, p. 169)

[4] The so-called "No-manifesto" (Rainer, 1965, p. 178) rejects explicitly the performative, representative and expressive aspects of dance.

I will proceed as follows: a) To describe the (triple) results of MIP applied to *Trio A* one by one. b) To argue for their emphatic status in order to justify why the respective aspects, the results, are exemplified rather than only instantiated. Having done so in the case of each of the three dominant formal aspects, I will subsequently present a subtle way of emphasis particular to artworks: the mutual emphasis through the interrelatedness of the syntactic aspects.

4.1. Dominant Formal Aspects of a Constructionist Dance

Having applied the MIP to *Trio A* it leads to the following – triple – results:[5]

1a) The dominant quality of the dance piece is, not surprisingly, its dynamics: it has a continous low-energetic dynamics. The attributes of Sigman are therefore valid: "lumpy, sloppy quality", MIP would add 'heavy' (in respect of weight use) without strain (in respect of applied force), and above all without any (visible) "regulating" or "modulation" (Jeschke, 1999, p. 57). In respect of the use of time and space, *Trio A*'s dynamics can be situated in the middle range of Laban's so-called Effort-cube (Laban, p. 24). It is neither minimal nor maximal in its (intentional) time or space use.

1b) The features which emphasize the specific dynamic is its continous, perserverance and invariance. With the words of Goodman, the dance-piece's dynamics are 'small in size'. An analogy would be a monochrome picture that is small in size with regard to the colour category (see Goodman, 1977, p. 183). Goodman calls such aspects *derivative aspects*, i.e. derived from the basic category colour or dynamics. Interestingly, Goodman remarked that such derivative features are more striking than the underlying specific quality: "the pattern of qualia in a presentation is often noticed before the several qualia themselves" (Goodman, 1977, p. 189).

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[5] *Trio A* is one of four case studies analysed by MIP in: Soldati 2014.

The missing modulation prohibits any evolution of a swing, élan and also of movement phrases. Without phrases the dance is left with small piecemeal-cut metronome-sized movement.[6]

We can agree that monotony is an undoubted mean of emphasis. But why should the specific middle-range dynamics be relevant? We could imagine the same piece danced with a strained muscular tonus. It would change the entire dance. We could imagine the same piece danced in an elevated manner (balletic-light), which would likewise contrast to *Trio A*. But to jump in a sloppy mode, as Rainer does, to carry out some balletic moves in a careless way is a distinct artistic choice specific to *Trio A*.

2a) The second dominant formal aspect MIP made an inventory of is the isolation of body parts (specifically whole limbs). There are numerous isolated limbs movements; we mentioned the walk on the spot, followed by dangling arms (without leg moves), only two minutes later. Another instance of isolation is the repeated circling of the head without any organic bodily involvement or previous motivation (57''-59'').

2b) What renders exemplified isolation? On the one hand, isolation becomes apparent if a complementary movement-pair appeares in separated parts and delayed. The delay makes us conscious of their 'belonging together', like puzzle-pieces. On the other hand, an inappropriate recombination makes their elements striking. I would call this phenomenon a *montage of mis-match*. The head rotations are an example hereof. The circling of the head at 57'' of *Trio A* is similar to a warm up exercise before a sport event. Yet, paradoxically, the legs are already running. And they do this sideways. The coordination mis-match also affects dynamics. Or else, it would, if organic dynamics would be permitted. However, the evenness of dynamics is a paramount syntactic feature, and it is obtained at the expense of a dynamic suggesting itself organically (namely of a *swinging* head circle, e.g.). Yet, *not* to use dynamics here makes mis-matching matters worse. It is a challenging task to evenly rotate the head whilst the legs unevenly have to pass. A swinging head would help, as it could ease the uneven steps. But they may not. It would sacrifice the dominant feature of constant dynamics, and its implied rhythmless, even timing. Head and leg movements remain thus visibly isolated.

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[6] Given that there is no music, the impression of metronome-guided sequencing of movement material is due in part to frequent repetitions in a row to a tacit beat of approximately 60b/s.

3a) A third dominant feature the MIP revealed is that entire body sectors often move autonomously.

Let me describe an example. *Rond-de-jambe* is, in dance, usually a half-circle of the leg on the floor or in the air. It may begin in the front (*endehors*) or back (*endedans*). Yvonne Rainer shows in 1:21" three *endedans* (alternating the legs each time) and finishes by an *endehors*. In ballet, where arms accompany the legs, they always adapt the musical phrasing to the legs. Most commonly, legs and arms end in a coordinated pose, which is then maintained for a moment. In *Trio A* quite the opposite happens: the arms, which have already been paddling for a while (since 1:18"), are joined by the *ronds-de-jambe* later (see FIGURE 1). And the arms would happily continue to paddle if only the legs didn't kneel down and hit the floor. The circling arm has a different timing and a different direction to the leg circles. The legs 'decide' to kneel, so the arms have to 'give in'.

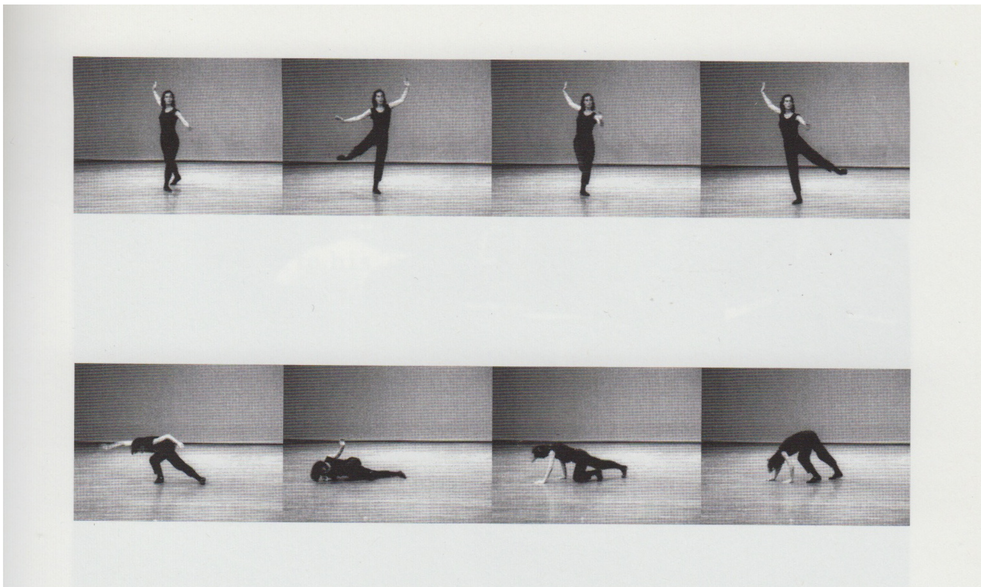

FIGURE 1. Wood, 2007, p53.

3b) The legitimate question in this third case of dominant syntactic aspects, is what lets the autonomy be an exemplified feature rather than instantiated? The answer is twofold: first, both parts of the body are autonomous in the use of time, which strikes as a lack of coordination. Second, the resulting mutual hindrance and incompatibility makes the autonomy conspicous. You have 8 arm moves against 3 for the legs. This arithmetic is no less of a challenge for the body. In addition, we see the incompatibility of circle directions, particularly when the legs change (from *endedans* to *endehors*), the arms however continue. As a conclusion, in case 2 as in case 3, the emphasis comes from a striking mis-match. Mis-match combinations prove the formal features to be used in a constructionist way. The import of the mis-match combinations, emphasising dominant features, prove construction itself to be significant. We can therefore subsume the dance *Trio A* under the label 'constructionist dance'.[7]

4.2. Mutual Emphasis Through Interrelations

My thesis is that in general the necessary emphasis on instantiated features (in order to become an exemplification) can originate in a mutual 'resonance'. However in the present dance the features in question are already proved to be exemplified.

How do the three dominant aspects emphasize one another?

a) Let us consider first the mutual emphasis on the dynamics and the isolations.

The monotony and metronome-guided time span emphasizes an ongoing exchange of gestures, and isolated complements (walks, dangling arms) of movement-pairs, appearing one by one. It yields the impression of perpetuity. Vice-versa, repetitions-in-a-row of some such puzzle-pieces emphasize the meter of monotony. Moreover, they *constitute* the metronomic timing in the first place – instead of the music.

b) Let us consider the mutual emphasis on dynamics and autonomous body sectors. The monotony and metronome-powered timings first interrupt the autonomous sectorial movements from time to time, yet through the succession of *new* sectorial moves, monotony then emphasizes the perseverance of autonomy.

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[7] A position sustaining my claim can be found in (Clark, 2010, p. 127): "It could readily be claimed that the identity of the work is in the detail of the discrete actions which accumulate to form the continuing illogical sequence of events".

By overcoming the interruptions (there are no pauses in the movements) the persistent autonomy emphasizes on its turn the monotonous succession. Combined with the mentioned distracted gaze, another isolated 'body part', autonomy emphasizes the low energy, an uncommitted *coolness*, in the dynamics.

4.3. Conclusion of my Constructionist Account

I presented three dominant, formal features of *Trio A*. I argued why they may be considered as exemplified rather than instantiated. Striking, miss-matched combinations played an eminent role in this. The inclusion of such combinations proves the piece to be constructionist. Seeing the three dominant features as interrelated, an additional mutual emphasis on them could be observed. The interrelations strengthen the importance of the three exemplified aspects, but show dynamics to be the paramount feature of the piece.

The appreciation of this interrelated form is meaning enough. In Susanne Langer's words, with regard to understanding meaning of arts: « But in a broader sense any appreciation of form, any awareness of patterns in experience, is 'reason' » (Langer, 1953, p. 29). Yet understanding of form does not preclude in principle expression or representation. I insist, however, if there are any in *Trio A*, they are secondary.

5. How does *Trio A* Signify Ordinary Movement?

If we are willing to suspect *tasks* behind the on-going exchange of puzzle-pieces and the autonomously moving limbs – even though obscure to us – then the whole piece is very task-driven. Or to use a more visceral term: buzzy. What is exemplified throughout is busy-ness. A hustle and bustle. In this sense we can admit, *Trio A* shares with every-day life what we take to be typical for it, (besides the mentioned sloppy dynamics) its on-going task-likeness. As no complicated gestures are involved, we can say: *Trio A* expresses (see chapt. 3. 'Aboutness') "busy with ordinary life (activities)".

6. Conclusion

I did not turn away from the option that *Trio A* could mean something concerning ordinary movement as commonly held in dance science and philosophical debate. But only as one layer of meaning.

The point of my alternative is that there are more pertinent and intriguing properties, namely the constructionist features of *Trio A*, that constitute a network of meaning through their mutual emphasis.

Thus, an interpretation taking only the piece's presumed representation into account, disregarding the construction of the syntactical features, is incomplete. It is not appropriate for formal art. To prove that ordinary movement "is the stuff of concert dance or that it is important and interesting in its own right" (see Sigman, 2000, p. 508) or as in the case of Banes and Carroll to prove the integrationist theory according to which the post-modernists overcome the boundaries between art and non-art, is not all the dance was about.

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