

Ichnography of dance

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ABSTRACT

Just as François Wahl gave one of his works the title *Introduction au discours du tableau*, we could present this study as an *Introduction to the Semiotics of Dance*, although, to be more careful, we should rather be talking of a possible introduction to a semiotics of dance, starting by asking the question of an (im)possible representation of its space. The obstacles and aporias which this question encounters will lead us to make a detour through the representations of architecture, among others through a drawing by Baldassarre Peruzzi, which single-handedly sums up all the indecisions leading to the acknowledgment of an impossible totalization of the logics of representation. It is the ground of dance, as Valéry perceives it in Degas, which leads us to the necessity of taking into account a dissolution of the figure in the semiotic approach to dance. At this stage a Real presents itself, that which of the body fails to signify, its *objects*, those remainders: breath, breathlessness, sweat, traces, that impossible of dance as necessary to knot its structure.

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1. (Not) representing dance

Just as a sculpture by Henry Moore is built around a hollow which it envelops, and not as an object placed within a landscape, a dancer moves around masses of air which s/he shapes and creates. Dance, just like sculpture in the round, creates its own space (the body on the ground or the body cleaving to the wall would be an equivalent of bas-relief). Thus, René Lew writes that '[t]he movements of the body are a (schematic, or more precisely, drawn) mode of eliciting the body's space just as the space surrounding a letter (the blanks, let us say, mixed with the general white spaces preceding writing in black letters), defines the (black) letter more than the latter is defined

by its own figurability' (2017:58-59).¹ The dancer is not situated in a pre-established space, a Euclidean space for instance. The body of the dancer sculpts its own moving space, a space being transformed. This way of thinking the space of dance borrows the essentials of its approach from the conception of the place as elaborated by Aristotle.

It will never be stressed enough how much the semiotics of the arts would have gained by acknowledging the significance of François Wahl's book *Introduction au discours du tableau* and the role which the author attributes, throughout his consideration of the work of art, to Benveniste's thinking.² No less useful for our consideration is how François Wahl sums up, in a very long footnote in his book, Aristotle's thinking about the place.³ A short extract from this goes as follows:

I refer to the investigation (never bettered since) by Aristotle (*Physics IV* [*Books I-IV*, transl. Henri Carteron, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, (1926) 2022], 212 a 9 and 220 b 24-32) on the place (*topos*), occupying the first five chapters of *Physics IV*. It is well-known that in its central part, that of definition, Aristotle, having ruled out that the place could be the form of the body it contains, or its matter, or the interval as independent of the body contained, concludes that it is 'the limit of the enveloping body' (212a, 6), which qua place can only ('wants to') be immobile (212a, 18). Hence finally: 'the immobile immediate limit of the envelope, that is the place' (212a, 20). (1996:49-51)

François Wahl next proposes to consider 'the properties of the place *as structure of the visible*.' He points out that 'as Victor Goldschmidt has shown in an exemplary article about "The Aristotelian theory of the place" (in *Écrits I*, Paris, Vrin 1984), the whole demonstration can only be understood if one poses that the body contained is *mobile* with regard to the limit, which is immobile.' It is not a matter for François Wahl (1996:38-39) of limiting oneself to the opposition, to the dichotomy space/place: 'always, he writes, space works for place, [always] the stasis of a place is indicated for space to overflow it and expose itself.' Wahl refers to a double articulation: 'the one calls for a centered subject and the other for a disseminated subject,' and wonders if representation 'between place and space (limiting ourselves to those two structures) is "constitutable."' In this study, we will endeavor to grasp what aporias engenders this constitution of space, and, more specifically, of the space of dance. We need to take Frédéric Pouillaude seriously, however abrupt his position may seem, and derive its

¹ In this thinking about writing in general and in this predominant role given to the space of the blank, it will be easy to recognize the thinking about Chinese writing and painting.

² Ivan Darrault-Harris acknowledges Benveniste's importance in establishing 'the complex links and relationships between Lacan's psychoanalysis [...] and post-Greimassian redefinitions of semiotics' (Darrault-Harris 2020).

³ The terms distributed by me in Figure 1 were borrowed from that note.

full consequences. We will therefore have to find an alternative approach to the representational illusion, one able to foil its play of simulation.

Céline-Marie Hervé chose as the title of her dissertation *La machine à (dé)représenter pour une théorie systémique de la scénographie* (2018).⁴ “(De)representing” is far more indicative than “not representing,” since it is a matter of subtracting or being subtracted from representation. Between place and space, between physical-technical space and topology, ‘the unsurpassable alternation,’ as François Wahl writes, obliges us to necessarily ask ourselves about the limits of representation, and if not about its impossibility, at least about its splitting-up. Introducing his impressive work *Le Désœuvrement chorégraphique. Étude sur la notion d’œuvre en danse*, Frédéric Pouillaude presents it ‘as the mere explanation of its failure,’ for indeed ‘[it] is always another space that dance seems to fall under’; hence, the acknowledgement of an “impossibility” of thinking its object (2009:9). We are therefore confronted, from the very inception of our thinking, with the necessity of circumventing an obstacle, an impossibility, an aporia.

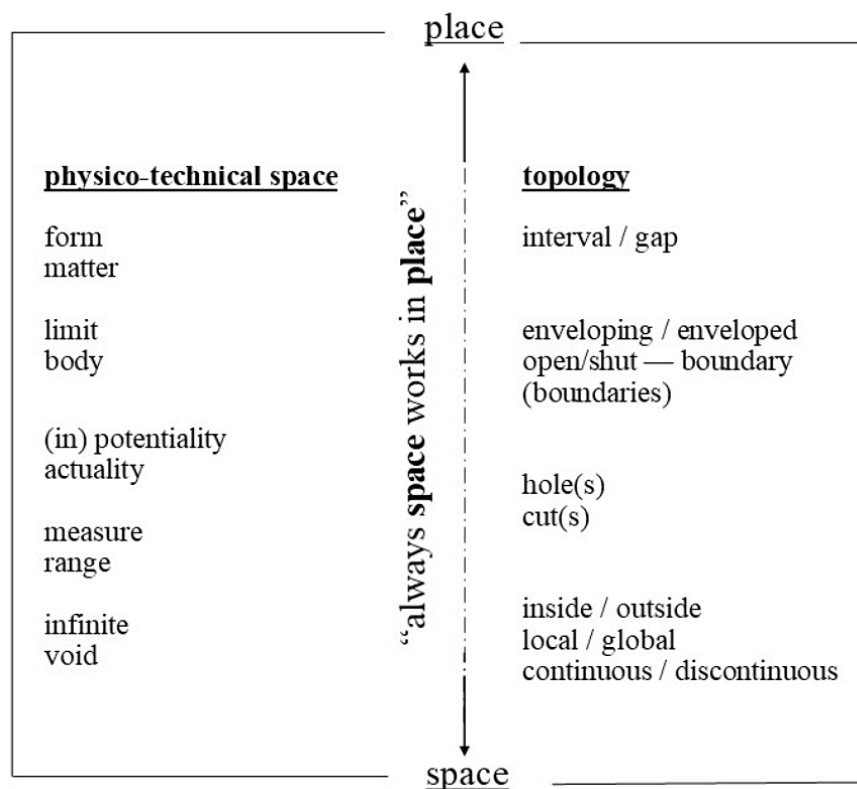


Figure 1. After François Wahl, linkage of space and place.⁵

⁴ It is also possible to refer to her thesis as adapted for publication. Though it no longer appears in the title, the author uses this concept of (de)representation in the third part of her work (Hervé 2024:203-252).

⁵ We should also refer here to a crucial text by René Lavendhomme (1997).

The above table (Fig. 1) was drawn in accordance with the one devised by Pierre Boudon, which we reproduce below (see Fig. 9). It is possible to connect our column “physical-technical space” with his column “perspective,” and our column “topology” with his column “geometral,” though without identifying them. This leads us to question a number of commonplaces by confronting us with the fact of considering the perspective formatting of our usual conception of space as a subjective (“subject-centered”) conception, and of thinking the geometral, as well as topology, as objective (“disseminated subject”).⁶ Following in this Yve-Alain Bois, we shall see how architectural representation, and thus all representation, finds itself torn between ground plan, perspective and axonometry.

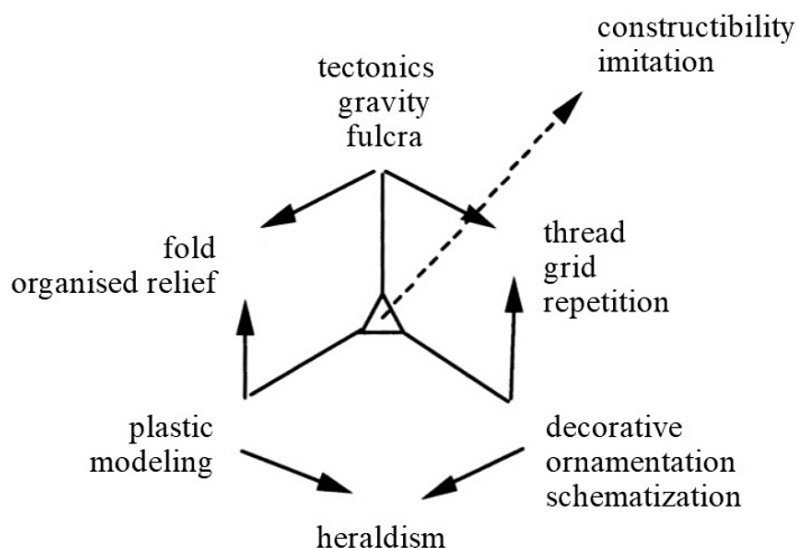


Figure 2. After Pierre Boudon, *templum* of representation (1992:47).

Let us draw from the outset, with this *templum* of representation (Fig. 2), borrowed from Pierre Boudon, the frame of the project for a thinking of ichnography that will follow, which will take a long detour through Yve-Alain Bois's work on architectural representation, from which Boudon himself drew much of his inspiration. This *templum*, writes the author, proposes a ‘principle of connection between diverse conceptions of the notion of representation’ (1992:44). The “plastic” should be understood here as a volume “in the round.” These terms, as Pierre Boudon also writes, ‘are principles fashioning esthetic form.’ Under “heraldism,” Pierre Boudon (1992:45, 47 and 48) understands, for instance, the schematism of Villard de Honnecourt’s drawings. We should

⁶ We should note that considering the topological as objective and associating objectivity with the disseminated subject in themselves amount to quite a “Copernican” revolution.

also note here, to the left of this *templum*, a more topological aspect, with the terms “fold” and “plasticity” and more metrical characteristics on the left, with the terms “grid” and “schematization.” If dance, as we indicated at the onset, can come close to sculpture in the round, it would, if we follow this distribution proposed by Pierre Boudon, come under a topological conception, and not the metric approach which Villard de Honnecourt’s drawings belong to.



Figure 3-4. Villard de Honnecourt, *Carnet*, plate 37, folio 19r, Rudolf Laban, *Choreology \ Spationom*, drawing (Archive Ref No L/E/1/27). From the Rudolf Laban Archive, University of Surrey, © University of Surrey.

In the correlation we could draw between the drawings of Villard de Honnecourt and those of Rudolf Laban (Fig. 3-4), it would be excessively simple to reduce the similarities that can be perceived in them to the effects of schematization. Noticeably, both highlight the essential role played by the center of gravity, wishing to account for the necessary balance of the figure. We should also note here the tension between heraldism and fulcrum, between plane of the body and movement.⁷

⁷ Laurence Louppe notes that what is at stake as early as Feuillet’s system is ‘the loss of support’: it is, she says, ‘the quality of the loss of support which grounds dance’ (Louppe 2005: 51).

Hans R. Hahnloser provides a detailed analysis of each of the plates in Villard de Honnecourt's album. As regards in particular the figures in plate 37 reproduced below, which he analyzes one by one, he notes that 'We see how Villard, starting from a customary method, is searching through various uncertain attempts for a fixed method and a measurable norm.' These diagrams, Hahnloser suggests, have a 'constructive and normative character' (1972: 93, 361).

Those representations by Villard de Honnecourt and Rudolf Laban fail to account for the plane, or the body, or movement, though they claim to deal with all of these. Pierre Legendre postulates the existence of a '*system of dances*' (a system for the representation of bodies), as though one were ordaining on the 'unique man of ideal'⁸ (1978:40). In addition to the codification of the ballet in the West since the 18th century, one could certainly think here of systems like those of Laban.⁹

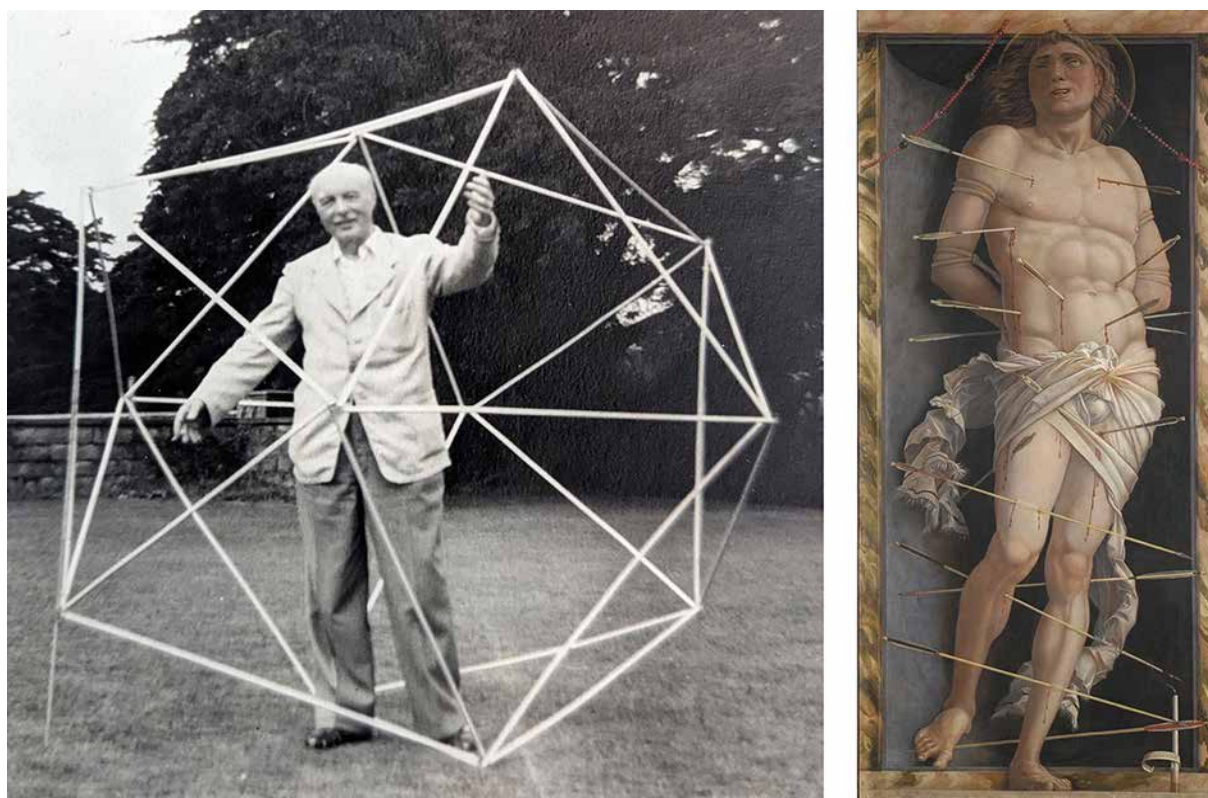


Figure 5-6. Photograph of Rudolf Laban standing within an icosahedron at the Ashridge Summer School, 1955. © June Petit. (Repository GB 1701 LC/A/1/5/22). Trinity Laban Archive collections, London, UK., and Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Sebastian*, Galleria Giorgio Franchetti, Ca' d'Oro, Venice, 1490, tempera on canvas, 213 x 95 cm (commons.wikimedia).

⁸ Underlined by the author.

⁹ As regards the notations of dance, see for instance Gabriele Brandstetter (2017).

Paradoxically, the braiding of arrows in Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian*, in Venice, and Laban's icosahedron (Fig. 5-6) have the same goal: to provide the body with a network of spatial coordinates. The arrows, Carlo Severi writes (2020:146), 'seem to multiply the viewpoints' on to the body. 'Sebastian moves his foot towards a plane which seems to be external to the space of the composition.' We note that the string of coral goes behind the head of the saint but in front of the marble of the alcove; that the left foot is set in front of the alcove, but that an arrow goes behind the left ankle, in front of the candle in the foreground and behind the right foot, whereas another arrow goes through the right thigh but in front of the left thigh. Such is the interlacing of the "objects"¹⁰ of painting. If Laban's dancer is indeed encompassed within the icosahedron, inscribed in it, the character in Mantegna, while he is inserted in his alcove, is nonetheless contorted by the multiplication of contradictory indications of what is above or below.

Most of the arrows are situated relatively horizontally and represented in the maximum width offered by the painting. Most of them are therefore painted almost life-size. To situate our thinking, we should recall the analysis of the dispositif of painting proposed by Louis Marin on the basis of the Poussin painting *Et in Arcadia ego*, inasmuch as 'that painting represents representation':

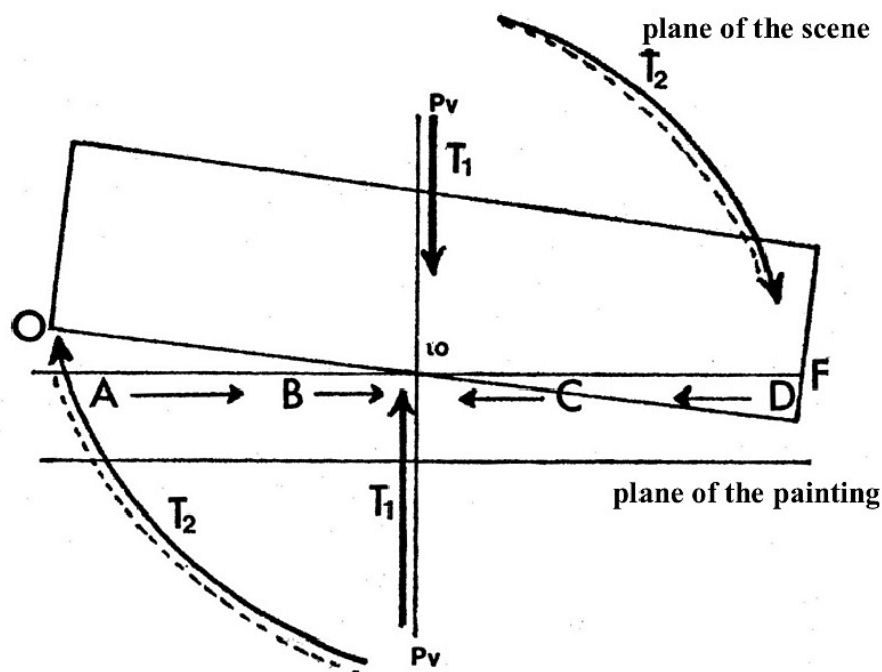


Figure 7. Lateralization of the deep structure of the represented space (Marin 1995: 58)

¹⁰ As regards this notion of 'object,' see a detailed approach in Lucien Massaert (2025).

all happens as though the painting by Poussin effected a transformation, in the geometrical sense of the word, consisting in *lateralizing* the depth structure of the space represented [...] All happens, fundamentally, as though a second eye were situated in the wings on the left of the scene, very close to the plane of the painting, and perceived from that hidden location, and as a form of *width*, the dimension of *depth* opened within that plane [...]. But that enigmatic, concealed second eye, that anamorphic eye has left a trace spread all over the painting; it is thereby inscribed in the figures.¹¹ (1995:63, 56, 59, modified translation)

Marin proceeds to add that any narrative produced by painting results from ‘the *hidden presence* of that second eye in the wings’ (1995:60) modified translation. The diagram he proposed (Fig. 7) offers in a planar view the dispositif of all representation, whether of painting, theatre or dance. This folding of the viewpoint on to the distance point¹² is assuredly what Mantegna’s painting effects, in a probably even more manifest manner, ‘the dimension of *depth* opened in the plane’ being here reduced to a minimum by the depth of the marble alcove. If, as Carlo Severi proposes, the arrows constitute points of view on the body, they fold down our gaze, both to the left and to the right, in the wings, in other words on to the aforementioned distance points. And the eye, as Marin writes, leaves its trace – in the figures-objects-arrows – ‘spread all over the painting.’

The probably vain attempt to reduce the body in general, and the dancer’s moving body in particular, through the input of geometrical coordinates, is perfectly demonstrated by Mantegna with that multiplication of geometrical vectors which Carlo Severi defines as being a multiplication of points of view.¹³ However much the gaze may wish to grasp the body from all sides, what is given is always only an image of the body; the body eludes it. As Hahnloser writes, concerning Villard de Honnecourt’s figures, all attempts to grasp it remain ‘uncertain.’

¹¹ Author’s own italics

¹² It is impossible not to notice the striking similarity between the operation proposed by Marin and the operation consisting in projecting the paradigmatic axis on to the syntagmatic axis which characterizes for Roman Jakobson what he calls the “poetic function.”

¹³ For those who might wonder why the question of the writing of dance, a writing which meets its own aporias, is not being further developed here, we will refer, in addition to the text by Gabriele Brandstetter (2017), to the excellent chapter in Frédéric Pouillaude’s work, ‘D’une graphie qui ne dit rien’ (2009:207-242).

2. Ground

We all know the virtual nature of the blank page, or the promise of space in a painting. The canvas, known as a “support,” constitutes the necessary condition for the “projection” of representation. However, as Daniel Sibony writes, ‘in dance, the scriptor, the support and the text is the body’ (1995:145). Hence, the very specific function of the ground for dance, a ground which, following Sibony, cannot have the same status as the body / support. This three- in-one of the scriptor, the support and the text in the body of the dancer, this collapse of the structure scriptor-support-text, calls for an entirely different approach to the writing of dance. The ground, the place where the body comes down, is therefore a reminder of the reality of gravity, of weight, but it isn’t the locus of inscription of dance. That ground, that ichnography, is what our text aims to examine, to show precisely why it is not a place of inscription or a support.

Louis Marin (1987:35, n. 13) observes that Claude Perrault, in his translation of Vitruvius, notes that ‘one of the three representations of the architectural edifice is *ichnography* [...] the representation of its ground plan. The term comes from the Greek *ichnos*, which means footstep, trace left on the ground. Perrault's note is as follows:

Ichnographia. The term ichnographia made up of ἵχνος, trace, and, γράφω, I describe, strictly signifies the plan or trace formed on the ground by the base of a body resting on it; this is what we call terrestrial, or planimetric plane. In architecture, it is a transverse section of a building, which represents the circumference of the whole edifice with the thickness of the walls, the distribution of the different rooms composing it, the dimensions of the doors and windows, the ledges/juttings of the columns and the doorjambs, in a word with all that can be seen in a section of this type. (Vitruvius 1847, Tome I, n. 52, p. 104)

For architecture, ichnography is the fundamental “representation”: it is on this basis that the edifice can be erected, and it will remain after the building has turned to ruins. Falling, dropping, collapsing, are among the commonplaces of contemporary dance. The weight of the body, their fall-out compelled recognition, after the reign of the ideal of elevation. The weight of the bodies, their fall-out, the drops of perspiration spurting and shining under the light of the spotlights and falling on to the ground, the flushing of the skin, a trace of the repeated brutal falls to the ground, and let us not forget the smell of the place, the smell of the bodies and their perspiration. For want of being able to trust a representation of dance, which turns out be impossible, as Frédéric Pouillaude observes: these are therefore the elusive remnants that we propose to question.

Architecture, like choreography, provides for journeys, it manages them. Commenting on the relationship between architecture and dance in Valéry's *Amphion* and *Dance and the Soul*, Véronique Fabbri writes that those works

which present two figures of constructors, make it possible to displace the traditional opposition between the arts which produce solid works, able to be analyzed according to mathematical and formal principles, and the arts which are considered as evanescent, because they are arts of time, in particular dance. (2007:122)

In this way we find corroborated by Valéry's approach the necessary detour proposed here between dance and architecture, as a way of thinking their respective spaces and their representations.¹⁴

Having established the need for this roundabout journey let us start again from the question of the 'ichnography [of the edifice] as representation of its ground plan,' and let us see how Yve-Alain Bois approaches this indecision between plan and perspective, between two marks of an impossible totalization. He writes that, whereas Sebastiano Serlio, in his *Primo libro d'Architettura* (published in 1537), still separated the three graphic instances (plane - cross section - elevation) drawn on the same sheet and articulated geometrically, Peruzzi, prefiguring axonometry, wishes to show 'the "mental image" of the building [referring to the term used by Claude Bragdon (1932) to designate axonometry], the way in which the spaces are articulated with one another' (Bois 1984:132),¹⁵ adding that his drawing is 'closer to the "facts" than to appearances.' Yve-Alain Bois describes Baldassarre Peruzzi's drawing (Fig. 8) as follows:

Conceived as a manner of *methodological demonstration* [...] this drawing exposes in a single image and without tripartition a ground plan (in the foreground [its vanishing point is very distant]), a partial elevation of the pillars, built on this plane (with cross section of the pillars), and an elevation in an orthogonal projection (in the background). (*ibid.*)

¹⁴ Let us note that *Nouvelles de danse* has devoted its volume 42/43 (Brussels, Éditions Contredanse, spring-summer 2000) to this problematic of "Dance and Architecture," though the contributions are far removed from the problematic developed here. Paul Virilio indicates that he too was led to take an interest in choreographic notation through his architectural research (Loupe 2005: 47-49).

¹⁵ Writing about this drawing by Peruzzi, Yve-Alain Bois talks of 'proto-axonometric elevated view.'

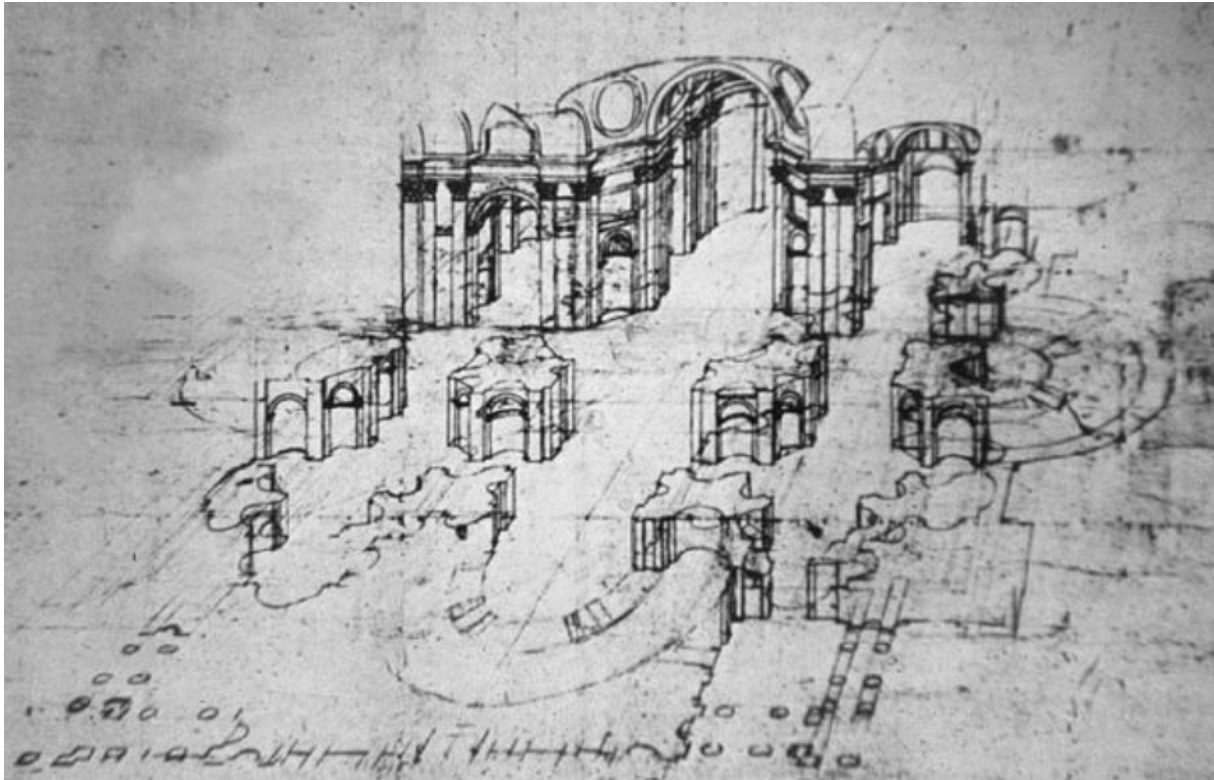


Figure 8. Baldassarre Peruzzi, *Project for St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, 1505*, Florence, Uffizi Gallery, Drawings and Prints Department.

What is most remarkable here is the importance of the ground: it occupies the entire space, the horizon line being pushed far beyond the upper edge of the drawing. This emblematic drawing by Peruzzi, with its 'desire of systematic spatial exposition,' lays bare the aporias of representation. Yve-Alain Bois proposes this exceptionally eloquent formula concerning axonometric representation: 'Just like the knight in chess, it proposes an oblique approach to a Western optical prejudice, a generalized wavering' (1984:134). With this idea of obliquity we meet again the necessity, pointed out above by Louis Marin, of tipping over virtually into the wings of representation in an effort to grasp it.

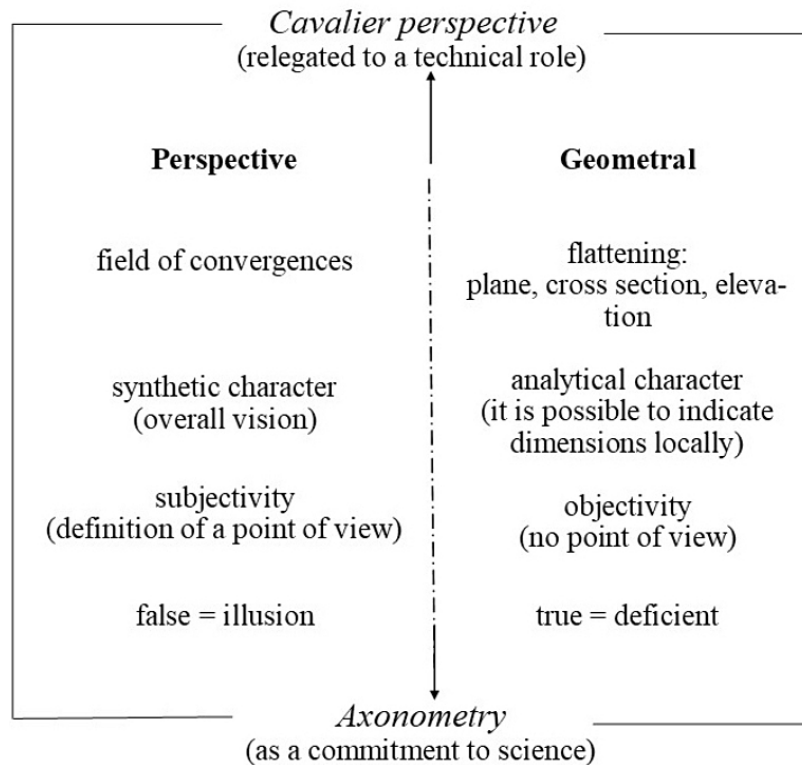


Figure 9. Pierre Boudon: Side-by-side comparison of a perspective and a geometral (1993:50).

As we have shown, Pierre Boudon (1993) relies on the work of Yve-Alain Bois¹⁶ to bring together the terms of the diagram above (Fig. 9). The title *Counter Constructions* of the works by Van Doesburg which Pierre Boudon evokes, associated with the term “(de) representation” in Céline-Marie Hervé – we could also think of Gordon Matta-Clark’s “anarchitecture” – shows that the references to architecture have to be conceived here both at the level of construction and at the level of its questioning, its failure, its impossibilities. The representations of Laban’s icosahedron can be seen as pertaining to an axonometric perspective, as meant to be approached from up close – if not conceived as apprehended from the inside – with a quasi-absence of vanishing perspective of the parallel sides. Between a trickle-down in the form of *dripping* of the cloud of drops of sweat scattered in the air by the dancer and Laban’s crystal – ideal in the same way as Leonardo’s Vitruvian body –, *between the crystal of the plane and the smoke of the sublime*,¹⁷ clearly opens a spacing in which the dance’s body cannot be asserted as such.

¹⁶ He refers to the three following texts: Yve-Alain Bois, “Axonométrie”, *Architecture/Arts plastiques*, Paris, CORDA (Comité de la recherche et du développement en architecture), 1979, pp. 251-366; Yve-Alain Bois, Bruno Reichlin, Jean-Paul Rayon, Nancy Troy, *De Stijl et l’architecture en France*, Brussels, Mardaga, 1985; Yve-Alain Bois, “De – ∞ à 0, à + ∞”, in El Lissitzky (1890-1941): *architecte, peintre, photographe, typographe*, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1991.

¹⁷ Or the flame and the crystal in Valéry, see Benedetta Zaccarelli (2005).

Representations in a linear perspective or in an axonometric projection, or the “utopia” of a curvilinear perspective, are conventions the coexistence and incompatibility of which reveal the impossibility of a “true” representation, one that would correspond to our natural vision, which both sweeps and focuses. As shown by Edwige Phitoussi, in Valéry the ‘loss of the image, the absence of a “general figure” is asserted again and again in his *Notebooks*, and in literary form in *L’idée fixe*’ (2009:132). The ‘problems in a more subtle kind of mathematics’ (Valéry 1989: 5), which Degas had apparently seen in art are, as Edwige Phitoussi writes, ‘the art of the plane [...] At the point where the figure comes undone and the act comes to its end’ (2009:134-135).

Whereas philosophy would tend to essentialize dance, to the point of making it the essence of art, the primary, original art, for Degas, on the contrary, the raising of the ground, his very high skylines lead to a failure of figures, casting doubt on ideality to the benefit of some kind of paradoxical, because dissolving, materialization. How would the plane undo the figure? In a text which Hubert Damisch devotes to Dubuffet’s paintings, we read the following:

It is again Valéry who observed, in the pages he devoted to Degas, that the notion of form is changed – if not actually called into question – by the projection on to the vertical plane of the canvas of the horizontal plane of the ground, which then no longer acts as a neutral, indifferent background, but as an essential factor in the vision of things, and can – at a stretch – constitute the very subject of the painting.¹⁸ (1984:111)

And so, this is Degas’s dance ground, the ground as the “very subject” of dance! And indeed, Valéry writes: ‘Degas is one of the rare painters who gave due emphasis to the *ground* [...] The ground is *an essential factor in our perception of things*’ (Valéry 1989:42-43).¹⁹ Some works go as far as to allow the ground to occupy almost the whole surface of the painting – see, for instance, *Before the Ballet*, kept in the Washington, D.C. National Gallery of Art (c.1890-1892). Valéry adds that, for Degas, color is ‘a local result of all the different sheddings and reflections of light in space, passing and repassing between all the bodies’ (*ibid.* 43). The switches, emissions and reflections between the bodies of dance thus also become switches, emissions and reflections between the figures of painting. And Damisch goes on:

¹⁸ See Paul Valéry, ‘The Ground and the Formless’ (Valéry 1989:42-47).

¹⁹ We have underlined the expression which Damisch borrows in the singular and without inverted commas.

But the erection of the ground, and the dissolution of forms which it introduces, doesn't only have a negative sense: the ground has to be a wall and the wall has to be a ground, so that, starting from a surface which only offers the eye a patch of bewilderment or of tranquillity, it should all be taken up again *through gestures*. The *Wall of the ground* is the obstacle against which any pictorial doubt vanishes, the original foundation proffered to the gesture through which man introduces his figurative order within nature. (1984:111-112)

Damisch thus constructs a contradictory space, between the "patch of bewilderment" and abolished pictorial doubt, between "dissolution of forms" and "figurative order." This is the very question of how to apprehend dance, as well as the very question of representation. One feels one is reading Deleuze defining the monstrous: 'raising the ground'²⁰ and dissolving the form' (1994:29). The ground of dance in Degas isn't a support or foundation but a place of dissolution. This lesson of Degas is what we propose as a starting-point to think dance itself. And Damisch again (1984:112): 'Hasty, elementary drawing style, less drawing than trace, man's inscription in sand or on the table, this *constant playmate* is nothing other for the painter than a "raised ground".' And indeed, Valéry has the "score" performed on the table:

Let us suppose that we want to draw one of these formless things, but one which has a certain recognizable correspondence between its parts. If I throw a crumpled handkerchief onto a table, it looks like nothing. To the eye, at first, it is simply a chaos of creases. I can move one of the corners without disturbing the others. My problem, however, is to make my drawing show that it is a piece of cloth of a certain kind, thickness, and flexibility, and all in one piece. The question is, then, how to make *intelligible* a particular structure of an object which has no determinate structure... (Valéry 1989:44)

Here we are first, to borrow the words of Valéry, with that 'dissolution of forms,' 'one of these formless things,' tossed on to the plane, which 'looks like nothing,' 'a chaos,' and yet the shapeless – the movements of dance – is only apparent. It is a topology of folds – see the second column of Figure 1 – which can be shown through drawing: a solidarity of parts, 'a particular structure' where it is possible to 'move one of the corners without disturbing the others.'

²⁰ Clearly this "ground," this depth which rises in Deleuze does not have the solidity (support) or the pragmatic aspect (plane) of the grounds evoked so far in our text. One could rather, if I am allowed to use those metaphors, associate this ground with a soil saturated with water through which that water keeps moving up, or with the magma moving up from the abyss. We could estimate at this stage, drawing on the Lacanian instances, that the support (which is lacking) pertains to the conditions of possibility of the structure (S1), the plane to the symbolic constraints of language (S2), the ground to the imaginary (I) and finally the depth rising up to the Real (R).



Figure 10. Edgar Degas, *The Rehearsal*, c. 1874, oil on canvas, 58.4 x 83.8 cm, The Burrell Collection, © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums and Libraries Collections.

In Degas' *Rehearsal* (Fig. 10), the regularity of the topological scroll is situated within the metaphor constituted by the spiral staircase. The raising of the ground, as in many other paintings and pastels by Degas – although this raising is less radical than in the Peruzzi drawing – leads to the dissolution of the figures of the dancers, 'a generalized wavering,' as Yve-Alain Bois described it about axonometry. Damisch again:

'scrambling the vertical with the horizontal, mixing them or instituting in the painting a plane of ambiguity between the two', it responds to the double wish to constrain the gaze to consider the painted surface as a ground seen overhanging and at the same time to raise the ground as a wall which calls for some human intervention, through trace or print. (Damisch 1984:112)²¹

²¹ Damisch is quoting Jean Dubuffet, *Mémoire, Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, vol. II, Paris, Hubert Damisch (ed.), 1967:169.

Damisch then makes a connection with the human traces revealed by aerial photography, opposing them to the traces found ‘in the depths’ by traditional archaeology, and calling for giving a ‘meaning, a value of information’ ‘to the strictly visual data.’ Damisch thus jettisons a metaphysical vision of the deep, the concealed, in favor of a thinking of art which offers all of its meaning on the surface. This will lead him, in a text devoted to the work of Pollock, to compare his *drippings* to ‘a surface, a playing area [in which the painter] did not hesitate to enter in person’ (1984:149).²² This ‘gesticulation’ by Pollock, around his canvas set on the ground, has always been compared to a dance with its throwing of colors through space, the traces of which the canvas will gather as they fall on to it. Damisch will also find here the logic brought to light by Valéry in the work of Degas, observing that with Pollock, in the same way, ‘the *linearity* which will have imposed its law on figurative painting in the West gives up on itself,’ and that in this ‘erection’ of the ground ‘a certain notion of form, based on delineation, on the pre-eminence of the outline, is somehow called into question’ (1984:139).

Just as an approach to Pollock’s œuvre has to move away from conventional esthetics, accounting for the logic of dance requires that one should appeal to parameters that are different from those traditionally linked to the esthetics of form; in other words, we move away, in the formulation of Yve-Alain Bois, from the ‘optical prejudices of the West.’ As Deleuze writes: ‘It is as if the ground rose to the surface, without ceasing to be ground. There is cruelty, even monstrosity, on both sides of this struggle’ (1994:28). If we are thus confronted with a ‘blanket of confusion’ if the ‘original foundation’ of representation collapses, it is a matter, as Louis Marin writes, of ‘mak[ing] sense of the collapse,’ taking account of the ‘structural equivalence [...] between construction and destruction, between composition and obliteration, between erection and collapse’ (1987:35). Hence, there is no negativity in this dissolution of the ideal of a meaning of form but another modality of meaning has to be considered.

If there is a “music” peculiar to dance, it is the rhythm of the beats, of the slams of the steps on the ground, or the noise of the fall of bodies, associated to the noise of panting, of the short breath of breathlessness. Perhaps, writes Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor, ‘we are unable to represent or feel anything beyond the rhythm which is that of breathing, of heart beats or of the movement of waves’ (2013:93); a paradoxical representation therefore, or a borderline representation which would only be a matter of breathing and heart beats. The ichnography of dance which we have been endeavoring to discern since the beginning by questioning the possibilities/impossibilities of representation – an impossibility which we have noted from here from the outset of our reflections, following the ascertainment of Frédéric Pouillaude, more recently reiterated by Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor –, in other words, the falling of bodies on the ground and their rising again, this ichnography can

²² Hubert Damisch, “Stratégies 1950-1960”.

probably be approached as a *dispositif*, in the sense which Philippe Ortel gives the word, inasmuch as ‘physical and technical realities,’ ‘instruments’ are invariably involved in it. Ortel specifies that ‘[t]he form of the *dispositif* is coupled with a force which simultaneously justifies and threatens it,’ an ‘anarchic reality.’ The *dispositif* brings together a *con-figuration* ‘and a *conjuncture*: chaos, chance, brutality are, he writes, its inevitable reverse side.’ According to one of the examples he analyses, the contact between the body and the ground would be like ‘[t]he contact between the hull [of a ship] and the wave’ (2008:51-53). He also notes that this *dispositif* would be a pulsional one, evoking Jean-François Lyotard. If the delineation is dismissed, if form comes undone, this is because representation

reactivates the link with this repressed reverse side, as by stressing the internal organisation of the instruments rather than their use, it brings back to the foreground the chaotic background which they are supposed to master. (Ortel 2008:53)²³

3. Remainder

To consider that ‘reverse side,’ ‘the chaos, chance, brutality’ discussed by Ortel, let us come back to Wahl, and to what results from his appeal to Aristotle’s theory of place. One should not focus on the acknowledgment that ‘two figures like those of space and place [...] alternate and disallow each other [...] each of them being necessarily involved,’ ‘their unsurpassable alternation,’ writes Wahl, indexes the representation ‘of the *Real*: pointing in it a specific *impossible*’ (1996:39).

To clarify our remarks, and this notion of the Real – the reader will recognize the Real defined as impossible by Lacan –, we could refer to what Wahl states in an openly provocative manner in the opening of his paper at the Cerisy ‘Bataille’ conference, in 1972, to make sure, as regards the œuvre of Georges Bataille, that he would not be ‘reassuring or comforting.’²⁴ ‘How can the subtraction of a puddle of sperm be exchanged for the addition of a string of pearls?’ (1973:199, reprinted in 2025:91), the sperm being later called a ‘supplement.’

It would be legitimate to wonder whether François Wahl isn’t here playing again the scene of ‘seduction’ in the Turin hospital of catechumens scene described by Rousseau in his *Confessions*: ‘I saw something white, like glue, shoot towards the fireplace and fall on the ground, which turned my stomach’ (1963:68, modified translation). Stéphane Lojkin comments: ‘the material, geometral journey [constitutes] the provisional cancellation of the “as if” of metaphor’ (2001:228-229), the lifting of the constitutive distance of representation, ‘the presence-absence of the metaphorical cut [...] is

²³ Quoted by Hervé 2018:66 and Hervé 2024:37.

²⁴ How could we indeed avoid normalizing what can never be reassuring or comforting in our encounters with dance?

the “making surface” (2001:232). And indubitably our experience of dance, radically different in this respect from our relationship with painting, is first and foremost an invalidation ‘of the “as if” of metaphor,’ of the distance constitutive of representation. Here we find again the relationship between the calling into question of representation and the rising-up of the surface. And Wahl adds:

Desire is produced by what it produces. That is, less by that (other) body that is supposed to arouse it than by the sperm in which it will be resolved (as which it will succeed) – and in a general way, through the objects which the body lets issue out of itself, that it leaves as traces of itself. (1973:219; 2025:109)

So, we have on the one hand a trace as subtraction and on the other hand a string of pearls as addition. It would not be impossible once again to make a detour by way of Aristotle, but this time by referring to his treatise *On the Generation of Animals* (D’Onofrio 2014).²⁵ Stéphane Lojkin notes, again in Rousseau, a counterpart to the ignominy of the Turin episode in the ‘something blue’ of the flowering periwinkle glimpsed by Madame de Warens, his mother (Lojkin 2001: 230-231). If we wish to continue the parallel with dance, we will say that the supplement, the dancer’s sweat for instance, produces the desire to dance. And Wahl explains:

Therefore: that setting in motion of the supernumerary signifier, this rotation of syllables through sequences which are not controlled by a chain of communicable meaning / practice, this *assault on the economy of meaning* (and aren’t the two words a tautology?) has something to do with this *dispersion of objects*, this irreducible diversity of matter, which are the other side of eroticism. (1973:240 (2025:129))

Like Stéphane Lojkin, here Wahl refers to the logic of the ‘supernumerary signifier,’ superfluous in one register, absent in the other.²⁶ As for Deleuze, he evokes Kafka’s short story “Blumfeld,” and the ‘two little ping-pong balls which of their own accord jump on to the wall of the floor, bounce all over the place,’ as well as the Ballet by Debussy and Nijinsky in which ‘a small tennis ball comes and bounces on the stage’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 207).²⁷ The question thus arises: what would a ‘dispersion of objects’ involve in dance, linked to a ‘violence wrought on the economy of meaning’? Shedding light on his remarks, François Wahl next suggests an equally eloquent

²⁵ See for instance his ‘diagram of fluids,’ p. 63 (Aristotle 1995. *Generation of Animals*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Jonathan Barnes (ed.). Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press.

²⁶ See Gilles Deleuze. À quoi reconnaît-on le structuralisme. In: *Histoire de la philosophie*, ed. by François Chatelet, vol. 8. Paris: Hachette. 1973: 323-328 and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Introduction à l’œuvre de Marcel Mauss. In: Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*. Paris: PUF, 1950: XIV.

²⁷ See also Deleuze 1969: 83-91, “Eleventh series. Of nonsense”.

version of his first utterance: *'how can the subtraction of a corpse be exchanged against the addition of a bunch of flowers?'*²⁸ renewing a balancing movement between an ab-ject and a sublime and continuing his elucidation in these terms:

Between that less and that more, *that lack of the body in being where it is inclined*, and that *surplus of signs* to say nothing, a substitution takes place, the latter with their multiplicity coming somehow to obturate the morcellating (priva-tive) insignificance of the former. (1973:240 (2025:129))

Will we also accept to say that in dance there is a 'lack of the body in being where it is inclined,' and that breathing, breathlessness, sweat, the traces left by the dancer on the ground are 'surpluses of signs,' obturating what Jacques Lacan calls the Real; that which of the body cannot be reduced to a word or an image, cannot come to signify? If there is a peculiarity of that trace as it is conceived here – a trace also of the architectural ichnography touched on at the beginning of this text – it is that not unlike the trace in Derrida, it is set to become obliterated, the traces of the dancers are superimposed and erased as they are covered over, the drops of sweat evaporate immediately, they "are" merely in the instant of their appearance, hence it is futile to pretend to set them in the form of writing. Whoever claims to account for dance in itself, for the body as such can only be referred to the phenomenological epoche. We recall Derrida's comments based on Husserl: the living present 'is always already a trace. This trace cannot be thought based on the simplicity of a present whose life would be internal to itself. The self of the living present is originally a trace' (Derrida 1993[1967]: 95).

Coming back to those remainders, to that Real, that impossible of dance and of its representation, we will note that this Real is indeed essential to extract a structure in order to tie the symbolic constraints of language to the imaginary register of representations, without which the language of dance and its imaginary would be in a state of abandonment, incapable of weaving any narrative, any meaning whatsoever. We will therefore note that the traces, the ground exhibit an operational character in the structure. We could recall here Georges Didi-Huberman's comment on the way the flowers in the meadow were painted in Fra Angelico's *Noli me tangere* in the San Marco Convent. Didi Huberman describes those flowers as 'punctiform deposits' of white and red pigments 'which produce very subtle reliefs on the wall.'

²⁸ It is difficult not to think here of Kant (*Critique of Judgment*. Indianapolis/Cambridge. Hackett Publishing Company. 1987: 84. n. 50), and of the passage which Jacques Derrida devotes to it ("The Sans of the Pure Cut". In *The Truth in Painting*. Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press. 1987). See also Francis Ponge. "La façon de faner les tulipes". In *L'opinion changée quant aux fleurs (Nouveau Nouveau Recueil II. 1940-1975*. Paris: Gallimard. 1992:120-124; Paris: éd. Fario, 2023: 37-42). (See also Georges Bataille 1970:173-178). We should devote a detailed commentary to this last text, as it corresponds closely to the movement of our thinking here.

They [those colored rhythms] do not *describe* anything, do not provide anything we could distinguish: those flowers do not include any calyxes, corollas, pistils or stamens [...] tiny circular clusters [...] Those red spots are even painted in the way Fra Angelico painted stigmata [...] There is a displacement of the iconic value, hence equivocal of representation [...] The iconic character of those red signs becomes secondary – or even undergoes the trial of a logical aporia. (1990:22-23)

Didi-Huberman thus points to the structurally operational character of those signs: ‘they are not more of “the background” than of the “figure,” or rather [they] produce the one from the very work of the other.’ The figure is produced from the work of the background (or the ground). Didi-Huberman then adds: ‘It is therefore a matter of exceeding the iconographic²⁹ evidence of the figure and the meaning: evidence which as a last resort only deals with storia or with allegory’ (1990:25). By dint of only wanting to see in art the image, the history or the narrative, increasingly, current commentaries or analyses tend to miss out on the very meaning of the work, which can be grasped on the very surface of the material data and the signifying articulation. Being too much painting, being crushed on the surface of the fresco, those pigment-flowers of Fra Angelico’s give existence to the structure, they allow symbolic and imaginary to be distinct everywhere else in the painting.

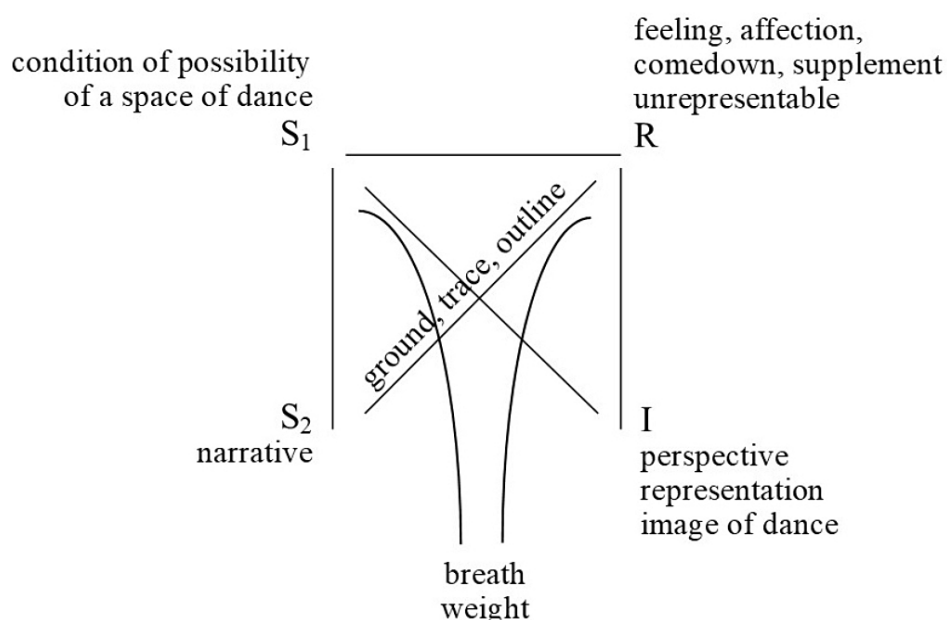


Figure 11. After Jacques Lacan's 'schema L' and 'schema R' graphs.³⁰

²⁹ It will be noted that it takes only one letter for the term "ichnography" to seal the fate of iconography.

³⁰ See Marc Barbut, "Sur le sens du mot structure en mathématiques". *Les temps modernes* 246. Problèmes du structuralisme. November 1966:791-814. See also "Le carré sémiotique", Algirdas J. Greimas & Joseph Courtès. *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la science du langage*. Paris: Hachette (1979: 29-33).

Though Ortel writes that '[t]he real threatens at any moment to [...] engulf the symbolic' (2008:53), we tend to think that it is as though the imaginary extension³¹ were subtracted and in its place came a possible inscription of S2, the symbolic constraints of language being transferred as indices in the Real (Fig. 11). If we are to include the ground and the trace in this diagram, they can only form the Eulerian continuous path between the four instances,³² the ground and the trace coming under both the necessities of language, S2, and the Real, and being also transcribable in the imaginary.³³ The *petit a*, like the mazzocchio,³⁴ circulates between the series of the structure.

'The addition of a string of pearls' or 'of a bunch of flowers,' the free beauty of a wild tulip,³⁵ all constitute the emblems of a Real such as Malevich's *Black Square*, a sublime black tulip, an icon, a paragon of all art, not the last painting but the first one of a new classicism in which Gérard Wacjman sees 'the object of the century' (1998). Dance, the ballet, have not failed to have recourse, often in a rather stereotypical manner, to botanic metaphors. But let us take these few fragments of two versions of Mallarmé's *Prose* quoted by Jean Petitot (1989) in the study he devoted to that text,

Every flower spread out enlarged,
And so immense they were...,
The manifold lilies' stem would grow,
Claiming abundance should have come
Glory of long desire...,
To a size far beyond our reason
... sheds her ecstasy³⁶

³¹ René Lew uses the term 'extension' to describe S2, R and I, respectively symbolic, real and imaginary extensions of significance S1. See for instance Lew (2017:33).

³² It should be pointed out that in this Eulerian path none of the four instances is primary. Each of them is to be taken within the whole of the path.

³³ It was only as a first approximation that (in note 20 above) we had situated the ground as pertaining precisely to the imaginary, and not to the course of the different instances.

³⁴ See Jean Louis Schefer, *Le déluge, la peste, Paolo Uccello*, Paris, Galilée, 1976. In the second edition, under the title *Paolo Uccello, le déluge*, Paris, P.O.L., 1999, Jean Louis Schefer, to our deep regret, abandoned the more explicitly semiological theorization of the first edition.

³⁵ See Jacques Derrida, ("The Sans of the Pure Cut", *op. cit.* Kant, *La critique de la faculté de juger*, trad. franç A. Philonenko, Paris, Vrin, p. 76 n. 2.

³⁶ Mallarmé, *Prose (for des Esseintes)*. This refers to an older version (Gualdo copy, BNF, Montesquiou collection) and to the text published in the *Revue indépendante* of January 1885. See Mallarmé (1945: 55-57 and commentary 1472-1474).

The more the flower rises, the more it sets itself up, the more it marks the imminence of decline, of loss, of detumescence, of erasure, '... with a clear contour, and this breach,' as Mallarmé writes (*Ibid.*). Jean Petitot synthesizes the logic of the parergon developed by the poem based on two oppositions, 'finery and breach,' 'supplement and lack,' in other words, he writes, an 'ensigned' Real (1989:171). Which, in the present configuration, clearly marks the privileged relationship between the registers of the symbolic and the real.

Kant's tulip could thus reconcile the regularity of the *crystal* and the vagaries of the movements of *smoke*, not unlike the abstraction which, according to Benedetta Zaccarello, would be 'the only factor able to sum up the apparently shapeless complexity of the real into a creative principle,'³⁷ abstraction being here those fall-outs of dance, those traces, that ground on which dance 'sheds her ecstasy,' hence an abstraction pertaining more to the meanders of so-called abstract expressionism³⁸ than to a so-called geometric abstraction. Rather than considering, like the Valéry of the *Notebooks*, that there is a 'crystallization' in *inventio* (Zaccarello 2005:89), shouldn't we, on the contrary, focus on what in those fluids undermines all hardness, all solidity, all assurance of an objective grasp: 'any calyxes, corollas, pistils or stamens' (Didi-Huberman 1990:22), rather 'messy encrustation of pollen,' or again 'tuft of sordid appearance,' 'old rag of aerial manure' (Bataille 1970:173 and 176).

The supposedly objective grasp of a 'system of dances is articulated,' as Pierre Legendre writes, *with a phantasmatic organisation*' (1978:40).³⁹ Here we find the preliminary question he asks in *La passion d'être un autre. Étude pour la danse*: 'what is supposed to be reproduced by the body?' Is it a matter of questioning the hypothesis of dance as a production of the body? Legendre postulates that 'through dance the text of desire is exposed' (1978:11 and 10), defenseless in its *objects*: breath, breathlessness, sweat, traces. 'Glory of long desire,' its fall-out, that Real, 'violence wrought on the economy of meaning': 'it is in desire,' writes Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor, 'that it [the movement] takes flesh' (2013:95).

Of the dispositif noted by Ortel, Frédéric Dahan tells us that its interest isn't 'to come into it and to be in actuality [in it],' as with a body inscribed in Laban's icosahedron, but to introduce questions, adding: 'the interest of every dispositif is to produce a real.' It is also to Frédéric Dahan that we owe the formulation: 'The drive is a gap in the order of concepts.'⁴⁰ Hence the difficulty / impossibility of thinking / representing dance. Can we

³⁷ Benedetta Zaccarello, "Le 'Drame intérieur' et l'ornement' in *L'introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci*." in Christina Vogel (ed.), *Valéry et Léonard: le drame d'une rencontre. Genèse de l'Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci*. Rostocker Romanistische Arbeiten Band 12. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. 2007: 122.

³⁸ See our study concerning the questions of ornamentation and motif (Massaert 2024).

³⁹ Underlined by the author.

⁴⁰ Frédéric Dahan, "D'une écriture pulsionnelle...?", paper presented at the conference of Dimensions de la psychanalyse, "Mythes et apories de la sexualité et des pulsions," Paris, 4 and 5 October 2025.

thus suggest that dance is *jouissance*, just as Lacan was able to state that ‘writing is *jouissance*’ (2006: 129).⁴¹ The letter, evoked by René Lew in the beginning of this text, or rather its surroundings as a metaphor of the space of the body, is taken up again by Frédéric Dahan as, more precisely, the ‘journey of the letter a which never ceases to write desire.’ If it is possible to establish something like a discourse of art in general and a discourse of dance in particular, we will aver that, not unlike the analyst’s discourse according to Lacan, it is the *objet a* – ‘something which is defined by a loss,’ says Lacan (1991: 13), breath, breathlessness, sweat, traces, ‘cause of desire’ – which is found in the place of the agent, whereas the subject is inscribed here in the place of the other.⁴²

Translated from the French by Philippe Hunt

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⁴¹ Session of 19 May 1971.

⁴² Knowledge being in the place of truth.

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