

The aspectuality of space, time, and bodies in *Rosas danst Rosas*

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BY: Sémir Badir

ABSTRACT

This study applies aspectual semiotics to *Rosas danst Rosas* (1983), the landmark choreographic work by Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker. Rather than evaluating it aesthetically, the piece is used as a testing ground for the semiotic theory of *aspectuality*, defined as a relational structure linking an observing subject to temporal, spatial, or bodily objects. Temporally, the choreography operates through serial composition, producing inchoative and progressive aspects akin to linguistic verb aspects. Spatially, the piece is structured around a linear, one-dimensional arrangement of dancers that gradually multiplies into parallel, orthogonal, and diagonal lines – an idealised geometry made legible to the attentive observer. On a bodily level, finally, the dancers function as “moving bodies” (in Susan Foster’s terms), creating an ambivalence between group cohesion and individual autonomy that resists fixed representation. The author ultimately proposes “constructivism” as a more fitting label than “minimalism” for the work, emphasising its rhythmic abstraction, embodied geometry, and invitation to active spectatorial meaning-making.

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Questions and Pretext

In this study, I pose simple questions – though they are by no means easy. What dances? What is the space of dance? What is the time of dance? As we can see, these are very general questions. The first, for example, which seems the most unusual, would call for answers such as: a dancer, a human

being, a body. However, I do not claim to answer them at that level of generality. For that, we would need to agree on what constitutes the common denominator of the three questions, namely dance. Yet we can surmise that what is meant by “dance” varies infinitely across cultures (where it can take on very different values); within a given culture, depending on the practices (in the West, one would notably distinguish between ballroom dance, competitive dance, and artistic dance); within a specific practice, for example, dance as a performing art, depending on the era, the type, the style, the choreographers, and so on.

What, then, is the point of giving these questions an air of generality? It shows that, for each specific case, they can be posed and that the answers – however specific they may be – are correlated with this generality. In other words, these questions call for a theoretical framework from which they can be conceptually determined and within which the answers make sense. This theoretical framework will be, as I will explain later, that of aspectual semiotics.

The specific case studied here involves just one piece. It is the *Rosas danst Rosas*, choreographed by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and premiered in 1983. Among the reasons that led me to choose it is that this work is fairly well documented. We know how difficult it is to produce analyses of works in the performing arts, particularly dance performances, which are often wordless and non-narrative. Words fail us, even just to describe them. For this particular work, researchers have access, notably, to a film¹ by Thierry De Mey (who also co-composed the piece’s music with Peter Vermeersch) as well as video clips,² available on the Rosas YouTube channel (the name of the company founded specifically with this work), where certain “movements” and the “structure” or “combination” (in De Keersmaeker’s own words) of the piece’s second part are explained.

I will return to the description of these materials, but first I must clarify the connection I intend to establish between the general questions and the case under study. Despite the undeniable interest the piece has generated – since its premiere, *Rosas danst Rosas* has been performed over 500 times, including this year’s performance as part of a tour that began in February with four Rosas dancers. It has also found broad resonance through the music video for an R’n’B song (“Countdown”) in which the singer Beyoncé performs certain movements drawn from De Keersmaeker’s piece – I will not attempt here to deal with its “meaning” or “value” as a work of art. The piece serves as a testing ground for me to experiment with concepts of semiotic analysis. Greimas (1976) did not proceed any differently with his *Maupassant*: despite the title, which seems to suggest the book is a general introduction to the writer, the

¹ *Rosas danst Rosas*, Avila, 1996.

² <https://www.rosasdanstrosas.be/accueil/>

nearly three-hundred-page volume focuses solely on one short story, “Les deux amis,” and its aim is essentially experimental and didactic, as made explicit by the book’s subtitle: *The Semiotics of the Text. Practical Exercises*. The work serves as a *pre-text*: the demonstration proceeds through its analysis (the analysis of its text, more precisely), but its aesthetic value and its significance within the broader context of Maupassant’s works remain incidental, merely suggested by the extensive and sophisticated “yield” of the analysis. The true object of Greimas’s focus is indeed “the text,” in its generality, just as “dance” is the object of my study, even if the analysis is valid, at best (it is up to the reader to decide!), only for the work chosen as an example.

One might find the results unsatisfactory. There will be no general answers to the questions posed; moreover, the analysis provided as a response to a particular work does not claim to contribute to determining its aesthetic value.³ It seems that the semiotic approach to dance, based on what my readings in the field have led me to conclude, is doubly risky: either the concepts it invokes are too general to have any real descriptive power and merely “translate” into its language forms of understanding that, in fact, function perfectly well without its intervention; or it has an *ad hoc* conception of dance, which reduces it to what the chosen method of analysis can say about it. I would like to guard against these risks through a cautious approach that seeks to assess the very applicability of semiotic analysis to dance. In this regard, my approach draws inspiration from – though does not align with – the one taken by Valeria De Luca (2021) in her book on tango, whose first three chapters are devoted to carefully establishing the analytical framework.

Nevertheless, a semiotic analysis can be expected to make a positive contribution to the interpretation of the work. The analysis lends a different meaning to the immediate appearances of a choreography than that which springs to mind based on conventions associated with this type of performance: time, space and the collective formed by the dancers in *Rosas danst Rosas* present particular aspects, some of which are surprising, and which are therefore capable of highlighting the work’s originality. In this respect, my approach differs from the interpretation – however well-informed it may be – that Philippe Guisgand (2008) offered of the work in the first chapter of his book on De Keersmaeker’s dance. His meticulous description of the movements, organised by section, does not seem to allow him to identify the work’s key themes except through a psychological analysis of behaviour (“seduction, decision, reflection, despair”). As I hope to demonstrate, aspects are better suited to guiding the interpretation towards the work’s form.

³ Regarding the selected work, this was proposed by Haidu (2020), who seeks to demonstrate that *Rosas danst Rosas* is compatible with feminist thought.

The choreographic form as an object of semiotic analysis

Semiotics analyses the concrete data of a practice only to subsume them under general categories that it interconnects. From this interconnection emerges an abstract object – a “form,” in the semiotic and Hjelmslevian sense. A preliminary question (in my view, a crucial one) is whether this abstract object has any utility, or, at the very least, any immediate plausibility in the eyes of the practitioners concerned. Fortunately, in the present case, there will be no doubt on this matter: this abstract object, as a process, coincides with an internal order whose active presence in observable phenomena is presupposed as an artistic project.

Let us examine this more closely. In *Rosas danst Rosas*, I do not intend to analyse for its own sake a particular performance (the one I attended in February 2026 at the Rosas Performance Space in Brussels) or a particular video recording (De Mey’s film), otherwise I would inevitably be led to note particularities (very numerous, as one might expect) that are specific to them without providing direct insight into the dance but rather, among other things, into the dancers’ identities, the piece’s duration, the atmosphere in the hall that day, or even the film’s framing and editing choices. Even if I were to focus my observations on the questions posed above, I would still have to take into account contingent factors, for example, regarding the space, the dimensions of the stage, the nature of the floor, the lighting, and the arrangement of the audience. I would be forced to acknowledge that the performance and the film provide very different data, and even data that appear to be incompatible. I do not claim that the description of these data is without interest, but semiotics is not the best tool for this task. As is well known, what a semiotic approach aims at is the analysis of what “bears meaning,” namely the signification inscribed in “things” (the stage, the lighting, the costumes, the dancers’ movements) but detachable from them.

The processual form which I propose to analyze semiotically is the choreography of *Rosas danst Rosas*. This is a partial analysis, focusing only on questions related to space, time, and something less easily characterized but let us call, for the moment, the bodies. Undoubtedly, specialists are capable of considering other formal objects for dance, since, obviously, certain dance practices are not choreographed. For the specific piece under consideration, however, choreography seems to me to be the appropriate object of analysis because, like many artistic works in Western culture, this one is, so to speak, “signed”: it is indeed the work of A. T. De Keersmaecker, and this authorial status designates her as the choreographer.

What is choreography as a semiotic form? It is a syntagmatic constant instantiated in observable phenomena, which we refer to (following Hjelmslev) as its “manifestations.” Beyond its concrete manifestations, the choreographic form is analysable and describable. Moreover, in the present case, it has a social existence as an object of discourse, since critics, specialists, and the author herself can speak of the choreography

of *Rosas in Rosas* without referring to any of its particular manifestations. This discursive “existence” is not sufficient to grant it ontological status (unlike the equilateral triangle for the mathematician, one cannot infer that the choreography exists as an ideality and that all its manifestations instantiate this ideal form only imperfectly), but it does indeed have an epistemic status (the choreography serves to signify something) and a sociological status (it has a history and is part of a history).

The epistemic status of choreography is confirmed by De Keersmaecker’s teaching approach outlined in the introductory video for *Re:Rosas! (The fABULEUS Rosas Project Remix)*, where she sets out to ‘explain the structure, the combination, how that dance was made.’ Choreography refers to this “structure.” The suffix *-graphy* refers to the organized, combined nature of the movements danced in the piece. Structure therefore means here *pre-ordered*: the order of what has been planned, prepared, and rehearsed. Nevertheless, we shouldn’t regard this to have the same status as a written text in the usual sense. It is well known that the choreography of contemporary dance pieces is difficult to put into writing.⁴ De Keersmaecker (2020: 8) speaks much more accurately of “calligraphy.”

In manifestations, movements are distinct, individual entities; yet, in analysis, they can be regarded as “variations” (again, following Hjelmslev) due to the organisational structure they share. At first glance, the analysis of variations seems a straightforward task, especially in light of our questions. For example, the multiple performances that follow one another day after day in a single venue, or even in different venues during a tour, give rise to variations in time, space, and body that can be characterized according to well-known categories (temporal measures, topographies, bodily figures) and subsumed under formal invariants. However, by using a performance of the piece and a film which presents itself as a work in its own right (a filmed performance rather than a recording of a previous performance) as my corpus of analysis, this task becomes more difficult because the variations in space, time, and body *cannot* then be characterized according to their ordinary categorisations and cannot, consequently, be subsumed under invariants. In doing so, my analysis offers greater assurance of capturing the choreographic form, as this form remains presupposed *despite* the differences perceived among the variations. I will take a simple example concerning the number of dancers, to illustrate what is at stake. In performances staged before an audience, the choreography calls for four dancers. But in the film, the piece features no fewer than eighteen dancers. In one of the shots in the fourth part of the piece, specifically, five dancers perform synchronised movements. In the introduction to *Re:Rosas!*, De Keersmaecker suggests, moreover, that ‘you can make it with as many dancers as you want.’ Even if we assume that these variations are truly significant

⁴ It should be noted, however, that Karreman (2015) conducted a very interesting study on the notation and transmission techniques used by De Keersmaecker for the dancers in *Rosas danst Rosas*.

(and that they express the ‘life of a form’ according to its ‘metamorphoses’, to borrow Focillon’s [1943] metaphors), the choreography, as an organisational project, remains sufficiently stable to be identified as that of the *Rosas danst Rosas* piece. The question is to determine the parameters to be taken into account to ensure this stability in terms of the body, and the deployment of bodies in space and time.

The time of *Rosas danst Rosas*

What parameters determine the time of dance according to the choreographic form? Let us begin by eliminating parameters that are frequently invoked for the temporal characterization of a performed work, whether a concert or a stage performance. Duration is hardly relevant, as it partly depends on the performer’s choice. For *Rosas danst Rosas*, the duration varies significantly between live performances (nearly two hours) and the film (less than an hour). Did the film cut parts of the dance? Yes and no. Through editing, it certainly shortened certain dance sequences (though it also sometimes extended them). But all the movements are there, filmed according to their respective tempos. Is the number of parts in the piece more significant? Undoubtedly, but it is not decisive. The film adds a prelude and a coda, without music, which do not alter the choreography but may, possibly, enhance its expression in the eyes of the viewer. The number of parts matters less, in any case, than their order, which remains unchanged. Not the objective duration, then, but tempo in its qualitative aspect. Not the number, but the order – that is, the qualitative aspect of a sequence. It is these two aspects of time specific to the choreographic form that need to be described.

The main tempo of the movements in *Rosas danst Rosas* has three successive aspects: movement (i) initiated abruptly, “attacked,” (ii) held, “suspended,”⁵ (iii) released slowly. In the second instructional video clip of the *Re:Rosas!* project, dancer Samantha van Wissen describes and demonstrates six movements used in the second part of the piece, a part where the dance is performed almost entirely in a seated position. Each of these movements is broken down into four equal beats, with a gesture, or a combination of gestures, to be executed on certain beats.⁶ For the simplest movements, the first two aspects are expressed on the first beat. For example, movement D consists, on beat 1, of a gesture in which the upper body falls toward the knees and a

⁵ “Attacked” and “suspended” are terms used during the learning of the piece’s movements, as described in a glossary by Cvejić and De Keersmaeker (2012: 244–245).

⁶ This second video clip is titled “The Vocabulary,” which suggests that the grammatical framework remains lively, if not in contemporary dance creation, then at least in its didactic presentation (as a reminder, De Keersmaeker founded a dance school in Brussels in 1995, P.A.R.T.S., which gained an international reputation almost immediately). One problem with this “vocabulary,” however, is that a single word, “movement,” refers simultaneously to the parts of the choreography (as in a symphony), the basic sequences of the composition, and the actual gestures executed in each sequence. For the sake of clarity, I refer to them here, respectively, as *parts*, *movements*, and *gestures*, acknowledging that the last term is ambiguous because the gesture itself can be further broken down.

hold in this folded position, then, on beats 2, 3, and 4, of a languid raising of the body, accompanied by the right hand with a slow, meditative gesture of smoothing the hair from the forehead toward the nape of the neck. This sequence of aspects is also found in the standard composition of two movements, the second of which is designated as a “pause” (even if it includes a gesture or two). For example, when movement D is followed by a pause, beats 5 through 8 (relating to the pause) express two successive relaxations, one beginning on beat 4 (on which the dancer has abruptly struck a pose similar to that of Rodin’s *The Thinker*, with crossed legs and an elbow resting on a knee), the other beginning on beat 7. This combination heightens the impression of release and reinforces the contrast between bodily tension and relaxation.

As explained in the third video clip, the combination of these movements forms “phrases.” Since each dancer is capable of performing a combination, each phrase is performed multiple times. When the dancers execute the phrase in exactly the same way, the positions are said to be “in unison,” much like different voices in a polyphonic composition. In other cases, the phrase can be characterized based on the temporal relationships of its execution by the dancers. For example, positions are said to be “in a fan” when they are performed at different times, though in the same order for each dancer. For example, assuming that a letter represents a movement performed by a dancer and that there are four dancers performing the phrase (as is often the case), the composition “AAAA, BAAA, BBAA, BBBA, BBBB, BBBC, BBCC, BCCC, CCCC, DCCC, DDCC, DDDC, DDDD” expresses an in-a-fan composition of movements A, B, C, and D, following the same sequence of movements for each dancer, albeit with an unevenly staggered execution due to the repetition of the same movement.

Thus, the combination of movements creates the impression of a series. In fact, the choreography can be likened to the creative process of serial music, in which a musical phrase is repeated by several instruments, sometimes in unison, but more often with varied and superimposable temporal shifts. The music of the piece is, moreover, an (original) composition of serial music, reinforcing the impression conveyed by the dance.⁷ In this sense, the piece does not merely take place “in” time; it is the direct expression of a temporality. The time of dance is conceived through choreography. Based on four canonical conceptions of temporality, two interpretations are possible to characterize that of the piece. One is, in my opinion, more defensible than the other, but the

⁷ According to Philippe Guisgand (2017), the relationship between music and dance is that of ‘two embedded forms of expression [...]’. De Keersmaecker is not concerned with a somewhat heavy-handed demonstration of an understanding of the musical process, but simply with a subtle allusion to the way in which music is constructed.’ Thierry De Mey, quoted by Guisgand, comments on the creative process as follows: ‘We needed a form that was extremely rigid, a veritable structural wall against which the four dancers would come crashing with all their might. In this case, the structure was a sort of implacable master imposing constraint, speed and exertion on the body.’ *Constraint, speed and exertion* are another expression (and in a different order) of the three aspects of tempo mentioned above (held, abruptly initiated, slowly released), confirming that the relationship of embedding is indeed of an aspectual nature (‘subtly allusive’).

choice ultimately depends on the viewer's sensibility. Either the choreography has a marked beginning, starting from a simple composition of movements, and evolves through the gradual complexification of this composition, thanks to sequences with derived or related compositions, to timing discrepancies between these compositions, and to more global modifications of the series' order (fanning out, in reverse, etc.). Or the choreography explores a heterogeneous milieu of complex compositions, producing effects of repetition and differentiation due to the meticulousness of its unfolding. The two canonical concepts that can most certainly be ruled out for the piece are those that impose an end to the series, either starting from a beginning (by looping the temporality, as if returning to the starting point), or starting from some arbitrary state (giving "what happens" in time a denouement, such as the finale in a ballet). From the perspective of choreographic form, *Rosas danst Rosas* has no end. The work is simply interrupted.

It is easy to draw parallels between the elements just outlined to describe the time of dance and what linguists call aspects when characterizing verb tenses. A temporality defined by the middle is "iterative" and, due to the resulting serial effect, "frequentative." A temporality with a marked beginning, on the other hand, is "inchoative," and the serial effect makes it "progressive." At the specific level of gestures, the relevance of an aspectual description of their temporality had already been suggested by Greimas (1970: 58). A sudden gesture is "ingressive," equivalent to the adverb *suddenly*; a slow release is "degressive." The brief maintenance of a gesture can be described as "punctual," while a prolonged pause is equivalent to a "state."

Linguists have often observed that these aspectual categories could apply not only to verbs but also to adjectives, adverbs, and nouns (particularly deverbal nouns). Semioticians, following them, have considered that these aspects reflect a general mechanism for the discursive construction of any narrative. A theory of *aspectualisation*, grounded in a more general (and abstract) conception of aspect, has therefore been proposed.

Aspectual semiotics: a brief introduction

In *Sémiotique*, Greimas and Courtés (1979: 21–22) define aspectualisation as the meaning that can be conferred upon a text (according to a broad interpretation common in semiotics) due to the presence of an observer, who may be a reader or a viewer but also, by enunciative disengagement (*débrayage*), a narrator, a choreographer, a character, or a dancer onto whom the function of observation is projected. This disengagement opens the possibility of a secondary engagement (*embrayage*) within the text, where the observer would have left enunciative traces. For example, during the performance of *Rosas danst Rosas* that I attended, the audience could hear a dancer

say aloud “six, seven, eight”; this utterance is the trace of a choreographic enunciation, understood as a pre-ordering of the performance.

The presence of an observer affects the meaning of both space and the actors as much as that of time. Each of these is subject to an enunciative aspectualisation, traces of which the text may retain. The utterances specific to time, space, and the actors are therefore susceptible to aspectualisation.

Although presented as a dictionary, Greimas and Courtés’s work was, for semiotic theory, largely forward-looking. By developing the program suggested therein, semioticians have applied an aspectual conception of space not only to novels but also, notably, to works in the visual arts. As one might expect, the ways in which space is observed produce aspects other than those characteristics of time. We observe, for example, that space is either open or closed. This aspectual configuration depends on the observer. If the space has a window, it will tend to be open (visually) to the outside when the observer is inside the space, and closed (physically) if the observer is outside.

Of course, other factors also come into play. But this is not the place to go into the details of the state of the art.⁸ Let us simply note that the conception of aspectualisation remains ‘a work in progress’ for semiotic theory. It is fairly advanced with regard to space, dependent on linguistic conceptions with regard to time, and has remained in limbo with regard to actors. In any case, it fits easily into a semiotics of practices (Fontanille 2008), as suggested by existing research and as anticipated by the semiotics of the observer developed by Fontanille (1989).

My contribution in this domain has primarily consisted of developing the concept of *aspectuality*, which, by virtue of its formal status, is capable of supporting the enunciative and interpretive functions resulting from aspectualisation. Aspectuality can be defined as a stable structure linking an observing subject with a temporal, spatial, or actorial object. This relationship is constituted in three ways: by a *direction* in which the subject aims at an object; by a *position* that, in turn, situates the subject in relation to that object; and by a *momentum* (*élan*) that characterises the observer as the subject vis-à-vis the observed object even before it is brought into their presence. Furthermore, this object is itself characterisable, by a mirror effect, as the object, according to an *order of repetition* when it defines a temporality, a *dimensional number* when it defines a spatiality, and a *bodily operator* when it defines an actor. Each of these categories allows for the definition of “polarised” aspects, with every aspect tending to signify the opposite of another.⁹ Thus, this theoretical proposition advocates for a relational (dynamic) and differential (structural) conception of aspect.

⁸ I have presented this state of the art elsewhere (Badir 2017), emphasizing spatial aspectualisation. Regarding a semiotic conception of temporal aspectuality, including the presentation of the four temporalities mentioned above, I would like to refer the reader to another work (Badir 2024); as well as to a third work on the aspectuality of actors (Badir 2021).

Hopefully, these elements of a theory still in its experimental stage suffice to provide a framework for describing the various spatialities observed by the viewer of *Rosas danst Rosas*, which I now address by seeking to identify the aspectual characterisations of the choreography.

The space of *Rosas danst Rosas*

Suppose that at the beginning of a performance, six or eight dancers enter the stage, disperse, and wait for the start of a musical phrase before beginning to dance. This is a common (perhaps outdated) device that aligns the formal space of the dance with the concrete space of the stage. This space is, for the most part, a surface, a two-dimensional space. Certainly, the bodies move within a volume (and they are themselves volumes), but dance choreography, more often than not, makes relatively little use – or uses them only to a rather limited extent¹⁰ – of the characteristics of the surrounding three-dimensional space (unlike circus acts, for example), and instead explores movement on a plane extensively.

The spatial arrangement in *Rosas danst Rosas* is significantly different. It appears linear, that is, as a one-dimensional space. Four dancers enter from the back of the stage and line up, standing an arm's length apart from one another. Soon they fall abruptly: the entire first part of the dance takes place in this lying position, without ever breaking the initial linear arrangement.

What happens to this line – as a choreographic form that defines the space of dance – can be described in terms of the aspectual characteristics that an observer, in this case the audience, assigns to a one-dimensional space. Let us begin by examining it in terms of the momentum that animates the subject. The dance line is first viewed in its entirety, as a segment. And it is worth noting in this regard that the line formed by the alignment of the dancers does not distribute them across the entire width of the stage; the delimitation of the segment is therefore independent of this. Soon, however, the gaze is invited to move from one dancer to another, to *follow* the line they form. The line comes to life, so to speak. This orientation of the gaze depends directly on the choreographic composition: time inscribes its order onto the line. What might have been described as the series “AAAA, BAAA, BBAA, BBBA, BBBB, BBBC,” and so on, can be specified by the order of appearance in the spatial line (and no longer merely as the abstract structure of a series): “AAAA, B^{1st}AAA, B^{1st}B^{2nd}AA, B^{1st}B^{2nd}B^{3rd}A, B^{1st}B^{2nd}B^{3rd}B^{4th}, BBBC^{1st}...” As a result, the gaze is led to move from one dancer to

⁹ The overarching theoretical framework of this proposal is indebted to Claude Zilberberg's (2006) tensional semiotics, itself inspired by Hjelmslev's theory of language.

¹⁰ Whatever the desire. De Keersmaeker (2020: 21) recounts an anecdote in which Trisha Brown, when asked by a journalist what she considered the most beautiful of movements, reportedly replied: flying.

another, from left to right. During the execution of movement C, the direction is reversed, from so that the gaze moves from right to left: “BBBB, BBBC^{1st}, BBC^{2nd}C^{1st}, BC^{3rd}C^{2nd}C^{1st}, C^{4th}C^{3rd}C^{2nd}C^{1st}...,” thus creating a “sweep” across the line.

Let us now consider the aspects related to the orientation of the observer facing this line. The line can be seen as either continuous or discontinuous. Here again, the materiality of the bodies is not decisive. For example, the skyline of a metropolis appears continuous, even though it is a broken line and, if we were to consider each building that makes it up, we would have to admit that it is discontinuous. In *Rosas danst Rosas*, discontinuity is signified by the regular interval maintained between the dancers. In the third and fourth parts, their complex movements across the stage do not compromise the discontinuity of their alignment. Thus, the choreography inscribes its compositional principle into space: cells of movement arranged in an increasingly sophisticated manner yet remaining identifiable at all times in their cellular integrity. There is, however, a particular gesture that invites the observer to make the line continuous. This is a “nodding” glance that the dancers exchange with one another, in pairs, in a sequenced manner – that is, as a movement in its own right (composed of four beats). This exchanged gaze creates continuity. It is introduced in the first part and takes on its full meaning in the second. Indeed, in the second part, the eleven chairs scattered across the stage are all facing the same direction but form four lines (three consisting of three chairs and one of two) rather than a single line. The nods exchanged by the dancers, each seated in one of these lines, allow the initial line – now traced in a zigzag pattern – to be reconstructed.

Finally, the line positions the observer either as an “eye-mind,” when considered in its formal aspect, or as a “sensory eye,” when viewed in its material trajectory. It is evident, for example, that the lines painted by Cy Twombly have no meaning unless the viewer scrutinizes them in the tremor of their strokes; conversely, the lines in a Mondrian painting may well have some imperfections, yet they are valued for the ideal-coloured form they compose. In *Rosas danst Rosas*, the lines are ideal. This is what allows its space of dance to manifest itself in varying stage settings, depending on their three-dimensional and two-dimensional configurations, without in any way disrupting the linear structure. In De Mey’s film, the importance of the choreographic line is emphasized by lateral tracking shots, as well as by the modernist architecture of the location (the RITO technical school in Leuven) designed by Henry Van de Velde, where the grid of lines is omnipresent (through the cross-bar frames of the large windows, the checkerboard flooring, the rectangular tiles on the lower sections of the walls and on the supporting columns, and even through the metal cladding of the roofs). The perceptible nature of the lines is signified only as enunciative markers, precisely to deny their aspectual significance for the choreography. Thus, in the second part, a dancer pauses in her movements to reposition the chairs, even though the audience has not noticed that they have been moved: this ostension (reprised in the film, thus intended as such) makes sense only to the mind, not to the eye. Other, more incidental

enunciative markers seek to produce the same aspectual effect. Thus, marks affixed to the floor for the positioning of the chairs and dancers; like the construction lines visible in Rodin's sculptures, they indicate a formal plan of construction, and this plan is essentially linear. I would also like to mention an incident that occurred during the performance I attended: a dancer interrupted the movement she was executing in order to mark, with an outstretched arm, the distance to be maintained from the other dancers. I do not believe the incident was intentional, but clearly the dancer did not seek to conceal it; on the contrary, she endowed it with a meaning that transcends, precisely, its fortuitous nature. These enunciative traces manifest "departures" from the utterance, which can thus preserve, in its expression, the purity of its choreographic form.

Throughout the piece, the fate of the initial line is to shift and multiply: the emergence of parallel lines (Part 2), orthogonal lines (Part 3), and diagonal lines (Part 4). A formal structure is established based on these lines. Aspectual characteristics played an essential role in this establishment. The animation of the line brought about its displacement. Its discontinuity made orthogonality possible as soon as a dancer inscribed her movement in two lines at the same time, through the pairs she forms with two other dancers, since, as we know, an orthogonal plane requires only three (necessarily "discontinuous") construction points. And, to express diagonality within a plane, an additional point is necessary, which justifies the presence of at least four dancers. Finally, the idealising positioning of the observer allows them to grasp the increasing complexity of the structure of the lines expressed during the unfolding of the choreographic form, whereas an emphasis on the trace of the line would have immediately made them feel the complexity of its variation.

The bodies in *Rosas danst Rosas*

How does the observer perceive the actor? Of the three questions I posed at the beginning of this essay, this is the one for which it is most difficult to arrive at a consensus. Certainly, everyone will agree that *Rosas danst Rosas* features four dancers. But one must be somewhat of a semiotician to consider that the eleven chairs are, too, actors in this performance.¹¹

To address this question, I will begin by drawing on the characterization proposed by Susan Leigh Foster (1982: 173) regarding the type of dance she calls "semic dance," a category that clearly includes *Rosas danst Rosas*, as well as De Keersmaeker's works

¹¹ I would like to point out that for the semiotic observer, the actor does not need to be animate; as long as they have a role to play that can be situated within the framework of an action, they are capable of constituting an actor (Grimas & Courtés 1979: 7). An anecdote recounted by De Keersmaeker illustrates the plausibility of this perspective, however naïve it may be: "I had friends whose daughter had seen a video of Pina Bausch's *Café Müller*, and then, one day, this little girl of three or four years old started throwing all the chairs around. My friends asked her, 'But Eugénie, what are you doing?' and she replied, 'I'm dancing'" (2025: 109).

in general, no less than those by Merce Cunningham and Yvonne Rainer, whom the author cites as examples. In this type of dance, the dancer is viewed as a “moving body.” This characterization is sufficient to distinguish semic dance from other types of dances (termed “metaphorical,” “iconic,” and “emblematic”), in which the dancer is the expression of a personality (a graceful person, a virtuoso, or an experiencer of psychological profundities, respectively). In semic dance, the dancer’s expression refers solely to his or her body, and since the body is in motion, it is these movements that are expressed. I find this proposition convincing because, in addition to the clear distinction it draws between different types of dances, it is compatible with aspectual semiotics.

I would nevertheless add this clarification: since, for the semiotician, the notion of the body extends to inanimate objects (which may be mobile), the body in motion in semic dance is a *human* body. This clarification is important: the characterization of being human is what the dancer and the observer share. In all other respects, they differ. The observer’s body, for its part, is neutralised. It knows it is capable of being set in motion (the observer is endowed with momentum, as we have seen) but remains in the background, swallowed up in the shadows of the auditorium. Foster offers a bold interpretation of Western theatre which, in my view, would apply better to dance:

The division of mind and body is replicated in the distinction between auditorium and stage. The stage represents the inner and bodily – that which is felt, the room into which the audience gains a surreptitious view. The auditorium is the outer – the judging and evaluating, mindful public. (Foster 1982: 74)

On stage, everything is expression, nothing but expression, like the materialisation of a “plane of expression” dear to Hjelmlev. To the auditorium belongs meaning, the plane of content, which is the invisible, secret reverse side of the plane of expression. In semic dance, in particular, the division is even more marked, almost positive, since the dancer expresses no interiority and any emotions that may be signified are the sole responsibility of the spectators—and of the choreographer, as well.¹²

We must not caricature; it is merely a matter of describing roles, those of the model dancer and the model spectator. It is evident, for example, that when a dancer manifests the enunciative marks of the choreography, she is not merely a body, for what is delegated to her is the expression of an intention. Nevertheless, the dancer’s primary task in a semic performance consists in executing movements that are the expression of a global entity to be signified, namely “the dance” or, at a lower level of generality, a particular choreography.

¹² In her lecture at the Collège de France, De Keersmaecker (2020: 9) uses a beautiful phrase to describe what emerges from her first two works, *Fase* and *Rosas danst Rosas*: a ‘somewhat ecstatic quality of energy.’ The energy lies with the dancers; the ecstasy – that rapture of the spirit beyond the senses – lies with the choreographer, in her attempt to reconcile the abstract with the concrete, and with the audience members faced with the same choice.

To continue describing the role of the model dancer in *Rosas danst Rosas*, an aspectual analysis is appropriate. We have already noted one characteristic, as it is immediately apparent to the observer: the body of the dance is multiple; during the performance that serves as the basis for my analysis, in three of the four parts of the choreography, it manifests a corporeality consisting solely of four female bodies. In the remaining part, the second, the multiplicity of the body is enhanced by the presence of chairs. *Eleven* chairs, whereas only four are used by the dancers: a prime number, irreducible, signifying a multiplicity of any kind. (Sometimes the obvious makes sense; it suffices to point it out.)

What are the aspectual characteristics proper to the multiple body? The observer may view this body as a cohesive group or as a collection of individuals – two opposing aspects that position the observer according to the possibilities of integration with respect to it. The observer directs their gaze by seeking within the multiple body either principles of dependence or reasons for autonomy. Finally, if the observer is moved by a keen momentum, they see in the multiple body a dynamic opportunity for differentiation, whereas their passivity will find only sameness there.

Chairs can serve well for testing these aspects. Do they not offer an opportunity to observe a situational identity between the dancers, seated in this second part of the piece, and the audience? Yes, but the chairs on stage are mismatched, whereas the seats in the auditorium (which are therefore not exactly chairs) are identical. Furthermore, their number (eleven chairs) accentuates the heterogeneity of their individuality, just as the audience, among whom the observer is counted, is gathered only for the occasion; from another perspective, however, a spatial order is assigned to these chairs in a way that is significant for the choreography (they form four lines), much like the arrangement – so to speak – of the audience, assembled for a specific purpose. In any case, these observations may make sense to the spectator (principle of dependence) or not (autonomy of the performance with regard to its practical conditions).

The ambivalence of aspectual characterisation is also evident in the dancers and their movements. The sense of relational cohesion grows stronger as the choreography becomes more complex, necessitating the presence of multiple bodies. As long as the dancers perform similar movements – even if out of sync – in an alignment that makes them interchangeable, the opposite impression of a collection remains all the stronger because they do not come into contact with one another (to the point that anyone could be integrated into the dance, as De Keersmaeker suggests for the *Re:Rosas!* project). Certainly, the spectator cannot fail to notice that the movements are coordinated, and is invited to seek out the principle of interdependence (the “structure”). Soon, however, they will observe that one or another dancer is often dissociated from the others, through autonomous movements as well as by her position outside the line. Thus, they

may wonder – challenging certain preconceptions – whether it is not the group that is capable of producing autonomy, while serial individuation creates dependence. The tension is even greater regarding the latter aspect. Identity of movements within the choreographic form, or continuously differentiating variations? The performance is conceived in such a way that the observer's free will – or their indecision – can swing at any moment from one side to the other.¹³

The aspectual ambivalence of the multiple body is found in many contemporary dance pieces, although the choreography of *Rosas danst Rosas* employs specific ways to express it. It is part of a questioning that the audience is invited to make their own. Foster, in her highly stimulating thesis I have already cited, before turning to dance she develops an extensive reflection on the body and the subject (of which the observer is a case), drawing notably on the experiences of Antonin Artaud, Bunraku theatre (as viewed by Roland Barthes), and the cosmology of the Dogon people studied by Marcel Griaule. This investigation allows the researcher to avoid confining the body to its Western conception, so that contemporary dance may discover a horizon that is not merely aesthetic but also ethical. When she turns to semic dance, she writes:

The body in the “semic dance” is a *physical* body – the sinew, effort, stretch, sweat, tension, and relaxation of bones and muscles. [...] The body expresses these [movements] as an expression of *itself*. By problematizing the production of meaning, the “semic dance” also problematizes the body as a representational model. (Foster 1982: 185)

It seems that aspectual instability is the best indicator of the body's fallibility in fulfilling a representational role. If one is led to constantly hesitate about its characteristics, how could the body represent anything at all? A representational role needs to be supported by conventions. Those of theatre, ballet, or opera are so deeply rooted in the aesthetic tradition that the physical adequacy between the actor and their character may be weak. In the choreography of semic dance, conventions are far fewer, so that the actor – that is, the dancer(s) – is reduced to what their body expresses, but they always do so authentically. They do not represent; they embody. This is the word chosen by De Keersmaecker (2020: 8) when she defines choreography as ‘calligraphy of embodiment.’

¹³ These aspects are remarkably reinterpreted in the film. For example, in the third part, a dancer, followed by the camera in a lateral tracking shot (starting at the 33rd minute of the film), calmly moves through different rooms where groups of two to four dancers are performing. Her autonomy of movement reinforces, by contrast, the cohesion of each group and invites comparison – potentially revealing differences – as does a wide shot taken from outside the building. The viewer has no choice but to accept a paradoxical vision of the choreography, one that is both partial and multifaceted, as if diffracted through the prism of the windows.

In conclusion

Although often given to her work, particularly her early pieces, De Keersmaecker treats the label of “minimalism” with caution. If the aim is to highlight the reduction of means (no set or props: a bare stage), one can accept it; though what is important in this regard lies elsewhere, namely in the enunciative traces that the choreography leaves on stage, through the exposure of the backstage area,¹⁴ the marks on the floor, and the instructions expressed gesturally or vocally by one or another dancer. And, if the point is to say that the choreography, when it comes to representing non-danced actions and gestures, sticks to subtle allusions (in *Rosas danst Rosas*, a few gestures related to a woman’s daily life, such as adjusting the neckline of a blouse that has slipped off her shoulder), the label of “minimalism” is certainly not the clearest way to describe it.

Since labels are a matter of interpretation, they are open to change. I would like to suggest one that I have not seen used by critics of *Rosas danst Rosas*: that of “constructivism”¹⁵ – at the very least, the anachronism of this label would show that the meaning to be attributed to the piece must be understood within a broad perspective of artistic and cultural traditions. I will highlight the five characteristics of this artistic and architectural movement set out in the manifesto by Naum and Pevsner (1920): (i) an aesthetic based on rhythm and movement; (ii) a taste for structures and geometric abstraction, balanced by an equally strong taste for the dominance of materials, and thus for the embodiment of structures; (iii) the enunciative affirmation of a real space (rather than the representation of an imaginary space); (iv) the setting aside of subjectivity; (v) an aesthetic linked to social life through its extensions into ethics and politics.

My concluding suggestion can only be of a heuristic nature, with a view to a more general interpretation of the work. It is worth noting, as an indication of plausibility, that De Mey and Vermeersch chose Maximalist! as their stage name. This name makes no secret of the influence exerted on them by American minimalist music, but also hints at the contrast they seek to express in relation to it, through the energetic, even frenetic, nature of their compositions (closely coinciding with the temporal aspects of the dance movements in *Rosas danst Rosas*, as De Mey explains¹⁶). In this regard, an artistic kinship has often been noted with the music of Stravinsky – ‘constructivist’ in its own way (Vinay 2007) – characterised by compositions with a solid structure that objectify rhythmic and metrical balances.

¹⁴ This also applies to the film: in a shot with a deep depth of field (at the 19th minute), a dancer is visible, seated at the back of the hall; she watches, like the viewer, the movements performed by the four dancers in the foreground.

¹⁵ I take as a sign that her familiarity with this movement – which, very early on, De Keersmaecker associated in her formative years with the discovery of the minimalist movement in North American contemporary music (see De Keersmaecker 2025: 41) – is not entirely out of place.

¹⁶ <https://blindman.be/en/projects/maxmal-blindman>. De Mey imbues his compositions with a ‘vigorous muscularity.’

The aspectual analysis developed in this essay also supports the connection with constructivist aesthetics. It shows how the spectator is invited to go beyond appearances and the conventions of representation. The performance does not necessarily have a beginning and an end; the temporality of *Rosas danst Rosas* remains open to further development. Nor does the theatre stage truly constitute the space of dance; the spatiality of the piece is constructed from a linear space and, through measured movements, sets out to conquer the second dimension. Finally, the dance itself is not the work of the four dancers named in the program; it arises from the intentions and instructions of a choreographer for bodies – some human and moving, others inert and inanimate – whose overall cohesion serves to guarantee specific instances of autonomy.

It is up to the audience to bring out the meaning of the work. They achieve this through a process of observation that involves a kind of thoughtful reflection on the signs they perceive, in this respect akin to a phenomenological approach. Marguerite Duras once said that in traditional cinema, the viewer contributes only 20% to the film's meaning, so conventional is it; in her own films, though, she would like to engage 80% of their potential. It seems to me that this applies to contemporary semic dance, particularly to the works of Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker. Observing aspectual characteristics requires effort. And when, during the performance, certain aspects are converted into their opposites, or if they remain ambivalent, the observer's participation in the work's meaning is all the more called upon. The observer is no longer merely an informed judge but also becomes a witness. Through their presence, they bear witness to a new reality.

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AUTHOR

Sémir Badir Research director at the Belgian Fund for Scientific Research and Professor at the University of Liège, Belgium.

