

Bodily Simultaneity in Avant-garde Art. Graphic Readings and Schemas

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Abstract

Starting from the graphic expressions pertaining to the artistic avant-garde and their influence on the performing arts, the aim of the article is to investigate the relationship between geometry and bodies in motion in costume and set designs dedicated to dance. The proposed readings concern the analysis of some emblematic representations of the artistic avant-garde that shared a profound interest in costume and set-design with those choreographers, dancers and music composers who were contributing to establish a vision of theatre strongly rooted in the socio-political worries of the time. The graphic interpretation dwells in the first instance on the sketches and costumes with the aim of tracing those geometric and distributive connections that exist between the totality of the human figure and the parts that define its dynamics. Subsequently some analytical schemas are proposed on the photograms of two ballets performed for the first time by Sergei Diaghilev's company, La Chatte (1927) and Les Noces (1923). In this case the choreographic structure, the arrangement of gestures in space, the directions and the dynamic elements are analyzed in order to frame and distinguish relationships between things and movements by means of force lines, in a mosaic of weights and graphic balances, seeing in the drawing a possible dimension of choreographic explication.

Keywords: schema, graphic analysis, avant-garde art, choreography, set-design.

Introduction

Following the theories developed by Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig, who experimented a vision in open rupture with the realist and naturalist style of the set-design tradition, the contribution of Russian theatre worldwide also revealed an aesthetic panorama now far removed from the exotic charm of the *Schéhérazade* of the *Ballets Russes*, of 1910, arriving at the *Victory over the Sun* that Kazimir Malevich created together with numerous poets and painters in 1913, proposing an intermediate space in which words, images and movements defined an abstract territory, thus directing the set-design and costume design towards a new scenic shape. From this moment on, the frenetic Russian theatrical activity developed through

the coexistence of multiple art fields and multifaceted personalities who gave a contribution strongly rooted in the socio-political issues of the time and, during the first decade of the twentieth century, imbued with those subversive theories that were feeding the great masses of the October Revolution.

Dance, costumes and set-design of the Avant-garde art

Many of the Ukrainian avant-garde artists, travelling in Italy and France, as well as in Russia, showed a deep interest in the trends that were developing in visual arts although maintaining a strong connection with

their native language. The result was the definition of a nationalistic style that saw the representation of human figures using bright colors and costumes with dynamic shapes, characterized by blurred and bright contours.

One of the painters who contributed to the Russian theatrical turning point in the association between the figurative arts and ballet was Vadym Meller, who collaborated with the choreographer Bronislava Nijinska, starting work in 1920 at the Kiev Opera House, by then a place of design experimentation aimed at constructivist issues (figs. 1, 2).

In the same year he was costume and set designer at the Shevchenko Theatre, soon becoming a precursor of modern constructivism in the Ukrainian Soviet Republic [Mudrak 1986]. Meller's cube-futurist approach and the development of forms in space were influenced by Alexandra Exter's teachings and would also be the expression of a copious production of paintings and sculptures also accepted at the Berezil Theatre [1], which was founded as an artistic association that had renounced traditionalist aesthetics to embrace left-wing arguments linked to the cause of the proletarian revolution.

In 1923, he created one of his best-known works for the play staged on the work of the German playwright Georg Kaiser entitled *Gas I* (fig. 3), a symbolic representation of how industrialization led to destruction and skillfully told by the costumes designed by Meller [Bowit 1977]. Until the 1930s, the artist maintained, a style very similar to Exter's, exploring a dynamic three-dimensionality expressed in the construction of costumes and the choice of colors that influenced a large number of Russian artists of the time.

In general, the geometric construct, with a clear constructivist matrix, favored the recognition of the compositional structure, as occurs in the eccentric characters and costumes drawn by Anatol Petritsky, who defined his sketches by means of the emotional and behavioral value of the character, often favoring the rigor of the geometric structure over the choreographic one (fig. 4).

Together with Alexandra Exter and Vadym Meller, Anatol Petritsky was among the leading figures to dominate the Ukrainian constructivist scene in Russia and worldwide. After working for Exter like Meller, he drew numerous costumes for Bronislava Nijinska's

company (figs. 5, 6), working as a set and costume designer for many theatres, including the Berezil.

After 1917, Petritsky turned much more to a traditional style, as in the *House of Interludes* of 1917 made for a theatre directed by Bonch-Tomashevsky. The large panel shows a simplification of forms contrasted in color and emphasized by the gestures of the characters, a realistic representation of the subjects, far from the abstraction of forms in favor of a simplification of the parts that manifest the emotional state through the sinuosity of the lines and the thickness of the contours.

His bodily transformations in drawing seem to follow the principle already expressed by Charles Darwin according to whom "movements [...] always have a close relationship of dependence and correspondence with the form that produces them" [Tombari 2019, p. 22]. This transformation of the body during movement is also interpreted by Kasyan Goleizovsky who, in addition to his activity as a dancer and choreographer, left a significant latent graphic legacy of that symbiotic spirit between movement and its representation that defined a gestural language sacralized in the trace of the annotation (fig. 7).

Goleizovsky's costumes, like Meller's ones, became true masks that altered the human body, structuring repetitions and translations of forms, combining color and geometry in the aesthetics of action (fig. 8).

Constructivism entered the design and realization of stage costumes and sets as well as choreography, by means of a shift from composition on the plane to composition in space.

This process was implemented mainly by virtue of the collaboration of artists coming from different places and not only from Russia or Ukraine, as in the case of Meller, Petritsky or Nathan Altman, but also from Armenia, as in the case of Georgy Yakulov, artists who highlighted the differences between nationalistic visions for the resolution of theatrical issues and design choices.

In this context, the figure of filmmaker Vsevolod Meyerhold was of fundamental importance for the evolution of Russian theatre design in the 20th century; thinking of theatre as an extension of the actor, Meyerhold provided the artists who began to train with him the opportunity to use the stage as a space of integration between the body and the set [2].

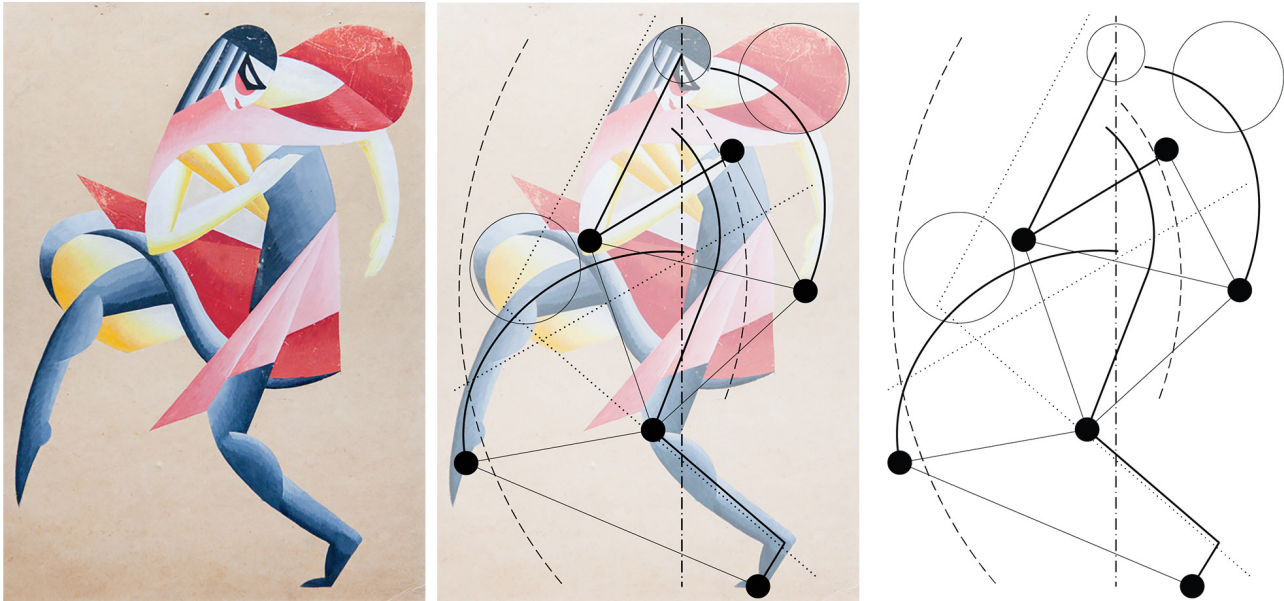


Fig. 1. V. Meller, costume for the choreography *Masks*, 1919 (elab. by Starlight Vattano).

In fact, the use of mobile elements and kinematics that could be activated directly on stage accentuated the emotional emphasis of the themes inspired by the drastic transformation that was no longer just theatrical but predominantly social.

Constructivism in Meyerhold's work thus made it possible to resolve the dichotomy between the conventional two-dimensional mode of set-design and the three-dimensionality of movement. A synthesis occurred in 1906 with Alexandr Blok's production, together with Meyerhold, *The Fairground Booth*, in St Petersburg, which staged the profound process of disenchantment with Symbolist ideals and at the same time the inevitability of existence, estrangement and the double [Bowit 1977].

The rejection of excessive stage decorations in favor of a scene undressed and completely shown to the public in its volumetric and compositive structure left space for the evolution of gestures and the movement expression, anticipating many of the principles later taken up in the works of the theatre artistic avant-garde.

Schemas and graphic constructions

The graphic analysis focuses on two types of images, static and dynamic ones, produced in the context of the artistic avant-garde theatre. In the first case, some drawings of stage costumes are schematized, then the graphic reading of the frames of two ballets is proposed. The type of graphic language used for the analysis is based on the synthesis of the objects, in the plane and space, in the form of meshes of lines and hierarchies of signs, according to an order of gesture execution that takes shape from the same scheme of analysis. The geometries that define the distribution of movements allow us to trace two and three-dimensional elements through which it is possible to grasp their unfolding in temporal fragments.

The graphic factors through which the schematic structures are configured are: the lines of the bodies (thick continuous lines), the directions of the main movements of the dancers (dotted lines), the spatial relationships/distances between the dancers (light

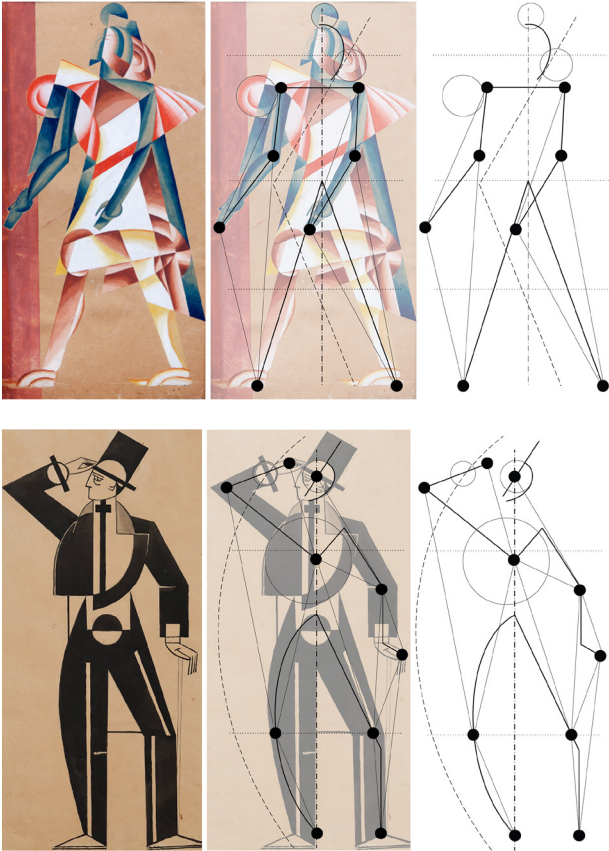


Fig. 2. V. Meller, costume for Assirian dances, 1919 (elab. by Starlight Vattano).

Fig. 3. V. Meller, costume of the capitalist for the opera Gas I by G. Kaiser, 1923 (elab. by Starlight Vattano).

continuous lines), the position marks (large circles), the pivot elements (small circles), the axis of symmetry (dash-dot).

The images

Vadym Meller was confronted with an artistic language that drew simultaneously on Expressionism, Cubism and Constructivism. Moving in both the theatrical and architectural spheres, his interpretations for stage costumes were influenced by the spatial issues between the body and the scenic object. The chromatic strength of his costumes does not require a clear outline but follows the plasticity of movement in geometric contrasts.

In the costumes drawn for *Le Maschere*, the artist concentrates the action in the curvature of the torso, which arches to the right concluding the expansion of movement with the arching of the left arm, whose hand once again indicates the origin of the action: the circumference at the top right which brings attention back to the figure's face.

The pivot points (black circles) define the relationships between the limbs (light continuous lines), while a game of cross-references and rebounds (dotted-lines) heralds a shift to the left (dotted curved-line) of the entire figure and the continuation of the movement with a slight rotation to the right (dotted right-curve) (fig. 1).

Her cubo-futuristic constructions anticipated the dynamic action of the choreographies realized by Bratislava Nijinska. The curved lines assumed by the body contrast with the sharpness of the contours, the pivot points (wrists, hands, shoulders and heels) interrupt the continuity of the movement, the broken dashed line shows the synthesis of the movements and the dotted lines the directions in which the limbs are arranged (fig. 2).

In 1923, Vadym Meller was director of set-design at Berezil theatre. In that year he staged *Gas I* based on Georg Kaiser's play, experimenting with a system of linear structures and curved surfaces defining a completely innovative theatrical effect. This work became a reference point for expressionist theatre, loaded with symbols and paradoxes latent with a strongly ethical message. The figure of the capitalist becomes one of the stage machines, the limbs move like parts

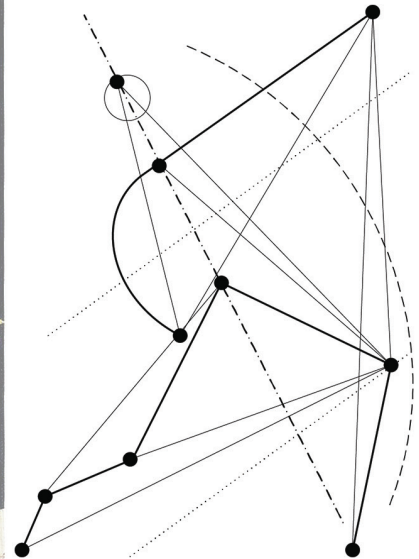
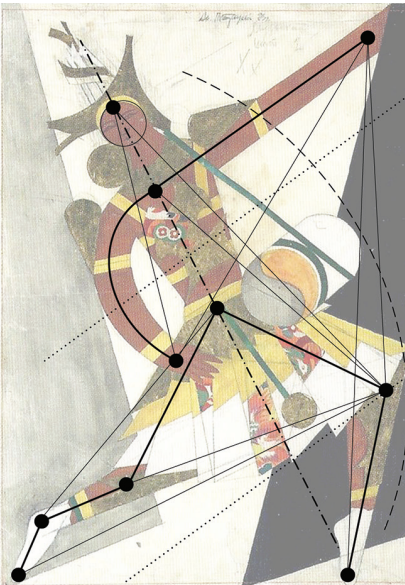
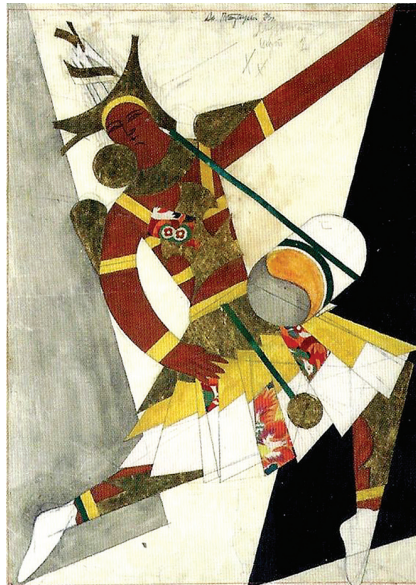
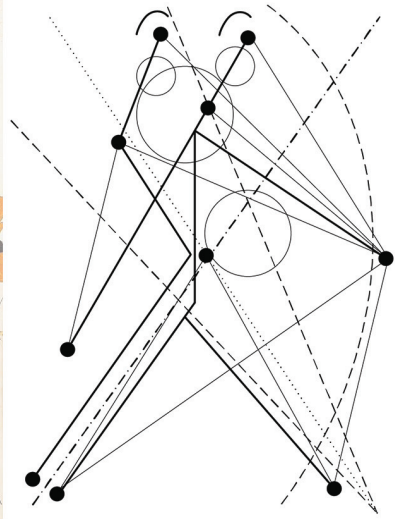


Fig. 4. A. Petritsky, costume for Eccentric dances, 1923 (elab. by Starlight Vattano).

Fig. 5. A. Petritsky, musician's costume for the ballet Nur and Anitra, 1923 (elab. by Starlight Vattano).

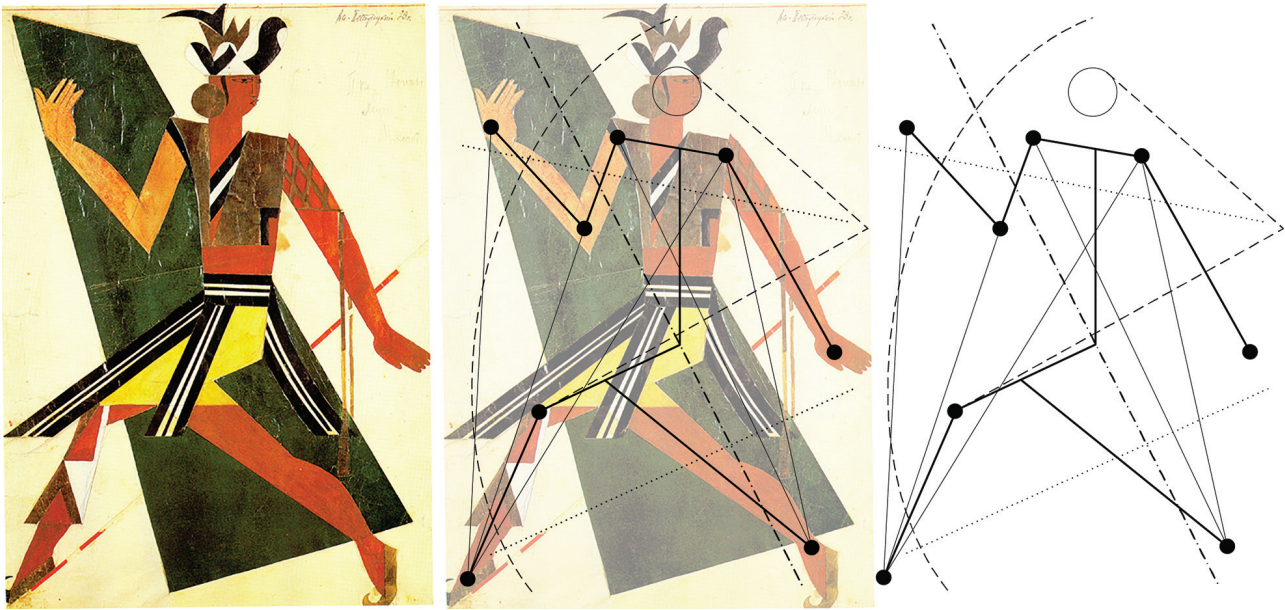


Fig. 6.A. Petritsky, costume for the ballet *Nur and Anitra*, 1923 (elab. by Starlight Vattano).

of a kinematism, and the rotations occur intermittently, the axis of symmetry stiffens the action turned almost completely to the left (dotted-curved line). The relations between the different parts of the body take place from a center (circumferences) to branch out towards the ends (the hands) arranged diagonally (fig. 3).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Ukrainian theatre became a place where national cultural traditions and international artistic currents mingled. Anatol Petritsky's work often aimed at the engineering of parts, the geometric unit rigor and the use of very bright colors. The two figures are translated into their parts and organized in three sections: the first, the heads; the second, the busts; the third, the legs (fig. 4).

His work always looked to the constructivist theme on the one hand and to expressionistic pathos on the other, aiming at a geometric and chromatic aesthetic under the control of convergent balances, made dynamic by the inclination of the symmetry axes. His

approach to costume drawing is characterized by a multifaceted gaze that at times refers to monumental figures, iconic of a pasted tradition. In the musician's costume for the ballet *Nur and Anitra*, Petritsky used a geometric contrast between the circular shapes of the instruments and the broken shapes of the body. Only one arm curves, closing the diagonal movement that ascends from the bottom left to the top right (fig. 5).

Anatol Petritsky's imaginative gaze permeates the human form in movement with constructivist and strongly tactile accents. His drawings juxtaposed surfaces, the composition of the image is that of a cubist collage which, through the use of different materials and textures, explored the body in its movement from different points of view. In this case, too, the action takes place along a diagonal line (dash-dotted line), highlighted by a green quadrilateral that does not correspond to the direction of the body, facing to the right (dotted-lines) (fig. 6).

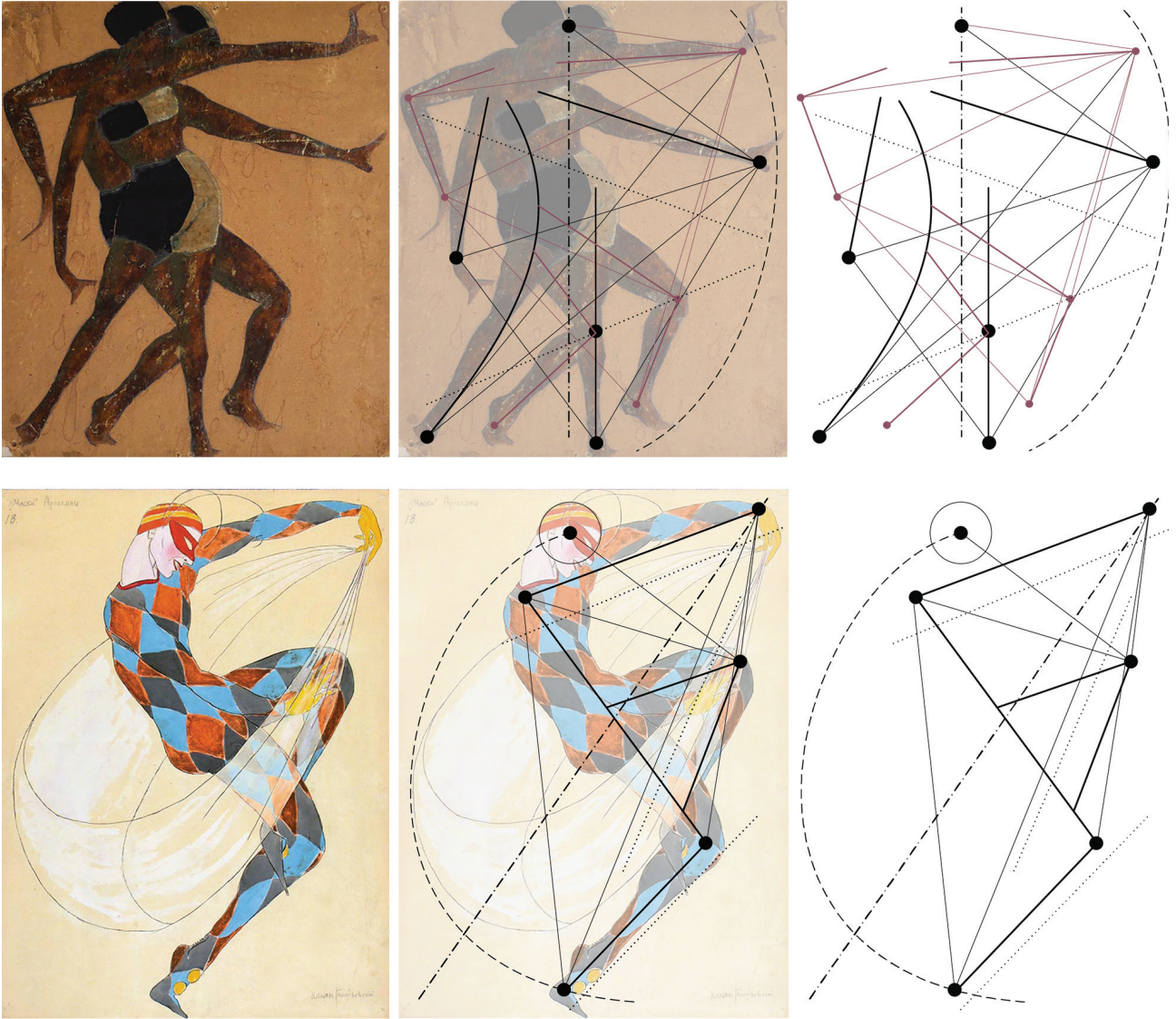


Fig. 7. K. Golezovsky, *Dancing couple*, 1920 (elab. by Starlight Vattano).

Fig. 8. K. Golezovsky, *Harlequin, costume for Masks*, 1918 (elab. by Starlight Vattano).

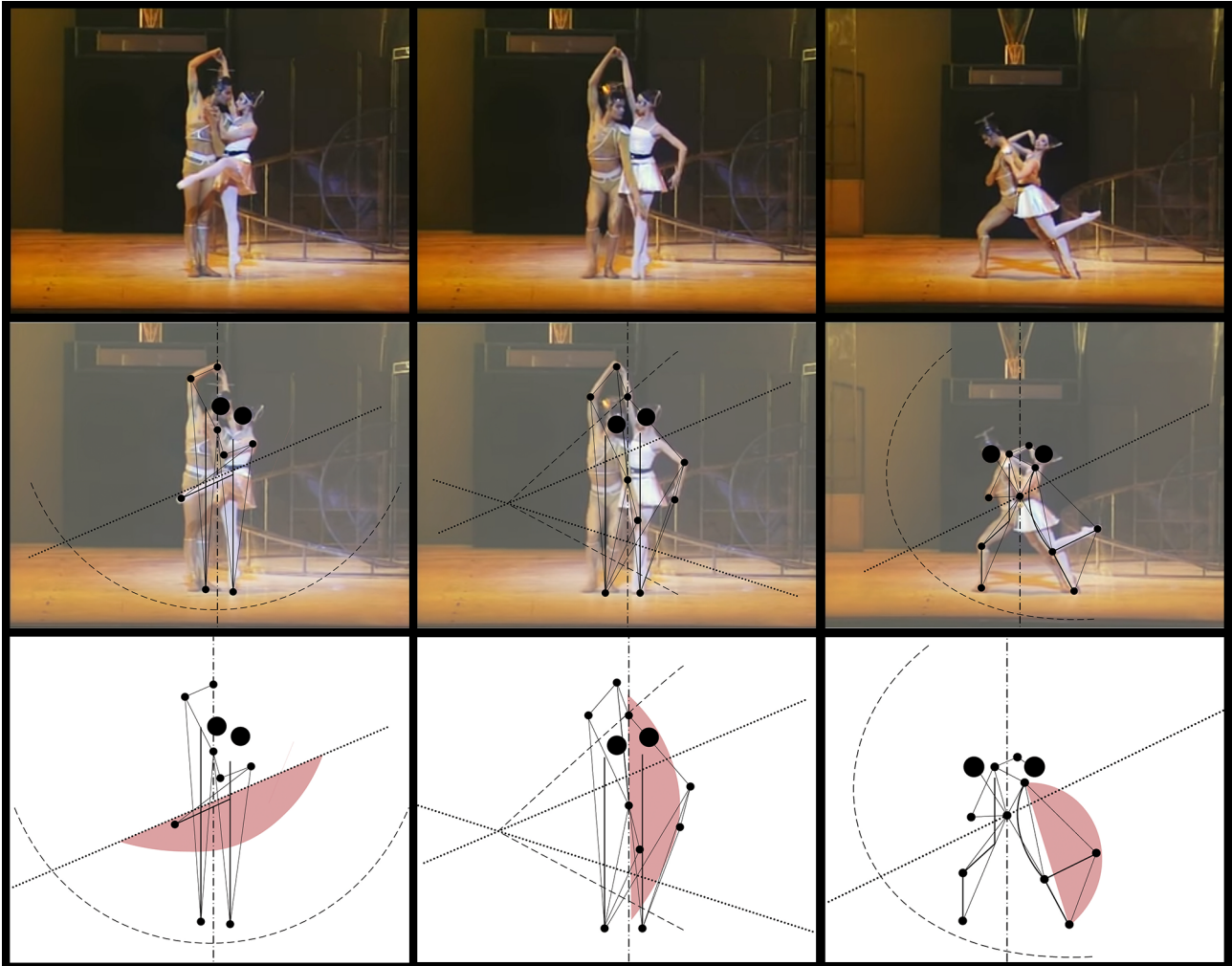


Fig. 9. Photograms taken from the ballet *La Chatte*, 1927 (elab. by Starlight Vattano).

Both choreographer and dancer, Kasyan Goleyzovsky succeeded in describing through his drawings for costumes and sets, the dynamic operation of the body with language that recalled the linearity of ancient Greek sculptures to interpret a dance far removed from the tradition of national ballet. In the *Dancing Couple*, Goleyzovsky positioned the two bodies facing to the right, represented in front and side views, thus providing information on the static posture and the evolution of the movement once the rotation is complete. The two colors in the diagram correspond to this offset between the figures but coincide with the expression of the two movements performed by the same body (fig. 7).

Starting from the basics of classical dance, Goleyzovsky experimented with the possible combinations of the body in movement on stage with the use of set and costume drawing as a means of completing the dance. His research aimed at exploring irregular movements, synthesized with broken-lines no longer extended in the verticality or horizontality of the stage, according to the choreographer "the line is broken, curved, softened, without internal force, as would be the case in circus or acrobatic, but refined and delicately bizarre, with a constant rejection of everything that resembles the classical" [Souritz 1988, p.16] (fig. 8).

The photograms

Diaghilev's production, *La Chatte* (1927) took up the constructivist themes in the three-dimensionality of both the set and costume design by Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner and the choreography by George Balanchine. The abstract forms on the stage, the lighting system, the transparencies and the use of reflective materials are a direct reference to the themes of the 1924 movie *Aelita*. The ballet developed in a constant crossing of the set-design device, the symbolism of the materials used, and the futuristic shapes of the costumes underlined the dimension rigorously controlled by the geometries and the linear verticality of the background [Bowit 1977]. In the schematic frames the poses are broken up in the gestures, the arms interrupt the fluidity of the movements, the pivot points (black circles) highlight the system of in-

terruption and continuation of the action, the main directions (dotted-lines) describe a sequentially by pauses during which it is possible to trace the successive positions that the two dancers will perform (dotted-lines) (fig. 9).

In 1923, the ballet *Les Noces* was staged to music by Igor Stravinsky, with choreography by Bratislava Nijinska and set design by Natalia Goncharova. The Russian artist also designed the costumes, representing a peasant setting that evokes Russian tradition. The action is performed in a small space above the dancers who move in front of the stage, following different choreographic schemas which, together with the music, make the figures of the two main characters look more and more like puppets manipulated in an atmosphere of implacable solitude.

The structure of the ballet is very simplified, the study scheme of the frames highlights the static nature of the figures in the background, which leave all the space to the central body. The main movement is all upwards, the opening of the arms, the closing and the identification of an intermediate position describe the impossibility of escaping the hierarchy of gestures decided by the choreographer: the axis of symmetry interrupts the scene in two portions of space that do not come never into contact (fig. 10).

Conclusions

The first topic highlighted by the schemas study of both static and dynamic images concerns the final configuration of the graphic structure: directions, position marks and pivot elements function as coding and translation devices.

The coding process is affected by the migrations of meaning that weave the new relationships between the determinate and indeterminate into an event whose contours are defined by the rationality of operation. A further relationship that is revealed in this process of codification-translation is that between language and image, between language and painting. In this regard, Foucault asserted that "the relationship between language and painting is an infinite one. Not that the word is imperfect and, in the face of the visible, in a deficiency that it would strive in vain to fill. They are irreducible to each other: in vain do we

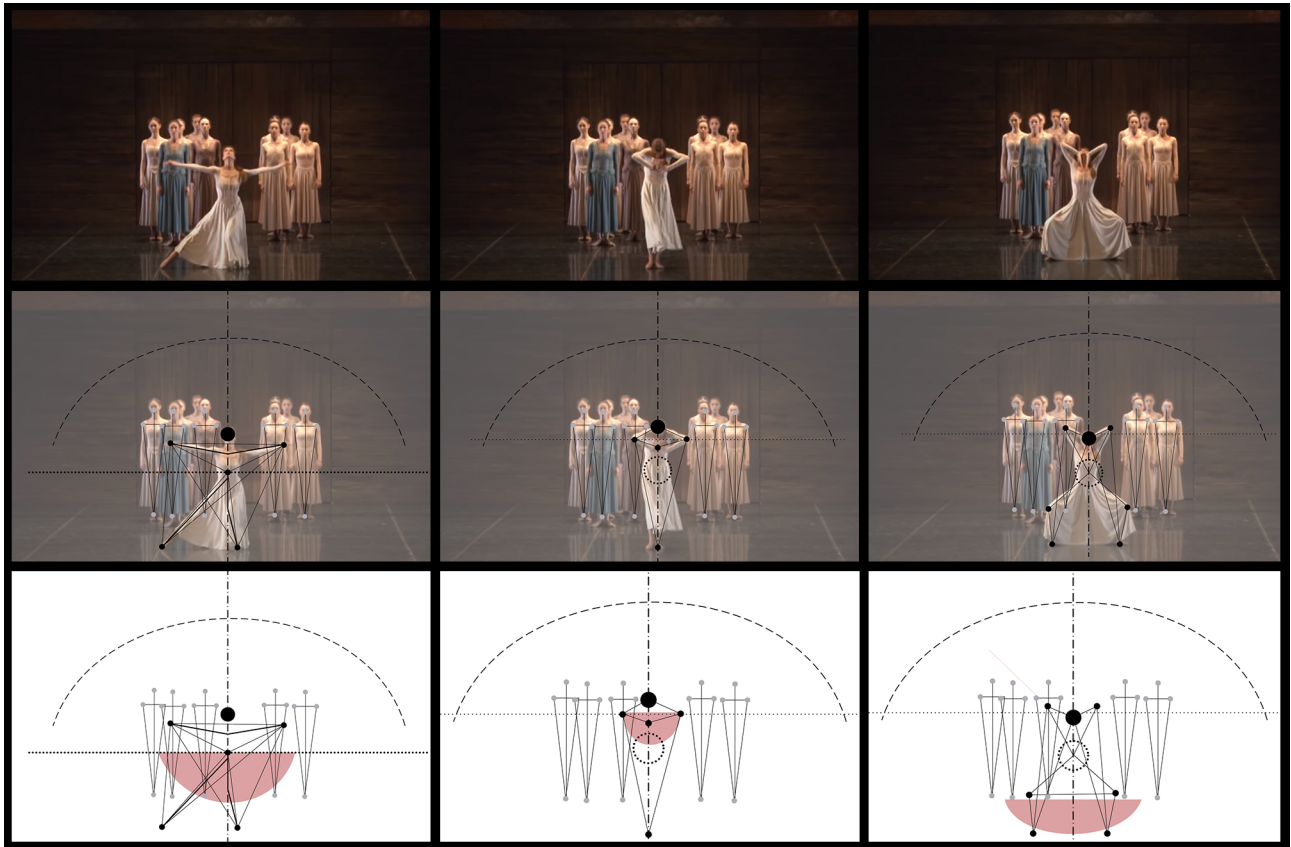


Fig. 10. Photograms taken from the ballet *Les Noces*, 1923 (elab. by Starlight Vattano).

try to say what we see; what we see is never in what we say; just as in vain do we try to show, by means of images, metaphors, comparisons, what we are saying; the place in which these figures shine is not that unfolded by the eyes, but that defined by the successions of syntax" [Cometa, Vaccaro 2007, pp. 42, 43]. A metaphor understood as a place in which the figures converge and unfold in their sequence of meaning, to define the invisible filled by the image in the absence of words.

The theoretical dimension of the movement representation, of the 'succession of syntaxes', is followed by that of the "double", of the external object that exercises its absence. The transcription of a movement in the form of a sign-object, and again of a hi-

erarchy of signs, poses the question of the relationship between the image and its schema, between the set of signs and their 'other'. An 'other' produced by the immobility of the schema, by its duration and its isolation of meaning. On the moving images of cinema, Gilles Deleuze argued that "they no longer have anything to do with poses, if they are privileged moments, they are so by way of remarkable points that belong to movement" [Deleuze 2002, p. 16]. The 'double' expressed by the diagram contains a section of duration, a 'remarkable point' that manifests directions and relationships, revealing the hidden configurations on which the bodies rest to give form to the image as its double, to the image as a model of itself.

Notes

[1] The Berezil Theatre, recognized as the national theatre of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, was established in 1922 in Kiev. It was an artistic association founded under the direction of Les Kurbas with the aim of developing experimental studies on avant-garde theatre and new teaching methods for actors and artistic directors. Les Kurbas never devoted himself to a single ideology or a specific program, but looked to Berezil as a dogma, a ceaseless research into new forms of artistic expression. For further details see: Rudnitskii K., Milne L. (1989). *Russian and Soviet Theater 1905-1932*.

New York: Harry N Abrams Inc.

[2] In the 1920s there were many artists who trained and worked with Vsevolod Meyerhold. Among them: Yurii Annenkov, Nikolai Evreinov, Alexandra Exter, Alexandre Vesnin, Georgy and Vladimir Stenberg, Alexandr Tairov, Ignatii Nivinsky, Liubov Popova, Alexandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova. Please refer to: Mudrak M. M. (1976). The Development of Constructivist Stage Design in Soviet Russia. In *Soviet Union*, n.3, pp. 253-268.

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