

The Poetics of Hans van Manen: going towards a visual analysis

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Hans van Manen (Amsterdam, 1932) is one of the most danced choreographers alive. His repertoire is known for its condensed power, a quality defined by the German critic Horst Koegler as “nuclear dance” after the premiere of his masterpiece *Adagio Hammerklavier* in 1973. But even if his name is well known in the dance world, from a theoretical point of view his contribution to the dance panorama and evolution of dance poetics in the second half of the 20th century remains almost unexplored. In order to plug such a gap, my research aims to approach the oeuvre of the Dutch choreographer visually, that is, by analyzing the visual event that his ballets are and how the relationship between the viewer and that which is seen is set to happen in his works. This research project, today still in a preliminary phase, emerges from the Master’s thesis

“Hans van Manen: approaching his poetics”, in which I linked Hans van Manen with the discourse around dance aesthetics in the aftermath of World War II in Europe and laid out a possible approach to his oeuvre based on different authors that have written about him so far. In my opinion, van Manen has built a strong, recognizable personal style and poetic point of view which revolves around two main leitmotifs: the recognition of human expression in the abstract form of dance and a certain erotic drive that can be defined in many ways. This article exposes them briefly, and presents the first ideas for further development as discussed with my tutor, Maaïke Bleeker, professor of Theatre Studies at Utrecht University.

Key words: choreography, visibility, preliminary research, Hans van Manen, dance.

The Master’s thesis

When starting with the research for my Master’s thesis, I chose to approach Hans van Manen’s poetics for several reasons. My personal attraction to and liking of his ballets were of course one of them, and the singularity of my own personal profile – half Catalan, half Dutch – was undoubtedly another one. I considered myself suited for the task at hand: to introduce the figure and the study of the Dutch choreographer from a theoretical point of view in my academic context. My intention, however, was not only to present the character and his oeuvre, writing a mere state of the question around his work; I also wanted to open doors for further research: “Hans van Manen: Approaching his poetics” was the title for a reason.

Thus both in the Master’s thesis and in a shorter article that emerged from it (Ribot, 2013), I started placing Hans van Manen into the dance panorama of Europe in the aftermath of World War II, and I also briefly exposed the histor-

ical and dance-related context in which Hans van Manen grew as a dancer and a choreographer. Subsequently I tried to isolate the different elements that define Hans van Manen's work and work procedure – main poetic problems or leitmotifs, esthetic choices, his understanding of the craftsmanship of choreography, etc. – and I organized them around two big ideas that, at that time, I thought were key to approach his work. On one hand, I wrote about 'human abstraction'; on the other, about the 'Eroticism of the act of seeing' (or rather, of *looking at*). To link them both under one cadre, I structured my arguments and examples following a chronological order, focusing on two main phases of Hans van Manen's career: his first years as resident choreographer and artistic director at Nederlands Dans Theater (1960-1971) and his first years as a resident choreographer at Het Nationale Ballet (1972-1987).

Human abstraction

To summarize, when I wrote about 'human abstraction' I agreed and developed the definition of Eva van Schaik about Hans van Manen's point of view on dance as an abstract form of art: "As he doesn't believe in purely abstract ballets, he creates dance dramas without telling an explicit story or referring to literal backgrounds" (Van Schaik, 1987: 24).

Hans van Manen's approach to dance and its intrinsic abstractness was and is particular, and is defined by his wish of never undermining the human being that is on stage. To achieve that, he has used/uses diverse resources, and he works in a certain way in the studio in collaboration with the dancers. One of the main elements put in motion in this process is the choreographing of the eyes of the dancers, of their direction.

The wish for abstraction defines my ballets, but abstraction must never undermine the human being. No one should forget for a second that it is people standing there. I have accomplished this by always giving a main role to the direction of the eyes of the dancers (Hans van Manen, quoted in Jonkers, 1992: 22).

Abstract form – as in free of anecdote – in Hans van Manen ballets *comes to being* on a three dimensional canvas, where the existence of the dancers is unavoidable. Hans van Manen acknowledges this and uses it in his favor. In this canvas, this no-man's-land but still land of existence that is an empty stage, Hans van Manen always deals with the same issue: the relationships between these existing beings – not just bodies or forms. By not denying their existence he implies the appearance of an *I*, and with it, the appearance of an *Other* – the other-danc-

er, the other-prop, the other-music and the other-audience – and of course a certain connection between them. To *look at* [lat. *mirari*] etymologically means to admire, to turn that which you see into an object of desire. By having the dancers look at or away from each other, for example, this attraction becomes part of van Manen's choreography: he acts upon it, among others, through form.

Starting out always from the academic classical dance technique, he uses its forms and figures at will, mixing them for example with other forms and gestures drawn from daily life. Thus he turns everything into dance; every turning of the head is taken out of its normal context to be placed in his own abstract, formal and relational world to further strengthen the existential quality of his ballets. As Jochen Schmidt states about the ballet *Situation* in the first monographic oeuvre dedicated to Hans van Manen:

Almost all the movements that van Manen uses for the first time in *Situation* have their origin in daily life and have been reinvented for the scene: insinuated fights, judo maneuvers, kicking... (...) It doesn't matter what the dancers do, it still is dance and it is immersed in a vigorous rhythm that the music doesn't demand. Van Manen makes the quotidian danceable. (Schmidt, 1987: 62)

Eroticism of the act of *looking at*

Having presented this canvas, the other key aspect of my research was to present his erotic drive as a main poetic leitmotif. My statement at the time was that both his choice for acknowledging human existence on stage and his constant aim to lose baggage, his striving for the essence of every figure, are also readable and approachable from an erotic point of view.

Choosing the term eroticism should not come as a surprise, for Hans van Manen himself has used the term a lot to talk about his work. "Eroticism, for me, is everything," he once said in an interview (Webeling, 1999). He also insists on the unique erotic vibe that every dancer expresses as a very important factor in his poetic research. Also in his own words:

I am always fascinated by the question: who are these dancers? ... I'm always hunting for what's genuine, everyone sends out their own erotic vibes and these should be respected. (Van Schaik, 1987: 23-25)

Eva van Schaik, in her book "Hans van Manen, leven en werk" (Van Schaik, 1997: 546), also pointed out eroticism as the main poetical *drijfveer* [spring] of

the Dutch choreographer and she broadened the scope by applying the concept of eroticism to his attraction to all that was new in his historical context:

Van Manen used the classical tradition as a true pragmatic, tongue in cheek, and set unexpected links between the timeless esthetics of academic dance-technique and the eroticism of modern times. (Van Schaik, 1987: 23-25)

I, again, agreed with her on this idea. But while working on my Master's research I had the intuition that there was more conceptual depth to his eroticism. I thought that the scope of eroticism – and through it, of sexuality – as theoretical concepts applied or linked to Hans van Manen's poetics could be developed much further.

First thoughts on PhD research

After my Master's thesis was presented, I took part in the New Scholars Forum of The International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) Congress in Barcelona 2013, testing myself in the field of academic presentation and introducing the same ideas I have briefly exposed so far. That congress was also my occasion to meet Maaïke Bleeker, Professor of Theatre Studies at Utrecht University and author of *Visuality in the Theatre. The locus of looking* (Bleeker, 2008). After sharing my ideas and interests with her over the past year, she has agreed to help me in defining a proper research project to be presented to Utrecht University, and in being my tutor henceforth.

One of the first assignments she gave me was to put in writing my intuitions for the future, stating what I felt could be interesting as a starting point to deepen in the ideas I had merely scratched during my Master's thesis. In that first draft, I developed a discourse around the notion of eroticism as opposed to sexuality, which I will try to sum up in the following paragraphs. It is important to read them as what they are: intuitions, first ideas, subject to much deeper analysis, and for now lacking in methodological and theoretic muscle.

The intuitions. Eroticism vs. sexuality protocol

Eroticism refers to that which is not seen. The enigmatic, that which is hidden, even if only by a silken veil. Nocturnal, unfocused, elusive. Following this thread, easily enough we could affirm that all dance is erotic: its meaning is always hidden, having lost the link with reality in the far past of its rituality. This

is even more so in classical ballet, its body hidden behind layers and layers of mostly forgotten aristocratic codes, tulle and rhetorical figures.

Hans van Manen, following the steps of Balanchine, goes beyond the rhetorical figures of classical ballet and tries to unveil its formal essence. His liking of minimalism and constructivism as the style of his choice for both scenery and costume designs is hardly a coincidence. The apparent simplicity and clarity of his most used figures either. Using the words of Horst Kogler, written after the première of *Adagio Hammerklavier* (1973), Hans van Manen strives for a “nuclear dance” (Kogler, 1974). He tries to find the nucleus, the thing in itself. But what is the essence of a (neo) classic dancing body? Is it the body in itself? Certainly not. The essence remains always hidden – if it even exists – and Hans van Manen just tries to get the closest possible.

How? By approaching the intrinsic eroticism of dance – the impossibility to be unveiled – sexually: opening multiple degrees of very clear focus but never really choosing one of them as the main theme. He plays with geometric forms in space; with combinations of numbers of dancers on stage; with the previously described relationships and sexual attraction awakened by the eyes of the dancers; with a deep understanding and play in regard to music; clear and repeated figures and movement combinations; etc. But even if all these elements are there *to be seen* in all their clarity, as objects of visual desire for the eye of the audience, none of them is ever pursued enough to become the main thing happening. The essence of every ballet remains inevitably hidden behind the combination of them all and dance (in its eroticism) becomes the only main character left: The nucleus?

If the erotic is that which is hidden, sexual would be that which is focused, clear, open. Using this opposition, and from a theoretic point of view, we could say that Hans van Manen’s approach to dance is operated from a certain sexuality protocol or way of *looking at*. Paradoxical as it might seem, Hans van Manen uses that which is intrinsically sexual in an erotic way whereas, as I said, he uses sexually that which is intrinsically erotic. What do I mean by that?

To *look at* something, again, is to focus on it and turn it into an object of desire. And Hans van Manen’s eye focuses, as I said, on diverse objects. He forces us to look at what he finds interesting, beautiful, needed in every piece. In the introductory interview of the series of DVD’s *Hans van Manen, master of movement* he said: “I want the least possible ballast. I want to stay as essential as possible, that you can follow what I am doing without being directly able to define it” (Stichting Hans van Manen, DVD1, 2007). In this obsession for clarity and his search for an undefined essence, his eye is objectified (to the extent to which this is possible) and freed from all possible psychological, dramat-

ic or emotional baggage. The eye of the choreographer becomes essential. His *looking at* is prioritized and elevated above any debate about meaning to allow on stage only that – movements, combinations, relationships, etc. – which he finds interesting and wants to be seen in all its sexuality: focused, clear, there to be followed.

Thus he approaches the intrinsic eroticism of dance in a sexual way, assuming that the essential unfocused nature of dance will always and eventually appear without adding any unneeded layer to it in order to make the piece work. The same way he assumes the existence of the dancers on stage and uses it in his favor, he also exploits the unavoidable eroticism of dance by exposing it as just the event that it is.

To explain this further it might be helpful to briefly compare him with another choreographer who has also wandered through the middle ground between classic forms and precepts of modern dance in search of a certain *human abstraction*. According to Leslie-Anne Sayer, Jiří Kylián builds “non-narrative dramatic ballets” (Sayer, 1991:134). To compare quotes: “most of Hans van Manen’s ballets appear to have been refined down to pure dance. Yet behind every dance is always the shadow of drama, the cut and thrust of a deliberately unspecified emotion.” (Clive Barnes, 1987, quoted in Reynolds, 2002:472). Same idea, different approach. For while in Kylián “his motivation comes from within, from an emotion or idea that resonates outwards” (Sayer, *ibid.*), in Hans van Manen the motivation comes from without, it comes from the situation and directions given by the choreographer. In conclusion: Hans van Manen’s ballets aren’t passionate; they aren’t dramatic in the sense of narrative or emotion as Kylian’s are. Rather, they come over as somewhat estranged, coldblooded even. The eye of the choreographer is cold, clinical, focused. Conceptually sexual.

But the use of sexuality and eroticism as concepts linked to Hans van Manen’s oeuvre is also supported in other, more literal ways. Sexuality appears in almost all of his ballets in one way or another: be it in the form of a very literal and sudden gesture (*Situation*, 1979; *Sarcasmen*, 1981); of an all too clear and meaningful direction of the eyes (*Twilight*, 1972; *Vijf tango’s*, 1977); or through the choice in clothing design (*Grosse Fugue*, 1971; *Three pieces for Het*, 1997), among others. It might be quite plausible to assess that the appearance of openly erotic sexual moments/sexual tension is related to do his immediate context, growing up as a choreographer in the years of The Netherlands’ sexual revolution. But this found sexuality is not militant in his ballets, he doesn’t argue for it politically. Instead, he used the freedom of his time in a formal way, extracting the conceptual power of every (sexual) ges-

ture and turning it into just another layer of his erotic strategy: without turning it into a main element in any of his formal quests, he uses it just because he wants to, because he can, and because he has never felt like limiting his options by that which is morally correct to do on stage. Au contraire. The best proof of this statement is the fact that his ballets, seen with the eyes of today, do not seem outdated or passé even after years of sex, nudity and provocation on the stages.

From this point on: the visual analysis of the work

These intuitions give merely an idea of my drive for research, and I think it is important to put them in writing as a reminder of where I started. However, my task at hand from this moment on is to define a stronger suit for my doctoral research. In discussion with Maaïke Bleeker she encouraged me to find my own words to define the *it* that I wanted to approach, since eroticism is the word chosen by the choreographer himself to define his poetic drive. In using it, as well I would be choosing the easy road, turning it into a shield that would lead inevitably to a rather uninteresting theoretic closed circle: to argue that what has already been said is, in fact, correct or useful. And back to square one.

In order to find a voice that is my own, we agreed on a first basic item: what I am really interested in, is in how a performance happens visually – specifically the event that the van Manen ballets are. Using Bleekers (2008) terminology: how the visuality of the theatrical event is awakened and how the relationship between the viewer and what is seen is set (in his works).

To focus on the analysis of the event of the visual is challenging per se, for several reasons. First and foremost, due to the open nature of its own limits as an academic object of study. Quoting Bleeker:

Visuality happens. Visuality is not a given property of things, situations, or objects. Visuality is not even an object in the sense that film is the object of film studies or the work of art the object of art history. The study of visuality draws upon work accomplished within many different disciplines and engages with images, texts, or events that have been studied and still are studied within these disciplines, yet its own object domain – visuality – does not belong to any of these disciplines proper. Instead, the object of visual analysis is the way things become visible as a result of the practices of looking invested in them. Visuality as an object of study, therefore, requires that we focus on the relationship between the one seeing and what is seen. (Bleeker, 2008: 2)

Thus to approach Hans van Manen's poetics choosing visuality as the theoretic scope will require an extensive phase of pre-research, organized in several actions: first, I will isolate those recurrent characteristics in his ballets that might help me define and understand his poetics – and probably the choreographing of the eyes and the eroticism as a poetic drive will be two of them – and then I will ask myself how each of these characteristics mark or influence the way we look at his ballets. How they steer the way the viewer *looks at*, how they set the stage for visuality to happen in a specific way.

To support my affirmations on these subjects I will subsequently have to place them in different traditions, using several of his ballets as an analytic tool to support my research along the way. These are traditions that primarily should give theoretic muscle to my affirmations, and thus will not necessarily be related to the choreographer's historic and personal context, but rather to disciplines close to the visual analysis and how our look on things is defined in different aspects: visual arts, painting, performance studies, gender or dance-based theories, etc.

Finally, I will also approach the other side of the visual relationship of every dance event: the study of the practices of looking. The evolution of how we look specifically at dance and performance is also key in understanding how the visual takes place, and I would like to use Hans van Manen's oeuvre as a bridge or excuse to go deeper into the analysis of this experience.

The wells are deep and many, as are the challenges that lie ahead. Wish me luck.

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