

STUDENA  
GLACIAL  
ROMANTIČNA  
ROMANTIC DANCE  
PLESNA GESTA  
GESTURE  
O tamnim  
On Marjana  
pejzažima  
Krajač s Dark  
Marjane Krajač  
Landscapes

Katja Šimunić

1 The exhibition was set up at Galeries nationales du Grand Palais in Paris, from 13 October 2005 to 16 January 2006. A comprehensive catalogue (*Mélancolie: génie et folie en Occident*, Gallimard, RMN, SMB, Paris, 2005, 504 pages, re-issued in 2014) was edited by the author of the exhibition Jean Clair, who invited theoreticians and writers like Jean Starobinski, Marc Fumaroli, Yves Bonnefoy, Philippe Comar and others to reflect on melancholy and its different visual transformations in written form.

In October 2005 I was disturbed, enchanted and deeply impressed, both on the emotional and the rational level of memory, by the exhibition *Melancholy: Genius and Madness in the West (Mélancolie: génie et folie en Occident)*<sup>1</sup>. Set up at the Grand Palais and curated by Jean Clair, the idea was to exhibit works focusing on melancholy from the ancient period to the late 20th century in an unorthodox chronological order; it was a heteroclit

exhibition encompassing around 300 exhibits, ranging from scientific objects and cabinets of curiosities, to paintings by Edvard Munch, George Grosz, Giorgio de Chirico and Edward Hopper, to sculptures by Anselm Kiefer and Ron Mueck, for example. The cover of the catalogue featured Caspar David Friedrich's dark painting *The Monk by the Sea* (1808—1810). Ten years after the exhibition to whose traces (catalogue,

web searches) I kept coming back to unpredictably, but often and with passion, in a hurry one late autumn evening which could, characterised by the season, quite aptly be named after Flaubert's story *November*, my eye was caught by a poster and, a moment later, by the leaflet of the ballet night at the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb. The first of the two choreographies scheduled for the evening, a synergy between the eminently classical ballet ensemble and the indisputably contemporary dance choreographer Marjana Krajač, bore the title *Dark Landscapes (Tamni pejzaži)*<sup>2</sup>. With this title, therefore, this choreography could easily be a lost exhibit in motion of the mentioned melancholic exhibition, I thought.

2 The ballet evening, whose first performance took place on 11 November 2016 at the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, consisted of two choreographies: *Dark Landscapes* by Marjana Krajač and *Bolero* by Maša Kolar. The creative team and cast of *Dark Landscapes* included composer Thomas Köner, set and costume designer Silvio Vujičić, dramaturgical associate Andrej Mirčev, with Marjana Krajač and Silvio Vujičić as the authors of the concept, and Aleksandar Čavlek as light designer. Performers: Asuka Maruo, Adam Harris, Cristiana Rotolo, Tomaž Golub, Iva Vitić Gameiro, Andrea Schifano, Lucija Radić, Takuya Sumitomo, Miruna Miciu, Kornel Palinko, Natalia Horsnell, Guilherme Gameiro Alves, Rieka Suzuki, Duilio Ingrassia, Valentina Štok, Ovidiu Muscalu. *Bolero* is set to the music of Maurice Ravel, in Višeslav Laboš's electro-acoustic version. Costume and set design: Petra Pavičić. Light designer: Nuno Salsinha. Assistant choreographer: Maja Marjančić. Performers: Natalia Horsnell, Takuya Sumitomo, Iva Vitić Gameiro, Andrea Schifano, Milka Hribar Bartolović, Guilherme Alves, Catarina Meneses, Kornel Palinko, Atina Tanović, Simon Yoshida, Mutsumi Matsuhisa, Duilio Ingrassia, Asuka Maruo, Gianmarco Beoni, Lucija Radić, Adam Harris, Sabrina Feichter, Tomaž Golub, Saya Ikegami, Sebastian Šimić.



# Achromatic disposition for a dystopian ballet

In the auditorium, awaiting *Dark Landscapes* to begin, sparked by the title that colours indistinct landscapes with a disturbing emotion, Caspar David Friedrich's landscapes, his oils on canvas like *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1817—18) or *Winter / Ruin of Eldena Abbey* (1808) emerged from the memory like cold or wintry layers. However, the very beginning of Marjana Krajač's choreography disproves the expected darkness of landscapes and immerses the spectator into a white stage and glaring, uncoloured, theatrical light. But nevertheless it evokes romantic Friedrichian landscapes in my mind, this time his *whitish* oil on canvas *The Sea of Ice / The Failed Hope* (1824), combining natural elements, water and rocks in great cold, unrolling a narrative of the *attack* of ice on a sail ship. The painting glorifies the dominance of natural forces, earth, water and air, above all of man's attempts and accomplishments. Such as, for instance, building a sail ship to circumnavigate the globe and discover new worlds. The composition is central, broken down into pointed, prismatic forms of earthen and bluish hues of sky and ice, accentuating the absence of warm elements like flora and fauna. Human presence is not visible, but it can be sensed, perhaps below the ship, perhaps below the ice. Omnipresent in this painting, as well as in its

spectator, is the magnificence and beauty of nature. Both magnificence and tragedy, which call for respect (and awe) before nature, so persistently failed since ancient times until this day, testified in a large span of time to our glacial, shipwrecked present since romantic painters also by the photographs of Daniel Beltrà<sup>3</sup>. They portray dark snow, quick thaw, glaciers cracking as a consequence of contemporary human aggression in(to) natural environment. And from the photographs of deeply grey and bright turquoise surface of Greenland snow and ice one can glide quite naturally

onto the stage of *Dark Landscapes*.

The scenic *image* of the choreography of *Dark Landscapes* is dominantly white, albeit interspersed with dark accents in the dancers' costumes and accentuated with a black mass which, at a certain moment, towards the end of the performance, lowers down to the floor of the stage. This black *threat* seems like a meltdown of a dense black mass, which is nevertheless not in the liquid state of matter because it rises again from the floor of stage equal and compact as it was. It seems like a *heavy* stain. Dangerous, ominous, inevitable. Equally material, physical and metaphoric, contemplative.

Oscillating between the set and costume design *palette* built on hues and gradations of different shades of white and black, an achromatic disposition is established for a choreography that will unfold as ballet *en pointe*. Marjana Krajač has created a contemporary dance work that could equally be *read* as a possible dystopian romantic ballet. By choreographing, in the expanded sense, the author created dances *en pointe* for ballerinas and dances on the verge of classical ballet vocabulary for male ballet dancers, conjoining improvisation as an essentially contemporary dance act and the academic rules of abstract movement which is, following the thought of John Martin, engrained in the roots of ballet aesthetic. It also leans on the classic partner relationship between the male and the female dancer, as well as on the sculptural grip of two male bodies being mutually transported from one place to the other.

The refined technique of maximum clarity in the performances of dancers like Asuka Maruo, Iva Vitić Gameiro, Cristiana Rotolo or Duilio Ingrassia, for example, adds to the indisputable legibility of movement, unhidden touches of corporeality, pensive gazes, hand gestures stretching out to something, to someone. All this creates a subtle narrative of melancholy flâneurs, meditative wanderers, silhouettes of passengers surrounded by tense haze in romantic paintings. Or, more accurately, the performers of *Dark Landscapes* seem to establish a sort of romantic dance *graphics* in motion with their unpredictable spatial trajectories on the one hand and their classical ballet gesture on the other. Rethinking, reinterpreting and re-sensing dance sylphs, Lynn Garafola writes:

“Although Romantic prints could be varied in subject matter, they belonged above all to the ballerina. She haunts them, as she haunts the writing of the era, an

<sup>4</sup> Lynn Garafola, “Introduction” in *Rethinking the Sylph: New Perspectives on the Romantic Ballet*, Wesleyan University Press, 1997, p. 2.

icon of femininity, graceful, teasing, mysterious. With her soulful gaze and airy skirts, she inhabited a world remote from home and hearth, the secluded valleys, misty lakesides, secret glades, and wild

heaths that in ballet as in fiction, poetry, and opera extolled a Romantic idea of nature even as they coded her as an exotic dwelling on the periphery of European civilization.”<sup>4</sup>

The choreography *Dark Landscapes* artfully idealises a female ballet dancer. In Marjana Krajač's latest works (*Choreographic Fantasy No. 1 / Koreografska fantazija br. 1, Choreographic Fantasy No. 2 / Koreografska fantazija br. 2, Variations on Sensitive / Varijacije o osjetnom, Kaleidoscope in Fog / Kaleidoskop im Nebel / Kaleidoskop u magli*) contemporary dancers advocated Duncanian barefootedness, however here the choreographer maintained, or better yet, embraced, respected (one could even say fetishized) pointe shoes on ballerinas' feet. Nevertheless, she does not resort to pointe shoes as the usual support to upward striving or a means to accentuate virtuosity, but as an extension to the line, an outstanding classical ballet technique of a powerfully shaped leg, as an aesthetic category, as an essential emblem of the women's lexica of *danse d'école*. Everyday pedestrian movement, so dear to the choreographer, here easily turns into a walk, just an ordinary walk on the whole foot, albeit a foot sharply confined in a pointe shoe. This *ordinary* walk thus becomes a tad different than the steady everyday walk, a bit different and *clearer, more ideal*. Dancers in pointe shoes in *Dark Landscapes* do not aspire to become ethereal fairies, but rather softly *poke* into the gravity axis and act *there*, deciding on their next movement. They do not aspire to “fly like ballerinas”, but to steadfastly jump into a vertical which becomes an undying potential of dance actions. Marjana Krajač in her choreographic procedure objectivises the ballet technique and sets it at the very source of performative thought. The dancers are given a chance to freely delve into an infinite archive of codified steps, turns, jumps, supports, poses... They improvise trajectories,

the graphism of their dance gestures and flashes of classical ballet figures in the set white space of a scene imbued with dark sound.

## Acoustic space of dance

Inside a turbulent achromatic monotony deriving from the exciting performance of unpredictable touching and being touched between the male and female dancers an acoustic space is established. German-American psychologist and phenomenologist Erwin Straus writes:

“In landscape we stop being historical beings [...]. We have no memory of landscape, nor does landscape have any memory of us. We dream in broad daylight with our eyes open. We are devoid of the objective world, but also of ourselves. [...] The contrast I tried to explain by juxtaposing geography and landscape I have already described elsewhere (*The Forms of Spatiality*), writing about the differences between acoustic and optical space, between the space of dance and the space of purposeful movement.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Erwin Straus, *Du sens des sens (Vom Sinn der Sinne. Ein Beitrag zur Grundlegung der Psychologie*, J. Springer, Berlin 1935), translated into French by: J.-P. Legrand and G. Tines, Editions Jérôme Millon, Grenoble, 2000, pp. 382—383.

Erwin Straus exemplifies the difference between the world of senses and the world of perception with the difference between landscape and geography or acoustic and optical space. Optical space houses purposeful actions within an organised timeframe, divided into before and after, a historical time, whereas in acoustic space there is only now, only a strong presence here and now, which is so close to the essence of dance art. Therefore, Marjana Krajač in *Dark Landscapes* penetrates deep into acoustic space, remarkably built by Thomas Köner's original score, delving profoundly into the dance space, into dance per se. In Marjana Krajač's dance landscapes one can easily imagine those dreaming with their eyes open, devoid of the objective world, fairies, sylphs, idealised ballerinas or simply those lacking in purposeful movement. In *Dark Land-*

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Beltrà is a photographer whose artistic works particularly focuses on the human impact on the environment. See more at <https://danielbeltra.photoshelter.com>.

scapes we find dancers who act and react with improvisation to the academic code of abstract movement. They move within a precisely defined vocabulary, the ideal vocabulary of the classical ballet technique, but infected with improvisation: their views, their states are extremely detached from the classical ballet purposeful view serving to perform a certain figure as virtuously as possible.

The dancers' indecision. So fine, delicate, barely noticeable. Or to be more precise: this is not realistic indecision, but rather facing the possibility of choice. Among the multitude of movements in the classical ballet repertory, a multitude of *examples* of ballet grammar. And *Dark Landscapes* do not undermine this sacrosanct ballet grammar, only deeply engrain it in the melancholy acoustic space where gravity becomes almost an unexpected gift — it becomes *friendly*. Therefore, if the physical disposition of the dancers in Croatian National Theatre's ballet company is dominantly characterised by the open feet position and consequentially equal body posture, outward-facing (this classical ballet turn out), their creative and performative concentration in *Dark Landscapes* is facing inwards (this contemporary dance turn in), focusing on the inward sense of space and time and choreography. Erwin Straus attributes music a constructive role in dance space. Music establishes, materialises, spatialises dance. And dancers in *Dark Landscapes* seem to feel Köner's subtle and fluid minimalist electronic music in their skin, in their finest pores. This music seems to be only a natural extension to their internal music: harmonised with their blood flow, breathing, heart palpitations.

## Improvisation pre-movement

Although Marjana Krajač in her recent works does not evoke a specific art work from the visual arts sphere, nevertheless her choreographic idea displays a latent presence of the idea of body stemming from classical art. She cannot be said to *follow* the ancient ideal, the ideal of Greek sculptures so fascinatedly and steadily focused on the ideal body, either in motion or still,

on the body sublimating the perfect form of life. Her previous dance works featured the bodies of male and female performers, deliberately chosen to be the *imperfect* bodies of dancers, significantly different, all in the details of personal corporealities, unaligned in terms of sorts and levels of dance techniques and skills. In *Dark Landscapes* the choreographer worked with ballerinas and ballet dancers of equally high performance qualities, belonging to the identical classical ballet vocabulary. One could say Marjana Krajač resorts to the classical ballet technique as a sort of ready-made, but a ready-made supplemented with the dance improvisation concept. The dancers can decide freely when and how to intervene into the choreographic flow. Will they make this *grand jeté* or arabesque or... At what moment? Marjana Krajač does not distort the classical ballet technique pointing it to free movement, but rather liberates the dancers' decisions on the choice of movement. And thus gets an exceptionally differentiated personality of their gazes, their fists, their pre-movements. An entire covert concept is present in the sense of pre-movement in *Dark Landscapes*.

Pre-movement is here in fact another name for the concept of improvisation used by the choreographer to intervene in the tissue of the classical ballet technique, in the male and female ballet dancers' bodies. The complex, clear and legible structure of *Dark Landscapes* relies on the choreographer's uncompromising negotiations with the dancers to establish *coming into existence* in pre-movement, this infinite field of possibilities of movement.

The potential of pre-movement is evident in the flicker of the possible freedom of movement, it is movement liberated from the inevitable, a final decision, movement pulsating in pre-space, in pre-time of its materialisation. The dominant trait of *Dark Landscapes* is the choreographer's refined decision to associate the strict code of classical ballet's abstract movement, i.e. its technique, which is, to Andre Levinson, the very soul of dance, with the concept of potentiality, the infinite field of pre-movement as a space of creation, in other words, a contemporary dance improvisation. A dancer in *Dark Landscapes* decided by herself when and how to perform the chosen ready-made, the chosen arabesque in the middle of the stage. As did Natalia

Horsnell at a certain point, with inspiration, determination and brilliance.

Following the thought of Vladimir Jankélévitch and his "almost nothing" (*le presque-rien*), a dance pre-movement is a movement which is not yet but already is. And this is what Marjana Krajač's choreographic thought pursues. In *Dark Landscapes* the dancers seem to have no past, no future, only a somewhat dystopian present in which they become accomplished through dance art. This barely perceived presentiment of melancholia and evident beauty stems from it, this ideality of the artistic dance gesture in which *everything* was invested to make it so movingly simple. Beautiful and human. Like walking. Falling on the floor. Semi-turn. Glance. Touch of another dancing body.

The very performance of *Dark Landscapes* to us also becomes a sort of ready-made that requires assistance. A continuation. In our memory and observation, in creating text or poetry to the subject, in engendering an image or a subsequent photograph. The most exciting impression is that Marjana Krajač's dances could have always been some other dances than the ones created, watched, observed, analysed. Her dance works set the traps of what they have not (yet) become. We consider these possibilities. We improvise. We take them as pre-movement and we imagine, perhaps, the contemporary sylphs of the 21st century. Refugees from this utterly utilitarian world subjected to liberal capitalism. Sure. Contemporary sylphs are today, in one way or another, necessarily — refugees. And the landscapes have grown darker.

English translation: Ivana Ostojčić

