

Dress as Archetype: Costumes in the Performance Art of Het Wilde Oog.

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to analyse how archetypes of dress are used as costumes in performance art. I will focus on the 'archetype' because this concept allows going beyond the materiality of dress and provides insight into narratives of culture. The archetype is a symbol that represents typical patterns of human nature and a basis for general cultural motifs. Het Wilde Oog is a Dutch theatre atelier initiated by the artists Hans Lemmerman and Inge van Run. For about fifteen years they have been working with three women from the remote village of Spakenburg. These women wear local, traditional dress on a daily basis. Het Wilde Oog made these ordinary women into performers and explored the meaning of their daily outfits as archetypes. In their performances, they introduce other cultural symbols, such as buildings, pieces of art and Dutch traditions.

Key words: Performance Art, Traditional Dress, Archetype, Netherlands

'Our images bear witness to love: love as a force and as engagement in the aggressive world. The women in traditional dress contain a healing power in themselves. This is the archetype.'[Hans Lemmerman]

Sixteen years ago, Dutch artists Hans Lemmerman and Inge van Run met three women from the village of Spakenburg – Corrie, Wijmpje and Hendrikje Koelewijn– and decided to turn them into performers. The two artists established a theatre group called *Het Wilde Oog* (The Wild Eye) and chose for the group's motto: 'To look wild and to think flexibly'. By that time, the three women were among the last in the Netherlands who still wore traditional dress every day. Spakenburg is a remote village in the province of Utrecht, in which most of inhabitants are firmly attached to tradition and religious values. A visual confirmation of this attitude is the local traditional dress that is worn, to this day, by a group of several hundred women. The traditional costumes of Spakenburg are, above all, daily outfits expressing a local identity. In contrast, Lemmerman and van Run invite artists and designers to interfere with the structure and form of the traditional dress. By doing so, they expand a message hidden in it and add new layers of meaning. Thus, the dress becomes more than theatre costume: it is transformed into a work of art.



Het Wilde Oog, 'Diva's and Frans Hals'.

This paper aims to show the meaning of traditional dress in the context of Het Wilde Oog's performance art. It is especially intriguing to observe how the cultural content that is hidden in dress changes when it is taken out of the context of daily life and included in a piece of art. I focus especially on the concept of the 'archetype', which term is not chosen arbitrarily: Lemmerman and van Run themselves call their artistic process 'the quest for archetypes'. They refer to the definition of archetype that was given by Dutch theatre docent Annette de Vries, who introduced it in her theatre and artistic thoughts. De Vries defines an archetype as a 'human primary idea that stays in the collective unconscious' (Vries de, 1994, p. 25).

This article consists of three parts. The first part reflects on traditional dress and its role within Dutch contemporary culture. The second part clarifies the role of the traditional dress of Spakenburg in general, and, more specifically, the role of the three women wearing this dress as a crucial component of the art of Het Wilde Oog. The last part of this paper focuses on the archetypal meaning of dress and the way it changes when transferred from daily life into performance.

The referencematerial includes interviews with the artists, private notes by Hans Lemmerman (Lemmerman, 2017), articles and news about Het Wilde Oog published in Dutch newspapers and, last but not least, field studies and visual sources, such as photographs that are records of performances and the final product of the creation process. Also used were some phrases from the book titled *Van Kniertje tot Diva* (Van Kniertje tot Diva, 2015), with monologues written for the three women from Spakenburg.

Costume and the Dutch culture

Regional dress constitutes a very important part of Dutch national heritage, which has its roots in the 19th-century process of nationalization of the peasant culture (Jong de, 2007). In the past, many types of dress could be found in different regions or villages in the Netherlands, but only in a couple of them has the dress survived as a daily outfit into the 21st century. One of these places is the village of Spakenburg, where, according to research done in 2004, approximately 440 women wore traditional dress. However, that year the youngest of the women was 52, and most of others were in their seventies, eighties, or nineties, so the number of women wearing traditional dress decreased rapidly in the following years (Kramer, 2004). Therefore, the last moments when traditional dress can still be considered a living tradition are upon us. Lemmerman is aware of this, and calls it ‘a turning point in Dutch history’ (Lemmerman, 2017).

The fact that these several hundred women, alone in all the country, persist in wearing their dress in the modern world evokes the interest of anthropologists, tourists, and, last but not least, artists. Some of the artists and fashion designers consider their art as a way to preserve this material heritage. On the other hand, for many of them this aspect is of secondary interest. They find in traditional dress limitless layers of meaning. The dress has materialized the past, and is a tangible attachment to tradition and disappearing values, as well as the community (Kargól, 2015, p. 88-93). In contrast, common people outside of these villages often associate traditional dress with backwardness and assign negative traits to it. In the press, costumes often represent primordial (‘oer’) and typical Dutch culture (Otter, 2009, p. 26-27). For Lemmerman, Spakenburg traditional dress is ultimately a symbol of ‘the world that is disappearing’ (Lemmerman, 2017).

The dress from Spakenburg consists of a long skirt, an apron, and a blouse with short sleeves. The most characteristic part of the outfit is the so-called *kraplap*, a breastcloth made of stiff, starched cotton. The *kraplap* is decorated with floral and geometric motifs. The central, red part of it always remains the same, but the colours of the side parts can range from white to a variety of shades of purple, including a very dark purple (Nieuwhoff, Diepraam, and Oorthuys, 1985, p. 60-62). These different shades correspond to the stages of mourning. In the community of Spakenburg, mourning was worn for members of the extended family, so the ‘out-of-mourning dress’ was rather rarely seen on the street (Lamers-Nieuwenhuis, 1991; 90-97). A monologue, ‘For Corrie’, by the Dutch playwright Gerardjan Rijders, is included in the book *Van Kniertje tot Diva* and reflects on this: ‘I am in mourning. I am actually always in mourning. I don’t even know anymore why I am in mourning’ (*Van Kniertje tot Diva*, p. 77). This mourning aspect of the traditional dress culture is a returning motif in Het Wilde Oog’s performances. The artists are fascinated by the different forms of garments and, in particular, by their ability to convey a personal message.

Costume in the performance art of Het Wilde Oog

The meaning of traditional dress in the art of Het Wilde Oog cannot be separated from the life narratives and personalities of the three women. It is worth mentioning that the three cousins from Spakenburg had never before had any affiliation with art, although they were very conscious of their role in preserving traditions. Working with Het Wilde Oog meant for them leaving the boundaries of their own community and discovering the world of modern art (Eversdijk, 2012). They became at the same time performers and works of art. Lemmerman writes about this in his notes: ‘These women do not match the expectations of society: they reflect the life that is almost disappearing, they also appeal to a time when ideals were important. They are icons of style in the last age of traditional dress. The women are crystal clear in their tradition. Literally and figuratively. The viewer experiences this as archetypal’ (Lemmerman, 2017). It is this authenticity and faithfulness that make the women so special for Het Wilde Oog. ‘As soon as they are a part of art, they become timeless’ (Lemmerman, 2017). Even though these ladies are taken out of their daily context, they still evoke traditional associations, because ‘they embody the past and their community’ (Lemmerman, 2017). The art of Het Wilde Oog is meant to add extra layers of meaning to the historically and sociologically determined roles of women.



Het Wilde Oog, ‘From Kniertje to Diva’.

Het Wilde Oog is especially fond of the costume of Spakenburg, and, above all, of ‘the starched kraplap, which covers the upper body and is a kind of necklace’ (Lemmerman, 2017). The artists consider them as powerful images in which the women wrap themselves. The images express their individual and group identity. As a part of the performance, the costumes always belong to someone. Even when the kraplap appears as an object not necessarily worn by a person, it carries a memory of an unknown individual to whom it used to belong in the past. This aspect is very explicitly brought forward in the project *Van Kniertje tot Diva*. In the performance art project *Corrie and Joseph*, an artistically re-created kraplap becomes somehow an energy

field that has the ability to heal wounds. For this reason, it should be awarded to someone who deserves it. Het Wilde Oog realizes that we are witnessing the last chapter of the history of traditional dress worn in daily life. In her monologue in *Van Kniertje tot Diva*, written by Pauline Mol, Hendrikje is asking: ‘Where will we lay our aprons, our patches, our treasures? Who will adopt them? Who will put them on?’ (*Van Kniertje tot Diva*, p. 43). Lemmerman calls the dress ‘a frozen history’ (Lemmerman, 2017). Yet, the costumes, as frozen history, have their continuation by being a part of the present performance. The art gives them a kind of afterlife.

Costume as archetype

The aforementioned Annette de Vries gives, in her book *De Afstand Tot de Maan*, interpretations of the archetype theory of the famous psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, and hence explains how it could possibly be applied to theatre art (Vries de, 1994, p. 17-27).

The topic of archetype is a significant subject of life. Hidden behind the dress from Spakenburg are primary ideas such as the past, traditional values, heritage, and identity. According to de Vries archetype is *recognizable and accessible to everyone* (Vries de, 1994, p. 25). Dutch regional dress belongs to the canon of national symbols. The dress survived until the 21st century, but only in remote communities, and for that reason it embodied the conservative attitudes of their members.

Lemmerman, in his notes, also discloses his thoughts on archetypes. In his definition, Lemmerman replaces *recognizable* with *perceptible*. For him, the perception of Spakenburg and the women wearing traditional dress is more about seeing and feeling than about the common knowledge or connotations about the village and its inhabitants that are pervasive in Dutch society. ‘Archetype is as much about heart as about mind’ (Lemmerman, 2017). For example, as mentioned earlier, one of the most important messages expressed by traditional dress was the state of mourning. However, people do not always recognize the precise stage of mourning; rather, they can instinctively feel the message hidden in a dress. A dark dress, such as strong violet hue of kraplap, is often associated with grief.

Furthermore, an archetype is not unilateral (Vries de, 1994, p. 25). Likewise, the meaning of traditional dress is definitely not one-sided. Some people regard such costumes as remarkable traditions. For others, the conservative attitude of women who have never stopped wearing their traditional outfits is seen as a negative. The next quality of an archetype is that it expresses itself in symbolic language, but can also disguise itself in an everyday realistic shape (Vries de, 1994, p. 25). Het Wilde Oog sees traditional dress as a symbolic item, or even as a magical one, because it belongs to a disappearing world. However, in its original context the dress is simply part of daily life.

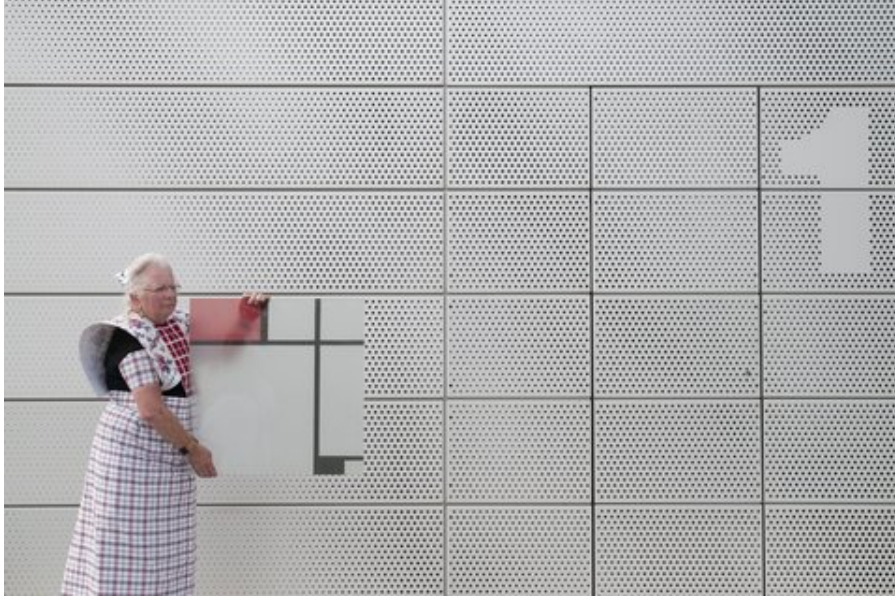
For the artists of Het Wilde Oog, women in traditional dress are archetypal images of women, such as the Madonna. In the performance that took place in the Soestdijk Palace, the former residence of Queen Juliana of Orange, the women paid homage to female icons such as Medea, Maria Magdalena, Mata Hari, Marilyn Monroe and Mother Theresa. Yet, the women from Spakenburg are themselves icons. They represent in themselves the archetype of a strong

and faithful woman who knows suffering too. The tradition, which they wear on and in themselves, ennoble them, and makes them belong to this fellowship of distinguished women.



Het Wilde Oog, 'Diva's in the Soestdijk Palace'.

The dress in performance does not lose its primary meanings because associations attached to it are strongly rooted in the mindset of the Dutch. Het Wilde Oog plays a great deal with the content of culture commonly known in the Netherlands, but also with that which is recognized abroad as typically Dutch. Lemmerman writes: 'Het Wilde Oog is looking for those images that will settle in the collective memory and become part of visual culture. Archetype is about revealing and activating. A feature of archetypes is that they make an appeal to inner images. Inner images are strong – they have ambiguity, are still open' (Lemmerman, 2017). Thus, the meaning of traditional dress within art is a fusion of primary ideas hidden behind the dress and new connotations. These new meanings occur when we put the traditional dress together with other symbols belonging to Dutch canon of visual culture, such as architecture (e.g., Schröderhuis in Utrecht, designed by Gerrit Rietveld, or the Soestdijk Palace) or art (e.g., Mondriaan, Armando). The juxtaposition of these pieces of art and traditional dress creates a constellation of primary images.



Het Wilde Oog, 'Hendrikje with Mondriaan'.

Het Wilde Oog also references pieces from this international history of art. In one of their performances, Corrie is walking in front of Daniel Libeskind's work *Polderland Garden of Love and Fire* (1997). Lemmerman describes it as follows: 'Corrie with her stroller walks past Libeskind's work and we capture the sacred moment, the moment when the archetypal comes into the picture, when images merge or collide' (Lemmerman, 2017).

Further, Het Wilde Oog refers to Dutch history, such as that of the former Zuiderzee, which was a bay of the North Sea before it was closed off by a dam (the so-called Afsluitdijk) in the first half of the 20th century. On the land, which was subsequently reclaimed by means of polders and drainage, the Dutch built the twelfth province, Flevoland (Mersbergen van, 2007). In the project *Divas in Flevoland*, the three women appear in a landscape typical of this province, but where, instead of traditional windmills, only modern turbines can be seen. The landscape with turbines refers to development over time and looks into the future. Women from Spakenburg, a village that also belonged to the Zuiderzee area, are, in this context, a last link to the past. In this image, the past and the present day are contrasted and embodied by cultural symbols. Likewise, in *Spakenburg Fashion* new outfits inspired by traditional dress from Spakenburg were accompanied by the turbines, instead of windmills (Lemmerman, 2009, p. 78-88). In this project, traditional dress stands also for sustainability, to which Lemmerman assigns an archetypal energy. Yet, the archetype occurs again in the collision of two images.



Het Wilde Oog, 'Diva's in Flevoland'.

Final remarks

Traditional dress is archetypal because it evokes certain emotions and associations, such as the past, traditional values, heritage, and identity, that are connected with the cultural heritage. This article has elaborated how traditional dress has been transformed into a piece of art in the performance art of Het Wilde Oog and, consequently, in this new form has been added to the canon of art history. This canon consists of images and objects that are universally recognizable, and these particular images speak to the Dutch collective unconscious. The most important feature of an archetype is that it is open and multifaceted. Likewise, the performance art of Het Wilde Oog is open to different interpretations. Traditional dress itself has different meanings in its natural environment, which do not entirely disappear when the dress is taken out of this environment and set in a new context of other images. On the contrary, it is enriched with new content. Yet, this is not the end of this quest for meanings. Eventually, the viewer will add his or her own layers too, by recalling his or her own inner images. Even though the images are rooted in the collective unconscious, they can vary widely, as they arouse various associations. Traditional dress disappearing from daily life is archetypal in itself. The archetypal image of the costumes within the performance art is inverted and uprooted from its reality, and at the same time it is strengthened. The viewer experiences it as collision of two notions: dress as heritage and dress as piece of art.

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