

Methodology of the Spiral

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'When you start writing down your poems you've forgotten how to dance.'
– Ulla Ryum¹

Introduction

I had my first (and only human) child just a few months before starting on this doctoral research. I was, and still am, convinced that part of the reason I managed to formulate an application that got me into this quite competitive program was because at the time of writing it I had two hearts, two brains and two stomachs. However, the experience of entering what felt like a new temporality for making work – the deepening and long-term perspective of research – together with having a child (as a queer person and late in life) and being continually interrupted by the various and immediate demands for sustenance and attention, was quite overpowering. I could no longer sense the boundaries of my body as I was sensorially intermeshed with all kinds of new gestures and movements, impressions, sounds, smells, and textures. This new situation evoked sensory registers such as play, depression, joy, familiarity, sexuality and avoidance, all within rhythms of a very tactile kind of care. Other things demanded my attention, and in ways other than before. Other pleasures, other possibilities in the body, required other methods, ones that would allow for temporal discontinuity and material investment. Even if it ever was a functioning model, which is far from certain, the idea that in order to become a person (or artist) one must have access to a vision of oneself as a being free from interruption with a right to bodily integrity, had been put out of action. As a result, I was unable to keep hold of my previous ways of making work.

In this search for a different methodology, which allows for temporal discontinuity and material investment, I will begin with what Emanuela Bianchi calls 'aleatory time'. This involves an understanding of time as something that emanates through bodily experience – a monstrous and queer corollary that disrupts and interrupts the Aristotelian distinctions between activity and passivity, and form and matter, from within. I will then shortly touch upon the legacy of conceptual art as a defining (and limiting) methodology, which is both the context within which my art practice was initially formed and against which I now wish to formulate an alternative methodology. This brings me to the main inquiry of this text, which is an elaboration and examination of the non-linear, spiral dramaturgy, as formulated by the dramaturg, author, playwright, and theorist Ulla Ryum. According to Ryum, one

1 Quoted in Per Brask, 'Performance in the Fourth World: An Interview with Ulla Ryum', in *Aboriginal Voices: Amerindian, Inuit and Sami Theater*, eds. Per Brask and William Morgan (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

of the problems with contemporary film dramaturgy is that it has largely chosen its concepts from the most experience driven theatre that Western European high culture has developed, namely bourgeois theatre and its development of Aristotelian narrative technique. Drawing from her experiences of working with nomadic theatre and within local narrative traditions, Ryum proposes that we abandon this conflict-led linear model of understanding time and structuring stories and, instead, move into the spiralling formation, emphasising difference, bodily experience, and dynamic relationships to time, that she calls the spiral dramaturgy. Through the configuration of her dramaturgy, and by placing it in dialogue with new materialist feminist thinking, I wish to follow Ryum into a spiral that expands, rather than reduces, the proliferation of perspectives for film (and art).

Aleatory time / unlearning conceptual art

When Emanuela Bianchi asks if gender has a time, she does so with a political aim of describing modes of temporality that counter the supposed universality of linear time – disputing examples of sport, labour, and travel as paradigms of free movement.² Through the work of Marion Young and other thinkers, Bianchi connects movement in pregnancy and childcare with a sort of spatial awareness emanating from the body. She characterises this as ‘aleatory’ or ‘interruptive’ time. The pregnant body feels the movements of another within itself without inflicting a sense of alienation or fear, such as might occur with an illness. Instead, these movements become an integral part of whatever other activities are going on at the same time. This interruptive time, however, is not a passive state, but instead one that indicates a kind of being in time that is simultaneously the passive capacity *to be interrupted* and the active ability *to interrupt*. It is a sensual corporeal immersion, where the flows of rhythms in time and of matter (beginning with the iambic maternal heartbeat) are not known or conceived in advance, but evolve as a kind of improvisational dance. They are entangled ‘sensorimotor relations of call and response, call-response, anticipation, play and interruption’,³ holding a temporal logic that resists the possibility of any fixed identity. But as Bianchi points out, it is never *about* motherhood. Instead, these are ultimately queer temporalities and modes of modality that operate with different temporal logics, such as those of the nightclub, the bathhouse, the bar, or certain parts of the park – places that ‘come alive when good children are

2 Emanuela Bianchi, ‘The Interruptive Feminine: Aleatory Time and Feminist Politics’, in *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, eds. Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni, and Fanny Söderbäck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 40.

3 Bianchi, ‘The Interruptive Feminine’, 41.

sleeping'.⁴ When described by the dramaturg, author, and theorist Ulla Ryum, whose work I will examine further below, the temporal logic of something like aleatory time is considered through relating the space of the theatre to that of the restaurant industry: 'it is about being present in a situation, about daring the paradoxical.'⁵

Finding myself immersed in this improvisational dance of aleatory time also activated an ongoing process of unlearning a kind of methodology that has shaped my thoughts and practice until today – namely that of conceptual art. With this, I am referring broadly to the art genre that began to emerge with the rise of Modernism, and then formed into its key phase, with the first wave, stretching from end of the 1960s to the end of the 70s, and then continuing into second and third generations and beyond, with the post- and neo-conceptual art of the 1990s and onwards. In this most general form, conceptual art contains the perception that what makes art relevant or specific are not the objects or matters themselves, but rather the *idea* or *concept* of the work. As such, it puts emphasis on (human) language and on representation – on what things *mean* rather than what they *do* – regardless of whether the medium is the immaterial idea itself or an artefact that is, so to say, imbued with ideas. Conceptual art was there as a sort of given during my art school years, permeating all levels of my education, I believe, partly because of its strong connection to language and to pedagogy. But in fact, it goes well beyond its pedagogy as it has an internal logic and historizing effect that, as in an act of 'structural magic',⁶ seems to place most other artistic expressions, regardless of time, cultural origin, material specificity or geographical context, in relation to the United States in the 1960s.

Minimalist and conceptual artist Sol LeWitt writes in *Artforum* in June 1967 that: 'In conceptual art, the idea of concept is the most important

4 Bianchi, 'The Interruptive Feminine', 41.

5 Ulla Ryum, 'Om hvorfor hoteller ligner teatre!' [About why hotels resemble theatres!], in *Når kvinder skriver: en antologi*, ed. Susi Frastein (Tiderne Skifter, 1985).

6 'Structural magic' is a concept borrowed from artist Liv Bugge as presented in her research *The Other Wild – Touching art as confrontation*, 2019. Bugge looks at how, in secular democracies where magical practices are otherwise ridiculed and shattered by capitalism and normativity, some of what we might recognise as magical practices are characterised as structures of power with a transformative purpose (such as the court case). She exemplifies this mainly through two institutions: the prison system and the geological museum. Drawing from Angela Davis, Bugge discusses how the prison system not only masks racism, but acts as a paranormal phenomenon, where unwanted people (because of socio-political problems like poverty, mental disorders, drug abuse, and lack of education) are made to disappear from the regular society. In a similar act of structural magic, the paleontological process of dating fossils by placing them on a linear timeline enables the disappearance of the material world (fossil, rock etcetera) into a great void of history, a process that further enables us to see them as passive resources and to handle and govern them as such.

aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand, and the execution is a perfunctory affair.⁷

There is an odd ease to this idea of the making as a ‘perfunctory affair’. A peculiar separation between the subject and the material world they inhabit. One that centralises the (human) brain as prior to other senses, beings, or objects; suggesting, as it seems, that it is possible to make clear distinctions between being and thinking, subject or object – passivity and activity. Again, finding myself in this interruptive time, immersed in the matters of life, suddenly nothing felt more unreal to me than the legacy of art in which the idea of the work itself is separate from, and prior to, material concerns, taking precedence over them. Of course, ‘we need concepts to think with’,⁸ as Elizabeth Grosz states, while emphasising that these concepts are not for predicting what will be, but as movements that reach beyond ourselves; not as processes of prior planning, that is, involving a linear temporality, but instead as another method to ‘think our way in a world of forces we do not control’⁹ – a world where matter is interruptive and time aleatory. In a similar way, and as if directly addressing the legacy of conceptual art, Ulla Ryum concludes that ‘any process dominated by prior planning will inevitably reproduce one power structure or another.’¹⁰

This account is of course a simplification of conceptual art – a cultural movement that has been ongoing and transforming over long periods of time, and which includes feminist and land art works that are very close to my heart. I do not intend to dismiss conceptualism’s critique of the romantic notion of the genius, or modernist essentialism. But nevertheless, it suffers a tendency to reduce things into stand-ins for representation, intentions, meanings, symbols, signs and power. Within the conception of conceptual art, everything becomes conceptual. Confirming and maintaining this distance between the self and the material world runs the risk of concealing some of the multiple ways in which things come to us, in all their liveliness, as well as our options for seeing the world as habitable and animate. In other words, if there are concepts without practices (or matter), then what is there to testify to how we are involved in the world?

7 Sol LeWitt ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’, *Artforum*, 5:10 (Summer 1967), 80. Also available at https://monoskop.org/images/3/3d/LeWitt_Sol_1967_1999_Paragraphs_on_Conceptual_Art.pdf last accessed 22/04/2024.

8 Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 80–81.

9 Grosz, *Becoming Undone*

10 Quote from the film *The Spiral Dramaturgy*, dir. Kajsa Dahlberg 2019. (My translation)

A work that emerged in the same context as conceptual art, but which nonetheless also questions its assumptions of linear temporality and conceptual priority, is Robert Smithson's artwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970), located on the northeast shore of the Great Salt Lake near Rozel Point in Utah. It is simultaneously a kind of materialist inquiry into more-than-human size relations *and* a manifestation of the human ability to move thousands of tons of basalt rock into a 460-metre-long and 4.6-metre-wide counter-clockwise spiral. Smithson describes the relationship of the work with the Devonian, Silurian and Carboniferous geological periods. It is, as he writes, 'Mud, salt crystal, rocks, water. Mud, salt crystal, rocks, water.'¹¹ We must keep adding to that list: Archaeobacteria and salt-water shrimp; calcium sulphate and magnesium chloride; toxic sludge from oil excavation; quicksilver and cyanide from decades of mineral extraction and settler colonial destruction of Indigenous people's land and livelihood. 'One seizes the spiral,' Smithson writes, 'and the spiral becomes a seizure.'¹²

Let us embrace that bodily reaction for a moment – its spiralling affect.

Into the spiral

In order to enter into this spiral, I will consider the work of the dramaturg, author, playwright, and theorist Ulla Ryum, and her dramaturgical model called the spiral dramaturgy. I have been interested in Ryum's work since it was introduced to me by a friend, colleague and former student of her, Gritt Uldall-Jessen, some two decades ago. I had a recording of an interview with her from 2011, when Uldall-Jessen and I visited Ryum at her home in Præstø, south of Copenhagen. I had documented this conversation, which went on for several hours, on video. At the time, however, we felt she was not answering our questions the way we had anticipated, making us somewhat confused, and hence the material had been sitting in my studio, untouched for years. In order to reengage with Ryum's thinking and practice, I picked it up again.

My initial engagement with Ryum came precisely from my interest in her work with the spiral dramaturgy. Although her practice originated from within the field of theatre, she has worked across several media including film and television. She taught at Statens Teaterskole in Denmark from 1975 and was the director at both the Danish Radio Theatre and at the Royal Theatre's Intimate Stage. Also, as she repeatedly states throughout our hours of interview, she worked numerous

11 Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 149.

12 Smithson, *The Collected Writings*, 147.

random jobs at factories making Smørrebrød – a practice that for Ryum had everything to do with storytelling. Her work influenced a generation of women filmmakers in Scandinavia, and she lived and worked with Mai Zetterling in her film collective in France for many years.

Ryum's spiral dramaturgy emerged out of what she identified as a need for dramaturgical working tools other than those of Aristotelian suspense. The non-linear spiral dramaturgy that she developed is indebted to her living and working in Ammarnäs and then visiting and revisiting Sápmi from the mid 1950s onwards.¹³ She was heavily influenced by how Indigenous and nomadic theatre traditions combine standardised dramaturgy with their own. Her work came to draw on a rich lineage of Indigenous and nomadic theatre, dance and other narrative traditions and dramaturgic techniques that often exist in the range between epic techniques of drama, shamanism, performance art, mythical material, and local narrative traditions – while developing her own circular and non-linear dramaturgical model. In the 1980s, Ryum held a series of workshops in Kautokeino and presented her thoughts on the spiral dramaturgy at a Sámi playwright and drama seminar, organised by Nordisk Teaterkomité in September 1985, on the occasion of the newly founded Norwegian Sámi theatre Beaivväs.¹⁴ Her work influenced an already thriving performance and theatre culture partaking in the struggle for decolonisation, political recognition, and cultural independence in Sápmi. At the conference of the International Association of Scandinavian Studies (IASS) in Gdansk, Poland, in 2008, theatre professor David Schuler referred to Ryum's work when discussing how the plays of Finnish-Sámi artist and playwright Nils-Aslak Valkeapää are built up around the narrative structure of the joik.¹⁵ With reference to Ryum's spiral or circular dramaturgy, Schuler shows how the singing music of the joik – characterised by a reciting way of singing with repetition and variation based on short formulas and special vocal techniques – create portraits of landscapes and people without the need for any given narrative.

According to Ryum, while visual media has to a large extent developed in relation to experience driven Aristotelian dramaturgy (for hegemonic, economic, and political reasons), theatre has had the advantage of developing many different dramaturgies directly related to local

13 Brask, 'Performance in the Fourth World'.

14 Knut Ove Arntzen 'Sámi and indigenous Theatre, The Nomadic Perspective and the Notion of a Spiral Dramaturgy'. *TRANS Nr 19 Internet Journal for Cultural Studies*. <https://www.inst.at/trans/19/sami-and-indigenous-theatre/> last accessed 22/04/2024.

15 Knut Ove Arntzen 'Arctic Drama to Sámi Theatre – Cultural Clashes Towards Decolonisation: in Shared Dialogic Spaces', *Art History & Criticism* 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.2478/mik-2021-0008> last accessed 22/04/2024.

communities and specific audiences who are able to influence the performance as it happens (and thereby also the message of what is being performed). Although her work with indigenous theatre groups contains a desire to transmit the dramaturgies and technologies of production so that these groups can represent themselves instead of being constantly represented by others, her work accommodates an inherent sensitivity and responsiveness as to how audiences are formed in relation to specific environments, as well as social and political contexts. As she points out, teaching people about Western storytelling techniques is simple. The important challenge is to learn and to be attentive to processes of reciprocity, multiplicity, acceptance, and change. 'I listen and I watch – that is the beginning of the dramaturgical process', she states.¹⁶ Ryum passes on these experiences to the field of film and visual media and, as such, challenges the assumption that the audience already exists, and that the work of the filmmaker is to meet the needs of this so-called audience. Transferred to the practices of filmmaking, it is never about genre or about controlling the narrative through self-affirmative ideas of expressions or culture – it is never about power, control, or claiming a special status – but about questioning hegemonic and patriarchal filmic codes and conventions in ways that open for multiplicity, simultaneity, and to expressions of generous inclusion.

The spiral dramaturgy and nonlinear time

According to Ryum, the ability to experience coherence is not only linked to our ability to analytically understand things or to a logical principle of development. We contain, within ourselves, a simultaneity that run across and against 'chrononormative'¹⁷ spaces of time. As Ryum puts it, 'We can feel old, be experienced as even older, while we take completely young actions which in themselves lay the foundation for future/utopian developments.'¹⁸ This notion of the experience of time, which recalls Bianchi's aleatory time, is perhaps the most important difference between linear and non-linear storytelling techniques. For Ryum, there is no such thing as an accomplished, or coherent, causality. Instead, the cause-effect relationship has a reciprocal effect in which associative processes define the course of action instead of the linearity of actions. The awareness that there are many spaces of time is the result of a process – an ever-expanding insight and realisation – that is not necessarily based on a causal connection, but is rather the result of a kind of stream of consciousness.

16 Per Brask, 'Performance in the Fourth World', 116.

17 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

18 Ulla Ryum, 'Om den ikke-aristoteliske fortaelleteknik' [On the non-Aristotelian narrative technique]. Report from the seminar *Dramatikern i dialog med sin samtid* (Oslo: Nordiska Teaterkommittén, 1982, 15–16. (My translation)

But this stream-like consciousness is inherently also a critical mind. According to Ryum, one of the aspects constitutive of Aristotelian suspense dramaturgy is that one should ‘clear’ the story of everything that does not advance the progression of the plot. When following this logic, one position excludes and displaces the other in a progressive development that cannot be reversed, and that ‘forces’ the spectator to accept the conditions of the plot – to think, criticise, judge, and experience, only within the framework of its given conditions. As such, it is a model that reduces the space for interpretation. Within a non-linear dramaturgy, however, a conscious connection between the scenes can be developed in numerous different ways as it is ‘not about building a logically coherent course, but about putting together a mosaic from which the audience can draw elements for their own forms of understanding of the problem under investigation’.¹⁹ By including the time dimension in which the audience’s experience is located, the non-linear dramaturgy of the spiral opens up to the spectator’s own level of awareness, giving the viewer the opportunity to search around in the course of the story. Through this dynamic relationship to time and space, a common ethical room is created with space to accommodate difference and disagreement, one that gives the viewer the possibility to *search around* instead of *looking forward*. As filmmaker Ingela Romare writes in a text about her encounters with Ryum’s work: ‘Instead of tying the audience’s tension to the question: “How will it go? How will it go?” which implies a movement forwards, one could structure the audience’s interest around the question: “How is it – really?” which implies a movement inwards, towards a shared observation.’²⁰

Within this shared observation there is as much emphasis on elements such as music, sound, body, gesture, objects, and place, as on the ‘unleashed’ human speech. The actors do not take it upon themselves to *lead* a character. The non-linear dramaturgy does not operate with the value system of a main character in relation to supporting characters as in the Aristotelian character building/development. Characters are not ‘realised’ or ‘completed’ but are understood in terms of ‘whole globes’, each with their own roots, needs, passions, and consciousness. Where the linear model is understood as hierarchical and conflict led, the non-linear model is instead organised around a central question that is allowed to grow, spirally, and as an open-ended consideration. It formulates questions, begins investigations, and then lets the observer do the work. No actual conflict resolution takes place. Instead, the story formally ends when the question under investigation is understood to have been considered in as many ways necessary.

19 Ulla Ryum, ‘Om den ikke-aristoteliske fortælle teknik’, 13. (My translation)

20 Romare, Ingela, ‘Arbetet för jämställdhet i film fyller 40!’, *Nordic Women in Film*, April 2016. <https://nordicwomeninfilm.com/kreativitet-kraft-och-gladje-i-skff/> last accessed 22/04/2024. (My translation)

From model to (non) methodology

Ryum's spiral dramaturgy is based on the principle that the linear and progressive understandings of time come at the expense of the material, and ecological conditions of our lives. Just as all beings are different from, and more than, the sum of their analysable components, a play or a film is always different from and more than the dramaturgically analysable components. Although the spiral dramaturgy constitutes a kind of 'model', Ryum makes sure to point out that it is only a functioning model insofar as it is set in motion by practice, and that this practice is responsive to the many tones of overlapping and parallel actions set in oscillation by the story. The non-linear dramaturgy of the spiral seeks associative connections between images, rather than maintaining continuity; repetition (meaning, repetitions that never reproduce or lead to the same) before development; and dynamic, rather than progressive, time. It allows for the story to be influenced by the process itself and the world through which it emerges – it stays open for things to happen along the way.

Throughout our conversation with Ryum, she kept taking us around, refusing to tell a straight story. It 'takes the time it takes',²¹ as she says of the relation to her nonlinear temporal logic. About halfway through our conversation with her, there is a moment in which we ask yet another of our (too many all-too-clever and well formulated) questions, and instead of answering the question: *What was the background for you conceiving this dramaturgical model?* she tells a long story about a baby elephant with which she once developed a relationship while traveling with a circus in Italy. She tells us how she took it upon herself to care for this elephant. She understood that it had been stolen away from its mother way too early. She washed it and collected hairs from its back. Let it sleep in her tent. She tells us how it first came bumping into her tent at night. How it waved its trunk across her nose and face and how she let it come into her tent to sleep. The elephant loved to snuggle, and she describes at length, the sensation of hugging a baby elephant.

In the follow up question: *Was there anything else...?* she begins: 'I always had the feeling that there were other ways of telling a story, that were more open and that provided room. But above all, that there was an opening up for searching around in the course of the story. One in which you were not nervous or out of your mind at the thought of sudden surprises that might not belong to the story.'²²

21 Ulla Ryum, 'Om den ikke-aristoteliske fortaelle teknik', 3. (My translation)

22 Quote from the film *The Spiral Dramaturgy*, dir. Kajsa Dahlberg 2019. (My translation)

Considering the work of Ryum does not only include considering spiral or non-linear methods for making film or telling stories (the model itself). More importantly, it also entails considering what this model means for the processes themselves, what kind of methodology it brings about. Along with others, such as for example science-fiction writer Ursula Le Guin²³, Ryum is interested in what figures appear if one stops looking for a hero. The drive for control is replaced by insight, collective knowledge, and a striving for the elimination of dramatic conflict as a starting point for creating dramaturgical tension. It seeks associative connections and unexpected openings between elements of the story, as well as between past, present, and future. As such, Ryum's practice of refusing linearity opens up questions around what elements and what processes are part of making expressions possible, and by what temporalities? It follows the post-humanist urge to join ontology (being) and epistemology (knowledge), into 'ontoepistemology', where it is not possible to make any distinction between being and thinking, subject or object; as such, it might be understood as a kind of (non) methodology.

Patterns of difference

In her article on the non-Aristotelian storytelling technique, Ryum writes about 'aim' – be it a dramaturgical aim, or the aiming of a camera – as a kind of reciprocal moment.²⁴ In our interview, she says: 'when you take aim at something you're also given something... when you take aim, what you're aiming at also looks back at you, and in doing so, tells its story'.²⁵ This corresponds with what physicist and philosopher Karen Barad calls 'intra-action'. If 'interaction' implies the idea of two separately contained and independent entities that meet, 'intra-action', instead, describes the inability to be separate. As individuals we do not pre-exist our interactions, Barad argues, as we cannot observe the world from the outside. Instead, we 'emerge through and as part of [our] entangled intra-relating'.²⁶ Like all aspects of life, the one aiming and the one being aimed at are always already entangled.

But the dramaturgical model that Ryum describes is also always more than an aiming device. In another account, she exemplifies this through the example of the action of throwing stones into water, observing how their vertical movement through the water creates the pattern of

23 Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (ignota.org: Ignota Books, 2019).

24 Ulla Ryum, 'Om den ikke-aristoteliske fortælle teknik', 6. (My translation)

25 Quote from the film 'The Spiral Dramaturgy', dir. Kajsa Dahlberg 2019. (My translation)

26 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 184.

concentric rings on the surface of the water, which, in extension, overlap and extend into new interfering patterns. Although Ryum never refers to it as such, what she is talking about are the disturbances that, according to classical physics, are called a ‘diffraction’ pattern. According to Barad, and from the perspective of quantum physics, ‘we can understand diffraction patterns – as patterns of difference that make a difference – to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world’.²⁷ Considered through feminist theory, diffraction is a phenomenon that is used, figuratively, to describe modes of thought and models of identity that are attentive to difference. Donna Haraway expands on this by considering diffraction as an optical metaphor. Contrasted with the metaphor of reflectivity as the traditional way of producing (scientific) knowledge, Haraway proposes diffraction as a more useful metaphor for the work that needs to be done. While reflection signifies mirroring, sameness, and a practice that ‘only displaces the same elsewhere’,²⁸ diffraction becomes an ‘optical metaphor for making a difference in the world.’²⁹ This mode for thinking, according to Haraway, is one that gives us the opportunity to accommodate how differences are being created in the world, and what effects they have on bodies and individuals. Ryum suggests something similar when speaking about repetition based in difference, where the returning pattern of the spiral comes back, but never to the exact same place. As she says herself, the spiral dramaturgy becomes useful exactly because ‘it organises with certain forms of difference.’³⁰

Filmmaker and literary theorist Trinh Minh-ha speaks of a similar kind of difference, one that is radically unlike the apartheid-based, segregation type based in a patriarchal conception of difference in terms of biological essences. Through Minh-ha’s account, difference ‘is not opposed to sameness, nor synonymous with separateness’,³¹

27 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 72.

28 Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16. The full sentence reads: ‘Reflexivity [As an optical metaphor in Western philosophy and science] has been much recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere, setting up the worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real.’ Here, I would like to point to how Haraway’s alternative optical metaphor, and the idea that reflexivity activates ‘worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real’, connects to what Jean Epstein argues for (as put forward in my other text *Filming with the Ocean*) when he disputes the idea of the mechanism of cinema as a mere extension of human faculties (as representation, copy or simulacrum), and instead asserts that images appear through the joint apparatus made up of body (coenaesthesia), the camera as an ‘intelligent machine’, and the material world.

29 Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse*, 16.

30 Quote from our conversation with Ulla Ryum that is not in the film. (My translation)

31 Trinh Minh-ha ‘Questions of Images and Politics’, *The Independent* Vol. 10, No. 4 (May 1987), 21–23.

as it contains both differences and similarities. She writes: ‘Difference is not otherness. And while otherness has its laws and interdictions, difference always implies the interdependency of these two-sided feminist gestures: that of affirming “I am like you” while pointing insistently to the difference; and that of reminding “I am different” while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.’³² Parallel to Ryum’s opposition to Aristotelian linear storytelling as the overriding dramaturgical and hegemonical ideology, and in which conflict is often that which serves to define identities, Minh-ha suggests that we replace conflict with difference. This seems to be the matter at hand for both Ryum and Minh-ha: the concern that that we have become so used to looking for conflict that we are unable to perceive difference. We need to learn that ‘difference is not what makes conflicts. It is beyond and alongside conflict.’³³ When thinking *with* Ryum (or *nearby* as Minh-ha might suggest in order to emphasise that very difference), filmmaking becomes a practice that urges us to be sensitive to difference. One that allows us to engage in reciprocal relationships with the world. For Ryum, this is a matter of being in touch. It is a practice that requires care and that affects how we care. Ryum’s outward moving spirals seems to diffract what Haraway calls a ‘promising interference patterns on the recording films of our lives and bodies.’³⁴

Being in the spiral

Ryum’s writings and accounts are often concrete, stemming from bodily experience and told through lived life. She describes storytelling as a process of pulling things out of her fingers. This is the storyteller’s method for structuring and remembering. She uses her thumbs to remember and then draw the different elements of the story from her fingers. For important things like teaching, it is the right hand. When it is her own imagination – the broad expanses of storytelling – it is the left.

For Ryum, the practice of storytelling is something that should equip us to survive our struggles in life, and part of this struggle is ‘placing the words, so they don’t impede the movements of the body, and to get the movements of the body to underpin all the fine, small nuances of words.’³⁵ In a text called ‘Music “dance” words / word “dance”’³⁶ from 1985, Ryum describes her realisation, as a child, that words and music are not the same expression (that they could be related but were not

32 Minh-ha ‘Questions of Images and Politics’.

33 Minh-ha ‘Questions of Images and Politics’.

34 Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse*, 16.

35 Quote from the film *The Spiral Dramaturgy*, dir. Kajsa Dahlberg, 2019. (My translation)

36 Ulla Ryum, ‘Musik “danse” ord / ord “danse”’, *Modspil*, nr. 28, 1985.

the same). Growing up, she often refused to articulate words so that they could be understood by others. Instead, she hummed the syllables and beat the rhythm of the 'understandable word' with her hands, either against a table or her thigh, something that developed into a kind of dance though which she felt as if she was able to move more quickly. She describes this activity as one that redressed her into a kind of pleasurable remoteness, bordering on joy and a with a warmth that had colours – a state of mind that was often abruptly interrupted by the adult world, demanding that she account for what it was that she was muttering (or fussing) about. It is as if Ryum, here, express the experience of Bianchi's aleatory time, one in which the sense of time (of suddenly moving more quickly through space) springs from bodily experience and gestural material, all intimately connected to both practice and environment. Ryum recalls this humming word-dance years later as she, while directing one of her plays at a theatre, suddenly felt unable to tell the actors how to stand and walk while speaking their lines. It gripped her as a terrifying powerlessness, knowing that she had once been able to do something that was not so far from what she was now trying to do on a stage. She spent years considering dramaturgical working tools that would allow her to attune to the many responsive relationships between music, dance, and the inner movements of words. Part of this work resulted in the spiral dramaturgy.

Immediately after filming the conversation with Ryum, Uldall-Jessen and I were stunned, unsure of what it was, that we had just been through. We were even thinking, at the time, that we might have come 'too late' – whatever that meant. We interpreted the lack of straight answers as vulnerability and considered our need for guidance as unfulfilled. Thinking back, it was as if we could not anticipate that the spiral could be a real space and defined through life lived. However, when revisiting the material now, years later, it becomes clear that it was never only a dramaturgical model. Ryum seems immediately at ease in the aleatory time of Bianchi, one in which movement is plural and engaged rather than unified and singly directed. She seems to have an endless capacity for making connections between wildly disparate things: Being here and there; now and then; present and absent. She pays attention to what is outside the window, as well as to the shifting reactions in our faces. Even that which escapes memory is ever-present, with the awareness of what it means to grow closer to the end of a life's work. Editing the material felt like a sensitive and important matter. Like an improvisational dance, moving between control, power, attention, while holding on to the spiral.

The story of this particular research began with the search for a methodology. One that would get the work done, not despite temporal discontinuity and material investment, but through, and because of, it. As such, it is described as a shift away from a position in which the (art)work itself is understood as prior to its involvement with the materialities of the world – one that risks only consolidating and reinforcing the (power) structures and (human) perspectives through which it appears – towards a methodology radically affected by process. What makes the process important, Ryum says, is that it tells us something about how randomly things come about (totally randomly!) and how it is crucial to give oneself and the story that freedom. But this process does not simply describe the different steps involved in making work as part of the work itself (as I believe most film or art making involves processes that are, to varying degrees, available to the recipient). Instead, it should be seen as that which enables us to be attentive to reciprocity, simultaneity, and change within and between the multiple divergences and materialities that emerge as part of the work. If anything, it is a kind of non-methodology. Moving from what Bianchi calls aleatory time – questioning any dichotomy between passive and active by showing us how the experience of time depends on the bodies we inhabit and thus the temporalities we abide with – to the configuration of Ryum's non-linear time diffracted through a new-materialist attention to matter as active and difference as premise, it seems that being in this spiral means allowing oneself the potential to be interrupted by the world in ways that lead on into other relationalities, and then into others yet again and again. But it also means having the ability to interrupt, of choosing how to tell the story.

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