



## INTRODUCTION to seminar discussion 2015/11/20-21:

### “Landscape dramaturgy and landscape change; parallel and intertwined stories”

“The landscape mantle” (Hägerstrand 2009) can be understood as the visible dimension of our living environment (an interface between hidden natural resources and the invisible atmosphere; shaped by natural forces as well as by the history of humanity). Landscape is everywhere; it is the environment we perceive with our senses and includes flora and fauna, artefacts, buildings and roads. Today most of the human population live in urban landscapes. This means – which is most often forgotten – that our surroundings also include our fellow humans (and that every one of us is part of many other’s landscape).

Not many years ago (in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century!) the majority of Sweden’s population lived in the countryside; the farmer’s life being the norm and “the city” to many people something quite exciting (and scaring). There are however very many other city narratives in the European history, connected to the various patterns of production and urbanisation as well as the different practices of power and warfare. Nevertheless, the urban-rural dichotomy seems to persist, and with it also the idea that “nature” is connected to the countryside and “art” to the city. “Landscape” is often associated with “countryside” and “nature” and via a common metonym is also “urban landscapes” conceptualized as the parts of the city that mimic the countryside, i. e. trees, parks and water etc. *In this context, however, we will consider landscape as perceivable surroundings, no matter if we act inside or outside of the urban borderline (which is, b t w, often diffused and more often conceptualized than detected in actual reality).*

In the interplay between performance arts and landscape architecture, it is interesting to note the mutual implicit understanding (or even construction) of each other. Conventional theatre/opera/ballet acts within a landscape specifically built-up for the occasion. The landscape can thus be understood as something taken-for-granted or frozen.

In landscape architecture on the other hand, the art and the crafts conventionally create or alter a landscape without inhabitants. The people, the performers, are taken for granted, (or handled as frozen figurants). In both cases, we have reduced a big part of the pre-conditions and possible co-actants<sup>1</sup>. The landscape is always an actant (for any action, if we presume that all actions take place somewhere) but is most often disregarded and taken for granted. Vice versa, the people; as the culture, the human dimension, history, but also as human bodies; are always part (as actants!) of a landscape, but most often disregarded/ taken for

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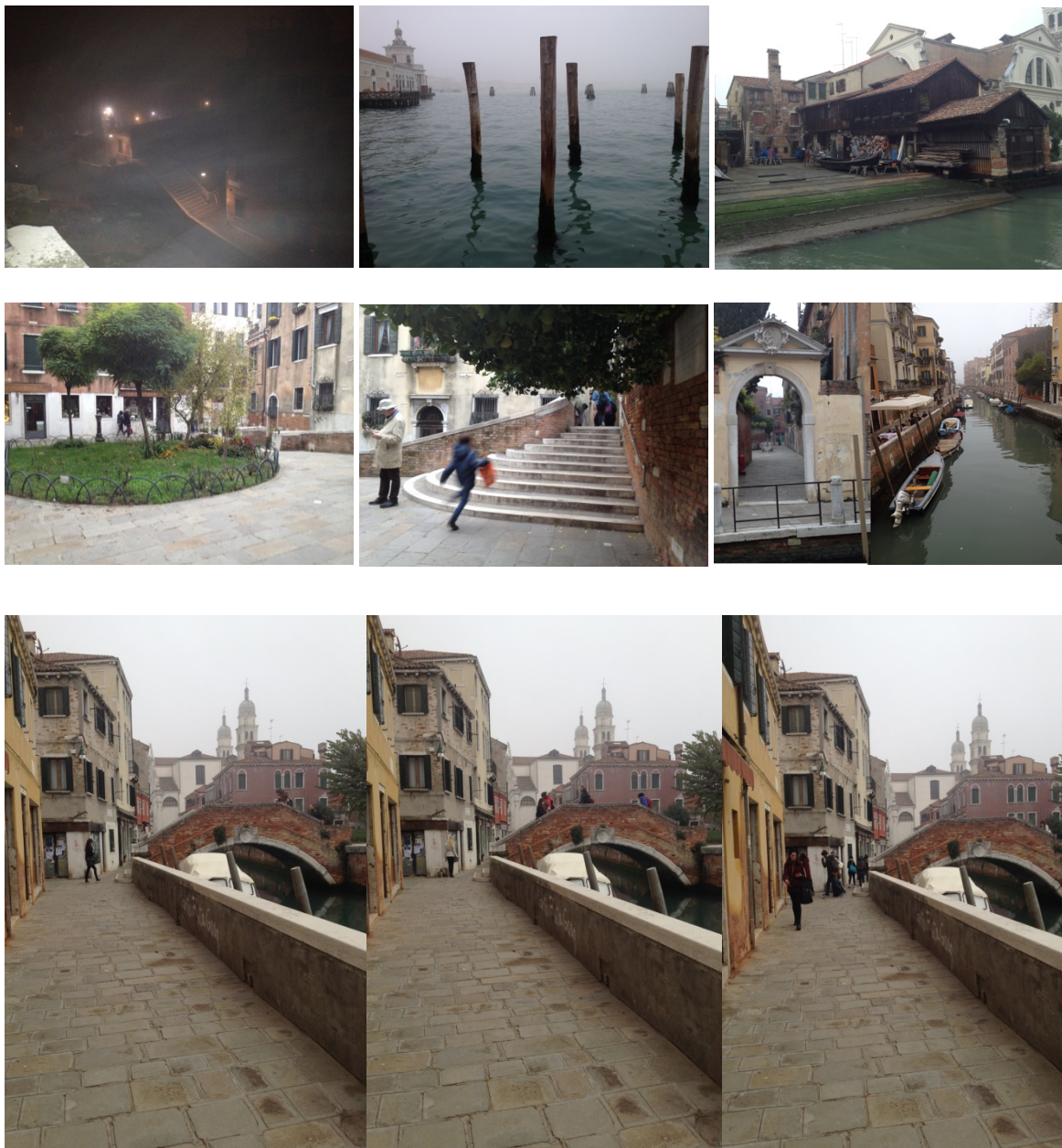
<sup>1</sup> “Actant” is a concept often connected to Bruno Latour’s Actors-Network-Theory, but with an origin in Greimas’ “actantial model” (1966). Actant is a broader concept than actor and includes individual actors but also collectives and objects. Greimas model includes three axes, each with two “poles”, thus the model contains 6 actants: The **axis of desire**: (1) **subject** / (2) **object**, the **axis of power**: (3) **helper** / (4) **opponent** and the **axis of transmission** (the axis of knowledge, according to Greimas): (5) **sender** / (6) **receiver**. In Latour’s interpretation and use in social-technical-systems, the actant can be an organization (e. g. a bank) or a physical feature (space, volume, material etc).

granted, in works of urban development (planning, design, building and management activities).

As much as these disregardings might have influenced main streams of performance arts and landscape architecture, on the other hand examples of transgressions are also near at hand; such as site specific theatre performances or participatory planning projects.

This project is, however, only partly engaged in studying locally produced performances or planning projects, but more aiming for some general knowledge, by means of *learning-by-doing-together*; to merge these two very different *performance-landscape-relations*.

In this seminar, we are exploring and discussing how to understand something like “the dramaturgy of the landscape”. We could have started anywhere, but co-incidentally I have very fresh experiences (and pictures) from Venice. This is not without importance, since the Italians are often described as an early “urbanised” (we might have inherited archetypical ideas of “the urban” from Italy) as well as early “individualised” people.



The upper six images show some experiences of the Venetian landscape. There are both features of something “urban” in general but also some “typically Venice”. We observe very quickly the movement caused by someone quicker than the camera lens in one of the images. We can take a look upon the series of three images at the bottom. Are they “three images of the same landscape, with some people in different stages of movement within it” or are they “three images of different urban landscapes, with some basic features in common”. In the first suggestion, we divide between the people and their environment. In the latter, we see the landscape as containing both the mobile (the people, the water etc) and the immobile (as we perceive them) parts (the bridge, the street), as one entirety. There is certainly a third possibility; to just take an interest in the people in the images, their directions and movements.

The problem (or the shortcoming in the understanding of our environment) becomes obvious when thinking further at the mobile non-humans, i. e. animals. Even here we use the man-environment-dichotomy; counting wild animals (in the city mostly birds and insects, but also myriads of invisible mammals, e. g. rats) as “landscape” but domestic animals as something else, since they are not moving freely around. (They become something like an extra limb to their human owner.)<sup>2</sup>

We can certainly not claim the one way of looking as “right” and the other as “wrong”. This is more a case of “hidden faces”; you see the one image and the next second you see the other. The point here is to raise the question if maybe the different ways of seeing can explain something of the different entrances into this “meeting place project”, giving examples of the different habits-of-mind, which instantly direct our attention, not unto our common aims, but to our different, repeatedly trained lines of thinking.

The point with performing-in-landscape-together has very much to do with getting engaged in *the present, the here-and-now*, which is obviously common property, as a way of transgression of the inherited borderlines of our professions and disciplines.

This was a very long introduction to say something of “landscape as part of dramaturgy”. My observations and thoughts over quite a few of common “meeting place activities” have led to the conclusion that yes, landscape acts, in different ways, in a performance; as a “bottom” for movements (where it can support or hinder<sup>3</sup> and thereby influence movements and directions in “the play”). Compared to environmental experiences in general, this happens quite unconscious, but this relationship can certainly – when noticed! – be used to determine the direction of the event. If this described a bodily relationship between the immobile and the mobile parts (actants), there are also other ways to understand landscape as dramaturg, e.g. to understand the performance as part of the history of the landscape; to comment on what happened or to intervene into the becoming!

These very few examples of performance-landscape-interacting will serve as base for our discussion, where we elaborate, deepen and take further our experiences of these interactions; from our common experiences, but also from our different practices, from professions and disciplines. The trick is to not allow ourselves to be imprisoned in our habits-of-mind, but to give away what is in there – to share our ideas; event-specific or general, tradition based or

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<sup>2</sup> Cats are especially interesting here, as something in-between the wild and the domestic (see Hillier 2015)

<sup>3</sup> The Norwegian sociologist Dag Österberg describes how an experience of a movement in an urban landscape can be characterized as “loads and unloadings”, that the environment is “allowing” or “demanding”.

invented-on-spot, founded in theory or deeply intuitive!

I will present one more entrance to the discussion; to anchor the seminar not just in performance (interventions in landscapes) but also the continuously on-going urban development, on the surface very rational, very regulated by law, by fixed processes, with property rights and to society customs (largely similar in the Western world, but nevertheless stated on a national level by planning, building and property acts). Within this “rationality” there are both injustices and side-effects, partly due to fixed ideas around precisely the relationship between people and landscape (the meaning of the concept of “landscape” is in urban planning vocabulary sliding between “territory” (the division between private properties and public space), “scenery” (often idealized as “the image of Stockholm”) and “experienced surroundings” (most often not taken into account).

The power of urban landscape change can be described as in the figure below (the Swedish as reference, but the circumstances within Europe are quite similar). Over all, the municipality has the assignment to proceed a comprehensive planning (to map the present land use state and to look for future adjustments, restructurings and developments), but not to make binding decisions for what to build, grow or construct (thus, on the overall level, there is a certain superficial overview, but no responsibility for actions). The binding decisions for urban landscape change (such as building permits) are taken in connection to a “development plan” (valid for a quite small area, with rather weak ideas of the consequences outside the borders of the plan). Development plans are single legal documents, with no relation to each other. Thirdly (the middle level in the figure) we have the landowners’ knowledge and decisions. Every square meter of the urban landscape is owned by someone. The municipality is usually among the actors owning a big part of the urban land, but this differs. It also differs how many landowners a city is divided between, due to history and politics. Theoretically, the property owners together have an overview of the urban landscape. But this is meaningless, until these potential actors decide to act together (and they do more often than seldom have contradicting interests). In the end, the conclusion is that we have no actor with an overview of the urban landscape. Instead, we can resemble this situation with “the tyranny of small steps”<sup>4</sup>. In this (a bit depressing) situation it is certainly also possible to see the absence of landscape overview as an advantage, a play room. And maybe it is also possible to claim the activities of this project (and many other more or less un-controlled projects going on!) “the blessings of small steps” – or at least this is a possible goal!

## References:

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<sup>4</sup> This expression is used mostly in literature of environmental sciences, to describe the accumulated effects of many actors’ (each innocent with little impact) individual acts.

Performance, and the Landscape. *Environment and Planning A*, Vol 40 (8), 1843-1861



The aim with this figure is to put together the outreach of responsibility as well as the limits of perspective; of public institutions for planning and management and private land owners, alike (from Lindholm 2016).