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Please note that this is a draft of the beginning of the article. It is not the final and complete article.

### **Dramaturgy, landscape and nature**

In this article I will look at ways in which ideas and concepts relating to ecology, landscape, nature and life processes can inform dramaturgical thinking and models of performance practice. Thus the focus for my discussion is the creative and generative potential of nature, ecology and landscape in relation to performance and dramaturgy,

The article's investigation has its genesis in two different, yet related, lines of inquiry; the first relates to what I would call the conceptualisation of a new dramaturgical paradigm that can adequately describe and articulate dramaturgical approaches and models that do not belong to the classical Aristotelian dramaturgy paradigm. One such important attempt is Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri's book *Theatre/Land/Scape* (2002); here they posit that the term *landscape* 'has emerged as a new dramaturgical model' (2002: 3). While the use of the landscape concept is not unproblematic, Fuchs and Chaudhuri's discourse opens up a new discursive space and illustrates the complex sense-making processes that a lot of contemporary dramaturgies call for. 'Landscape' may have conceptual baggage which on one level disqualifies it from being an alternative to the Aristotelian paradigm, however on another level it serves as a good example of the way in which nature and ecology can offer a generative lens through which we can think about theatre and performance. With point of departure in existing critical perspectives and examples from art and theatre practice, the article investigates how concepts sourced from nature and landscape studies have inspired performance in the past whilst also exploring the potential that these concepts have for the future development of new dramaturgies.

This brings me to the second line of inquiry which relates to my practice as dramaturg within devising, and specifically my collaboration with London-based theatre company Fevered Sleep. Between 2008-2013 I collaborated as dramaturg with directors David Harradine and Samantha Butler on three Fevered Sleep performance projects *An Infinite Line: Brighton*

(2008); *On Ageing* (2010) and *Above Me the Wide Blue Sky* (2013). While these three projects differed significantly in terms of their dramaturgical challenges, there was a circulation of ideas relating to the relationship between humans and organic processes and nature: *An Infinite Line: Brighton* was an exploration of Brighton's light and landscape; *On Ageing* took ageing as its starting point and *Above Me the Wide Blue Sky* explored human being's relationship with nature and their environment.

From a dramaturgical point of view the proposition was not to create a fictional, 'dramatic' or representational structure with a story and characters but instead to ask: how can we make an event that is not *about* ageing, nature or light but instead conveys these phenomena as *complex and dynamic processes*: What does a dramaturgical principle sourced from an *ecosystem* look like? What would it mean to imagine the performance as 'behaving' like *the weather*; what would it mean to write a text according to the movement of *erosion*; what would it mean to view the performance structure in terms of *entropy*, or to devise a dramaturgy that mirrors the *biological process of ageing*? The dramaturgical starting point was therefore not to work out what we could say *about* these, rather the starting point was to extrapolate *processes*: how do they behave and what patterns, systems of organisation or guiding principles do they suggest. With reference to *Fevered Sleep's* three productions I will address how ideas relating to nature informed the performance dramaturgy.

Finally, I will bring the two parts together in a discussion about what Fuchs and Chaudhuri, in relation to their landscape dramaturgy concept, have referred to as the 'perspectival spectator' (2002: 7). In the final part of the article I will look at the implication for the relationship between the work and the viewer (or spectator) in relation to the current discourse on nature, ecology and landscape in the arts.

### **Dramaturgy and Landscape – a new dramaturgical paradigm**

It is no exaggeration that Greek philosopher Aristotle's observations on dramatic composition in his *Poetics* (350 BC), which were effectively formalised into a particular plot structure by Gustav Freytag in *Die Technik des Dramas* (1863), have historically been regarded as the backbone of dramaturgical thinking. However with changing performance practices there has been an increased need to articulate alternatives to the Aristotelian paradigm. Thus Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999 in German and 2006 in

English translation); Elinor Fuchs's *Death of Character* (1996); Knut Ove Arntzen's article 'A Visual kind of Dramaturgy' (1997) and Marianne Van Kerkhoven's short but influential piece 'New Dramaturgy' (1996) are but a few attempts to articulate a new dramaturgical paradigm. While the writers differ in their use of terminology, examples and emphasis, a common theme that emerges is the notion of a *spatial* approach to composition; where the Aristotelian representational structure subordinates theatrical elements within a composition to *one central* element (for example the plot or *muthos*) a new dramaturgical paradigm places the individual elements on an equal footing. Michel Foucault's essay 'Of other spaces' (1967) may further our understanding of 'spatial'; he interestingly describes 'spatial' in terms of simultaneity, juxtaposition, side-by-side, the dispersed and a 'network that connects points' (Wiles 2003: 7). This echoes Umberto Eco's suggestion that in the open work the individual elements should be viewed in terms of a *network of relationships* (Eco 1965: 10). The theatre event may no longer be experienced as continuum in time and space, rather the audiences are invited to negotiate simultaneity, fragments, juxtaposition and different temporal and spatial realities; they are, to use an expression from Marianne Van Kerkhoven, asked to handle complexity.

In 1936 Gertrude Stein gave a lecture entitled 'Plays' and here she explained that her plays were like 'landscapes'. By this she did not mean that her plays were *about* landscapes, rather she used landscape as an image to describe a compositional approach. Within a landscape, she proposed, elements are *in relation to one another* and the viewer holds the whole picture in one view. Compositionally speaking a landscape is, Chaudhuri remarks, a 'dispersed visual field' (2002: 15). The idea being that we look at a landscape, or indeed a painting, and our eyes will wander and roam across a dispersed field as we organize and assemble the different 'components' into an overall picture. The viewer is thus engaged in an act of *composing* by *assembling* the elements across wide and hence open plane, so to speak. What is being invoked here is that 'landscape' denotes a 'spatial' approach where rather than unfolding through sequential time (one thing follows the next) the elements can exist within the same frame simultaneously.

Before I go on to consider what is interesting about viewing dramaturgy through the lens of landscape, I will pause at the specific conceptual problems that arise when we use the term landscape. It may be a case of 'what is in a word', however when we begin to examine the conceptual implications of landscape, we discover that 'landscape' and the Aristotelian

dramaturgy are built on the same foundation with shared denominators, for example the obsession with a perspectival composition where particularities and irregularities are subsumed and reorganized in order to serve a greater structure.

The parallels between theatre and landscape have been flagged up by different scholars, most notably by John Jackson whose essay 'Theatre and Landscape' (1954) points out that the landscape concept emerges at the time when theatre was beginning to develop as a formal stage art in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century; there are similarities between theatre's new emphasis on composed scenes, 'regulated space', illusory setting and the proscenium arch stage as a frame separating the auditorium from the stage world and the implications of the landscape concept. Landscape, Denis Cosgrove writes, is a construction and composition of the world, and thus 'landscape is a way of seeing the world' (1984: 13). He goes on to say: 'Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world' (13).

Cosgrove writes that between the early fifteenth century and the late nineteenth century 'the idea of landscape came to denote the artistic and literary representation of the visible world, the scenery (literally that which is *seen*) which is viewed by a spectator' (1984: 2), and hence in the classical landscape painting nature and landscape are presented in such a way that the viewer is made to feel that they can grasp (and control) it at a single glance. Petra Halkes comments: 'Traditional landscape paintings have generally shown scenery, a vista, a prospect; the land is laid out before the viewer with geometric clarity. Foreground, middle ground, and background are organized according to the principles of perspective' (cited in Bal 2007: 158).

Landscape is in the first instance, Barrell argues, 'a painter's word' that denotes the act of organizing nature into a pictorial structure (1972:1). Yet rather than being a means for 'realistic representation' (of nature), the perspectival organisation was about asserting spatial control, Cosgrove notes: 'In landscape painting, landforms, trees and buildings could be altered in position and scale, introduced or removed in order to structure and compose an apparently realistic and accurate scene' (1984: 21). And John Barrell notes in relation to eighteenth century landscape painting: 'For the painter painting from nature, or a poet describing a view he had seen, would inevitably rearrange what he saw to a very high degree, to satisfy the compositional demands of the structure' (1972: 11).

Thus similar to the Aristotelian paradigm where 'plot is the most important' (Aristotle), the landscape concept embeds an obsession with a particular form of composition where components are in service of the overall structure. Instead of observing the particularities of 'elements' and then find a structure that can hold their differences, elements are shaped to fit the structure. In other words, if we look consider the conceptual and historical implications of landscape we understand that it does not challenge the Aristotelian paradigm, as Fuchs and Chaudhuri argue, quite on the contrary in fact. However if we disregard the conceptual baggage and instead consider landscape in terms of a spatial quality, then we can see how it may work as an alternative to Aristotle.