

**Six Paths into Thoughts on  
Landscape and Dramaturgy**  
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For the last ten years or so, I have been battling with the term “landscape”, trying to encompass it in my art, thinking and personal life. Like so many others who employ this term, I have found great joy and fascination in it and its associative powers. Associations that have generated a lot of curiosity, creativity and meaning. Simply a fruitful way of thinking. But when people ask me what I mean by a “landscape” in regards to theater, I struggle, I do not know where to begin. It is as if the term mirrors what it tries to define. In the same way that a landscape is defined by a scope, with no particular focus point within that scope, I believe the increased use of this term in relation to theater implicitly refers to a body of thought and understandings of the term itself. I began to look for trends and consistencies in the thinking that has inspired me and my engagement with landscape. To explore the thinking the term landscape has generated in relation to theater and how this affects possible conceptions of dramaturgy and my own thinking and practice as well. I came up with six paths into thoughts on landscape and dramaturgy. This essay is an invitation into a landscape of landscape thinking and dramaturgy.

Before I start – I am aware that by developing and advocating for a certain type of theory and thinking based on my own work, I engage myself in the power game of interpretation. As this is not my intention, I have tried to keep a personal and speculative approach, mixing theory with memories and reflections. The paths I draw onto

the map are not meant to be paved roads that you must drive to understand the connection between landscape and dramaturgy. Nor do they cover the vast amount of theory this thinking draws upon or sum up the “central ones”. It is rather a personal attempt to open a terrain of multitudes, giving voice to the possibility of landscape, of thinking landscape dramaturgy.

### **Path 1: The view.**

#### **From landscape speculations to seeing things as landscapes**

It starts in a care home for the elderly, in a small village in the western part of Norway. While attending an international boarding school I was required once a week to do what was called “community service”. This meant that I would visit Ludwig, a 96 year old man at the care home, every Monday for four hours. During those hours we would sit and look at the view together. That was how I learned the art of “landscape speculations”; to sit and watch, in this case, the fjord, for hours and hours, often in silence, or with the radio humming in the background, zooming in and out on the landscape. Not fixating any thoughts, just dwelling upon what I was seeing.

Here we need to make a detour and enter the term landscape from a different perspective. Etymologically it is said to be of Dutch origin. It consists of two parts; *land* and *-scape*. The *land* part is the easy one, it is the rocks, the soil, flora and fauna, but might also be the buildings and the

asphalted roads and so on; everything non-human. It is the *-scape* part that makes things difficult. Following the etymology, it is not connected to *scope*, as many people seem to believe. Rather it is connected to the suffix *-scape*, equivalent to the suffix *-ship* in the English language. In other words, the qualities that constitute something, the core of what is enclosed. Personally, I like to mix the meaning, of that which constitutes and the scope, because it points to a key element of landscapes: a landscape could be said to be the concrete world framed by the eye. One of the proponents of social geography, Denis Cosgrove, has suggested that it is “a way of seeing” (Cosgrove 2008:17).

Back to the track. Ludwig and I were looking out a window, hence our landscape was already framed for us. Now what this did was to open up the possibility of zooming in and out on this landscape. Looking at the trees, then the boat on the fjord, the birds, the flowerpot on the windowsill, and so on. We would speculate upon the meaning and significance of what we saw in relation to the whole, the landscape. What we called landscape speculations was a process of continuously defining and questioning our surroundings, inventing stories about what we saw and what we didn't see: How old are those trees? That mountain looks like a troll! If we could listen to all the cell phone conversations that were flying through the air, what would they be about?

Our self-invented term landscape speculation was a way of thinking upon landscapes, giving

its elements meaning. "Landscape has meaning. Rivers reflect, clouds conceal. Water and fire purify and destroy" (Witson 2008:55), declares linguist Anne Witson, pointing to how we often talk about landscapes in a language that is both metaphorical and concrete at the same time. I will add that such a metaphorical and concrete language also points to, and invites one into, the act of landscape appreciation which is an ongoing process of watching and negotiating what you are watching and why it is taking place. You speculate upon, but you also speculate upon what it does to make you speculate. It is a self-reflective way of seeing. A continuous loop between the observer and the observed.

Inspired by my meetings with Ludwig I found joy in using this "way of seeing" on other views as well. Seeing things as landscapes. And I soon recognized that this situation of looking at landscapes somehow corresponded to how I looked in the theater.

By watching, the spectator creates an 'other' space, no longer subject to the laws of the quotidian, and in this space he inscribes what he observes, perceiving it as belonging to a space where he has no place except as external observer. Without this gaze, indispensable for the emergence of theatricality and for its recognition as such, the other would share the spectator's space and remain part of his daily reality. (Feral 2002:105)

In her attempt to define theatricality, the French-Canadian theater scholar Josette Feral approaches the theater and describes the stage in a similar way to how I see a landscape. A space looked upon, but also framed by the onlooker, with the awareness of being positioned and as a way of defining one's own position.

Now, this quality is not exclusive to landscape, theater and theatricality. By naming something we position ourselves in relation to it. This is the geography of language. I grew up with the wounds that defining the "other" as different, unique, exotic, evil, and so on, has created in our communities. And with the critique of it. As well as with the understanding that doing so in our language and formation of identity is unavoidable. As for many kids growing up in the 1990s, this was a lose-lose situation in which you either simplified and misrepresented the other or lost your own identity. This dilemma shaped my political understanding of the world. And to me, seeing things and people as landscapes opened up a more curious and less defined way of approaching the world. Seeing something as a landscape provided a focus; not on what things are in themselves, but what they are in relation to a whole and the awareness that this whole was created by me. It provided a freedom that was also linked to responsibility.

As an activity, looking at landscapes is a dialogic relation between the abstract subject (me) and my surroundings. It is a process of connecting with the land, its history and people by speculating

upon the questions it raises. Looking upon something as a landscape implies a similar movement and curiosity towards the “other”, and the questions they generate within me. When “landscape” is applied in dance and theater today, it is often in this metaphorical way, seeing things as landscapes. My first path leads to an understanding of what a landscape dramaturgy has meant to me; namely, an attentiveness to the questions posed to me by whatever I am looking upon. Rather than suggesting a methodology it is a term that suggests an attitude and way of seeing.

### **Path 2: From landscapes of drama to the power of surroundings**

It starts at school. As a theater directing student at Oslo National Academy of the Arts I found myself in a situation where I had to engage in classical drama analysis. The trick was of course to reveal the motivations and conflicts between the characters in the play. I found this extremely difficult. “What would you do in this situation?” Or “what would you feel in this situation?” These were the questions we were taught to ask. To me they only triggered the answer, “it depends on where I am!” I felt like a devil’s advocate, but it seemed so banal, of course we think and feel differently depending on where we are.

What saved me in these classes was an old essay I found enclosed in a secondhand book. It was called “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet” (Fuchs 2004). In this essay, professor at Yale School of

Drama Elinor Fuchs encourages her students to search for “the world of the play” (Fuchs 2004:6). She asks one to consider the function and powers of the concrete, invisible and imagined landscapes within a play. Following Fuchs’ encouragement, I started an exploration of the role of landscapes within theatrical fiction. This might be banal, but try to imagine Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* without the characters’ conflicting internal images of the American highway. Or *Hamlet* without a Norway? Where would Fortinbras and new politics come from? Or Ibsen’s *The Lady from the Sea*; without a sea to dream about, what would this play be about? Even though it is clear that the above-mentioned landscapes play important dramaturgical roles in these plays, it can be difficult to point to exactly how they do so (and that might be why they so often are overlooked). The power of these landscapes is not so much the impact any concrete surrounding would have on behavior; cold weather makes one freeze and so on. The power exuded by these landscapes lies in the way they constitute the mythological cosmos of possible dreams and imagery, and thus impact the world view of the characters in the plays. What I came to call the “life-form”, or the state of the place. In other words, the energy and the possible ways of thinking, organizing and living within that landscape.

Does it sound strange? Deterministic? To me, it is quite concrete and not at all opposed to a free will. Having moved a lot through different landscapes, cultures and societies, it is clear to

me that the energy and atmosphere of places and communities, their history and self-image, their state, makes me more open to certain types of behavior and thinking. It does not settle on any one thing but continues to be influenced. I believe one of the powers of landscape to be its ability to put me in a particular state. I think and prioritize differently in the endlessly white landscapes of Northern Greenland than when facing the cityscape of Tokyo from a café in Shinjuku.

But let's return to school. Actively searching for what I came to call life-forms, play analysis became a thrill, opening up a completely new way of approaching worlds of fiction. But more importantly with respect to dramaturgy, it made me question my own engagement with non-fictional space. In particular my engagement with the concrete landscape of the black box stage. If it is so that a space and a landscape contain a vague body of thought and mythology that affects its internal behaviors and thinking, thus creating a state or a life-form, then creating new potential life-forms and thoughts in the theater could be achieved by changing, recreating or simply leaving the black box. This is the basis of a trilogy of one-man theaters I have developed together with scenographer Heidi Dalene called *In the End We Are All Alone*. In this project I basically started by thinking upon the architecture of the space to see what state, thoughts and themes it opened up. What I learned at school was that I had to consider the resonance between what I had to say and the life-form of the space I was working in.

These thoughts reflect what is often referred to as site-specific art. However, in my practice this does not so much make me a "site-specific artist" as an artist working with landscapes and life-forms as a tool to analyze space. I have no political agenda beyond stating that there is a relationship between the landscape surrounding the staged event and the thinking and emotions the performance provokes. So, another way to think about a landscape dramaturgy would be how the vague conception of the state or life-form of the theatrical space is experienced, engaged and used as a dramaturgical tool.

### Path 3: From poetry to maps

At the end of the first path I wrote about the territorial aspects of language. That words position themselves in a territory. That is where this path starts. It is a lover's path. It starts with my love for poetry, how poets use words to create and open landscapes of meaning that otherwise would be invisible to me. How poetry can be considered as maps to unknown landscapes. For many years Gertrude Stein was one of my favorites. It is well-known that Gertrude Stein also wrote some plays and described them as "landscape plays". She theorized around this in the introduction to *Last Operas and Plays* (Stein 1995). It is a text often referred to when the term "landscape dramaturgy" is applied, making her the grandmother of these approaches to theater. For sure, this is also a text that has informed and inspired my thinking. But maybe not in a straightforward way...

In her introductory essay to *Last Plays and Operas*, Gertrude Stein links her work with a formalist tradition in which structural reconfigurations are used in response to what she considers an old-fashioned focus on the narrative structure of drama. By seeing the text as a landscape, she proposes a new type of drama. A drama in which landscape is the structure. Sentences are put together as if they were a landscape. This is a focus and ideal followed up and developed in much modern and postmodern drama. "Writing has nothing to do with meaning. It has to do with landsurveying (sic) and cartography, including the mapping of countries yet to come." (Deleuze 2001:105) So claims Gilles Deleuze, opening up the whole question of texts as landscapes. However, this is a highway for others to explore. As for me, on this path, I will return to my personal engagement with Stein's plays. Because the more I read of Stein, the more I question her own description of her work as mere formalist experiments. In their humoristic absurdity and landscape form, what can be recognized in Stein's poetry is a strange kind of realism. Her landscapes are, despite her playful juggling with language, quite concrete. They are not only texts as landscape, but representations of real places and views, and they propose a landscape of the stage event. Once I had the idea that we ought to call them "performance maps" rather than plays. And since I have already confessed my somewhat archaic love of poetry, I might as well confess my love of maps. To follow these formalist approaches

to landscapes in contemplating the idea of a landscape dramaturgy, without acknowledging the art of cartography and its role in the arts, would be a serious slip.

But to keep it personal; in looking at my diaries it is striking how playing around with possible ways of representing structures and patterns in my performances, finding ways of mapping the landscape of my work, is a key tool. I am by no means alone in doing this. The post-it wall has become a cliché image of the process in many artistic practices. Quite like landscape speculations, it is a way of joining together, looking for meaning, looking for the whole and its details, trying to make a map of what I am about to make. And trying to make that map correspond to both an inner, felt landscape and the life-form of the space of the work. My maps seldom consist of text only, they often include images, sound files, sometimes also objects and videos. This way of working, making subjective maps of elements, layers and so on in my art, naturally affects the structuring of elements in time, its dramaturgy. Composition as poetry or maps somehow implies that one sees the structure of the stage and the staged event as a landscape.

However, the problem of defining this process as landscape dramaturgy arises within the works themselves. The map does not necessarily match the terrain. Gertrude Stein's dramas could be read as beautiful poetry. So even though working like this could lead to a work of art that is seen or experienced as a landscape, it does not necessarily

imply any recognizable or coherent set of structures or aesthetics. To some extent, all material, even a classic drama, can be treated and worked with in this manner as a landscape. This implies that a landscape dramaturgy defines a process rather than a result. A fixed idea of what parts and structures constitute the landscape. As demonstrated by the first path, this would imply a move away from the landscape as personally framed, to landscape as something culturally framed. A thought I will keep with me on the following paths.

#### **Path 4: Geo-cultural and geo-political landscapes**

That landscape is also culturally framed becomes apparent when one considers how we talk about specific landscapes. I myself have for many years been fascinated by Arctic landscapes. So, I will start down this path with one of the things I have learned in the North. But, first, a question: Do you already now have an image of what I am talking about when I say Arctic landscapes? Is it an image of a white, vast, desolated landscape?

Well, this is also the Arctic, but depending on the definition used, the Arctic occupies about one-sixth of the world's surface. It is Northern Norway, Northern Siberia, Alaska, Northern Canada, Greenland and of course the Arctic ice cap – huge territories and extremely varied, in their geology, flora and fauna, aesthetically, climatically, economically, politically and so on. In fact, I would say that there are more things separating them than keeping

these areas together. Still, we often talk about them and understand them as one landscape, everything within one frame.

The aforementioned Denis Cosgrove points to how a landscape description, like the Arctic, “culturally is held together by its symbolic meaning” (Cosgrove 2008:31). In other words, when I talk about the Arctic you get an image in your head, because we share a geographical understanding of what this place is about and represents. It is a symbolic meaning that has implications beyond the territory it describes. “Arctic winds howl in New York,” a friend told me the other day. A more common symbolic meaning would be a periphery landscape far north, struggling with a sparse population, a harsh climate, hungry polar bears and melting icebergs. Starting like this, the emotional and political implications of how and what we consider to be a certain landscape become apparent. We talk about landscapes as characteristics of nations and political territories. And we use landscapes to claim a belonging. The characteristics of landscapes unify (and exclude) groups through the symbolic and emotional meaning projected onto them – this is the field of cultural and political geography.

This path leads me to questions about how these geo-cultural perspectives are engaged within dance and theater. In 2016, together with Ingeleiv Berstad, Kristin Ryg Helgebostad and Eivind Seljeseth, I made *Lulleli for Fruholmen fyr*. It was a “one-night-only” event at the northernmost lighthouse in the world. One of the core ideas of this



event was simply to interfere in a center-periphery thinking through a gigantic event and make this “remote” place the center of the new possibilities. This is only one example. National and regional institutions for performance, as “state” operas and “national” theaters are other examples of how theater and art is used to constitute geographical notions and a sense of belonging (or exclusion). We could, like professor Knut Ove Arntzen, talk about how certain theater cultures could be said to be connected to certain areas, or ask questions about how such perspectives are employed, represented and used as dramaturgical means.

#### **Path 5: From surface to history**

“I know this because I have been there.” It is by no means a critical argument valid in any discussion. At the same time, it is true when it comes to landscapes. Consider a landscape you know, maybe the place you grew up or your hometown. Now if you tried to explain this to me, would I then know it like you do? Probably not. You know these places because you have invested in them, spent time in them, given them meaning, created them. One’s knowledge of a landscape is inseparable from one’s history within it.

Lately I have been concerned with the power of remembering landscapes. The intellectual approach to this would probably start with Jewish professor Simon Schama. But on this path, I will continue in Greenland. Working in this environment, post-colonial wounds, nationalism and the

Greenlandic fight for independence have challenged my own understanding of landscapes and made me move beyond a post-modern conception of space as surface. Many modern and postmodern thinkers conceive of landscape as surface. They talk about geography, territory, topology and so on – a place to look upon, move about and map. In stage art such conceptions of space are of course connected to the role of the director and choreographer as creators and composers of movement on a floor – the outside eye with the power to see the whole “landscape of the show”. As an artist and kid of postmodernism, my initial understanding of landscape was a similar one. Greenland taught me that this is not the case. A landscape has meaning, especially when it is lost.

To understand this, let me return to the initial argument of this path: “I know this because I have been there.” Framing a landscape is deeply connected to the work and investment of understanding and decoding a place. Framing a landscape is a way of connecting oneself to the place. Losing that frame, in case of Greenland, through the eagerness of outsiders to frame and understand the country from their perspectives, is experienced as a loss. My initial understanding, a bit simplified, that Greenland was just another place, was challenged. That is how I started to read Schama and consider the emotional powers of landscapes.

In *Landscape and Memory* (1995), Schama concerns himself with the role of nature and its effect on human psychology. He concerns himself

with how every landscape connects to mythological ideas of self. As Cosgrove he sees it as a work of the mind, but more importantly, as culturally-made depositories of the memories and obsessions of the people who gaze upon it. "Every landscape reflects an inner landscape," he says (Schama 1995:21). Through his studies of art, he is interested in how different landscapes are connected to emotions. His example of how Nazi Germany romanticized the woods, as a place for wild animals, as historically ancient, where rapes and murder had taken place, connects to identification with a place where only true heroes could survive. This serves as one example of how landscapes act as human sentiments.

In terms of dramaturgy, the implications are of course how such considerations could lead to questioning how they come into play as geo-cultural and geo-political aspects of a performance. However, my concern on this path is rather how concrete landscapes connect to nostalgia and connect us to a past. How landscapes, and our engagement with them, not only position us geographically as far away from or close to, but position us in time, as part of a timeline. "How much time have you spent in that landscape?" becomes not only a valid, but a necessary question to ask. A dramaturgy that engage itself with the landscape triggers questions of history.

Theater and art events can be used to create a similar attachment to space and history. You know Black Box teater because you have been there. It

connects you not only to the space, but the time you were there. Your descriptions of this space position you in relation to the history of this space and the amount of time you have invested in this space. Correspondingly, we can consider how a performance itself uses time as landscape and encourages a "landscape way of seeing", how it invites a continuous self-reflective gaze to connect you to the place as a historical memory. How it engages a gaze that does not only bring meaning to the performance, but also creates an attachment between the time invested and historical significance.

#### **Path 6: From a notion of problems to ecology**

"The Problems are in the Atmospheres Today". This was the heading I initially gave myself for my presentation on this topic. And this is where my last path starts. It is the shortest. But I promise that it is also the most beautiful.

"Wow, all I have to say is 'wow!'" I once heard a German tourist utter when facing the view of the North Cape in Northern Norway. This lack of words but sense of meaning is often connected to landscape experience. I believe that the re-occurring use of landscape in regards to theater, and the focus on defining and understanding a landscape dramaturgy among many practitioners today, reflects a similar need to say something when faced with a world where there seems to be no point in saying anything at all. A wider notion in society that

we are dealing with problems that are too complex, too encompassing, too confusing to be dealt with verbally or artistically. We sense that there are problems in the atmosphere, in political currents, in oceans of misery, in the climate in which we live. The drama out there seems bigger, more important than the struggles of any singular human being. It reflects a search for a singularity, not around a self, but around something bigger. At the same time, we know and understand the dangers any tradition of self-effacement has had in history. Concrete and metaphorical usage of landscape in regards to dramaturgy could be understood as a search for a way of acknowledging and giving focus to the needs and struggles of our surroundings, without writing ourselves out of the picture. As attempts to live within a climate crisis. You may call it a search for a different way of perceiving the world, where that which is silent is given a voice, where that which is “just there” and taken for granted is acknowledged, where that which is potentially without meaning is accepted. A search for a greater ecology.

It might seem strange that I haven't mentioned this before. I guess that was on purpose. As much as simply connecting a landscape dramaturgy to a set of structural means, I find it just as problematic to simply connect it to an environmental concern related to the times in which we live. Any landscape refuses to be simply one thing, until you frame it. Engagement with landscape and its implications in theater and art reflects, in

my opinion, more than just one frame. It reflects an interdisciplinary search for artistic tools where art connects and engages with the complexity of our times, not with one political focus, but as a multitude of focuses and needs. And it shares the will to look outwards and consider our surroundings and our relations to them. My last assertion on a landscape dramaturgy is that, in its greatest potential, it implies a way of being in and caring for our surroundings, an attempt to open up new experiences of the whole. Artistic experiences are needed to face the problems we are facing today.

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