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INTRODUCTION

Introduction: performance and ecology – what can theatre do?

Carl Lavery

School of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

First: an explanation

In the call for papers that motivated this issue of *Green Letters*, contributors were invited to reflect on what theatre and performance might be able to *do* ecologically, as opposed to what they may argue for and/or represent in terms of textual content. In making that distinction, my intention was to think through the implications of two challenging provocations that too many ecocritics, in both theatre and literary studies, have either repressed or ignored. First, the suggestion made by Elinor Fuchs (2006) and Bonnie Marranca (1996) that theatre's ecological contribution is not found in any explicit ecocritical message it may purport to communicate, but rather resides in the more oblique possibilities inherent in the theatrical medium itself; and second, the perverse scenario that eco-theorist Tim Clark sketches out when he reminds readers that while 'the dominant public conception of nature is now loosely ecological, and notions of "biodiversity" and the eco-friendly are ubiquitous truisms [...] forms of environmental degradation continue to accelerate' (2014, 77). Taken together, these comments suggest that *if* theatre is to contribute to a more progressive environmental future, then it is incumbent on practitioners and scholars to reflect, rigorously, on how theatre works as a medium, while at the same time remaining vigilant with respect to its supposed efficacy. Such an approach differs from much extant work in Theatre and Performance Studies that tends either to advocate for a direct intervention into ecological and environmental matters and/or makes largely positive – perhaps even hyperbolic – claims for theatre's capacity to bring about behaviour change, more often than not, through some ecstatic or enchanted immersion in 'environment' or 'nature'.¹

Second: a confession

The provocation behind the call could be accused of assuming, in advance, that theatre actually has the capacity to achieve something, a premise that not everyone might be willing to accept. For many activists, for instance, theatre's politics are vicarious and rhetorical – they can only gesture towards the 'real' rather than impacting on it. While I am sensitive to such a critique, I was reluctant, in fashioning the call, to dismiss theatre's social impact out of hand. Without ever wanting to collapse the very real distance between theatrical acts and real ones, theatre's mode of doing was posited as a unique

form of praxis, whose 'frame of appearance' – or what Félix Guattari would term its 'incorporeality' (2008, 26) – might have the capacity to alter how we exist in the world by troubling conventional modes of thinking and feeling. As all the contributions to this journal show in their own unique ways, this way of approaching theatre does not preclude a certain pedagogy. Only now the teaching is indirect and 'negative', an example of what the philosopher Gianni Vattimo terms 'weak thought' or *il pensiero debole* (2012, 40) – thinking that hesitates to prescribe a 'strong meaning' and which willingly opens itself to further interpretation and dialogue. To appropriate Vattimo's terminology, the point of 'weak performance' is not so much to do as to 'undo', to impose a certain limit on the possibilities of theatre, to trouble notions of mastery and intentionality, to remain hypothetical and suspensive.²

Third: an ambition

The goal of this edition of *Green Letters* is to explain to an audience of non-specialists how contemporary theatre might be figured as a form of ecological doing. But before this aim can be accomplished a preliminary move needs to be made. For today, theatre is no longer solely associated with the transposition of a pre-existing script on to a black box stage, and neither can it be approached as a relatively stable, linguistic artefact whose meanings can be pored over, disputed and deconstructed in the same way that one might engage with any other textual object. Rather, in contemporary practice and theory, theatre is seen as a predominantly performative medium, that is to say, as something embodied, ephemeral and affective, with the result that the fundamental concern of scholars is no longer to decipher what the theatre text means but rather to focus on what the theatre medium 'does'; in how, that is, its dramaturgical distribution of organic and inorganic bodies in actual time and space creates sensations and experiences in the here and now. This reminder bears repeating. For on the few occasions when theatre does appear in literary-based models of ecocriticism, it tends to be approached as a dramatic text to be reinterpreted historically or read against its environmental grain. Not only does this literary approach overlook the 'liveness' of performance, but it fails too, perhaps, to understand where the ecocritical purchase of theatre might reside: namely, in its immanent capacity for affecting bodies, individually and collectively.³

An expanded field

In its current postdramatic modes (performance that eschews characters, stories and dialogue), theatre takes place in what Alan Read calls 'an expanded field' (2013), and partakes of many different forms, some of which may include site-based performance, devised work, immersive installations, direct interventions, open-ended scores, durational pieces, and large scale community events. These diverse modalities of theatre and performance trouble the anthropocentrism that has long been associated with the theatrical medium, and which perhaps explains why theatre, either consciously or unconsciously, has played such a minor role in ecocriticism in comparison to other disciplines such as literature, philosophy, visual art, history and, more recently, media studies. For whereas these disciplines can do without human beings by turning their

attention to the object world, dramatic theatre has, since antiquity, concerned itself with what Sophocles, in *Antigone*, termed 'the miracle of man' (1998, 146). Theatre's long obsession with the *anthropos*, with expressing the human psyche in dialogue form, is the very thing that leads the environmental thinker Michel Serres to dispute its ecological value:

Take away the world around the battles, keep only conflicts and debates, thick with humanity and purified of things, and you obtain stage theatre [...] the interesting spectacle they call cultural. Does anyone ever say where the master and stage and slave fight it out? Our culture abhors the world. (Serres 1995, 3)

While Serres' provocation may hold good for normative, dramatic models of theatre, it is hopelessly inadequate when it comes to understanding the ecological potential inherent in contemporary models of theatre and performance. What, for instance, would Serres make of National Theatre Wales' recent site-specific attempts to produce a theatre map of Wales; of Cuban performance artist Ana Mendieta's actions with mud and earth; or of Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* in which a huge projected 'sun' filled the cavernous auditorium of the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London in the winter of 2004? In all of these performances, the onus is no longer, as Serres claims, on the *agon* of human conflict alone, but on displacing the human subject from the centre of the 'world' and locating it instead in an agential landscape of flows, systems and networks.

As several recent ecocritical collections in Theatre and Performance Studies have highlighted (see Heddon and Mackey 2012; Bottoms, Franks and Kramer 2012; Arons and May 2012; Allen and Preece 2016), works such as these call out for new methods of analysis.⁴ They compel performance scholars to shift their traditional focus of interest away from the interior lives of dramatic characters and, additionally, to pay attention, to those material aspects of the theatrical medium that have either been forgotten or actively repressed for the sake of a compelling story. From an ecological perspective, some of these might include: the inherent relationality of theatre, the fact that it always takes place between actors and audiences, and so provokes what Erika Fischer-Lichte, after the biologists Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, terms 'autopoietic feedback loops' (2008, 39); the physical presence and fragility of the performer whose body cannot help but show its mortality, its necessary entanglement in both 'nature' and 'culture'; the explicitly 'networked quality' of the stage, in which the human being is always part of a larger assemblage of objects, technologies, and processes; and last, but no means least, the sense in which theatre's temporality is fabricated, malleable and multi-scalar, able to contest the limited (and limiting) teleological chronologies insisted upon by capitalist modernity. Ironically, what this cursory list discloses is the extent to which the theatrical medium, the art form that is supposedly focused on human concerns alone, is, in the very interplay of its internal mechanisms, always already 'more than human', an apparatus that cannot help but point beyond itself to 'a nature' that it is both dependent on and unable either to forget or master, in spite of its best efforts to the contrary.

Focusing on theatre's immanent qualities, furthermore, might well afford a new approach to ecocriticism; one that has much in common with what Jean-Luc Nancy in his recent essay on Fukushima refers to as 'exposure', the fact that we are always

implicated in systems that we can never control or predict, even when they have been created by human beings themselves:

We live no longer either in tragic meaning nor in what, with Christianity, was supposed to transport and elevate tragedy to divine salvation. [...] We are being exposed to a catastrophe of meaning. Let's not hurry to hide this exposure.... Let us remain exposed, and let us think about what is happening [*ce qui nous arrive*] to us: Let us think that it is we who are arriving, or who are leaving. (2015, 10)

The demand for exposure implicit in Nancy's use of the passive tense (*ce qui nous arrive*) advances a view of ecotheatre that is interrogative, indeterminate, and modest. For if theatre's ecocritical potential is located in how the immanence of the medium poses a challenge to human intentionality, then to prescribe a meaning that audiences are expected to act upon is problematised in advance. In the face of such a contradiction, the most – or maybe best – that one can hope to achieve is to produce a theatre that highlights its own incapacity to signify, its own failure to act. As such, theatre's 'power', to borrow and reverse the title of Erika Fischer-Lichte's paradigmatic text *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2008), would be found in its weakness. Insisting on weakness, but without for all that giving into nihilism or despondency, may permit theatre to refrain from perpetuating the type of Promethean thinking that has produced such things as climate change, species extinction, and toxic pollution in the first place. Instead then of 'strong performance' that would succeed in meeting its targets, weak theatre holds out the possibility of an alternative kind of eco-practice, rooted in a recognition of limits and capacities and keenly aware of what Baz Kershaw terms 'mutual vulnerability' (2007, 238).

This mention of weak performance is timely. Since the 'performative turn' that took place in the 1980s, performance has been largely fêted as a progressive force – an activity that supposedly produces a more democratic world by stressing the iterability and contingent nature of all identity and reality.⁵ Indeed, in these impact-obsessed times, it sometimes seems that one has only to mention the word performance to convince policy makers, funding bodies and academics of the fundamental rightness of any project looking to transform individuals and communities for the better. But what if this view of performance is wrong, an instance of empty rhetoric that not only does little or nothing to change the status quo, but which actively hampers the transformations it supposedly brings about? This critique not only harks back to Clark's more general question about the validity and labour of ecocriticism in a world that purports to be generally ecological, it also resonates with Sara Ahmed's related deconstruction of the supposed efficacy of radical speech acts as they pertain to critical race studies (2004). For Ahmed, the conscious performance (or 'marking') of whiteness in an institutional context does not trouble the 'racist' status quo; it acts as a convenient alibi for stasis. Instead of bringing about a new state of affairs by highlighting the contingent, ungrounded nature of all identity and power, an investment in performativity, Ahmed proposes, is all too often a non performance, a failed speech act whose entire *raison d'être* is to achieve the very opposite of what it claims to do: 'the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, but is actually what the speech act is doing' (2004, 3).

Although Ahmed is concerned with performativity as opposed to aesthetic performance, her suspicion about the efficacy of speech acts has important ramifications for anyone interested in theatre's relevance as an ecocritical medium: it reminds us that theatre's success may be found in the exposure of its own artifice. With Ahmed's and Clark's cautions firmly in mind, theatre asks 'strong performance' to prove itself, to evidence its claims by adhering to a mode of showing that self-consciously prevents spectators from mistaking a theatrical event for an actual one. As such, theatre's ecological praxis resides in its recognition of what Hans-Thies Lehmann terms 'afformance', an affirmation of 'a non-action' that contests, by the very fact that it takes place, the hubristic and misguided thinking that would purport to save the planet through performance (2006, 179). In this way, theatre allies itself with everything that Western modernity distrusts – the weak, the unfinished, the superfluous, the contingent. Like 'nature', there is always something in the medium of theatre that refuses to serve a purpose, and which is content, merely, to reproduce itself, again and again. From this point of view, it is telling that the essays in this issue make no great claims for theatre and performance's efficacy; on the contrary, they are at pains to show that theatre's doing as I mentioned previously is always to some extent an 'undoing', a coming to terms with weakness and inadequacy. Whether or not such modesty will prove to be a more generative vehicle for environmental change than the usual positive claims made for theatre and performance is a different matter. But at least the question has been raised, which I hope will provide a space for a pause, and perhaps even allow for a reconsideration of the often unreasonable expectations made by funding bodies, research councils, and audiences on theatre and theatre makers. As an art of weakness, theatre's role is not to produce the real, it is to corrode it, to make the world problematic, multiple and complex.

Structure

The issue opens with an approach to performance and ecology that has been almost entirely overlooked by scholars working in Theatre Studies, to date – that is, the ecological potential inherent in the rehearsal or devising process itself.⁶ In 'On Creating a Climate of Attention: The Composition of Our Work', Karen Christopher and Sophie Grodin, from the company Haranczak/Navarre, explain how for them devising is a mode of ecological production in and by itself. Importantly, this process of creativity is dependent upon what Christopher and Grodin define, metaphorically, as 'a climate of attention', in which performance makers are required to open themselves to each other as well as to the 'more than human materials' they are working with. In this exposure to alterity, the artists displace themselves from the centre of creativity, and exist in a patient, often painful dialogue with the world around them, learning how to accept weakness as a first step towards existing within a larger ecosystem.

The following two essays by Minty Donald and Baz Kershaw, are grounded in one of Theatre Studies' newest and most generative methodologies: practice-based research. Reflecting on her water-based project *Guddling About* in 'The Performance "Apparatus": Performance and Its Documentation as Ecological Practice', Donald discusses her attempts to investigate some of the paradoxes of eco-performance by exploring the relationship between performance scores and their documentation. She

does this by drawing on Karan Barad's new materialist theory of the 'apparatus', which, in turn, allows her to suggest that the 'intra-active' nature of the performance score questions the primacy of the human subject and discloses new, more modest ways of ecocritical thinking that embrace contingency and open-endedness. In his article 'Projecting Climate Scenarios: Landscaping Nature, and Knowing Performance in Becoming Performed by Ecology', Baz Kershaw draws on three of his own practice-based experiments that have sought, in their different ways, to contest the 'double-binds' inherent in our 'performance compulsion'. Through his performative engagement with the ideas of Gregory Bateson, Kershaw proposes a more gently hopeful version of Bateson's feedback loop. For Kershaw, this is found in the human agent's ability to affirm what he calls 'eco-lacunae' – that is, those things that we are unable to know about ecosystems in advance or through language. Through this experience of 'active passivity', Kershaw develops his long-standing interest in advocating 'a paradoxology of performance', in which the cultivation of failure might be our best chance of survival.

The final three articles explore the ecological potential of the theatrical medium through more traditional forms of performance analysis. In 'Theatre, Conflict and Nature', Wallace Heim argues that dramatic theatre's contribution to environmental debates is not found in offering solutions or in providing sensual experience of the world, but in disclosing the ineluctability of conflict. By rethinking the meaning and function of tragedy, Heim asks a series of awkward questions and suggests that theatre's ecological function might be to confront its audiences with an agonistic view of 'nature' that defies accommodation and resolution, and which places the very meaning and practice of democracy in crisis. Like Heim, Carl Lavery also stresses the 'dark' pedagogical function of the theatre medium. In 'Theatre, Time and Ecology: Deceleration in *Stifters Dinge* and *L'Effet de Serge*', Lavery argues that postdramatic theatre's fascination with the production of 'decelerated durations' has the ability to contribute to a new time ecology. For Lavery, deceleration does not make the world slower; on the contrary, it makes the world multiple and voids it of drama, often resulting in an uncomfortable sense of boredom. In his close readings of *Stifters Dinge* and *L'Effet de Serge*, Lavery show how spectators are no longer the masters of time; rather they are subjected to it, forced to undergo its fluxes and flows, and denied any sense of transcendence. In the final article 'Confounding Ecospectations: Disappointment and Hope in the Forest', Dee Heddon provides an autobiographical account of her experience of disappointment when attending the performance *Forest Pitch*, Scotland's contribution to the Cultural Olympiad in 2012. Reversing conventional ideas about what performance does, Heddon shows how disappointment is a necessary affect in eco-performance, since it prevents spectators from regarding the artwork as an imaginative solution to the environmental problems that beset us. For Heddon, the affective labour of disappointment is paradoxically productive: the failure of the work is what causes her to return to the scene of performance not in the hope of ever fixing it but with the more modest desire, perhaps, of thinking how to improve it. Heddon's text provides a fitting conclusion to this edition of *Green Letters*: her sense of disappointment is not, in any way, advanced from a position of critical superiority. Rather, it emerges from an awareness of the limits of her own

expectations as an eco-spectator as well as those that she points to in the performance of *Forest Pitch* itself.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May's prescriptive definition of eco-dramaturgy as a type 'of theatre and performance making that puts ecological reciprocity at the centre of its theatrical and thematic intent' (2012, 4); or Anthony Kubiak's claim that developing 'a greater sensitivity' to what he calls 'the bionet' is 'found in realizing (and not simply thinking or naming) the world as alive' (2012, 55).
2. For more on weak performance, see Alan Read's wonderful chapter on transhumance in *Theatre In the Expanded Field: Seven Approaches to Performance* (29–47).
3. See, for instance, Gabriel Egan's *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (2006).
4. See also Heim, Szerzynski and Wateron (2003) and Giannachi and Stewart (2005).
5. The exception here is Jon Mackenzie's *Perform of Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001).
6. It could be argued that Theresa J. May's work on Jerzy Grotowski's *Mountain Project* (1977) touches on the rehearsal process, but, as May recognises, this was at a time when Grotowski was more concerned with developing the participatory ethos of paratheatre than with making public/aesthetic performances per se. See May (2005).

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