

## DRAMATURGY AS A MODE OF LOOKING

Maaïke Bleeker

In *What is Philosophy?* (1994) Deleuze and Guattari propose to conceive of thinking as something that happens between people rather than as an individual action. They speak of thinking as an action that occurs between friends, where friendship is the required condition or setting for thinking to take place. This friendship is not based on sharing the same ideas, but instead is the momentum for having something to say to one another; this momentum results not only in thoughts but in thoughts that move. This movement starts from what Deleuze calls a certain "charme", a spark that lights up between two people turning them into friends. The relationship between these friends involves both closeness—or, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, "competent intimacy"—and distance—or "competitive distrust.;

Their understanding of friendship as a precondition of thought points attention to what might be called the "other side" of definitions which consider the dramaturg as the external eye, the first audience, the observer at a distance, or even the critic. This "other side" is the dramaturg as partner in a collaborative movement towards a common goal. For although the dramaturg may represent the "other" within a working process, he or she is an involved other. He or she is not only an analytical, intellectual eye from the outside, but also a body who thinks along with the director or choreographer—that is, as a collaborator who moves along with him or her in a movement that involves both closeness and distance, both similarity and difference.

I propose to understand this collaborative movement in terms of an interaction between two different modes of looking. With this notion of dramaturgy as a mode of looking, I argue against the idea that dramaturgy is some independent aspect of a work or, even worse, something applied to a work. All too easily, the function of the dramaturg gets associated with rules that become applied in the creation of a well-made performance, whatever that may be. I am strongly opposed to this. I also argue against the idea that dramaturgy is the exclusive terrain of the dramaturg. Instead, I propose that dramaturgy can be better understood as a practice that involves a specific relationship to the various elements that make up the work and the working process. Both the director or the choreographer and the dramaturg deal with the same material and are part of the same creative process, yet they have a different approach to it; they look at the material at hand and the process of making a performance from a different point of view. As a result, they have different perspectives on what is there to be seen. They are different persons from different backgrounds and with different experiences; differences that can help us become aware of the implications of the cultural gaze at work in what we think we see. But more than that, they have a different perspective because they focus attention differently. The dramaturgical perspective differs in some important respects from the director's perspective or the choreographer's perspective. At moments, this difference can be minimal, yet it is critical, for it is this difference that allows an encounter to take place.

Deleuze and Guattari's conception of thinking in terms of movement that is divided up within itself seems to be useful as well for a reconsideration of the interaction between stage and audience. Thinking as movement presents an alternative to representational thinking in which meaning is thought to result from the decoding of signs. It helps to understand meaning as something that "takes place" and results from the way the audience is moved by a performance or invited to move along with it or even led astray. Thinking as movement taking place between

friends helps to understand this movement as not necessarily the following of a given path, but rather as an interaction between what is presented and a response that can have its own agenda. Questions of how meaning "takes place," and why it takes place the way it does, are crucial to the dramaturgical perspective on the elements that make up a performance and the process in which this performance is produced.

I am aware that all too easily the work of Deleuze and Guattari, and that of other philosophers and theorists, is used as a kind of trademark, an intellectual justification for artistic practices. For me it worked the other way around. My ideas about dramaturgy were already well on their way before I read Deleuze and Guattari. These ideas are based on practical experience in the theatre, and not on philosophy. Let me therefore begin by locating myself within the theatre practice in which I developed my ideas about dramaturgy. This is a European theatre practice, more precisely, the theatre as it developed in the Netherlands and Flanders in the last two decades of the 20th century.'

### **Brecht and Beyond**

In the Netherlands and Flanders, it was only in the sixties that dramaturgy developed as a phenomenon, as a consciousness or a practice, and this happened mainly under the influence of the German tradition of Bertolt Brecht, among others.' Dramaturgy, as it was then conceived, starts from a concept (usually an interpretation of a text) that the director and the dramaturg work out before the rehearsals begin. This concept entails a well-defined direction in which they want the performance to go—that is, the idea that the play should express. Seen this way, the dramaturgical concept is a goal one has to work towards. Often, the dramaturg is assigned the role of protector of this goal?

What was new and positive in this dramaturgy was that it made room for intellectual reflection in the theatre, and made room as well to adapt and transform historical material to meet contemporary needs. It was, however, also from this tradition that the mistaken idea grew that directing is the execution of a dramaturgical concept thought out in advance. As a result, dramaturgy became associated with pre-given concepts that have to be fulfilled, rules that have to be imposed on the artistic material, prescriptions that have to be carried out—or, to put it simply, with limitations imposed upon artistic freedom. Ironically, this historical moment in which intellectual practice got incorporated into the theatre itself contributed to the opposition of the artistic and the intellectual that still can be seen at work today in certain critical appraisals of dramaturgy and **dramaturgs** in which dramaturgy is associated with intellectualism imposed on theatre or dance.

The theatre that I started working in became recognized for its resistance to this restrictive use of concepts. Today, many theatre-makers prefer a process-oriented method of working in which form and meaning arise during the working process. In this process, visual elements and the body are often used to undermine or deconstruct the authority of the text as a stable source of meaning. **Hans Thies Lehmann** (1997) describes this development beautifully in terms of a transition from a **logocentric** way of structuring performances towards what he calls landscape architecture. With

this term, he wants to evoke both Gertrude Stein's notion of landscape play and Derrida's notion of *espacement*.

"Landscape," as a concept to describe the new theatre, indicates a certain "spacing out" that involves both actual spaces and scenography, as well as the symbolic spaces opened up by discourse. Dramatic structure as a unifying framework gives way to what Lehmann in his *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999) terms "multiplication of frames." The performance text "spaces out" and opens up visual and auditive spaces that call upon the spectator to synthesize the elements presented. In this "theatre of landscape," if I may neologize, conventional dramaturgical tools originating from the dramatic theatre do not serve the purpose **anymore**. More productive seems to be the proposal by Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks to conceive of theatre performance in terms of a stratigraphy of layers —f text, physical action, music **and/or** soundtrack, scenography **and/or** architecture (2001, 24). **Material** on one track will inevitably mediate material in others; they are read and interpreted onto, into, and through each other, whether they have natural **affinities** or not. To understand the procedures and effects of theatre performance as a stratigraphy of layers, Pearson and Shanks propose the concepts of parataxis (defined as the placing of clauses, etc. one after another, without words to indicate coordination or subordination or cohesion between causes or actions of equivalent rank joined by conjunctions, with implications of sequentiality), hypotaxis (the subordination of one clause to another or cohesion through dependency of clauses or actions joined by relative pronouns, with implications of simultaneity), or katachresis (misapplication, a process of reinscription jarring articulations, with implications of temporal discontinuity) (25).

### **Dramaturgy as a Mode of Looking**

With his notion of the contemporary stage as a landscape, Lehmann opens up the possibility to think of dramaturgy in terms of the organization of an event. At moments, these events can be organized in such a way as to guide or direct the attention of the audience in a very specific direction and towards a very specific meaning, while at other moments the audience can be left free to wander around.

In this theatre, the meaning of meaning itself starts to shift as the pragmatic and affective dimensions of the interaction of stage and audience gain importance at the cost of semantic dimensions. Instead of communicating the meaning of the performance to the audience with the help of signs presented within a clearly defined framework, a situation is being set up which carries the possibility of various kinds of communication. Meaning here is the result of what Pearson and Shanks term inciting incidents and their trajectories (26). In a performance, inciting incidents like Deleuze and Guattari's "**charme**" light up, attract attention, and thus engage with the audience. They present an address that can invite the audience to move along. But the tracks they inaugurate also can be suddenly cut off or can change of direction radically. They can run parallel or clash with one another. The audience can be lead from one track to another or left alone to find its way.

In this theatrical practice, doing dramaturgy turns into a quest for provisional or possible arrangements of the diverse elements used by the artist and the question of how this challenges, invites, puts off, or leads astray an audience. Here, dramaturgy turns into a mode of looking that implies an eye for the possibilities inherent in the ideas and the material, as well as an eye for their implications, their effects.

One way to imagine what such a dramaturgical mode of looking might entail could be to start from this notion of inciting incidents and understand them as what Hubert Damish (1997) has termed "moves." These moves that make up the performance turn time and space into a specific here and now place. These moves appear through and against a complex network of earlier moves, be it other performances, other art works, philosophical ideas, practical knowledge and everyday experience, or historical events. Hubert Damish compares such moves as presented by works of art and their relationship with the complex network of synchronic and diachronic relationships against and through which they appear, with a game of chess. At any time during a game of chess the distribution of the pieces on the board can be considered either the product of a given history (the succession of moves from which it results) or a "position" that contains all necessary information for the player whose turn comes next to be able to decide a move in an informed manner.

Typical of the dramaturgical mode of looking might be the development of an awareness of, on the one hand, (possible) relationships between the various moves that together make up the performance, and on the other hand, the relationship between these moves as they make up a performance and the multidimensional network of synchronic and diachronic relationships against which they appear to an audience. The goal of this awareness is not to follow some pre-given rules—as the comparison with a game of chess might (wrongly) suggest. If dramaturgy is about rules and conventions at all, it is not about applying or following them, but about becoming aware of them as they guide making performances as well as looking at them. It is about allowing all of these activities to operate self-reflexively.

Seen this way, the dramaturgy of a particular work is inseparable from the work; it is the work seen from a particular point of view. The director or choreographer herself or himself can look at her or his own work from a dramaturgical point of view as well, and, no doubt, at times she or he will do so. It can also be productive to ask somebody else to take this position in the creative process in order to open up the possibility for a dialogue. Here, concepts can function as a meeting ground in the working process.

This demands a concept of concept, however, that is at a considerable distance from the concept as prescription, goal or rule. This is a concept of concept that is at a considerable distance as well from an idea of concept as derived from the interpretation of a text, as a condensed meaning one has to work towards. It demands a concept of concept that is dynamic instead of static, and open instead of already saturated with meaning. The concept as meeting ground for the dialogue between dramaturg and director or choreographer is a concept that does not restrict possible meanings or impose limits to construction, but instead can serve as an Archimedean point, a point of reference

in a process of exploration. This concept is not a starting point in linear sense, nor is it some kind of goal or endpoint; instead it should be thought of as a function in the process of making a work. What that means, I will explain by means of an example from my own practice.

### **The Concept as Meeting Ground: A Practical Example**

Figure 1 is a concept drawn by choreographer Itzik Galili. It is an image that came to his mind and he explained it as follows: there is this small cart, the kind that is used to move around crates or boxes (fig. 2). On this cart, there is a screen (fig. 3). There is also this figure standing alone. Light causes a shadow of this figure to fall on the screen (fig. 4). The figure is screaming a text, a text about art. And while this figure is screaming, the text appears in writing on the screen filling in the outline of the shadow. There is also this line that seems to function as a pointer. When the figure walks away, and consequently the shadow disappears, the image of the body remains visible in written text (fig. 5). In the concept these different moments are simultaneously present (fig 1).

The first thing that strikes me about this concept is that it is not about dance movement, or at least in the first place. It is about the setting up of a situation. The concept appears as a constellation of elements that might give rise to an event, or, to be more precise, that can give rise to various events. What it will give rise to is still to be seen.

The concept refers to different techniques of meaning making: written and spoken text, bodily presence, a visual representation of a body, and a visual composition of elements in space. These different techniques imply different ways of address to an audience, inviting to both seeing, hearing and reading.

The concept appears as a combination of elements placed in relation to one another. Yet, the concept does not specify these relationships in terms of meaning represented. It does not fill in but opens up to questions about what these relationships might be and what they might lead to.

The concept does contain words and words were used to describe it, yet the concept in itself is more "spatial" than the linearity of language allows for. Its elements are more formal than signs referring to specific meanings. The relationships between them are more open and ambiguous than the causal and logical relationships in language.

As such, this concept does not tell a story or make a statement, although it can be made to do so. It can be made to tell many different stories depending on where one would proceed from here. Among these are visual "stories" about positioning and repositioning in space, about the relationships between the body and a moveable object, about light and shadow, about the moving body versus the static image, about presence and disappearance.

These stories could be linked up with verbal stories like, for example, Kafka's story of the penal colony in which text is inscribed on the body of the convicted, and where completion of the text coincides with the death and disappearance of the body written upon.

Actually, the concept is full of stories. Here are some of them:



Figure 1

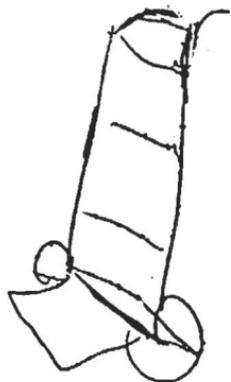


Figure 2

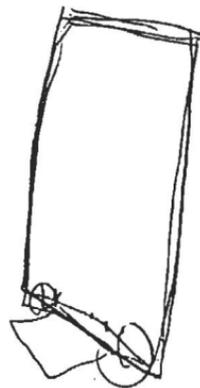


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



The text in the shape of body is like a calligram, the genre of poetry in which the words of a poem are arranged to offer a visual image, and where presence and disappearance are result of the two different modes of address presented to an audience. One cannot simultaneously read the text and see the image. As soon as one starts to read, the image disappears, becomes invisible.

In Itzik Galili's concept the visual image is an echo of the body of the one speaking. It is an image that represents the body of the one speaking. This image shows a body yet is not a body. This paradox is expressed beautifully by the Belgian surrealist painter Magritte in his famous *Ceci nest pas une Pipe* (This is not a Pipe) series. In Itzik's concept the body speaking, the body of flesh and blood, is turned into words and an image, bringing to mind medical discourse in which language and visuals are used to name, represent and replace physical presence. The words written on the body bring to mind Foucauldian ideas about the disciplining of bodies through the inscription and incorporation of discourse.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Dramaturg as Active Mirror**

What I am doing here is being playful with the possibilities of the concept. I am not arguing that the concept represents these stories, or that the meaning of this concept is these stories, or that a performance that results from this concept necessarily has to tell these stories. What I do want to point out, however, is that the specific structure of this concept, the particular juxtaposition of elements as presented or proposed here, allows for this concept to be linked up with these stories, or with many more other stories. These stories are the concept in its various possibilities and implications.

The fact that there are so many of these already indicates that a concept like this does not prescribe any particular story or meaning, but rather that the concept opens up many possibilities for proceeding from here. As a **dramaturg**, I can point to these possibilities and implications. In doing so, I act as what I call an active mirror, presenting a reflexive response to my partner in dialogue, reflecting back in a way that is both analytical and creative. Seen this way the question of concepts is not about what they mean or prescribe, but rather it is about how they might be used as a working hypothesis.

This concept of concept is similar in many ways to the concept of concept proposed by **Deleuze** and Guattari. They understand a concept as a constellation of elements, a junction that opens up a perceptual space. These junctions as presented by concepts have to be understood in **terms** of events and relationships rather than in terms of essences or reference. Concepts are centers of vibrations that resonate rather than cohere or correspond to some absent referent. Concepts are not like jigsaw **puzzles** that allow fitting in everything into a coherent, unitary whole. Instead, they have to be understood in terms of fragments whose edges do not match up, of always local and temporarily contractions of elements into seemingly coherent entities that nevertheless have only limited existence unrelated to others or

even existing in a state of tension with others. This concept of concept as a junction of elements that can even be in conflict or give rise to conflicting readings, seems to be particularly useful to think through the complexity of the contemporary world and to envisage new ways theatre could relate to this world in a meaningful way.

### Screaming Theory

One story which Itzik Galili's concept could be made to tell is a self-reflexive remark about the interaction of choreographer and dramaturg. In his concept, the transformation of embodied presence into words is linked up with reflections about art. The concept could be made to tell a story about the risks involved in turning bodies and movement into words, questioning what is the use of it. It could become a story about screaming theory; about words threatening to replace the body, reducing it to a mere shadow on the wall. Read this way, the concept gives rise to a pretty negative story about the interaction of dramaturg and director or choreographer as a collision of the artistic and the intellectual, showing it to be an instance of violent intellectualism and colonization of the visual and embodied presence through verbalization. This idea about dramaturgy finds its expression in, among others, a critique of recently developed collaborations between dramaturgs and choreographers in which dramaturgy is understood as part of an old literary theatre tradition and rejected as imposed intellectualism on dance. Such a story about dramaturgy is one of the possibilities presented by the concept, one of the implications that results from the ways in which this particular constellation of elements resonates with negative views of dramaturgy as imposed intellectualism. The concept, therefore, could be made to tell this story. Yet does not necessarily have to do so, just as doing dramaturgy does not necessarily have to be understood in this limited way.

The practice of dramaturgy as it has developed during the last decades has undergone such profound changes that it seems to be highly unfair to keep on denouncing it on the basis of what once upon a time it may have been. Did not the development usually summarized as "the death of the author" teach us that the meaning of a certain text, phenomenon or practice cannot be understood from reducing it to its origin? Just as the meaning of a text cannot be understood solely from tracing back to its author or to the historical period in which it was written, so can the meaning of the practice of dramaturgy today not be understood from what it used to be in times past and in function of a historical type of theatre. The persistent tendency to explain what dramaturgy is by going back to Lessing et al implies a denial of the long way both theatre and dramaturgy have come since then. Of course, these historical moves that make up the past of dramaturgy do form the backdrop against which dramaturgy today appears and therefore have to be taken into consideration when one tries to understand what dramaturgy might mean. However, instead of taking this backdrop as a prescription, frame, or model, it seems to me to be more productive to understand it as a starting point for new moves.

Not thinking referentially, but rather, inferentially (that is, in terms of Inference Instead of reference) offers a way to

go beyond the opposition of "intellectual" versus "artistic". It offers a way to conceive of possible relationships between the artistic and the intellectual that avoid either the violence or over-privileging of intellectualism (in which case theatre and dance have to become philosophy, and to justify themselves through, for example, Deleuze and Guattari) or anti-intellectualism (in which theatre and dance have to stay far away from Deleuze and Guattari or from theory in general). Thinking in terms of inference offers a way to conceive of a situation in which one might profit from the other without being reduced to it. It might open up a situation in which they have to say something to one another, which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is the precondition of thinking per se. This situation can be productive for both.

Deleuze and Guattari propose to imagine the friends thinking together in terms of athletes. It is interesting that they come up with an image of thinking that is so physical. This might be taken as a pointer drawing attention to the necessity to rethink how being invited to move along or move through a performance involves the body as the locus of various sense systems addressed by the performance. Thinking in terms of inferences that proceed through a body implies an even more radical undermining of representational thinking in favor of thinking as taking place through a body that is the junction of various sense systems; to conceive of thinking as involving a process of mapping and positioning in which different sense systems can be addressed in various ways and influence the way we are moving through landscapes on stage. Here the intellectual practice of Deleuze and Guattari can help to articulate new moves in thinking about the artistic practice of the theatre while at the same time the artistic practice of the theatre can help to become aware of unexpected implications of their philosophy. For Deleuze and Guattari, the athlete designates the condition of, on the one hand, being friends striving for the same goal, and, on the other hand, being different in relation to this goal. It seems that here the theatrical practice of the duet offers a complementary image that highlights aspects that remain in the dark in the comparison with the athlete.

Like athletes, the partners in a duet have different positions in relation to their goal. Yet, unlike athletes who are rivals striving towards the same goal, partners in a duet are collaborating towards a common goal. This common goal is the collaborative movement that is the duet. A duet does not necessarily involve that the partners are moving in the same way. It can contain tensions and collisions. However, in a duet, momentary collisions between these two partners are an integral part of movement as it takes place between the two. On the other hand, movement between athletes who are competing for the same goal seems to be a matter of parallel tracks running simultaneously rather than something taking place between the two.

Interestingly, Deleuze himself has described his collaboration with Guattari in terms of movement, in terms of dance, but only to disqualify them as dance partners. In the introduction to *What is Philosophy?*—the fourth and last book they wrote together—it reads; "We don't work together, we work between the two [...] We don't work, we negotiate. We were never in the same rhythm, we were always out of step" (1994, viii). Instead of moving along naturally,

every step had to be won through negotiation. His intellectual partnership with Guattari thus seems to be confirming their model of philosophical thinking as the product of competent intimacy between claimant and rival, a friendship that has to be won time and time again over competitive distrust. In the books that are the expression of this "duet" however, it is hard to distinguish between the two competitors. The differences in rhythm appear now dissolved in a collective movement presented under the double name that has become their trademark. Here, the model of the duet helps to conceive of the movement of thought as it is materialized in their books as the product of their movement towards a common goal, a product that in its turn—like a duet—invites an "other" to engage with it, to move along with it but also to produce new moves in interaction with it.

## Notes

1. As I see it, developments in thinking about dramaturgy as they took place in this theatrical context paved the way for new collaborations of dramaturgs not only with theatre directors but also with choreographers and visual artists. Not only did new developments in the theatre make these collaborations thinkable, but it is a result of these developments in the theatre that the collaborations of dramaturgs with choreographers and visual artists appear as a logical next step, a step beyond the limitations imposed by more traditional types of theatre performance. This step helps to open up the possibility to reconceptualize what dramaturgy might mean not only in dance and visual arts, but also in the theatre.

2. I do not want to suggest that the idea of dramaturgy as it developed at that time was intended this way by Brecht, nor that his texts and ideas necessarily have to be understood the way they were. I only want to point out some of the (perhaps unintended) effects of his heritage in the Netherlands and Flanders at that time.

3. For an introduction into this notion of dramaturgy and its historical context, see Van Kerkhoven (1994).

4. This list is not exhaustive. Other possible stories include Plato's story about the cave, where the presence is absent and is only known through its shadow on a wall. In the concept here, the spoken word coming from the body is turned into written language, bringing to mind Derrida's critique of the opposition between speech and writing. And all of this results in a mirror image of the figure present, a mirror image mediated by language, bringing to mind theories of subject formation of, for example, Lacan.

## Works Cited

- Damish, Hubert. 1997. *Moves: Schaken en kaarten met het Museum/Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum*. Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. 1994. *What is Philosophy?* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Van Kerkhoven, Marianne. 1994. *On Dramaturgy*. *Theaterschrift* 5-6:9-34.
- Lehmann, Hans Thies. 1997. *From Logos to Landscape: Text in Contemporary Dramaturgy*. *Performance Research* 2, no. 1:55-60.
- . 1999. *Postdramatisches Theater*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren.
- Pearson, Mike and Michael Shanks. 2001. *Theatre/Archaeology*. London and New York: Routledge.