Dramaturgical Analysis

A Relational Approach

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END by A Two Dogs Company / Kris Verdonck © Reinout Hiel

In this contribution we present a relational approach to dramaturgical analysis, in which we distinguish acts of composition, the address to the spectator, and the immanent context as key elements in any performance event. These components as such are not necessarily new, yet they are not always as equally integrated as we suggest. This is also a text about the methodology of dramaturgical analysis, as it offers a set of tools to do so, and actively reflects on the suggested approach.

Introduction

This contribution engages with the topic of dramaturgy, and more specifically, with dramaturgical analysis. Dramaturgy is a multifaceted term, and its content and understanding often depend on the specific context in which it is used. Historically, dramaturgy is often associated with playwriting or repertoire and literary research.[1] Looking at contemporary staging practices, which is our point of departure, dramaturgy is not only concerned with the knowledge of composition and storytelling principles, but also with exploring how theatrical strategies are put to use to manage the attention of the audience, how these strategies create meaning and experience, and how theatre, dance, and performance relate to the 'world at large'. We look at dramaturgy as an extremely useful perspective for analysing not only artistic processes but also societal or even behavioural processes; we can also analyse, for instance, the dramaturgy of urban spaces, classrooms, climate conferences, or presidential elections.

In this article we introduce a methodology for Dramaturgical Analysis, which we have developed in the context of our work as dramaturgs and scholars at the Theatre and Performance Studies department at Utrecht University. In our approach to dramaturgical analysis we distinguish three components, or *planes of dramaturgy*, namely: principles of composition, modes of addressing the spectator, and ways in which a performance may relate to a wider social and artistic context. *Composition*, briefly put, entails the arrangement of space, time, and action and the employment of all theatrical means available to create and activate that arrangement. Composition may generate specific meanings or experiences when presented to a *spectator*, through varying modes of audience address and responses to that address, and through the different ways that sociocultural or artistic *contexts* reverberate within the performative event. Our triad is fundamentally relational; dramaturgical analysis necessarily pays attention to all three components. One cannot discuss one component without evoking the other two. This emphasis on relationality is partly inspired by triadic thinkers like Henri Lefebvre and Chiel Kattenbelt; by the non-dualistic assemblages and networked modes of thinking in poststructuralist and new materialist theories of, for instance, Deleuze, Bennett and Barad; it also affiliates with Pearson and Shanks' reflections on dramaturgy-as-assemblage, but foremost relies on our own (field) experience.[2]

Our take on dramaturgy is closely connected to the innovative and experimental Dutch and Flemish theatre and dance practice that surrounds us and that inspires our work. This practice can to a large extent be characterized as postdramatic, which explains why audience address and spectatorship play a prominent role in our approach. It is precisely the relationship between the stage and the spectator (who sometimes can be found *on* the stage), and the subsequent shift from internal to external communication that is a key theme in postdramatic theatre.[3] This is not to say that we are proposing a postdramatic model, rather, we wish to present an inclusive approach, as our dramaturgical analysis accommodates both conventional and experimental work.

In the next sections, we will first elaborate on the key components previously introduced, after which we will demonstrate our approach through brief discussions of three case studies: *Phobiarama*, a participatory performance installation by director-scenographer Dries Verhoeven; *End*, Kris Verdonck's visual 'techno-opera' for the big stage; and *Apollon*, Florentina Holzinger's radical feminist re-enactment of Balanchine's famous ballet *Apollon Musagète*. Each case study is used to foreground a different dimension of our triad, while we also point at the flexibility of our relational approach, exposing the components as tools to work with, rather than offering a standard recipe for interpretation.

Dramaturgical analysis – a brief positioning

Dramaturgy is often regarded as a 'slippery term' as it is used for many different activities, roles, and purposes.[4] Within the context of this article, we focus on the dramaturgy of performances, installations, or other performative events presented to an audience, and less on the function of dramaturgy as a

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reflexive component in artistic making processes – although the creation process can never be isolated from its moment of presentation, of course.[5] Dramaturgy, as we understand it here, concerns the meaningful coherence of all theatrical means employed, of their organization and structure in time and space, and how their interplay generates meaning and experience. ‘Theatrical means’ is an umbrella term which includes the multiple methods and ‘tools’ for creating theatre and dance, referring to the use of bodies, spaces, objects, text, media, gesture, acting or movement styles, light and sound design, music, cameras, screens and other technological equipment, and more. Dramaturgy revolves around asking questions such as: How is a work composed or constructed, and what theatrical means does it use? How does a performative event engage its audience? How does a performance relate to the ‘outside’ world, that is, to everyday life, to historical events or actual phenomena, to anything that is present within the theatre but not ‘of’ the theatre? Dramaturgy may be slippery and multidimensional, yet it can perhaps be boiled down to a single question, once asked by artist Edit Kaldor: ‘Does it make sense?’ The question is itself multifaceted, subsequently inquiring into the inner logic, structure, or cohesiveness of a given event (does the performance make a point in a convincing way?); to what is its purpose (what is this text, action, or gesture trying to say or do?); and to how a work engages the senses (how does it address the key organs through which we sense and make sense of things)?

Our method can be situated in-between existing models of performance analysis and dramaturgy studies. In both fields of inquiry, many publications tend to centre on one or two of the components, whereas we believe there is value in discussing all three components, in an integrated manner – which is why we put emphasis on the relationality of our approach. Many handbooks for performance analysis, for instance, especially the structuralist and semiotic models that emerged in the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s focus strongly on the composition of theatre texts or performances, teaching students how to observe and analyse the (relations between) different theatrical means employed, in a detailed and systematic manner.[6] Less attention is paid, however, to how one moves from such a systematic analysis to a motivated interpretation of the dramaturgy of the work, how specific compositional strategies and organizing principles relate or respond to the world at large.[7] Closer to our method is Gay McAuley’s way of identifying ‘performance paradigms’, where a conscious clustering of signs enables the analyst to articulate a performance’s ‘global statement’ and its communicative potential.[8] McAuley, however, pays little attention to the wider societal or artistic context of performative events. Dramaturgy studies, on the other hand, often do address compositional strategies and, to some extent, the connection with wider contexts yet the address to the spectator often remains rather implicit, and, since those texts are not intended as methodologies for dramaturgical analysis, they do not offer any systematic analytical approach.[9]

A dramaturgical triad: composition, spectator, context

In our dramaturgical analysis we distinguish between three planes of dramaturgy.[10] These planes relate to, respectively, matters of composition, ways in which the spectator is being addressed in or through this composition, and the social and artistic context immanent within a work (see fig.1).[11] These planes continuously inflect and interfere with each other. In this section, we will briefly describe and discuss these planes, demonstrating their use later in the essay.[12]

The first plane, *composition*, comprises all the tactics and strategies used to create and structure a performance, organizing and arranging space and time so that the performance is carried across from beginning ‘a’ to endpoint ‘z’. Such strategies may be derived from certain creation principles or methods deployed for generating text or movement material, (interdisciplinary) teamwork dynamics, casting processes, or preparatory research. This compositional component is often addressed in dramaturgy studies. In *Dramaturgy and Performance*, for instance, Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt refer to composition as the ‘internal fabric’ or 'texture' of the performance event.[13] Equating dramaturgy with architecture, they observe that both elicit structural coherence. Drawing on the writings of architect Bernhard Tschumi, they note that

dramaturgy, like architecture, involves the 'deliberate deployment of structure in order to provoke or enable live events'.[14] Such a take on composition accommodates traditional as well as non-conventional forms, from well-made plays to conceptual dance. We can think of Aristotelian or classical plot structures, or the fragmentary episodic structures of many absurdist plays, the repetitive patterns of minimalist dance, or sequences organized through chance or algorithms. These structures and organizational principles are meaningful in themselves; they often suggest a certain worldview, for instance teleological or, on the contrary, fragmentary; a view that corresponds to a world seen from above, or presented as not having a centre. Structural principles like (a)symmetry, mirroring, play-within-the-play, or seriality are equally significant. The compositional plane also pertains to the means and tools with which a work is made and staged, whether theatrical means (like acting or movement styles, proxemics, text, objects, costumes, set, sound, music, or lighting), or 'extra-theatrical' elements (such as film, social media formats, mobile phones or webcams, etc.).[15]

Our second plane of dramaturgical analysis pertains to the *spectator* and to specific modes of spectatorial address. Spectators, whether *en groupe* or isolated, do not just look at or participate in a performance. They are addressed in a specific way, and positioned through that address: perhaps they are confronted, warmly welcomed, or aroused, treated as guests or as outsiders, as sensitive organisms, as democratic citizens, and so on. We focus on the single spectator rather than the collective audience, since we are interested in exploring spectatorial address rather than audience reception research.

As suggested previously, the address to the spectator is not often studied in a systematic way. Although valuable for the detailed analysis of composition principles, semiotic models prove less suitable for analysing how a composition produces particular forms of spectatorial address. Semiotic approaches do acknowledge the relation between performance and the spectator yet often reduce the spectator to a decoding 'recipient'. From the 1990s onwards, post-semiotic theory started to look at the act of spectating as a form of active and embodied participation in the process of meaning-making, which stands in line with the increasing attention for 'the emergence of new dramaturgies of and for the spectator' as observed in the special issue 'On Dramaturgy' in *Performance Research*.[16] However, when it comes to analysing these new dramaturgies, we agree with Helen Freshwater's critical observation that post-semiotic and phenomenological approaches often draw heavily upon the affective and emotional experience of the analyst – and regularly fail to properly tie in the performance with its social context.[17] Our focus, instead, is on *how* experience is organized for the spectator and on the particular dramaturgical strategies through which specific sensations and meaning-making processes are invited.

Many genres and theatre conventions have developed specific modes of address. Think of Naturalism, Absurdism, or classical ballet, the fourth-wall convention or the aside, the use of dramatic irony or Brecht's alienation techniques. In *Visuality in the Theatre,* Maaike Bleeker lucidly analyses the function of address in the theatre. 'Address' means that spectators are invited to adopt a particular point of view from which to look at what is being presented on stage. Bleeker terms this presented viewpoint the 'subject of vision', to be distinguished from the subject seeing and the performance event as the subject seen.[18] Bleeker's subject of vision does not imply that spectators (the subjects seeing) always accept or identify with the presented or implicated perspective (the subject of vision) in the performance (the subject seen). In fact, Bleeker's theory helps to explain precisely how experiences of frustration, annoyance or displacement are the product of a collision between the subject seeing and the subject of vision.

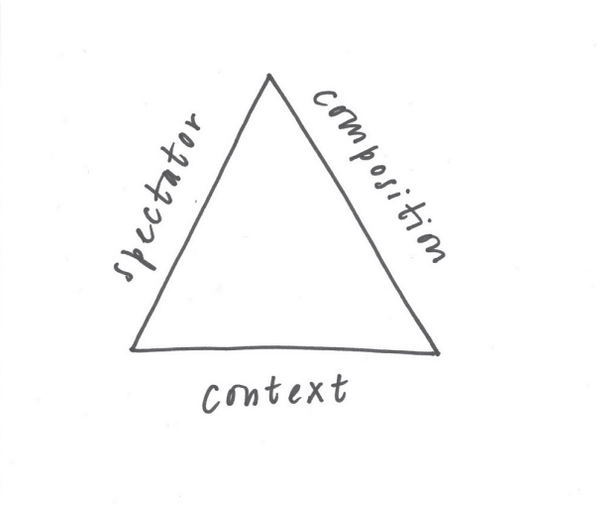

Figure 1. Dramaturgical analysis: composition, spectator, context

Context is the third building block in our approach. Obviously, performances do not exist in a vacuum. In trying to understand and interpret what performances communicate to their audiences and how they do so, a dramaturgical analysis attends to the social and artistic contexts in which a work is made and embedded. 'Societal context' is an umbrella term for the social, cultural, economic, or political world(s) that somehow resonate within the work. This wider context always reverberates within a work – even when it is obscured, or when a performance pretends not to. This resonance is also alluded to by Alan Read, in *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement*, when he describes the relationship between artworks and the 'outer world' as two surfaces, characterizing their connection as 'the crossing and re-crossing of intensities across and between these surfaces'.[19] Another 'intensity' moving across that surface is the specific artistic biotope within which a work is created. This artistic context works its way through an artwork as well. This context or biotope refers to a given artist's oeuvre, preferences for certain styles or working methods, sets of design principles or parameters identified in specific creation processes, use of idiosyncratic source materials, recurring themes or motifs, affinities with other artists, thinkers, political ideas, working conditions, and so on. All these elements add up to a work's communicative potential and may inspire certain interpretations.

We argue that these contexts are as much part of the dramaturgy of a performance as aspects of composition and the spectator and as such are immanent in the work. Marianne van Kerkhoven's famous distinction between 'minor' and 'major' dramaturgy is helpful here. 'Minor dramaturgy,' for Van Kerkhoven, is the dramaturgical work that situates itself around a concrete artwork, referring to 'that zone, that structural circle, which lies in and around a production'.[20] Minor dramaturgy mostly affiliates with the planes of *composition*

and the *spectator* in our approach. But, as Van Kerkhoven continues, 'around the production lies the theatre and around the theatre lies the city and around the city, as far as we can see, lies the whole world and even the sky and all its stars'.[21] This is what she calls 'major dramaturgy', which for us activates the plane of *context*. For Van Kerkhoven, the circles of minor and major dramaturgy are inseparable: 'The walls that link all these circles together are made of skin, they have pores, they breathe'.[22] This is why we argue for a relational approach that allows for analysing the interaction between work, spectator, and world.

Although we distinguish between these three planes, we ultimately wish to emphasize their *relationality*. A performance event always involves the triad of composition, spectator, and context and so, necessarily, must a dramaturgical analysis. As Van Kerkhoven aptly points out, 'a production comes alive through its interaction, through its audience, and through what is going on outside its own orbit'.[23] Similarly, dramaturgical analysis comes alive through actively tracing such interactions. We envision the three sides of our triangle as flexible bases from which one can start the analysis at any point, facilitating a movement back and forth between these planes of meaning-making.

Connecting the vectors: spectatorship, statements, situatedness

Exploring the different sides of the triangle creates different perspectives from which to analyse a performance dramaturgically. Which starting point to choose and which plane to emphasize depends both on what the performance itself seems to foreground and on the position of the analyst-researcher, i.e. what it is you want to show in the analysis. As we will demonstrate next, our triadic approach helps to discuss, respectively, elements of spectatorship, the possible statements conveyed, and matters of situatedness.

When emphasis is on the address to the spectator, this often leads to an analysis of *spectatorship* that can reveal how the performance constructs a position for the spectator. In the previously mentioned *Visuality in the Theatre*, Maaike Bleeker distinguishes two often recurring modes of audience address. *Theatricality*, on the one hand, is about rendering visible how theatre addresses and positions a spectator, illuminating how the means of theatre are deployed to present a specific argument and to expose how the spectator is actively involved in processes of meaning-making. *Absorption*, on the other hand, is the mode of address in which the spectator is drawn into the world on stage, precisely because the traces of mediation are erased.[24] These modes are not fixed or static phenomena, they are two poles on the same axis of spectatorship. They can alternate within a performance or even appear to be present simultaneously, as is the case in *Phobiarama*, discussed below.

Dramaturgical analysis also invites reflections on what *statement* is being expressed or presented, and how this is achieved. By using the word 'statement', we certainly do not aim for extracting a clear-cut 'message' or a single-focused meaning from an artwork. On the contrary, a statement can be many things and can take numerous shapes. As previously mentioned, a performance event always relates to an outside world, as both a reflection *of* and a reflection *on* that outside world. Van Kerkhoven once beautifully described how the composition of a work is 'a provisional or possible arrangement which the artist imposes on those elements

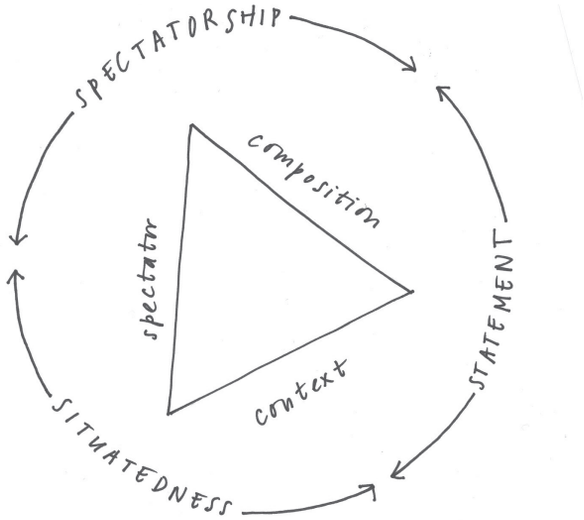

Figure 2. Planes of dramaturgy.

he gathers from a reality that appears to him chaotic'.[25] The theatrical world of a performance thus emerges as the result of an artist's attempt to work his or her way through and make sense of the outside world. In doing so, a 'statement' is conveyed, that is, the performance affirms, questions, or criticizes that world, or maybe proposes an alternative. In our view, answering the question of what the performance 'says' or is trying to do is crucial to dramaturgical analysis. This is not just a matter of reflecting on how a performance thematically relates to and references a social context, be it a contemporary or historical one. It is equally relevant to explore how the artistic context shapes the work, and how a choice for certain genres, styles, or working methods may reveal particular perspectives, strategies, assumptions, or propositions.

Previously, we remarked that the outside world always reverberates within the work. This 'echoing' or interference pertains to the maker as well as the spectator who engages with that performance. Dramaturgical analysis, therefore, also facilitates inquiries into the *situatedness* of both the work and the spectator. Situatedness acknowledges that knowledge and expertise is not universal but precisely particular, informed by one's specific local and social position and circumstance.[26] Spectators are situated in specific social, economic, and political contexts; they are defined by race, ethnicity, gender, age, social class, and physical capacities, which allow or limit each spectator to act within these contexts. Obviously, situatedness has an impact on how spectators make sense of a performance and how they look at the statements a performance may convey. Subsequently, we can start to see how it is not at all self-evident that a spectator is willing or able to identify with the point of view or 'subject of vision' offered by the performance. We can imagine how radical differences between the 'conceived' subject position constructed by the work and the 'lived' subject position of the spectator can produce tensions that become tangible and therefore meaningful in the performance event. Or alternatively, how being able to fully identify with a presented point of view might produce a sense of empowerment, especially when this viewpoint relates to a minority perspective. A performance thus can become active as a political agent. Dramaturgical analysis may help render visible such politics of perception.

Now that we have outlined the core components of relational dramaturgical analysis, and how they can facilitate different types of analytical reflection, let's put these tools to work. In the following section, we will demonstrate what dramaturgical analysis may look like in practice. With each example we choose one side of the triangle as a starting point for the analysis and then show how from this point of departure one can move to the other sides, thus activating all planes in the triad, while emphasizing, ultimately, the triad's fundamental relationality.

Exploring spectatorship in Dries Verhoeven's *Phobiarama*

We will start with *Phobiarama* (2017), an installation by Dutch theatre maker Dries Verhoeven designed for public spaces, in particular public squares.[27] The show has been presented at various theatre and performance festivals in different cities across Europe. *Phobiarama*, according to its maker, is a 21st-century haunted house, a dark ride into our collective social fears. An important characteristic of this performance is how the form and logic of the haunted house are used both for the *composition* of the work and for how the *spectator* is addressed. This latter aspect in particular gives rise to explore aspects of *spectatorship*.

In *Phobiarama*, audience members are put two by two into small entertainment park carriages. Entering the pitch-dark haunted house, invisible speakers spit out an eclectic mix of messages that a Dutch audience will recognize from the media. The messages all suggest that danger is near: 'Mohammed is the second most popular name in the Netherlands', according to Geert Wilders, front man of the PVV, the far-right-wing party of the Netherlands. Another voice recounts that February and March have been the hottest months in the Netherlands in the last century. Then the voice of Dutch prime-minister Mark Rutte claims that 'this has to stop', that 'our way of life' is at stake. Rutte is referring to anti-racist demonstrations against Black Pete, a black-face character and increasingly contested figure in the Dutch Saint Nicholas tradition.

While riding through the haunted house there is just enough light to see some figures looming in the dark. The figures turn out to be huge bears that pop up unexpectedly close to the carriage. The dim light coupled with the silent, staring bears produces the kind of anxiety typical of how a haunted house can simultaneously make one anxious while still enjoying the anxiety. *Phobiarama* happily copies and exploits this logic. After a while the bears transform in front of the eyes of the spectator. Stepping out of their furry coats they unexpectedly morph into clown figures in light-blue overalls, wearing red wigs and white masks, their red lips in a creepy stuck grimace: highly uncanny clowns, slowly fondling their own bodies in rather sexual ways, coming closer and closer. This is then followed by yet another transformation, as the clowns undress and men appear, naked except for their underwear. Their bodies are muscular, trained in gyms. Many have tattoos. By their appearance these male bodies seem to come from different cultural backgrounds. Moroccan? Turkish? Surinam? The men do not smile, yet fix their gaze firmly upon the spectator, following the carriages and even climbing on them. The lights by now are shining bright, the men's almost naked bodies disturbingly close. The carriages have slowed their pace, the spectator cannot get out. All of this increases the spectator's discomfort.

The compositional logic of *Phobiarama* reinforces the sense of danger lurking around every corner in the haunted house. With the gradual transformation from rather straightforward primal sensations of fear (help a bear! – the monster), to more ambiguous, but still entertaining feelings of uncanniness (the clown – the deformed and masked), and finally a sense of discomfort (the culturally diverse male body – the other), *Phobiarama*'s composition creates a multilayered experience of fear. The political messages in the beginning of the performance all play into collective cultural perceptions of fear and anxiety, ranging from the fear of Islamisation, to the loss of national traditions and climate change. Through the 'ghosts' that appear in the haunted house, that abstract fear materialises, forcing the spectator to confront it, round after round. This raises possible questions for the spectator: What do I feel when I see these figures? Why do I feel that? What do I think I see? Is there a need to be afraid?

At first sight, *Phobiarama* may seem to absorb the spectator in sensations of fear. However, ultimately the communicative effect of *Phobiarama* is not one of absorption but of theatricality, as Bleeker understands it, since the spectators are consciously made aware of their relationship with what is being shown and their response to it. Using the logic of the haunted house, *Phobiarama* obstructs the patterns with which we often deal with fear of others in everyday life, where we frequently opt for avoiding, turning away, or excluding. The performance inverts this pattern, forcing the spectators to face their fear, while also laying bare the processes through which this sense of fear is being produced. On top of this dissection of *spectatorship*, the spectators are addressed as visitors to a haunted house, literally contained by the carriage, and as such firmly fixed in the role of 'the anxious', the one who fears and enjoys fearing at the same time. The spectator thus is staged as the one who is afraid of the other while there is no real danger. The spectator can't control this act of staging. With a little twist, this sensation could be seen as echoing the daily life experience of those who are perceived as 'other', who also cannot control how they are 'staged' by society.

Through this analysis of spectatorship it would also be possible to address the *situatedness* of *Phobiarama*, exploring how the performance mainly addresses white, Western spectators and their specific cultural fears by staging non-Western bodies of colour. Also, the construction of spectatorship cannot be seen as separate from the sociopolitical *context* that resonates in the work and that is clearly alluded to in the political messages in the beginning of the performance that reference contemporary political and social debates about migration, racism, Islamisation, and climate change. The 'affective' *statement* the performance seems to make is that our sense of fear is ultimately fuelled by pre-formatted social anxieties that we project onto the 'other' without any ground. This idea is both made tangible and problematized on an experiential level.

Composing constellations in Kris Verdonck's *End*

End is a performance by the Flemish group A Two Dogs Company/Kris Verdonck, created in 2008 and performed subsequently at various international stages and festivals.[28] Like the previous example, this analysis starts with the plane of *composition*. However, in this example we move from *composition* towards the plane of *context*, and finally examine how the performance produces certain *statements*. As *End*

Phobiarama by Dries Verhoeven (2017) © Willem Popelier

begins, we see a wide and soberly lit stage. At the back is a large screen on which thick, grey clouds move slowly from stage right to stage left. Black snow falls from the 'sky', i.e. the stage tower, and an indefinable sound fills the air. After a while, a man enters a stage, carrying a strap over his shoulder and pulling a cable with all his weight. The attentive spectator will notice that while the man pulls at his invisible burden, the clouds on the screen in the back move synchronously along. *Listen to the Bloody Machine*, a book documenting the creation process of *End*, describes how this figure called Stakhanov, 'drags along the set/the whole world'.[29] When he has almost left the stage, he is joined by the Messenger, a man in a glass box who also moves from right to left while he 'carries' the glass box, incessantly uttering texts that report catastrophes, crises, and processes of downfall and extinction. These performers are joined by both human and non-human performers, such as a woman carrying a body bag, a roaring car engine, and a mobile fire. All figures cross the stage from right to left, each in a separate cycle and rhythm which continues invisibly at the back of the stage, and determines the moment of re-entrance of each figure. One exception is a performer who repeats a vertical movement of falls from the 'sky' (the stage tower) to below. After each landing, he stands up straight and walks off stage, moving from left to right – contrary to the other figures – only to reappear, falling, some minutes later.

What we see here is a *composition* of humans, objects, and machines, caught in cyclic movements of a never-ending carousel. Due to the various rhythms, they are organized as flexible elements within a constellation wherein the internal relations and relative positions of the elements constantly change. The performing agents have names (e.g. Woman with the Body Bag, Engine, Fire, Choir) but they can hardly be understood as characters. Instead, these performing 'figures', as Kris Verdonck prefers to call them, emerge out of a process of 'listening to the bloody machine'. The compositional logic is that of a constantly changing constellation of things and humans that fall, collapse, move forward, or fight against invisible anti-gravitational forces that pull them either back or up. The constellation calls forth associations with a post-apocalyptic world, creating a sense of ending. Supported by the title, this sense of finality makes way for reflecting on the performance's potential *statement*, as do the reports of catastrophes by the Messenger. In *Listening to the Bloody Machine*, dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven describes how *End* emerged from a deeply felt awareness of the end of human life as we know it, alluding to environmental degradation, the growing food and climate crisis, and related social tensions, violence, and societal instability. In *New Media Dramaturgy*, a description of *End* alludes to a similar sense of dawning disaster:

> Near the end of the performance, a car engine stripped of all its attachments (the engine is referred to in the script as a 'dancer') is flown across the stage, belching carbon monoxide and CO2 fumes and emitting a deafening roar – not the four horses of the apocalypse, but only one, the harbinger of the haze of global warming and an uncertain future. There is a mysteriously appearing fire, suggestive of the biblical metaphor of the 'burning bush', along with constantly falling black snow to complete the mood of Old Testament eschatology.[30]

End quite literally presents a *world* on stage, in which human and non-human agents constantly define and redefine each

Phobiarama by Dries Verhoeven (2017) © Willem Popelier

other. This constellation is not only post-apocalyptic but also deeply post-anthropocentric, as *End* increases our awareness of the collapsing of borders between humans, objects, and machines. Human-machine relations mark all of Verdonck's work, and his deep-felt affinity with a sense of absence, 'lessness', or ending explains his affinity with the work of Samuel Beckett, Heiner Müller, or Daniil Charms. The black snow and a Beckettian sense of ending also appeared in his more recent *Conversations at the End of the World* (2018).[31] These sources of inspiration show that a social as well as an artistic context actively reverberate in *End* and are deeply intertwined.

From here on we could delve further into aspects of *spectatorship*. In an essay on *End* and new materialism, Maaike Bleeker usefully observes that performances like *End*

> take the audience along in compositions of materials of various kinds. They present what may be considered propositions incarnated in the heterogeneous components of the performance, the relations between these components, and between these components and what is not present on stage. Making sense of these performances requires enacting the logic of connections, composition and associations.[32]

By enacting this very logic, the spectator becomes a compositional force as well, and subsequently, this could be a starting point for reflecting on the spectator's position within such large-scale constellations, and spectatorial ways of 'listening to' and tuning in with 'the machine'.

Rethinking context in Florentina Holzinger's *Apollon*

Florentina Holzinger's dance performance *Apollon* from 2017 is a radical re-enactment of George Balanchine's ballet *Apollon Musagète* from 1928.[33] Balanchine's ballet tells the story of the young Apollo who becomes a god after meeting the three Muses of Poetry, Mime, and Dance. Balanchine's ballet marked an important point in the tradition of classical ballet in the United States, as it challenged then-current views on ballet technique and movement.[34] Holzinger, an Austrian-born performance artist and choreographer with a background in sports, specifically challenges the gender roles in Balanchine's ballet, reclaiming space for the female bodies in the ballet. As a re-enactment, the performance invites an analysis of how the *context* of the original ballet and its particular gender codes resonates within the *composition*, which is a starting point for exploring how Holzinger's re-contextualization of Balanchine's ballet ultimately proposes a radically different view on femininity, one that provokes *spectators* to think about what they believe femininity is and confronting them, inevitably, with their own *situatedness*.

Balanchine's *Apollon Musagète* depicts how Apollo, through his encounter with the Muses, discovers and takes up his calling as god of music, evolving into being their mentor in the arts. At the end of the ballet, he humbly assumes his new stature and ascends Mount Olympus. The Muses in Balanchine's composition are dainty waif-like figures, elegant and beautiful, dancing around Apollo like he is the centre of their world. They balance upon his muscular arms and become stripped of their unique personalities as they march

identically behind him to the final balancing pose on the staircase to Mount Olympus. Balanchine allegedly said that it is the woman's task to inspire the man with her beauty and is commonly seen as a choreographer who glorifies women in his dances but does so from a clearly patriarchal point of view. Balanchine's choreographies literally stretched ballerinas' bodies to new physical extremes – which is why his work has been qualified as 'sadomasochistic'.[35]

In Holzinger's version of the ballet, Apollo and the three Muses are replaced by six naked female performers, all equally representing Apollo and the Muses – to the point that the roles collapse into one another. The strict hierarchy of the original has given way to a radical equality of collective 'sisterhood', turning the original inner logic of the work upside down. In this 'freak show' (according to one of the performers) notions of 'strength', 'beauty', and 'technique' are all radically redefined in a crazy mix of short scenes referencing all kinds of artistic and cultural contexts, including fitness culture, bodybuilding, Western movies, pornography, bull fights, and body art. The performers shamelessly and confidently showcase their naked bodies and ironically indulge in performing male stereotypes: working on a six-pack, taking a shit, playing a cowboy, riding a rodeo bull (perhaps the Muses riding Apollo?). These scenes are interrupted by short re-enactments of movement sequences from the original ballet, including dancing on pointe. The manifestations of what a woman can do and achieve with her body in Holzinger's version are diverse, ranging from impressive, to daring, absurd, carnal, and banal – but certainly none of it qualifies as what Balanchine considered aesthetically pleasing or beautiful. Fuelled by this emancipatory *context* the performance playfully cracks open the role and technique Balanchine (or ballet) etched out for the ballerina and gives the performers the freedom to present their bodies and their skills radically differently.

According to dance critic Fransien van der Putt, more than simply critiquing Balanchine's sadomasochism or the patriarchal order, *Apollon* seems to want to do away with female masochism as well, that is, the passive suffering of patriarchy by women.[36] And indeed, the performance makes a powerful *statement* about how female suffering and pain can be transformed into a source of power and strength, to be enjoyed. The actions clearly offer the performers a kind of pleasure which also informs the performance's take on (situated) spectatorship. It is precisely because of that pleasure, and the performers' ease and self-awareness on stage, that this performance forces the spectator to consider what he or she feels or thinks while watching these women. Is their (the women's) pleasure also the spectator's? Are these indeed Muses, inspiring and empowering role models of femininity? Or the opposite? Does the spectator feel empowered, intrigued, shocked, appalled?

What *Apollon* might mean to and evoke in the spectator is very much dependent on the spectator's individual *situatedness*. The performance makes an active appeal, confronting each spectator through its extreme provocations, triggering immediate and uncensored responses (people applaud, walk out, scream, shut their eyes, become nauseous, laugh, sigh, etc.). And because the feminine world on stage is not presented as one that is up for debate or discussion but as a reality, and since it is so clear that the performers truly don't care about what the audience thinks about them and do not ask for either positive or negative judgment or in fact any sort of identification, the spectators are thrown back on themselves and their sensations – leaving nothing more than their own situatedness as the context within which they need to come to terms with what they are seeing.

We look at dramaturgy as an extremely useful perspective for analysing not only artistic processes but also societal or even behavioural processes; we can also analyse, for instance, the dramaturgy of urban spaces, classrooms, climate conferences, or presidential elections.

Apollon by Florentina Holzinger © Radovan Dranga

Apollon by Florentina Holzinger © Radovan Dranga

To conclude

Obviously, all three examples invite a further exploration and elaboration, and the analysis is necessarily limited. However, we hope that these concise analyses help to demonstrate how our triadic approach can serve dramaturgical analysis, and that this article may invite others to create their own. We would like to conclude with a few reflections, beginning with the problem of terms. Once you start using this model, sooner or later one is confronted with the question of the difference between *dramaturgy* and *staging*. Directors, choreographers, theatre-making collectives, and solo artists all engage with matters of composition, spectatorship, and context. Similarly, dramaturgy is deeply involved with staging. These terms are not mutually exclusive, instead, we regard dramaturgy and staging as two sides of the same coin. Yet, there is a subtle distinction between these terms, and in when we use them. We tend to speak of staging when we address the concrete reality of what is being shown and perceived – often this relates to elements of composition and the address to the spectator. Dramaturgy, on the other hand, comes to the fore when we wish to encompass the 'immaterial' dimensions of this staged reality, like the thoughts and ideas that are conveyed through the work, the principles of composition underlying the work ('the logic behind'), or a work's reliance on imagination, conceptualization, or sensation, matters of social or artistic context, and so on. Staging relates to *what* we actually see on a stage or in a staged situation; dramaturgy investigates *how* meaning and experience are produced. Staging and dramaturgy then are instruments useful in switching focus, rather than being entirely different concepts.

Secondly, we would like to present some brief thoughts about the limits of this approach. With regards to the issue of *context*, one may wonder how to deal with this in relation to seemingly abstract performances. Even in those situations, in our view, there is always a connection with a wider world. Take postmodern dance, for instance, and let's take the movement style of Trisha Brown as an example. Although her non-representational choreographies do not represent a narrative or (emotional) situation, the movements are clearly inspired by ordinary, non-spectacular movement in daily life. Moreover, her work operates within the specific artistic context of postmodern dance itself. We might even say that the social and artistic context are actively involved in this case, since postmodern dance both adopts and reworks ordinary movement, thus alluding to a strong connection between art and everyday life.

As mentioned in the introduction, our approach is not limited to plays or performances. Dramaturgy has the potential to act as a perspective through which to look at the world at large. As a brief example, we can understand the Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington DC (US) dramaturgically. June 2020, the square was renamed by Washington's mayor after the Department of Public Works had painted 'black lives matter' in yellow capitals, as part of the George Floyd protests. Renaming and 'repainting' the square can be seen as a compositional act which clearly addresses the advocates as well as the adversaries of BLM and derives its significance from both the recent political context of the protests, and the long history of racial inequality and (police) violence. It is thus a performative event that actively involves acts of composition, spectatorial address, and the wider context. We could equally look into the dramaturgy of environmental protests, social media sites, magazines, talk show settings, election debates, shop windows, trends in fashion, and much more. We might analyse how in all these events and spaces, compositional principles and a variety of means are put to use to manage the attention of the audience, to address and position spectators, and how this all relates to wider socio-political spheres. Dramaturgical analysis, then, helps us to probe the porous skins, to paraphrase Marianne van Kerkhoven, of the many circles of thought and action that performative events are made of.

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1 Turner, Cathy, and Synne K. Behrndt. *Dramaturgy and Performance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 19-25.

2 See Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Blackwell Publishing, 1991; Kattenbelt, Chiel. "De esthetische rationaliteit van artistiek onderzoek." *Theater topics: De theatermaker als onderzoeker*, eds. Maaike Bleeker, Lucia van Heteren, Chiel Kattenbelt, and Kees Vuyk, Amsterdam University Press, 2006, pp. 70-82; Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Transl. and introduced by Brian Massumi. Continuum, 2004; Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Half-way: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press, 2007; Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010; Pearson, Mike, and Michael Shanks. *Theatre/Archaeology*. Routledge, 2001, pp.89-90.

3 Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Transl. and introduced by Karen Jürs-Munby. Routledge, 2006, pp. 85, 136.

4 Kerkhoven in Turner and Behrndt, p. 17.

5 For publications with an explicit focus on the function of dramaturgy in creative processes see, for instance, Georgelou, Konstantina, Efrosini Protopapa, and Danae Theodoridou, eds. *The Practice of Dramaturgy: Working on Actions in Performance.* Valiz, 2016, or Trencsényi, Katalin. *Dramaturgy in the Making: A User's Guide for Theatre Practitioners*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015.

6 Aston, Elaine, and George Savona. *Theatre as Sign System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance*. Routledge, 1991; Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Semiotics of Theater*. Transl. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones. Indiana University Press, 1992; Pfister, Manfred. *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*. Transl. John Halliday. Cambridge University Press, 1991; Whitmore, Jon. 1994. *Directing Postmodern Theater: Shaping Signification in Performance*. University of Michigan Press, 1994.

7 Pavis, Patrice. *Analyzing Performance: Theatre, Dance and Film*. Transl. David Williams. University of Michigan Press, 2003. Pavis attends more explicitly to performance as process but his methodology of analysing transitional 'vectors of performance' still relies on a separation of (sign) systems and hardly addresses matters of dramaturgy.

8 McAuley, Gay. "Performance Analysis: Theory and Practice." *About Performance*, no. 4, 1998, p. 5.

9 Eckersall, Peter, Helena Grehan, and Edward Scheer. *New Media Dramaturgy: Performance, Media and New-Materialism.* Palgrave MacMillan, 2017; Gritzner, Karoline, Patrick Primavesi, and Heike Roms, eds. *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2009: On Dramaturgy; Trencsényi, Katalin, and Bernadette Cochrane. *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014; Turner and Behrndt.

10 We opt for 'plane' rather than 'layer' to evoke a sense of spatiality. For us, a 'plane' indicates a domain, area or *denkpiste*, as the Flemish so aptly put it; a 'thinking arena' for playing around with ideas and observations, which is open to interference by other planes.

11 In this model another triad resonates, described by our colleague Chiel Kattenbelt, who distinguishes between, respectively, referentiality; organization and structure; and function and effect (i.e. what a work can do and what it actually does to us). See Kattenbelt, p. 79.

12 For a concise version of these planes with a focus on spatial dramaturgy see Groot Nibbelink, Liesbeth. *Nomadic Theatre: Mobilizing Theory and Practice on the European Stage*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2019.

13 Turner and Behrndt, p. 3.

14 Turner and Behrndt, p. 5.

15 This brief inventory presumes some basic experience in play or performance analysis. Readers unacquainted with this could consult handbooks such as Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*. Routledge, 2014; Balme, Christopher B. *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies.* Cambridge University Press, 2008, or Pavis. For an introduction to play analysis, see for instance Shepherd, Simon, and Mick Wallis. *Studying Plays*. Third edition. Bloomsbury, 2010, or Pfister.

16 Boenisch, Peter. "Acts of Spectating: The Dramaturgy of the Audience's Experience in Contemporary Theatre." *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, eds. Katalin Trencsényi and Bernadette Cochrane, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014, pp. 225-241; Gritzner et al, p. 1.

17 Freshwater, Helen. *Theatre & Audiences*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 23-25.

18 Bleeker, Maaike. *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 80.

19 Read, Alan. *Theatre, Intimacy and Engagement: The Last Human Venue*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 37.

20 Van Kerkhoven, Marianne. "The theatre is in the city and the city is in the world and its walls are of skin." State of the Union speech Theater Festival 1994. Transl. Gregory Ball. http://sarma.be/docs/3229. Last Accessed 2 August 2021.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Bleeker, p. 21.

25 Van Kerkhoven, Marianne. "On Dramaturgy." *Theaterschrift*, no. 5/6, February 1994. http://sarma.be/docs/3108. Last Accessed 6 May 2021.

26 Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, 14, 1988, pp. 575-599. This idea of situated knowledge appears in many feminist theories. Next to Haraway, we can think of the work of Adrienne Rich (who coined the term politics of location), see Rich, Adrienne. "Notes Towards a Politics of Location" (1984). *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected prose, 1979-1985*, Norton, 1986, pp. 210-231, or Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Second edition. Columbia University Press, 2011. See also the entry in the New Materialism Almanac, newmaterialism.eu/almanac/s/situated-knowledges.html (accessed 5 May 2021).

27 *Phobiarama*. By Dries Verhoeven. Stadsschouwburg Utrecht/Spring in Autumn, Utrecht. 19 October 2017. Performance installation. For a more extensive analysis of *Phobiarama*, see Merx, Sigrid. "Facing Fear: The Radical Reversal of Narratives of Risk." *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics*, eds. Peter Eckersall and Helena Grehan, Routledge, 2018, pp. 250-253. For a short video, see driesverhoeven.com/en/project/phobiarama/.

28 *End*. By A Two Dogs Company, dir. Kris Verdonck. Kaaitheater/Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels. 9 May 2008. Performance installation.

29 Van Kerkhoven, Marianne, and Anoek Nuyens. *Listen to the Bloody Machine: Creating Kris Verdonck's End*. Utrecht School of the Arts / International Theatre & Film Books, 2012, p. 15.

30 Eckersall et al., p. 203.

31 For further performance details see Eckersall et al., pp. 202-205. For a further reflection on *End*'s compositional logic, see Bleeker, Maaike. "Thinking that Matters: Towards a Post-Anthropocentric Approach to Performance Design." *Scenography Expanded*, eds. Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer, Bloomsbury Methuen. Drama, 2017, pp. 125-135. For extensive documentation of the creation process, see Van Kerkhoven and Nuyens. For an overview of Kris Verdonck's work, see www.atwodogscompany.org/en/. Last accessed 28 May 2021.

32 Bleeker, "Thinking", p. 126.

33 *Apollon*. By Florentina Holzinger/CAMPO. La Bâtie, Genève. 15 September 2017. Performance. Florentina Holzinger (Austria, 1986) studied at the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) at the Amsterdam School of the Arts. For other pictures of *Apollon* and additional information, see www.campo.nu/en/production/7391/apollon. Last accessed 6 May 2021.

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35 Daly, Ann. "The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers." *The Drama Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1987, p. 8.

36 Putt, Fransien van der. 2017. "Feministisch exorcisme anno 2017." *Theaterkrant*, 14 December 2017. https://www.theaterkrant.nl/recensie/apollon-musagete/campo-florentina-holzinger/ Last accessed 6 May 2021.