

Recycling sources and experiencing physical theatre in educating professionals.

By John Keefe

Our beginning.

're': from the Latin, a prefix meaning 'back' or 'again', but in the development of the English language since the 13thC. almost exclusively a prefix in formations of the latter sense 'again'.

To do something with some 'thing' again.

There is an equation that may be set out as theatre-recycling-environment; an equation concerning theatre's environmental responsibilities and it's using/wasting of resources. I will not be discussing this as such but it is a trope of theatre-recycling that will have ever greater impact and demand on us as our present system seemingly devours itself. Perhaps we will have to reuse the same decors in our shows, consume less energy, reduce the spectacle of over-consumption of resources; to give new meanings to 'poor theatre'.

So, for the purposes and themes of this seminar; the doing of something with some 'thing' (signs, ideas, themes, objects, the body) in our arts education and theatres. Too often, this is merely re-using as a repeating or re-iterating of these things (offering a nominal claim to or patina of 'newness'). Thus working from Walter Benjamin, the techniques of electro-mechanical or digital reproduction that re-circulate our art leaving that art, but not our perception of it, as it is. Or such re-use may become a re-working, a re-thinking or re-constituting that allows some 'different' artifact or understanding to be seen, to emerge.

In this sense we can think of re-cycling; what is done with the 're-things'? For what purpose and intention, what is revealed? How is the re-working used to confront, to challenge, to interrogate? In other words, what is the position and relationship of the 'thing' or 're-thing' to the status quo? To adopt Brecht, does the familiar remain familiar and the strange remain strange or is the familiar made strange and the strange made familiar such that we re-look at what we think and feel we know? For the theatre, this latter comes about -unavoidably and inescapably- through the practitioner and spectatorial re-cycling and re-working of aesthetic and ethical principles made manifest in each era by each theatre, by each style and genre of theatre; by the politics of theatre.

This becomes the first of my re-cycled themes.

The seminar invites us to take Baudrillard's notion of 'recyclage' or professional retraining in our careers, to be informed and up to date, as our

starting point. Perhaps in a wider sense, to be up to date with fashion, the latest ideas, the newest music and so on. But I would suggest that the key notion in this chapter, perhaps the whole book comes a page further on and provides my premise for this seminar.

What the acculturated receive is not culture, but *cultural recycling* ... They get to be 'in the know', to 'know what's going on' ... on a monthly or yearly basis ... that low-intensity constraint which is perpetually shifting like fashion and which is the absolute opposite of culture conceived as:

- 1 an inherited legacy of works, thought and tradition;
- 2 a continuous dimension of theoretical and critical reflection – critical transcendence and symbolic function.

(Baudrillard, 1998: 101)

In his anxiety to condemn mass culture, to criticize with some justification (following Veblen) the conspicuous consumption of culture as commodity, the commoditization of culture, Baudrillard uses the term 'recycling' in a too narrow sense and derogatory tone. 'Cultural recycling' becomes a term of abuse aimed at all those who fall victim to the seductions of fashion, who are in thrall to mass culture.

But we are all equally consumers of ephemeral fashions as we are of the great canon and legacy, of fun at the circus and *King Lear*, of celebrity affairs and affairs of state. Conditioned by his times, his own concerns and ideological perspectives, Baudrillard here stands for an intellectual discomfort with and arrogance toward human agency, and thus paradoxical choice and knowingness and human contrariness. So against 1) and 2), we can place the perpetuating – recycling- of equally influential superstitions and irrationalities and faiths and beliefs across generations and eras.

In receiving any kind of performance text I am a knowing spectator; I know it is a fiction of some kind or other but accept it as a form of truth. I know what to read and how to read what is on stage, I know what will affect me and why. I know that at its best and worst, what I am receiving and accepting will allow me to feel ideas and think feelings of all kinds.

I do this on the basis of agency.

I do this on the basis of what I know and what I re-cycle and what I re-define.

This is a necessary dramaturgy of re-cycling.

This becomes the second of my re-cycled themes.

Thus I choose and know what I am buying, what I am consuming, what I give regard and disregard to. I know something is 'rubbish' but still choose to see it. I make these choices on the basis of knowledge and prejudice and feelings located

in the material self that comes from my various inheritances: my cognitive-physiological- biological self, my en-cultured self, my socialized self.

I have these inheritances as the result of re-cyclings.

What Baudrillard fails to see is that 'recycling' in this sense is a necessary condition of both cultural stasis and cultural change.

Far from cultural recycling being a matter of disdain and dismissal, I would suggest it is at the heart of our being as individuals in a social and cultural framework that we both inherit but vary and thus re-structure and re-construct and re-define. Re-cycling is the mechanism and process(es) by which I, acting as both personal agent and collective agent, frame and re-frame the world, order and re-order the world, and thus inhabit and change the world. It did not begin in the 1990's as has been suggested.

We may simply repeat the past, we may abuse the past, we may learn from the past and thus change our present and future.

Recycling both holds us into and enables us to out-reach the worlds we inherit and inhabit and imagine. Re-cycling sustains the fabric of our culture for better and worse. It is the necessary, pragmatic element in the dynamic of change. It is one of the axioms of human life and culture.

As such, this is the third of my re-cycled themes.

In the spirit of this approach and the premises implied, I can re-use and thus re-cycle some of my own previous materials to introduce these themes. These previous expressions are proven to 'work' and are thus most suitable for my purpose here.

The sources and sites of such previous using are, of course, properly acknowledged.

Minsky coined the term 'society of mind' to describe the evolved human cognitive system as a vast nexus of individual processes of genetic evolution, cultural evolution and personal experience he calls 'agents'. Such agents are the combined activity of multiple and specialised cognitive processes aroused in actions, themselves arousing further actions.

Or citing Geertz as a bridge between the cultural and the physiological:

The Ice Age appears (to be) ... a time in which were forged nearly all those characteristics of man's existence which are most graphically human: his thoroughly encephelated nervous system, his incest-taboo-based social structure, and his capacity to create and use symbols. The fact that these distinctive features of humanity emerged together in complex interaction with one another rather than serially...suggests that man's nervous system does not merely enable him to acquire culture, it positively demands that he do so if it is going to function at all. (Geertz 2002; 67-68)

Re-cycling is genetic and material.

Those cognitive, psychological and neurological roots of individual and social behaviours and actions experienced as empathy and reciprocal responses:

(Spinoza) said that our mind is a very specific bodily process ... biology and neurology have shown that the processes ... are material and physical. (Murray & Keefe 2007: 135)

... emotion induction sites trigger a number of signals toward other brain sites ... and toward the body (Damasio 2000: 69)

Mirror neurons are pre-motor neurons that fire when the monkey performs object-directed actions ... but also when the animal observes somebody else performing the same class of actions ... present data show that the intentions behind the actions of others can be recognized by the motor system using a mirror mechanism (Iacoboni *et al* 2005: 529-32).

Re-cycling is social and cultural. It is a form of virtuous and necessary stealing.

That is, those discursive and material formations that we may discuss as (necessarily) acquired dispositions manifested by a self-willed social agent within the necessary given conditions. We can consider these under three headings that represent distinct but intertwining ethical stances:

the 'habitus' of Bourdieu; a set of embodied values, dispositions, attitudes and patterns of behavior by which we live our daily, apparently individual, lives. (see Danaher 2002: 37)

the 'structures of feeling' of Williams;

... meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt ... practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-related continuity. (Williams 1977: 132)

All that is lived and made, by a given community in a given period, is related ... although this is not always easy to see.

(Williams 1973: 9)

the 'Hyle' (hi-le) of Husserl;

... the body at the basic level of conscious experience; the lived, embodied consciousness ... the 'lived body' Not merely the corporeal body but the body which has intentionality, motivation and which senses-feels itself, has awareness of it-self. (Murray & Keefe 2007: 61)

This is the 'habitual body' and, if we borrow from behavioral economics and sociology, suggests the ways in which our habits – our re-cycling's - frame what we read and how we read it. (see Ariely, 2008)

Some 15 months ago, Knut Ove Arntzen and I first played around with the notion of 'recycling', sitting in a pub in London. We played with terms such as

‘rescuing’, ‘refinding’, restoring’, ‘reconstituting’, ‘stealing’, ‘hybridity’. I sketched out a diagram that resembled the stave lines and bar lines from music notation representing the diachronic and the synchronic respectively. We played with the notion of theatre ideas. We are still playing with all this but a first attempt to outline such a model of re-cycling for the theatre and academy may be offered here.

What are recycled are those deep principles and tropes of human culture that endure, have duration; that seem to run through all eras of any culture and through all cultures.

The axiomatic, diachronic stave lines of culture;

body-mind

actor-presenter

character-persona

text-presentation

spectator

site-space

scenographies-graphics.

They are replicated and transmitted as the ‘agents’ identified by Minsky, or as the ‘memes’ identified by Dawkins or the ‘archetypes’ identified by Jung. Units of culture that structure the narratives and narrativising of cultures and societies; that are transmitted and replicated and imitated, and which our intelligence enables us to learn, but also to culturally modify and adapt within and across lifetimes.

Thus, by deep principle or trope I mean those axiomatic truths that lie at the foundations and roots of human consciousness and cultural cognition that underlie the various routes of emergence.

Let us consider a practical example. Imagine a baby elephant taken to see his mother who is chained by her leg in a barred wagon. Through the bars the tips of their trunks strain and then touch, entwine. Simple coloured cels evoking the mother-child archetype that re-cycle our deepest visceral memories and emotions

The relationship between such principles and their manifestations is dialectic and symbiotic. These principles and tropes are re-worked to be manifested synchronically, as specific outcomes of styles or genres or individual works. These are the synchronic bar lines of culture.

We may see neo-principles of hegemonic orthodoxy that have survival and currency for an extended period but which eventually expire or change. I am reminded here of the Platonist or Neo-Platonist ‘chain of being’ that ordered the orthodox understanding of the world:

(Ulysses): O, when degree is shak’d, Which is the ladder of

all high designs, The enterprise is sick ... Take but degree away ...
And hark what discord follows!

(Troilus and Cressida, 1:3)

But from such specific orthodoxy, the world is turned up-side-down, evolves, changes; new ideas emerge from the orthodoxy. A neo-principle of a particular hegemony passes and is replaced by some new one but here the deeper trope of order remains.

Let me offer some examples from both the academy and the theatre. Both institutions may be characterized as 'meme vehicles' or 'agent pools'; means of inculcating, transmitting, preserving, re-circulating, interrogating, re-working, re-cycling units of culture.

The academy may pass on and perpetuate a meme as an embedded, received idea that is a form of false knowledge; for example, the continuing mistranslation and misunderstanding of Brecht's 'Verfremdung' as 'alienation' (the 'Entfremdung' of philosophy and sociology), rather than the 'estranging or distancing or de-familiarising to understand' that Brecht is aiming for.

The academy may be the repository of an enduring meme or archetypal idea that can be used and reused; for example 'katharsis'. A term from a specific culture and dramaturgy still casting a long cultural shadow, yet which stands for that principle of a learning empathy and understanding by one human from the actions of another human, and found in all theatres, including Brecht's.

The academy or training school will repeat and re-present those accepted fundamentals of approaches to acting styles and skills we associate with systems and methods; are thus instrumental in perpetuating and re-circulating the present hegemony of realism-naturalism but also occasionally, via some kind of re-cycling, provoking a rejecting response that tilts our students to other body forms and styles.

The academy, as a 'meme vehicle' will be part of a process and system concerned with 'an inherited legacy of works, thought and tradition' and 'a continuous dimension of theoretical and critical reflection'. Such reflection, paradoxically, of course changes, alters, helps evolve the original legacy itself. A virtuous re-cycling, perhaps.

In our theatres, such a deep principle and trope would be the theatre space (as indicated already) that contains a place for the spectator and a place for the actor-performer, within which there is a spectator and an actor-performer, in a dialectical, symbiotic and dramaturgical relationship. The spectator is a knowing participant and receiver, the actor-performer is a knowing presenter-re-presenter and transmitter.

The manifestations are all those theatres and productions and performances that we experience or know about (directly and indirectly) or read about or learn

about. Within any production we find that which remains the same, and that which is recycled and reworked and re-used. I want to use a personal timeline for one particular play to illustrate that which remains (the principles of the play-text) and that which changes – the manifestations in performance.

My play is *A Midsummer Nights Dream*.

9 productions seen, 1 production of my own, 1 production not seen but known. The 'dramatis personae' remain the same; the theme and fact of return - from Athens to wood to Athens remains; the returning as same but different remains; Oberon tells us "I am invisible and will overhear their conference"; Puck is dispatched to 'girdle the earth in forty minutes'; Bottom is 'translated' and enjoys his own particular dream; we are asked to accept 'magic' and so on. Given these necessary 'same-nesses', what then are the differences apart from the actors, scenographies, inflections and emphases, the theatre spaces? Each production recycles these 'same-nesses' via the particular actors, scenographies, spaces and stages; the different stage pictures of the same play made their own by each spectator in each era in the same shared experience that is theatre.

So I saw my first "Dream" in 1970; I remember an 'open-air' performance and the shallow grass amphitheatre.

My own production in 1985 where I tried to show the autocracy of Athens, or the dignity of the workers in their performance, or the dark side of the wood and its fairies – the dream as partial nightmare- by placing the wood around the audience.

The several deadly versions seen across 38 years set in different periods with different costumes and different actors but simply reproducing the play; offering a nominal patina of difference.

The production for which I was performance dramaturge in 1997 where I tried to bring out the asymmetric resolution of the 4 lovers entanglements.

The Lepage staging in 1992 that reduced the play's layers to a mono-vision of mud-pit and misguided 'concept' of spectacle.

The production of Peter Brook in 1970; not seen (to my regret) but known and, from the evidence, to be regarded as a 're-visioning' that releases the play. Not only in the visual effects of the staging, its overt physicality, its relocating to a 'bare' space filled by the staging and the inviting in of the spectators imagination, but its sharing of the experience with the audience.

One small example from the closing lines and stage direction note:

Give me your hands if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends (1)

(1) All off stage and into the auditorium, shaking hands with the audience.
(Brook 1974: 85a-85b)

Or an example that is of this moment; I noticed whilst in Oslo on Wednesday that the National Theatre is showing *Rosmersholm* and *Brand*. I cannot judge these unseen but can ask what 'new' can be said by more productions of such well-known plays? Will these merely be re-statings of the plays by the present directors, actors, scenographies? Will these be 'deadly theatre' or 're-visionings'?

The play-text may be regarded as a form of enduring original that is recycled through a history and variety of productions as a series of palimpsests. Each subsequent production 'rubs out' and overwrites those before but which remain as opaque shadows, as half-hidden spectres, memories or retained knowledge that affect each staging and spectatorial experience.

Each production inevitably and inescapably recycles and reuses and redraws what has gone before; both a 'conscious kind of recycling' as Knut Ove Arntzen has discussed and an inherited recycling from habits and experiences.

Thus all theatres and all productions are forms of hybridity of the 'before' and the 'now'.

This then emerges as a fourth theme.

The spectator draws on and is reminded of and thus mediates what they are watching by what has gone before. The performance text is formed and deformed and reformed as a spectatorial process. We bring our own ghosts whether personal, cultural, social, to what we see and experience as agents inhabiting a shared world. This makes re-cycling an inevitable form of 'stealing' and thus perhaps a notion that offends us. We are driven by desire, by art and funding policies, by competition to create what is labelled the 'new'. It offends us to be confronted by the counter-notion that re-cycling is necessary to the 'new'.

But re-cycling is also a liminal and subliminal dynamic in our cultural flows and rhythms. Thus as teachers in the academy we colour the 'memes' and 'agents' and 'archetypes' we both reiterate and re-cycle, and thus change these in big or small ways.

As academics, we colour the material we are drawing on and thus, whilst reiterating, also re-cycle it in some big or small way.

As students we receive the transmitted material and vary it, recycle it through our own growing experiences.

As theatre-makers we both draw on and try to escape what has been done already; we repeat and recycle at the same time.

As spectators we mediate from ourselves.

As stated, I am inevitably recycling –by choice and by default- ideas and materials from earlier works in this paper.

If we are passing on the craft secrets - the totems and taboos – of our theatres, are these now diluted in our mediatised and global cultures?

Perhaps we should be teaching principles rather than simply systems and methods; be teaching the place of archetypes, totems and taboos; be teaching the basic skills rather than particular skills and thus teaching the tools to learn? As was said in the final plenary, to be teaching thinking not thoughts.

The analogy was made between theatre and team games eg. football. In the theatre the outcome is known but in the latter it is not; a game played between roughly equal teams within the rules will turn on a small difference to give an outcome that may be predicted but is unknown. But the theatre outcome is always known when a play-text is being presented. The presentation may turn on small moments, but Nora must always walk through that door. How the actress gets Nora to that exit may affect our perception and understanding of that leave taking preordained by the play-text; the exit is repeated and recycled and maybe, renewed.

We may play with the absence-presence of Nora, eg. the figure leaves but a (her) doll remains; the spectator reads the ambiguity of leaving and remaining.

When the actor-as-shaman looks at me, I may have access to the ‘realm of the dead’. But as a knowing spectators we always know we are watching a ‘pretence’. The spectator allows the actor to be shaman by sharing in the making of the pretence. I then enjoy, learn from, have ‘frisson’ from such making, such liminal pretence-making.

To repeat.

I am inevitably recycling –by choice and by default- ideas and materials from works already given, published, or presently in preparation in this paper. These are acknowledged as conventions and courtesies demand and serve to exemplify the principles and practices I am exploring and suggesting.

So, as a closing coda, 2 further images from my own ‘befores’

- a dramaturgical carousel turning very slowly, now recycling the same issues and concerns into a blurred focus every decade.
- on this carousel ghosts and dreams from our histories that haunt our rhetoric, our practices, our anxieties, our desires, our renewals.

These ghosts become the frames and lens that shape our present dramaturgies. The ghosts of neo-dualisms and neo-romanticisms and theatre epigones that haunt our innovations and explorations.

The ghosts that haunt and inform our theatre re-cyclings and re-definings and ‘re-thingsings’.

Afterwords.

This is a slightly revised and expanded version of the paper given at the ‘Recycling in Arts Education and Contemporary Theatre’ symposium,

Norwegian Theatre Academy, Fredrikstad, December 2008. As such, it benefits from the papers and discussions running across the days and evenings of the event, for which I express my acknowledgement.

The essay purposely retains certain elements of the presentation; as a piece about theatre, it seems right that the performance colour and flavour of the delivered paper should be in this printed version.

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