

**The topographical sublime**  
**Space and textual action in Jon Fosse's fiction and dramatic art**

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*I Preliminary remarks*

In Scandinavian Late Modern prose fiction and drama, like in other literatures, the accentuation of everyday themes, spatial patterns and textual performativity sometimes raises current aesthetic challenges. How are we to analyze, understand, and assess literary works in which previously specific and separate genre components now converge? And where identical subject matters are recirculated in different versions – as a novel, as a theatre text, sometimes as a film script, a film, and so on? What happens, and what can we learn, when we read texts – novels, dramas, films – where as well character action and narrative plot or story-line are reduced to a minimum? – In such cases, we apperceive that the text "is happening" elsewhere than in the characters' quotidian, often suffering and miserable existential worlds. Our readerly attention – our gaze – is instead inflected towards "the margins".

In the materials that I have selected for investigation – some Jon Fosse and some Marguerite Duras – in a larger, joint project called "Text, Action and Space", this "elsewhere" seems to produce performativity in the sense of textual action – by way of the repetitive work carried out by space-prompting images and topographies. And the phenomenon that I study – the creative blend of space and textual action – occurs precisely in texts where subject matters, themes, landscapes and cityscapes are recirculated, and where the delimitation of genre-constituting traits is challenged, i.e. where genre and media converging seems to be going on.

For discussion *here*, I have selected from Jon Fosse a few examples from two reduplicating pairs of a novel and a drama. In the one pair, the novel *Bly og vatn* (1992) appears alongside the drama *Vinter* (2000). In the other pair [to the extent that there will be time to go into it], the drama *Ein sommars dag* (1997/99) appears alongside the novel *Det er Ales* (2003/04). [The third pair in my material, is the novel *Naustet*, and the drama *Vakkert*.] In pairs, they figure the same settings, topics, themes and characters. – Most of what I have to say here about Fosse, also applies to Duras; but while Duras relies on *spatial expansion*, Fosse's figuring of space is one of *concentration*. (I will clarify in a while.) – Against this background, let me try to pose some more precise basis problems.

Problems posed: (1) What relationship do images and topographical patterns bear to the performativity of the text, to its textual action? (2) What is the basic nature of the representational modes involved, and the function of generic converging? (3) Is any critique of existential or aesthetic ideologies involved? (4) If so, how does that critique relate to the inscription of those ideologies on bodies and landscapes, and to the possibility of material, uncoded apperception – in (the fears and blisses of) the sublime? Could such a critique unleash silenced sayabilities and unseen visibilities, "material vision"? – Complex basis questions! But they need to be posed.

Now, within our format today, there are by necessity some preliminaries that have to be taken for granted. However, let me at least indicate a few of them. – Modernity: While Jon Fosse's *œuvre* may be labelled *Late Modern*, and while it fosters qualities of an "hallucinatory realism", yet it certainly belongs to Modernity proper. Already the language of aesthetic form in Fosse's art indicates this: Both his fiction and his theatre texts are imbued with a yearning towards a totalizing form, an overarching "vault" (a ceiling) of wholeness (*Formvollendung*). At the same time, the rhythmic, serialized, prosaic, repetitional quality both of his prose and of his theatre texts, undercuts, destabilizes, "deconstructs" that constructive impulse towards plenitude. Fosse's language of aesthetic form is that of Modernity's irony, with all its aesthetic paradoxes, that both privilege and haunt us. – From within Modernity itself, though with *Late Modern* means, Fosse's novels and dramas wrestle challengingly with the separated spheres of knowledge, practical morality, and aesthetics of Modernity proper (incepted in the 18th century). Fosse does so in ways that can arguably be critically linked with Kant's three Critiques: that of pure reason, that of practical reason/moral conduct, and that of aesthetic judgment. This motivates my use of the Kant'ian/post-Kant'ian concept of the sublime. – Fosse's work on space and images has a propensity to challenge our encoded apperceptions and understanding of topographical phenomena, to destabilize them, and to reflectively question their viability. Where phenomenal understanding falls short, the intrusion into encoded space of "something else" in his art can be seen as a trustful and caring "overpassing" – an "overpassing" to the reader to responsibly decide what to do about it.

Theoretical frame: In keeping with this, the theoretical perspectives that inform my work on Fosse, have been selected from the critical tradition in the wake of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790). They are a blend of the early Lukács' and Szondi's theories of the novel and the drama, of critical theory, and deconstruction and performativity thought in the critical tradition after Kant (mainly Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, and their commentators). As to the role of the image and its space-inducing properties in relation to textual action, I lean on Jacques Rancière's recent thinking. I will return briefly to Rancière. – Importantly, all "my" theorists

share the double concern for both *phenomenal* (existential, "meaningful"), and *non-phenomenal or material* ("non-human") realities.<sup>1</sup>

Two spatial modes: With a view to the role of *repetition* – thematic, perspectival, character-duplicating, textual, genre-converging – I observe in Duras and Fosse two distinct variants in their respective configuration of space: that of *expansion* in Duras, and that of *concentration* in Fosse: The disruptive-yet-fused *spatial expansion in Duras*, is there combined with *mediating concentration* in narration and dialogue. – The *spatial concentration in Fosse* is on an enclosed, localized topography and its thing-images (often the closed-in Hardangerfjord parish landscape, or selected segments of a West Norwegian cityscape). While stifling, yet, by its focus on material things, it installs rudiments of an alternative spatiality. *That* aesthetics of space entails Fosse's well-known *expansion* of the narrational and dialogic-dramatic *mediating space*. Spatial concentration, then, is in Fosse combined with mediating expansion. – In other words, the two writers' aesthetics of space and mediation seem to be figured as a chiasmus (diagonally) in relation to one another. Still, they both accentuate the material impact of images in space; and further, they share representational modes, and possible cultural effects: Both modes are *oblique*, and *slow*. They have common properties precisely in relation to *textual* action.

An hypothesis: An hypothesis in my study is that *both* of these aesthetics of space might constitute two possible slopes from where to question existential and aesthetic *ideologies* in culture and in the life-world of Late Modernity. Because of the *material* impacts of things and images in these spaces, I conduct my study against the backdrop of the concepts of *ideology* and *of the sublime*. – *Ideologies* (in Marx, Althusser, Paul de Man, and others) are aberrations, erroneous relations between consciousness and material reality. Ideologies also foster the convergence of a narrational and a dramatic mode: Ideologies depend prosaically on repeated narration to become aberrational patterns; but at the same time, they foster in their midst the potentially dramatic power of muted and silenced inscriptions on bodies and landscapes to be unleashed to speak, or "speak back". – And it is on this point that the concept of *the sublime* – as powerful, uncoded, material apperceptions – can furnish us with a critical language in which to handle, formulate and discuss that power, and that material, sensorial impact.

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<sup>1</sup> My perspective on Fosse (and Duras) obviously has to do with performativity and performative language. J.L. Austin certainly is a broacher/initiator of that kind of thinking. Still, I wish to avoid misunderstandings of performativity as textual or cultural practices relating to the shaping of *identity* and *sameness*, to human intentions, and to questions about felicity and the role of contexts in the use of performative language. So, instead of talking about performativity as speech acts in *such* terms and in *that* kind of appropriation of J.L. Austin, I lean more towards Derrida's and Hillis Miller's take on performativity as linguistic (and material) acts of *difference*. In keeping with this, I choose instead the more flexible and *differential* term of *textual action* in my approach. (In so doing, I also avoid the sometimes confusing discussions in otherwise great theorists as Butler and Fischer-Lichte.

Jacques Rancière: Here, Jacques Rancière provides a perspective on our problems posed: First, he distinguishes between two art regimes – ”the representational”, and ”the aesthetic” (Fosse – whose character action, plots, story-lines (mythos) are reduced to a minimum – certainly belongs to the aesthetic). Representation occurs in both regimes, but in fundamentally different ways and modes. Second, Rancière launches ideas about the role of the aesthetic image and space in *aesthetic* art, their functions for textual action, as well as for the redistribution of the sensible – for emerging visibilities and sayabilities.

According to Rancière, representational art normatively favours the sayable over the visible. It favours fictional mythos and character action. Depicted reality is normatively delimited. Affects are controlled and allotted to designated places. Rules apply to verisimilitude. In general, representational *logos* is placed above, and controls *pathos*. – On the other hand, the aesthetic regime of art breaks with such normativities: Likeness, mimesis and representation are liberated from designated control. So are subject matters, styles and genre properties. Visibilities and sayabilities are made equal, and are set free. *Pathos* is made equal to *logos*. The visible and the sayable can be redistributed, and *obliquely* make a hitherto unseen and unheard space emerge for apperception, and eventually for new encoding.

In the aesthetic image and the space that it prompts, two aesthetic forces made equal, are at work: raw, material presence; and formulated, encoded apperception through language. *Very importantly*: the aesthetic image and space are figured by the imaging power of rupture, and the phrasal power of continuity. By these combined powers, a sentence-image emerges obliquely as space. So, the materiality and affect of the thing-image and its space, *power* the continuity, the linking, ”happening” in *textual* action. Textual action creatively undoes the representative relationship between text and muted, silenced image-space. It gives space to flesh, bodies, material topographies. A new sensory order is opened up for and installed.

## ***II Fosse’s prose fiction and dramatic art works***

I now turn to Jon Fosse’s pair(s) of reduplicated novel(s) and drama(s), for a more concrete reading of the problems posed initially:

### **The novel *Bly og vatn* (1992) – The theatre text *Vinter* (2000):**

The novel’s rudimentary ”action” and character-related thematics are made up of the following components: The provincial newspaper journalist arrives at the city centre by airporter to stay overnight for two interview sessions at his hotel. He sees a prostitute, who falls, is weak, injured, and dishevelled. His love is awakened – first care, then also erotically. He brings her to his hotel room, to take care of her, let her shower, sleep; he brings supplies. The care element is

the stronger; beyond *his* bashful and *her* shameless nakedness and bodily behaviour – a touch, a hug, a kiss, an embrace – it never comes to sex. The novel is about their day, night and morning together, and apart, she intermittently doing her job outside, he constantly avoiding his appointments and obligations. On the final pages, she has left him, but calls him from a phone booth, again in urgent need of help. They again go to his room, and a conversation of an alternative existence, with a place in common to live together, is begun, but never completed – obstacles are seen, also advantages. The novel ends in affect with him taking off again on the airporter, leaving the city.

Two life-world ideologies collide, two aberrations of consciousness in relation to material reality: that of the narrowly provincial parrish life, and that of an exploited, commodified existence among the lowest of the low in the city. As well, the two vernacular variants of the characters collide, prudent and foul language respectively. The ideologies are inscribed onto their bodies and attitudes, and in their respective behavioural patterns in the novel's heavily accentuated cityscape. This is a concentrated space, with local coordinates and thing-objects repeated over and over. Both ideologies have their codes – that are partly broken: He never calls his wife as promised (*she* calls his room and prostitute friend, but he does not speak); he shuns his assignment and job responsibilities; he transgresses his bodily bashfulness. She transgresses the rules of commodified human relations, those of her obligations to her pimp, and those of her attitudes to her own self. Both of them enter the challenges of a fundamentally endangered zone. A space of possibility, of otherness emerges (so far: in their *phenomenal* worlds), since the two patterns meet, but only slightly, blend. Still, there is no real action, only a series of scattered incidents, episodes, events.

But there is more to the novel than a clash of ideological spaces. There is, on the one hand, an extensive space of mediation, where He, the male character, is the perspectival consciousness. The space of mediation deals extensively with the processes of apperception (inviting the reader to reflect upon the depicted world). On the other hand, the novel is imbued with a massively repeated, concentrated focus on a small, enclosed segment of the cityscape (challenging the reader with material impacts of the thing-images that make up the space of the city). Both mediation as well as cityscape, as we shall now see, inflect the text towards the *material margins* of phenomenality, towards its muffled, silenced, unseen *exteriority*.

First, the space of mediation: It is a converging mediation, (a) in the sense that it depicts the same subject matter which is again refracted in the drama *Vinter*. But (b), the mediation is converging also in the sense that it is a dramatic-narrational fiction: It blends complex novelistic narration with dramatic dialogue. In a sense, *Bly og vatn* is a novel, for sure, but also already a

drama or a theatre text (where the novelistic narration could be seen as side-textual paraphernalia). The mediation accentuates perspectivism and the clash of gazes, to such an extent that it obliquely makes us aware of *gaze-ness* as part of an emerging, sidelong space: in the margins of the depicted phenomenal one. – Further, the mediation consists of endlessly repeated series of segments, that have the following components: (0) The writing "I" opens and ends the novel (totalizing form!), and gives space for both dramatic dialogues, and direct and indirect narration. (1) The direct narration of a small local incident that He and She are involved in. (2) The indirect narration of the male character's apperception of that incident. And (3) The indirect narration of the character's reflection on that incident. – This pattern pervades the text from beginning to end, and in immensely long periods. (Examples: 14; 58-59) This complex array in the mediating space gives textually acting "life" to the novel; it makes something happen: our attention is drawn obliquely to the side, to a sidelong space of sensibility, of apperception, to an awareness *off* from the rigid patterns of ideological life. Something emerges to be seen, be visible and audible, as a textually acting space.

Then, second, there is the concentrated segment of the cityscape, with all its material thing-images making it up. In this concentrated space, He (and sometimes She) move(s) meticulously around. It consists of the local street grid, lights and crossings around the hotel, the nearby park, entrance doors and windows, the interior hotel topography, the interior of a pub, and the topography of the hookers' and the pimps' joint. Endlessly repeated, streets and corners, up and down, left and right are depicted (and we follow). So are the park and its benches, the hotel lobby and cafeteria, with doorman, receptionist, furniture, elevator up/down, corridors, corners. Further, incessantly repeated, the interior of the hotel room: table, chairs, bed, closed curtain; further: pieces of clothing, meticulously described. Likewise, bars, tables, chairs, directions and so on, in the pub and the pimps' joint. The only "character action" to speak of, are the innumerable, repeated movements of the characters around in this concentrated city grid and these closed-in interiors. In this aspect, the novel can be called a forced, narrational-dramatic processing of a concentrated space, refracted through an extensive apperceptual process.

But *in* this cityscape, the material objects and thing-images that prompt it, gradually emerge with a life – a textual, hitherto unnameable life – of their own. The material vision and sensation of these images emerge sidelong, *obliquely*, and very *slowly*. In the concentrated cityscape, where two ideological patterns collide, a critique of those patterns is opened up for in the shape of an alternative, sidelong, space – out of material images that make the cityscape up, and that are inscribed on its human bodies and on its material surfaces: The mud, the slime of vomit, the paleness of a face, the scars and scratches and thinness of a body, the black- and

redness and wetness of clothes, the fabric of an old curtain, the angle of chairs to tables, the size of a key, the sensation of a wrist-watch, the shape of a phone receiver, the warmth of an embrace. And further: the material, ineffable impact of the closed eyes upon a face, and of a voice (the girl's voice) "as if [...] it came from a place far away" (163), as well as of the "image of Jesus Christ upon the cross" (passim; referring to the old and faded painting on the hotel room wall). Not any longer the doorman's gaze or the other authoritarian gazes that also imbue the novel, – but (now) repeatedly, gradually, the paintingly dead, but materially animating and embracing gaze from a world far away, to the side, on the outside of phenomenality, permeates the text:

All of these thing-images prompting the detailed and concentrated cityscape, start impacting, and emerge as an alternative space together with the space of apperceptive gaze-ness – *obliquely, slowly*. A powerful critique of ideology – as textual action – is wrought out this way, out of something exterior, out of a marginalized "elsewhere". Love (both care and sex) is questioned, from a hitherto ineffable space of things, sidelong. Another "existence" intrudes, as a frail possibility, still unphrased and unformulated, but materially impacting. These moments of intruding materiality, of material vision, are instances of sublimity – yet uncoded, but rendered as space turned into textuality, into textual action. Thing-images and their spaces have no will, but their material impact in moments of the sublime, open up for new visibilities and new sayabilities: They lend themselves to be used and recoded and redistributed, to be re-phrased – but at the *impact*, they are sheer material vision, they are "eyes eyeing", and "voices voicing". – *This* is the trustful and caring "overpassing" to the reader, for the reader to decide what to do about the apperceptive rent, and about the possibility of an alternative, oblique space that is being handed over. Something *may* now happen in the phenomenal world, or put even stronger (as the mail character thinks it): "Something **MUST** happen" (passim). In the obliquely and slowly space-prompting materiality of the novelistic-dramatic action of the *text*, it already *is* happening.

**The theatre text *Vinter* (2000):** In a more stylized version, *Vinter* comprises many of the same elements. In it, love as care and altruism is still a thematic main focus, but the rewriting of the subject matter to a higher degree accentuates the possibility of illicit sex: However – only until the final act: Here, love's caring aspect re-enters full force. At the end of the play, unlike in the novel, both of them are still in the same room, discussing the possibility of a life together in a different place, and all the ideological hurdles speaking against it. Also this end overpasses to the reader/spectator to reflect and decide.

The play's language of aesthetic form is full-fledged Fosse'an, with symmetrical act structure, striving towards a Modern overarching "vault" that, on the other hand, is ironically

deconstructed by Late Modernity's prosaic, rhythmic serialization. The concentrated cityscape is here even more reduced in scope: The play focuses only on the topography of the park, and of the hotel room, and on the slight coming-together of the ideological patterns. The opening up of an alternative space therefore carries considerable weight. – What is "missing" in the play, is the novel's *extensive* mediating space (that is collateral to the *concentrated* cityscape). In other words, the theatre text *seems* to leave the problematization of the narrative-dramatic apperception process out, and so leaves it up to the staging, to the gesturing and the acting to mediate it. – But only seemingly so; what the theatre text *does* have instead, is an array of empty, local spaces *precisely* for the accentuation of the apperception process: The dialogue, namely, is rendered with an endless prosaic series of *anakolutha*, interruptions, pauses and one-words – more than ample to focus attention on the apperception in the (*dialogic*) mediation. Also *this* textual action – combined with the presence of material objects, and with dexterous staging, directing and gestural acting – certainly renders the emergence of an alternative, materially impacting space felt. Again it happens *obliquely* and *slowly*, and it challenges the human sensorium for the redistribution of visibilities and sayabilities.

Just as the novel is made novelistic-dramatic, so is the theatre text (in this case even a conversation play at first sight) made prosaically dramatic-novelistic. – **Converging** occurs precisely where the space-engendering imaging-power of material rupture, makes a muted and unseen, alternative space emerge as linked phrasing. **Converging** is a function of the materiality of space-prompting thing-images turned into textually acting continuity. [To Conclusion?-->]

### **The theatre text *Ein sommars dag* (1997/99) – The novel *Det er Ales* (2003/04):**

We now know how Fosse's narrative-dramatic aesthetics of spatial concentration (along with mediating expansion) works as textual action – in either genre. The same phenomenon is at hand as well in the reduplicated pair of the drama *Ein sommars dag*, and the novel *Det er Ales*. (Here, Fosse wrote the theatre text first.) – Again, the thematic core are problems of love, now in a childless marriage, alongside the stifling mourning and melancholy of the wife after the incomprehensible, bereaving death by drowning of her husband Asle, in the fjord, on a dark, stormy autumn night years ago. In the play as well as in the novel, the stifled existence of husband and wife is rendered as ideological: as an aberration between consciousness and material reality. In drama and novel, that ideological existence is depicted as the boxed-in outlook onto a highly concentrated Hardangerfjord-like parrish landscape – through the frames of the living-room window: Road, fjord, waves, boat-house, pier, bay, mountains, river, storms, darkness – are all apperceived, year after year, as sensed through the limited window view, also when the



characters move outside. In this reduplicated pair, too, the apperception process is accentuated through extensive mediation, and the Hardangerfjord-like landscape is depicted repetitively as highly concentrated, with all elements always in their allotted place.

Mediation: To a high degree in the theatre text, and in the novel outright *radically*, the mediation is narrativized in the doubling and multiplication of temporal zones, characters (young/old), and of gaze-postures, thus accentuating the importance of apperception. The novel operates with ideological landscape apperceptions through no less than 5 generations, numerous narrative perspectives, doubling of names, and of events of deaths and near-deaths by drowning.

Material vision in the concentrated space: Still, in both texts, the repetitive reduplications *slowly* and *obliquely* make an alternative, *de*-ideologized space emerge. What seems to be no end to a stifled, bereaved and melancholy existence in the concentrated Fjord parrish landscape, is gradually imbued with the impact of uncoded material visions of things and thing-images *in* this space: Both in drama and novel the characters are bodily invaded by the material sensation of wind, rain and seawaves that at instances uncanningly, ineffably "speak back", and above all by the visibility of an uncanny fire and pink light that move around in the darkness on the fjord and onshore in the bay. Subjects and objects merge. In marked moments of sublimity, the landscape is opened up into a space of unknown alterity, and onto a possibly different future – in a trustful "overpassing", for characters as well as for readers/spectators. – In these two art works, in minute formal details, Fosse's converging also challenges these two *generic* codes of Modernity's aesthetic languages of form – the novel and the drama.

### ***III In conclusion***

I will conclude and attempt to answer the basis problems I posed initially:

(1) Fosse's topographies of concentration, by their materiality of thing-images, are *the driving force, the powering of creative textual action* in his reduplicated novels and dramas.

(2) Their representational modes are obliqueness and slowness, in a converging blend of *dedramatization* (including postures of gazes, tableaux, sometimes even temps mort/dead time), and the multiplying *seriality of novelistic narrative*. This makes a *textually dramatic* material impact of spatial things engender an emerging, alternative, sidelong spatiality, phrased as textual action.

(3) By this narrative-dramatic blend, Fosse's novels and dramas critique existential ideologies of Late Modernity, sometimes also ideological aspects of the languages of aesthetic form.

(4) The critique of ideologies in Fosse responds to the inscription of them on bodies and landscapes – by opening up for the impact of moments of sublimity in material, uncoded apperceptions (of silenced sayabilities, and unseen visibilities, of material vision).

[– Finally, (5) the properties that the two aesthetics of Fosse's space as concentration and Duras's space as expansion have in common in relation to textual action, are those of the representational modes of obliqueness and slowness, as well as that of the dedramatization of character action, however, though: the *dramatization* of *textual* action. *The possible cultural effects of those properties are potentially enormous – like those of Late Modern film.*]