PERFORMING RURAL SPACES IN URBAN PLACES: MEMORY AND AFFECTIVE NOSTALGIA

The aim of this paper this afternoon is to consider how performing rural space in urban places creates a nostalgia that is productive rather than privative. As a case-study I'll be offering a performance analysis of the 2013 contemporary Irish theatre performance of FARM in Dublin, as well as interviews with the company that made the performance: WillFredd Theatre. WillFredd work with the collective memories of real-life communities in order to inform, inspire and give knowledge and understanding about the community's collective memories in Irish culture. The community that WillFredd worked with in FARM was Maicre Na Feirme (Irish for Keepers of the Land), and they were present in rehearsals, and every single performance. Maicre na Ferme's collective memories were integral to facilitating feelings of nostalgia in the audience. Here's a brief clip of the performance that promoted the company's 2013 national tour.

First coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer by combining the Greek *nostos* (home) and *algos* (pain), nostalgia is an acute feeling of longing and loss in the face of uncomfortable change. In 2013 Ireland was changing, rapidly. In 2008 one of Ireland's two centre-right, national-popular political parties, *Fianna Fáil* guaranteed a €440 billion bailout after the fiscal collapse of the property market in 2007, effectively shackling Irish economic and political sovereignty to the European Council. Emigration was at an unprecedented high. Communal modes of existence were fast disappearing. WillFredd responsed to this socio-cultural anxiety with F*ARM* which staged a rural space in an urban place: a Dublin warehouse. The rural is often incorrectly considered as the quintessence of nostalgia, and we are conditioned into thinking of it as a place that is untouched and untainted by change. *FARM* played on the popular culture myth of the rural being a symbolic site of nostalgia in order to contest Ireland's national myth of rural places of being frozen in time, and to reconfigure cultural attitudes to space and place in contemporary Irish culture at a time of uncomfortable loss and change.

Rural places are powerful ideological apparatuses in contemporary Irish culture: they are essential to the economy in terms of agriculture and tourism, but much more than this they also shape cultural attitudes. In contemporary Ireland, popular culture categorizes Dublin as 'the big smoke' and everything else outside of the greater Dublin area is categorized as 'the country.' Such biased demarcations stem back to colonial rule, when Dublin was the nucleus of colonial administration. And so began the national myth, so essential to the postcolonial project at the beginning of the tewneteth century, which maintained that rural places were in someway indicative of the real Ireland. The rural became a nostalgic site of longing and loss before British colonialism. The rural as a symbolic site for nostalgia was cemented in Taoiseach Eamonn De Valera's 1937 St. Patrick's Day speech in which De Valera reminded the nation of 'the ideal Ireland'.

> The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age.'

Luke Gibbons argues that nostalgia in modern Irish culture **'embalms rather than actively renegotiates the past'**[1], and it is easy to see why, because Ireland's fascination with the painful longing for a sense of home in the face of change is inherent and integral to Ireland's traumatic past marked by postcolonial resistance, emigration and accelerated modernization. From this perspective, nostalgia and the rural in Ireland is seen as an imagined entry point into a past devoid of trauma, a space that is carefree, and this helps to support the national myth that rural space in Ireland is a place that is uniquely other to the pressures of twentieth-first-century capitalist societies, or to put it another way, uniquely other to the anxiety caused by the urban experience. However, the reality behind the popular culture interpretation of rural place in Irish culture is similar to the reality behind any other rural place in Western Europe: it can be a site of home (*nostos*), and it can be a site of pain (*algos*). Susan Bennett has argued that 'in all its manifestations nostalgia is, in its praxis, conservative.' But I don't think that this isn't the case when applied to rural spaces *within* urban places. What my research into *FARM* demonstrated is that the rural in the urban has the power to be anything but conservative, but quite radical.

---

[1] P43 transofrmations

In performance *FARM* reminded its Dublin audience of the reality behind the false ideals of rural space, and in so doing it broke down the unhelpful spatial boundaries between the rural and the urban. Nostalgia was an essential part of breaking down these spatial boundaries because it was a point of immediate engagement and accessibility for the spectator, simply because nostalgia and rural space lies cheek-by-jowl in Dublin's urban consciousness. And so, what was happening in WillFredd's performance of *FARM* was a destruction of the spatial structures that Ireland's postcolonial project actually created. For if Ireland's postcolonial project used nostalgia to create a binary between the urban and the rural, then *FARM* used nostalgia to build bridges between the urban and rural. At the beginning of the twentieth century nostalgia for the rural was summoned to deal with the uncomfortable reality of colonization. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the rural was being summoned to deal with the uncomfortable reality of socio-economic collapse.

FARM premiered in a city-centre warehouse in Dublin's Grand Canal Dock district, a part of Dublin that has received a huge amount of urban investment in the past ten years. Within this warehouse, WillFredd brought Ireland's collective memories of rural space that proceeded to complicate the industrial, urban frame of the performance. Within the urban warehouse WillFredd installed fences, soil, hay, a hay cart, a tractor, ducks and a working shire horse. WillFredd marketed the performance by appealing to both rural and urban communities: 'there is a farmer inside everyone. How far from the land are you? The city has gone to seed but the price of sheep is going up. FARM asks what can rescue us?'[2] The performance deliberately did not create a structural binary between two communities (the rural and the urban) but rather, the performance blurred the boundaries of both communities to create a new community. The creation of this community was entirely dependent on *FARM* being true to WillFredd's mission statement of creating **'work that is spatially resonant, provoking questions and responses'**. The question that *FARM* asked was this: what is the relationship between urban and rural places in contemporary Irish culture?

[2] Absolut Fringe, Festival Programme, p93.

In *The Production of Space* Henri Lefebvre considered the production of space in three ways: 1) spatial practice, 2) representations of space and 3) spaces of representation. Spatial practice is perception of physical space: it is the difference between where I am sitting now and where you are sitting, in terms of the rural space it is the flows, transfers and negotiations of everyday life, from the public footpath, to a farmer's "do not trespass sign". Representations of space is the knowledge of space: it is the work of planners, farmers, engineers, cartographers, it is the fences, the gates, the boundaries and the territories. And finally, spaces of representation are representations of lived space that is both material and imagined, and invested with symbolism: it is the Peak District, it's Loch Ness, it's the walk where you went on your first date. Significantly, all these spaces are, for Lefebvre, produced by capitalism. For Lefebvre space is intrinsic to production and exchange of economic capital. When thinking about the spatial practice of the rural, it is easy to see how space is product of capitalism: from the orderly ques at the Peak District National Park visitors centre, to the traffic lights that orchestrate the spatial coordinates of milk lorries. Leferbvre classified space produced by capitalism as abstract space because it was at once homogenous and fragmented. What he meant by this is that spatial practice is fragmented in the rural into private properties and public areas, but still there is a homogeneity of power that governs fragmented spaces for the benefit of capital: from the public visitors centre, right down to down to the private dairy farm.

The dialectic of rural and urban abstract space was foregrounded from the beginning of the performance. The performance began with spectators being immersed into a cramped, sectioned-off area of an industrial warehouse as three real-estate brokers negotiated the price of rural places. All three brokers were dressed in suits and their negotiations revolved around the spatial deployment of toy farm figures. Two of the brokers played by Marie Ruane and Paul Curley fought over the spatial deployment of fences that demarked rural boundaries. As the fighting escalated into the full-scale throwing of toy farmyard animals at each other, it became clear that WilFredd had carefully orchestrated the exposition of the piece to foreground the culturally popular understanding of the urban deciding the practice of the country for the benefit of economic capital.

As the two brokers flung fences, gates, cows, sheep and horses at each other, the production and exchange or rural space with an urban place was suddenly, and quite unexpectedly shattered as a working shire-horse, Ralph, who stormed into the industrial warehouse pulling a hay cart. Immediately, and without warning members of Maicre na Ferme removed large corrugated iron flats to reveal an immersive space of a farm as Ralph was brought into his paddock. The three brokers had now switched characters and had become farmers. Referring to the spectators as “the cattle”, we were orchestrated around the farmyard as we experienced the totality of rural space within an urban place.

Lefebvre’s understanding of the three ways of how rural space is produced is helpful to understand how *FARM* was conducive to facilitating a nostalgia as a productive phenomenon. There was the spatial practice of rural space in that we were immersed into the rural space with all the paraphernalia of a farmyard, and we were asked to negotiate the space with other farmers and farmyard animals. There was the representation of rural space in that the space was always being demarked by fences. But how did this production of rural space create a feeling of nostalgia? The spectator understood that they were watching a theatricalised farmyard in an urban warehouse, but in accordance with Lefebvre’s third category of space, the representation of rural space was both material and imagined. Material in that there were certainly elements commonly associated with rural space in the warehouse, such as a shire horse, but also imagined because the performance of Maicre Na Ferme’s collective memories encouraged the spectator to remember their own memories of rural space. Novelist and essayist Milan Kundera maintains that ‘nostalgia is the pain of ignorance, of not knowing’, but *FARM* consciously used collective memory so that spectators were not ignorant, so that they did know. So the inverse of Kundera’s definition of nostalgia is equally applicable to *FARM*: nostalgia is the pain of knowing. What *FARM*’S performance of nostalgia for rural space impressed on the spectator was the rural space is just as much a site of nostalgia as urban space. But significantly, it would use our preconceived associations of space and nostalgia to break down such a category. However, unlike Lefebvre’s understanding of space being heavily invested in the production and exchange of economic capital, *FARM*’S spatial triad

was conducive towards a nostalgia that was critical of capitalism's privileging of the individual over the collective. The production of rural space in *FARM* used nostalgia to privilege the collective over the individual.

One of the most traumatic and deeply alienating scenes in *FARM* offered an insight into the pain of knowing loss in the face of uncomfortable change. One of the scenes in *FARM* explored suicide in rural Ireland. The scene involved an actor dancing on soil with a pitchfork while statistics of rural suicide were projected onto a wall behind the dance. WillFredd made the scene from working with one member of the farming community that had attempted to commit suicide, twice, because of the pressure of achieving net results when working in agricultural workplace controlled by the elements. If we recall that nostalgia is characterised by knowing loss in the face of change, then this scene reminded spectators that the nostalgia for rural space is not always idyllic. As the actor raked the pitchfork down a stone wall with tears in his eyes, the spectator was reminded of the struggle that those who work in agriculture face on a consistent basis: the struggle to work rural space in the production and exchange for economic capital. The production of rural space was compounded by the fact we were watching the performance in an urban place where, meters away from the industrial warehouse were artisan delicatessens that economically benefited from the production and exchange of rural space. Scenes like this in *FARM* were absolutely integral to complicate the carefree nostalgia that rural space is associated with: scenes like this reminded us that rural space is not always about barn dances, which was the subject of a previous scene, but painful moments of isolation. Sharing this collective memory from Ireland's farming community forced the spectator to know both the pain of longing, and the profound feeling of loss in the face of uncomfortable change. Significantly, scenes like this reminded the spectators that the financial pressures involved in the production of rural space were just as acute at the financial pressures of urban space. At a time when Ireland was experiencing longing and loss in the face of uncomfortable change, scenes like this identified that nostalgia was a collective memory for the entire country.

This scene was integral in setting up the efficacy of the final scene in the performance because the spectator was asked to reconfigure their spatial preconceptions of nostalgia in contemporary Irish culture. At the end of the performance actors, directors, designers, spectators and members of Maicre Na Ferme sat on hay-bales, stools, or perched on a hay wagon in a specially created 'Mead Bar' in which mead was served for free. Each member of this new community was handed a glass of mead as one actor in the company, Paul Curley, sat on a hay-bale and began reading from his now deceased-father's diary. Curley's father was a County Galway farmer he read his father's diary entries from 1962 – exactly 50 years before the show opened. In so doing, Curley offered the community an insight into his father's early days as a farmer detailing price of lands, names of people employed on the farm, social events, birth of livestock and, perhaps an Irish farmer's greatest nemesis, the unpredictable nature of the weather. What was particularly transparent in Curley's recalling of his father's memories is the sense of feeling trapped by familial obligation; to become a successful farmer and the need to carry on trying to achieve something that might not be working precisely because of the familial attachment. Again, what was foregrounded was the longing in face of change. When Curley finished reading his father's diary, he turned to the spectators sitting in the Mead Bar and asked us to share our own memories for rural space: the spectators were asked to perform their own individual acts of remembrance that had taken place throughout the performance. The memories that I documented across several performances were largely nostalgic, simply because the future of the country was uncertain. But I wonder if this sense of nostalgia can be considered as a positive phenomenon? Through the very act of performing the knowingness of pain for another time in the face of change, other spectators organically supported each other. A new community was forged, and members of this newly formed community stayed long after the performance as spectators swapped stories, shared memories and made new friends. In an interview one of the actors pointed out to me that the performance was centered around the importance of the Mead Bar:

> 'The Mead Bar allows for the show to become individual and specific to the community that have attended. The mead bar doesn't dissolve at the end of the show, but rather the show moves on to another space, for another community, and leaves its audience in the mead bar to continue their own communal experience.'

What *FARM* demonstrated was an alternative understanding of what Lefebvre calls the right to the city, which is the right to change the urban experience by changing the city. The right to the city will always be policed by dominant culture, but through engaging with rural space in an urban place spectators were allowed to form new urban experiences through an engagement with nostalgia. The right to the rural became the right to the city. Not all spaces are focused on producing capital. Some spaces are on focused on sharing experiences, collective memories and common nostalgias that are particularly effective when faced with uncomfortable change. What *FARM* demonstrated was a new way to create communities through being immersed into work that spatially resonated with nostalgia. What *FARM* reminded the spectator that Ireland's national myth of the rural as being the spatial and cultural other to the urban was just that: a myth.