Chapter ______

Dramaturgy and Post-Structuralism

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The relationship between dramaturgy and post-structuralism—the subject of this chapter—is an uneasy one. Now, Goffman’s work to be sure has vastly appealed to both postmodernists and post-structuralists for various reasons—chiefly because of its emphasis on ephemeral appearances and its unique approach to signification, individual agency, and social structure (e.g. see Battershill 1990; Ticineto Clough 1990). Moreover, the performative dimensions of dramaturgy have long been congruent with other performative approaches, such as speech-act theory, long en vogue within post-structuralist theory. However, the true uneasiness arising from a combination of dramaturgy and post-structuralism today comes from the evolution of post-structuralism itself. Writing about post-structuralism in 2012, is infinitely more difficult than it already was at the time of the diffusion of post-structuralist ideas across the social sciences in the 1990s. Post-structuralism today is an amorphous creature which finds its home everywhere and nowhere in particular (see Davis 2007; Lechte 2009). It is also an eclectic being which derives its multifaceted identity—if it any longer finds one at all—by continuously reinventing itself through the theoretical flavor of the day. So, while dramaturgy has remained relatively stable, post-structuralism is more than ever before a schizoid, evanescent entity, and to talk about a “post-structuralist approach to dramaturgy” would mean, inevitably, to commit a sin of partiality.

With this said allow me to claim the virtue of partiality from the very beginning and not speak of Post-Structuralism with capital initials, but rather of a—one of many—post-structuralist perspectives in particular: non-representational theory. The purpose of this chapter shall therefore be that of borrowing inspiration from non-representational theory in order to engender new dramaturgical ideas, research subjects, and orientations. I do so not because I feel that dramaturgy needs to be made more fashionable by mixing it with a hot theoretical trend, but because any combination of flavors—whether it is food, drink, music, or whatever—is meant to create something new and worth a sampling taste. This unique flavor—which I shall call a non-representational dramaturgy—will hereby be served in six doses, named performance, more-than-human
subjectivity, weaving, vitality, transformation, and assemblage. Each of these six servings—the sections in which this chapter is divided—will be cooked up on the basis of a more-or-less constant recipe: I will begin by outlining a central focus and principle of dramaturgy, then introduce its non-representational cognate, and finally blend the two in a way I hope offers an innovative approach. The usual disclaimers of course apply. First, my treatment of a non-representational (let alone post-structural) dramaturgy cannot be exhaustive or comprehensive here. Second, my ideas are not meant to be orthodox or representative of all those scholars who are aiming to bring post-structuralism to bear on dramaturgical principles. And third, any mixing of different ingredients will cause me to sacrifice some of the original flavors, and occasionally even cause a stomach ache. Let us begin with an all-too-brief introduction to non-representational theory.

Non-Representational Theory

As the name itself suggests, non-representational theory’s main tenet is a negation: the negation of the value of cognitive representationalism. Cognitive representationalism is the idea that people form images (or discursive representations) in their mind and then act on the basis of those images. Non-representational theory denies the value of this overly mechanic perspective in its various manifestations across the social sciences, taking up battle not only with cognitivism, but also with constructionism, nominalism, textualism, discursivism, and symbolism. All these perspectives paint a portrait of the lifeworld that is too dependent on the mental abstractions of language. Non-representational theory instead puts a premium on the “onflow of everyday life” (Thrift 2008: 5) and a sort of Deweyan qualitative immediacy that transcends objective consciousness and privileges the effervescent energies of the pre-cognitive.

Sensibility, playfulness, imagination, creativity, extemporaneous adaption, emergence, and vitality are the main components of non-representational theory (Anderson and Harrison 2010). This mosaic of ideas is pieced together with contributions by a motley crew of scholars across the social sciences, but chiefly located in fields such as human geography, science and technology studies, performance studies, material culture studies, the sociology and anthropology of the senses, political ecology, ecological anthropology, biological philosophy, contemporary cultural studies, and the sociology of the body. There are no central philosophical founding figures, but articulations of non-representational theory by both Thrift (2008) and Ingold (2011)—
arguably the most prominent exponents at the moment—both make regular references to the thought of Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze’s influence is also evident throughout the contributions collected in Anderson and Harrison (2010). Students of dramaturgy will find Deleuzian non-representationalism to be especially sensitive to the ideas of performance and concerted action, or practice.

As I have articulated elsewhere (Vannini 2009) non-representational tenets are quite congruent with certain variants of interactionism and pragmatism, though less so with constructionist-inspired versions of the same perspectives. Non-representational theory—like interactionism and dramaturgy—denies the primacy of the individual without denying the value of individual agency. The subject is important because it is the locus of performance, action, practice, and experience and because it has the corporeal capacity to affect the world and be affected by it. Methodologically this means that non-representational theory is quite closely aligned with ethnographic approaches, just like dramaturgy is. And just like it is the case for dramaturgy, the ethnographic predisposition of non-representational theory is not for talk- and text-centered research, but rather for observation of, and participation in, action. Thrift (2008) in particular advocates for experimentalist and innovative approaches to ethnography that attempt to animate the lifeworld under study without the excessive hyper-realist concerns of traditional empiricism. And while Thrift (2008) calls for playful research and a sense of play, Ingold (2011) invokes the need for research fueled by a sense of astonishment and wonder.

A non-representational dramaturgy is possible, but clearly two tendencies of dramaturgy need to be amended. The first is a tendency (not uniform across all dramaturgical approaches) to view social behavior as the enactment of social scripts somehow waited to be enacted by individual actors. The notion of a script is an obviously crucial element in theatrical metaphors, for it determines roles and prescribes behaviors. But if we surrender to the idea that social life is the enactment of previously spelled out designs and representations then we inevitably lose the vitality that characterizes social life. A possible amendment might then be to view the drama of everyday life as more improvised, more extemporaneous, and less loosely constrained. If you like, a non-representational drama is a bit less like a Shakespeare play and a bit more like guerilla theatre. The second tendency is to view the “stage” upon which social life unfolds as a relatively inert background full of
various inanimate props waiting to be taken up and utilized for their symbolic value. A non-representational dramaturgy is instead as interested in the vitality of the stage itself—intended as a negotiated timespace—and the props themselves, which are endowed with material agency and transformative power.

**Performance**

The concept of performance is the nexus between non-representational theory and dramaturgy. Performance, as used in dramaturgy, is a metaphor. It is the idea that life unfolds much like a theatrical performance. Performance, as used in non-representational theory, is however not a metaphor but more of a source of inspiration which can be used “to unlock and animate new (human and nonhuman) potentialities” (Thrift and Dewsbury 2003: 411). A non-representational dramaturgy can be formed at this intersecting point, with the purpose of making social lives “livelier”—to borrow a useful expression from Thrift and Dewsbury (2003: 411). In other words, a non-representational dramaturgy uses the concept of performance less as an explanatory tool for the description of how things are, and more of a productive catalyst for the reinvention of how things can be.

Performance is a kind of action. To be sure, actors perform, but so do others. Athletes perform by running faster or hitting harder, cars perform by driving more efficiently or hugging the road more securely, lovers perform by lasting longer and pleasing more, organizations perform by satisfying key indicators, and so on. Performance is, essentially, about getting things done: the very spirit of action. Performance is therefore a potential waiting to be actualized: an opening, a possibility awaiting the unfolding of practice (Schechner 2002). Understood this way performance becomes a manner of releasing the potential of everyday life to unfold as possible but unpredictable actions—actions constrained by the limits of capacities and affordances as much as, if not more, the confines of normative prescription. To perform, in other words, is to take action more than it is to play out a well-rehearsed script. Performative impulses of all kinds cannot be reduced to textual scripts because their power relies in their “imaginative creation of worlds” (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000: 422) and in their capacity to open up “the tension of the present tense” (Phelan 1999: 224).
Performance is an expressive engagement of the body’s kinesthetic and intuitive power. To act—from a non-representational dramaturgic perspective—therefore is not to act out, or to enact an established role. To act is to produce certain effects, whether expected or unexpected, intended or unintended, inventive or uninventive, effective or ineffective. Thus, performance expands our knowledge of how we know what we know about the world, most especially by stressing the arts of what people do (or can do) in real time through the expressive qualities of the body (including language, gesture, and so on), through the appropriate spacings of things, and through the way in which things themselves become part of expression. It is both a means of appreciating and a vocabulary for describing the skilled nature of everyday life (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000: 420).

In this sense performance is less than a mimetic lens which allows us to view social life as if it were an imitation of theatrical interaction (see Messinger et al. 1975), and more of an unsettling rupture which allows us to animate—through our research and theorizing—the ongoing flows of everyday life, its embodied practices, and their entanglements in the creation of effects and affect.

Such understanding of performance does not constitute a break with traditional dramaturgic ideas, obviously. But it pushes dramaturgy into a more than representational domain of interpretive apprehension of the social world, a domain more concerned with creative encounters rendered possible by skills and techniques for effective performance than with socially functional or “consciously planned codings and symbols” (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000: 415). Borrowing from Deleuzian terminology we might then say that a non-representational dramaturgy is less interested in the realization of the possible—which operates on the pre-formed basis of imitation and resemblance—and more interested in the actualization of the virtual (Deleuze 1991: 97): a creation that unfolds through its own open-ended lines of action, marked by unpredictable vitality. A non-representational dramaturgy, in sum, cannot know or explain the outcomes of performance, it can only find its enchantments and effectuations worthy of astonishment.

More-than-human subjectivity

Like symbolic interactionists, dramaturgists are keen on the studying the human person. Various aspects of the human person, such as the self, social identity, situational identity, and personal identity are the bread and butter of dramaturgic research. The person, for Goffman (1959), is a product of a social action: an effect that comes off instead of various performances. Non-representational theorists have a similar understanding of
subjectivity as the outcome of performances, rather than a composite product of attitudes, values, traits, needs, ego dialectics, motivation structures, and so forth. A non-representational dramaturgic approach to subjectivity views individuality as social and distributed—that is, emergent through processes of concerted action and intertwined social practices. It should also be no surprise that a non-representational dramaturgic approach to subjectivity treats individuality as situationally specific and therefore plural. But the key contribution to our understanding of subjectivity comes from non-representational theory’s emphasis on individuality as not solely human.

By not solely human I intend animal, organic, and non-organic. To be clear: I intend critters, plants, things, and all the objects that can be found on our planet. To suggest that a computer mouse, a dandelion, and a credit card all have subjectivity might seem preposterous, but the idea is that individuality is not an essential property brought by humans to bear onto an interaction setting and then somehow activated. Rather, individuality is built up within the process of interaction by way of doing. Doing—to borrow from the philosophy of Kenneth Burke—is being. So, the question for a non-representational dramaturgist becomes that of *how subjectivity is done*. How does a dandelion have the power to upset a gardener? How does a computer mouse frustrate a computer user when it freezes? How can a credit card make a dream come true, and then crush it when the bill comes in the mail?

Dramaturgists ought to pay more attention to more-than-human subjectivity than they have done thus far. Subjectivity transcends the power of internal dialogue and reflection that humans have. The power of individuality and subjectivity emerges from the way subjects of all kinds—in virtue of their way existence, function, and affordances—modify the world around them. Language is not unimportant, but it is not all there is. The manipulation of performance, not linguistic reflection, is the key to individuality. The very participation of all kinds of subjects within interaction—with their diverse forces—shows the vitality of social life, and therefore the might of their agency. Ingold (2011) views the very materials present in everyday life as key ingredients in the formation of life itself. There is no need, he suggests, to impute a magic-like force to them. There is no need to anthromorphize them, or to engage in ontological gymnastics to attribute will to
them. The very being of things resides in their qualities, and their qualities are their doing. Water is its flowing, wind is its blowing, rubber is its bending, food is its nourishing, and so on.

The way for a non-representational dramaturgist to capture more-than-human subjectivity is to be less concerned with language and impression management. As long as we continue to view selfhood as a product of ideas and talk then there is no space for non-humans. Things remain inert props that just won’t answer our interview questions. And as long as we continue to treat performance as a thespian metaphor—rather than more broadly as embodied doing, as discussed before—then we have no way of transcending the frame of impression management. The key for a non-representational dramaturgist is therefore to go from information control onward to architectures of affect. Individuality, within non-representational dramaturgy, must simply be the capacity to act and be acted toward. And relatedly, that action must be intended simply as doing, the way a blender does its job, or not, or the way a dog scares us or comforts us, or the way a rainy day in the middle of a summer beach party pisses us off: a “shared, interactive phenomenon” “established by its activity and the activity of others with respect to it” (Brissett and Edgley: 1975: 3).

Weaving

One of dramaturgy’s most important concepts is that of social roles. Role refers to various things. By role one can intend an “organization of rights and privileges associated with a position in society” or a constant pattern of behavior or a structure of attitudes and expectations” (Brissett and Edgley 1975: 105). While it may be difficult to define the idea of social roles in abstract terms, it is relatively easy to recognize a role when we see one. In everyday life we experience people (such as ourselves) playing the role of friends, doctors, patients, spouses, children, second basemen, policewomen, and so on. Some of these roles are ascribed, whereas others are achieved. But all, to some degree, reflect the continuity of social positions and situations. Roles reflect structures and processes of social behavior that are relatively regular, constant, and prototypical, and even reliable across times and places. But herein lies the problem. As Brissett and Edgley (1975: 106) opine the dominant perspective on roles has tended to privilege regularity and predictability at the expense of variety. Amongst others, the work of Ralph Turner over the years has tended to downplay these tendencies,
positing roles as outcomes—not preconditions—of interaction. Role-making is a promising direction for non-representational dramaturgists as well, and it is on this idea that I want to build here.

At it is probably clear by now non-representational thought denies the value of mimesis. Mimesis—or the act of copying—unfolds in many different ways. One of these ways is by behaving so as to mimic expectations already laid out for us. Taking a role is a form of mimesis: a way of playing a position imagined in one’s mind and following these imagined expectations. This is not to discount the value of role-playing, of course. There are several instances in which individuals play out exactly the roles assigned to them and everyone is fine with that—I myself am not entirely sure I would much appreciate a student standing up in my class and beginning to lecture in spite of his and my prescribed role—but I believe the value of a non-representational dramaturgy must come from how it pushes us to investigate subjects we have not investigated sufficiently before, how it invites us to explore old phenomena through new conceptual lenses, and how it can serve not only as an interpretive tool but also an inventive and regenerative one as well. Therefore I want to introduce an idea that will allow us to understand role-playing and role-making in different ways.

The idea is the metaphor of weaving. Weaving is an activity that I intend to contrast to making, following Ingold (2000). Like him, I wish to suggest that making is a subset of weaving—rather than vice versa. While Ingold focuses his example on the weaving of a basket, I am going to reflect on the weaving of a social role. The idea is rather simple: weaving a role is a practice of rhythmic, skilled action out of which arises a regularity of form. But weaving—though it may begin from a loose idea in the weaver’s mind—“does not issue from the idea” itself, Ingold says: “it rather comes into being through the gradual unfolding of that field of forces set up through the active and sensuous engagement of practitioner and material. This field is neither internal to the material nor internal to the practitioner (hence external to the material); rather, it cuts across the emergent interface between them” (Ingold 2000: 342).

Thus the form of a particular social role emerges through the performance of skilled action. Intended this way roles are not the outcome of rote behavior but rather of capacity, technique, style, and the “material” available for crafting. While techniques and style may emerge from constellations of long-formed habits there
is no blueprint, no design for the weaving of roles. Roles arise through processes of growth and entangled systems of “relations set up by virtue of the presence of the developing organism in its environment” (Ingold 2000: 345). According to this view, in short, roles (a) grow in patterns arising from skills and techniques; (b) are the emergent outcomes of creative undertaking; (c) are more deeply a reflection of the unique qualities of the actors (human and more-than-human) involved in weaving them together; and (d) arise not as expressions of ideas but rather as offshoots of embodied rhythmic patterns which role-makers engage with “care, judgment, and dexterity” (Ingold 2000: 347).

Vitality

Non-representational dramaturgists are interested in the study of everyday life. In its mundane everyday life is full of regular routines, but it is equally teeming with novelty and unexpected outcomes of action. The realm of unexpectedness is what dramaturgists have come to know by the concept of deviance. A focus on deviance is a focus on moral matters, but it is also a focus on the social construction of morality itself by way of ritualistic observance and rule-breaking. One of the key concepts in this domain is that of labeling. By labeling a person deviant we essentially construct a role for that person, a role which he/she is then somehow compelled to play out. In a sense, by labeling we design a discursive and mental construct which we then mimic—or judge others by. Because of the cited reasons a non-representational dramaturgist would have difficulties with this. But before we proceed with this, let us return to the non-representational dramaturgist’s interest in the study of everyday life. A few examples drawn from my own personal life will come in handy.

Over the last few days I happened to notice quite a few cases of deviance that the typical dramaturgist would have a difficult time explaining. For starters, my computer was attacked by a nasty Trojan. It hid all my files and made it impossible for my computer to start in normal mode. Once I was able to deploy an antivirus software specialized against that particular Trojan, during a successive cleanup section I downloaded a very powerful software which caused all my programs to slow down to a crawl. Computer foes weren’t the only things that captured my attention. The constant dance of rain and sun—atypical for the month of June—caused big nasty dandelions to grow in my lawn. Also, the espresso machine filter got a bit dirty, so now I need to press coffee a little less hard or else it won’t come up as smoothly. And the deer that
hang out in my front yard gave birth to fawns and unexpectedly took them out of the bushes and into the plain view of our open field earlier than they normally do. Well, the list of my mind-numbingly mundane observations about deviance could go on, but essentially my point is ready to be made: deviance is not necessarily concerned with morality or human behavior. Deviance is another word for the performance of unexpected events, something which a non-representational dramaturgist might call vitality.

Deviance is the perception by others of the breaking of a rule, a norm, a habit, an expectation, a prototypical function. It is the perceived (the actual breaking may not occur at all—a perception is all that matters) deviation from a pattern of previous action. If we define deviance this way, as simply an “event” (on this concept see Dewsbury 2000) no one should intend deviance to be exclusively a matter of human subjectivity. Computers, coffee machines, deer, weather, and plants—amongst other things—deviate from their patterns as much as anyone. Because they do so before audiences of humans—who have to come to rely on their patterns of action to have functional technologies, clean yards, good-tasting lattes, or whatever—they too are part of social performances of ritual of great significance for our day to day lives. A non-representational dramaturgist finds these patterns of interest, instead of refusing to analyze them simply because non-human organic and inorganic manner possess no moral images (i.e. no labels) in their mind to mimic or violate. In other words, a non-representational dramaturgist views the violation of expectation as a manifestation of vitality (e.g. see Bogost 2012).

The fear of a non-representational dramaturgist is that by confining the study of broken expectations to the behavior of humans alone—as much sociology does—is to numb the liveliness of life. The actions of other things—organic or inorganic—show us that the ways in which they perform their roles evades the narrow boundaries we have drawn around them. The principle of vitalism works as a useful way to remind us of the unexplained and unexplainable ways in which things without the power to “behave” still find ways to act (Greenhough 2010). Vitalism affirms that “objects, subjects, concepts, are composed of nothing more or less than relations, reciprocal enfolding gathered together in temporary and contingent unities…understood in relation to one another” (Fraser, Kember, and Lury 2005: 3). Therefore, a vitalist non-representational dramaturgy ought to insist that; first, we focus on the doing of actors rather than their being, indeed rather
than whether or not they have a being to begin with. Second, because deviance is a violation of expectations it is important that we always keep in mind whose expectations are being violated. For example, in the case of objects designers, users, technical experts, non-users, and others may have different expectations, skills, capacities, purposes, etc. that define the very nature of how an object ought to act and that define the nature of deviant events. Third and final point, because vitalism reminds us to pay attention to the animated nature of all things living in the world, then our own analytical work should pay respect to things. Objects cannot be treated as inert props subject to human action but instead ought to come to life through our own creative descriptive practices.

Transformation

Social psychological perspectives of all kinds must deal at one point or another with the thorny issue of motivation. Motivation, so the story goes, is the key to explaining behavior. Various theories of motivation explain how and why various forces pull or push action, either from within the individual or from the outside. (See Chapter ___) Internal and external forces may include gain, ideology, drives, instincts, needs, self-preservation, organizational wants, and so forth. Motivation, all of these theories stipulate, is something that happens before the act in question. Therefore individuals are somewhat at the mercy of these processes, facts, and events, over which they have little or no control. Dramaturgy rejects this view—focusing on how action is directed instead of its source or origin. Human beings just act and typically make sense of their action retrospectively. One of the ways in which dramaturgists have studied this phenomenon is by inquiring about the process of accounting for one’s behavior. Studies of vocabularies of motives developed by individuals to make sense—to both self and others—have therefore occupied dramaturgists.

Here I want to offer a sympathetic critique of the dramaturgical theory on motives. I begin with a double challenge. The first challenge is this: find a flight to board, preferably a long one, and ideally a fully booked one as well. Find a seat in coach. Then sit. If you are like me chances are you will sooner or later become uncomfortable, and with the passing of the hours you will find the seat more or more unpleasant to rest on. In fact you might end up finding the sitting experience so wretched that you will tell yourself you won’t fly again for quite some time. Now the second challenge: find a place you love. It could be a room in
your home, a park, or a special town where you like to get away to on your holidays, or anywhere else. Then go there and take it all in. Soak the experience in all its depth, and experience the ways—the senses, the sights, the sounds, the flavors, etc.—in which that place exerts its magic on you. So, what does this double challenge reveal?

Well, it reveals that motives are an interesting way to make sense of action, but they don’t explain how or why airplane seats can make flights so damn uncomfortable or how or why places can move us in such profound ways. That is because neither airplane seats nor geographic sites are able to make sense of their actions or are able to account for their actions through words. Asking ourselves—the flyer and the landscape dweller—how these places are meaningful might seem to do the trick, but all this questioning will reveal is how different actors make sense of other actors. Doing this is tantamount to police investigating a crime by interrogating not the main suspect but rather a bystander. When we dodge the issue of non-human action by accounting for it through the actions of human actors what we get is an explanation that treats things—like seats and landscapes—as hocus pocus. This hocus pocus is what we call “inferred meaning.” It is generally described as something we “attach” onto things, as if things were some kind of blank, immaterial, inexistent, ethereal, ephemeral surface waiting for us to attach a sticker onto. Once the sticker is there the thing comes to life: it speaks through our words, it is lent a voice.

This way of making sense of the way the lifeworld acts is based on an abstraction of action. But action is not something we should impute to things. Things may just move, but that movement is significant and consequential action. Meaning—whether it comes before or after an actual act—cannot explain away action. Action comes first. If we take meaning to be the primary mode and operation of existence then the symbolic qualities of life unduly take precedence over action. We need to avoid this. The concept of transformation then comes in handy. Transformation is what happens when actors act. Whether it is people or nonorganic actors, things change as a result of action—and not of motivation. Everything holds transformative power—in different measures, of course. As Schieffelin (1985) argues, if we understand performance as the potential for transformation then we cease to feel so preoccupied with what performance and its different components mean. What we then realize is then that action matters because it works—or
because it fails to work, at times—not because it symbolizes something. Transformation is change in form and appearance: a metamorphosis occurring as a result of different life materials becoming entangled with one another and affecting one another, changing shape, direction, function, or simply exerting their intended and expected force in preserving things. Transformations occur on all stages of everyday life. From the way a lover’s look can change our mood to the sadness a third strike can engender in us, transformations are the consequences of actions. At times transformations can be enacted by human behavior, and at times they can be the outcome of material objects, plants, or animals exercising their material properties. Like uncomfortable seats. The key for a non-representational dramaturgist is to trace the way in which transformations unfold without privileging any one type of them (e.g. human actions) or any one mode (e.g. discursive motives) in which they occur.

**Assemblages (and Concluding Remarks)**

Throughout this chapter I have stressed the importance of updating a few key dramaturgical concepts. The “updates” I have suggested originate from a wedding of non-representational theory and dramaturgy. One way to summarize all these modifications of existing concepts and understandings is to say that non-representational theory demands that dramaturgy stick to its gun. Its “gun” is its quintessentially typical focus on action. Where dramaturgy deviates from its non-representational bent is in its occasional departures from performance-based interpretations of the lifeworld, departures that result in hierarchies of importance that end up privileging the representational at the expense of the non-representational. Such hierarchies include the privileging of human behavior over the actions of other kinds of (non-human) actors, and the privileging of discursive and symbolic processes over non-discursive and non-symbolic ones. I have attempted to transcend this problem in my own research (e.g. Vannini). In previous sections of this chapter I have argued that a non-representational dramaturgy ought to do away with these hierarchies, and it should do so by shedding its cognitivist and linguistic tendencies and by broadening its conceptualization of subjectivity, roles, deviance, motivation, and performance.

What I have done in this chapter is is to incite dramaturgists to think beyond the realm of human action. The actions of non-humans matter greatly in everyday life, and a closer attention to them is of great
importance. I do not want to come across as saying that we ought to abandon our focus on social processes. What I more modestly want to convey is that we cannot understand the actions of non-humans by pretending they were humans, or by simply explaining them through perspectives and modes (such as the cognitive and linguistic) in which their action does not necessarily express itself, or—even worse—by ignoring them and letting other scholars have their go at them. “The dramaturgical orientation,” write Brissett and Edgley (1975: 202, original emphasis) in their classic introduction to the perspective, “stresses what can best be called the relational basis of social institutions.” This point is of sacrosanct importance. Relationality is the idea that things are what they are with. And not whom they are with. In other words, ecologies of action are not restricted to human participants and their uniquely human ways of acting. Webs of relations make up assemblages of motley characters—each with their own material qualities, capacities, skills, purposes, designs, and transformative power—tied together by the ways in which action unfolds.

An assemblage is a simple idea: it is a knot of intertwined actors (DeLanda 2010; Robbins and Marks 2009). Thinking about assemblages prompts us to think of: “relationships between people and things; changing trajectories and rates of change, including acceleration and trans-mutation as well as deceleration and stabilization; and spatially heterogeneous forms and effects” (Robbins and Marks 2009: 181). An emphasis on assemblage invites us to reflect on the making, unmaking, and remaking of ecologies of action whose intricate parts make up tangled webs of different properties, and whose consequences unfold differently on different contexts. This is perhaps the most emblematic characterization of a non-representational dramaturgy that I can present: not a new stage with new scripts, not a new vocabulary of motives for human behavior, or a new frame, but rather an old and simple characterization—that of interweaving actions—that is appreciated for its original flavor. The flavor is that of a performance within which what happens and how it happens is important because, well, the happening is what really matters.

References


