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Fishing in Puddles: Place and Space in Performance Research

Abstract

This article examines the significance of place and space from a Performance Studies and Social Studies perspective. In terms of the social sciences, I draw upon the formal, symbolic and marginal articulation of place. Hetherington suggests that certain places act as focal point for the establishment of social identities, citing city-centre landmarks and shopping malls. Similarly, children attach all kinds of values to the formal spaces they occupy. As one example of this point, I examine the child's relationship to the school hall. From the perspective of performance, I examine a project undertaken at a junior school in Stoke-on-Trent, inspired by the site work of Wrights & Sites. As a critical lens, I adopt Boal's understanding of the oneiric dimension. The oneiric dimension is particularly relevant in performance work as these are the moments when we (as performers and spectators) are pulled into the action. In these instances, the physical space simply disappears, imagination replaces actuality and the desire to believe outweighs the reality of the present.

Overview

Educational research and writing on the significance of the school building and issues of place and space tend to be concerned with debates over class size, economic class divides between wealthy schools and underprivileged areas and gender divides and racial community groupings. From a visual sociological perspective, Prosser & Warburton's (1999) use of cameras to record and observe classroom interaction offers a useful insight into the proxemical configuration of the classroom as a way of understanding the development of a school culture. More recent debates and, in particular, those caught up within the now defunct Building Schools for the Future programme, address the use and management of information and computing technology (ICT) and issues of sustainability, flexibility, long-term adaptability and community cohesion.

In this article, the terms place and space refer to and denote the formal structural, physical, architectural and permanent qualities of the school building. The terms also signify the informal, personal, cultural, proxemical and temporal manifestations and applications of space and movement. To separate the two terms I adopt Certeau's

definition of the difference between place and space. According to Certeau (1984, 117), a 'place is ... an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability'. In this context, the term 'place' refers to the permanent and fixed aspects of the school building, for example, the classroom, the school hall, library and playground. The term 'space', however, refers to the movement and use of a given place. Certeau (1984, 117) writes: 'Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporise it and make it function ... a street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers'. Space can also refer to the symbolic and representational meaning(s) we bring to a place. In short, 'space is a practiced place' (Certeau 1984,117). To illustrate this point, I consider the school hall as a representational and marginal space.

From a performance perspective, I consider the site work of Wrights & Sites and in particular the *Exeter Misguides* (2003). Here, Wrights & Sites offer an alternative version of the city map. Visitors and local residents are encouraged to explore familiar and unknown landmarks from a highly personal perspective, which aims 'to help local people to discover the unknown side of their city and to celebrate each person's unique sense of place' (Wrights & Sites 2003, np). Misguides are alternative ways of seeing, engaging, attending to and walking through the physical and structural landscape. Suggestions for misguided walks are varied and include: night walks in an unknown part of a city; revisiting familiar landscapes and environments; finding new places to sleep overnight, so as to awake to new sights, smells and sounds and 'for stepping off the road's conveyor belt and seeing what lies to one's side' (Wrights & Sites 2006, 7). Crucially though, a misguided walk sets out to connect the physical and structural, formal and informal landscape with the human and corporeal.

In 2006, as part of my doctoral research, I explored site-specific practice with a school in Stoke on Trent: Park-Road Junior School (a pseudonym for the school, chosen by the head teacher). The children, inspired by the work of Wrights & Sites, created their own version of a Misguide. There were 61 children taking part, all year 6, and I divided them into two groups. For one week, the normal timetable was suspended and I alternated my time between the two classes, working with each group in the morning and afternoon. I encouraged participants to re-look at the building from a personal and shared perspective: for example, part of the tour included a

cloakroom where an impromptu disco had taken place. Children wrote and performed stories about the games they played (real and imagined), of haunted toilets and bell-towers and tales of friendships and fallouts. To support their writing and to offer different ways of engaging with the project, children produced tour guides, maps and posters. The maps, for example, marked out places of interest such as the 'haunted bell-tower' and sites, which were personal to the participants. We also imagined what was behind closed doors, the spaces forbidden to children: such as the teachers' staff room, the cleaning cupboard and the school kitchen. We produced luggage labels and short descriptive statements about the site and attached these onto doors, walls, windows, brick walls and railings.

As a critical lens for the inquiry, I adopt Boal's understanding of the oneiric dimension (1995). For Boal, the oneiric dimension has a special magical quality, 'the observer is drawn of her own volition into the vertigo of dreams, she loses contact with the concrete, real, physical space' (Boal 1995, 22). Linked to this term is also the idea of metaxis, 'the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of the reality and the reality of the stage' (Boal 1995, 43). In other words, to embody two realities and two autonomous worlds, 'her reality and the image of her reality, which she herself has created' (Boal 1995, 43). For this article, I deal with the divide between the formal and oneiric dream space from the perspective of play and performance. I begin then, with a consideration of the formal place.

The formal place

Formal places can be symbolic, marginal and representational. Hetherington's contribution towards an understanding of identity politics suggests that certain places act as a focal point for social cohesion and collective belief systems, citing 'shopping malls, street corners, city centre landmarks [in addition to] festival sites, sacred sites, Greenfield sites' as places whereby group identity might be formed and maintained (Hetherington 1998, 106). In terms of the school building this is analogous to the classroom, school hall, playground, staff room and head teacher's office. A useful starting point to examine this perspective would be to consider the school hall. Alexander's (2001) far-reaching comparison between English, European and American primary educational provision notes that, architecturally, the traditional

English school hall tends to occupy a central position in school layout. Park Road Junior School, built in 1894, is an archetypal Victorian School building, with newer classrooms and corridors leading into the hall.

The current day usage of the school building places great emphasis on the import of the school hall. The centrality of the room facilitates the creation and development of a school identity; here is where normative modes and codes of behaviour and identity are established, affirmed and re-informed. It is a place for morning assembly, school plays, celebrations, festivals, recitals, dance classes, a vast array of group work and a place to eat school lunch. Arguably, however, the place is more than a communal area, Hetherington (1998, 108) has shown that the 'link between establishing an identity and the space is a symbolic one' (Morning assembly in the school hall is when guiding values are underpinned, and for English schools, post the 1988 Education Act, tends to be Christian, multi-faith or spiritual in nature. At Park Road Junior School, assembly also instils a sense of community, belonging and shared understanding. The school motto – Learning Together, Working Together, Playing Together – placed prominently at eye-level in the hall connects and inscribes the intended aims and aspirations for children and teachers onto the fabric of the school building. The Victorian tiles decorating the back wall are a visible reminder of the history of the building. There is a sense of permanence, continuity and locality since many of the children have grandparents who went to the school.

Symbolically then, the hall has a social and cultural significance beyond that of its communal everyday use. Nevertheless, the hall can also be a marginal and representational space. The school hall is a place where children who have been excluded from class can be found lingering outside classrooms, kicking feet against low wooden gym benches. Children, instructed not to stray too far from their classroom door, inhabit a narrow strip of land that runs around the outer edges of the hall. The centre can be noisy and busy, with music lessons, singing and dancing classes and indoor physical education, taking place and so forth, but, for the excluded child, occupying the margins can be a lonely and isolating experience. Hetherington (1998) suggests that excluded and disaffected community groups can electively choose a marginal space. In this context, though, marginality, *Otherness*, is enforced. Children and teachers are acutely aware of the semiotic significance of the space

between the centre of the room and the walls of the hall. It is a highly codified and nuanced space, 'the elsewhere in which meanings are sought' (Hetherington 1998, 120). Place, therefore, can take on new meanings when we semiotically read space through the perspective of the body, intervention and personal experience. Performance extracts, written by children for the Misguide, reveal paradoxical and conflicting attitudes towards the school hall, which are closer to ideas of exclusion than notions of cohesion:

In the Hall

This is the place where you stand if you've been naughty in class. I remember the time when I was sent out of the class for talking about 'Celebrity Big Brother' instead of practising my times tables. The person I wanted to win was Preston but sadly he lost. So did I because I had to stand outside for half an hour. Boring! In May this year C was listening to her teacher when a boy walked past and pulled her hair and told her she was a mouse, so she just ignored him then he did it again so she told him shut to up. The teacher heard C and send [sic] her out. That's the reason why she was sitting there.

The identification of the representational space is important in this context, since it suggests that a space can hold a semiotic value, quite apart from its functional use. From this perspective, the difference between place and space can be paradoxical, most telling in the lines: 'This is the place where you stand if you've been naughty in class'. In the second story, C was listening to her teacher, but a boy pulled her hair and called her a 'mouse'. Here, the narrator understands fully the significance of the space. There is a sense of unfairness and injustice for C who ends up sitting on the other side of her classroom door. The application and demarcation of space, in this instance, the outer edges of the room, suggests that children and teachers at certain times perceive the hall in a negative context. Hence, being there, in a marginal space, renders the child to a marginal position within the broader context of her school community.

For the participants the project offered a unique opportunity to connect as an individual to their school building and thereby their school life, whilst at the same time being part of a much bigger, collaborative project. Thematically, we set out to

explore the transition to secondary school, which for the current year 6 was an on-going source of discussion. Memories of starting junior school and being in the lower school were dominant, but also through the Misguide, children explored their worries and fears about starting secondary school:

The First Day of School

It was the first day [of school]. The Bell rang for the morning break. We all rushed into the play ground. I found myself just standing in the middle of the schoolyard. I did not have anyone to play with but all around me it seems to me that everyone had someone to play with, except for me. I walked to sit down on the bench and in the distance was a wall and there was a little opening. I walked slowly to the open space next to the wall. I found myself looking down at a little space with a door and I was leaning over a black gate. I did not find it very amusing at all. I went to turn around when I heard a bang. The handle on the door sckweek [sic] and then everyone started to crowd around, the door began to open, my heart began to pump louder then I just shot up and realised that it was just a dream. I went to school that morning and it seemed just a normal day.

The Seat of Death

There is a strange phenomenon that only strikes year 6. It's patchy and I think there was a deadly gas coming through the gas vents. And there is only one vent in the school and its right by one seat in year 6!! When it starts to get you, they say you start coughing out ... blood! Then, you feel your body rotting from the inside out. Your ears start falling off. All of your skin opens up and you can see yourself rotting. The boy who last sat in that seat died of the dizzies! [sic]. I mean, he actually died in this seat!!!!

GUESS WHO SITS IN THAT SEAT NOW?

I thought it was scary at first but now, now I am a zombie! There's no stopping me. I am going, I'm going, I'm going to high school!

Importantly, the project allowed for a symbolic understanding of place and space to emerge through the telling and enactment of personal stories and histories.

Performances included stories about ghosts who supposedly haunt the bell-tower and the girls' toilets, a bench where one pupil was 'dumped' by his girlfriend and heroic playground adventures, featuring giant spiders, aliens and world-cup football. The project prioritised spaces often overlooked or invisible to casual visitors to the school: secret hideaways, nooks and crannies, spaces where friendships are forged for a lifetime:

The Cloakroom

In year 4 we had a disco in the cloakroom. My friend J had a laser, a dark blue one. Everybody went in the cloakroom so my friend said let's have a disco so my friend J got his laser out and he was shining it everywhere then R said every body lets boogy woogy [sic]. My best friend M was dancing like mad. The disco lasted 20 minutes and then the prefects came so we all rushed out and went into the playground.

The Dumping Bench

When I in year 5 at last break, I went up to the benches where hearts are broken and dreams are shattered. I sat down next to my girlfriend to talk to her about the disco the next day to see if she would dance with me to Titanic. She turned around with a zombie like expression on her face. All her cronies turned and stared at me and she said, 'I'm sorry but you're dumped.' I looked at her with a sad expression on my face and said 'Why?' 'I don't know' she replied. 'Fine' I said, and walked off.

To take the example of the second text, *The Dumping Bench*, the formal space (in this instance a playground bench), enables the child to inscribe a sense of self and belonging over the physical landscape. In doing so, connecting personal, lived experience in a meaningful way with the broader context of the history of the school. Similarly, the impromptu disco (which had taken place quite unbeknown to teachers) described in *The Cloakroom*, was remembered with much enthusiasm and prompting of half-recalled memories. The articulation of self as belonging to somewhere in a particular space and time with others, resonates loudly in this kind of performance practice. Notwithstanding the ephemeral nature of performance, such works act as a kind of performative version of the old school desk: a palimpsest of where we have been, and what we hope to achieve. Put simply, it gave children who were nearing the end of their junior school years the chance to say: I was here and this is how I felt.

The oneiric dimension

For Boal, performance has the potential to break down the formal and physical space, to blur the lines between the real and the unreal. Referred to as the oneiric dimension, these are the moments when we, as performers and spectators, 'are drawn into the space of the dream, whether we are asleep or awake' (Boal 1995, 22). This is not to suggest though, for site-centred work, that the formal space becomes redundant or overshadowed by the performance work much in the way that a theatre building might in conventional drama. But, rather, the formal and physical space acts in tandem with the dream and the magical. The following performance extracts from the Misguide offer an illustration of the imaginative interplay between the formal and the oneiric dimension. The first example concerns a patch of concrete in the playground. To the casual observer there is nothing particularly significant about the area other than a slight depression in the concrete. But, when it rains water gathers in a puddle, which the children refer to as *Water World* and the second concerns a brick wall:

Water World

J was sitting next to water world telling a joke when he got pushed in a puddle down the bottom of the playground. The puddle is called 'Water World' and appears when we had a lot of rain. It is strictly forbidden to stand by it but J wanted to catch a stray fish and wishing he had his fishing net and next thing he was on his back in the Water World.

The Wall

When [we were in year 4] we found a radio aerial and a piece of cement from the wall. We thought it would be fun to start to chip cement from the wall. So we took turns to chip out cement. We did this for about a month until there was hardly any cement left on the side that we could see. Luckily we were never caught and were always on the lookout for teachers. On the second week we found coal in the wall and kept chipping until we had pockets full of the coal. They have not replaced it even to this day.

In *Water World* we move easily between the actual (a puddle of water) and the fantastical (a fish). The second is particularly interesting, since the divide between the

formal and the oneiric dream space is broken down in a literal sense (the picking away of the cement) and as an act of imagination. In truth, the children had chipped away far less cement than the story suggests and the brick wall shows no signs of lasting damage. The reality for all these performance texts of course is that these events never happened (at least in terms of how they have been retold here). For example, in *Water World* it is likely that children are required to stay away from the puddle to prevent spending the rest of the school day in wet clothes, rather than the implied risk of water, resplendent with fish. However, this is unimportant. What matters is the connection the child has with place and space and the events that make sense of his life.

Hence, it is not necessary to catch a real fish. In this context, desire and imagination are enough. From an outsider's perspective, the playground is a rectangular block of concrete, enclosed on four sides by brick walls, windows and doors and overlooked by an imposing Victorian bell-tower. However, when seen from a child's perspective, the space opens out to include the improbable alongside the possible. Persighetti (2000, 9) suggests that 'in a society where the gap between dream and reality is not as divided as in western European culture(s), the power of place is often overwhelming.' Arguably, school (and the places children occupy), can be places where dreams and imagination collide with reality and actuality.

Conclusions

David Miliband, referring to the Building Schools for the Future programme in 2003, states that 'school buildings should inspire learning. They should nurture every pupil and member of staff. They should be a source of pride and a practical resource for the community' (Miliband, cited in Middlewood *et al.* 2005, 82). But, arguably, the school building is much more than this suggests. This article has shown how children attach meaning to the smaller, hidden and inconsequential places: a playground bench, a brick wall and a puddle. To return to an earlier example of the disco in the cloakroom, a genuine sense of belonging and participation emerges. The children use the word 'friend' easily and often and we should not underestimate its importance when considering social and emotional wellbeing. For teachers, the final year of school was characterised by SATs and dominated conversation in the staff room. Children involved in the Misguide project though, sought to make full sense of their

school lives through an attachment to place and space. *The Seat of Death*, a humorous re-working of a conventional zombie story, reveals uncertainty (and some anxiety) about the forthcoming transition to secondary school.

Similarly, Boal's articulation of the oneiric dimension has a special resonance for this inquiry. In this context place and space have the potential to open out, include and embrace the dream and the magical. In the example of *Water World*, all we need to bring fish into existence is imagination. In the oneiric dimension children enter into a make-believe world without limitations and of endless possibilities. In *The First Day of School*, the narrator begins with telling her audience that she felt excluded on her first day of school: 'I found myself just standing in the middle of the school yard. I did not have anyone to play with but all around me it seems to me that everyone had someone to play with, except for me.' But, a perception of an unhappy, lonely child is overthrown as the narrator is thrown into a world of dream and magic: 'I walked slowly to the open space next to the wall. I found myself looking down at a little space with a door and I was leaning over a black gate.' As the text develops, she moves into a central and highly visible position: 'and then everyone started to crowd around'. Able to manipulate her own story and no longer positioned as an outsider, the child can show how she wants others to see her, and what she wants to become. Our connection to the physical and imaginative space, then, is crucial to developing an understanding of self and our relationship with others.

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