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The Autonomy of the Landscape in the
Work of *Philippe Quesne*

A Autonomia da Paisagem na
Obra de *Philippe Quesne*

ABSTRACT

In his company Vivarium Studio and then at Nanterre-Les Amandiers, Philippe Quesne examines the relationship between art and the living world. He places onstage the branches of trees, stones, animals and atmospheric phenomena on a par with human beings. His work accompanies and questions a conceptual revolution. The living world, both plant and animal, is not for him a mere object. His theatre gives it the status of a subject. We will see how this onstage revision in the hierarchy of living creatures is based on the theory of landscape from the Renaissance to the present day, in particular by analysing his show *Caspar Western Friedrich* and his "mole trilogy" (*Swamp Club*, *Crash Park* and *La nuit des taupes*).

Keywords: Landscape-Theatre; Theory of Landscape; Non-Human; Philippe Quesne.

RESUMO

Na sua companhia, Vivarium Studio, e depois em Nanterre-Les Amandiers, Philippe Quesne examina a relação entre a arte e o mundo vivo. Ele coloca no palco galhos de árvores, pedras, animais e fenômenos atmosféricos no mesmo nível do ser humano. Seu trabalho acompanha e questiona uma revolução conceitual. O mundo vivo, tanto vegetal como animal, não é para ele um mero objeto. Seu teatro lhe confere o status de sujeito. Neste artigo, veremos como esta revisão cênica da hierarquia dos seres vivos se baseia na teoria da paisagem, desde o Renascimento até aos nossos dias. Nomeadamente através da análise do seu espetáculo *Caspar Western Friedrich* e da sua "trilogia toupeira" (*Swamp Club*, *Crash Park* e *La nuit des taupes*).

Keywords: Teatro-Paisagem; Teoria da Paisagem; Não Humano; Philippe Quesne.



Fig. 1. Bivouac. Photo: Martin Argyroglo, 2011

To understand Philippe Quesne's onstage revolution, we must take a close look at the concept of landscape. The landscape is the ground where the relationship between the subject and the world around him is built up. This definition gives rise to some kind of identity with the theatre. The theatre is also the place where the subject thinks about his relationship with the world, the place where he imagines and becomes aware – if he so wishes – of his place in the world. In the classical theatre paradigm, natural features merely set the scene and accompany the plot. Nature is just an object, a

background against which the active subject evolves. Since the two world wars, non-narrative and non-figurative theatre has been reinventing the idea of the landscape, drawing on the history of painting. In this context, the landscape makes it possible to describe a play's spatial and temporal organisation, the orchestration of its voices, its rhythm and its sound design. We can thus fashion a unitary concept that can be called landscape theatre. Purely scenographic concerns – staging, the positioning of the objects, the relationship between the subjects and objects, and even technical matters (“how to make a cloud cross the stage”¹) – become essential when we are dealing with landscape theatre.

For twenty years, Philippe Quesne has been putting forward his landscape theatre model, through which he shares his political and ecological convictions. Taking the image of the vivarium as his point of departure, he puts humans and non-humans in symbiotic, non-conflicting and benevolent relationships. His interest in small communities and the naturalistic observation of the scientific world lead him to implement a drama scheme reminiscent of laboratory testing. For Quesne, landscape theatre means building a new world with new agreements on the relationship between the audience and what they are watching. He re-enacts several concepts that are central to the theoretical work of the philosopher Bruno Latour. There is, in

¹ This is the title of a chapter in the book by Nicola Sabbattini // SABBATTINI Nicola, *Pratique pour fabriquer scènes et machines de théâtre*, Ides et calendes, Lausanne, 2015, p.154-157

particular, the idea of the Anthropocene; that of Gaia as a living and semiotic organism; as well as ideas about the political representation of non-humans, and a whole field of anthropology beyond the human (anthropology of the living world) that feature extensively in Latour's work. But his work is not just a rehearsal of concepts from the new philosophical anthropology. These come to life in a very personal universe. It is the stage design and the art of illusion that transfigure the theory and make it resonate in tune with the author's extraordinary imagination, full of tenderness and irony for the living world. The relationship between the elements of his plays is often explained by the rules of art history. His scenery, well put together and worked out in detail, is quite literally placed onstage to share the plot with the actors: in Philippe Quesne's productions, the mist makes jokes, the rain measures the time, the cloud acts forcefully, the rocks are as light as foam and deceive our senses, while gold-tinted minerals convey messages about the cultural sector's economy. But the real scenographic reversal is the appearance of the mole, who becomes the main actor in his theatre for a while.

Fascinated by science, Philippe Quesne also invents a daemon, a "becoming", a "gentle monster" that embodies this new outlook, this rather complex political and ecological statement – and brings it to the theatre. The giant anthropomorphic mole is a fictional character that Philippe Quesne suggested so as to stage this new multi-species arrangement. More specifically and materially (in the

scenographic sense), the giant mole is a live sculpture: like any piece of scenery that comes to life in the theatre, it is firstly a threat (remember the statue of the Commander in *Don Juan* or Birnam Forest in *Macbeth*). The mole changes the landscape of the show, it reverses the relations between humans and non-humans, the object/subject relationship between the actor and his setting. In a photo² of *Bivouac* (a touring show created in New York in 2013), we can see a fine panoramic view of Manhattan, with the figure of the watching mole in the middle. Quesne also replaces the human with the mole in this double perspective device, inherited from the Romantics, so as to position the landscape between the gaze of the human spectator and that of the watching mole. The mole is this little character that we can see in the foreground from behind, standing in front of the landscape – the one who is looking. A first attempt by Philippe Quesne to put an autonomous non-human community onstage is to be found in *La nuit des taupes*. He then goes even further and grants a subjectivity to non-living non-humans in *Farm Fatale*, featuring a community of scarecrows that hint at the possibility of survival through multi-species solidarity in the broad sense of the term.

² Fig. 1

Living scenery

Since 2011, the Nanterre-Les Amandiers theatre in the Paris suburbs, with its rich and glorious past (the theatrical decentralisation of the Patrice Chéreau years), has gained a fresh lease of life under the artistic direction of Philippe Quesne, who has made it a living laboratory for his landscape-theatre research. The theatre's surroundings, in the middle of the Parc André-Malraux, are carefully maintained (unlike the building, which has been awaiting refurbishment for 18 years). The place has become an island, a sort of utopian space for research and creative thinking, a landmark for new ways of surviving and living together. Quesne has embellished the trees around the theatre, its green amphitheatre and the little paths in the park (which often host parades and shows that are on tour). The park is also a protected area, an island romantically reclaimed by nature, although tamed and surrounded by affordable-housing tower blocks and the skyscrapers of La Défense.

In Quesne's shows, atmospheric phenomena (snow, rain, wind, fog) and wild or cultivated landscapes (rocks, mountains, caves and islands, but also gardens) are not just items of scenery but are often characters, agents and actors among the other players. Tree branches taken from the wild decorate each show. As for the smoke machine, it remains a favourite tool and a tireless source of Chaplinesque humour. The painted rocks look so realistic that they

remind us of the history of alpine landscapes in Romantic art. If we look at each production chronologically, the landscape gradually takes up more and more space until it finally becomes independent and even, in a way, self-sufficient. It is at first a window – a frame and a view through the glass door in *L'effet de Serge* (2007), then the wooded space that occupies part of the stage in *D'après nature* (2006), and then a wooded and snowy landscape taking up the whole stage in *Mélancolie des dragons* (2008). The living and communicating ecosystem of a wetland appears in *Swamp Club* (2013), but the “natural” aspect is immediately questionable here, since it is still a theatrical performance that is reproducing the landscape. The stones sing as a huge cloud comes and goes, occupying all the vertical and horizontal space of the stage, as well as its depth, in *Caspar Western Friedrich* (2016). The cloud then unleashes a spectacular display of rain and fog and then a rainbow and starts to communicate with a human interpreter. At that moment, humans disappear from the landscape of Philippe Quesne's shows, as is often the case in Caspar David Friedrich's landscapes. They are replaced once more by non-humans. The moles lead a completely animal-like life in the underground world of *La nuit des taupes* (2016). An island that revolves (like the Earth?) becomes the whole world and the main character in the post-apocalyptic universe of *Crash Park, la vie d'une île* (2018). Straw bales and fully conscious scarecrows are all that is left of the overexploited landscape in *Farm Fatale* (2019).

Trained in the visual arts, Philippe Quesne first produced stage designs for the theatre, the opera and some exhibitions. For ten years, he led the life of an independent artist (which also means precarious³) in his company *Vivarium Studio*, where he created his first designs following the lead set by Maurice Maeterlinck in *La Vie des termites* and Samuel Beckett in *The Lost Ones*⁴. The name of the company comes from his childhood passion for entomology: Quesne spent a lot of time observing stick insects⁵, “insects that look like leaves” (of which he had a whole colony in his room), which some researchers think mimic their own environment⁶. This partially explains his naturalistic approach to theatre, his relationship with the players, and even the place of the curious watcher (human or non-human), who is able to draw his own conclusions on the functioning of society from his observations of nature.

In Quesne’s work, humans exist in a collective whole, just like the staffage figures in a Brueghel painting. They speak softly at the back of the stage, build something or invent some artistic activity, while the landscape changes. In their way of life, we recognise a community of artists linked by friendship and solidarity – not only

³ Anna Tsing in particular develops the idea of how precarious everything is in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton University Press, 2015). The whole work deals with “the precariousness of our ways of life”, which she defines as “life with no promise of stability”.

⁴ “La Vie des termites” by Maurice Maeterlinck and *The Lost Ones* by Samuel Beckett / BELLET Catherine, Dossier pédagogique pour *La Mélancolie des dragons*, CDR Tours, 2015, p.7

⁵ QUESNE Philippe: “Pour se sauver l’homme doit être aidé par les animaux” – I take the liberty of quoting my own interview // Kamila Mamadnazarbekova for *Snob Magazine*, 19/09/2014 (in Russian) <https://snob.ru/selected/entry/81192/>

⁶ See DIDI-HUBERMAN Georges, *Phasmes. Essais sur l'apparition*, Les Éditions de minuit, 1998

onstage: we recognise a group of friends from different backgrounds – the theatre, the visual arts, dance and music. During the first performances, a dog even went up to join them onstage. Often, the performers also create part of the production’s scenery or its music. They address each other by their real first names. There are no roles, just situations and tasks to be carried out. The text takes shape during rehearsals from suggestions made by the performers, supervised by the dramatists and the stage director. The Vivarium Studio artists often engage together in other projects associated with the theme of a production – shows, exhibitions, concerts and photo albums.

Double perspective

Between *Swamp Club* and *La nuit des taupes* (i.e. after the start of the destruction of the landscape theatre’s anthropocentric vision and before the definitive affirmation of non-humans as the main characters), Philippe Quesne staged *Caspar Western Friedrich*, a co-production with the Munich Kammerspiele (2016) – a grandiose, melancholy contemplation of the Romantic landscape as a history of man’s view of nature and, at the same time, an emotional tribute to the craftsmen of the Nanterre-Amandiers scenery workshops.

Quesne places his show inside Friedrich’s most famous painting: *The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* – but he populates that landscape with singing cowboys, admirers of the great American

landscapes, adding the idea of the conquest of the country and some new “birth of a nation” Romanticism – all played by German actors.

Friedrich’s “sea of fog” conceals an alpine landscape, as is emphasised several times in the text of the performance. The view that stretches into infinity is here an iconographic representation of space, the autonomous physical world, “represented for itself because it has become worthy of interest in itself” (Descola). The European concept “vast” (from the Latin *vastus* – empty, excessive, wild) is truly Romantic and matches the American concept of “wilderness” that originated in the writings of Henry Thoreau and, especially, John Muir, who celebrates the first American national parks, Yosemite and Yellowstone. Anything that was “vast” was initially viewed negatively and gave rise to a feeling of horror among 17th-century writers. It is only with Romanticism that the “vast” and the “sublime” are appreciated aesthetically,⁷ Yvon Le Scanff insists in his monograph “Paysage romantique et l’expérience du sublime”. Before then, uncolonised forests, seas and mountains were regarded as material that was still to be processed.

The show seems to incorporate onstage the famous text⁸ by Philippe Descola on the autonomy of the landscape, albeit discreetly and without referring to it directly. Descola analyses the history of the

⁷ Charles de Saint-Évremond, *Dissertation sur le mot de «vaste»* (1685), in *Entretiens sur toutes choses*, Desjonquères, 1998, pp. 123-124. In LE SCANFF Yvon, *Paysage romantique et l’expérience du sublime*, Éditions Champ Vallon, 2007, p.25

⁸ DESCOLA Philippe, *Par-delà de nature et culture*, op. cit., p.91-99

landscape and draws attention to the appearance of the figure of the spectator in “Mountainous Landscape with an Artist” by Roelandt Savery (ca.1606). In this engraving, made “from nature” (i.e. from life) during a hike, we can see the tiny figure of the artist right at the bottom – from behind. Émilie Hache, a lecturer at the University of Nanterre and a specialist in political ecology, adds⁹ a North American perspective to a reading of this text by Descola: “This wild, frightening or magnified nature, whether in its European or American version, embodies a dualistic vision in which man is located outside nature. Whether it is judged to be desolate or imagined as an inviolate sanctuary, it is always thought of as being devoid of human beings.”

Quesne carries out this operation that other artists dreamed of doing: he removes the character of the spectator from Friedrich’s painting. He deprives the human of his position as an observer of nature. First of all, he invites his five German actors to try out this empty spot. Each one climbs on a small rock/stepladder and, facing the audience, speaks and sings a *lied*, recites a poem by Rilke or Novalis and tells a homely story about the view (“When the weather is fine, you can see, behind this mountain, the Giant Mountains in Silesia...”). Peter Brombacher, an experienced actor at the Kammerspiele, recounts, with fine poses and theatrical gestures, Tadeusz Kantor’s trip to Kraków and then his stay at the Hauptmans: he thus assimilates the story of the play to the history of the theatre,

⁹ HACHE Émilie, “Alpi, d’Armin Linke. Getting back to the wrong nature”, *Sciences de la société*, 87|2012, 114-127.

which also allows us to link the rules of painting, the philosophy of nature that they express, and the show as a medium.

Caspar Western Friedrich begins with song, accompanied on a guitar, around a campfire – *My Rifle, My Pony and Me*, taken from Howard Hawks' towering classic western, *Rio Bravo* (1959). We then hear a whole repertoire of songs, still taken from North American folk culture – *Home on the Range*, a poem from 1872 set to music and revived by Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, *And the Moon Grew Brighter and Brighter*, sung by Kirk Douglas in *Man Without a Star* (1954), and *I Talk to the Trees*, sung by Clint Eastwood in *Paint your Wagon* (1969). This lyrical strain leaves traces in the next production: *La nuit des taupes* begins with *I Wish I Was a Mole in the Ground* by Bascom Lamar Lunsford.

To amplify the sound, the cowboys find microphones inside large stones. These scenery props are so well painted that they convey a perfect illusion of being real rocks – except that... no, everything here is artificial. The landscape theatre is a construct. These natural items, so dear to Romantic landscapes, are picked up by humans and carried in their arms.

As soon as the cowboys turn their backs on the audience, the curtain rises, and the tremendous depth of the stage opens up in front of them – the empty space of a scenic workshop. However, two windows recall Caspar David Friedrich's workshop, familiar from many paintings by Georg Kersting or from Friedrich's *Woman at the*

Window. The wooden structure is a “theatre within the theatre” (or a “hut”, conceptualised by Marielle Macé in “Nos cabanes”) with a homely feel. And the melancholy, in this context, also comes to be the loneliness of an artist before the great void of the public theatre that has to be filled.

Despite the aesthetics of the Romantic texts (the most theoretical are broadcast on an electronic display ticker), *Caspar Western Friedrich’s* cowboys retain a popular mindset and a working-class style. In the very first scene, one of them receives, as a birthday present, a sweatshirt printed with Friedrich’s painting – a scene already familiar with its long-haired hard-rockers from *La mélancolie des dragons*. The cowboys are hard at work: there will soon be a “Caspar Western Friedrich Museum”, a sign indicates. They play with the stepladders and brushes; they clean and paint the walls. Playful manipulations with the smoke machine finally produce a huge cloud that occupies the whole stage and takes on an independent life of its own. The cloud grows, changes shape and produces rain of varying intensity and mist on which coloured light creates a rainbow effect. The cloud remains central to the show for a good half an hour and lets you watch its various atmospheric phenomena.

Since “sea” occurs in the “sea of cloud”, we also get a view of the sea. All the water that falls from the sky remains on the ground, and the actor Franz Rogowski has great fun crossing this sea several times by sliding on his stomach (a scene that recalls the crossing of

the ocean in *Crash Park*). The actor's naked torso gives the scene a metaphorical meaning: he is no longer just a man, but Man in a dialogue with Nature. He addresses the torrent with gestures – rather like King Lear, but without uttering the famous “*Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!*”

The cloud, the rain and the rocks are just as important here as the humans and have a capacity for action, a power of action, the ability to be an agent: “As if the set had been assembled onstage to share the plot with the actors,”¹⁰ Bruno Latour states in order to explain this “new climatic regime”.

On the cover of his collection of lectures, *Face à Gaïa*¹¹, we can, in fact, see another painting by Caspar David Friedrich, which the author calls *La Grande Clôture*, but which also appears in French catalogues under the name *La Grande Réserve*¹². This panorama of the River Elbe (on flooded banks or in a dried-up river bed?) is made up of a patchwork of watery expanses forming a semicircle touching the sky, and reminding Latour of the image of the Earth as seen by astronauts – an impossible viewpoint for any 19th-century spectator, as for the theoretician of today (“No, this is not a landscape that anyone could contemplate”¹³). Drawing on an analysis made by art historian Joseph Koerner, Latour explains at the beginning of his

¹⁰ *Face à Gaïa*, op. cit., p.11

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Das Große Gehege*, 1832

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.286

seventh lecture that this image sums up the previous chapters of his book: “The Great Enclosure, the great impossibility, is not to be imprisoned on Earth; it is to believe that it can be grasped as a reasonable and coherent Whole, by stacking the scales inside each other, from the most local to the most global – and back – or to believe that we could be satisfied with our own patch in which to cultivate our own garden.”

Latour and Descola share this idea of the landscape as an image of the world – an artificial and mistaken image. To better explain the invention of “nature” by painting and to underline the role of the Romantic double perspective in this invention (the artist’s point of view reinforced by that of the viewer inside the work), Philippe Descola refers to a famous essay by art historian Erwin Panofsky, “Perspective as a symbolic form”¹⁴. Panofsky shows that linear perspective, invented in the 15th century, “brings about a new relationship between the subject and the world, between the point of view of the person who measures and a space that has been made systematic, where the objects and the intervals that separate them are only proportional variations of a seamless continuum”¹⁵. Linear perspective, according to Panofsky, is artificial. Its aim is to restore natural vision, which, according to Panofsky, is curved. The means used thus run counter to the desired objective. The more we look for

¹⁴ PANOFSKY Erwin, *La perspective comme forme symbolique et autres essais*, Les éditions de Minuit, 1976

¹⁵ DESCOLA Philippe, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Gallimard, 2005, p.94

the most adequate illusion, the more we fall into convention, which is determined, *inter alia*, by cultural traditions (near vision in the North, distant vision in Italy, oblique vision, etc.). So there is nothing “natural” about the subject’s place.

Émilie Hache also recalls the appearance of the figure of the spectator as well as his artificial perspective and his role in “the invention of nature”: “It is the invention of perspective that made it possible to see the landscape as an autonomous representation of the secularised physical world. The natural world is no longer the place for edifying scenes, but “is beginning to organise itself to accommodate the way in which it is perceived by a subject who is outside the image”. This subject is placed onstage through the appearance of the figure of the spectator, whose “viewpoint confers a supreme position on the organisation of this outside status, which he envelops in his gaze”¹⁶.

For his part, to account for our erroneous conception of “nature”, Bruno Latour comments, in *Face à Gaïa*, on the invention of the spectator’s position in the history of Western painting. The spectator’s gaze is organised in such a way as to bridge the gap between himself and the spectacle of objects or landscapes. “The spectator must not only stand some way away from what he is looking at, but what he sees must be arranged, prepared, staged and aligned so as to be made perfectly visible. Between the two is the plane of

¹⁶ HACHE Émilie, “*Alpi*, d’Armin Linke. Getting back to the wrong nature”, *Sciences de la société*, 87|2012, p.114-127

the stage, which occupies the middle ground between the object and the subject”¹⁷.

Landscape as a reflection of the social order

Despite the absence of drama and the benevolent atmosphere surrounding each creation by Philippe Quesne, a degree of political tension still hangs over the stage. The relationship with air is also important to Quesne, who evokes, in particular, his interest in “the invisible world, the world of reverie, but also terrible things that are invisible, such as waves or radioactivity”¹⁸. The conflict is never direct, but rather is exteriorised, contextualised and codified with the help of art history, often through parables.

Quesne maintains a special relationship with Pieter Brueghel the Elder, a painter who is associated with the invention of the modern landscape and who “gave the landscape its independence”¹⁹: Brueghel’s alpine views are among the very first pictorial representations that remove man from the landscape. In Quesne’s productions, Brueghel’s works often feature, more or less implicitly, onstage. The fable of *The Urge to Fly* is linked to *The Fall of Icarus*, an illustration of the myth by Brueghel. We should recall that in this

¹⁷ LATOUR Bruno, *op. cit.*, p.27

¹⁸ Philippe Quesne on *Farm Fatale*, “Meeting on multi-species worlds”, with Marielle Macé, Emanuele Coccia, Frédérique Aït-Touati and Philippe Quesne, moderated by Camille Louis as part of the “Possible worlds” cycle, posted online on 21/09/2019 by Nanterre-Amandiers

¹⁹ DESCOLA Philippe, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Gallimard, 2005, p.95

painting, where the artist is illustrating a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*²⁰, we see very little of Icarus – only the feet of his drowned body. We focus on the peasant women who are tending the land, and the panoramic view of a bay. Men and animals are separated from the maritime panorama by a very clear diagonal, which also suggests the separation between dream and reality. The English poet W.H. Auden was particularly touched by this painting and by the indifference of men and nature to the tragedy of the fall: “how everything turns away quite leisurely from the disaster,”²¹ he wrote in a poem entitled *Musée des Beaux-Arts* (1938).

In *Swamp Club* there is a debate around the engraving *Patientia*, produced in 1557. According to art historian Karel Boon²², Brueghel was painting an allegory of the religious conflicts of his time, the domination of the Spanish Habsburgs in Flanders and the conflicts between Catholic soldiers and Protestant peasants (see also *Le Massacre des Innocents*, a painting dating from 1565, to which Auden also refers). This is a phase in Brueghel's career known as the “devilry period”, during which he devoted himself especially to engravings

²⁰ OVID, *Metamorphoses*, Book VIII, Verses 215-229: “A fisherman teasing the fish with the end of his flexible rod, a shepherd leaning on his crook, and a ploughman guiding his plough see them both pass. Astonished, they take these men able to fly in the air for gods. Already, Samos, beloved of Juno, has disappeared on their left; they have passed Delos and Paros; on their right, appear Lebinthos and Calymne, famous for its honey, when the lad, intoxicated by the daring sensation of flight, departs from his guide. Abandoning himself to the dizziness of the heavens, he soars aloft. Here it is that, as he nears the blazing sun, the fragrant wax that binds the feathers together becomes soft. It melts. Icarus flaps his bare arms in vain: shorn of his wings, he no longer has purchase on the empty air. He calls to his father, then disappears in the azure waves of the sea that we since have called the Icarian Sea.”

²¹ AUDEN W.H., “Musée des Beaux-Arts”, <https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/musee-des-beaux-arts/>

²² BOON Karel G., “*Patientia* dans les gravures de la Réforme aux Pays-Bas”. *Revue de l'Art*, 56 (1982): 7 - 24.e l'Art, 56 (1982): 7 - 24.

featuring monsters, under the considerable influence of Hieronymus Bosch. The *Patientia*, according to Boon, heralds the triumph of the virtue of serenity, patience and humanism in the face of the chaos surrounding them. Despite the prevailing anxiety in *Swamp Club*, the characters in the show always remain calm and benevolent. But this is also a silent demand, which has now become quite radical, for the right to lead a slow life in a fast-moving world.

In *D'après nature*, a show that Quesne staged in 2006, which Aude Lavigne, a journalist at France Culture in 2009, regarded as the equivalent of a Greenpeace ship at the theatre, the actors repeatedly mime Brueghel's *Parable of the Blind* (1568), taken from a parable that Christ recounted to the Pharisees: "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." In Brueghel's painting, six blind people hold each other by the shoulder and are dragged down as their guide falls. They have their eyes raised to heaven, appealing to God for help. "Whether it is by miming Brueghel's blind men or by reconstituting a sort of vivarium for the human species, Philippe Quesne asks the same question: where will we go if we are groping our way in the footsteps of an inept guide?" Lavigne then comments²³. Ismaël Jude recalls the same scene in a book published in 2018, quoting another sentence heard in the show, this time taken from the American science fiction writer Norman Spinrad: "The future that awaits us is the one we are

²³ LAVIGNE Aude, Dossier pédagogique autour de Philippe Quesne et du Vivarium Studio, 2009

creating²⁴ ". Recently, Philippe Quesne once again recalled this parable of the blind during a round table in Nanterre, but this time he was much more direct: "Our leaders are incapable of guiding us²⁵." This also echoes one of Bruno Latour's preoccupations in his book *Où atterrir?*²⁶, written shortly after the 2016 election of climate sceptic Donald Trump in the United States and his withdrawal from the Paris agreement.

To return to Brueghel, he too had a humorous side, a sort of Brueghel the Comic, the painter of rustics and peasants. According to some researchers, he was in the habit of disguising himself as a peasant and mingling at village festivals or weddings. Michel Weemans, the author of a monograph²⁷ on Brueghel, sees this as an anthropological approach²⁸. Similarly, the scarecrows that party in *Farm Fatale* are all that is left of peasant life in this new world, even if Quesne calls them "the dustbins of humanity" ("I've always wanted to stage the dustbin of humanity, rejected people and harmful populations, as is the case with moles and other species, harmful insects and poisonous mushrooms"²⁹). With their faces disfigured by

²⁴ JUDE Ismaël, op. cit., p.58

²⁵ Meeting: "Huts! Poetic Resistance and Political Construction" between Phia Ménard, Philippe Quesne, Gwenaël Morin, Marielle Macé, Christophe Laurence and Ludovic Lamant, moderated by Camille Louis as part of the "Possible worlds" cycle, posted online on 01/06/2019 by the Nanterre-Amandiers communications team

²⁶ LATOUR Bruno, *La Découverte*, 2017.

²⁷ WEEMANS Michel, FALKENBURG Reinert L., Brueghel, Hazan, 2018

²⁸ DE LOISY Jean, Programme on France Culture: "Pieter Brueghel, anthropomorphiste de la nature", broadcast on 04/08/2019 (first broadcast on 11/11/2018), with Michel Weemans and Sandrine Vézilier-Dussart

²⁹ Meeting: "Huts! Poetic Resistance and Political Construction" between Phia Ménard, Philippe Quesne, Gwenaël Morin, Marielle Macé, Christophe Laurence and Ludovic Lamant, moderated by Camille Louis as part of the "Possible worlds" cycle, posted online on 01/06/2019 by the Nanterre-Amandiers communications team

masks, they make one think of Harmony Korine's "trash humpers"³⁰ or even, in fact, of Brueghel's peasants, who dance and prepare their wedding feast.

To pursue the analogy with the peasants, it is noteworthy that the appearance onstage, among the characters in the show, of the mole and the scarecrows as agents of action and bearers of meaning can be compared to the appearance of peasant staffage figures in the rustic scenes of noble landscapes. This amounts to a reversal of the aristocratic order, Jacques Rancière explains in a recent work, *Le temps du paysage*. He refers, in particular, to Thomas Gainsborough's *The Market Cart*, "this vulgar object of everyday life" that the painter places in Foxley, the magnificent property of the aristocrat and art theorist Uvedale Price, with the cart forming the subject of his painting on a par with the owners and the beauty of their gardens. The landscape reflects a social order, Rancière insists, before giving several examples of the political consequences of the aestheticisation of the landscape: there is the destruction of hamlets to clear the view, as well as the removal of large trees that bordered the roads and provided shade for passers-by, as part and parcel of an architectural policy of "improvement" according to the tastes of the time, and, more broadly, the degrading of common land³¹ (the *commons*) to

³⁰ *Trash Humpers* by Harmony Korine (USA, 2009). Peter Bradshaw, in his review of the film (*The Guardian*, 17/06/2010) describes these masked and socially excluded characters as follows: "monsters from a horror film who have somehow got existentially excluded from the main gory action, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard's play"

³¹ See also Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village*

eliminate meeting points and areas open to all, so as to separate the manor and the prerogatives of the rich from the dwellings and living conditions of a population that they tend to reduce to a shared level of poverty.

Ranci re refers to Romanticism, which is also a pointer along the way for Philippe Quesne, but the political issues are, however, pressing. This even affects the choice of certain species of trees rather than others:

It is due to a British penchant for curved, soft lines and wide, protective branches that Knight [Richard Payne-Knight, art critic, elected to Parliament and owner of the Hereford estate where he put his landscape theory into practice, ndla condemns the "antisocial" stiffness of pines; and the king of trees that he prefers to them is that same great oak that Burke (Edmund) made the symbol of the aristocratic order"³².

For Quesne too, no doubt, the landscape is the reflection of a social order – an order that he tries to overturn by equating humans and non-humans. The very title "*D'apr s nature*" refers to the technique of landscape painting: either the painter undertakes the journey, sets up his easel and directly imitates what he sees (he thus paints "from nature", i.e. from life), or he paints "from his imagination". In the case of Brueghel, this is never obvious because he mixes the two techniques. Michel Weemans aligns him rather with

³² RANCI RE Jacques, op. cit., p.104. In this passage, the author refers to the following works: *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* by Edmund Burke, and *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* and the didactic poem *The Landscape* by Richard Payne-Knight.

the “Weltlandschaft”³³ – “world landscape”. This means that he does not paint a fragment of nature, but a *particular idea of nature*, in this case an idea of nature with a potential story, both lyrical and ironic – nature as in a novel. Weemans claims that there are anthropomorphic rocks in his alpine landscapes. These “actor rocks” or anthropomorphic rocks occupy a fundamental place in the composition of the paintings. He also talks of “anthropomorphic houses” in *The Hunters in the Snow*. Nature itself can be a painter: the artist then paints nature, which in turn acts as a painter. This idea of double perspective refers us back once again to Philippe Descola’s analysis of the *Mountainous Landscape with an Artist* by Roelandt Savery (ca. 1606): he sees in it a “double objectification of reality, a somewhat reflexive representation of the operation by which nature and the world are produced as autonomous objects thanks to the gaze that man directs on them”³⁴. Let us recall that this double perspective is precisely the way to look at the world of Caspar David Friedrich. In the foreground, there is always a *mise en abyme* of the spectator – the character that we see from behind. His painting *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* (1818) exists in two versions, with and without human beings – in addition to a reworking of the composition of Savery’s *Mountainous Landscape with an Artist*.

³³ DE LOISY Jean, programme on France Culture: “Pieter Brueghel, anthropomorphiste de la nature”, broadcast on 04/08/2019 (first broadcast on 11/11/2018), with Michel Weemans and Sandrine Vézilier-Dussart

³⁴ DESCOLA Philippe, *Par-delà de nature et culture*, op. cit., p. 95

The other thing that Weemans notes about Brueghel, which may interest us in the context of Philippe Quesne's work, is the hidden threat. "There is always a threat in his landscape," he explains, before referring to *Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Bird Trap* (or just *The Bird Trap*, 1565). As always with Brueghel, the subject given in the title is located somewhere off-centre in the painting. In the foreground, we can see only the small figure of a child with a sledge dangerously close to a hole in the ice. Several birds surround the figure – blackbirds and magpies, robins and crows are perched in the bushes near the trap. The analogy between the crow and the human figure gives the painting all of its allegorical meaning.

In conclusion

The revolution of the living that Philippe Quesne explores in his theatre is, in turn, a kind of landscape theatre of thought where several living ideas intersect. It is as if his theatre was the place where the artist's relationship with the intellectual landscape of his time is founded. An analysis of this relationship, of which we have shown a sample, shows that Quesne only brings into his landscape theatre those ideas that are themselves alive and in touch with other areas of thought. Latour is one of those who are at the origin of the cross-fertilisation of anthropology, philosophy and the natural sciences. Rancière is known to be, at one and the same time, a political philosopher and a philosopher dealing with images. And we have

seen how all the many references to art and painting never take the stage without a suggestion of fresh links with modern art and modern thought.

We have seen, in particular, how the different stages of the subjectivisation of nature and the scenery enter into a dialogue with Romanticism. In its time, Romanticism imposed a certain perspective on the landscape. This perspective was strongly supported by the production of the absolute subject constituting the consciousness of the nineteenth century. Quesne brings back the ghost of the phenomenology of the mind, but in a totally opposite sense. What appears is no longer a subject against nature, the soul of the world against the world. Rather it is how the world comes to assert itself as an absolute subject. It is more than just a simple reversal of perspective. It is as if, after a Prometheus chained to the mountain, Quesne were staging a mountain chained to a human being. On the contrary, we know how the Neo-Romanticism of the landscape theatre dispels the element of conflict that accompanies man's triumphant vision of nature in favour of a benevolent representation of the interdependence of all living creatures.

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