

## Dwelling

'The uncanny is ghostly. It is concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious, with a flickering sense of (but not conviction) with the supernatural.' (Royle, 2003, p.1)

Dwelling investigates the concept of hauntology (Derrida, 1994) in performance practice situated at the intersection between dance and theatre. The performance addresses the concept of haunting through the lens of the eerie, as cultural theorist Mark Fisher says 'An example of the second mode of the eerie (the failure of presence) is the feeling of the eerie that pertains to ruins or other abandoned structures.' (2016, p. 62) Therefore, haunting is conceived of as both a temporal and spatial occurrence, as the 'materiality of the ghost' needs a site to manifest.

Fisher (2016) progresses Freud's (1903) theory of the uncanny as he focusses this concept through the lens of hauntology, delineating it into the weird and eerie. Fisher says 'the folding of the weird and the eerie into the Unheimlich is symptomatic of a secular retreat from the outside.' (2016, p. 10) This retreat from the outside 'is commensurate with a compulsion towards a certain kind of critique, which operates by always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside.' (2016, p. 10) Fisher's analysis of the eerie is through this practice as it conceives of the ghost from this perspective of the 'outside', situating haunting 'outside' in sites that Fisher defines as having a 'sense of the eerie', in 'landscapes partially emptied of the human.' (2016, p.11) The site of a derelict mansion was viewed from the perspective of the eerie as having a presence or an absence that is felt sensorially and perceptually. The processes described here were informed by a way of thinking that was based on the following principles which are tropes of the eerie:

- the principle of *place* as key to the notion of haunting.
- the principle of an *absent presence* or *present absence* that constitutes the concept of the Eerie and the ontology of the ghost.
- and the principle of *repetition*, as Derrida predicated his theory of hauntology on the idea that the spectre returns, as haunting is 'A question of repetition: a spectre is always a *revenant*. one that cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*.' (1994, p. 11)

These are reimagined as dramaturgical processes and compositional strategies that focus on a spatial mode of haunting, as site became a key factor in the construction of the performance. Derrida's theory of haunting sets the sense of the haunting in time, but as Blanco and Peeren argue haunting needs a site, a location:

While this scholarship has helped us understand the ghost in its irrevocable connections with the realm of memory, history and the workings of language, we have to consolidate the methods used to define in order to discuss it in spatial terms, as a physical occupation of everyday sites that emphasises the materiality of the ghost and defines its agency as grounded in a particular locale - in a disturbance of space as much as time. (2010, p. xvii)

Fisher's definition of the eerie as 'when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present where there should be something.' (2016, p. 61) Thus, the ghost as a deconstructive tool raises questions to destabilise certainties and meaningful boundaries related to the existence and non-existence of the living and the dead. Fisher writes 'the eerie concerns the most fundamental metaphysical questions one could pose, questions to do with existence and non-existence: Why is there something where there should be nothing? Why is there nothing where there should be something?' (2016, p.12) These questions are addressed through the site-responsive methodology, 'What is there

which can't be seen? What dwells in this abandoned space? What speaks and how does it speak? This method of questioning was creatively productive, as these questions pose an imaginative invitation to ghosts. It is conceived that at the core of these questions there is always a 'secret', an unknown absence or mysterious essence that could not be answered, as Fishers says, 'The eerie concerns the unknown; when the unknown is achieved, the eerie disappears.' (2016, p. 62) Therefore, the practice explores this absence, which remains eerily present.

The processes sought to reveal what is absent, and what has been unspoken, as Gordon says 'that the wavering present is demanding.' (2008, p. 183) Thus, connections between the images, 'murmurs and echoes' (Gordon, 2008), occur as a sense of apprehending and knowing what is making its presence felt in order to be recognised. With this recognition comes a sense of longing to be heard, to be spoken and to redress injustices, as Gordons says this 'will be possible only when a sense of that has been lost or what we never had can be brought back from exile and articulated fully as a form of longing in this world.' (2008, p. xii) The processes led to encounters with these 'sociological ghosts', as they are recognised here as Mothers and Children. The social ghosts are apprehended with a sense of 'longing' of something that needs to be told which has gone unspoken, for something that needs to be done. The spectral or ghostly speaks to the present, and this is nothing without 'the living, since haunting makes its only social meaning in contact with the living time of now.' (Gordon, 2008, p.179) The persistence of these stories calls from the past, as something to be said and done, as the ghosts speak to the present of the spectres of social institutions from which they have come.

*Dwelling's* central theme of Children and Childhood emerged through a process of ghosting elements of a previous production *The Strange Geometry of Time*, these elements were perceived as 'residual' - traces or remains, as if there was something unresolved in this story which couldn't be 'laid to rest'; hauntological elements that persisted. Central to this was the theme of the Lost Child, which was named The Orphan, an archetype of those who have lost - parents, family, and in some cases are lost themselves as they possess little sense of belonging in a most fundamental sense to family structures. At the time of preparing the research for *Dwelling* I came across the story of the lost children of Taum in Ireland. These were the children of unmarried women in Taum who had to give up their children soon after their birth, some of these children had died very young and were not accounted for, and others were never seen again as they were sold to adoptive parents in the US. These mothers had lost their children to other parents or to death, and the children had lost their mothers. This historical story presented its 'sociological ghosts', those children from Taum and all the other children who had been orphaned before them under different circumstances.

*Dwelling* is constructed around five films, each one created through a site-sensitive methodology at Poltimore House, Devon, UK, each of these tells a story of a room in the house, this was not a documentary of Poltimore's history but a combination of responding to the site and of themes that emerged from the previous project. This was reimagined in this site through the lens of the eerie, as this approach sought to construct a world that draws together history and imagination in relation to sites, with the intention to discover 'social ghosts' and to recognise their world. *Dwelling* tells a story of what dwell in abandoned sites, where the fictional and imagined meets with an unspoken past, with each film bearing witness to the social ghosts. In the final performance of *Dwelling*, each story coalesces around the story of the Child or Mother, the Fathers are there but they are 'absent, gone'. Here some of the final text conveys this sense of absence at the core of the performance:

*A story begins, a story. Ends.*

*Some say she locked her tears in a drawer. Kept them in there for years...*

*How many times a mother has cried, and tried to keep her grief locked inside?  
How many times?  
Everyone wants to know.  
She did actually, and she never spoke about it for years.  
Promises she held, promises he never meant to keep. She must have left in the middle of the  
night. They never spoke about it for years.  
Five little fingers and five little toes, where they went nobody knows, all those toes!*

**and**

*There were others. Mothers. Others. Children. Mother. Father gone. There was the sound  
of boots, on stone, on flesh, on bone. Gone. Where? A story begins and a story ends,  
sometimes there's a happy ending and sometimes, they get the living daylight's beat out of  
them. Sometimes there's no end to it. You stood outside and waited. They stood. Waiting.  
Until the truth began to dawn. Never coming back. That was childhood for you.  
Troublesome.*

This narrative of loss and mourning is framed through the performer's roles of 'Hired Mourners', a premise for the Mourners to invoke ghosts in a performative act of eulogising their stories as a memorial. Thus, these lives are given a voice, they are stories of longing and loss, of love, of life, of children, of family, an exploration lives that have gone unrecognised. *Dwelling* was performed at The Anglican Chapel, Bristol, UK. The performance opens with an 'invocation', which draws ghosts out of the shadows of the Chapel's walls, therefore, this memorial site becomes a site of haunting. *Dwelling* gives voice to the dead as it memorialises, and in doing so is an invitation for the dead to speak to and through the living. The performers shape-shift between their role as 'Mourner' and the ghosts from the house, as their live score takes the form of imagistic movement and dance juxtaposed with the vocal score to tell the story of the ghost/s and bring them into the here and now of the Chapel. *Dwelling* explores a coalescence of stories, through vocal-looping text is sampled, looped and amplified, and this text provides the structure as it makes connections between the live imagery and the filmed imagery. Each scene begins with the looped text as an invocation to the ghost(s), as the scene unfolds this is then followed by a film that corresponds to the story being told projected onto the walls of the Chapel as if it emerges from somewhere else and appears through the walls. The blending of live performance and film sought to collapse time, so the sense of the present through live action and film a sense of the binaries of past/present are 'queered.' (Shildrick 2020)

*Dwelling* has aimed to develop new methods of storytelling and dance0theatre practice informed directly through the interaction of performers with the fabric and memories of these site-sensitive locations. The study of this interaction applies equally to the level of audience engagement and emotional response evoked by *Dwelling's* themes of loss and grief. *Dwelling* explores what remains within such premises when emptied of the living and the consequences of not listening to the cacophony of untold stories abounding. Poltimore provided not just a poignant setting in which to shoot the film footage employed in the performance but promoted the realisation that the context in which the piece is made/presented offers the invitation to contemplate the possibility of fluidity between the realms of the living and the dead more compelling.

Works cited

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