

Duncan Robertson

Forgotten & Erased Energy Narratives: A Trans-Disciplinary Conference 'Helen Electricity travels to Jyväskylä and worries about visibility.mp3'

I'm submitting an improvised audio essay featuring the character Helen Electricity.

The character of Helen is one that popped up early on in the Live Art and Performance Studies (LAPS) programme at Uniarts Helsinki. Helen emerged as a response to a prompt from Tero Nauha, the professor on the LAPS programme. The prompt included Pauline Oliveros and deep listening exercises that I chose to incorporate into a short 'meeting' with Helen. I am adding this also here to provide some extra context, that audio is entitled Helens Introduction.

Helen Electricity, to give her her full title, is Finnish electricity with a voice. Rather confusingly she has quite a posh English accent. The character came into my head when I first moved to Finland. I kept seeing stickers on the doors of shops and other businesses emblazoned with 'HELEN'. Through a conversation with a Finnish person I discovered that 'Helen' is the name of an electricity production company in Finland. I thought it was a useful coincidence that Helen was a name I was familiar with from the UK and chose it to help embody the 'character' of electricity.

During a seminar on approaches to Dramaturgy, specifically regarding the topic of 'space' in dramaturgy, I encountered Ramón Griffero and his book 'The Dramaturgy of Space' as a reference. While reading 'The Dramaturgy of Space', what stuck out most to me was the discussion around the centering of white, European narratives in relation to his projects and dramaturgical thinking. Ramón Griffero includes a memorable anecdote; after a reading of his work '*Cinema-Utopia*', realised in 1985, was discussed by a German critic. In a discussion about Griffero's reading, the critic underlined '*Cinema-Utopia*' as having a strong structural similarity to a play of a German playwright. Griffero pointed out to the critic that the correct way it worked is

that the German playwright's work has a structural similarity to Griffero's work, as the German playwrights work had been realised 7 years later than his own.

This anecdote stood out to me and I link to my exploration of 'performance' of a male body, through characters who are often isolated and stuck in particularly banal situations. One example is a character stuck forever in an auditorium, waiting to announce his promotion to CEO of an unnamed company. I relate this to the anecdote as I was exploring a particular kind of personal idea or story this character had of themselves. This story enabled them to believe that they are where they are now, only thanks to themselves, rather than to innumerable benefits from throughout their lives.

I believe a similar form of thinking was enacted by the German critic in Griffero's anecdote. Griffero, I think, leads us to believe the same; that the German critic was so sure of the story that 'European thinking leads the way and the rest of the world follows' that he happily produced that story and, in doing so, enabled that way of thinking to carry on.

I wanted to explore the form of improvisation as it felt like an engaging way to satirise or critique myself and also my relationship to power and whiteness. I also wanted it to be quite fun as I think the idea of having a difficult conversation with someone while travelling on a bus is a good way of imagining difficult conversations. To be clear, I am not Helen Electricity, I'm using the character as a way to explore a generalised view of implication within discussions of power and whiteness. I believe there is a slipperiness of responsibility of power and how 'we' benefit from it as white people, while having the ability to remain invisible. That's what the character allows me to explore, I think. Power and invisibility.

In terms of the texts in reference, primarily what was going through my mind was Richard Dyer's introductory text from their book 'White', which I haven't even properly ingested. For me, it was a really powerful text and I found the exploration of whiteness through film studies to be really productive. The concept of whiteness explored in that text in relation to how we've been discussing Jacques Derrida and his concept of 'iterability' is something very interesting to me.

Iterability, as I understand it, is the possibility for something to be 'readable' without having a 'signature', in other words being 'invisible' but still acting within the world. The position of 'whiteness' I would like to posit as the invisible signature we all have that enables particular forms of power within society whilst also allowing that power never to be assigned to a particular force, due to its invisibility.

My proposal would be an expansion of this submitted audio file to the 4000 word count as an improvised audio intervention. I would also feature sound recordings taken from the conference centre to include as dramaturgical instigators of action (heating, plumbing and electrical noise and interference). The proposal would be for the intervention to happen without my physical presence being on stage, merely my voice coming through the speakers.