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The Doors of Perception: An enquiry into the spirit of place

This paper is a personal account of an artistic practice that draws together the fields of folklore, mythology, storytelling and sustainability. It explores different ways of perceiving the world, challenging the mechanistic model that has dominated Western society since the Enlightenment. In its place a more holistic vision of the world is proffered, one that highlights its animating presence, the genius loci or spirit of place. The paper will argue that such a mindset must be considered if we are to tackle the current ecological crisis.

The question ‘what constitutes a creative sustainable practice?’ lies at the heart of my work. Drawing on the principle that the health of the biosphere, on which all life depends, is the bottom line in terms of sustainability (Chick and Micklethwaite 2011: 81; Kagan 2011: 10), three main areas have been investigated: the making process (materials used, energy impact, etc.), the lifestyle of the artist (self-sustainability), and the concepts informing the work. The focus for this paper is on the latter subject, presenting an overview of the ideas informing the practice so far, as well as plans for future development.

The opening words of the paper’s title, ‘The Doors of Perception’, are taken from a poem composed by the visionary artist and poet William Blake between 1790 and 1793: ‘If the doors of perception were cleansed then everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern’ (Blake 1975: xxii).

For many, these words have a particular resonance with our own troubled times, highlighting humanity’s urgent need to change its perception of the world if it is to overcome the global ecological crisis (climate change, mass extinction of species, decrease in habitats and resources, population increase, etc.). For example, in his book *The Nature of Business: Redesign for Resilience*, management consultant Giles Hutchins states that our current situation is as much ‘a crisis of spirit as it is a crisis of resources’. As a result, he calls for the necessity ‘to perceive the

Earth as an animate, living system in which humans play a constructive, not destructive part’ (Hutchins 2013: xii). In a similar vein, the scientist Stephan Harding states that ‘the crisis is at root one of perception; we no longer see the cosmos as alive, nor do we any longer recognise that we are inseparable from the whole of nature, and from our Earth as a living being’ (Harding 2009: 34).

This holistic vision of the world is described by the research physicist Fritjof Capra as a ‘shift to a new paradigm of deep ecology’, which views the world as ‘a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent’ (Capra 1995: 20–23). According to Capra, this shift is already occurring amongst researchers at the leading edge of science (see quantum mechanics, general systems thinking, chaos theory, etc.), numerous social movements and various alternative networks (Capra 1995: 20–3). This emerging approach to reality, as put forward by Capra et al., is consistent with the ‘perennial philosophy’ of such spiritual traditions as Chinese Taoism, Western esotericism and the belief systems of many indigenous cultures (Capra 1995: 21).

The ‘deep ecology’ perspective, however, contrasts dramatically with the dominant paradigm of the past three hundred years, the Cartesian–Baconian scientific model, which regards ‘the Earth, and her more-than-human inhabitants, as no more than a dead machine to be exploited as we wish for our own benefit, without let or hindrance’ (Harding 2009: 25). Indeed, the philosopher Descartes urged his students to ‘ignore the screams of vivisectioned animals’, saying that they were ‘little more than the creakings and gratings of a complicated machine’ (Harding 2009: 33). According to the scientist Rupert Sheldrake, the belief that ‘nature is mechanical or machine like’ still dominates scientific thought to this day, forming part of the ‘default world view, which is held by almost all educated people all over the world’, despite not standing up to proper scientific enquiry (Sheldrake 2012).

At the other end of the spectrum, cultural ecologist and philosopher David Abram writes about the Socratic roots of the Cartesian mindset. By this he means the advent of formal writing systems (especially the Phonetic alphabet), which Abram believes shifted our instinctively animistic-orientated perception away from the natural world. In its place are printed letters, now commanding the attention that rivers, rocks and trees once did for our more indigenous ancestors (Abram 1997: 130–1).

Some environmental commentators, such as the deep ecologist Paul Shepard and the evolutionary biologist Dustin Penn, claim that humanity's abuse of the environment goes back even further – to the prehistoric period. Penn states that our ancient ancestors were no more sustainable than we are now; they were just fewer in number, and possessed less technology. He believes that the damage started during the Pleistocene era (between about 2,588,000 to 11,700 years ago), whilst Shepard marks the Neolithic, around five to ten thousand years ago, as a time of 'change to a more hostile stance toward nature', when for many people farming supplanted the hunter-gatherer lifestyle (Penn 2003; Shepard 1995: 24).

Returning to the 'deep ecology' perspective, my practice initially focused on using folklore, mythology and storytelling to help people develop a deeper emotional relationship to, and appreciation of, the environment via their cultural heritage. The storyteller Anthony Nanson speaks of the/his art(s) as a conveyor of timeless truths that 'can help us to orientate ourselves in time and space: to understand the geography we inhabit and the history that brought us where we are' (Nanson 2011: 95). Furthermore, he says that 'if a story or a painting causes us to perceive members of another species – wolves, say, or beech trees – as inspirited beings, then we may feel less inclined to let them be destroyed' (Nanson 2011: 96).

In his essay 'Storytelling and Wonder', Abram writes along similar lines, stating that:

When we begin to tell stories, our imagination begins to flow out through our eyes and our ears to inhabit the breathing earth once again. Suddenly, the trees along the street are looking at us, and the clouds crouch low over the city as though they are trying to hatch something wondrous. We find ourselves back inside the same world that the squirrels and the spiders inhabit, along with the deer stealthily

munching the last plants in our garden, and the wild geese honking overhead as they flap south for the winter. Linear time falls away, and we find ourselves held, once again, in the vast cycles of the cosmos – the round dance of the seasons, the sun climbing out of the ground each morning and slipping down into the earth every evening, the opening and closing of the lunar eye whose full gaze attracts the tidal waters within and all around us. (Abram 2007)

Abram concludes that 'we cannot *restore* the land without *restorying* the land' (Abram 2007).

Moreover, a well-chosen story can promote the values of sustainability without ever mentioning the word. For example, the story of Old Crockern, the guardian spirit of Dartmoor, provided the inspiration to run a series of children's workshops, linking ecologically sustainable art practices with folklore and storytelling. In the story, Old Crockern appears to a moorman in his dream, telling him to pass on a warning to a Lancashire businessman who planned to build on a large tract of moorland. The spirit threatens to destroy this man if he touches as much as a single blade of grass on Dartmoor. The warning was justified, the businessman going bankrupt soon after (Devon Folk Life Register 1978: 28; Whitlock 1977: 64).

Integral to my practice's emphasis on folklore, mythology and storytelling as tools of connectivity is the 'locale'. Taking the traditional Irish storyteller's or *seanchaí's* idea of becoming, as mythologist and wilderness teacher Martin Shaw puts it, 'thoroughly drenched in a place' by taking on the role of 'cultural custodians of a five-mile radius' (Hopkins 2012), the practice focuses on the folklore, history and ecology of my neighbourhood, utilising locally sourced, eco-friendly, salvaged, and re-used materials wherever possible in the making process.

This emphasis on the 'locale' began whilst living in south-east London. My creative practice centred largely on the folklore and mythology of Blackheath and Greenwich, both located within the *seanchaí's* favoured 'five-mile radius'. By becoming immersed in the local lore and legends I experienced a deep sense of belonging, moving from a state of disconnection to one of rootedness, as if I had got beneath the skin of the city. This experience is reminiscent of what the writer Arthur Machen saw beneath the city's veil. In his book *The London Adventure, or the Art of Wandering*, Machen describes 'the eternal beauty hidden beneath the crust of common and commonplace things; hidden and yet burning and

glowing continually if you care to look with purged eyes' (Coverley 2006: 48). On moving to the edge of Dartmoor, that feeling of connection and rootedness to the land deepened as the interest in local folklore increased. This is reflected in my practice through oral storytelling and a series of paintings that draw heavily upon the folktales of Dartmoor.

'Terrapsychology', the study of the presence or 'soul' of place, has influenced the most recent folklore-inspired work. The term comes from *terra* (Earth, ground), *psyche* (soul, mind) and *-logy* (the study of) and was developed by the ecopsychologist Craig Chalquist. According to Chalquist, local folklore can reflect recurring themes shared by people and places alike. For example, Chalquist cites the Mexican legend of La Llorona, the ghostly Weeping Woman, who has been known to cry out in places undergoing overdevelopment:

Folklore is at least in part the dream of place and can be listened into as such. Ignored, it becomes dangerously, possessively re-enacted, as when psychotic mothers married to mythic Jasons or living in overdeveloped areas drown their children and cry out like La Llorona without ever knowing they have repeated a tragic regional tale. (Chalquist 2007: 58)

Chalquist believes that 'places behave as though they possess an imaginal interactivity or "presence" that reflects what was done to them and upon them, and they communicate this to their inhabitants and investigators through dreams, trauma, folklore, and replays of unhealed past events' (Chalquist 2007: 53). Thus, the terrapsychological approach not only takes note of such aspects as the locale's history and ecology, but also any similarities between the motifs of one's personal biography and others living in the area, as well as any moods or dreams linked to different spots in the environment (Chalquist 2007: 53).

Chalquist poses the following question: 'does the story of what traumatized the land keep repeating until finally heard and healed?' (Chalquist 2007: 63). There is no definitive answer to this, but the question is now being carefully considered, along with other aspects of the terrapsychology model, in relation to any creative response that I make to the folklore and myth that haunt specific locales.

Like the writer John Hanson Mitchell in his book *Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile*, my most recent work also focuses on

an area within a one-square-mile radius from home (Mitchell 1997). The latest offering, an installation sharing the same title as this paper, returns to the latter's initial exploration of the dichotomy between the mechanistic worldview and the deep ecology perspective. Virtually all of the materials used in its construction were handmade, reused or salvaged and sourced within the one square mile perimeter. Even the sound recording of bats in flight was made locally. Three species of bat, the pipistrelle, the greater horseshoe and the lesser horseshoe bat, were recorded just beyond my garden, catching insects over the Harbourne River.

Behind the first door of the installation hangs a veil of mesh, entwined with pieces of clockwork, representing Cartesian mechanism. Beyond this are a series of mirrors, two door-windows (depicting painted silhouettes of trees) and the bat recording. Together, these elements symbolise the *anima mundi* (the soul of the world) (Harding 2009: 11), the deep ecologist's network of 'interconnected and interdependent' phenomena and the spirit of place. The mirror is a universal symbol for truth, the soul and the 'mirror of the universe'. In Chinese culture, a square mirror symbolises the earth (Cooper 1979: 106). The trees stand for the cosmos in its entirety and 'the feminine principle, the nourishing, sheltering, protecting, supporting aspect of the Great [Earth] Mother' (Cooper 1979: 176). The bat sounds, usually pitched at a frequency beyond the natural hearing range of adult humans (BCT 2013), meanwhile reveal a hidden world of animate presence, the inaudible made audible.

The political theorist Jane Bennett refers to the possibility, suggested by Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 311–13), of sounds that can 'provide sensory access to the cosmological dimension of things', attachment to life, and the location of enchantment. Bennett sums up her approach in the following quote: 'through sound, through the various refrains we invent, repeat, and catch from nonhumans, we receive news of the cosmic energies to which we humans are always in close, molecular proximity' (Bennett 2001: 166–8). The audio recordings of bats can, I believe, be viewed in this light, as a way of connecting humanity to the non-human world of which it is an integral part.

This paper has attempted to show how, through my creative practice, folklore, mythology and storytelling can help people develop a deeper emotional connection to 'the Earth and her more-than-human inhabitants' (Harding 2009: 25) via their

cultural heritage. Although folklore, mythology and storytelling are still key influences on my practice, future plans involve exploring new modes of perceiving the world on a deeper level, drawing on a multitude of disciplines such as anthropology, chaos theory, Goethian science, integral ecology, new materialism, phenomenology, quantum physics and systems thinking.

Thus, my practice is in essence an attempt to find another language to express humanity's place in the world, one that may help to radically shift our consciousness by destroying the anthropocentric-based sense of separation between us and the rest of the natural world. The environmental activist Christopher Manes believes that the role of the artist is to 'to break down this pyramid ... of domination that looms over our culture, and then start telling other stories' which recapture 'the rich, poetic, wild ways in which we can relate to nature and ourselves'. Manes acknowledges this is 'easier said than done ... it might be impossible – we might crash and burn. But we have a responsibility to try' (Gablik 1995: 100–1). The desire to 'start telling other stories' is central to my practice.

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