



**TRANS-**

Revue de littérature générale et comparée

**16 | 2013**

**Littérature, Paysage et Écologie**

---

## 'Not such an empty space': Cinematic Ecocriticism and the Performative Landscape in Damon Galgut's Fiction

Mark Deggan

---



### Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/trans/835>

DOI : 10.4000/trans.835

ISSN : 1778-3887

### Éditeur

Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle

### Référence électronique

Mark Deggan, « 'Not such an empty space': Cinematic Ecocriticism and the Performative Landscape in Damon Galgut's Fiction », *TRANS-* [En ligne], 16 | 2013, mis en ligne le 07 août 2013, consulté le 27 novembre 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/trans/835> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/trans.835>

---

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 27 novembre 2024.

Le texte et les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés), sont « Tous droits réservés », sauf mention contraire.

---

# 'Not such an empty space': Cinematic Ecocriticism and the Performative Landscape in Damon Galgut's Fiction

Mark Deggan

---

- 1 This paper mounts a comparative ecocritical reading of landscape representations in fiction and film. Working from Gernot Böhme's theorization of the ecological and aesthetic aspects of atmospheres, I argue that the ambient effects created in film and literature are not backgrounds to thought or action, nor even the affective excess of Barthean "reality effects", but symbiotic representations of the lived world. To this extent, the theory of atmospheres presents a comprehensive means of discussing the narrative, thematic, and affective effects underwriting psychosomatic renderings of fictional settings, and so provides a template for considering the complex relations between humans and places. Attention is also focused upon the degree to which the interactive aspects of ecological representation produce what the cultural theorist, Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), labels 'performative space', the ambient sensory arena in and through which theatrical actions are presented and sustained, including the scenic, luminary, or auditory alterations that form part of the spectacle.
- 2 Through investigating Damon Galgut's South African fiction alongside Marion Hänsel's film version of *The Quarry* (2000), a further set of notifications will be made concerning the performative dynamics of landscape representations. As raised here, the term "performative" strives to capture the thematic contents and aesthetic possibilities such representations produce, as well as what landscapes do or *perform* within works of art. To use an analogy, a theatrical actor performs roles within particular scenarios, yet that process of human presencing simultaneously gives rise to a range of thematically rich potential meanings, including their symbolic, analogous, or affective correlatives. Moreover, just as metaphorical content can be communicated through the landscapes found in fiction, a deeper stratum of ecological consciousness can be discovered by

attending to the ambient conditions by and through which human connections to particular environments are depicted. As implied by the etymological roots of the word, *ambience*, I go on to argue that the moods produced through the atmospherics of landscape are no less open-ended than those produced via an actor's performance: they do not provide the backdrop to the scene so much as "go around" (Latin: *ambire*) a series of 'unstable, fluid, ever changing' environments (Fischer-Lichte 180. Cf. Elkins 2008: 11ff.).

- 3 The comparative basis of the paper thus has two features, one pertaining to geographically situated readings of Galgut's landscapes in relation to their ambient poetics of mood and space, the other to the shared aspects of literary and cinematic atmospherics as substantiated in Hänsel's films. The cinematic material supplements the fictional material not only by indicating where the ambient fallouts of literary environments reappear across disparate media, but where authors engage ecological sensibilities through sound and image. The notion of the "cinematic" is therefore as central to the paper as the landscape's performative aspects. In an obvious sense, cinematic pertains to the moving images of film art, but I also use it to denote the cinematographic process by which those movements and images induce and communicate aesthetic contents – the poetics of film which, like the dynamics of literary texts, "produce" and so perform (e.g. *give form to*) additional meanings and correspondences. These are not the only possible correlatives. With regard to ecocritical approaches, having an interdisciplinary frame applicable to the ambient effects utilized by both literary authors and film auteurs allows us to measure the sensory qualities of fiction alongside the more tangibly audiovisual dynamics of our digital age. More directly, while aesthetic theory has long considered nature itself as an aesthetic or potentially aesthetic realm (Hepburn 1966, 2010; Carlson 2000, 2004; James 2009), work needs to be done to address the means by which ecological awareness impacts the way in which artists communicate subliminal insights drawn from the landscape.
- 4 *Geopoetic* or *geocritical* scholars have been made in roads here. Drawn respectively from the poetic and explanatory musings of Kenneth White, and the primarily continental heritage utilized by Bernard Westphal and his translator and sometime colleague, Robert Tally, these investigative frames have looked into interactions between humans and places, as well as the cultural forms such interactions take. To date, however, neither approach has raised the performativity of ambience as a means of capturing the atmospheric aspects linking 'places that readers and writers experience' and 'the experience of space and place within ourselves' (Tally 8). This is all the more surprising given Westphal's alertness to the significance potential of cinematic space. In a study 'examining several forms of mimetic art in a single study of spatial representation', he claims that '[c]inematic representations of a given space might lie at the heart of a geocritical approach' (2011 [2007]: 120).<sup>1</sup> Westphal's declaration turns partly upon 'polysensoriality', the awareness that environments are constructed as largely synaesthetic totalities. This awareness would appear to point us towards the affective and sensorially charged aesthetic realm of *atmosphere*, only Westphal goes on to cite Jacques Fontanille's discourse-based model of 'figurative syntax', the 'synaesthetic (or simultaneous perceptions)' by which we organize the spaces of the world (133).<sup>2</sup> While this nexus of mind, body, and world is essential to the aesthetics of ambience, Westphal immediately reminds us that landscape art could not exist without 'the interface of the *paysage intérieur* and a world open to the senses' (134; cf. Porteous 1990). A critical

frame is therefore required in order to interpret such interfaces as communicative structures.

- 5 Despite the centrality of atmosphere in film, there exists no typology of cinematic ambience, let alone an ecology of film's ability to embody affects. One of film's more prolific voices, David Bordwell, collects the ambient effects of the photographic image under the umbrella term of "style", 'the tangible texture of the film, the perceptual surface we encounter as we watch and listen' (32). More broadly, this impressionistic surface is 'our point of departure in moving to plot, theme, feeling – everything else that matters to us' (*ibid.*), a claim indicating how the atmospherics of cultural representations might be aligned with the performatively active 'tangible texture' or 'surface' around which a cinematic *ecology* might be construed. Indeed, by interrogating the sensory fallouts of the landscapes of fiction and film as environments, we approximate Böhme's equally expansive claims: 'The space of moods is atmospheric space, that is, a certain mental or emotive tone permeating a particular environment, and it is also the atmosphere spreading spatially around me, in which I participate through my mood' (2002 : 5). To this extent, Bordwell's cinematic 'tangible texture' is both aesthetically conceived and *polysensorial*: it is the many-sided *feel* of the places represented in films and art, along with what that collusion of sense, affect, and aesthetics conveys.
- 6 How do these observations apply to Galgut's and Hänsel's landscape practices, in which affective and narrative tension is created through his characters' acts of being in place? Here, a point of ethics needs to be made concerning the contexts within which landscape representations are raised. Despite its achievement of full democracy, place-based narratives can hardly avoid being drawn into the larger frame of South Africa's newly postcolonial actuality. While fictional settings involving that country often display resistant or aporetic settings as a means of dramatizing moral contradictions, with this paper I suppress the socio-political thematics of my primary texts in order to concentrate upon the aesthetics of ambience through which such themes are communicated. If comparisons between novelistic and cinematic practices offer a way of grounding an eco-poetic political discourse across texts and films, the ecologies Galgut stages in the first section or "story" of *In a Strange Room* (2010) are suggestive in a more personal vein, as where unspoken human intimacies are engaged as a kind of weather:<sup>3</sup>
- 7 When the storm clears the light comes through and they go out into a world rinsed clean and dripping with colour. These afternoon storms happen almost every day, the heat will build in intensity till it finally breaks, afterwards there is always this feeling of regeneration, in the landscape, but also in themselves (36).
- 8 How might we unravel this sense of the self and a landscape sharing a 'feeling', of this collusion being act-like? With Böhme, for instance 'atmospheres are totalities: atmospheres imbue everything, they tinge the whole of the world or a view, they bathe everything in a certain light, unify a diversity of impressions in a single emotive state' (2008). As that writer has long been aware, the atmospheric aspects of environmental representation are aesthetically compelling because they are present regardless of 'whether what is represented is merely a product of thought or is derived from reality'. The resulting 'representational spaces' are interactive since atmospheric states assume the 'character of virtual spaces at the moment when they become entwined with the space of bodily presence' (2002 : 1), that is to say, at the moment atmospheres bring about the unity of subjects and environments.

- 9 We need one more term before we can call this sort of ecological presencing “performative” in the dynamic sense used by Fischer-Lichte. Derived from the Greek for “scene painting”, *scenography* names the art of creating and altering the shape and feel of theatrical performance space, and so of harnessing poetic or ‘virtual’ potentials deriving from human interactions with landscapes. As Fischer-Lichte explains, ‘[w]hile the architectural-geometrical space in which a performance takes place is more or less stable, the performative space changes with each movement of an actor, an animal, an object, the light, with each change of the light, with each sound ringing out’ (2008: 180). Alterations in a particular surroundings are no more neutral for spectators than readers, since those ‘who watch [the performers] and perceive the performative spaces they create, will conjure imagined spaces’ (*ibid.* Cf. Bleeker 76ff.). To take a theatrical example, a revolving stage has this productive reciprocity, shunting actors into a revised relationship with their surroundings whilst introducing audiences to a new scenic “reality”. Galgut’s fictions likewise tend to focus upon on his characters’ sensitivity (or lack of sensitivity) to their surroundings, and so move between ecocritically-nuanced stagings of human interactions with environments and the aesthetic and ethical fallouts such stagings enable. The performative aspect of Galgut’s textual scenography not only suggests a means of investigating and communicating the artistic effects produced between fictional centres of consciousness and the places they move through, but the affective and thematic potential thereby produced.
- 10 While this potential would appear to reflect the geopoetic process marked out by Kenneth White in terms of a mental ‘corresponding’ with natural phenomena, it is important to remember that the search for some deeper symbiosis between mind and world can have less to do with acts of poesis bridging humans and environments than the ecological fullness of consciousness.<sup>4</sup>The performativity of a landscape does not imply tapping into a vein of *ecological* authenticity as one might, for instance, unthinkingly follow the contours of a hill whilst shivering with cold (and absently leaning this way and that to avoid the brambles), but rather exists as the modality of that landscape itself – the moods and embodied rhythms by which White’s ‘music of the landscape’ communicates itself as an interactive mode (1989: 230)<sup>5</sup>. Elsewhere, White cites Heraclitus’s acknowledgement that ‘man is separated from what is closest to him’, but the idea of separation is not particularly helpful.<sup>6</sup>The theory of atmospheres works from the opposite idea, asking not what we notice when we are separated or connected to that which is ‘closest’ to us, but how the aesthetic treatment of ambience operates despite our more limited understandings. White’s idea of the landscape as ‘music’ might follow from a poetic reading of responses to a given surroundings, but as David Mazel points out, while embarking upon such readings we must remain attentive to the ‘myth of the environment’ as a fixed site. For Mazel, the natural scene should not be erroneously treated as though it ‘were an ontologically stable, foundational entity we have a myth *about*’, but a multivalent “‘reality’ deriv[ing] from the ways we write, speak, and think about it’ (2000 : xii). Awareness of the ambient effects produced by art likewise allows us to consider that which is closest to us without recourse to tropes of “reality”, separation, or nature’s “holistic” inclusiveness, and so adds phenomenal weight to the ‘feeling of regeneration’ noted by Galgut.
- 11 Indeed, the performative spatial model I apply to Galgut’s fictions reveals how *The Quarry* and the first two novella-length sections of *In a Strange Room* employ a more nuanced literary aesthetics of embodied interaction than might be mounted through

reference to, among other possibilities, Timothy Morton's ecological "mesh" or the more subjective focus of Jakob von Uexküll's *Umwelt* (the self-centred interactive universe in which an organism behaves as a subject). By approaching Galgut's texts via both the aesthetics of atmosphere and Erika Fischer-Lichte's theorizations of theatrical performativity, Galgut's ambient effects may be productively read as a scenographic process extending beyond the individual. It is worth recalling, too, that each of the literary or cinematic works addressed here contains numerous references to subjects and objects becoming lost in space. These effaced spaces may be either natural or pastoral, but while they might remain tied to the aporias of apartheid South Africa as scenes of moral absence or more pointed meaninglessness, they continue to operate as atmospheric registers of a now theatricalized interiority. Investigating the poetic means by which landscape representations reveal personal, thematic, or ethical contents allows us to see novelistic or cinematic settings both as vessels of significance in their own right, and the symbiotic, and so *performative* excess of ecological reflection. Before incorporating the kinetic aspects of the cinematic material as a means of observing how authors engage ecological sensibilities through sound and image, we must first raise the 'stage' motif in Galgut's fiction via atmospheric and performance theory.

## Galgut's Ambient Practice

- 12 Having acted, directed, and written for the stage, Galgut's fiction reveals a theatrical sensibility alert not only to the involvements of fictional characters with their surroundings, but the affective and thematic repercussions of such settings. His often physically challenging environments are both topographically accurate renderings of places, and aesthetic structures evincing a range of human investments. Moreover, the response of his characters to the powerful presence of the southern African landscape points beyond the aesthetic realm towards ecological awarenesses built upon the embodied aspects of human consciousness. It is the theatrical aspect of these factors that underwrites the juncture of place and consciousness. In *The Quarry* we find 'a patch of road perhaps ten metres wide' reinscribed as an 'arena as small and charged as the stage of a theatre'. The resulting 'vision brief but potent' undergone by Galgut's protagonist is not only rendered by the brush of a 'painter who was visionary and occasionally brilliant' (*ibid.*), but focalized as an aesthetic construct seen through stalks of grass standing 'like a curtain' (*ibid.*). With these lines the landscape is transformed from an 'empty space' to a more theatrically active site of 'vision'. This transition is rehearsed in Galgut's treatment of his wandering fugitive, for instance where the latter is found traversing a solitude upon which 'the sky pressed vacantly down', his inner absence weighted by that of the world like an actor squeezed beneath a vast backdrop (17). The nowhere space at which Galgut's troubled protagonist stares is not only wrapped up in the desperation and moral struggles against which he contends, but provides the atmosphere in which he moves, and in which his consciousness operates.
- 13 To this degree, the theatrical features of *The Quarry* suggest affinities with Cézanne's aside to Joachim Gasquet that 'the landscape thinks itself in me [...] and I am its consciousness' (in Merleau-Ponty 1964 : 17), yet how does this latter notion play out where the apparently atemporal moral space occupied by the fugitive is the topographically barren world he looks out at in real time? The question reflects an

important trope in South African fiction. A like-minded acknowledgement of the landscape is made in Wilma Stockenström's *Die kremetartekspedisie*, translated by J. M. Coetzee under the title, *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*. Stockenström's escaped protagonist is reduced to living in isolation in the African bush. Her existence there indicates both the symbiosis of the human with a surroundings and a restorative ecology within the novella's symbolic apparatus, yet it is an ecology centred upon emptiness in which 'paths leading nowhere radiate from my dwelling' (10). The point, of course, is that even an "empty" topography is never bereft of mental content, but as Kenneth White accedes, can give rise to a rich 'mental topology'.<sup>7</sup> One can go further. For Gernot Böhme's brother and sometime collaborator, the literary anthropologist Hartmut Böhme, '[n]ature reveals itself to the body and lays its trace in language' (see Muller 82).<sup>8</sup> Here the poetics of ecological thought and the putative emptiness of one's surroundings do stop at sense, let alone scenography, but, as we saw off Fontanille, produce a 'figurative syntax'. How might we move from physical experience to what these aesthetic frames perform, from Galgut's sky pressing 'vacantly down' to the fugitive's inability to 'imagine he had ever walked' in such a place (18)?

- 14 Like Stockenström's 'nowhere', figures of formless space offer an initial means of linking embodied consciousness to that of a landscape.<sup>9</sup> Tropes of emptiness are useful to artists as a means of sustaining otherwise inexpressible transfers of significance between minds and sensory phenomena. For the composer, John Cage, '[t]here is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.'<sup>10</sup> That the empty landscape is filled with 'something' is also Galgut's observation. As with the auditors of Cage's soundscapes, it is the reader's job to sort out how to tease dramatic and thematic tension from the poetically charged phenomena artists provide, and to comprehend such tensions as collecting points for seemingly incommunicable meanings. Galgut's recent work is adept at creating memorable passages out of such insights:

A journey is a gesture inscribed in space, it vanishes even as it's made. You go from one place to another place, and on to somewhere else again, and already behind you there is no trace that you were ever there. [...] The very air closes behind you like water and soon your presence, which felt so weighty and permanent, has completely gone. (2010: 123)

- 15 This passage appears in the second section of *In a Strange Room*, wherein 'a sort of intimacy' develops between Galgut's travelling self and his places: underwriting the common medium of interiority with a landscape, both the subject and his environment 'put out tendrils and grow into each other' (122). Likewise, 'the little town and the landscape around it are also connected to him, there is no interruption between him and the world, he isn't separate any more from what he sees' (*ibid.*). Here Galgut's phrasing moves past Jacques Derrida's insight that, in aesthetics, significance derives from the interleaving of frame and ground, the *par-ergon*, or beyond-work implied through the act of delineating specific views (e.g. 1987: 61-4). But Derrida's observation also steers us towards one of the accepted tenets of ecocritical commentary, the discarding of vector-like divisions between centres of consciousness and the embodied "scene" of which they are part. As Timothy Morton states matters, we strive to unmask 'the metaphysical illusion of rigid, narrow boundaries between inside and outside' (2010: 39). Here Morton is not extolling the harmony of oppositions any more than Kenneth White is through geopoetic notions of 'corresponding' with the world. White may write of 'contact between the human mind and the things, the lines, the rhythms



of the earth', but he is less explicit about the concrete manoeuvres by which this collusion (Morton's 'between') is propped up<sup>11</sup>. As with the transient 'gestures' Galgut equates with travel, such figures are best sustained where they do, in fact, 'clos[e] behind you like water', and so add physical substance to the synaesthetic drama of one's emplacement in the world. But this process is not that of an actor on the stage of "nature" or some more personal or national landscape: as Galgut indicates, the staging is the drama, and so the artist's task becomes that of relating the condition of the human through his or her embodied existence at a particular place.

- 16 The notion of an "act of place" is therefore richer than the scenographic model provides. Just as Morton believes that existence is a *mesh* extending 'inside beings as well as among them', such porousness extends to the tensions and contradictions created by 'thinking difference' (*op. cit.*). In *The Quarry*, too, tension results wherever the expiation of the protagonist's wrongdoings simultaneously opens gaps in consciousness *and* the surrounding landscape. Indeed, an abandoned quarry provides the novel's most poetically loaded site of difference, one further revealing the aesthetic possibilities of topographical vacancy:

the darkness in the hole is no different to the darkness above it but you can't see down into the quarry. [...] There might be water in the quarry, or movement, or nothing. There might be no bottom to it (169).

- 17 The interconnectedness of interiority and its landscapes is no less open for Morton. Such connectedness reflects 'a vast sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite centre or edge' (8). Like the closing lines of *The Quarry* in which everything (the 'all') found there is 'clear, static, and visible', the scene's slowly thickening shadows supplement the elided human motivations of Galgut's narrative in a manner similar to the 'radical intimacy' of the mesh (8). Yet for Morton, the 'metaphysical illusion' of divisions between self and nature has its darker manifestations. As he says of Wordsworth's bleaker moments of vision, we 'exit the aesthetic without losing contact with perception' as though to 'contemplat[e] a subaesthetic level of being' (91). Similar to Wordsworth's loners, Galgut's escaping fugitive may be running from justice or nemesis, but he still finds his own version of aporia in the world: 'He saw the mountains recede like a bite-mark on the sky and then a charred plain replaced them. *Outside the train there was nothing*' (127, my emphasis). This foregrounding of perception alongside the 'nothing' of place is ecological not because the terrain is about to fill with movement and reflection, but where the interior conditions of man approximate, at least aesthetically, textually, the quarry's 'absence in the surface of the world' (43).
- 18 Galgut's texts are remarkable, too, for the manner in which their landscapes take on the ethical reflexivity of the human. *In a Strange Room* reminds us how 'strange' it is 'that all this space, unconfined by artificial limits as it spills to the horizon, should throw you back so completely into itself' (31). Even walking engenders a scenographic response where 'all the motion latent in the vast curves of the earth somehow contracted into the dynamics of this movement' (30), or 'the landscape passing on either side is moving now of its own volition'(45). But such processes might also be atmospheric, as where the fatigue of Galgut's two travellers melds into the phenomenal mood of the darkness and even 'the wild cries in the night' of birds 'are like the voice of the ground calling stop now stop' (45).
- 19 Following Gernot Böhme's lead, ecocritical scholars have begun charting the ambient features of artistic works, especially where atmospheric effects are found



'emanating from and created by things, people, or their constellations' (Dalsgaard & Kortbek 2009 : 2). More fully, such usages suggest a conception of psychosomatic spaces governed by moods:

atmospheres are not objective, like certain properties that things have, and yet they are tangible, belonging to that thing insofar as these things articulate the spheres of their presence through their properties [...] Neither are atmospheres something subjective, such as a mental state of mind. And yet, they are of the subject, form a part of it, insofar as they are sensed by people physically present.  
(*op. cit.*)<sup>12</sup>

- 20 Böhme's own views can be more dynamic still, not least where an atmosphere 'radiates into its environment, takes away the surrounding space's homogeneity, fills it with tension and possibilities for motion' (1995 : 33)<sup>13</sup>. The effects of which Böhme writes certainly include psychosomatic fallouts that may or may not extend into consciousness, but it is important to note the mobile aspect of such fallouts within fictional narratives. Akin to Cézanne's aside on the shared consciousness of landscape and the subject, consciousness is not just consciousness of the self, but the *action* of thinking in place. Böhme underwrites a similar dynamics of being where he claims that 'atmospheres are the very forms in which things and environments present themselves' (1995 : 96). Equally, if atmospheres contain 'a diversity of impressions in a single emotive state', they remain 'something like the aesthetic quality of a scene or a view' and so resist the efforts of language to re-present them (2008).
- 21 Fischer-Lichte's performative model of non-linguistic ambience becomes productive here since 'the autopoietic feedback loop, consisting of the mutual interaction between actors and spectators, brings forth the performance' (163). Further, in 'the actor's presence, the ecstasy of things, atmospheres, and the circulation of energy "occur" in the same way as the meanings brought forth as perceptions or the emotions, ideas, or thoughts resulting from them' (162-3). As with the ambient aspects of Galgut's oeuvre, the human actions on stage alter the mood of the spaces in which they occur, just as those same spaces engender responses in the human. For Böhme, too, if one cannot directly capture the originary immediacy Fischer-Lichte locates in theatrical performance, the artist can still create tropes of that connectivity as these are *performed* within the subject – or, as we are about to see, on screen.

## The Literary Case for Cinematic Atmosphere

- 22 Film scholars have been quick to note the potency of landscape evocations. As with Gilles Deleuze's notation of foregrounding 'the perception of perception' in *Cinema I* (98), the American critic, Tom Conley, indicates how in 'staging [...] space where no immediate centre can be discerned, the atmospheric qualities of the sensory world stretch before our eyes' as the object of vision (297). Bordwell also finds drama in the stylistic staging of "perception", describing how the director's work consists in 'judiciously concealing elements and then revealing them at the right moment, then concealing them again, only to reveal something else ... indefinitely' (240). The ellipsis underwrites the poetic potential Bordwell sees achieved through the textural surfaces of film, but it is also indicative of the *indefinite* blending of ambient phenomena, thematics, and interiority thereby enabled. As a means of exploring how the theory of atmospheres extends from literary works towards an ambient ecology of the cinematic landscape, this section cites Marion Hänsel's South African oeuvre while offering a

supplement to Céline Scemama-Heard's assertion that certain film auteurs are characterized by an 'indeterminacy in which there is a blurring of any distinction between objective and subjective dimensions to visual perception' (1988: 83).<sup>14</sup>

- 23 As already observed, Böhme's atmospheric usages are caught up in the indeterminacy of human experience. For him, the atmospheric aspects of environments have 'something irrational' or 'inexpressible' about them: 'to define their character, one must expose oneself to them, one must experience them in terms of one's own emotional state. Without the sentient subject, they are nothing' (2008). These statements also accord with Galgut's fictional practices, as where the fugitive in *The Quarry* moves upon a 'landscape of grass in which nothing moves except what you dream up in it' (8). This vision of places having merely subjective significance corresponds not just with Scemama-Heard's 'blurring' of 'objective and subjective' categories, but the seemingly bottomless quarry at the centre of Galgut's novel, a site which 'might mean everything and perhaps nothing at all' (6). There is a performative aspect to such indeterminacy. Despite the quarry being an 'absence' in the earth's surface (43), or an abyss in which objects become 'slowly lost [...] their edges erased and consumed' (169), the quarry casts its ambient presence across the novel rather like one of Bruno Latour's non-subjective *actants* 'modif[ying] other actors' through its presence (75). Galgut is of course not the only South African writer to have underlined the agentive aspects of literary discourse and its landscapes. This precise nexus is brilliantly dramatized in Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), at the end of which Coetzee's female narrator writes messages in stone upon the veld, and moves amongst them as between banks of meaning. Having the protagonist walk around the sentences she has composed while the cicadas sing and the grass grows through the letters is to reify ecological discourse at the cusp of consciousness. Recalling the *language of sense* from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (line 110), the last sentence of Coetzee's text contemplates 'a space echoing with hymns I could have written but did not'. The task of creating narrative and affective significance out of such 'echoing' spaces is also one of cinema's pressing concerns. Moreover, as with Galgut's and Coetzee's textual evocations, the scenographic gestures we see of film are often constructed around the ambient conditions of particular scenes.
- 24 Hänsel's oeuvre likewise blends ecologically themed studies of consciousness alongside works in which environmental challenges foreground human ties to a seascape or landscape (respectively, *Noir Océan* 2010, or *Si le vent soulève des sables* 2005). *Dust* (1985) and *The Quarry* might be studies of individual isolation played out against the physical surroundings of a South African setting, but they are also ruminations on the exteriorization of interior processes.<sup>15</sup> At one stage of *Dust*, Hänsel's film version of *In the Heart of the Country*, the all but abandoned white woman anchoring the narrative runs alone into darkening hills in her gleaming white slip, highlighting both the blanched flame of her bootless passions and the artifice of her presence in that bony setting. The shot is a stark reminder that landscapes are already themselves invested in ideological issues beyond the concrete interactions human actors bring to them, just as elsewhere in the film the daylight outside the farmhouse is as blanched as the interior rooms are sumptuously and psychosomatically dark. Here the shadings appear to reveal racial analogues, yet despite the ability of cinematography to reveal thematic or emotional contents (photography means "light/writing"), the atmospheric heart of this

country is not always legible, but as Bordwell generically argues, tends to 'reveal something else'.<sup>16</sup>

- 25 Of Hänsel's two South African films, *The Quarry* is more minimalistic in its topographical interventions, often relying upon changes of focus to underline narrative alterations. The opening shot instructs its viewers how the film is to be understood, transitioning from a soft focus close-up of waving grain to a slow pull shot in which the figure of the escaped fugitive appears, moving nearer, at the top of the frame. Just as the close-up lures the viewer into complicity with the surrounding summer fields, a jump fade from the distant human figure to full bodily presence rehearses the shifts in perspective by which Hänsel collapses the temporal dynamics of the fugitive's escape (0:01:42). Following the man's lurching off the road to hide from a passing car – the moment of the theatrical 'arena' discussed in the previous section – we see the exhausted figure lying back, breathing hard in the gently waving grasses, his panting substantiated through the dry stems washing to and fro around him (3:21-41). Against moments like this in which natural phenomena are insinuated into human engagements, both novel and film work to dramatize complex processes of perspective-making. Near the end of the film we learn that the parallel cross-country flight of the coloured man, Valentine, is henceforth to be the audience's focal and emotional centre. This transfer is signaled to the audience by positioning the camera behind Valentine as he opens a train boxcar and looks out at an estuary fringed by mountains (1:35:04-18). Through this visual play, the framing of the landscape revealed beyond comes to replicate the mobile surface of a letterboxed screen. By silhouetting Valentine, so to speak, within the world of the scene encompassed by the door and the picture plane of the screen, the film draws attention to that character's new centrality for the viewer along with the theatricalized processes underpinning the ecology of subject and landscape.
- 26 This is not the only scene in which the staging of perspective achieves narrative force within a landscape. Earlier, the fugitive had climbed a rocky outcrop in order to track the progress of a following policeman (1:32:18-22). Seen from behind, and panning to the right to foreground the fugitive's locked focus – a moment enhanced through a reverse shot of his gaze – the subjective force of the landscape created by the camera links the distances stretching away to the movement attracting the fugitive's glance. Elsewhere in the film, the viewer is presented with images of the fugitive and the policeman against disappearing rail lines or telegraph poles (e.g. 0:2:48-3:02), or through shots linking the men in the same near and middle distance (1:34:42-53). At such moments, tension is created between proximity and distance, or around the affective burden of flight. As noted above, Galgut effects a similar linkage of movement, affect, and space in *The Quarry*, writing of human figures and their environment as a scenographic negotiation:
- They drew slowly away from each other on the pale white road, casting backward glances at each other, like two tiny weights on a surface connected to each other by intricate pulleys and dependent on one another for their continuing motion. Then the black man disappeared around a bend. The road went on, unwinding. (3)<sup>17</sup>
- 27 Hänsel's handling of surfaces and motions is replicated in literary form of the second part of Galgut's *In a Strange Room*. In this story, the drama of being in place in a landscape ('his life overflows outdoors' 122) ceases to communicate through any unmediated process of becoming, and 'walking into the world' no longer holds grace for the narrator – 'through the dark lens on his eyes everything he knows looks strange

and unfamiliar' (123). In the book's first part, 'undulations and gaps' in the topography had rather 'chart[ed] moods in striations of colour', just as objects on a hot day were seen to 'wax and wane in the fuming air' (30). Later, the relationship between the two travellers ceases to carry mystery, and the sensory environment of which they had been part no longer performs the subconscious aspects of friendship. Like the 'noise of water' that 'underscores the scene' (53), ambient effects have become the background to action, hence the poetics of atmosphere no longer centre the drama, but merely 'underscor[e]' the human 'scene' occupying its surface. Here, the collusion of the world with the human has all at once devolved into a stage for human performance, and the ecological realm failed to enable scenographic agency. As evidenced by Hänsel's version of *The Quarry*, and substantiated in Galgut's text, travelling on foot might give rise to a 'rhythm that takes you over', and so offer a sense of being 'attuned to the rhythms of the universe' (32), but such rhythms need not be emotionally or ethically positive. In either case, it is by heeding the ambient aspects of both texts and films that we may posit the continuous ecology of self and surroundings, and so to take meaning from atmospherically sustained tropes as they morph across aesthetic forms.

## Conclusion

- 28 Building upon Gernot Böhme's theory of atmospheres, Martin Seel writes of what he calls 'the consciousness of atmospheric appearing', wherein the encounter with ambience links human concerns with the web of their involvements with environments. 'The presence radiating in aesthetic perception [...] is not simply a temporary constellation of things and events but a kind of experiential encounter with this constellation; it is a *relation* of human beings to their life surroundings' (2005: 97). This 'aesthetic perception' is not dissimilar to the ecological involvements traceable in fiction and film. The aesthetic experience of landscape may indeed be "constructed", but such formations are not mere settings or metaphors but processes of engagement that produce or *perform* a new kind of relation between subjects and their ecological immersions. The concluding long take of Hänsel's *The Quarry* (1:45:29 – 1:49:26) calls forth a like performativity. Following the fugitive's death, the petty thief Valentine is shown fleeing along yet another dust road. The light is warm and gentle, the grasses and wheat swaying on either side. Finding and opening a discarded umbrella as though at last able to shelter from nature's endless privations, he passes slowly and confidently out of sight over a rise. This sequence spans 3:57, including credits, during which time the film's new fugitive is absorbed into the golden haze and seemingly contourless uplands leading away from human settlement. As where he had paused to drink and wash naked in a pooling spring (1:33:12-28), the camera marks Valentine's physical absorption into the landscape as amoral occasion, an event supplemented by the camera's recording of the waving surfaces and exonerating hues of his surroundings, that is to say, as by the landscape's ambient agency.
- 29 Atmospheric theory thus offers a way of connecting the raw data of living in a place to the aesthetic practices by which expressions of ecological experience become meaningful, and to the thematic contents artists encode in their works. It is because the term "landscape" is so strongly inflected by the ambient fallouts of human interactions with environments that I have drawn attention to atmospheric sites of poesis as performative arenas. Equally, this theatricalized aspect underlines the

communicative potential of landscapes as these enter consciousness, and by which they take on particular moral tenors within the subject: as Galgut's and Hänsel's oeuvres show, within aesthetic discourse, representations of place are capable of linking words and images to the interior processes of affect and ethical or psychological compulsion. Just as atmospheres provide a means of bridging interiority and its concrete surroundings, the nexus of self and ambient world they produce comprises a way of capturing their common performance as the landscape's unfolding consciousness.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHIE

- Bleeker, Maaïke. *Visuality in the Theatre : The Locus of Looking*, New York : Palgrave, 2008.
- Böhme, Gernot, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics", Trans. David Roberts, *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 113–26.
- . *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995.
- . "The Space of Bodily Presence & Space as a Medium of Representation", *Transforming Spaces: The Topological Turn in Technology Studies*, eds. M. Hård, A. Lösch, D. Verdicchio, Web.
- . "The art of the stage set as a paradigm for an aesthetics of atmospheres" [2008], Web, 8 May, 2012. < [www.cresson.archi.fr/PUBLI/pubCOLLOQUE/AMB8-confGBohme-eng.pdf](http://www.cresson.archi.fr/PUBLI/pubCOLLOQUE/AMB8-confGBohme-eng.pdf) >
- Bateson, Gregory, *A Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, ed. R. E. Donaldson, New York: Harper Collins, 1991.
- John Cage, "Address to Music Teachers National Association", Chicago, winter 1957; brochure "George Avkian: 25 year retrospective concert" (Town Hall, New York, 1958).
- Carlson, Allen, *Aesthetics and The Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*, New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Carlson, Allen and Arnold Berleant, eds, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, Peterborough ON: Broadview Press, 2004.
- Coetzee, J. M., *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.
- . *In the Heart of the Country*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1977.
- Conley, Tom, "Landscape and Perception: on Anthony Mann", in *Lefebvre* 2006: 291-314.
- Elkins, James, "Elusive Landscapes and Shifting Grounds." *Landscape Theory*. Eds. Rachel Ziady DeLue, and James Elkins. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. Trans. S. I Jain. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Galgut, Damon, *The Quarry*, London: Atlantic, 1995.
- . *In a Strange Room*. London: Atlantic, 2010.
- Goodbody, Axel, and Kate Rigby, eds, *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*. Charlottesville: U Virginia Press, 2011.

- Hepburn, R. W., "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty", *British Analytical Philosophy*, eds. B. Williams and A. Montefiore. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
- . "The Aesthetics of Sky and Space", *Environmental Values*, 19 (2010): 273–288.
- James, Simon, *The Presence of Nature: A Study in Phenomenology and Environmental Philosophy*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Latour, Bruno, *Politics of Nature*, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2009.
- Lefebvre, Martin, *Landscape and Film*, New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Mazel, David, *American Literary Environmentalism*, Athens: U Georgia Press, 2000.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, "Cézanne's Doubt", *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. H. and P. Dreyfus, Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964.
- Morton, Timothy, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2007.
- . *Ecological Thought*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Müller, Timo, "From Literary Anthropology to Cultural Ecology: Ecocritical Theory since Wolfgang Iser", in Goodbody & Rigby 71-83.
- Nancy, J-L, & Lacoue-Labarthe, P., "Scène : un échange de lettres" *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse* 46 (Autumn 1992).
- Porteous, Douglas, *Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor*. Toronto : U Toronto, 1990.
- Scemama-Heard, Céline. *Antonioni : le désert figuré*, Paris: Harmattan, 1998.
- Seel, Martin, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Tally, Robert, Jr. ed., *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Westphal, Bernard, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. Trans. Robert Tally, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- White, Kenneth, *The Bird Path*, Edinburgh and London : Mainstream, 1989
- . *Le Plateau de l'albatros, introduction à la géopoétique*, Paris : Grasset, 1994
- . *Autour de Kenneth White : Espace, Pensée, Poétique*, Ed. J-J Wunenburger, Dijon : Figure Libres, 1996.

## NOTES

1. Elsewhere in this text, Westphal cites the 'study of cartography, and its literary and cinematic applications' as though this were much trodden ground (63).
2. The word, atmosphere, does not appear in Westphal's study, and scarcely in Tally's collection.
3. As the provenance of the word, *atmosphere*, implies, the subjective ambience of place is most easily seen meteorologically, *atmos/spharia* being Greek for the "watery/sphere" surrounding the earth.
4. Bateson (1991) offers a counter view in which landscape *meaning* results from metaphorical linkage.
5. "Late August on the Coast." *The Bird Path*. Edinburgh and London: Mainstream, 1989: 230-39.

6. From his inaugural address to the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1989 [<http://www.geopoetics.org.uk/welcome/what-is-geopoetics/>].
  7. From White's conversation with Erik Sablé, collected in White 1996: 10.
  8. Translated by Timo Müller from page 36 of Böhme's "Aussichten einer ästhetischen Theorie der Natur". *Wahrnehmung von Gegenwart*. Ed. Jörg Huber. Basel: Stroemfeld, 1992. 31-55.
  9. See Coetzee 1998 for his rendering of the poetics of aporia with regard to late-Apartheid renditions of South African topography.
  10. See Cage's *Silence*, Wesleyan UP, 1961: 8.
  11. see *Le Plateau de l'albatros, introduction à la géopoétique* (1994) as translated by Tony McManus in *The Radical Field: Kenneth White and Geopoetics*. Dingwall (Scotland): Sandpiper, 2007: 183.
  12. See Rigby's "Gernot Böhme's Ecological Aesthetics of Atmospheres" in Goodbody & Rigby (2009).
  13. As translated by Fischer-Lichte 2008: 115-16.
  14. As translated by Matthew Gandy in Lefebvre 2006: 315. Scemama-Heard is writing of Antonioni's desert films.
  15. I make allowances for the fact that *Dust* was filmed not in South Africa but Spain.
  16. Bordwell also discusses the etymological roots of *photography* (338).
  17. A like triangulation of two figures in a landscape animates the first paragraphs of *In a Strange Room*.
- 

## RÉSUMÉS

Gernot Böhme analyse les aspects esthétique et écologique des atmosphères. À partir de ce travail, l'article explore les « manœuvres » esthétiques par lesquelles les espaces naturels sont utilisés afin d'exprimer la symbiose entre les humains et la terre. En attirant l'attention sur les sites atmosphériques, en tant qu'arènes performatives, l'étude met en évidence le potentiel communicatif des représentations de paysages dans leur teneur affective et morale. L'article analyse les romans de Damon Galgut ainsi que les films sud-africains de Marion Hänsel en construisant un nouvel archétype interdisciplinaire autour de la conscience humaine de l'environnement. Les connections entre ces deux formes de media sont explorées dans le but de créer un nouveau discours scénographique des paysages. Pour conclure, l'article analyse le rendez-vous des personnages fictifs avec les environnements pour souligner un processus insuffisamment analysé de la signification esthétique.

Following Gernot Böhme's theorization of the ecological and aesthetic aspects of atmospheres, this paper explores the aesthetic manoeuvres by which natural spaces may be seen to stage the symbiotic excess of human/world relations in fiction and film. In drawing attention to atmospheric sites as *performative* arenas, the paper focuses primarily upon the communicative potential of landscape representations, and traces how such arenas give rise to affective and moral tenors within the human subject. Constructing a new interdisciplinary model around the human consciousness of environment, it analyzes Damon Galgut's fictions alongside Marion Hänsel's South African films as a means of mapping the scenographic dynamics by which landscape representations constitute the symbiotic aspects of ecological engagements between people and places. The essay concludes by pointing towards the experiential encounter of fictional subjects with landscapes as an under-analyzed facet of aesthetic signification.



## AUTEUR

### MARK DEGGAN

Mark Deggan is a recent PhD from the Department of English at the University of British Columbia. His dissertation was entitled "Nowhere Places and the Poetics of Landscape : Temporality, Literary Atmosphere, and the Ethical Arena in Colonial Modernity". In this study He mounted a performative ecological reading of modernist confrontations with the landscapes of the then colonial world, analyzing the aesthetic atmospheres through which artists sought to communicate profound thematic content through representations of particular environments. His current research work outwards from historical notions of landscape to investigate cosmopolitan spatial practices in contemporary culture, primarily in Hong Kong, but with comparatist forays into other multi-ethnic centres – the South African writer, Damon Galgut, has granted him exclusive use of his notes and manuscripts. The new project thus asks whether there is an "ecology" of natural space in contemporary world literature, and to what degree urban settings complicate cultural expressions of human interactions with environments. His work on landscapes as evoked in modernist or contemporary texts or images has produced a number of publications : "Nowhere Will Now Say A Few Words : The Aesthetics of Landscape in D. H. Lawrence's Kangaroo" (*D. H. Lawrence Studies*. vol. 20, No. 2 October 2012 : 85-111) ; "Performance Value : Theatrical Atmospheres & Ethical Space in *The Lagoon & Lord Jim*" (*Époque Conradienne* No. 38. [Limoges FR] 2013) ; "The Atmospheric of Marguerite Duras : Fictive Motion and Ambience in *L'Amant*" (*Language and the Creative Mind*. Stanford : CSLI Publications [U Chicago P] : 2013) ; "In the Mood for Scenography' : Theatricalized Ambience & Anti-Narrative in East Asian Film" (*ManyCinemas* 4 [Web]) ; "Islands in the Mind' : Synesthesia and the Exotic in Malcolm Lowry's *October Ferry to Gabriola*" (*Lowry encore*. Lyon FR : Anglophilia, 2013).