

**Even when laws have been written down,
they ought not always to remain unaltered.**

~ Aristotle

We still use central aspects of Aristotle's Poetics today: on stage, in film, and in writing.

By closely looking at Aristotle's analysis of reading, spectacle, and mimesis in the Poetics, I will point out some of the problematic consequences - the question of authority, text, dramatic performance, and terminology - as identified in the essays by Shannon Jackson and W.B. Worthen.

By briefly offering some insight into the Poetics' historical, political, and philosophical background, I hope to show that the problem of Aristotle's legacy of the Poetics begins with the fact that it is regarded as prescriptive, static authority instead of a fragmented, unfinished, but brilliant early attempt at artistic criticism and investigation of the components of drama.

I will conclude my argument by suggesting that, if conceived as an early guide, the Poetics is in no ways averse to change. Therefore it should serve as a foundation for the evolving world of artistic criticism, aid in overcoming ambivalence, and encourage the mapping of "undiscovered realms," as opposed to being a hindrance to it (Bial 33).

In his essay "Disciplines of the Text: Sites of Performance," W.B. Worthen rightfully criticizes the matter of authority in regards to performance, text, and work. Being faithful to the author or the work, he says, is illusory. If by work we mean the original manuscript of the author, it is futile to claim any kind of faithfulness. Most of the old manuscripts do not exist anymore, and even if they did, the eventual play was governed by the print. It was the publishers and editors who gave 'the work' its form, punctuation, and often changed meaning according to era

or taste of the audience. Even contemporary authors, such as Tom Stoppard, Worthen points out, produce many versions of plays. Another fitting example is the nationality change of the female characters from British to American in Patrick Marber's play "Closer" meant to aid American audiences understand the Broadway production better. Moreover, it is often impossible to adhere to stage directions, such as, for example, the brazen talking heads bouncing around in the plays by Richard Greene or Thomas Drecker; not to mention Shaw or O'Neill. "The work is always absent, an ideal construction assigned to an equally absent 'author'" (Bial 14).

Worthen introduces the idea of viewing the performance as the work itself; it is, he says, a kind of playing field that has its own life and language. It transcends the written text and is full of potential (different or unexpected interpretations of the actors, sounds, etc) at any moment in time. However, as Worthen's example of the Schechner/Turner-enactment of the Ndembu ritual shows, performance is still understood as "a mode of fidelity- to the offstage authority of the work being reproduced here, the authentic Ndembu ritual" (Bial 18).

It is here that the legacy of Aristotle's Poetics becomes problematic concerning text, performance, authority, and terminology. His approach of a scientific, hierarchic, and purpose-driven categorization of these components, albeit not meant as a legacy, has caused confusion, controversy, and indecision.

Aristotle experienced drama by reading the plays he analyzed in the Poetics, and through oral narrations. He was influenced by current performances as well. The Poetics examines plays from almost a century ago, which he never saw as originally performed. These plays were directed by the writer himself, in a ritualistic competition which honored the latter. The emphasis on the author as authority most certainly has some roots in the Poetics, which was somewhat of a

manuscript or lecture, possibly given at the Lyceum to guide future writers. Neither was it meant to be circulated, nor was it meant as a fixed model for future eras to come. It is a historical study and criticism of Greek drama from ca. 100 years prior to its composition. Aristotle repeatedly refers to the authors, mainly Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, in his examples of how tragedy should be written. He ranked tragedy above epic poetry in his last chapter (26), because – amongst other reasons - the former can be experienced both through reading and performance: “Again, Tragedy like Epic poetry produces its effect even without action; it reveals its power by mere reading” (“Aristotle’s Poetics, 26”). He mentions ‘spectacle’ as the sixth and last characteristic of tragedy in Chapter 6: “The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet” (“Aristotle’s Poetics, 6”).

This causes a schism today; as Worthen points out: The ‘literary perspective’ claims that even though performance can reveal “meanings or nuances,” they were unexpressed possibilities already on the page, while the performative perspective claims that “stage production is, in a sense, the final cause for the writing of plays, which gain their fullest, their essential meaning only in the circumstances for which they were originally intended: theatrical performance” (Bial 12). A play like Jonson’s “Bartholomew Fair,” which is utterly confusing on the page, but comes to life on stage, would have been a convincing example in favor of performance. To question Aristotle’s preference of reading over performance, however, would be like asking him why he didn’t watch the reruns of “Oedipus Rex” and “Medea” on the telly to fully appreciate the power

of performance. He had experienced too limited a range of ‘spectacles’ to come to Worthen’s advanced concept of performance.

Shannon Jackson, in her essay “Professing Performances: Disciplinary Genealogies,” adds an interesting point of contention to the problem of authority and terminology. To understand the “implications of the institutionalizing of performance studies,” she returns to “areas already mapped,” such as theater and literature departments (Bial 32). She describes the power struggle between the established and the new. “Rather than wholly succumbing to the language of the new,” she says, it might be better to “expose the historical entanglements of the already-was and thus still still-kind-of-is,” which would indeed help to effect some clarity (Bial 40). This is “a means of the past to unsettle the heretofore stable” (Bial 40). Her anecdote of Professor Baker who taught “the drama” in 1905, which the chairman called his “special field,” reveals how many of the Aristotelian terms still reign supreme and create confusion over institutional authority, disciplines, and uncertainty in terminology. Jackson states that [...] the institutionalization of performance studies and the institutionalization of something like ‘theatre’ or ‘speech’ or ‘literature’ turn out to have more to do with each other than current conversations let on, and that “assumptions of the ‘special’ status of performance studies, as enticing as they are, could do with a genealogical jolt” (Bial 40). One might wonder, however, where she wants that ‘jolt’ to lead?

Aristotle’s approach of ascribing a certain fixed meaning to the components of drama is what haunts today’s concept of “the popular and the academic conception of theatrical meaning” and might be the cause of the blurred lines between disciplines. It also might be the very ghost Worthen mentions when he says that “new paradigms are often ghosted by their history [...]” (Bial 19). It might also be the reason why both Worthen and Jackson are hesitant when it comes

to quick reforms, assumptions, or paradigms of performance studies. R. Schechner's call for a paradigm is, after all, an Aristotelian approach: a fixed pattern or classification that calls for in- and exclusions.

Another problem concerning terminology and performance is the term 'mimesis.' V. Turner's statement of being worried about being "artificial" and "inauthentic," (Greek: *authentikós*-original) after his ritual enactment reveals another layer of Aristotelian legacy. Worthen counters Turner's need to mime, to perfectly 're-produce' the natural event by saying that "the fact that authenticity is at issue here is revealing and troubling" (Bial 18). Worthen's point is that Turner believes that "performance can achieve authenticity" (Bial 18). This leads back to Aristotle's original quote from chapter 2 of the *Poetics*: "[...] we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are" ("Aristotle's *Poetics*, 2"). This definition of imitation is still a point of great disagreement today: from scholars to directors to Method/Meisner/Adler-actors. Such is the power of fragment: it entices people to fill in the gaps with their varying interpretations. Turner both had "subvert notions of authorized performance" and he construed *mimesis* to mean re-producing something past and gone as opposed to give life to a performance in the here and now.

Mimesis was a Platonic term redefined by Aristotle as more than imitation: the synthesis of the real with the ideal, a form of persuasion that asks us to frame the world in a certain way. In chapter 4 Aristotle says that man, "through imitation learns his earliest lessons" ("Aristotle's *Poetics*, 4"). In other words, it serves a function. And there is the rub: the *Poetics* arguably was composed as a reactionary validation of poets and poetry to the challenge of Plato's Book 10 of the *Republic*: "Then we'll allow its defenders, who aren't poets themselves but lovers of poetry, to speak in prose on its behalf [...]" (*Republic*, Book 10, p.1212: 607d). To Aristotle, what is

imitated in the world around us has already been defined due to his ethical and teleological thinking. Characters are already moralized. The function of tragedy is to purify by purging people's bad impulses (catharsis). This, in turn, serves the purpose of improving one's life, thus helping society. Aristotle's is a philosophy of certainty, purpose, and the greater good of all. Accordingly, the Poetics has to be read within its philosophical, historical, political and societal context.

The fact that so many aspects of the Poetics is still in use today is both astounding and confusing. It is in need of additions and changes to suit the ever-evolving movements in art and society. One must bear in mind that the Poetics was never meant to be resistant to change; we are. This certainly was not the 'purpose' Aristotle had in mind. After all, Aristotle's explanation of how things change was one of the most important contributions he made to philosophy. He saw purpose in change, didn't regard it as negative, but as natural. Change was necessary for things to reach their full potential. The Poetics was change. Thus it can change again to reach its current potential.

Plausibly, the "negative capability" Worthen calls for "at this moment of undisciplined, interdisciplinary flux, euphoria, uncertainty, mystery, and doubt," which should keep one from "reaching too quickly and irritably for the certainty that notions of 'paradigm' and 'discipline' seem to offer" is a result of the Poetics' strict categorization of terms, which, once in place, proved permanent (Bial 20). Perhaps Jackson's caution and concern with 'ambivalence,' a word she used three times in her essay, also stems from the repercussions of the Poetics. Granted, change is hardly ever benign. However, after having cried out for a "genealogical jolt," a potentially effective demand, Jackson offers no direction. Does she return to the past to go forward, or is she going back for the sake of going back? She gives the impression of being, as

Henry Bial puts it in the introduction of The Performance Studies Reader, one of “the people who like not knowing, who find the uncertainty of unmapped terrain exhilarating” (Bial 1). This, to Aristotle, would have been a paradox without purpose: it is the people who *like* knowing who work through uncertainties of “unmapped terrain” so they *can* map it (Bial 1).

Jackson’s “return to,” remapping, foregoing the “mapping of undiscovered realms,” which are “over-mapped” by the departments that have “institutional assurance” does, at some point, beg the question if she herself fell victim to her paradox of wanting to remain an “inhabitant of unclaimed territory,” denying that “earlier, colonial cartographers” had mapped it before, thereby preferring “renegade status” plus “recognition” over *knowing* and institutionalization (Bial 33)?

Neal Gabler’s anecdote of Lewis Carroll seems appropriate to aid Jackson in her ‘map quest.’

“Lewis Carroll, commenting on a vogue among nineteenth-century cartographers for ever larger and more detailed maps, once cautioned that the maps might get so large they would interfere with agriculture, and waggishly suggested that the earth be used as a map of itself instead” (Bial 77).

And what’s the purpose of that?