Book Section:
Flannery, D (2018) The Intensification of the Novel: Ayn Rand's and Ivo van Hove's The Fountainhead. In: Bennett, S and Massai, S, (eds.) Ivo van Hove: From Shakespeare to David Bowie. Bloomsbury , London, UK , pp. 187-193. ISBN 9781350031555

THE INTENSIFICATION OF THE NOVEL: AYN RAND'S AND IVO VAN HOVE'S *THE FOUNTAINHEAD*

Denis Flannery

'An acted play,' Henry James wrote in 1872, 'is a novel intensified; it realizes what the novel suggests' (James, 1949: 3). When James made this comment he wasn't talking about adaptation from novel to stage – which is my preoccupation in this essay – but about how theatre gives, in his words, 'a vision of the immediate not to be enjoyed in any other way' (James, 1949: 273). Going (even conceptually) from the novel to the stage meant, for James, going from the realm of the suggestive to the realm of the intensely evident and present.

Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943) is, though, one of the least suggestive of novels. A film adaptation, directed by King Vidor, was released in 1949. The IMDB plot summary for this reads: 'An uncompromising visionary architect struggles to maintain his integrity and individualism despite personal, professional and economic pressures to conform to popular standards' (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041386/). This sentence pretty much gets the novel's essence. In 1968 Rand wrote a new Introduction to mark its twenty-fifth anniversary. What shines most from the book's pages is an appetite for a discussion, or a conclusion. *The Fountainhead* is a novel with an argument and a moral. Everything in it seems to build towards the fabrication of the one and the enforcement of the other. Rand wrote the book to 'portray a moral idea', to present an '*ideal man'* (Rand [1943] 2007: ix). A major lesson she learnt in the course of writing and publishing it was that 'one cannot give up the world to those one despises' (Rand [1943] 2007: viii). The novel ends with a view, from below, of its architect hero atop the unfinished skyscraper that will be his

career's crowning statement: 'There was only,' we read, 'the ocean and the sky and the figure of Howard Roark' (Rand [1943] 2007: 727) *The Fountainhead* oscillates between the kind of romanticism evident in the concluding sentence I have just quoted and a proliferative paranoia. Everyone's vices are allegorized and on display: all weak and/or unclean bodies in the book signify conscious malice and danger. Yet Rand's fictional world endlessly keeps secret its schemes for your destruction: it almost becomes your moral duty to ferret out such schemes and to destroy them.

The trailer for Toneelgroep Amsterdam's (TGA's) 2014 production of *The Fountainhead*, directed by Ivo Van Hove, ends with a fragment of the show's closing moments – a long speech, in Dutch, by Ramsey Nasr who plays Roark: 'Man's first duty is to be himself,' Nasr says, 'No man can live for another' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAfeQjoWQKM). In the show, as he makes this final speech other members of the cast, standing behind him in silhouette, make haunting, beautiful sounds on theremins.

What is involved in 'intensifying' something already so intense, in bringing a novel already so forcefully (you might say relentlessly) 'realized' to the stage? Among the range of meanings for the verb 'to intensify' given by the OED online we find 'to strengthen' and 'to deepen.' How do you strengthen something so unyielding sure of its own strength and so confidently ambitious in its reach for profundity? 'To me,' van Hove wrote, '*The Fountainhead* is a war of ideas' (*The Fountainhead*, English-Language Publicity 2014).

Like a latter-day Edmund Spenser, Rand has these ideas fight, almost diagrammatically, through characters: the weakling, perversely altruistic, architecture critic Ellsworth (Elsie) Toohey (played, with most of the caricature

stripped away, by Bart Slegers in the show) versus Howard Roark who is in turn opposed to Peter Keating (played by Aus Greidanus Jr), his conformist and career-obsessed contemporary, the perverse and rebellious Dominique Francon (Halina Reijn) versus the kind and complaint Catherine Halsey (Tamar van den Dop in 2014, more recently Hélène Devos).

'Intense' is a word that well describes the show's popularity and global acclaim. *The Fountainhead* has been an enormous hit, with repeated performances in Amsterdam, where it has often sold out. It has been performed in Avignon, Antwerp, Barcelona, Paris, Seoul, Taipei and New York. The production, with a script by Koen Tachelet, almost seemed to precipitate a flow of plays and productions based on novels by van Hove and his contemporaries. 2015 saw the premiere of *The Hidden Force (De Stille Kracht)*, based on the 1900 novel by Louis Couperus. The following year a second play based on a Couperus novel, *The Things That Pass (De Dingen Die Voorbijgaan)* opened. Other TGA directors have also been bringing novels to the stage. Guy Cassiers directed a new play based on Jonathan Littell's monumental holocaust novel *The Kindly Ones* in 2015 and, in February 2018, his production of *May We Be Forgiven (Vergeef Ons)*, based on the book by A. M. Homes, will open. Luk Percevaal directed, also in 2015, *The Year of Cancer* (*Het Jaar Van de Kreeft*) from the 1972 novel by Hugo Claus. For van Hove and TGA *The Fountainhead* has initiated something of a novelistic wave. Furthermore, one of the most bold and striking aspects of this Rand adaptation is its readiness to put debate on stage. Van Hove once claimed that one of theatre's functions is to ask questions without fears and without restraint (van Hove, 2012 http://2012.teatterikesa.fi/media/taustamateriaalit-

kansainvalisis/toneelgroep-amsterdam-husbands/). His *Fountainhead* takes this mission quite literally. The play doesn't just provoke questions: it stages the asking of them in very literal ways. You watch actors have discussions about theatrically unpromising topics and it's made – miraculously – compelling. And influential. Thomas Ostermeier's recent production *Returning to Reims*, based on the 2009 memoir by Didier Eribon, bears, in its quite brilliant staging of memory and theory, more than a small trace of debt to van Hove's work with Ayn Rand's novel.

Cinema

The TGA *Fountainhead* is, then, not only vivid and publicly successful. In the few years since its premiere it has already had an extensive influence. When asked in 2008 why he had never worked on a novel adaptation, even though he had covered material outside of theatre such as film screenplays, van Hove answered:

> Because I love the cinema, in particular Cassavetes or Marguerite Duras (who called *India Song* 'text-film-theatre'). I need to work on a text that interests me passionately and which I feel the need to get heard. I like open texts that allow for different forms of representation. So far I have not found a novel that corresponds to what I want. I have to fall in love with these texts … I've no idea what type of things I'll be working on in five years time. (Perrier, 2009: 12)

Just over five years after van Hove made this comment, Toneelgroep Amsterdam (TGA) premiered their *Fountainhead*. 'It's an engaging, addictive novel,' he said at the time, 'that was begging to be staged' (Van Hove, 2014)

Marguerite Duras and Ayn Rand are not names that go together like love and marriage but, in its elephantine way, Rand's novel *can* be considered under the heading 'text-film-theatre.' Duras's poetically sparse narrative prose can often read like stage directions or the outline of a scene in a film. Dialogue can often be the dominant form in her fiction so that reading a novel like *L'Amante Anglaise* (1967) can feel like reading a screenplay. On the very first page of her 1968 introduction, Rand invokes Victor Hugo and nineteenth-century realism. Like Dostoevsky, she sees novel-writing as a philosophical project. If Duras consciously blurs the line between cinema and fiction, then filmic feelings and scenarios can just erupt in Rand's prose. There is often a cinematic sweep and sensibility to *The Fountainhead*. Here, for example, is her description of the news tycoon Gail Wynand and Dominique Francon taking in the New York skyline: 'On a night of late fall they stood together on the roof-garden parapet, looking at the city. The long shafts made of lighted windows were like streams breaking out of the black sky, flowing down in single drops to feed the great pools of fire below' (Rand [1943] 2007: 518).

It is precisely this this kind of moment that is reproduced by Van Hove and TGA in a way that one reviewer, Fabienne Darge, described as a 'New York in Cinemascope' (Darge, 2014) . Darge claimed that the production was 'brilliantly cinematic,' describing its stage-space as one that enabled a 'masterly' use of video, whether to screen massive architectural drawing or to create the kind of cinematic vistas I have been outlining. (Darge, 2014). There are different kinds and sizes of screen in the production that enable visual encounter from the scale of the drawing board to that of the billboard to the grandest cinematic sweep. Van Hove and Jan Verswyveld, the show's scenographer and lighting

designer, were not only celebrating their source material's fervent appreciation of cinema; they were re-enacting their own love of the medium. However much its status as the adaptation of a novel may represent a departure from previous work, their *Fountainhead* represents, both in scale and technical-visual ambition, a return to the technically elaborate, cinema-fixated show they had made in 2008 with *The Antonioni Project*, based on Michaelangelo Antonioni's films *L'Aventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), and *L'Eclisse* (1962). This was performed using a combination of live action, blue-screen backdrop, a film crew filming live on stage and screens of different scales and intensities. Both *The Antonioni Project* and TGA's adaptation of *The Fountainhead* celebrate the power and presence of the screen. The later show, however, does this with far more narrative fury and drive.

Writing

A reader might wonder about the extent to which *The Fountainhead* is, to use van Hove's phrase, an 'open text,' one 'that allows for different forms of representation' (Perrier, 2009: 12). Through painful lampooning the novel eagerly attacks forms of representation different to its own. A favourite target, one that didn't survive into the show, is Rand's fictional modernist writer Lois Cook, the author of *Clouds and Shrouds,* a wilfully obscure, nonsensical travelogue and *The Gallant Gallstone*, a novel whose purpose is 'to prove that there's no such thing as free will' (Rand [1943]2007: 409). Rand's use of the verb 'to prove' in relation to the novel says much about her own convictions as to what novels can, and should, do. Lois Cook looks 'offensively unkempt, with studied slovenliness as careful as grooming – and for the same purpose (Rand

[1943] 2007: 244) As an attack on modernist writing of the 1920s and later this is, to say the very least, weak and uninformed. But this kind of portrayal is part and parcel of the novel's oppositional structure: Cook's decadent writing versus the invigorating literary presence of, well, Ayn Rand. The quality of being 'open' – something we might find in texts by, say, Ingmar Bergman or Tony Kushner that van Hove has brought to the stage, would appear conspicuous by its absence in Rand. But it is important to remember that, for van Hove and for his contemporaries, *The Fountainhead* is as much a product of the late 1960s as it is an anti-authoritarian novel of the 1940s. Rand herself seemed to underline this by ending her anniversary introduction with the words 'May 1968'.

Much of van Hove's work has consisted of bold and very textured theatrical manifestations of the archive of his teenage years: the films of Antonioni, Bergman and Cassavetes, the music of David Bowie and – we would need to include – the fiction of Ayn Rand. It is easy to see how, in the late 1960s, an affinity could have been made between Rand's insistence on the primacy of the individual will and the stance of, say, Roland Barthes in his 1968 essay when he insisted that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (Barthes [1968] 2010: 1326)

Because it's an intensely *written* novel – one that is full of writers, readers and competing forms of writing – *The Fountainhead* for all its lumpen fondness for the prescriptive, compels its reader to move between different styles and different kinds of story – and so does van Hove's adaptation. The novel's second sentence reads 'He (Roark) stood naked at the edge of the cliff' (Rand [1943] 2007: 3). In the production Nasr's Roark, having begun the show by picking up a

massive iron bar and slamming it three times onto some metal industrial plating, walks, fully clothed, though with an open shirt, to a large table downstage centre, picks up a paperback copy of *The Fountainhead* and reads these words. He reads them, though, in the *present* tense: 'He stands naked at the edge of the cliff.' Later on in the show Halina Reijn's Dominque Francon quotes, again changing the grammatical past into the present, the novel's third-person narration of her first violent sex-scene with Roark: 'She feels his ribs,' Reijn's Dominique says of herself, 'he forces her open mouth.'

If the production's multiple screens display cityscapes, close-ups of human faces and – at the show's climax – the massive dynamiting by Roark of his building project Cortland Homes, then they also display text. More than any other show by van Hove or Toneelgroep Amsterdam, *The Fountainhead* compels its audience to literally *read* text as an integral part of their participation. Many newspaper headlines, the titles of different sections of the show (Part Two is called 'Valhalla', for example), a place name – 'Oyster Bay' – written in Roark's hand, or snatches of text by Roark's would-be nemesis Ellsworth Toohey, are all present on screen. So too are different forms of writing machinery: a massive printing press is wheeled forward in the show's second part and is put into action by Kesting's Gail Wynand. Pencils and sheets of paper proliferate: we see many onscreen typewriters. The intense presence of onscreen writing is made equivalent to the architectural drawing on which the novel and the show focus with such passion. Darge writes of how the acts of drawing become a powerful dramaturgical element in the show; at times the drawings almost assume the force and agency of characters (Darge, 2014). Sketches made by Nasr's Roark are filmed by small overhead cameras and projected onto vast white screens

(Darge 2014). When Nasr's Roark steps away from these drawings they keep proliferating onscreen, making a brilliant embodiment of the novel's (and this production's) love of creative energy. This spectacular element of the show is an act of fidelity to the novel's own writerly celebration of drawing: 'He seized the sketch, his hand flashed forward and a pencil ripped across the drawing… The lines … rent the windows wide; they splintered the balcony and hurled a terrace over the sea' (Rand [1943] 2007: 121).

Post-structural, feminist and queer theorists tend to give *The Fountainhead* a very wide berth. And you can see why. The steamy faux-Lawrentian tone in which Dominque's and Roark's early attraction is described would make the most committed of feminists take to the hills or just lie down in exhaustion: 'He stood looking at her,' we read as Rand goes into her hottest bestseller mode, 'it was not a glance, but an act of ownership' (Rand [1943] 2007: 207). Van Hove's stage version might encourage us to wonder what could happen when *The Fountainhead* meets theoretically conscious reading. Because, in many ways, that is what happens in his production.

For Barbara Johnson, one the most creative deconstructionist and feminist critics, we know that we encounter writing when we meet with 'materiality, silence, space, and conflict' (Johnson, 1991: 46). *The Fountainhead* is a book that abounds in materiality but is also distinguished by conflict between different kinds of writing There are also divisions between what it espouses, on the one hand and what, on the other, it values. Recently described by Jonathan Freedland, as 'Gordon Gekko with A-levels,' Rand is regularly criticized by the left for espousing or enabling doctrines of relentless

individualism, far-right *laissez faire* economics, and the dismantling of social support (Freedland, 2017: 8)

Love

But, reading the book I was surprised by the forms of intimacy I found in *The Fountainhead* and by the tenderness with which it describes them. Rand's 1968 Introduction makes her novel sound like a love-letter to her husband. Indeed, part of what made the book so engaging and addictive for van Hove is that it is the story of the 'relentless' love between Roark and Dominque Francon (van Hove, 2014). 'They were simply four people who liked being there together,' Rand writes, describing how Roark, the sculptor Steven Mallory, Dominique Francon and Roark's devoted foreman Mike Donnigan gather on-site in the evenings at Roark's soon-to-be-maligned Temple to the Human Spirit (Rand [1943]2007: 345). When we get to a brief conversation between an idealistic young man and Roark as they sit in a Pennsylvania valley looking at a nearly completed summer resort of Roark's design, the text takes on board the value and energy of this briefest of encounters: 'He (Roark) did not know that he had given someone the courage to face a lifetime' (Rand [1943] 2007: 530). A sense of intimacy with and tenderness towards the novel itself is also evident in readers' responses to it. The briefest of glances at Amazon reviews will tell you that people tend to *love* this book. One of the reasons they do is that there is, perhaps surprisingly, a lot of love *in* this book.

And this love is replicated in van Hove's production where the interaction between the characters has, firstly, this element of sometimes tender responsiveness and is, secondly, stripped of the paranoid, freakish kinds of caricature over which, especially in her depiction of Ellsworth Toohey, Rand

expends so much labour. 'Ayn Rand' and 'Nina Simone' might not be names most people would be prompt to link, but part of the show's rich sonic palette is a 1964 recording of Simone singing – to utterly moving effect – Billie Holiday's song, 'Don't Explain' during a second, tender erotic encounter between Nasr's Roark and Reijn's Dominque Francon. Most of the music in the production, composed by Eric Sleichim, is instrumental and played by on-stage musicians. The first erotic encounter between Nasr's Roark and Reijn's Dominique is sensationally described in the novel and brutally enacted onstage. The second encounter is more tender, balletic and (quite literally) vulnerable: both actors are naked for much of it. The strength and fragility of Simone's voice, the sparse tenderness of the song's arrangement and the historical affect all these things carry bring out a pained tenderness that is there in Rand's novel but often forgotten in debates around her. The song's concluding lines are 'My life's yours love/Don't explain '(Holiday, 1945). These words contrast vividly with words spoken by Roark in the show and which were considered so important that they were printed large, in English, in the centre spread of *The Fountainhead's* Dutch-language programme: 'I could die for you, but I couldn't and wouldn't live for you'.

I'd like to end, though, by returning to a final sense of the verb 'to intensify' provided by the OED, that is 'to produce stronger contrasts of light and shade'. How do you sharpen contrasts of light and shade in a text that makes it world so unrelentingly oppositional? *The Fountainhead* is not a novel without its awkwardnesses and infelicitites. But something fascinating seems to happen when Rand writes about light. Let's return briefly that passage I quoted earlier with Gail Wynand and Dominique Francon looking at the New York skyline and

the 'long shafts of lighted windows … like streams.' Different forms of light – sunlight, waterfalls, cityscapes, candlelight – saturate this novel. One of the great pleasures or intensities of seeing a show directed by van Hove (in collaboration wih his partner and usual set and lighting designer, Versweyveld) is how sharp, uncanny, brutal – and often just gorgeous – the lighting is: the white strip lighting in their *Angels in America*, the alternating between golden ambience and brutal white spots in *Roman Tragedies*, the sickly off-gold mirrored lighting that accompanies Hans Kesting's soliloquies as Richard III in *Kings of War*. Part of the attraction of Rand's novel for van Hove and Versweyveld must have been its sensitivity to light and, I would imagine, the poetry of Rand's prose when it slows down to describe, and emulate, luminous force. All this appears to have inspired the great lighting decisions they made for the TGA production of the play. Notes I made when I saw the show in Amsterdam in 2014 refer to 'white lights', to a 'gold slant' in the lighting, to 'smoky light' and, as Roark draws the Cortland plans, just to 'LIGHT!' Part of what is involved in 'intensification' is a sharpening of contrasts between light and shade. This is also, however problematically, a distinguishing feature of Rand's novel. Such light-work is also a gorgeous and spectacular part of van Hove's work as he faithfully turns *The Fountainhead* from a reading experience to a vision of the immediate.

REFERENCES

Barthes, Roland (2010) 'The Death of the Author' in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent Letich, London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1322-26: 1326.

Darge, Fabienne (2014) 'Au Milieu des Gratte-Ciel, la Liberté de l'Artiste Contre la Société' de Masse', *Le Monde*, July 14.

The Fountainhead, IMDB Summary http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0041386/.

The Fountainhead, Toneelgroep Amsterdam Trailer. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAfeQjoWQKM.

Freedland, Jonathan (2017) 'Goddess of the New Right', *The Guardian*, April 11, 6-9.

Holiday, Billie (1945) 'Don't Explain' https://play.google.com/music/preview/Tny6pwuslm7uvughizum47rvrri?lyrics=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=lyrics&pcampaignid=kp-lyrics

James, Henry (1949) *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama 1872-1901*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Allan Wade, London: Rupert Hart-Davis.

Johnson, Barbara (1991) 'Writing' in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Perrier, Jean-François (2009) 'The World of Politics: Ivo van Hove in Conversation' *Roman Tragedies* Programme, London: Barbican.

Rand, Ayn ([1943] 2007) *The Fountainhead*, London: Penguin.

Van Hove, Ivo (2014) *The Fountainhead*, English-language Publicity.

Van Hove, Ivo (2012) *Husbands* Publicity

http://2012.teatterikesa.fi/media/taustamateriaalit-kansainvalisis/toneelgroep-amsterdam-husbands/.

.