RURAL DRAMATURGY: SITE-SPECIFICITY, RURAL CONTEXT, AND STRUCTURE OF FEELING

The development of a theoretical framework for the analysis of rural dramaturgies

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores what *rural dramaturgies* could entail through an analysis of three site-specific Dutch performances: *Hjir Ha Ik West* (2019), *Onze Grond* (2021), and *Huilende Bruiden* (2021). These works, situated in rural areas, are analysed in relation to transformational processes impacting rural areas in the Netherlands, such as globalisation, urbanisation, environmental change, and policies.

Whereas the concept of urban dramaturgy has been theorised, rural dramaturgy has not. Drawing on theories around site-specificity, rural context, and Raymond Williams' structure of feeling, the thesis develops a theoretical framework for understanding how dramaturgical strategies – rural dramaturgies – reflect and reclaim rural space and its local identity in response to these transformational processes. Through a concept-driven dramaturgical analysis, the thesis shows how these performances engage with what is inherent to their rural locations (both material and intangible characteristics). Each case study reveals how performance can reframe and reveal local lived experiences and concerns. Rural dramaturgies invite spectators to engage with the rural, encouraging critical reflection on the feeling of belonging, the preservation of history, socio-political issues, and the future of regions like these.

By presenting the local perspectives and tensions, these performances do not only reflect the rural way and sense of life but actively participate in the reclaiming of 'the rural.' Reclaiming is understood here as the speaking up of the local communities – which are often overshadowed by dominant, powerful (urban) processes and parties (and their ideas about the rural) – and the reclaim of the power over the preservation of rural (hi)stories.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, multiple Dutch theatre groups have invited their audiences to join them for a site-specific performance in the rural areas of the Netherlands. Sometimes they performed in the centre of villages, other times they were located in a meadow near it. Examples are *Grutte Pier van Kimswert* by Peergroup (2016), *Operatie IJsellinie* by Theatergroep De Jonge Honden (2017), *Aardappelvreters* by Silbersee (2018), *Hjir Ha Ik West* by Tryater (2019), *Onze Grond* by PS|Theater (2021), *Huilende Bruiden* by Peergroup (2021) and *CARGO Shanghai-Friesland* by Rimini Protokoll (2022). Some of these have more in common than solely their location. Not only do they present the rural areas to their audience, but they also give voice to the local point of view on and the experience of transformational processes and the future of the rural. In this thesis I will argue that through these performances, the rural reclaims itself.

The future of the rural is being influenced by transformational processes with far-reaching consequences, such as globalisation. Globalisation influences spatial, economic, and social aspects of life significantly. Consequences of globalisation are for example the creation of world cities and networks between (these) cities.[1] But globalisation is not the only factor that influences the future of the rural. Geography scholar Michael Woods touches upon political debates about the future of rural areas in different parts of the world in ''The Future of Rural Places'' (2019).[2] These political debates are all based on similar patterns and experiences of rural change and transformations (and thus other factors that influence the rural), and Woods appoints these to the term 'key drivers'. These key drivers consist of urbanisation, globalisation, environmental change, commodification of the countryside, technological change, and political and ideological pressures.[3] I wonder, how do people who actively experience these changes respond to them, *outside* of these political debates? What is happening in rural areas as a consequence of these key drivers and what is the rural point of view on this?

In theatre and performance studies, scholars have published on site-specific performances in both urban and rural contexts. In an edition of *rekto:verso* dedicated to the theme periphery, Belgian arts platform Plan B sketched the outlines of what they would call the practice of 'village dramaturgy'.[4] They present three case studies and the themes, dynamics, and perspectives from the countryside that these performances shine a light on. However, the term 'dramaturgy' here seems to be used more as a synonym for 'narratives' or 'narrations', as the village is approached as a 'text' (although one that is continuously transforming), rather than focussing on *how* these narratives are portrayed.[5] Whereas the concept of urban dramaturgy has been more systematically studied in an academic discourse, village dramaturgy – or rural dramaturgy, as I will call it, since these performances do not only reflect village life, but broader rural dynamics as well – has not. Since site-specific performances in rural areas seem to be a trend to stay, and globalisation and urbanisation are popular themes within that trend, the aim of this thesis is to

[1] Beyhan Kara, ''The Impact Of Globalization On Cities,'' *Journal of Contemporary Urban Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2019): 108, 112.
[2] Michael Woods, ''The future of rural places,'' in *The Routledge Companion to Rural Planning,* ed. M.J. Scott, N. Gallent and M. Gkartzios (Routledge, 2019).
[3] Idem, 623.
[4] ''Artikel: PLAN B over Dorpsdramaturgie,'' Reflecties, Plan B, accessed June 16, 2025. https://www.kunstenplatformplanb.be/nieuws/bijdrage-in-rekto-verso-themanummer-de-periferie.
[5] Ibidem.

develop a theoretical framework for analysing this specific dramaturgy with the help of the case studies *Hjir Ha Ik West, Onze Grond,* and *Huilende Bruiden*.

THE TERM 'RURAL'

In order to talk about rural issues and develop a framework for rural dramaturgies, I will firstly need to explain what I mean when I talk about rurality. In *Theatre & The Rural*, performance scholar Jo Robinson sets out a discussion of definitions of 'rural' in the United Kingdom. Robinson aims to raise questions and address issues that are also relevant in other contexts (and countries) where divisions between the urban and the rural exist. In this way, I would argue that what Robinson addresses about non-urban Britain also applies to the non-urban areas of the Netherlands. Namely that it is difficult to say what is meant by rural since the non-urban areas are so varied and that there are therefore many different versions of the rural.[6] However varied, the definitions of rural are frequently related to the urban.[7] In the *rekto:verso* article about village dramaturgy Plan B even surpasses this by stating that the city and the village are ''intimately *intertwined''* (my emphasis).[8] Further, the definition depends on what the intentions are for the use of the classification, for example, the relationship between urban and rural communities.[9] When classifying communities, there is an affective component. Robinson refers to Lidia Varbanova's research about connotations surrounding the terms 'rural communities' and 'rural place', carried out for the Creative City Network of Canada. Varbanova's definition is that a community is formed where a population shares a collective memory and a 'sense of place' in a certain rural territory.[10] Plan B proposes that the rural especially exists as a mental space, which aligns with this 'sense' of place that Varbanova describes.

URBAN VS RURAL DRAMATURGY

Although rural dramaturgy hardly has been studied in an academic context, there are some affinities with academic reflections on urban dramaturgy, as they both can be seen as forms of site-specific performance. To examine what a site-specific dramaturgy such as rural dramaturgy could entail, theatre scholar Bertie Ferdman's work on urban dramaturgy offers some useful points of attention. Ferdman defines urban dramaturgy in ''Off the Grid: New York City Landmark Performance'' (2015) as follows:

> The theatricalization of the city as well as all forms of theatrical activity within the city can be understood as forms of urban dramaturgies, collectively revealing individual narratives about where we live, how we live, who is represented, who is excluded, what is privileged, and what power dynamics (historical, social, and economic) are present in any given narrative about the city.[11]

Ferdman uses the term to identify both performance *in* and *of* cities: various performances can be analysed as distinct examples of urban dramaturgies, just as cities themselves, Ferdman

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[6] Jo Robinson, ''A rural sense of place,'' in *Theatre & The Rural*, ed. Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato (Palgrave, 2016), Kobo Desktop edition, 5/11.
[7] Jo Robinson, ''Defining the rural,'' in *Theatre & The Rural*, ed. Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato (Palgrave, 2016), Kobo Desktop edition, 3/11.
[8] Plan B, ''Artikel: Plan B over Dorpsdramaturgie.''
[9] Robinson, ''Defining the rural,'' 3-4/11.
[10] Lidia Varbanova, ''Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity: EUROPE,'' prepared for the Creative City Network of Canada, 2009, 3.
[11] Bertie Ferdman, ''Off the Grid: New York City Landmark Performance,'' *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 37, no. 2 (2015): 19.

explains. The individual narratives that Ferdman talks about, are varying voices that all are a part of the reframing of the city, that these urban dramaturgies do.[12]

What kind of city people want and desire, is connected to their lifestyle, social ties, relationships to nature, social class, etcetera. There are thus different ideas about what 'urban' should and/or could be. I will argue that this also applies to rural areas. To contextualize what type of 'urban' is implied, Ferdman proposes the following questions which can be translated to the 'rural' in rural dramaturgies, like this: what narrative of rural is being performed? What village or community is either desired or produced through these dramaturgies? Other questions are: what communities are present or silenced? And what real-life context is incorporated into the performance? This can consist of, for example, economic and political actualities, events, social and cultural practices, and histories. How are these framed? And how are these interpreted by what spectators? Since forms of urban dramaturgies reveal narratives, one also examines how narratives are revealed when analysing rural dramaturgies.[13]

Urban dramaturgies thus theatricalize the city and reframe the city: they use the transformative potential of these spaces to think about what that space is and could be. Further, they reveal untold narratives that are linked to the city, they integrate architecture or the neighbourhood in which they are located and relate to the economics and politics of these spaces. These dramaturgies are ingrained with what is happening at their sites.[14] But urban dramaturgies are also ephemeral, a ''vanishing *mise-en-scène*'', since they temporarily appropriate a site but without taking up physical space: the city *is* their space, the urban environment has become their performance landscape.[15] But how is the rural used as a performance landscape? How can the rural be theatricalized, reframed, and revealed? I will use these questions and look at the ways my case studies integrate architecture, the neighbourhood and its context, and use the transformative potential of rural spaces.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This thesis will be built around the argument that through these performances, the rural reclaims itself. In this process, the rural unearths their silenced voice within social and artistic trends and speaks up against (external) perspectives on the rural that do not correspond to their lived reality. I will argue why this can be seen as a form of 'reclaiming' and develop a theoretical framework in order to analyse rural dramaturgies. I will analyse the dramaturgical strategies used in the performances, with a focus on site-specificity, and how they respond to factors and themes that I will name 'rural context'. This includes the key drivers identified by Woods. Lastly, I will look at the way of life in the different areas, which encompasses the local cultural and social practices, and perspectives on wider social and political topics such as challenging rural transformations. My main research question that I aim to answer therefore is:

How are rural dramaturgies used in Hjir Ha Ik West*,* Onze Grond*, and* Huilende Bruiden *to reclaim 'the rural' – its local identity and its voice – in response to contemporary transformations in Dutch rural areas?*

To answer this question, both chapters will circle around different sub-topics. First, I will set out the theories and concepts that I will use to analyse the case studies: theories about the

[12] Ferdman, ''Off the Grid: New York City Landmark Performance,'' 17.
[13] Idem, 19-23.
[14] Idem, 20-26.
[15] Bertie Ferdman, ''Urban Dramaturgy: The Global Art Project of JR,'' *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 3 (2012): 24.

occupation of space and site-specificity, about the different kinds of rural and what influences these (contemporary transformations and key drivers), and about the structural and affective way of life (via the concept 'structure of feeling', which I will elaborate on later). In the second chapter I will use these theories to show how analysing with this theoretical framework reveals dramaturgical strategies that were used to portray the local rural. Or, in other words, I will carry out an analysis of these rural dramaturgies. The two chapters thus circle around these two sub-questions, respectively:

- What theories about the constitution and representation of the rural (space) contribute to understanding rural dramaturgies and how?
- In what ways do *Hjir Ha Ik West, Onze Grond,* and *Huilende Bruiden* engage with local ways of living and address local, current topics and issues?

CASE STUDIES

Hjir Ha Ik West (2019) takes us to Jannum, the smallest terp-village in the world which lays in the middle of meadows and wide landscapes. Two tour guides tell us about the history of Jannum, which shows a trend of people leaving, of the area not being viable for living and having a community anymore. Performers, representing former residents, walk through the meadows from the village towards the horizon – leaving the village and never returning. Afterwards, the spectators are invited to walk through the village, where they look inside and enter the historical houses. The village is transformed into an open-air-museum. *Hjir Ha Ik West* is a lived experience of a possible future.[16]

Onze Grond (2021) portrays the narrative of a small village's, Akkerdorp, struggles and emotions regarding the last piece of free, unbuild land, and the city getting closer. All the residents are worried about the future, of their village, of the world, of themselves, and of their children. Four of them are protesting by occupying this piece of free land and hosting a protest-radio show against the government's plans with the same piece of land, on which the spectators also find themselves. Behind this meadow, the skyline of the city looms. *Onze Grond* explores the dilemma between self-interest and collective interest, now and future, your own near future and the larger future.[17]

Huilende Bruiden (2021) takes place in the most eastern part of the province Groningen. Spectators listen to an audio while walking through a lot of green, wide meadows. Here, the Grain Republic (1870-1920) was located: a prosperous part of the Netherlands in that time. Near the road, the large farms (officially called Oldambster Herenboerderijen) of the Grain Republic loom. Most of them are damaged, due to a lack of maintenance. Via your headphones, you hear documentary-maker Tom Tieman tell an autobiographical story, and the stories of the residents of the Herenboerderijen who explain *why* the farms can hardly be maintained. *Huilende Bruiden* revolves around the question: what do we save/keep and why? During the walk, the spectators are welcomed into some of the farms.[18]

HHIW, *OG*, and *HB* all express a fear of the future.

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[16] *Hjir Ha Ik West*, concept and direction by Aukje Schaafsma, text by Wessel de Vries, performance by Tryater, Jannum, April 2019.
[17] *Onze Grond*, directed by Pepijn Smit, text by Eva Maria de Wit and Pepijn Smit, performance by PS|Theater, filmed performance, Kaasboerderij Captein, Zoeterwoude, August 25–September 19, 2021.
[18] *Huilende Bruiden*, concept, direction, and montage by Tom Tieman, performance by Peergroup, Mellemaheerd, Bad Nieuweschans, October 14–24, 2021.

METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework is divided into three parts – site-specific performance, rural context, and structure of feeling – to explore theories around the rural and rural space. These concepts will be the foundation for the dramaturgical analysis of my case studies, through which I will demonstrate how this theoretical framework can be applied to analyse rural dramaturgies within the performance field of the Netherlands. I will argue that aspects used for urban dramaturgy can be altered and then applied to rural areas.

To answer my research question, I will use dramaturgical analysis as my main method. I will use the questions that are proposed by performance scholars Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx in ''Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach'' (2021), such as: how is a work constructed? What theatrical means are being used? How does the performance engage and address its spectators (and their senses)? How does the performance relate to everyday life, history, and actual, societal phenomena and what is it trying to say about this?[19] Some of these questions correspond to the questions of Ferdman.

My analysis will be concept-driven and comparative, because I will draw out relations between the case studies by focussing on dramaturgical strategies, such as site-specificity, and how these are used to say something about (local) rural context and the concept of structure of feeling.

In order to develop a usable rural dramaturgy framework, and since there are many different versions of the rural, I will put three artworks from three different rural areas in the Netherlands in relation to each other. The three case studies will be *Hjir Ha Ik West, Onze Grond* and *Huilende Bruiden* because they have similarities in site and theme. Other possible case studies did have a similar site but focussed for example on historical themes.

Since I have not visited these case studies when they were being performed, my performance analysis relies on a variety of performance documentations. For the analysis of *Onze Grond* I rely on a video registration of the performance. For *Hjir Ha Ik West*, I have gathered documentation out of the archives of Tryater, such as the script, pictures, and reviews. In addition, I visited Jannum myself. *Huilende Bruiden* takes the form of an audio tour. I have walked this route of *Huilende Bruiden* in eastern Groningen while listening to the audio. Since I am writing this thesis a few years after *Huilende Bruiden* performed, some of the farms are being restored and some of the workers-houses that were mentioned in the audio, are already demolished.

[19] Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach,'' *FORUM+* 28, no. 3 (2021): 7.

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In both chapters I will use the same structure: first, site-specificity, then rural context, and finally structure of feeling. Site-specificity focusses amongst other things on what is physically present on the site and how this is used in the performances. It also has to do with the context of the site. The second section, rural context, is therefore also related to what is physically present at the site but focusses more on (immaterial) context. Structure of feeling focusses more on the locals and is intangible. It again stands in relation to what is physically present as well as to current issues and topics. As I will explain in this chapter, these three elements *together* – including representation of the rural – produce rural space. Therefore, this chapter revolves around the question 'how can theories about the constitution/production and representation of the rural (space) contribute to understanding rural dramaturgies?' and consists of a theoretical framework for analysing rural dramaturgies, which I will use in the next chapter.

1.1 SITE-SPECIFICITY

In her book *The Ambit of Performativity: How Site Makes Meaning in Site-Specific Performance* (2007), scenography scholar Kathleen Irwin describes site-specific performance as a ''hybrid form of presentation that takes its initial impulse from the material world'' and wonders what can be said about the scenographic strategies that are being used in these performances.[20] She quotes the definition of theatre scholar Patrice Pavis, that site-specific performance is based on a place in the real world. Often, this place takes with it a history and/or atmosphere. According to Pavis, staging and performing a text in this 'found space', as he calls it, redefines the relationship between the audience and the text, the place, and the purpose of being there by creating a new situation of enunciation.[21] Irwin notes this definition fails to incorporate the process driven nature of site-specific work, which means that the work is made in relation to and engaging with the site.[22] Performance scholar Mike Pearson also turns to this quote in the introduction of his book *Site-specific performance* (2010), and notes that Pavis' idea about site-specificity indeed fails to address the exchanges between the work and the place which play an important role in how the meaning of a work is defined. Since Pavis' definition is short, it does not, in my opinion, do justice to all that site-specific performance entails. Pearson notes that in the ten years between Pavis' and his own publication site-specific practice has changed from fixed and expositional into a more mobile, relational, and dialogic process – and since Pearson's publication is also already fifteen years old this has evolved even further.[23] Nonetheless, Pavis' observation about the place in the real world, the inherent history and atmosphere, and the consequential redefining of the relationships between everything present, remains relevant. In his introduction, Pearson gathers multiple ideas about (the definition of) site-specific performance from various authors, among whom art scholar Miwon Kwon. Kwon states that site-specific performance has the ''capacity to articulate and cultivate local particularities (...).''[24] Pearson also quotes performance scholar Gay

[20] Kathleen Irwin, ''Introduction,'' in *The Ambit of Performativity: How Site Makes Meaning in Site-Specific Performance* (Vaajakoski, Finland: Gummerus Printing, 2007), 9.
[21] Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis* (Toronto, Buffalo, Londen: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 337-8.
[22] Irwin, ''Introduction,'' 10.
[23] Mike Pearson, ''Introduction,'' in *Site-Specific Performance* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010), 7-8.
[24] Idem, 12.

McAuley, who says that site-specific work ''engages intensively with the history and politics of that place, and with the resonance of these in the present.''[25] These definitions show similarities with Irwin's process-based approach to site-specificity, namely that site-specific performance engages with the history, atmosphere, politics, locality and other particularities of the site on which the performance takes place (such as the structure of feeling and rural context on which I will elaborate later). These observations also correspond to what Ferdman writes about urban dramaturgy, as set out in the introduction of this thesis, and is one of the characteristics of this site-specific dramaturgy that also applies to rural dramaturgy: these dramaturgies are ingrained with what is present and happening at their sites.[26]

Within their reflections on site-specific theatre, both Pearson and Irwin distinguish between that which belongs to the site (inherent to the site) and that which is brought to the site (that which is of the performance).[27] The site is both the represented place *and* the place of reception, or, in Irwin her exact words, the site provides both the visual frame as well as ''the aesthetic, social, political and historical context within which the event, the spectator, and the place are situated.''[28] Pearson talks about how site-specific performances occupy spaces, which can also be called *found* or *chosen* spaces (a term that Pavis also uses in his definition). These spaces are existing, social situations or locations.[29] That which belongs to the site could be the architecture, (traces of) materials, histories, and the size and dimensions of the site. For example, vast plains, the old houses in Jannum, the Oldambster Herenboerderijen, and the skyline of a city. As set out above, a site-specific work engages with the narratives that are attached to these elements, such as the character or history of buildings, or biographies of local communities (socio-political context and history) – which both reoccur in my case studies.[30] Irwin adds the spectator to this relationship. When looking at the context of a performance, it partly consists of the contexts of each individual spectator: every spectator plays a unique role in the apprehension of the networks of meanings, their subjective and situated experiences function as a filter through which they apprehend.[31] The relationship between the work, spectator, the site and these contexts is rather transformative than fixed. The site is doing things and thus performative, Irwin states. In this way, the site implicates the viewer ''in a process of mapping and contextualizing in order to expose what is already being 'acted out' by the site itself.''[32] A site can also create a certain atmosphere through elements such as air, light, and sound since these can have an affective impact on the body of the spectator.[33] These observations again correspond to what Ferdman has written about urban dramaturgies. As an example, Ferdman discusses the *Inside Out* project of artist JR, a project where huge posters

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[25] Pearson, ''Introduction,'' 10.
[26] Ferdman, ''Off the Grid: New York City Landmark Performance,'' 20-26.
[27] Mike Pearson, ''Models and Approaches,'' in *Site-Specific Performance* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010), 35.
[28] Kathleen Irwin, ''A Historical Overview'', in *The Ambit of Performativity: How Site Makes Meaning in Site-Specific Performance* (Vaajakoski, Finland: Gummerus Printing, 2007), 30-31.
[29] Pearson, ''Models and Approaches,'' 34-35; Christopher Baugh, ''Devices of Wonder': Globalizing Technologies in the Process of Scenography,'' in *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design*, ed. Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer (Londen and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 33-34; Irwin, ''Introduction,'' 10-11.
[30] Pearson, ''Models and Approaches,'' 35.
[31] Kathleen Irwin, ''Situating Performativity'', in *The Ambit of Performativity: How Site Makes Meaning in Site-Specific Performance* (Vaajakoski, Finland: Gummerus Printing, 2007), 85.
[32] Irwin, ''A Historical Overview'', 30-31.
[33] David Shearing, ''Audience Immersion, Mindfulness and the Experience of Scenography,'' in *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design*, ed. Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer (Londen and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 145.

of portraits are pasted in city space. By occupying the city space – people upload their portraits, get them sent back as an oversized poster, and paste it in public space themselves – the untold narratives of often ignored inhabitants (by mainstream media and/or due to living in poverty) claim their spotlight with JR's help. The posters invite the passersby to have different associations of what and who the urban space is for, consider its layered and diverse histories, and imagine its various possible futures.[34] Therefore, this dramaturgical strategy redefines the relationships between spectators, text, place, and the purpose of being there by letting people see and imagine that specific site anew themselves.[35]

These observations are relevant to the framework of rural dramaturgy. The performances engage with everything that is present there – from architecture to intangible context. Using rural dramaturgies, I will argue, the rural claims the spotlight (through the performances, the rural occupies the rural back). By taking the audience to the rural landscapes, the theatre-audience relationship changes compared to performances in theatre buildings.[36] That the site is both the represented place and the place of reception gives a special force to the statement of the performance, Jo Robinson argues in *Theatre & The Rural*.[37] When experiencing the artwork, then, the found space and the fabricated work are experienced *together*. Pearson states that it is not possible for a spectator to view and/or experience one of them independently from the other. The spectator will interpretate what they experience through the two aspects combined. The performance, the place, and the spectator are all active agents, who engage with each other and co-create the experience of the site-specific performance. They are all equally important.[38]

1.2 RURAL CONTEXT

1.2.1 THE TERM 'RURAL' AND THE SPATIAL TRIAD

In *Theatre & The Rural* (2016), Jo Robinson sets out a discussion of definitions of 'rural' in the United Kingdom. One of the definitions that Robinson gathered, describes place as something that is ''constructed by people doing things and in this sense (...) [is] never ''finished'' but (...) constantly being performed.''[39] So, the sense of a rural space and/or place is socially produced through repetitive (social) practices, forces, and impulses (what is done, written and performed within and about that place) and is not universal. Therefore, there are many different versions of the rural.[40] Among these forces are the cultural representations of theatre and performance.[41]

In the chapter ''Defining the rural'' Robinson cites geographer Keith Halfacree, who re-worked Henri Lefebvre's triad of space and applied it to the rural. Lefebvre is a sociologist and philosopher

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[34] Ferdman, ''Urban Dramaturgy: The Global Art Project of JR,'' 13-24.
[35] Ferdman, ''Off the Grid: New York City Landmark Performance,'' 17; Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, 337-8.
[36] Jo Robinson, ''Introduction – viewing the rural,'' in *Theatre & The Rural*, ed. Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato (Palgrave, 2016), Kobo Desktop edition, 9/9.
[37] Jo Robinson, ''The rural as site for performance,'' in *Theatre & The Rural*, ed. Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato (Palgrave, 2016), Kobo Desktop edition, 4/25.
[38] Pearson, ''Models and Approaches,'' 36-37.
[39] Tim Cresswell, ''The Genealogy of Place,'' in *Place: A Short Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2004), 37.
[40] Robinson, ''A rural sense of place,'' 5/11.
[41] Jo Robinson, ''Conclusion,'' in *Theatre & The Rural*, ed. Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato (Palgrave, 2016), Kobo Desktop edition, 2/2.

who studied the city and the urban. Well-known notions of Lefebvre include the production of space and planetary urbanisation, which he developed in the 1970s of the twentieth century. In *The Routledge handbook of Henri Lefebvre, the city and urban society* (2020) urban and spatial planning scholars Michael E. Leary-Owhin and John P. McCarthy suggest that the large scope of ideas and topics that have been applied to Lefebvre's theories over the years is the reason why there is no agreement on how to interpret some of Lefebvre's ideas.[42] Hence why they provide an accessible framework about these ideas in their book.

The triad of space (which consists of perceived, conceived, and lived space) is one of Lefebvre's notions that has often been reworked and applied in different contexts (like Halfacree did). Lefebvre himself emphasized that the dialectical interaction of the three components of the triad space *together* produce urban space.[43] Halfacree reworked these to try to understand the terms on which *rural* space is produced and represented.[44] These components can be used as tools to look at what we experience, and how we experience the urban/rural space. I have compared the triad as explained by Leary-Owhin and McCarthy with the triad as proposed by Halfacree, and propose this combined version, which I would call 'the spatial triad of the rural':

- Perceived space: the physical, material, perceptible rural space; rural redevelopment as influenced by social, political, economic and cultural context; the production and consumption of the rural space, routines of the daily life shaped by social and power structures.[45] In rural areas, this could be, for example, agricultural practices and food production, and cultural practices.[46]
- Conceived space: official and dominant representations and conceptions of rural areas for analytical, administrative and property development purposes (it reflects the dominant, formal ways of thinking about the rural space).[47] So, expressed by for example business or commercial interests, and/or politicians.[48] This may be in the form of the written word or quasi-scientific visual representations of various kinds such as maps, master plans and design guides.[49] In other words, rural space as it is conceptualized and planned, the ideas and ideologies regarding this space (which means that they are not neutral/objective). Robinson adds theatre's representations of the rural – often created from an outsider perspective – to this component. The dominance of outsider-representations of the rural outweigh the representations of the lived reality of the local communities.[50]
- Lived space: rural everyday space and life; how it is individually understood, experienced and lived by the inhabitants and users of the rural space. This entails the emotional interpretations of the rural space, and is informed by associated cultural memories, images, symbols and cultural meaning.[51] The lived space is thus informed

[42] Michael E. Leary-Owhin and John P. McCarthy, ''Introduction: 'Urban' ideas for two centuries,'' in *The Routledge Handbook of Henri Lefebvre, the City and Urban society*, ed. M.E. Leary-Owhin and M. Edema (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 2.
[43] Ibidem.
[44] Robinson, ''A rural sense of place,'' 5-6/11.
[45] Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, ''Introduction,'' 7.
[46] Robinson, ''A rural sense of place,'' 5/11.
[47] Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, ''Introduction,'' 7.
[48] Keith Halfacree, ''Rural Space: Constructing a Three-fold Architecture,'' in *Handbook of Rural Studies*, ed. P. Cloke, T. Marsden and P. Mooney (Sage, 2006), 54.
[49] Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, ''Introduction,'' 7.
[50] Robinson, ''A rural sense of place,'' 6/11.
[51] Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, ''Introduction,'' 7.

by both individual and social elements which are incorporated in the individual interpretation of and feeling about the rural life.[52] These interpretations can possibly be in conflict with the dominant representations of space and can differ per person.[53]

Concluding: the rural in its totality is continually (re)produced through different impulses and forces and is represented in different contexts and by different groups. Therefore, it has no universal definition: there is not one rural, but many.[54]

1.2.2 WOODS – KEY DRIVERS

Contexts that can be implied by the site, or the found space, are issues that live there. In ''The Future of Rural Places,'' Michael Woods touches upon political debates about the future of rural areas in different parts of the world. Some of these debates are about the relation between the rural and the urban. Issues surrounding the future of rural areas that Woods mentions are, amongst others, the loss of rural land to new construction and the viability of rural communities even though they are depopulating. These issues are consequences of global urbanisation. Woods states that a possible future of the rural is an increasing growing together of urban and rural areas, which would turn rural areas into a so-called 'urban countrysides'. The urban countryside is based on ''the inter-connection and inter-dependency of rural and urban places.''[55] Another model is 'the global countryside'. This model emphasises the same as the urban countryside, but differs from it by not positioning the city as the agent of change: ''globalisation is not *imposed* on the countryside by an urban power centre but is the product of everyday interactions in both rural and urban places'' (my emphasis).[56] Examples are villages that have the agency to actively seize the opportunities emerging from globalisation. This implies that local actors are engaged in responding to globalisation processes, which means that the outcomes can differ between places. As a consequence, contrasting ideas about the future of the local area can lead to competition, turning the global countryside into a contested space, Woods explains.[57]

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, Woods states that political debates about the (future of the) rural are all based on similar patterns and experiences of rural change, even though they take place in different geographical and political-economic contexts. These debates, patterns, and experiences have a few key drivers, which Woods identifies as are urbanisation, globalisation, environmental change, commodification of the countryside, technological change, and political and ideological pressures.[58] A summary of what Woods classifies as the various key drivers and what they (amongst other things) entail:[59]

- Urbanisation
    - Urban demands on rural land
    - Viability of depopulating rural communities
- Globalisation: the increase in connections between rural areas and cities and changing market conditions
    - Restructuring of rural economies and populations

[52] Halfacree, ''Rural Space: Constructing a Three-fold Architecture,'' 51.
[53] Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, ''Introduction,'' 7.
[54] Robinson, ''Conclusion,'' 2/2.
[55] Woods, ''The future of rural places,'' 624-26.
[56] Idem, 627.
[57] Ibidem.
[58] Idem, 623.
[59] Ibidem.

    - Challenges to rural cultural practices
- Environmental change (climate change)
    - Shifts in geography of agricultural production
    - Rural tourism
    - Post-carbon future
    - Changes in rural lifestyles and land use
- Commodification of the countryside: the cultural and recreational appeal of the rural
    - Consumption-based economy
    - Land management and planning
    - Localised conflicts
- Technological change
    - New economic opportunities
    - Influence of technologies on everyday life, agricultural practice, and geographies
- Political and ideological pressures (neoliberalism)
    - Questioning and challenging rural policies

1.2.3 A 'DUTCH' KEY DRIVER: THE 'GAP' AND LOCAL RESENTMENT

Over the last decade, there have been many public debates in the Netherlands about the relation between Dutch rural areas and the centre of the Netherlands, represented by large cities and the west. This area is called the 'Randstad' and also includes The Hague, where the Dutch political system is located. These debates circle around the idea that certain tensions in the Dutch society are a consequence of a feeling of misunderstanding between different regions, namely that the countryside does not feel seen by the national politics and feels disadvantaged compared to the Randstad. This difference has been called 'the gap', and the theme flared up again during the run-up to the provincial elections in the Netherlands in 2023. The state secretary for housing, spatial planning and environment, Johan Remkes, spoke of the gap in relation to the policies around nitrogen, which had a large influence on the practice and future of agriculture.[60]

There are different definitions of what the gap entails: a gap between the inhabitants of the Randstad and the inhabitants of rest of the country, or a gap between inhabitants of the cities and the inhabitants of the countryside. Researcher of the Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau Emily Miltenburg concludes that this last definition is confusing since the Randstad also contains areas of countryside, and the rest of the country also has cities. A third definition is the perceived distance towards the national political system in The Hague.[61] Miltenburg shares her findings together with researcher Twan Huijsmans on the political blog *Stuk Rood Vlees*, in which they look at the feeling of social unease, or social dissatisfaction: the feeling of powerlessness towards the improvement of society. Even though there is a higher level of social unease in the rest of the country than in the Randstad, it does not mean that it counts for everybody in these regions and for nobody in the Randstad. There are differences between inhabitants of the different regions too. Factors that play a big role in producing/contributing to these differences are level of education, income, health, and political preference (thus, people's individual backgrounds).[62] As mentioned

[60] Roemer Ockhuijsen, "Een kloof tussen stad en platteland? Dat hangt ervan af aan wie je het vraagt,'' *NOS*, March 13, 2023, https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/collectie/13923/artikel/2467280-een-kloof-tussen-stad-en-platteland-dat-hangt-ervan-af-aan-wie-je-het-vraagt.
[61] Emily Miltenburg and Twan Huijsmans, "Nuance in debat over 'de kloof' tussen stad en platteland nodig,'' *StukRoodVlees*, March 6, 2023, https://stukroodvlees.nl/nuance-in-debat-over-de-kloof-tussen-stad-en-platteland-nodig/.
[62] Miltenburg and Huijsmans, "Nuance in debat over 'de kloof' tussen stad en platteland nodig.''

in the introduction, these factors are also connected to the differences regarding what kind of rural people want and desire.[63] Differences *within* the regions are mostly bigger than the differences *between* them, Miltenburg and Huijsmans conclude.[64]

Miltenburg and Huijsmans found in their research that social unease is relatively low in urban areas in both the Randstad and the periphery, whereas in the rural municipalities in both regions it is higher. Miltenburg and Huijsmans conclude that the spatial patterns in social dissatisfaction are not only a consequence of rurality but also partly explained by the fact that the different areas are inhabited by people with averagely other backgrounds (such as education) and political beliefs.

What also contributes to the creation of social unease in the Netherlands, is what Miltenburg and Huijsmans call 'local resentment': with an increase in distance from The Hague, there is also an increase in the feeling that The Hague is not giving enough attention to the region. The highest level of local resentment is in the peripheral, rural municipalities. Miltenburg and Huijsmans thus conclude that there is no 'gap' between *residents* of the Randstad and the rest of the Netherlands, but there *is* a 'gap', a felt distance, towards the national political system which differs between rural and urban areas. The feeling of a low level of attention to the region-specific issues and challenges flares up in response to policies on themes such as nitrogen.[65]

1.3 STRUCTURE OF FEELING

As set out above in the first two parts of this chapter, site-specificness implies the significance of and emphasis on the presence of (local) context. When analysing what local ideas about 'the rural' are being implied in the case studies, I will draw on the concept of *structure of feeling*, as defined by cultural theorist Raymond Williams. Structure of feeling has to do with the experiences and (consequential) feelings and values that live within a local community. Williams proposed the term structure of feeling to designate the affective element of a culture. This structure is noticeable and demonstrable, also for an external someone, yet not tangible.[66] Williams defined the term in *The Long Revolution* (1961) as follows:

> [A] particular sense of life, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression, through which the characteristics of our way of life that an external analyst could describe are in some way passed, giving them a particular and characteristic colour.[67]

It is expressed through social and cultural practices, habits, and also possibly through art. Even though it may be implicitly or even unconsciously, ''some art express[es] feelings which the society, in its general character, could not express.''[68] Structure of feeling is something that one can learn and understand from a specific group that exists in a specific place and time. The temporal, spatial, and communal characteristics of structure of feelings are the reason that different groups, generations and or/communities experience a different structure of feeling. Structure of feeling is therefore very much situated and belongs to a specific region and/or site. It

[63] Ferdman, ''Urban Dramaturgy: The Global Art Project of JR,'' 19.
[64] Miltenburg and Huijsmans, "Nuance in debat over 'de kloof' tussen stad en platteland nodig.''
[65] Ibidem.
[66] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), 64.
[67] Ibidem.
[68] Idem, 86-87.

is thus connected to both site-specificity and rural context which is why I discuss this concept lastly. The contrasts between groups result in the division of internal and external positions towards a certain structure of feeling.[69] In other words, one can possibly recognise oneself (or not) in the different aspects that together produce a structure of feeling.

Whether one recognises oneself can be connected to the idea of belonging to a particular culture. William distinguishes between dominant, residual, and emergent cultures. The dominant culture is ''the central, effective and dominant system of meanings and values, which are not merely abstract but which are organized and lived.''[70] Williams explains that the dominant culture consists of the *central* system of practices, meanings, and values of which educational institutions are the main transmitters:

> It is a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and his world. It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society.[71]

The dominant culture consists of a selection of aspects (meanings, practices, histories): some meanings and histories are emphasized whereas others are excluded. What the dominant culture entails, depends on these emphasized aspects. The emphasizing is done by educational institutions and social training through for example families, and the organisation and practice of work.[72]

There are also practices, experiences, meanings, and values which do not belong to the dominant culture. Williams divides these aspects into alternative (residual culture) and oppositional (emergent culture). Residual culture consists of aspects that do not correspond to the dominant culture but are still lived and practiced. The basis of these residual cultures may lie in previous social formations. Williams uses religious values as an example: some religious meanings and values are incorporated into the dominant culture, whereas others may not be part of the dominant culture but are nevertheless practiced. But also aspects from for example a rural past may form a residual culture since these aspects do not belong to the dominant culture (anymore) but are still practiced in certain areas. However, Williams mentions, since the dominant culture has to make sense to the areas it is the dominant culture of, the most popular residual cultures will probably be incorporated in the dominant culture. Especially when it is based on a dominant culture of the past, it probably is in some version still part of the effective dominant culture.[73]

'Emergent' points to new meanings, values, practices, and experiences that are constantly being created.[74] But something is seen as an emergent culture when it is openly oppositional to – and thus possibly attacking – the dominant culture, performance scholar Dick Zijp explains in

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[69] Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 64.
[70] Raymond Williams, ''Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,'' *New Left Review*, no. 82 (November–December, 1973), online edition, PDF page 13, https://newleftreview.org/issues/i82/articles/raymond-williams-base-and-superstructure-in-marxist-cultural-theory.
[71] Ibidem.
[72] Idem, PDF page 14.
[73] Idem, PDF page 16-18.
[74] Idem, PDF page 17-18.

''Cultural materialism'' (publication in progress).[75] The theoretical distinction between oppositional and alternative, emergent and residual, is whether someone practices a different way of life and actually seeks to change society accordingly or not. This distinction usually corresponds to the solutions to social crises from respectively revolutionary or political practices versus individual or small-group solutions. There are also distinctions that can be made between residual/emergent-incorporated and residual/emergent-not incorporated. Williams: ''It is an important fact about any particular society, how far it reaches into the whole range of human practices and experiences in an attempt at incorporation.''[76]

Theoretically, there is thus a clear distinction between the three forms of culture, but in reality it is messier. Zijp explains that this is because social reality is structured by competing interests and intersecting domains of struggle.[77] This is also noticeable in the rural areas: even though rural lifestyles may have been part of dominant culture in the past and are in some version part of the current dominant culture, this does not mean that they can maintain this lifestyle easily. The lived realities of rural communities and the structure of feeling connected with it align with the component of lived space from the spatial triad of the rural, which, as mentioned earlier, can possibly be in conflict with the dominant representations of space.[78] Structure of feeling also shows similarities to Lidia Varbanova's definition of rural communities, namely that they are formed when a population shares a collective memory and a 'sense of place' in a certain rural territory, and Plan B's concept of the rural as a mental space.[79] What I will define as 'rural', will therefore have to do with the structure of feeling, the feeling of community, and experiencing a sense of place. Part of this structure of feeling is local resentment, as defined by Miltenburg and Huijsmans. Just as structure of feeling is very much situated, this resentment is also linked to location.

[75] Dick Zijp, publication in progress, ''Cultural materialism,'' in *Performance Research Methods: Interdisciplinary Methods for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies*, ed. Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Laura Karreman (Open Book Publishers), 6.
[76] Williams, ''Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,'' PDF page 18-19.
[77] Zijp, ''Cultural materialism,'' 9.
[78] Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, ''Introduction,'' 7.
[79] Varbanova, ''Developing and Revitalizing Rural Communities Through Arts and Creativity: EUROPE,'' 3; Plan B, ''Artikel: Plan B over Dorpsdramaturgie.''

CHAPTER 2: ANALYSIS

In this chapter I will use the theoretical framework of the previous chapter to analyse the rural dramaturgies used in *Hjir Ha Ik West, Onze Grond,* and *Huilende Bruiden*. This chapter begins with an analysis of site-specific elements, the perceived space, and performance composition, followed by an exploration of how the rural context and its key drivers (which relate to the conceived rural space) are expressed in the case studies. I will then analyse the structures of feeling present in the different areas as they are implied by the performances, and how these relate back to the previously discussed sections of site-specificity and rural context. By examining how these contexts and (hi)stories are represented in the performances, I aim to investigate the statements *HHIW, OG,* and *HB* make about 'the rural'. I will therefore also touch upon what kind of definition of 'rural' my case studies use: what they have in common, and which aspects reoccur.

2.1 SITE-SPECIFICITY

2.1.1 HJIR HA IK WEST

As said earlier, *HHIW* takes place in the smallest terp-village in the world. Jannum consists of fourteen houses, a few on the terp, and some farms spread around it. The eyecatcher on top of the terp is a small church, built around 1300.[80] There is one small road made of cobblestones leading towards the terp. *HHIW* takes place in 2053. After a bus tour through the landscapes of Fryslân while historical 'facts' are being told by tour guides dressed in white futuristic clothing with white rainboots (they look out of place here in nature), we, the spectators, are dropped off at the turn off towards that little road. We see a lot of green meadows and branches of the Dokkumer Ee (a long river from Leeuwarden to Dokkum). In the corner of the meadow that is parallel to the corner in the road, a sign has been placed. It consists of large letters that says 'I <3 Jannum'. It is similar to the big touristic 'IAMsterdam' sign in Amsterdam and therefore evokes associations with tourism for attractions (such as Amsterdam). There is almost no traffic, and apart from Jannum's own farms, there are no other buildings nearby. Instead of local people in 2019, the audience is positioned and addressed as international tourists who fell for the tourist-trap of the tour to Jannum. We sit down on stands, in the curve of the small road, and performers pass by us while walking towards the horizon. They represent former inhabitants, from 500 BC until the last inhabitants left in 2045. Afterwards, we are invited to walk through the village, 'in the shoes' of all these former Jannumer residents.[81]

[80] ''Jannum'', Dorpen - J, Friesland Wonderland, accessed May 9, 2025, https://www.frieslandwonderland.nl/friesland/plaats/jannum.
[81] *Hjir Ha Ik West*, Tryater.

Image 1: scenographic additions for HHIW *in a house in Jannum. ''Hjir Ha Ik West,'' Evenementen, Kerkmuseum Jannum, accessed June 19, 2025, https://www.kerkmuseumjannum.nl/evenementen.html.*

The houses that we may enter are small, crooked, and old-fashioned. Some of them contain scenographic additions, such as information signs about the history of the building and the village. One of the houses was set up as seen on Image 1: old looking, white clothes are hung out to dry on a clothesline. On the clothes, pictures of old residents are projected.[82]

Both the information and decoration that is presented to us, make the village look very ancient, as if there indeed had not been people living there for almost ten years. In reality, in 2019 (the year in which the performance took place), there are still people living (temporarily) in the houses, as the houses are rented out to tourists. The owners of the houses live in a village nearby. Because the whole village is scenography for the performance, the spectator gets absorbed into the world of the performance. The exchange between the audience address, the ancient look of the houses and the scenographic additions – the information signs, the big board in the meadow, and the projection on the clothing – create the illusion of Jannum being a real open-air-museum. This absorption results in a lived experience of the future, which can also make it feel more plausible. The spectators, who know that it is 2019 and not 2053, and therefore know that certain historical events have not happened (yet) – such as a big flood in 2039 – find themselves in a new relationship towards the village. The performance *creates* this whole new relationship: they are addressed as if they find it very unique and special to visit such an untouched, rural area. The spectator experiences the found space, Jannum, and the work *together* – as Pearson stated, it is impossible to experience them independently.[83] This exchange between the work and the place is important in how the meaning of the work is defined and interpreted by the spectator and this can – just as is happening in *HHIW*, for example through the audience address and absorption – redefine the relationship between the audience, the work, the place, and the purpose of being there.[84]

2.1.2 ONZE GROND

OG is located at Weipoort, in the municipality of Zoeterwoude, just south of the city of Leiden. Weipoort consists of a long road along a river, the meadows are wide, and in the background of the meadow where we are seated, we see a small road where cars drive by and the skyline of nearby villages or cities. On the left, there is a big screen. On the right, there is a radio studio that looks a bit like a greenhouse. Further, there is nothing else than the landscape. In the performance, the village is called Akkerdorp.[85] The makers did not change what was already there

[82] *Hjir Ha Ik West*.
[83] Pearson, ''Models and Approaches,'' 35.
[84] Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, 337-8.
[85] *Onze Grond*.

but simply renamed the village and performed a fictional story based on the truth, on the issues and stories that live in Zoeterwoude.[86]

One of the current topics that live in Zoeterwoude, is the urban getting closer, which we also see in the background where the skyline of the city looms.[87] An issue that is connected to the urban getting closer, is the building of the last pieces of free (unbuilt) land. In *OG*, four inhabitants of Akkerdorp host a 24/7 radio show as a form of protest against the construction of a large distribution centre on the last remaining open meadow in the village.[88] The use of the site and the possibly recognizable local stories contribute to the illusion of Akkerdorp being real. We are not only told that the urban is getting closer, we also *see* it being close. We are not only told that his is the last piece of unbuild ground, it *is* really the last piece of unbuild ground. Its fictionality is only in the name. The makers used the issues that live in this area when making the performance, these stories and struggles are therefore some people's truth. All the characters are, in their own way, attached to the place due to its wide, natural landscapes and rural/village character. This would change if the distribution would be built.

The performance steers the audience towards supporting the protest, partly because they are addressed as being in favour: both as listeners of the radio show, and by being outside together with the protestors which also physically positions them as being in protest. Physically experiencing the wideness and quietness in combination with the arguments that are presented in the performance, may change the spectator's perspective and relationship towards rural landscapes and areas. Being seated outside results in being confronted with what is at stake.

Via videos on the big screen on the left side of the spectators, the ground itself gets to share her perspective. She also expresses her fear for the future: what if she cannot carry the young children anymore? Everybody loves and values the ground, but the love is now destroying her.[89] Her videos are a cry for help. Hearing the ground while sitting on this ground, seeing her, smelling her even (the smell of grass) – looking her in the eyes, so to say – invites an embodied engagement at the end of the spectator. The element of smell and the wideness of the field create an atmosphere that has an affective impact on the body.[90] Because of this engagement and affect, the spectator is invited to re-evaluate their relationship towards the ground and the earth. The ground/earth takes the spotlight by absorbing the spectators into her own space. Nature is re-occupying her own space.

2.1.3 HUILENDE BRUIDEN

In *Huilende Bruiden* the spectators walk from Klein Ulsda to Bad Nieuweschans. As said earlier, this area consists of vast plains. The only buildings the spectator sees, are the large farms and some of the small workers-houses. In the distance there are windmills, which mark the border of Germany. The large farms are characterized by their stately front house with ornaments and the large granary behind it. They also have big gardens. The farms owe their appearance to the prosperity of the farmers who lived there during the Grain Republic (1870-1920) and stand in stark contrast with the appearance of the workers-houses, where the poor farmhands that worked for

[86] ''Wij zijn Zoeterwoude,'' Dorpsportretten, PS|Theater, accessed May 12, 2025, https://pstheater.nl/zoeterwoude/dorps/.
[87] Ibidem.
[88] *Onze Grond*.
[89] Ibidem.
[90] Shearing, ''Audience Immersion, Mindfulness and the Experience of Scenography,'' 145.

these farmers lived.[91] On the day that I visited the area there was hardly any traffic, except for a few people enjoying the sun in convertibles and on motorbikes. When they were not there, the only thing I heard was birds singing and the wind blowing. None of the farms had animals in the meadows. I saw no signs of residents living there except for one resident who was working in her garden.

HB is completely non-fiction and consists partly of interviews with the owners of the farms. They thus tell their story themselves. We, the spectators see how most of these farms are now in disrepair – one more than the other – and through our headphones we hear that this is because the restoration and maintenance are too expansive for the current owners to afford. The residents talk about the decaying of the farms and the fear for even worse decaying. The farms are sinking and collapsing due to the earthquakes caused by the natural gas extraction.[92] Groningen has been used for natural gas extraction for years. That the government took too long to stop the gas extraction is a feeling that prevails and has created distrust towards the government under the Groninger residents. Uncertainties about the earthquakes, the impact on their homes, and the long wait for renovation and damage claims are leading to health problems for some residents.[93] The whole situation resulted in tensions between the residents and the governing parties. Other reasons for the further decaying, are storms. These can be devastating because of the lack of maintenance and renovation of the buildings.[94] Some of the ornaments were formed like women, but now that the plasterwork is peeling off, it looks like they are crying – hence the nickname 'Crying Brides' (translation of 'Huilende Bruiden).[95]

The only thing that *HB* added to the site, is the fact that the houses are open to enter. The stories that normally live behind closed doors and far away from the ones who do not live close to Groningen, are now accessible to the spectator – also through the audio. Further, you are visiting the site as it is. The area is far away from the urban and on the other side of the country from The Hague, from the national government.

The big farms look extra big in contrast with the emptiness of the landscape. To me, they felt impressive. On the other hand, the damage makes them feel rather weak. As if the intimidating shield had been broken. When the stories of their residents were told, I felt the pain of both the residents and the building itself. How can something so beautiful and large, once so wealthy, be so forgotten and decayed? Where on first-hand the buildings and the area (so far away from other inhabited areas) may seem abandoned, they transform back to live once I hear the stories about their history and their current residents. Since it is non-fiction, the feelings and stories of the residents are authentic and the revealing of these stories *is* the performance.

HB is a clear example of how a site-specific performance engages with the narratives that are attached to the aspects that belong to the site, such as characters and histories of buildings, and

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[91] ''Huilende Bruiden – de film,'' Portfolio, Tom Tieman Media, accessed February 18, 2025, https://www.tomtiemanmedia.nl/portfolio/huilende-bruiden-de-film/;
[92] *Huilende Bruiden*.
[93] ''Voormalige gaswinning Groningen-gasveld,'' Sectoren, Staatstoezicht op de Mijnen, accessed June 18, 2025, https://www.sodm.nl/sectoren/gaswinning-groningen.
[94] *Huilende Bruiden*.
[95] ''Vervallen boerenkathedralen komen zelf aan het woord in 'Huilende Bruiden'", Nieuws, Omrop Fryslân, January 11, 2025, https://www.omropfryslan.nl/nl/nieuws/17136365/vervallen-boerenkathedralen-komen-zelf-aan-het-woord-in-huilende-bruiden.

biographies of local communities.[96] Just as in *OG*, elements of the site create an atmosphere that can have an affective impact on the body of the spectator, such as the wideness of the landscape, the contrast of this with the largeness of the buildings, and also the weather can play a role in the making of meaning. When I visited eastern Groningen, the sun was shining bright: the nature looked even more beautiful, which in turn contrasted enormously with the sloppiness and lifelessness of the farms. *HB* does what Irwin described in ''A Historical Overview'', namely that the site is performative and is 'acting out' already by itself.[97]

2.2 RURAL CONTEXT

2.2.1 HJIR HA IK WEST

The rural future that is portrayed in *HHIW*, is that the rural (as we now know and define it) will be something that belongs to the past: therefore, the rural is in danger. It will become unattractive for living (even for shorter stays) and therefore becomes a tourist attraction: a part of history rather than a part of the future's present; a museum. The addressing of the spectators as tourists who are about to see something very special, emphasises that: in 2053, this is not something that you are able to see easily. Predictions such as a big flood, do not seem unlikely due to climate change. Knowing that Jannum is already a village equipped for tourism, and thus not fulfilling its original function as a farmer's village anymore, and in the context of the rural being 'in danger', the future that is portrayed here, feels plausible.

Climate change is not the only thing threatening the rural/Jannum. In the texts of *HHIW*, spoken by the tour guides, it becomes clear what other reasons were for past inhabitants to leave or come to the village: the modernisation of urban areas, and the rural not being a place where people want their kids to grow up made people leave. Then, the overpopulation in urban areas resulted in an exchange of inhabitants with urban areas, which changed the rural atmosphere and lifestyles of the village. In the end, everybody leaves again. In 2020, the Jannumer inhabitants make a final attempt to fight the population shrinkage by focussing on tourism. Nonetheless, when the area gets flooded in 2039, it is the final blow for Jannum and other villages like it, the tour guides explain. The water is too threatening and makes the last inhabitants leave. In the last decennia (until 2053), a lot of global trends have changed the lifestyles in old-Frisian areas already. This results in the disappearance of that what made Jannum unique back in the day. The tour guides end the history-show with a positive note, like a sales-pitch for their tour: luckily tourism-tours like this one maintained the old-Frisian identity of these villages and now make it accessible for tourists from all over the world![98] However, the spectator may wonder, do they show us the *real* old-Frisian lifestyle? The way this tourist-tour presents Jannum can be considered as the conceived space (which does not necessarily correspond to the lived reality): official and dominant representations and conceptions of rural areas, expressed by for example business or commercial interests.[99] *HHIW* shows how the key drivers, patterns and experiences, influence the lived space and the perceived space of Jannum: the modernisation of the city, overpopulation and

[96] Baugh, ''Devices of Wonder': Globalizing Technologies in the Process of Scenography,'' 33-34; Irwin, ''Introduction,'' 10-11.
[97] Irwin, ''A Historical Overview'', 30-31.
[98] *Hjir Ha Ik West*.
[99] Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, ''Introduction,'' 7; Halfacree, ''Rural Space: Constructing a Three-fold Architecture,'' 54.

population shrinkage, and the consequential changes all influence perceived space and consequently influence what lived space entails. The dialectical interaction of these three components of the spatial triad of the rural – and the future development of these components as portrayed in *HHIW* – resulted in a radical change of the rural space into a touristic, open-air history-show.

That the rural as we now know it and its lifestyles could become something that belongs to the past, and is not viable anymore in the future, also reoccurs in *Onze Grond* and *Huilende Bruiden*.

2.2.2 ONZE GROND

Because of the construction of the distribution centre in Akkerdorp, farms will have to be demolished, and their residents will have to leave. *Onze Grond* makes clear how the wide landscape of the countryside will vanish and consequently the house prices may fall. That is because the area will become less attractive to live – just as in *HHIW* and *HB*, even though the reasons differ. Here, the landscape was Akkerdorp's 'unique selling point.' This building could not only ruin the view – which the spectator can imagine while looking out over the wide meadows – but could also be the beginning of the construction of a larger industrial park. In addition, it could lead to trucks in the historical streets, to either population shrinkage (and thus the falling house prices) or housing shortage due to large numbers of employees who need a home, to windmills, and to the city getting closer: if the polder disappears, it will effectively and inevitably mean the demise of Akkerdorp.[100] The characters in *OG* are engaged in responding to the globalisation processes, but are against the urban power center imposing globalisation on them. *OG* shows, and therefore confirms, that these contrasting ideas about the future of the local area lead to conflict, which Woods explains when talking about the model of the global countryside.[101]

A councillor refutes the arguments of the protest by explaining that the employment that the distribution centre will create, will attract young workers and will therefore provide a youthful impulse to the village. In addition, he shares that the research the municipality has done, showed that the natural value of the soil was low and that the new landscape – new trees and grass that they will plant around the distribution centre – will be beneficial for nature. This results in a debate with one of the protestors, who doubts whether this plan will indeed be beneficial for nature or not.[102] By playing out the debates and tensions between the different sides of the protest, and by addressing the spectators as part of the protest, the performance involves the spectators in thinking about what is best for the future and about which future they support.

Akkerdorp shares some of the key drivers with the other types of rural that are portrayed in the other performances – hence why they are *shared* patterns and experiences regarding rural change.[103] Here, key drivers such as urbanisation, commodification of the countryside, and environmental change seem to cause a change in conceived space: ideas regarding the space and its use are changing. This then influences the perceived space. The perceptible rural space will change if the distribution centre is built. Also agricultural practices are affected by the construction. This, then, has large consequences for the lived space, for the daily lives of the residents of Akkerdorp: they believe that this project will mean the demise of Akkerdorp,

[100] *Onze Grond*.
[101] Woods, ''The future of rural places,'' 627.
[102] *Onze Grond*.
[103] Woods, ''The future of rural places,'' 623.

2.2.3 HUILENDE BRUIDEN

Huilende Bruiden presents the challenges that the area and its residents face, such as the shrinkage of its population due to the attractiveness of the city, tensions with governing parties about gas extraction and consequential earthquake damage, and the fear of further decay due to storms – which could get worse if climate change keeps evolving.

In 2019, there was an advisory rapport written by consultancy firm Libau and the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands about the future of the Oldambster Herenboerderijen. In the rapport it says that the maintenance should be done because else the area will lose its attraction and with that its function as place of residence. Decayed farms do not contribute the feeling of home and are bad for the image of the region, which already has a difficult real estate market. The area becomes unliveable, because nobody will want to come there anymore and this influences tourism negatively.[104] In the audio of the performance, the maker, Tom Tieman, argues that if the place gets left behind completely and becomes forgotten, the history will also be forgotten and the generations to come will not be able to experience/know what once was.[105]

However, in contrast with Tieman, the rapport opts *for* the demolishment of the already badly decayed buildings, because it could have a positive effect on the atmosphere of the environment.[106] This perspective on the site can be regarded as an example of conceived space, because it portrays a written, official representation, and ideas and ideologies regarding the space. With the context of this rapport and the tensions around the gas extraction in mind, *HB* – which shines a light on this area as a valued lived space for its residents – becomes more earnest. If farms disappear, parts of history are threatened to disappear, and the atmosphere of this rural area is threatened to change. But, on the other hand: what deserves to be saved, and, if this does, *how* should it be preserved? Should it be turned into a tourist attraction or should it be left to decay and become forgotten? Who deserves to make decisions surrounding this piece of land, who does it belong to? Questions like these about space management, power, and transience reoccur in all three case studies.

2.3 STRUCTURE OF FEELING

2.3.1 HJIR HA IK WEST

The tour guides tell us during the open-air history-show that with the last inhabitants leaving in 2039, the typical, local, habits and lifestyles also disappeared permanently.[107] As mentioned in part 2.2.1 – the rural context of *HHIW* – the spectator may wonder if commercial tourism-tours like the one in *HHIW* are truthful about what these lifestyles and habits entailed. After all, the local parties that could be trusted as truthful are silenced. However, by using dramaturgical strategies such as time jumps and out-of-place tour guides, the spectators are pushed to be in favour of the local structure of feeling: visually portraying the tour guides as out-of-place – in their white, futuristic uniforms and therefore strongly contrasting with the environment – implies an aversion towards organisations like these that occupy Jannum for their own profit purpose and change the

[104] Libau, *Toekomst Oldambster boerderijen* (Amersfoort: Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Ergoed, 2019), 33.
[105] *Huilende Bruiden*.
[106] Libau, *Toekomst Oldambster boerderijen,* 33.
[107] *Hjir Ha Ik West*.

local atmosphere. Because, if Jannum gets to be experienced in a whole new context and atmosphere, can we then still speak of Jannum being its rural self?

As a consequence of the time jump to 2053 that the performance makes, all the facts that are told about the time period in between 2019 and 2053 cannot be factual, since it has not happened yet. This can make the spectator wonder whether the other facts are indeed factual or also made up, whether the structure of feeling that is portrayed is romanticized and perhaps fantasized, and whether this is something that happens more often to make a product (here: the tour) more entertaining. Since this tour also has an educational aspect (through, for example, the information-boards) tours like these are contributing to the formation of dominant culture. In tours like this, parts of rural history are emphasized and some are excluded, which contributes to the disappearance of the original rural as part of (the knowledge of) the dominant culture.[108]

Because of this form of *HHIW*, where the (former) locals can only implicitly share their perspective, it is harder to analyse the structure of feeling. Reading articles written about Jannum and *HHIW* reveals that the whole village used to rely on its agricultural business – this is also told by the tour guides when they explain that the agriculture kept modernising over the decades – but now it is about tourism, rest/quietness, privacy, nature, and history. Back in history (the twentieth century), there was no privacy at all. Everything was full, small, close together and you could hear everything that happened in the village. The residents used to work in the family-business, went ice-skating on the waters near the terp, and practiced their religion.[109] The people that now (between 2019 and 2025, when writing this thesis) still live near Jannum take shared responsibility for the village. They currently manage the tourism and are involved in the maintenance of the church (which is now a small museum) and the graveyard, which show signs of this past way and sense of living. When reading through their websites and interviews with them, a few things stick out, namely the appreciation of Jannum's history and quietness, and the small, old houses in which large families used to live and which also show signs of this past way of living.[110] This is how it is currently marketed to tourists.[111] There seems to be a conviction that these aspects should be preserved since they are/were affective characteristics of the way of life and therefore part of the local structure of feeling.[112] In *HHIW*, by being such a big group, this quiet, local atmosphere and affective elements are overshadowed. In addition, the tourists/spectators do not get a lot of chance to appreciate the nature, the surroundings of Jannum and the atmosphere of the village, since they are invited to investigate the houses and only have limited time.[113]

Whereas a local resident could explain the story from their point of view with love for the area – as done in reality by the locals who manage tourism – the tour guides do not show a personal connection to the village or the area.[114] It is a repeated story, it is created for tourism and thus again raises the question if it can be trusted to be truthful. Now, after having read the articles and interviews mentioned above, I can conclude that the former structure of feeling was indeed

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[108] Williams, ''Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,'' PDF page 14.
[109] *Hjir Ha Ik West*; Jantien de Boer, ''Kleinste terpdorp ter wereld is een paradijs voor rustzoekers,'' *Leeuwarder Courant*, March 30, 2019, https://lc.nl/friesland/Kleinste-terpdorp-ter-wereld-is-een-paradijs-voor-rustzoekers-24314634.html.
[110] Jantien de boer, ''Jannum: Groene, stille vluchtheuvel voor rustzoekers,'' *Leeuwarder Courant*, April 7, 2019, https://lc.nl/friesland/Jannum-Groene-stille-vluchtheuvel-voor-rustzoekers-24338014.html.
[111] ''Vakantiehuisjes op de terp van Jannum,'' Home, Jannum Logementen, accessed May 24, 2025, https://www.logementenjannum.nl/.
[112] Williams, *The Long Revolution* (1961), 64.
[113] *Hjir Ha Ik West*.
[114] Ibidem.

portrayed through some of the texts, the information signs, and picture projections (2.1.1), but that *HHIW* adds the critical note that big tourism companies will not give the opportunity to really experience that way of living yourself.

Because of the 'facts of the future' that are shared during the open-air history-show, the feeling conveyed to the spectators is a feeling of the rural belonging to the past, as a place that is unthinkable for living. It invites the spectator to think about the question if this is really how people in the future (as part of dominant culture) will look at rural areas as a consequence of commercial voices taking over and overshadowing the local voices, and/or, if this is perhaps a plausible future due to climate change.

Since the current structure of feeling is difficult to grasp when experiencing and analysing *HHIW* – and given that the village houses are used only for short stays – the question of what this structure of feeling really entails remains open.

2.3.2 ONZE GROND

The main topic of *OG* is the different versions of (and consequential tensions around) land-hunger: an almost unstoppable attraction to do something with the last piece of 'free' land and the different ideas about what to do with it.[115] Land-hunger is an example of the competing interests and intersecting domains of struggle – such as economic development, environmental preservation, and rural identity – that are characteristic for social reality and therefore for the unclear distinction between the three forms of culture (dominant, residual, emergent), as Zijp explained in ''Cultural materialism.''[116] In *OG*, a contrast is shown between the fear of change (due to the construction plans driven by globalisation and urbanisation), and the desire for change (to keep up with globalisation and urbanisation).[117] The desire for a modernised rural that grows along with the world around it could be seen as the dominant culture. It is likely to be practiced, since it aligns with the plans of the powerful parties (the government). The residual culture here, the desire to stay the same, is based on the dominant rural culture of the past. An emergent culture seems not present here but could originate from imagined alternatives for the future.

The structure of feeling of Akkerdorp portrayed in *OG* thus revolves around the disappearance of the last piece of free land: their view, space, village, and future, and therefore also their feeling of home, are on the line. Building the distribution centre on this last piece of land can result in the demolishing of this feeling of home and roots. Feelings towards the disappearance of the land are therefore fear, uncertainty, worries, and anger – especially towards the governing parties who sold the land to foreign companies. The rural community and its way of life are threatened by powerful parties with different priorities. The protesters feel unheard and unmet in their wishes by the Dutch government.[118] This shows that local resentment, as defined by Miltenburg and Huijsmans, is not by definition excluded from municipalities in the Randstad, which Zoeterwoude/Akkerdorp is.[119]

The residents seem aware of the possible inevitable change in rural lifestyles because of modern times but fear the uncertainty of what this change entails. The residents of Akkerdorp wonder: is there still a future for their children in this village? One thing is clear: to stand still is to go

[115] ''Grondhonger'', Verhalen, PS|Theater, August 5, 2021, https://pstheater.nl/verhalen/grondhonger/.
[116] Zijp, ''Cultural materialism,'' 9.
[117] *Onze Grond*.
[118] Ibidem.
[119] Miltenburg and Huijsmans, "Nuance in debat over 'de kloof' tussen stad en platteland nodig.''

backwards.[120] This debate around the future of Akkerdorp invites the spectators to think about the following questions: what is the primary characteristic of the rural here in Akkerdorp? Nature, community? And if both, which one has priority in this debate? *OG* shows that a village like Akkerdorp is thus valued for *both* its community and its natural environment. These two elements shape the local way of life, and the local *sense* of life – which is how Williams defined structure of feeling.[121] If the construction of the distribution centre goes ahead, one of these two values will vanish, namely the natural environment. This threat of change reveals which of the two are most valued by different residents of Akkerdorp and results in a gap between the locals: while some of them value it more for its community, others value the natural environment more. And while some prioritise their own future (for example the former resident who sold the land), others see that as selfish.[122] This contrast – and the tension it brings – also shapes the local sense of life. That the differences between people who live near the same area can be this big, are what Miltenburg and Huijsmans noticed when researching the gap.[123] The councillor's point that the protest is not beneficial for the community – since a majority of the Akkerdorpers appear to be against the protest which results in a gap within the community of the village – is therefore not an empty argument. This presence of a gap *within* the local community points at the existence of different groups within the community with therefore possibly different structures of feeling (because they relate to a different form of culture and/or have a different sense of life, for example). Nonetheless, *OG* portrays the protestors' side of the debate more dominantly (amongst other things by addressing the spectators as being in favour as explained in 2.1.2) and therefore states that the building of the distribution centre will *not* be beneficial for their future. It is not too late to create a better future, but the performance's question what that future should look like remains open.[124]

The spectators are invited to think about what their intentions would be with the land and about the perhaps inevitable evolution of the rural into something that is not what it used to be. After all, the rural place is never a finished product.[125]

2.3.3 HUILENDE BRUIDEN

Since structure of feeling is something that one can learn and understand from a specific group that exists in a specific place and time, interviewing this group seems a logical strategy for maker Tom Tieman to explore the structure of feeling he aims to convey.[126] In the interviews with the residents of the Herenboerderijen that we hear during the performance, it becomes clear that most of them moved there because they fell in love with the place. The spectator gains insight into this way and sense of life by walking through this area and getting to look inside the farms, and by experiencing the space, its atmosphere, and the silence of the emptiness. Some of the residents tell how they made the farm their life-project, they renovated the farms to live there. Others thought it would be a great thing to inherit for their children. However, their kids do not want to inherit the large task of maintaining the place and prefer living in the city, the resident in question tells Tieman; knowing how far I had to travel to get to the location, I can imagine that living this remote does not seem attractive to everyone.[127] When the interviewees talk about the decaying and the maintenance, the pain and fear in their voices is noticeable. Their lives have become

[120] *Onze Grond*.
[121] Williams, *The Long Revolution* (1961), 64.
[122] *Onze Grond*.
[123] Miltenburg and Huijsmans, "Nuance in debat over 'de kloof' tussen stad en platteland nodig.''
[124] *Onze Grond*.
[125] Cresswell, ''The Genealogy of Place,'' 37.
[126] Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 64.
[127] *Huilende Bruiden*.

stressful. By sharing this stress (which has become part of their sense of living and is therefore an element of the structure of feeling), the performance may evoke feelings of empathy in the spectator.[128]

Whereas in *OG* the urban is getting closer and may slowly absorb the village, in *HB* the urban seems to be and stay far away. It feels as the end of the world, even though it used to be an economically rich area in the late 1800's. The area *looks* forgotten by modern times: the buildings and wide empty landscapes make it seem as if new housing estates do not exist and as if there is no housing shortage. But the locals also *feel* forgotten, we hear, namely by the Dutch government. The belief prevails that the area would be seen as more of a priority if it were located near the Randstad. The residents thus feel disadvantaged compared to the urban regions closer to The Hague.[129] The governing parties keep promising things but never seem to keep their word (regarding maintenance, and the discontinuation of the gas extractions that are close by). Eastern Groningen is the living example of local resentment: with the increase in distance from The Hague, there is also an increase in the feeling that the Dutch government is not giving enough attention to the region.[130]

Tieman believes that most of our history is contained in material. Materials tell stories – hence why sites are performative – which survive the people that lived those (hi)stories. Stories give meaning to happenings, and without meaning, life is meaningless, Tieman tells us. He concludes that in the end, it is the stories that we tell that define who we are, what we do and what we have done in our lives.[131] Stories of specific groups that existed in a specific place and time express their way of life, their structure of feeling. The Herenboerderijen are a clear example: they show the way of life of the prosperous farmers during the Grain Republic. Also, we need the feeling of having 'roots', the performance concludes near the end. If you demolish history, you take away roots: the environment where you live, says something about who you are, and can feel as being part of you. In the interviews, it becomes clear that the local community indeed feels this way.[132] The demolition of the historical farms, therefore results in the disappearance of (hi)stories, the feeling of home, and the feeling of roots.

Tieman tells an autobiographical story about the cleaning up of his late grandmother's house. As a consequence of this experience, he understands that things will change once you save them out of their own context. For him, these were furniture pieces that he took out of his grandmother's house and put into his own home. For the Herenboerderijen it means that if the area decays even further (or turns into a touristic museum), a lot of stories and history thus will be lost. Tieman asks the spectator directly: what do we save/keep and why?[133] By comparing the situation in Groningen with an experience that is more common, Tieman turns the feeling of the local community into a more recognizable one.

Amongst the residents the emphasis lays more on the emotional value than on the historical value, on the feeling of home and roots, and their love for the area and living there. For the performance, Tieman combines this affective element of the local culture with his opinion on historical value, and the future of the rural from that viewpoint. A critical note is made by Tieman when he wonders whether the landscapes are perhaps already telling us a dishonest story: the

[128] Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 64.
[129] *Huilende Bruiden*.
[130] Miltenburg and Huijsmans, "Nuance in debat over 'de kloof' tussen stad en platteland nodig.''
[131] *Huilende Bruiden*.
[132] Ibidem.
[133] Ibidem.

preservation of the small workers-houses is not fought for even though these tell us about the class differences between the farmers and their workers.[134] Just as *HHIW*, *HB* deals with the stories that we tell and how these stories become – or already are – our history. If the (former and current) structure of feeling cannot be passed on anymore, it disappears. *HB* thus positions its spectators as the antidote for oblivion: the more people get to know the history, and more importantly, experience the atmosphere of this area, the more people perhaps will care for its maintenance. This could result in the preservation of the area, and therefore of the structure of feeling, and the community.

[134] *Huilende Bruiden*.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I developed a theoretical framework for analysing rural dramaturgies and put this to practice in an analysis of the performances *Hjir Ha Ik West, Onze Grond*, and *Huilende Bruiden*. I structured this around two sub-topics:

- Chapter 1 – theoretical framework: theories about the constitution and representation of the rural (space) that contribute to understanding rural dramaturgies.
- Chapter 2 – analysis: the ways in which the performances engage with local ways of living and address local, current topics and issues.

By doing a dramaturgical analysis, I analysed the site-specificity of the performance, followed by an analysis of the ways in which specific themes and rural stories were articulated (with the help of the spatial triad of the rural and the key drivers as identified by Michael Woods), and finally I analysed how the case studies portray in what ways 'the rural' is lived in the different Dutch rural areas (by means of Raymond Williams' concept 'structure of feeling'). In this conclusion, I will reflect on how this developed framework helped me reveal the dramaturgical strategies used in these performances to reclaim 'the rural' in response to contemporary transformations in Dutch rural areas and thus reflect on the analysing of 'rural dramaturgies'.

In my analysis, I argued that *HHIW, OG*, and *HB* are not only inspired by the physicality of the site but also by the rural context and the structure of feeling. However, the performances are not only *inspired* by these aspects, but they also actively *make use* of the site (as site-specific performances do) and actively *engage* with the structure of feeling in the performance – they portray the meanings, values, practices, and experiences of the local community – and the rural context that the site brings with it.

Reoccurring themes are the viability of rural lifestyles and communities, population shrinkage, the leaving and decaying of areas, the wideness and emptiness of rural landscapes, the feeling of home and roots, the feeling to be forgotten or unheard by governing parties (local resentment[135]), the uncertainty around the future of the rural, and the evolution that rural lifestyles will perhaps have to go through. Whatever their background or opinion, and no matter if their focus is on the short-term or long-term future, nobody knows the answer to the questions around the rural future. All three performances explore this question, each from the point of view of another part of the Netherlands and therefore from the perspective of another kind of rural. After all, there are many different versions of 'the rural'.

THE RECLAIM OF THE RURAL AND THE PRODUCTION OF RURAL SPACE

According to Lefebvre, all three components of the triad of space *together* produce urban space.[136] The same goes for rural space, I argue. In addition, I would argue that these *performances* together produce rural space. Together they portray the different components of the triad and, therefore, the three performances together give a view of what rural space entails. If these performances together produce rural space, and the performances give the stage to the perspectives, ways and senses of life, and stories of the rural areas, I would conclude that through these performances, the rural areas reclaim its own space (so, the rural itself). I call it a *re*-claim

[135] Miltenburg and Huijsmans, "Nuance in debat over 'de kloof' tussen stad en platteland nodig."
[136] Leary-Owhin and McCarthy, ''Introduction,'' 2.

because, during the research, I found that a reoccurring theme is that the rural as we now know it is threatened by, for example, processes as indicated by the key drivers. In addition, the outsider-ideas and representations threaten to outweigh the perspectives and lived realities of the local rural communities.[137] These processes and external perspectives lay claim to the rural, resulting in its possible disappearance.

HHIW, OG, and *HB* together state that in the future, the rural should be preserved as a lived space, and not as a museum, because this would change the context drastically and would therefore result in the demise as the rural as we know now it. This does not mean that the rural does not evolve, in the end the rural will always change, as long as the world (and therefore the) other components of the spatial triad) keeps changing. The reclaim is about the power structures behind this change, and who holds power over the future of rural areas and the preservation of rural (hi)stories.

DRAMATURGICAL STRATEGIES

I mentioned above that the performances give the stage to the perspectives and stories of the rural areas. In the dramaturgical analysis of Chapter 2, I looked at the different dramaturgical strategies that were used in order to do this. In all three performances, there is an awareness of the population shrinkage in rural areas, due to the attraction of urban areas. Rural lifestyles and businesses are not viable anymore due to environmental and technological change – they are not fitted for the 'new economy,' one of the councillor's employees explains in *OG*.[138] This results in the commodification of the countryside: economic and social changes in rural areas are necessary in order to modernise. Jannum, for example, is already a village used for tourism and recreation, instead of a farmers' village. However, the tourism is now organised by local residents, who focus on the possibility to experience Jannum and its characteristics for which it is valued.[139] This stands in contrast with big tourism companies as the one portrayed in *HHIW*, which possibly change historical stories in order to create a higher level of entertainment.

Different dramaturgical strategies were used to give the stage to the perspectives and stories of the rural areas. In *HHIW,* the events between 2019 and 2053 are presented as factual, however, because of the time jump the spectators know they are not (yet). This invites them to reflect on the possibility of this becoming the future. By portraying the tour guides as out-of-place through their outfits and emotional distance from locals, *HHIW* implies an aversion towards tourism organisations that reshape the rural for their own profit. The local parties thus seem to be silenced, but through these dramaturgical strategies, the spectators are slightly pushed to be in favour of preserving tourism as it currently exists. Just as *HHIW*, *HB* deals with the stories that we tell and save, and how these stories become – or already are – our history.[140] In *HB*, this is done by questioning it out loud while confronting the spectators with the decay (and thus the potential disappearance) of these historical elements and signs.

In both *HB* and *OG*, the parties that are present are the local communities and residents, while the governing parties are silenced or positioned as the opposite side. *OG* and *HB* highlight why people would want to live in these specific places: the sense of life and histories that locals connect to their areas are clearly valued. However, these residents are also aware of inevitable changes due to climate change and the ongoing pressure of globalisation and urbanisation (for

[137] Robinson, ''A rural sense of place,'' 6/11.
[138] *Onze Grond*.
[139] De boer, ''Jannum: Groene, stille vluchtheuvel voor rustzoekers.''
[140] *Hjir Ha Ik West*; *Huilende Bruiden*.

example, urban demands on rural land).[141] The makers of *OG*, PS|Theater, came up with the word 'land-hunger.'[142] This is especially relevant to Zoeterwoude, located between big urban areas in the Netherlands. In contrast, Jannum and eastern Groningen are considered too be too far away to fulfil the urban needs and are instead left behind or used as second housing (which can lead to villages turning into ghost towns during off-seasons[143]). In *HHIW* and *HB* this situation is presented to the spectator: both villages are either left behind or threatened to be forgotten. The dramaturgical strategy of linking the story about Tieman's grandmother's house to the preservation of the Herenboerderijen, makes the local feeling towards this preservation more recognizable for outsider-spectators. *OG* positions spectators as being on the same side as the protestors: through being addressed as listeners of the radio show, and by being outside with the protestors. The land itself is also given a voice and is speaking about her fear for climate change and the loss of nature.[144] The spectators are confronted with what is at stake: this world and this nature that we see around us, what is good for them?

A recurring theme is the clash between the conceived space and the lived space: the lived rurals (plural, because it counts for all three case studies) as they are now do not correspond to the business, commercial, and political ideas regarding the (future of) the rural. The performances hardly use any scenographic additions but make use of their sites – the perceived space. By bringing the spectator into the rural, the rural absorbs the spectator into its own space. The future imagined by the powerful parties is essentially more likely to happen since this future seems to align with the development of the world and dominant culture. However, by being absorbed, the spectator is closer to the reality of the rural as it is now than to this future imagined by conceived-space ideas. This positioning can lead the spectator to a new or redefined relationship with the rural – one that resonates with the ideas and wishes of the rural communities.

If these case studies tell us the truth, the rural is threatened to be partly absorbed by expanding cities and to be partly turned into tourist attractions that show 'what once was' in a romanticized – and therefore not truthful – way. Perhaps the current lived reality of rural areas is indeed transient and destined to disappear. However, the performances reclaim their space and fight for a reevaluation of this rural future.

URBAN DRAMATURGIES

Lastly, I want to reflect on the differences between analysing through the lenses of urban and rural dramaturgies. Urban dramaturgies focus more on society, relationships between people, and how the city is a shared space *of* these people where there are dominant and silenced voices. Rural dramaturgies use society and human relationships as context, but focusses on the relationship between people and place, between people and the rural. The relationships between the people does come to the forth but only connected to each individual's relationship to the rural and by the portrayal of political interests. Nevertheless, Bertie Ferdman's work on urban dramaturgy offered useful insights for the development of the theoretical framework for rural dramaturgy.

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[141] *Huilende Bruiden*; *Onze Grond*.
[142] PS|Theater, ''Grondhonger.''
[143] Tim Fierant, ''Ook Warten luidt noodklok over niet-permanente bewoning,'' *Leeuwarder Courant*, April 6, 2019, https://lc.nl/friesland/Ook-Warten-luidt-noodklok-over-niet-permanente-bewoning-24339573.html; ''Gemeente wil in Hindeloopen de strijd aangaan tegen leegstaande tweede woningen,'' Nieuws, Omrop Fryslân, accessed May 13, 2025, https://www.omropfryslan.nl/nl/nieuws/1219516/gemeente-wil-in-hindeloopen-de-strijd-aangaan-tegen-leegstaande-tweede-woningen.
[144] *Onze Grond*.

FURTHER RESEARCH

A logical next step would be to analyse rural dramaturgies in other countries, in order to investigate how not only the rural, but therefore also rural dramaturgies differ (or align) in different contexts. Other countries value the rural for different reasons, and other countries also have different dynamics between the rural and the urban. This research could broaden the conceptualisation of rural dramaturgy.

In this thesis I focused on performances in rural areas, but further research could be done on the rural as a performative site in itself – just as Ferdman, who uses urban dramaturgies to identify both performance *in* and *of* cities: various performances can be analysed as distinct examples of urban dramaturgies, just as cities themselves, Ferdman explains.[145] In the rural this would mean looking at non-human elements, such as nature, animals, weather, and the further landscape. This could be linked to posthumanist discourses in performance studies, perhaps.

[145] Ferdman, ‘’Off the Grid: New York City Landmark Performance,’’ 17.

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