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Visual Dramaturgy: Interview with Knut Ove Arntzen

Amálie Bulandrová

Knut Ove Arntzen is a professor of Theatre Studies at the Department of Linguistics, Literary and Aesthetics Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Bergen, Norway. His research is oriented towards theoretical and practical concepts of visual dramaturgy as well as post-mainstream developments in contemporary European theatre. Knut Ove Arntzen publishes findings in many international periodicals and books as well as presents his work to students and other theatre researchers as a visiting professor at European universities, for example in Lithuania, Belgium and Germany. He has participated in many international conferences (University of Glasgow, Amsterdam, Copenhagen), cooperated with Gordana Vnuk in seminars at the Eurokaz festival and presented several lectures about new theatre developments, post-mainstream and site specific/ambient theatre in Germany, Austria, and Finland. Recently, Knut Ove Arntzen have written and edited together with John Keefe a new book called *Staging and Re-cycling: Retrieving, Reflecting and Re-framing the Archive* (2020) that explores the various ways in which dramaturgical and academic materials, once published or presented, may be ‘resurrected’ to a new life. Knut Ove Arntzen was awarded the HEDDA Honorary Prize 2020 for outstanding achievements in Norwegian performing arts.

Knut Ove Arntzen had been planning to visit the Department of Theatre Studies at Masaryk University at the beginning of April 2020 and to give a lecture concerning the concept of Visual Dramaturgy. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the lecture was postponed until Autumn 2020, and the following interview was consequently carried out as an e-mail conversation in May/July 2020. Amálie Bulandrová, scholar at the Department of Theatre Studies, asked Professor Arntzen to respond to several questions regarding the concept of Visual Dramaturgy. We are looking for the upcoming seminar with Knut Ove Arntzen which will take place online on the 16th of November 2020 and the possibility of discussing in greater detail some of the issues outlined below.

[AB] As a part of your lecture at Masaryk University you also planned to attend a theatre production called *Čtvrtá opice* by the Czech company Handa Gote (Research & Development). Have you ever seen any Czech theatre productions? Do you have any favourites?

[KOA] I saw and wrote comments on some Czech productions after I had visited the Plzen *DIVADLO FESTIVAL Plzeň – EHMK 2015*. In my report I wrote: ‘This invitation gave me the possibility to see some more performances, although I could not remain throughout the whole festival to see everything. What I did see, however, was quite

interesting and rewarding. In April this year I was invited to sit on the jury of the festival *Kontrapunkt 2015* in Szczecin, Poland, so I was given a chance to get some impressions of Polish theatre and could compare the situation there to the international one. The invitation to Plzen gave me a similar chance to see theatre from the Czech Republic as well as from Slovakia and compare these productions to the visiting international productions. I had not been in the Czech Republic since I visited Prague in 2000 for the *Informal European Theatre Meeting (IETM)*. At that time, I got the impression that some of the Czech theatre was striving to renew itself when it came to puppetry. During this time I saw that Czech theatre was striving to come to grips with its avantgarde tradition from the 1960s, which we in Norway had some access to because of visiting Czech directors and scenographers during this period. My general impression was that especially after the 1968 events Czech theatre had more or less lost its impetus, although I am sure that much high quality theatre has been produced between then and now. But high quality does not always mean artistically interesting theatre. So now by coming to the *DIVADLO in Plzen* I got the chance to update my experience with the Czech scene, as well as take part in a dialogue between the international, especially then the Nordic, and Czech theatre.'

[AB] Your lecture was set to be oriented toward the concept of Visual Dramaturgy, a concept which you developed in late 1980s and 1990s to analyse theatre productions/performances with a specific pictorial orientation, such as the those being presented at theatres in the Netherlands, Belgium and Scandinavia, such as at the Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam, Kaai Theater in Brussels and BIT Teatergarasjen in Bergen. Can similar kinds of theatre productions be found even today? Have you recently seen some performances of more-or-less the same character? Or should we speak about Visual Dramaturgy as a specific movement directly connected with the 1990s?

[KOA] Yes, the aftermaths of these productions can still be seen as recycling of productions related to the documentary theatre, new authenticity and to some extent in institutional theatres today. This influence is also traced in productions referred to as post-dramatic – a concept partly based on Visual Dramaturgy – as indicating a fusion of means of expression. But in post-dramatic theatre there is a certain emphasis on the paratactic in the sense that text and production have an equal value but do not necessary merge or fuse together, i.e. all means of expression retain distinct characteristics, thus we can speak about relationships between the textual and the performative as a result.

[AB] Does the concept of Visual (kinds of) Dramaturgy represent a methodological tool which might help us analyse those performances which are, to put it simply, more visual than textual? Or does the concept rather represent a specific theatre praxis?

[KOA] If we accept visual dramaturgy as a metaphorical concept for the above mentioned fusion of means of expression, it can be said to be a tool for analysing performances marked by a break away from textual dominance and logic of action which was dominant in the classical and early modern theatre tradition. In Visual Dramaturgy,

the audience has to be able to see the metaphorical and allegorical aspects of meaning and decide for themselves what and how to understand of a production. Metaphorically seen, it is possible to speak of 'the directing of the gaze' when speaking of relating to productions in which the hierarchies have been broken down. The artists no longer convey the kind of meaning that is intentional and the spectator/viewer will him/herself have to work through the impressions from whatever is expressed by the help of his/her own view (*Blick/gaze/regard*). So, the answer to your question is that Visual Dramaturgy is about a specific theatre praxis, which also has been referred to as postmodern or postdramatic. Aesthetical narration in a visual kind of dramaturgy may largely be seen as guided by the premises of the pictures, an element that opens for another experience and type of reception than in the textually based theatre. The term Visual Dramaturgy also expresses a description of what happens when the traditional textual representation is disintegrating in some post-modern production practices.

[AB] The term 'dramaturgy of equivalence' is used as a synonym to Visual Dramaturgy in one of your papers (ARNTZEN 1991). What does the word 'equivalence' stand for here?

[KOA] First I have to say that Visual Dramaturgy acquires meaning in the way that it contributes to the creation of a new set of premises for theatre, and thereby it has influence on a theatre that originally might have been textual, but it can be also seen in relation to other traditions such as the figurative theatre and pantomime. The textual representation is challenged and broken apart as a fixed dimension in the Aristotelian or epical sense, which makes an impact on how the aesthetical means of expression, like the visual vs textual, the spatial vs. the frontal function and interact in relation to each other.

When we describe performances characterized by an equality of effects, we may as an auxiliary model put up crossing axes that represent pairs of oppositions on the effect level: visual vs. textual, frontal vs. spatial, not-acting vs. acting. Visual Dramaturgy presupposes or takes for a given that one of the premises lies in the equivalence of means of expression, so yes, in effect the term dramaturgy of equivalence is largely synonymous with Visual Dramaturgy.

[AB] Which philosophical concepts would you recommend for researchers to deepen their understanding of Visual Dramaturgy? Is it somehow connected with the idea of rhizome, for instance?

[KOA] Yes, the ideas of nomadism and the rhizomatic are one approach, but more concretely it is expressed by Patrice Pavis and to an even greater degree by Jean Francois Lyotard when he refers to an 'energetic performance'. Based on his knowledge of the predecessors of performance art in the 1960s such as happenings and events, Jean-Francois Lyotard perceives the situation as turning in the direction of what he understands as an energetic theatre. Patrice Pavis speaks of energetic theatre as an antimimetic theatre, since in energetic theatre it is possible to uphold hierarchical systems if a free flow of reflection is to take place (PAVIS 2003: 310). The mutual dependency of signs on each other will necessarily be terminated, and expression will be based on

the contemporaneity or equality between body, figure, picture, sound and words, such as when Lyotard claims that ‘where the relationship of signs and their difference is dissolved, the power of (the hierarchy) and consequently the dominance of the dramaturg + the director + the choreographer + the scenographer over so called signs and the so called spectators is turned impossible’ (LYOTARD 1982: 21, translation into English by KOA). So it can also be said to be connected to Lyotard’s affirmative philosophical aesthetics.

But I could also speak about the question of nomadism and non-orientability coming from the situationist movement.

[AB] It is said that the concept of Visual Dramaturgy is irrelevant in theatre praxis in which the hierarchical structure has been retained, i.e. where the form of expression is controlled throughout textual or literary-dramaturgical premises. Can you imagine the employment of Visual Dramaturgy in the analysis of non-theatrical performances which are not text-based? Such as the Expo world exhibitions, for example?

[KOA] This question has to be seen in the perspective of the performative and its relationship to the textual, not to speak about Hans-Thies Lehmann’s claim that the more you work on a text, the more it gets postdramatic (*Forsoegsstationen*, Copenhagen)¹. But on the other hand, if you really retain the dominance of the text as in so-called *Sprechtheater* (spoken theatre), as they say in German, it is almost impossible to retain this given the introduction of workshop-practices and improvisational styles. *Sprechtheater* is outdated, even if you want to do realistic theatre. If a theatre retains the *Sprechtheater*, it has to be referred to as old fashioned theatre. Yes, I can imagine the employment of Visual Dramaturgy in analysing non-theatrical performances such as historical re-enactments, or non-theatrical events turning spectacular. This can very well be the case with some aspects of world exhibitions.

[AB] Is it possible to say what is the position of ‘scenography’ in visually oriented performances such as those by the Billedstofteater, for instance? That is, in productions which somehow represent the concept of Visual Dramaturgy? It seems to me that Visual Dramaturgy is also connected with an expanded understanding of the term ‘dramaturgy’ itself. As for example, as Cathy Turner suggests, the dramaturgy of a play or a performance could also be described as its ‘composition’, ‘structure’ or ‘fabric’. Consequently, when applying the notion of dramaturgy to time-based qualities, the concerns of dramaturgy could be shared with the concerns of scenography. Could it mean that Visual Dramaturgy is also (mistakenly) articulated as a synonym for scenography?

[KOA] The Danish Billedstofteater was very scenographic or design oriented, but it had taken immediate inspiration from Robert Wilson’s production *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* at the Det Ny Teater in Copenhagen in 1973. The visual aspect of a production/performance will always be connected with the way the space is organised in the interaction between spatial- and the frontal-effects in theatre and performance. But

1 Available online at <https://www.forsoegsstationen.dk/forelaesning-med-hans-thies-lehmann/>.

I find it interesting that it can also be applied to scenographic approaches and costume agencies, a point which I will develop in an upcoming article in relationship to the Costume Agency artistic research project based in the State College of the Arts in Oslo in cooperation with Sódja Lotker at the Theatre Academy in Prague. This is a project showing work on the performativity of materials and costumes in workshops. If you claim that Visual Dramaturgy is articulated as a synonym for scenography, I think this is a bit outside my way of seeing the interaction in-between dramaturgy and scenography.

[AB] The concept of Visual Dramaturgy is also used in Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006). A genre of 'scenographic theatre' is implied in the same chapter as well. Is it possible to clarify the relation between those two terms?

[KOA] It is and is not possible to differentiate in-between those two terms, since one of the premises in Lehmann's book is the concept of Visual Dramaturgy. On the other hand, as I have already pointed out, Visual Dramaturgy is about the fusion of the means of expression, but taken the German word *gleichberechtigt*, which is very difficult to translate into English, it means that for instance the textual and the visual are dimensions which can exist in their right as well as parataxically with each other. In English the 'equivalence' can mean both fusion and independent existence, but German *gleichgestellt* clearly indicates that means of expression fuse with other means, as can be observed in what happens when you put a teabag into boiling water and you see that the water takes another colour. By this logic a text can be postdramatic if worked on long enough, but to become Visual-Dramaturgical it has to merge and be part of a grander weave of metaphorical and allegorical meaning. Scenographic theatre is created when the author of the production is the scenographer himself and when there is no textual interference. Robert Wilson's early productions were of such kind.

[AB] Lately you have been cooperating with a research group called Costume Agency. What is the focus of this organisation?

[KOA] Since I have already commented on this research project above, what I could still add is that this platform has the aim of training costume designers in cooperation with actors and dramaturgs into seeing the interconnections as well as deepen their understanding of the performative dimension of costume design. The project will be carried out through conferences and workshops. This is an ongoing collaboration and a conference on Zoom will take place in August. A new workshop event was not possible to realise this year because of the corona crisis, but will be held next year. Other workshops have already taken place in Oslo and Prague.²

[AB] Is it possible to suggest how/if the COVID 19 pandemic will influence European theatre praxis? Numerous streaming and drive-in performances have been taking place in the Czech Republic since physical visits are currently forbidden. Is the situation similar in Norway?

2 See the website of the Costume Agency project. Available online at <https://costumeagency.khio.no>.

[KOA] The situation has been exactly the same in Norway and Germany as well as in many other countries. Opening up means smaller audiences corresponding with more intimate theatrical practices. Whether this will have a long-time effect beyond the current situation remains to be seen. But I can say that this is a situation which in fact will affect theatre in the future.

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