SWEATING WITH PEER GYNT
PERFORMATIVE EXCHANGE AS A WAY OF ACCESSING SCENOGRAPHIC ACTION

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Introduction

The present article addresses the rather complex notion of *scenography* in relation to *historical research*. Two performances of Henrik Ibsens's *Peer Gynt* are presented as case studies with the aim of stimulating scenographic analyses of historical material. This approach does not dismiss the importance of the dramatic text, or the actors, or the various contexts in which the performances take place. On the contrary, I strongly believe that one always has to account for the multifarious complexity of a theatrical event. However, my research is guided by an interest in exploring ways of *accessing* long-past practices, forms and events, rather than relying on the assumption that one recovers something stable and fixed.

What I claim is very simple: much more reliable knowledge can be produced by exploring, and *working with* traces from past events and theatrical processes. This approach can be associated with a current trend in theatre studies, in which "historical research has once more come to the fore" (Tessing Schneider & Skjoldager-Nielsen, 2011, 5) as well as an ethic of "being-with" the objects of investigation found in artistic research (e.g. Hannula 2008). On a general level, my approach can be associated with the *affective turn* in the humanities. Acknowledging corporeality, materiality and sensuousness, this turn also notices the importance of social aspects, transformation and critical development (Diprose, 2002; Meskimmon, 2011).

This study is mainly concerned with the question of how we can theorize, and play with the challenging difference between a performance that one has actually experienced, intellectually as well as physically, and a performance that is accessible only through traces and fragments. I raise this question both as an art history scholar and as a former professional classical and contemporary dancer. This means that I make use of my own experiences from the theatre – an approach that does not detract from the requirements of critical thinking and accuracy in scholarly research.

Problems of presence and absence

There is no doubt that it is very useful to have been present at a performance. Today, "having been there" is often considered the only proper way of approaching a scenographic event. An example of this stance can be found in *Scenography in Action*, in which art history scholar Magdalena Holdar openly admits that she finds working with historical traces impossible:

> The researchers make inventories of costumes, props, and pieces of scenery from saved photographs, in order to catch every detail in the set design. Indeed, it seems like a detective's work trying to recreate the picture of a performance, finding the small pieces of an immensely complex jigsaw puzzle. I found these procedures increasingly unsatisfying, as they captured everything in

> scenography except its aliveness, its most vital characteristic. (Holdar, 2005, 103)

Moreover, Holdar strongly opposes a conventional application of the concept, in which scenography, according to her, "equals the material designs of the scenographer – the materialized drawings so to speak" (9).

In current writings, such as *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography* (McKinney and Butterworth, 2010), a clear distinction is made between *mise-en scène* and *scenography*. The former can be understood as "the process of realising a theatrical text on stage and the particular aesthetic and conceptual frames that have been adopted as part of that process" (4). Even if scenographic concerns are involved, the mise-en scène does not account for what actually happens in the performance. Scenography on the other hand "is defined in its realisation and performance rather than its intentions" (4). Traces such as models, drawings, photographs and video recordings are considered ephemeral, selective, and inadequate (7–8) in relation to the event that is forever gone, or a series of such events. Of course, the traces are imperfect, but it can be argued that the situation in which a performance occurs is no less problematic. Art historian and performance theoretician Amelia Jones states that the fact that one has "been present" guarantees nothing. She rightly claims that most research is conducted in other ways and in other places. Furthermore, Jones points out that these efforts should be given the weight they deserve (Jones, 1997, 11–12).

It seems rather unproductive to understand scenography as a feature only accessible within the live event. As a historically inclined researcher, I have spent many hours in the archive socializing with "drawings", since these "drawings" might be the only available traces of a long-gone performance. I do not necessarily make "inventories of props"; on the contrary, I analyse – or more correctly "I think" – spatiality and movement, in and with the historical material. And I do use "photographs", if any exist, as well other sources. There is no need to be particular. There is, however, a need to be creative, open and sensitive, without letting go of the necessary rigour. Let's face it. A *sketch* or a *model* is connected to an imaginary, holistic and spatial activity, not only to the material design of a future event. What is presented to us as traces was produced in the dialectics of an encounter between artistic integrity and diverse circumstances (e.g. Howard 2002). These creative processes are polymorphous and criss-crossed with expressive and affective qualities connected to a future performance. In this article I will develop and explore the idea that a definition of scenography as "a spatio-temporal category", tightly connected to the performance situation (Holdar, 2005, 14), can be applied to historical traces as well.

When investigating historical and current performances, I have found it useful to conceptualize scenography as an active part of an immensely complex and multifaceted *web of translations*. Theoretically, this idea is informed by Jacques Lacan's key concepts of the *real*, the *imaginary* and the *symbolic* (von Rosen 2010). Following the Lacanian approach, scenography, like dance (Siegmund 2008, 302), can be understood as simultaneously acting on the levels of body, image and language. The real captures corporeal and material dimensions, disturbances, and

impossibilities. Visual, multisensory and spatial worlds act as an imaginary collage, criss-crossed with desire and with structures on the symbolic level. The key concepts are very useful because of their capacity to help the researcher navigate and perceive structures in the sources, as well as *move with* the enormous complexities intrinsic to archival materials and their contextual extensions. In the first case study, presented below, I try to clarify what can be understood as a performative dimension in the encounter with a number of sketches and photographs.

Peer Gynt 1914–15. The sketch as a theatrical event

This case study presents material in the form of sketches from a version of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* first performed in 1914 at Münchener Künstler-Theater, and then again in 1915 at Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf (and which was restaged several times in the years that followed). It was directed by Gustav Lindemann, while Knut Ström was responsible for the scenography. My intention is not to analyse the entirety of the performance in any detail. Instead, I use a few examples to test the fruitfulness of applying the performative approach to sketch material. It has previously been pointed out that the past is not present in the archives, where we only find a few remaining artefacts that exist in our present. Thus, the only way any document can become historical is by a process of interpretation and articulation, and such acts take place in the mind and the imagination of the historian or researcher (Yerushalmi, 2010, 217).

Knut Ström (1887–1971) was a young Swedish visual artist and theatre worker who, after a couple of years in Berlin, was appointed Künstlerisher Beirat at Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf. A few photographs and a series of sketches, either originals or documented on diapositive, still remain from the staging of *Peer Gynt* in 1914–15. Of course, the images do not equal the scenographic event as it was performed on stage. Nevertheless, when it comes to Ström, I know from my previous research that what is represented in the visual materials is likely to have been present on stage. This close concordance can be observed when comparing a sketch and a photograph from the first act (Pictures 1 and 2). I deliberately use the notion of *scenography* in an anachronistic way here because of the fact that Ström's creative activities strongly resemble the work of today's European scenographers (von Rosen, 2010, 15).

As we know, there are many ways of accessing theatre history. The sketches can be understood as bearing the conceptualization of a future performance at a specific place in a specific time, including framing restrictions and structures. The sketches tell us about material and technical possibilities and charged issues. Furthermore, they are connected to other media, visual genres, and the art world. They can also be understood as keys to a contextualized understanding of Ibsen's drama, *Peer Gynt* as it was performed then and there, in the theatre and in society. What I would like to focus on here is the researcher's precarious *exchange* with the images. An exchange is not only a meeting or a confrontation, it is something far more difficult, because while it creates the possibility of innovation, it is also provocative (Todd, 2010, 252). So what will happen, what can happen, or what would we like to happen when socialising with a sketch? How can we think about the epistemological implications of the encounters, conflicts and exchanges with a historical fragment?

Ström's sketches are material artefacts, physically present today. If we are interested in creating a living, as well as reasonably solid basis for further research, it is of fundamental importance to theorize the practice of engaging with historical material such as scenography sketches. In order to achieve this, I will draw on new ways of using the notion of *performativity* in the fields of theatre and art history. Theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) has shown that performativity emphasizes cultural actions, activity, and the situated, co-creative as well as interactive character of an event. Art historian Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf (2007) argues that performativity can be used in analysing a broad range of art events. The research process involves epistemological aspects, and demands a thorough, yet undogmatic analysis. Following these approaches, when studying Ström's sketches in real time, one enters a process of realisation; an interpretation is created in a performative exchange. This turns into a historicising act of co-creation, in which the researcher's operational subjectivity can be used in productive ways.

The first case study experiments with this approach in order to emphasise the experience and effects of co-creative engagement with scenographical sketches. Consequently, my line of research will diverge from traditional as well as current views on how traces of historical theatrical events can be explored and what counts as a performance. I exclude neither formal, semiotic nor contextual aspects from the analysis. The performative approach is consequently a part of this, not separated or isolated.

The sketch I use as a point of entry for this example is rather well preserved (Picture 3). A mild, yet clear yellow light, created with the help of a *cyclorama* (a plastered wall or a curved plain cloth filling the rear of the stage), can be perceived in a distinct frame. This forms an image within the image, present and yet distant; it is like a breath of fresh air. The construction in the front part of the sketch is significantly material; but although it is built to interact with the actors and the audience, it creates immaterial spaces and associative meanings. Right now, in our present, Peer Gynt is sitting on the ground, resting his back against the proscenium. He is thus acting in an area that normally separates presentational space and audience space. The act of sitting contrasts with all the fighting, walking and running he has previously been engaged in. It is possible for us to sit down with him, reflect on life, and look at what is going on in the clearly lit space, so close and yet on the other side of the grey barrier. The actors appearing in dark clothes on the upper part of the construction are projected as strong formal elements against the sky. Their choreographed movements are an important part of the staging, and can almost be re-enacted. Doing this means becoming involved in a repeated religious ritual acted out in the theatrical space. This ritual appears to be clear and accessible, and yet it is out of reach.

The very idea of moving in the yellow light, this light that is so new and so perfectly tinted, provides a way of accessing something that is not the actual event, but nevertheless close to it. Why should we deny ourselves admittance to this twilight space, and thus the possibility of getting close? Ström was extremely skilled in the art of theatrical lighting, and the vision he so aptly expresses in the sketch was certainly realized on stage. There are plenty of examples of this skill of his (von Rosen 2010). The researcher, and hopefully also the reader following the process,

becomes clad in light, and while moving on the high platform, a *motion picture* in colour, better than any film maker could produce in 1914–15, is created. In his work, Ström clearly took on the challenges posed by the rapidly developing film industry.

Crosses dominate the picture, and in the background the soft form of a tree is present. The tree is recognizable as a transformational object that has followed Peer throughout the performance. It can be understood or lived with as a dancer, and the crosses function in the same way. They are corporeal and choreographed, they act and interact with the actors and the audience, and they constantly take part in the transformation of space. The tree is rather small, but nicely shaped – it looks young and fresh, not like the borderless structure marking Peer's entrance into the world of the trolls (Pictures 4, 5, 6). Earlier, the stage had been transformed into dark organic shapes, and there was no sunshine in that scary and sexually charged place (Picture 7).

The last picture I will discuss in this brief case study is a photograph in which Peer Gynt can be seen on his knees, close to a circular focus point in the construction built on stage (Picture 8). The light, coming from above, is very strong. When the researcher follows Peer, and goes down on her knees in the strong light, the space does indeed change. Before, the construction could be interpreted as a pathway up in the hills, as well as a slide leading downwards. Its central circle has transformed into a place to be melted down or changed. When the bottom is reached, there is no escape.

Peer's arms are outstretched and his body assumes the shape of a cross. He is hoping to be saved by someone belonging to the world of lights, present at the upper part of the construction. Solveig is kneeling on the higher platform, trying to reach Peer and save him. They are both part of a Neo-Platonic world immersed in *Lux Nova*, almost as if in a gothic cathedral. Triangular shapes repeat in the image. A dissolved tree-structure covers the sky behind the small hut. The image is both glorious and folkloric as well as bursting with technical and artistic skill.

These are only a few, incomplete remarks, but I hope they will suffice to indicate some of the challenges and possibilities posed by a performative exchange with images. Can the researcher and the readers, other academics, practitioners and ordinary interested people communicate in and through the web of translations? Will words in combination with co-creative exchanges manage to grasp anything of an event long-past? And if yes, what do these activities grasp? Now, it is time to turn to a more recent version of *Peer Gynt* and enter the web at a unique point that simultaneously changes, defies and repeats previous productions and performances.

Peer Gynt 2011. Learning from live experience

In this case study a production of *Peer Gynt* at the Gothenburg City Theatre in 2011 is used in order to 1) access live scenography and its challenges and 2) discuss this enterprise in relation to historical research. Internationally recognized director Stefan Metz, together with scenographer and costume designer Alex Tarragüel Rubio created a psychologically oriented and visually powerful version of Ibsen's drama. I attended the performances on 28 January and 16 April 2011. The analysis is based on my notes and memories, as well as research conducted before and after the performance. Reference has been made to a series of press photographs, still

accessible on the Internet as of October 2012. These pictures are selected fragments that cannot adequately convey the visual, sensuous and spatial impact of the event. Nevertheless they can be considered useful as points of entry and as memory aids.

Shortly after the first act began, Peer Gynt (Per Sandberg) was on his knees, with his back to the audience. His arms were outstretched and for a few seconds his body projected the clear shape of a cross against the stark blue sky of the cyclorama. In his hands he held the strings of a huge opaque object (Picture 9), interpreted by various critics as a plastic balloon, a cloud, snow-clad mountains, or perhaps a phallic sausage (von Rosen 2012).

Peer was played by a middle-aged actor – a bit pudgy and going bald – dressed in worn and somewhat dirty clothes. All in all, this came together as a perfect and totally ambiguous mix of child and adult. When Peer's mother (Christel Körner) accused him of lying, he ran his hand over what can be called "the inflatable dream". The plastic rustled softly, and this sound kept being repeating throughout the performance. The tittle-tattle, the rubbish running through Peer's head, as well as outside him, was transformed into presence in space. *Scenography* was operating somewhere between his hand, the rustling plastic, the blue sky, the spoken words and all the other factors consciously or unconsciously contributing to the viewer's experience of the play. The scenography can thus be defined as an active and co-creative part of the theatrical event. When the performance is over, the scenography in this sense has disappeared and cannot be repeated. So they say. And yet, when I write this, a sort of repetition or a translation occurs, full of slippages and incompleteness; but was the event ever "complete"? And was there ever an "original event"? In line with the writings of philosopher Jacques Derrida (1988) I suggest that we try to accept the limitless and parasitical character of an "event".

Scenography usually has strong unifying or structural qualities in a performance. In the present case, homeless plastic flakes drift across the stage, constantly transforming space when Peer Gynt's relationships are wrecked. His dying mother rests on torn plastic sheets while he recounts a last tale (Picture 10). A sphinx becomes a glimmering copper womb, an oven, a party tent, a cathedral with its own ritual, a madhouse (Picture 11). The plastic then turns into a sea in which Peer floats on his own cruelty. Finally he is forced to find evidence that he, at least once, has tried to be himself as a *human* being. The space widens, and the plastic suddenly transforms into small umbrellas carrying lights, slowly floating down from an enormous black sky (Picture 12). Thoughts Peer has never thought, reach him (Ibsen, 1991, 192). The small lit umbrellas unhurriedly float down towards the audience whose hands reach up to take hold of them. When the lights rest on the dark stage the scene resembles a (secular or religious) mass with an abundance of candles, perhaps indicating a formal, semiotic, or other connection to the cross-shaped body in the opening scene. Peer, who in a previous scene was getting rich from selling weapons, is taking part in a purifying ritual, at the same time as the space is filled with parachutes – and perhaps one can sense dead soldiers lying in the darkness. It is here, if not before, that it becomes obvious that images – and space, as well as physical, multisensory, non-verbal and non-textual activities do play an essential part in the event.

Fundamental aspects of human existence are brought to the fore in the performance. The human enigma, the unmeasurable, the non-linguistic and eternal questions live in the theatrical ritual. An infinitely adaptable object is present during the entire performance: it transforms, blows up, is wrecked, but is always there. A real, explicit and yet almost blind relation is acted out. Fragmentary, imaginary impressions are superimposed on each other in a continuous process of change and movement. Peer's existence is determined by a lawless structure: to live outside society and seek one's benefit by any and all means. Today this is a well-known global disease, as well as a local one.

The performance uses and transforms images from surrounding cultures, and this means that my subjective observations, probably to quite a large extent, are inter-subjective, or at least potentially inter-subjective. I believe that many features are shared and recognizable, or at least will be if we bother to discuss them and if we can learn how to partake in various exchanges in constructive and creative ways. Each member of the audience recognizes some of the cultural images and ideas, but not necessarily on a fully conscious level. For a researcher, the real, imaginary and symbolic connections are rewarding to explore. What is sensed and shown, what is permissible and what is not, according to the norms and systems of society? This approach can be systematised and employed when exploring historical traces.

There certainly is a lot to consider when acknowledging affective implications of the process of examining scenography. I would argue that this way of conducting research involves "the love of knowledge", and I will in turn connect this to how Lacan theorizes the notion of *transference*. In psychoanalysis, the concept of transference refers to the relationship between the analyst and the patient. Even if this relationship clearly has imaginary components, and often manifests itself in strong affective states such as love and hate, Lacan locates it in the symbolic order (Evans, 2005, 213–214), which is also the order of research. In this case study, the concept of transference, with its roots in dialectics, accounts for the co-creative, corporeally charged, mobile exchange between participant-researcher, event, and context.

There are no easy answers to my initial question of how to play with the challenging difference between a performance that one has actually experienced, and a performance that is accessible only through traces and fragments. I would like to propose the following approach, in relation to the possibilities and challenges briefly touched upon here. The knowledge and experience produced through the exploration of live or lived theatrical work can, at least to a certain extent, be transposed and made useful in research on historical theatrical events. When engaging in a performative exchange with scenographic complexities, we have to acknowledge the affects and the non-textual effects they cause, because those features will help us access the event and remain attuned to it. At the same time we have to adhere to a conviction that it is possible to achieve inter-subjective, intelligible, systematic and reasonably valid results through the research process.

Conclusion

There is no way to determine an objective truth about the constantly transforming worlds of performances, current or historical. Nevertheless, I think it is possible to

produce sensible, critically productive and valuable results. Historical scenography is not completely invisible, or imperceptible, and analyses of it need not be lifeless.

In the case study on a *Peer Gynt* production from 1914–15, I tried to show that a *performative exchange* with sketches is one way of "accessing the action", or at least accessing a few aspects close to the long-gone event. In the case study of a production of *Peer Gynt* in 2011, live scenography was explored with the aim of relating the performative exchange to historical research. It can be argued that the *web of translations*, an analytic model informed by Lacanian terminology, is a powerful tool in historical as well as contemporary explorations. The web produces many points of entry, threads to follow, and worlds to act in and move with. Processes of knowledge developed in relation to live events can be transferred, and thus applied to historical material. By claiming this, I am not trying to be very original; I am merely emphasizing the need to be more sensitive, creative, and precise when approaching historical traces. This stance stresses the "love of knowledge" and opens up a constructive process of performative exchange and transference. Or, differently expressed, one has to care, and start working – or, we could actually say, dancing – *with* Peer Gynt.

Historical research on scenography not only involves thinking the invisible event in terms of colour, form, movements, rhythm, sound, smell and space, it also engages the body and proposes an active corporeal presence. From such a stance, the event can fruitfully be contextualized, as well as critically interpreted. In this article, I have tried to underline the importance of working *with*, not on or against, historical theatrical space and the actions that can take place there. We need to sweat a bit and be there.

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Pictures. Picture 1, 4–7: Knut Ström, diapositive showing scenography sketch, *Peer Gynt*, Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf, 1915. Theatermuseum der Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf (TLD). The colours have changed. Picture 2: Photograph/postcard, *Peer Gynt*, Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf, 1915. Louise Dumont as Aase and Otto Stoeckel as Peer Gynt. TLD. Picture 3: Knut Ström, scenography sketch, *Peer Gynt*, Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf, 1915. TLD. The sketch is well preserved, and the colours are probably close to their original quality. In von Rosen (2010, 50) there is a printed version of this sketch. Picture 8: Photograph, *Peer Gynt*, Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf, 1915. The Ström family collections. Picture 9–12: *Peer Gynt*, Gothenburg City Theatre, 2011. Per Sandberg as Peer Gynt. Christel Körner as Åse. Photo: Ola Kjellbye. Accessed 22/09/2012 at
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