

Solutions to homesickness

Lösungen gegen Heimweh

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ABSTRACT (English)

The following contribution is a description of an artistic work – a street performance in which my dearest doll from childhood became an expressive object, an animated figure that helped me to elaborate theoretical ideas for my doctoral research. I never knew how to play with dolls until I took this doll with me to the street and treated her as co-actor. In addition to the description of this performance the text includes an analysis of animating this doll based on the theory with its main components (mode, location, aspect) developed for my thesis..

Keywords: expressive objects, animisation, stage animation, street performance

ABSTRACT (Deutsch)

Der folgende Beitrag beschreibt eine künstlerische Arbeit – eine Straßenperformance, in der meine Lieblingspuppe aus der Kindheit zu einem ausdrucksstarken Objekt wurde, einer animierten Figur, die mir half, theoretische Ideen für meine Doktorarbeit zu entwickeln. Ich wusste nie, wie man mit Puppen spielt, bis ich diese Puppe mit auf die Straße nahm und sie als Mit-Spielerin einbezog. Neben der Beschreibung dieser *Performance* enthält der Text eine Analyse der Animation dieser Puppe auf der Grundlage der für meine Doktorarbeit entwickelten Theorie mit ihren Hauptkomponenten (mode, location, aspect).

Schlüsselwörter: ausdrucksstarke Objekte, Animisierung, Bühnenanimation, Straßenperformance

A doll without a name

My nursery was full of toys amongst which the most visible was Anja – a brown-eyed, dark-haired, huge “baby-doll” with a middle-aged woman’s curler-made hairstyle and great resemblance to my mother with whom I had a complicated relationship. Anja’s clothes, given to me by my mother as was the doll itself, were the ones I wore myself as a newborn baby. In turn, when I dressed the doll my mother, in a way, became my baby – the object of my assumed care. As I didn’t know any other ways to care for Anja, I dressed, undressed, and dressed her again and again. That was all I could do. It was boring and at the same time distressing: girls were supposed to know how to play with dolls – only I did not. I never liked Anja because of her weirdness. I thought she was spooky.

The doll I loved was a blond-haired, small doll wearing the same clothes she had on when I got her – summer clothes on Christmas. She was baby-faced but long-legged, with gorgeous hair – a young girl, 5 or 6 years older than I was at the time, still completely innocent but pretty in a feminine way. She was a creature I hoped I could emulate someday although – based on information given by my mother – I knew this would never happen as she represented the type of fresh and adorable beauty that was unattainable for a defective being such as myself. My brother, to whom my mother directed all her love, damaged the sweet looks of the doll by coloring her face with a water-proof marker. He went unpunished as he was always allowed to express himself freely. I cried.

Later came Barbies. Dressing and undressing continued, especially the latter. As I still didn’t know how to play, I undressed Ken, too, and put him under the cover with Barbie and then I went out to do something more interesting.

Years went by, I do not know what happened to Anja, but I kept the nameless doll who travelled amongst my belongings through decades, towns, life situations.

Solutions to Homesickness

I had just bought a house in a new town and moved in with my family. When searching for a house I paid attention to advertisements that promised to sell a ‘home’ as instead of a flat or a house. At the same time, I discovered some articles on the research of the social psychiatrist Irmeli Järventie’s who had found that children’s basic needs were neglected in Finland. To gain a deeper understanding, I also read the book *Mitä lapsi tarvitsee hyvään kasvuun* (What

a child needs for good growth) by the child psychiatrist Jari Sinkkonen in which he also refers to Järventie’s research (Sinkkonen 2008, 24). Reading and learning about the basic needs of children led me to reconsider my own childhood. I realized then that the structure of a forthcoming performance was beginning to take form:

A researcher (me, using my real name) goes camping to collect data for the inquiry of what constitutes a ‘home’. After camping for five weeks, she has encountered several problems or deficiencies that prevent her from feeling at home. (These deficiencies become almost immediately inevitable in a Finnish winter which amuses the audience). Her ‘method’ for approaching and solving these problems is to recall her childhood home and to organize and recreate similar situations using camping equipment. During the performance or demonstration as a “research presentation”, she reads out these problems to the audience from her research diary and, one by one, demonstrates the solutions.

In the dramaturgy these problems, based loosely on the above-mentioned research and Sinkkonen’s book, focus on a human being’s basic needs for warmth, food, sleep, shelter, safety, rhythm in life and the feeling of belonging to a family. During the performance, it becomes clear that they all seem to require the presence of other people. To proceed with the study, the researcher decides to substitute her deceased mother and maternal grandmother with figures: a grill and a megaphone representing her grandmother, and a tent and a pillow with empty toilet paper rolls stuck to the pillow imitating curlers embodying her mother. To avoid a split into two characters, that of an adult researcher and the role of the child I once was, the latter is performed by the beloved doll – now given a name: Childhood (cf. figure 1).

As moving extensive camping equipment would have been difficult, animating the figures of the mother and grandmother was approached differently than in classical puppeteering. In his article “Towards a Theatre of Objects” puppet theatre researcher Henryk Jurkowski suggests that when a



Figure 1: Solutions to homesickness I (photo: Riku Laakkonen)

character is inanimate but treated as a live person by the other human performers, it can be referred to as the *animisation* of the figure (Jurkowski 1988, 37). According to him, this is the ritual way of making a figure live. In my performance the only moment when a traditional stage animation was used was when the audience heard my grandmother speaking. Her voice was produced by a human actor (me, the ‘researcher’) and came out of the figure’s head, represented by the megaphone. Otherwise both figures representing the previous generations became stage characters through animisation. Having the background of a puppet theatre artist, it would have been natural for me



Figure 2: Solutions to homesickness II (photo: Riku Laakkonen)



Figure 3: Solutions to homesickness III (photo: Katriina Andrianov)

to use puppet manipulation to make the third inanimate figure, the doll from my childhood, come alive. However, the very notion of this manipulation roused insurmountable disgust. I decided to remain with the dramaturgy using the doll to illustrate some evening rituals connected with sleep and security. I washed and dried her feet and, for a bedtime story, read her a short chapter from Heli-nä Siikala’s *Voiman ja ilon käsikirja* (Handbook of strength and joy). I recited an evening prayer, the one taught to me by my grandmother, and sheltered her with an opened umbrella (cf. figure 2)

In the summer version of the performance, the color of my t-shirt was approximately the same as the doll’s clothes – the only ones she had. For the winter performance, the doll and I wore identical costumes. In the process of sewing and knitting warm clothes for her, I suddenly realized that I was preparing to *dress* her – the same thing I did with my other dolls in my childhood. However, there was a significant difference: this time I was not doing something *to* her, but *for* her. The doll had changed from being an object/target of

my needs into a subject with her own necessities (in this case warm clothes). Further, the act of dressing was no longer the only way of giving care (cf. figures 3 and 4).

My unwillingness to manipulate was now explained. I was unable to repeat the act that had been done to me when nobody respected my grief and empathy for the doll’s damaged beauty. Even with a disfigured face, she had been worth taking care of. The solution to my homesickness was hidden in my childhood. On the level of performance dramaturgy, I was seeking answers to the “sub-problems”, but only the doll incarnated the real birthplace of my homesickness: the experience of being worthless. She represented the part of my childhood that, though secure in material well-being, had lacked space for my own interpretation of what happened to me. Treating the doll as an equal, I gave her a chance to rid herself of manipulation and become precious as she was.

Due to the chosen autoethnographic method of building dramaturgy, in which my life history and my profession functioned reciprocally, the production of *Solutions to Homesickness* became unpredictably healing and integrative. “Playing with dolls” and recreating my childhood was both personally and professionally enlightening, contributing to the development of the key hypothesis for my doctoral dissertation on expressive objects.

Mode, location and aspect of animation

When observing the stage as a spectator, I had noticed that an object (a thing, an item) was a piece of the set or props unless there was a certain *change* in it – a change that communicated that the object was to be a character, playing the part of, say, Hamlet. In puppet theatre movement/motion has explicitly been and still often is considered this change. However, according to my experience as a spectator, movement was not always the precondition nor prerequisite for an object to become animate. In relation, I explored different forms of a change in or to an object, movement included, and suggested these be called *modes*. Developing *Solutions to Homesickness* (2008–2015) provided an opportunity to first think of the modes from an artist’s point of view, later adding two other significant characteristics (location and aspects) that together make up the central components of my theoretical approach.



Figure 4: Solutions to homesickness IV (photo: Katriina Andrianov)

Mode

The original meaning of *mode* is derived from the Latin word *modus* which can be understood both as a modal verb as well as a description of how something is at a given moment. In colloquial use it often refers to ‘a way of life’ or ‘a lifestyle’. *Modus vivendi* is a satisfactory or tolerable temporary solution to which different parties can agree – literally it is ‘the way of living’ (Korpela 2013). Henryk Jurkowski uses the notion of *modus vivendi* when describing the historical development of the theatrical functions of the puppet (Jurkowski 1988, 38ff). In my research, *mode* is the means of animation, the change in a figure that enables the spectator to perceive the figure as the representation of a stage character.

At the beginning of artistic work on *Solutions to Homesickness* my observation had concentrated on these modes alone, classifying them by naming each individually. For example, *spoken I-lines* (a figure seems to be speaking and refers to her/himself as “I”), or *spoken s/he-lines* (the figure is talked about by another character, usually performed by a human actor). Although both mentioned ways to animate the figures were used in my performance, the notion of ‘mode’ alone seemed incomplete to understand the whole event of animation. In turn, two other characteristics of creating a change emerged: *location* and *aspect*.

Location

When I, in the role of the researcher, use the abovementioned *spoken s/he-lines* to tell the audience about the figure of my mother (the tent as her body and the pillow as her head with toilet paper rolls imitating curlers), there is no change in the figure itself. According to Jurkowski’s *animisation*, I treat the figure as an incarnation of my deceased mother showing respect, normally directed to living people, to camping equipment. I invite spectators to join the process of watching an installation of objects and of seeing it as a person. The location of the change from props to a stage character is in the context of the figure connected with it, namely in me talking of her. However, in the case of my grandmother, animated with a *spoken I-line* that comes from the megaphone representing her head, the location of animation is in the figure itself. Therefore, location is the *perceived* spot of the mode (grandmother *seems* to be speaking; her voice *seems* to be coming out of her), not the spot of the *source* of the mode (the source of grandmother’s speech is a human actor: myself crouching behind the figure and operating the microphone).

Aspect

Aspectology is an area of linguistics that studies those lingual forms and meanings that express the proceeding of action (or state) in time (Rönkä 2005). The aspect of the verb, familiar especially to those who know Slavic languages, is a category through which a viewpoint to the structure of action is created (Nikunlassi 2002, 173). By the structure of action, I mean mainly the duration and result that are expressed, for example in Russian, by the ‘imperfective’¹ and ‘perfective’² aspects of a verb.

The imperfective aspect expresses action in general, whereas the perfective aspect stresses the result of the action. The imperfective aspect does not express totality. Instead, it leaves an open viewpoint to the internal structure of the action. Consequently, the imperfective aspect can refer to a proceeding action which a real or imaginary observer can follow. The perfective aspect in turn, refers to an action that appears total as it is defined by an internal boundary. Totality can be characterized as a viewpoint in which the possibility to observe the internal structure of an action, its phases, is excluded. A total action can be compared to an object that can only be examined from the outside (Nikunlassi 2002, 176).

Further, the perfective aspect has two meanings: perfective and potential. In its perfective meaning, the perfective aspect expresses an action that, from the view of the moment of observation, takes place in the past but *its result or outcome is still present or in some other way topical*. In its potential meaning, the perfective aspect expresses *the speaker’s estimate of a performer’s ability or inability to perform the action in question* (ibid, 179).

In the verb system of stage animation “aspectuality” occurs, as with mode, as a property of the change. Mode is the means or way of the change while aspect is more connected to time. When a spectator perceives a change in which an inanimate figure seems to begin speaking, changing its appearance from “voiceless” to “vocal”, s/he is following animation in the present time. The figure becomes animate before her/his very eyes. Here, the mode of animation is a spoken I-line, location is in the object itself, and the aspect is imperfective. This can all be expressed in a simple sentence: *Grandmother is talking*.

1 As to Russian the imperfective (unfinished) aspect indicates an action in its course, a repeated action, or a fact as a neutral information without any reference to its completion.

2 In Russian the perfective (completed) aspect means a completed action (the result, beginning, or an individual case).

If a spectator does not observe the change of the figure as an event of the present tense but perceives it as *the result* of an action, the aspect of the mode is perfective. The ability to follow the phases of change is prevented by the artists or the spectator her/himself, when for example, s/he passes by the street performance twice. The second time s/he can see that *the doll has gone to bed*, in other words, it has been animated. This is the perfective aspect in its perfective meaning.

The potential meaning of the perfective aspect occurs when there is no change in the figure or in the context connected with it, but rather a certain quality in the figure itself that gives the spectator an inkling of a *potential* change. For example, a doll copies a human being far more recognizably than other figures around it thus intensely differing from them. This can arouse a feeling of an intentional creature whose gaze is unquestionably expressive implying that *she is going to move (in a minute)*.

For many modes of imperfective aspect both locations are possible, but the location of a mode of the perfective aspect is always in the figure itself, never in the connected environment. In turn, a figure becomes animate *in the spectator*, at least when it comes to the potential meaning of the perfective aspect. In other words, when there is no perceivable change, it is *her/his* expectation and experience which both animates and internalizes. The figure becomes animated *in her/him*. Nevertheless, the spectator is waiting for a change in the *figure*; the original reason for its becoming animate is in itself. The location of the change is different from the location of the experience, as in the case of the abovementioned casual passer-by.

Conclusion

The main inquiry of my dissertation research focused on the experience of the sacred and was based on data collected not from my own artistic work. Though considered theoretical, the pragmatic orientation of the study seemed to require experimentation as well. For this reason, I put on stage three solo performances as a side project of my dissertation, *Solutions to Homesickness* being one of them. My purpose was to experiment technically with modes of animating, however, quite unintentionally, the performance also contained an element of the sacred.

When demonstrating the importance of good sleep as one of the basic needs making one feel 'at home', I unwind a sleeping bag in which I find my doll waiting. I take her out very carefully as if I were touching a treasure and announce to the audience that her name is Childhood. After this, my attention is only directed

to her. What follows is a ritualistic scene with washing her feet and saying a prayer, originally meant only to demonstrate some homely evening habits. But the doll Childhood makes me a humble servant and I cannot but wish her God's blessing:

In the light of this research, the sacred is manifested specifically as an interpretation of the event of animation rather than as a static quality given to an object. This interpretation seems to call for the human performers to refrain from manipulation of both objects and spectators. The ethics of the performance arises from the human performers' attitude, not only towards themselves, but also towards the performing objects and the spectators which can be characterized as acknowledgement of otherness. Reciprocally, the spectator, too, has the possibility to become brittle; she has the right to be a "weak actor" but, still, to take the responsibility for construction of her experience and her attitude towards performers, both living and animated (Andrianov 2016, 12).

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