Nová dramaturgia, nový dramaturg II.

New Dramaturgy, New Dramaturge II
New Laocoön: On Dramaturgization, Or the Role of the Dramaturge as the Key to Understanding the Profession of the Artist Today

MAX RYNNÄNEN

Historically, the role of the dramaturge has puzzled both scholars and practitioners from theatre and the performing arts— even dramaturges themselves. Nations which have had a long time to develop the idea of the dramaturge have been lucky to have been the first to be introduced and to have become used to the idea of the dramaturge’s professional identity, before it then drifted into the current chaos of the arts. The current artistic chaos, where the weakness of identities and compartmentalizations of culture blurs boundaries. So their conception of that profession, which is now in crisis, was stable at least at some point. Germany is of course the pioneer of this group, with a tradition that extends from the origin of the concept, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s work, and continued (if we cut the story down to its most obvious components) most famously, to Bertold Brecht.

In most countries, though, this is not the case. Discussions about the dramaturge’s role are a recent phenomenon, and thus from the beginning, they were conducted in a post-modernist framework.

For example, when thinking about the postmodernist focus on grand narratives and performativity, it is understandable that debates about the postmodern era and the postmodern movement have been more dominant in performing arts than e.g. in visual arts and film, where only specific marginal groups have been interested in the issue.

But let us not forget one of the key trend concepts of postmodernism, intertextuality, which traveled a long way from Kristeva’s Saussurian analysis to the way cultural components depend on each other, and finally in the end, pointed only to the practice of making clear references to other works. Along with Lyotard’s endless questioning on how to handle textual information (The Postmodern Condition, 1979) it serves as a good example of the fact that this movement was almost totally textual.

I believe that it echoed and fueled practical changes in the arts. Clues to this might be found in the textual sensitivity of thinkers which were used as

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7 I have discussed this crisis in my essay “Institutional Stress. When bureaucracy replaced art”, published in the Miami-based art journal Art Pulse (Spring 2012, link in the list of literature).
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urge has puzzled both scholars and profession-forming arts - even dramaturges themselves. It is hard to imagine the idea of the dramaturge, having first been introduced and to have become a dramaturge's professional identity, before it then became a hub of the arts. The current artistic changes, and the compartmentalizations of cultural conception of that profession, which is now at some point. Germany is of course the cradle of Lessing's work, and continued (if we most obvious components) most famously in the U.S. Discussions about the phenomena, and thus from the beginning, postmodernist framework.

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end concepts of postmodernism, interesting how from Kristeva's Saussurian analyses, that depend on each other, and finally in practice of making clear references to other endless questioning on how to handle modern Condition, 1979) serves as a good movement was almost totally textual. Ideal changes in the arts. Clues to this sensitivity of thinkers which were used as tools for the debate. One of them, anything but a postmodernist in the typical sense for cultural studies, is Jacques Derrida. His Of Grammatology (1967) offers us insight on what scholarly work, scientific and academic writing is, for example by showing that the type of text we perceive as academic, echoes certain features of the era(s) when it was created (e.g. early modernity and its rationalist agenda). Derrida's focus on the role of writing and text, is of course connected to his broader aim to rethink these topics. I am not interested in going deeply into that swamp here. But in his spirit, I like to think that the textual agenda which has haunted those who have tried to make sense of our era, might in the same way be full of traces of the textualization of practices which has been typical of the arts and culture of these decades.

Textualization, however, is a word which puts too much weight on the philosophy of text. I think the way we work with texts today is more interesting. It might even invite us to rather talk about dramaturgization, as many of the typical ways of working in arts today echo the traditional role of the dramaturge, who mainly works with texts in varying ways.

To gain more insight into this phenomenon, it might be useful to take a small leap into Lessing's work. The Hamburger Dramaturgy (1767 - 1769) paradoxically offers us less hints on where to go than Lessing's earlier, seminal contribution to philosophical aesthetics, the Laokoön. An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry (Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie, 1750). As the former (chronologically later) work is a compound of approximately one hundred short, philosophically deepening and analysing on plays (texts) which entered the Hamburg National Theater when Lessing worked as its chief dramaturge; the Laokoön is an analytical inquiry about the differences and analogies of painting and poetry. Lessing's main idea was to argue against Horace's “picture poetics” (as painting, so poetry), and in doing so stress the differing, although still in many ways analogical characteristics of poetry and painting.

At the time Lessing wrote the Laokoön, the whole idea of the (fine) arts was just evolving. From Greek ideas about mimetic skills/practice, inspiration and divine imagination, to the Middle Ages with its curriculums of free/vulgar arts/skills (artes liberales/artes vulgares), when there was still no practical or theoretical work for bringing the arts together into one family of practices. The arts at that time were not highly valued and they were not as autonomic as in (later) modern times.

Arts became more individualistic and autonomous on the verge of the Renaissance. They formed their own territory, came closer to each other in spirit, and suddenly in the 18th century, it felt natural to talk about them as a group.

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It became trendy for 18th century philosophers to work out theories on how the arts were united and what their shared property (use of imagination, expression, etc.) contained. Music was no longer just a part of mathematics in the curriculum (still the thought even in the late middle ages), the Florentine master painters were no longer craftsmen (of guilds), and performing arts were valued highly enough to enter the system – along with sculpture, architecture, poetry and the (now bizarre) art of rhetoric.

This family of practices, building upon a new concept, fine arts (first belles artes (Portuguese), later on, beaux arts, belle arti, etc.), soon gained a role in a broader framework which was later coined the autonomy of the arts. Lessing’s text, which took the question of the analogies and differences between poetry and sculpture seriously and analyzed them in detail, is a classic most aestheticians read at the beginning of their studies. It has had an impact on the development of the whole conception and development of the art world, a web of practices from academies to criticism, from museums to city theaters, which now seem to be very natural, but which back then were just slowly coming together.

Lessing’s then controversial way of seeking analogies is a great methodological model for any era which seeks to trace its own nature or the life and constellation of its arts. In this text, I attempt by following the footsteps of Lessing, to discuss some of today’s most typical artistic phenomena which are closely related to what we more or less traditionally conceive of as the work of a dramaturge. Dramaturgy, here, is thus used as a mirror which sheds light on what unites some of the most important new forms of art today. As visual arts are still quite in the center of our conception of what art is, I will also reflect a bit on contemporary (visual) art.

To trace the dramaturgical side of today’s art, or to sketch out the dramaturgization of the arts, I will discuss some of the main features of dramaturgical work, the way artistic work has changed over the past few decades, and additionally, some thoughts about the artist as a philosopher which were not alien to the era when Lessing wrote his texts, and which have now gained importance in a new dramaturgical way.

Professional Crisis – and Impact

"The conventional role for the German dramaturge", Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt write in their *Dramaturgy and Performance* (2008), is found "within the management structure of a state-funded theatre. Here, the *Chefdramaturge* works with the artistic director to plan the repertoire..."
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Cathy Turner and Synne "Drama and Performance (2008), is found in state-funded theatre. Here, the director to plan the repertoire,

a job that includes research into new plays (...) and selecting established works." (2008, 7) Included in the description we also find: casting, writing programme material and working with the marketing department. Working with the director during rehearsals, inquiries in contextual information and other ways of participating are also mentioned. It seems that dramaturges are curators, creative collaborators, and, adding from other sources, teachers of dramatic text, headhunters for new dramatic texts, house philosophers and copywriters.

Lessing created the critical practice of the dramaturge. Later approaches, like Eugenio Barba’s view that dramaturgy is more narrowly an artistic practice, e.g. about “weaving” together “the performance’s different elements” (in Turner & Behrndt 2008, 12) makes the dramaturge the most dominant creator of plays, an ‘auteur’ to use film language (film directors already had their production crisis in the 1960s when the Nouvelle Vague (Godard on the front – and not coincidentally, quite a textualist) entered the scene).

Marianne Van Kerckhoven (I am still quoting the catchy story of the crisis in Turner & Behrndt) writes about the problems of the overflowing descriptions of the job: “It appeared... that dramaturgy involves everything, is to be found in everything, and is hard to pin down. Is it only possible to think of dramaturgy in terms of spoken theatre, or is there a dramaturgy for movement, sound, light and so on, as well? Is dramaturgy the thing that connects all the various elements of a play together?” (In Turner & Behrndt 2008, 17)

The crisis is not that different from what it has lately been in other arts, though one has to admit that it now seems to be especially strong in the case of dramaturgy.

Could the angst of the dramaturges, echo the fact that the broader crisis in arts is ‘dramaturgical’ in nature? At the least, it is interesting how much Lessing could be said to be an unconscious role model for the whole profession of an artist today. And, not only dramaturges or performing arts professionals have had situations where they do not really have a name or clear identity for what they do. Not only the performing arts have witnessed a radical transition of professional identities.

Could it be plausible (or interesting) to think that artists in other fields have stolen (unconsciously I believe), many of the traditional roles of the dramaturge? Take for example contemporary visual artists, who have had to become amateur philosophers in order to take conceptual art to a higher plane, who have had to become film makers to be able to use audiovisual equipment, and (here is the beef) who often work as
writers and editors (of journals, exhibition catalogues and flyers), critics, consultants, headhunters for new art, and even more as art journalists, than as painters.

In this situation, one could think that dramatists are actually very lucky to have a label for what they do. In many cases I feel that my own students and colleagues – I work mostly in the contemporary (visual) art world and educate people for it – are more lost than ever. There are no words for referring to their professional positions and agencies.

There are interesting cases very close to me, which connect in my own mind to Lessing. I have worked a lot with Petri Saarikko’s Kallio Kunsthalle, an alternative gallery space in a lately gentrified area in Helsinki (Kallio). In addition to exhibitions, it has hosted more than 20 performance acts per year. Saarikko does layouts, texts, editing work, curatorial work and in the end a lot of communications (press releases, etc.) as well. It organizes talks and screenings at the gallery, and works on a holistic publication of the whole project – of course alone.

In a world of art where alternative spaces are commonplace, there still do not exist enough conceptual tools to discuss this type of artistic work; and by looking at the lack of theoretical discussion in contemporary visual arts it seems that there is nothing bubbling underneath, no idea on how to tackle this phenomenon, although it has dominated the scene for two decades. This work is multi-faceted, quite textual, critical and semi-bureaucratic. I have quite close to me, at least 5 artists who focus more on running a ‘space’, which they conceive of as a kind of artistic work, though not a work of art, than on doing traditional works of art. In all cases the array of practices is quite the same as in the case of the ‘Kunsthalle’.

At my own university I have become involved in creating a new MA programme (Visual Culture and Contemporary Art), which focuses on analyzing and forming this developing territory, and giving a helping hand to people who are lost in the ruins of old compartmentalization, and who do not necessarily find any institutional or theoretical support for their new creative work. The new, emerging professional agencies and identities are the focus of the programme. Most of the students have a background in contemporary visual art, but there are film makers as well who do not want to work either in the film industry or in its alternative art houses, painters who do not feel at home in a traditional art institution, and so on. Everybody is more into curating, editing, doing adaptations, writing artistic research, working out new interpretations of classics, writing critiques, and other quite Lessingian practices, rather than sculpt only a

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sculpting, filming, or painting. I can only guess that we are not the
only university building a programme with this aim. The crisis in the
arts is, in this fashion, broad and deep.

The fact that there still is a classical label which can be debated, might even
look positive if you look at it from this perspective. Dramaturgy—you
can still build upon it! It means something—and the dramaturge is
practically more distinguishable from other forms of artistic work than
for example, the ‘contemporary artist’ is (his/her work can, artistically
speaking, be almost anything). Maybe it does not always look that way
in the field of theatre, as actors, playwrights and directors might still
have more traditional, strong roles in the field, but seen in the broader
context of arts and culture, the case of dramaturgy is not so bad, and
even less as the role of the dramaturge serves as a model for work in
other arts. This is something the profession (as much as other arts)
might have to become sensitive to, and which it might be able to use
to its own advantage.

The dramaturge, besides now feeling the pressure to become just a copywriter
and an ‘anything goes’ salesman/woman, has from the beginning of
the use of the concept, been forced to be a house critic, editor, curator
and a writer all at once.

The arts today are in a demarcation state, but more than breaking forms or
norms inside the arts, it might be that the identities and the professional
agencies of the artists are the ones which are in the most radical state of
transition. The arts have lost their clear modern boundaries, and I feel,
for example, that many performing artists work exactly the same
way as visual artists work today (with performance). Recently, active
territorialization of separate arts has been seen as untrendy, but it is
also harder to separate them if you concentrate on ‘avant-gardist’ and
experimental activity (to separate them from the more conservative
and middlebrow public art services).

In the constant reorganization of the artistic sphere, boundaries are blurred,
people have to multitask more and professionals are posted in new,
surprising ways. There are more and more ‘homeless’ professionals,
some more and some less happy about it. All types of artists curate,
facilitate, write, edit, manage, produce and do scholarly work.

Of course, the crisis of the dramaturge has special sides to it, and although I will
not go into these matters, one could say that the drift towards the work
of a copywriter, even paperback writer, is one which dramaturgy also
loosely shares with many other arts which have been forced to com-
promise in new (neoliberal and neocapitalist) ways. This development
has been the subject of philosophical lament since Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s 1944 essay “The Culture Industry”, and in the visual arts you could make a whole career just by criticizing capitalism, nagging about neoliberalism in biennale panels, speaking, editing publications on the topic, and so on.

One publishes journals, organizes events, and takes art out of its home context to engage in a dialogue with other arts, politics and mass media. This is what artists do today, seemingly in all the arts. I teach in a multidisciplinary MA program, and I have noticed that many of my students have a harder time working out a relation to their ‘official’ background (painting, dance, film), than to other ‘homeless’ artists who multiplied.

As their work is less and less narrowly professional in the old sense – research is freely written, people who cannot act (classically) in videos, etc. one can easily say that being an amateur is one of the most important features of artistry today, at the same time as we talk about professional identities where you have to be able to perform a broad variety of different tasks. Of course there exists a professional way to do things at the same time, but it no longer relies on an idea of quality or a type of restricted idea of professionalism and excellency which was typical of the past. But if we consider the work and role of the dramatizer, the different practices mastered today would no longer create such a fragmented experience.

In the aforementioned sense, for me the most interesting group in the Northern hemisphere is still to be found in the performing and performance scene, run by artists who probably would not like to be included in the world of theatre, but who, in some sense, fit in it well. The performing arts collective Reality Research Center (http://www.todellisuus.fi/) has worked relentlessly on writing, editing, critique, journalism and scholarly methods, to the extent that some people do not realize that it actually creates and gives performances as well. The group publishes the best theoretical arts journal (a quarterly) in Finnish language, and the huge archive of work done by this group extends from organizing an experimental ‘prison’ for artists so they can concentrate on the substance of their work which otherwise gets overshadowed by production administration and self-promotion (2014) to testing how it feels to crave in public places (2008). Textual, theoretical work seems to function as a binding force, and the group also works on criticizing its own work. Facilitation and cooperation are also central for the work of the group, which I have had the luck to collaborate with. One project was publishing critiques of theatre reviews, in which the group members summed up
and takes art out of its home context: arts, politics and mass media. Today in all the arts. I teach in a multidisciplinary environment, and I noticed that many of my students relate to their 'official' background, her 'homeless' artists who multitask professional in the old sense — research, not act (classically) in videos, etc. Amateur is one of the most important times as we talk about professional to perform a broad variety of tasks a professional way to do. Things relies on an idea of quality or a type and excellency which was typical of work and role of the dramaturge. Today would no longer create such an interesting group in the Northern the performing and performing would not like to be included in the sense, fit in it well. The performing (http://www.todellisuus.fi/484) editing, critique, journalism and at some people do not realize that we do as well. The group publishes (quarterly) in Finnish language, and it is clear that they can separate their production (2014) to testing how it feels to create critical work seems to function as works on criticizing its own work for the work of the group, which rith. One project was publishing the group members summed up the play reviews, and then went through the problems of these reviews. This sometimes resulted in responses written by the critics who were criticized. I was once invited to write a critique of the critiques, a meta-critique of one year's work, analyzing all the meta-critiques. These types of textual practices, which are critical, quite scholarly in nature, and include facilitation (which can definitely be seen to be a part of the classical work of the dramaturge), are typical of this group. On its web pages — one form of the editing of today, a site for adapting (video on performance) and textualizing other forms of work and practice — is a living archive. It is the electronic equivalent of a basement in a big, old city or national theatre, although the difference with the classical model is that it is now open for anyone's use, and even produced for the critical public. The Reality Research Center does not run its projects in the fashion a theatre house would, but it seems that the way it works echoes Lessing's role even more, than what can be said of many professional dramaturges today.

The center has published manifestos, organized reading groups, offered consultation services (on utopias), worked collectively on texts and adaptations, and produced mail-order art. The group's seminars have had a huge impact on the artistic and scholarly scene in Helsinki. At the same time, these people are scholars, editors, performers, directors, and in some sense their textual and discursive and institutional work is more than anything else about the work of the dramaturge, as coined by Lessing. Maybe even the whole center could be viewed as a dramaturgical enterprise, but here I am more interested in new artistic (and philosophical) work practices.

House Philosopher

Once quite a writer, philosopher, critic and bibliophilic scholar (Lessing) the new dramaturge who feels homeless and disoriented in the messed up territory of the arts, has now again come closer to what German philosophy (but as well a bit in the French and Italian tradition) meant since the 18th century, and which still seems to survive. However, in our era the university has not been very friendly towards fragile 'hyacinth disciplines' and to individuals who take their own path.

Taking a look at the philosophy of the European mainland in the 18th, 19th and (leaning towards critical theory and existentialism) 20th century, it is easy to see that the job of the philosopher has been holistic and has included multitasking. Philosophers have worked to provoke, discuss, talk and poeticize current problems as much as eternal ones, to engage
people in intellectual dialogues, working to describe and analyze broader horizons.

The poet-philosopher, an early modern German dream, is now relevant in a fresh way – as dramaturges (and performers) edit, translate and rework (Brecht put a lot of stress on the challenges of this work) other works and reality in a more energetic way than in other arts, and often have a broader impact on culture and society. This is part of our era as well and dates back to e.g. the social work done by the Living Theatre in NYC in the 1960s, which was, if anything, ethics in action.

The art of translation (one classical role of the dramaturge, but here we can skip it happens from art to art as a form of adaptation), dramatization and critique are crucial for the artist-philosopher, as much as it is central to introduce and present works, themes and perspectives in a critical and witty Hamburger Dramaturgie fashion.

The poetical tradition of philosophy, extending from Hölderlin to Heidegger and Sartre is alive in the intellectual works of today’s dramaturge experiments. As well as the experimental writing tradition of Pasolini and Cixous, and the social activism that has always been central for both French philosophy and American pragmatism. All these forms of work seem to have found a new home in the arts, where today everyone is an activist and a scholar. And the way these working methods get organized is something that is borrowed from the traditional role of the dramaturge.

In 1964, Arthur C. Danto famously wrote that art had become philosophy. He stressed, however, the way conceptual art had become intellectual and an enterprise where philosophical issues had a bigger role than ever, in relation to craft (now definitely back in visual arts). Danto focused mostly on examples from visual arts (only one performance is included in this seminal art theory), and his interest never expanded to thinking that beyond conceptualism there could be a possibility to work in a more holistic way. He also did not foresee the role textualism, and the dramaturge’s working practices would assume in the contemporary art world. The way that in the end, art became philosophical, was more classical and textual than the hidden formalism applied by the conceptual artists of the 1960s.

Of course the tradition I am referring to is most significantly a part of the intellectual and artistic scene of continental Europe, where even philosophers have often been outlaws and free spirits. From Bataille to Blanchot, one can witness how the last big wave of this type of philosophizing was anything but academic. Even today, many of the most important critics.
critical philosophical thinkers have made a career in the art world. Peter Sloterdijk, Nicolas Bourriaud, Boris Groys and Slavoj Žižek have all first found an audience and the freedom to work in the arts and art universities (in fact, most of these thinkers still work there). Only after their massive successes, did they enter the world of academic philosophy. From the 'other side' they are now met by artists who have taken the challenge to philosophize through art. They shock, like (I am now presenting you with the scene where I live and work) Feliko Koskinen, who hijacks performances. You buy a ticket to his performance but you find yourself in someone else's performance (though you paid for Koskinen's work, which of course in a philosophical sense it is). What does it mean to be an author, to 'own' a performance?

We find Maija Hirvonen (or her performer) talking at length about the subjects she studies in her performances, and after the so called works, most of it is then discussed in text publications, or discussed in public talks, maybe even auto-criticized in some sense. The roles of the producer, choreographer, director, curator and researcher are endlessly mixed.

The (Swedish) Malmö-based Institutet (RIP) was a theatre which also worked with texts, adaptations and philosophy. In their classical play Dallas (2007) pathetic macho scenes of the TV series Dallas were shown to the audience, and then performed by the actors (with dildos attached to their groins), stressing the (now) weird sexual metaphysics of 80s television. An extensive text on Deleuze was included in this play – a good one, says the philosopher – and the way the adaptation, analysis of the original 'play' (TV series), and how all this was melted down to form the work of a group of post-philosophers, opened doors to unseen truths and futures.

To conclude one could say that maybe we have also found a practical way to mark the dialectics of art vs popular culture. The modern system of arts helped to create a productive framework for the possibility of artistic practices in the 18th century, and in the beginning this development was done without referring to an 'enemy'. Modernism followed, and at the beginning of the 19th century it produced the mass culture debate, which was created to polarize art and its competitors. Now, without any hierarchical stance, one could say that you know that you have entered hardcore art territory when you see people doing the work of the dramaturge, in the fashion we have discussed here. In middlebrow practices like mainstream opera and public art life, there can be traces of this, but in the heart of art today, traces of the work of the dramaturge and at least a clear analogy or allegory to it, are found everywhere.
Whether dramaturgy as a profession can or cannot take advantage of this situation is another issue. Its nature, as one of the main keys for understanding what arts are about today, is something aesthetics and art theory should recognize. I hope that this paper can serve as a preliminary sketch on what that could lead to.

LITERATURE


