Poetics of the screenplay as drama-text

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Summary

(Peter van Stapele, *Poetics of the Screenplay as Drama-text*)

The present study aimed at formulating a poetics of the screenplay. I used the closed-structure theatre-play as a model for describing the screenplay. I chose the closed-structure theatre-play as model because it is well established and widely accepted in the Western art of writing theatre-plays (Pavis 1998, 438). I discussed this choice in the first section of chapter 1, after having treated the most important points that make a drama-text different from other fictional texts.

I used the ancient Greek tragedy as the prototype of the closed-structure theatre-play. For this reason Aristotle's *Poetics* is an important part of the foundation of the development of the poetics of the screenplay. Like Aristotle does in his work, I discussed three main themes about the closed-structure theatre-play as a basis for describing the screenplay:

- the structure of the plot as requisite to a screenplay for a feature film;
- the nature of the most important parts of which the screenplay is composed;
- an inquiry into methods that are used in creating form and content in the screenplay, intended to be transformed into a performance on film.

I focused my study on the development of dramatic action in the drama-text and on the intended transformation of the action into performance. This transformation is the main purpose of a drama-text. In discussing those themes, therefore, I aimed at developing a poetics that can fulfil two functions:

- making explicit the underlying system of dramatic principles, which makes it possible to describe and to analyse the elements of the screenplay, in particular its intended dramatic effects;
- explicating the dramatic world creating principles of dramatic representation in the play.

The main purpose of the poetics is to enable the reader of a screenplay to create the dramatic reality in the play and the characters and their acts in that reality, the acts creating the dramatic action in the play as a whole, intended to be transformed into performance.

After having introduced my choice for using the closed-structure theatre-play as model for developing the intended poetics of the screenplay, I concluded that for developing the poetics of the screenplay three subjects should be treated:

- the dramatic dialogue: providing concepts for the analysis of the dialogue as the main vehicle of creating drama;
- the mediating communication process: treating the way in which the dramatic dialogue expresses signs of the intended performance by actors before an audience;
- semiotics, the study of signs and of their use and meaning: discussing the way in which the intended transformation of a drama-text into a performance, which takes place through a specific use of signs, can be studied through semiotics.

First I introduced and discussed the subject of the mediating communication-system in the drama-text in the second section of chapter 1, and then the subject of semiotics in the third section. I discussed the dialogue in the second chapter and in chapter 3 I dealt with the ways in which the dialogue in the closed-structure drama-text conveys information about the intended transformation of the text into a theatrical performance of the drama.

In the section about the mediating communication system I discussed Pfister's idea that in drama-texts the positions of 'the fictional narrator' and of 'the fictional addressee' are left vacant, 'thereby eliminating the mediating communication system' (1988, 4). In my view the closed-structure drama-text is a two-layered text. The second layer consists of signs that refer to the intended performance. They are signs of the presence of the intended working of a mediating communication system. A drama-text does not have an 'absolute nature'.   Nevertheless, that difference of opinion does not alter the fact that Pfister's work has stimulated my idea about the necessity of developing a method for the analysis of deixis of the dramatic dialogue. Because he writes that the absence of the mediating communication system is not just compensated by the working of stage directions but also by signs in the dialogue. In discussing a segment of a work of 'realist drama', he concludes that a 'high percentage of the verbally transmitted information is mediated non-verbally at the same time'.[1] And in this context he refers to 'deictic references such as 'here' or 'there'' (1988, 46).

This is what characters do in the text. They say the words that are integrated parts of the intended action on stage. Nevertheless, actors are supposed to be the mediating force, not the characters. Although dramatic dialogue is the primary drama-text, intended dramatic action and the plot of this action form the primary dramatic elements. Dialogue is conducive to dramatic action and its plot. This is the reason why it is possible to create drama without dialogue but not without action. An example is the dramatic narrative of the screenplay that I have discussed in chapter 4 of my study. And there also are theatre-plays that use 'only the body language of mime', called 'mime play' (Pavis 1998, 213).

In preparation for the development of a method for analyzing deixis, I treated certain elements of semiotics in the third section of chapter 1, because the transformation of a drama-text into a performance takes place through a special use of signs. The heart of this process is indexicalization and contextualization. The signs used in a performance must have an iconic quality. But the textual signs become iconic in their general quality and only get an individual or specific meaning when they are used as indices. This is a process of indexicalization through which the reading of a dramatic dialogue creates the dramatic context, the characters and their acts in that context.

In the fourth section of the first chapter I described the characteristics of the drama-text that make the closed-structure drama recognizable, e.g. the *dénouement*. The experience of writing this section and the other parts of my study proved the value of the decision to confine, for heuristic purposes, the study in drama for theatre to the closed-structure drama-text. Already the closed-structure drama turned out to be such a complex phenomenon that it seemed quite impossible to reach a theoretically irreproachable definition of it. For this reason I used the term 'working-definition' for the description of the nature of the closed-structure drama-text at the end of chapter 1.

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[1] Pfister here uses an extract from Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879).

Because I used the ancient Greek tragedy as the prototype of the closed-structure drama-text, the fifth section of the first chapter deals with the plot of the tragedy. I discussed the main function of the plot – to arrange the dramatic action in the drama – which function has the purpose to present the action to an audience. I then described how Aristotle in his *Poetics* discusses basic dramatic principles and the element of the plot. As Aristotle writes, the plot is the first dramatic principle, the soul of drama. The working of the other dramatic principles is conducive to the working of the plot. The plot is the soul of drama because it arranges the dramatic action. I share Aristotle's view that drama is the imitation of an action and on this basis the imitation 'of the agents mainly with a view of the action' (27-29 / IV, 1450a/b). At the end of this section about the plot I referred to the plan to discuss in the fourth chapter of my study the question whether the dramatic principles that form the foundation of the plot of the closed-structure drama-text, also form the foundation of the plot of the classical screenplay.

The word 'soul' that Aristotle uses refers to the plot as a living thing, an organic entity, made of different elements and arranged in a system. Drama is, as Beckerman writes, '*organically* connected with theater'. It is 'but a special form of the art or presentation' (1979, 17). The purpose of a drama-text to be transformed into a performance causes a two-layered text. This conclusion leads to the question in which way what kinds of signs occur in the text that refer to the intended performance of the text. The answer to that question lies in the dramatic dialogue, which in a closed-structure theatre-play is the main vehicle of creating the dramatic reality and the characters and their acts in that reality.[2] The dialogue is discussed in the following two chapters.

I concluded at the end of chapter 1 that the most important features of the closed-structure drama-text had been discussed, in particular the signification, the major functions of action and the plot in drama. Dramatic action and plot are the heart and soul of the dramatic communication model in, as well as of, a drama. Analyzing the main vehicles of creating dramatic action as a unity and the working of the underlying system of dramatic principles in that process in the closed-structure theatre-play (chapters 2 and 3) and in the classical screenplay (chapter 4) is based on that communication model. For this reason I have formulated this model of communication at the end of chapter 1 as a working-definition of that text. I illustrated this definition with a diagram in the last part of the chapter.

Chapters 2 and 3 are about methods for analyzing dialogue as the main vehicle of creating dramatic action. Discussing the dramatic dialogue concerns two kinds of communication: the internal or dramatic communication between characters in their reality (R3) and the intended external or theatrical communication (in a performance (R2)). In a performance, actors present the internal communication between the characters to an audience. I demonstrated the different ways in which the dramatic dialogue is used to create drama. The analyses I made are based on the fact that almost every minimal speech of a character contains information about context, character, action and intended enactment.

The analysis of dramatic dialogue includes the working of dramatic principles in the process of the working of dialogue creating drama, e.g. the principle of motivation that causes a character to act, which refers to the working of the principles of causality

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[2] Together with monologue and soliloquy, which I did not discuss in the present study, because it is the dramatic dialogue that usually is the most fundamental and prominent means by which closed-structure drama is created. For the same reason I did not elaborately discuss the secondary text of stage directions. Besides, there are many texts without or with only a few stage directions.

and continuity in the dramatic action. I discussed in which way the dramatic dialogue fulfils its most important function. This function is serving the readers of a drama-text to interpret and create context, characters and dramatic action. Everything in a dramatic reality is created in the process of action and reaction (interaction) within and between the characters that participate in the drama.

In discussing this process, I demonstrated that such an elaborate study of the drama-text is necessary concerning the complexity of the intended working of the dramatic dialogue. Otherwise elements of the dramatic reality and of the dramatic action would not become noticeable. Important information then would remain hidden in and above all beneath the text (subtext).

In developing methods for analyzing dramatic dialogue I concentrated on questions about movement of action, within and between the speeches of the participants in the dialogue. Questions about movement refer to the intended presentation of the dramatic dialogue on stage. I have used Beckerman's method of descriptive analysis, in particular because his method focuses on the (intended) work of actors. They are expected to embody a drama on stage through studying the drama-text and transforming it into a performance. They are intended to give audible and visible form to the dialogue presented in the text. In Beckerman's view all presentation on stage is doing, and from

> the observer's point of view doing consists of a sequence of perceptible, and therefore external, signs of motion produced by the performer' (1979, 11).

In chapter 2 and 3 I have discussed in which way a dialogue, explicitly and implicitly, refers to motion on stage. In order to find out whether it would be possible to make the movement in a dramatic dialogue visible, I developed in chapter 3 a method for analyzing deixis in the dramatic dialogue, based on the work of Peirce (1958-1960), Fisch (1986), Benveniste (1970), Serpieri et al. (1981) and Elam 1980 (See Elam 2001,135-170). In discussing and demonstrating that method, I treated the subjects of dialogue, intended performance and elements of semiotic theory in an integrated way. These subjects became fully integrated parts of discussing the results of several analyses.

An analysis of deixis focuses on the fact that movement in dramatic dialogue is produced by turns, that is, by changes in the direction of the dialogue and therefore of the action. The changes are made by one character and taken over by the other or another participant in the dialogue. Attempts to turn that direction and definite turns are signs that show the movement within each speech and between the speeches; these signs refer to the motivation behind the speech acts (subtext). The analysis provides a detailed and reliable description of a drama-text. This description focuses on the essence of drama: turns in the dramatic action and movement in the dialogue and therefore in the intended action on stage. Through movement a dialogue produces signs of what happens between and within the characters who are involved in the action.

The results of an analysis of deixis present the turns in the direction of the dialogue through the use of an analytical method that is void of hermeneutics. The results form an adequate basis for discussing the interpretation of the text. They also form a basis for answering questions about the intended performance. This I have demonstrated in the third section of chapter 3, analyzing and describing the performance of a segment of a drama-text, which had been analysed and discussed in the former section.

It is possible to extend the analysis of deixis of a dialogue to analyzing other elements of the dialogue, e.g. the topics of discourse, and illocutionary acts and their effects (perlocution). This I have discussed by an analysis *Catastrophe* by Samuel Beckett (1984), in the last section of chapter 3. I have chosen to analyse this play in order to discuss and demonstrate that the concepts and the methods for analyzing the dramatic dialogue in the closed-structure drama-text also extends into studying the type of drama that can be classed as open structure drama. I concluded that those concepts and methods form together a strong and reliable basis for work and study in the field of internal and external communication in drama and theatre. Whether and in which ways the same concepts and methods can be used as tools for reading and describing screenplays, is discussed in chapter 4.

In this chapter I began with the introduction of the traditional Hollywood screenplay as the prototype of screenplay that is written with the purpose to be transformed into a film for mass-production. It is the kind of film that is well established and widely accepted in Western film art. I described and discussed in chapter 4 the traditional Hollywood screenplay and used in that part the concepts and the methods that have been discussed in chapters 1-3. I wrote chapter 4 with the intention to compare the plot of the traditional Hollywood screenplay with the plot of the closed-structure theatre-play.

To prevent the suggestion that the structure of the prototype screenplay and that of the closed-structure theatre-play are the same, I called that screenplay the 'classical screenplay' and not the 'closed-structure screenplay'. I defined the classical screenplay analogously to the working-definition of the closed-structure theatre-play. I called the definition of the classical screenplay 'hypothetical' because I based it on the hypothesis that the plot of the classical screenplay is fundamentally the same as that of the closed-structure theatre-play. I chose this point of departure, notwithstanding the fact that cinema 'has access to an alogical or *discontinuous* use of space [and of time]' (Sontag 1979, 366). After discussing some obvious other differences between the definitions of the classical screenplay and of the closed-structure theatre-play, I started to describe and discuss dramatic action in the classical screenplay in the second section of chapter 4, using *High Noon* by Carl Foreman (1949-1951) as an example.

An important conclusion of this work in the second section is that the plot of a classical screenplay, like *High Noon*, is closely similar to that of the closed-structure theatre-play. Even so I also concluded that at least the example of *High Noon* has fundamental characteristics of an open structure drama as I have discussed in the last section of chapter 3. The plot of the classical screenplay is discussed in the last section of chapter 4.

I also concluded at the end of section 2 of chapter 4 that a certain kind of narrative, that can be called 'dramatic narrative', has the function in creating context, characters and dramatic action in the screenplay, similar to but not the same as the dramatic dialogue in the closed-structure theatre-play. In the next section I discussed the particular features of the dramatic narrative and its function of intended communication between text and reader, or between what Pfister calls 'the fictional narrator' and 'the fictional addressee' (see above). Based on descriptions and analyses in the former section, I discussed that dramatic narrative usually does not concern elaborate communication between characters, e.g. discussing motives for certain acts. For this kind of communication in a screenplay the dramatic dialogue between characters is the main vehicle for creating drama. When, for example, it is necessary to elaborate the characterization of a character or to go more deeply into a problem or

a conflict, the use of dialogue is necessary. In the dramatic narrative an omniscient narrator describes context, characters and above all dramatic action. The narrator predominantly is the focalizor in the dramatic narrative.

The main question in the last section of chapter 4 is whether the dramatic principles that form the foundation of the closed-structure theatre-play also form the foundation of the classical screenplay. In the process of discussing that question, I used the analysis of the play *High Noon* by Carl Foreman in the former two sections as an example.

First I gave a summary of the dramatic principles, which form the foundation of the underlying system of the closed-structure drama-text (in particular its plot), as has been discussed in the former sections, based on the discussion about the closed-structure theatre-play in chapters 1-3.

Dramatic principles form the foundation of two different kinds of communication: internal, between the characters in a play, and external, the intended performance in a film, made for spectators. Discussing the working of dramatic principles includes, implicitly or explicitly, discussing intended effects of drama, internally as well as externally. When, for example, a character anxiously awaits something, readers or spectators are supposed to be kept in suspense at that moment if they identify themselves with the character in that situation. Words like character, identification, effect, expectation, suspense and tension refer to the working of dramatic principles. In each (part of a) dramatic event there is an integrated working of several dramatic principles.

In discussing the plot of the classical screenplay I treated (the working of) most of the dramatic principles. I concluded that the plot of the classical screenplay primarily is founded on a great number of the dramatic principles that form the foundation of the plot of the closed-structure theatre-play. At the same time important elements of the plot of the classical screenplay diverge or may easily diverge from the closed-structure plot. Examples of these divergences are:

- not only dialogue but also dramatic narrative is an important vehicle of creating dramatic reality, characters and dramatic action;
- the plot may have two or more relatively independent lines of dramatic action as long as the play meets the criterion of perspicuity;
- the main line of dramatic action may have an open ending because in the end the major conflict in the drama or in that action line is not (completely) solved;
- there are all kinds of possibilities of fragmenting time, space, image and sound;
- scenes and sequences of scenes, which are the building blocks of dramatic action, can be short in time and can take place in many different locations, alternately or consecutively;[3]
- two or more acts can be presented in different locations seemingly simultaneously (parallel action);
- more than one important subject may be communicated seemingly simultaneously (internally and externally), e.g. through the use of the method of parallel action;
- the use of space in a screenplay usually does not serve the continuity and unity of the dramatic action;

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[3] This makes it possible to interweave and interrelate several lines of action with one another and with the central line.

- the possibility for using methods of meta-communication in an easy way, e.g. through the use of voice-over, sound-over or image-over;
- there are all kinds of possibilities to use the technique of foregrounding, because in describing the image area in a screenplay, one can use the possibility that even the image of very small objects could fill the screen in a cinema, e.g. showing the word Rosebud on the burning sled at the end of *Citizen Kane*.

Nevertheless I concluded that, notwithstanding these divergences that are easily possible to use, the plot of the classical screenplay forms a dramatic unity that is not too difficult to embrace. Usually those divergences in a classical screenplay do not damage the play's quality of meeting the criterion of perspicuity, which is caused through the following features of the classical screenplay that cause (the feeling of) unity of action:

- the different lines of action are arranged in chronological order;
- the major protagonist usually is involved in many of the events in the different lines of action;
- in many scenes or sequences there are no more than a limited number of important and clearly characterized characters involved in the action;[4]
- the root cause of the main conflict in the play usually also effects the conflict in the other line or lines of action.

I then discussed that the example of the play *High Noon* that I used to demonstrate the working of the dramatic principles is not an exception in the whole range of classical screenplays or films, including the specific classical Hollywood style (Bordwell et al. 1985). I discussed another example of the classical screenplay, *Citizen Kane* by Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles (1940) and the film *Raging Bull*, directed by Martin Scorsese (1980), as discussed by Bordwell and Thompson (2001, 391-395).[5]

Bordwell and Thompson write that the ending of *Raging Bull* places the film

> in a tradition of Hollywood films (such as *Citizen Kane*) which avoid closure and opt for a degree of ambiguity, a denial of either/or answers. Such ambiguity can render the film's ideology equivocal, generating contrasting and even conflicting implicit meanings. (396)

Their conclusion supports my conclusion that the classical screenplay easily can diverge from the plot of the closed-structure drama, while it at the same time, and to a great extent is based on the principles of the closed-structure theatre-play.

In principle, for instance, the classical screenplay demonstrably has the possibility to avoid closure and to opt for ambiguity, which probably are two of its characteristics that causes the fact that the European avant-garde did not have

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[4] In most screenplays only a few characters are worked out in detail, depending on their function in the dramatic action as a whole.

[5] The film *Citizen Kane* has been carefully and detailed analysed and described by Bordwell and Thompson (2001, 79-90, *et passim*).

a disruptive effect when it entered Hollywood in the period 1925-1950. (…) on the whole, Hollywood absorbed and modified alternative artistic practices which had been developed in Europe and Russia. It is not much to say that Hollywood has perpetually renewed itself by assimilating techniques from experimental movements. Hollywood has done this by correlating new devices with functions already defined by the classical style. Three examples – avant-garde music, German Expressionist cinema, and Soviet montage cinema – illustrate how this has happened. (Bordwell et al. 1985, 72)

Based on what has been discussed in the present chapter about the plot of the classical screenplay, I came to the conclusion that the plot of the classical screenplay is primarily founded on the dramatic principles that form the foundation of the plot of the closed-structure drama-text. But the plot of the classical screenplay can easily diverge fundamentally from the closed-structure paradigm. The plot of the classical screenplay shows what can be called a paradoxical flexibility.

This flexibility of the plot of the classical screenplay or what I call the screenplay's epic quality did not hinder me from developing a poetics of the screenplay based on the study of the closed-structure paradigm, quite the contrary. Through the foundation of this paradigm of drama it is plausible that the poetics of the classical screenplay also can be used to function as the poetics to discuss screenplays that to a greater extent, diverge from that paradigm than classical plays such as *High Noon.*

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