

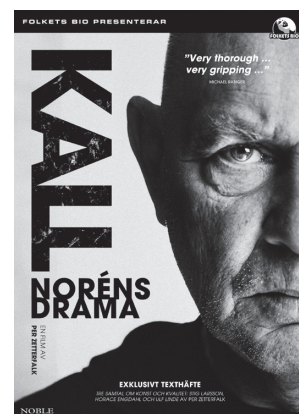
To Be In-between: In Search of the Artistic Subject

Reflections on artistic research as seen through the
dissertation *Inter Esse* by Per Zetterfalk

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In May 2008 Per Zetterfalk publicly defended his doctoral thesis *Inter Esse, Det skapande subjektet, Norén och Reality* (*The creative subject, Norén and Reality*), at the department of Cinema Studies, Stockholm University. The dissertation project was based at the Research School in Aesthetic Learning Processes, funded by the Swedish Research Council, Zetterfalk, however was physically based at the University College of Film, Radio, Television and Theatre in Stockholm. *Inter Esse* is one of the first examples of a dissertation within the field of artistic research, where scientific and artistic perspectives are merged together in various ways.

In *Inter Esse* Per Zetterfalk follows the development of Lars Norén's theatre production *Kyla* (Chill), and Swedish Television's reality-TV series *Riket* (The Kingdom), using direct observations, interviews and studies of the environment. The dissertation focuses on different forms of creative processes, from Norén's intensive dramaturgy for the theatre, to the extensive technique used in the making of an entertainment series for television. The dissertation, presented as a book with an attached DVD, contains a selection of the research work and a separate documentary film, *Norén's Drama*, about Norén's work with the play *Kyla*.



Per Zetterfalk places himself in a position of being 'in-between' (inter esse). He chooses to be "in-between art and science, theory and practice, between diverse genres and disciplines"¹, as well as in-between himself and the artists or the processes he is studying. Zetterfalk gives an account of the difficulties he experienced during the research, as confusion and opposition grew around him towards the work he was doing. He was by-passed and avoided by many different people and institutions. He says that it was as if there was a fear of 'contamination', from both the academic world and the art world.

Zetterfalk works with a documentary method that does not differ from traditional research, using interviews and direct observations, but he adds that he also has the ambition to do an 'artistic' interpretation of creative processes. That in order to understand the creative process, it should be studied through a 'praxis based, problem-solving reflection'. In this ambition the work diverts from a traditionally framed scientific approach in the humanities, where the requirements of the research are that the results are, and should be based on facts that can be verified.

What Zetterfalk does is follow a process that authors, composers, and artists have used as far back in recorded history that can be followed, without it ever being considered science. As Zetterfalk is one of the first to venture into the emerging field of artistic research in Sweden, not least within theatre and film, the ambivalent treatment of his research could be described as a result of unhappy circumstances.

You have to admire Per Zetterfalk's patience, like a fly on the wall he waits and listens. Zetterfalk is prepared to enter into different roles: the constantly bullied interviewer; the chauffeur that does errands he should not; and so on, he gathers different perspectives on creative processes. This gradually grows into a consistent position throughout his work. With openness as a starting point he awaits the questions. It is not unlike the artistic process, where questions and intentions often need time and space to evolve and surface.

The disadvantage with this open starting point and listening approach is that the questions do not clearly appear, and are therefore not deepened. The opponent Maaret Koskinen, who is professor in Cinema studies at Stockholm University, criticised Per Zetterfalk for not developing his questions further, that he avoided core research questions. We certainly agree there were issues that could have been pursued deeper in the dissertation, but it will be unfortunate if this kind of work is primarily judged with criteria from traditional scientific disciplines.

Per Zetterfalk writes: "the requirement that I should bind myself to a specific place, anywhere, and only after that, relate to the subject, is an interesting aspect of a research culture. Certainly, even a question that is badly formulated or even irrelevant could be a starting point – which later on could be changed. But if you know the question and the methods from the start, are you not obscuring the view of that which you can not know about a new field?"²

We support the open starting point, as a consciously chosen method in this context. You can discuss, which Zetterfalk does, whether the research process is an answer to a question or a part of a question. Often an artistic process can start with a notion, or a 'formless hunch', to quote the theatre director Peter Brook. The playwright Barbro Smeds calls it an 'intangible notion'³. It is about how to create meaning through connecting issues that were earlier not connected; to create recognition that leads the course of events forward.

1. Zetterfalk, p. 13.
2. Zetterfalk, p. 33.
3. From *Berättelse och kunskap. Slutrapport nr 2 från Kollegiet för forskning och utvecklingsarbete på det konstnärliga området*, Dramatiska Institutet, Stockholm 2006, p 159. ["Storytelling and knowledge. Final report nr. 2 from the Colligium for research and development in the artistic field, University College of Film, Radio, Television and Theatre, Stockholm 2006, p 159.]

Gradually this 'notion' can be formulated as a theme or a question. From this perspective, the formulation of the research question is an integral part of the process, and will not be ready until the work is about to be completed (perhaps not until after). Maybe the questions evolve gradually, and the aim of the research process is to formulate and bring forward those questions, rather than find answers.⁴ One also wonders whether research work must be about filtrating studies through specific questions or whether it could just as well be about adopting a questioning attitude to whatever you encounter.

It is one thing to initially set up a clear goal, so as [to] efficiently as possible reach there. It is a completely different thing to let the unexpected in a process define where you reach.⁴

What does Per Zetterfalk study, and make visible in his dissertation? The questions take their shape from the obvious curiosity that impels him, and the admirable endurance he possesses. He lets matters take their course. In the film, *Kall*, he captures the erratic dynamic moments that take place between Norén and his young ensemble as they work on the theatre performance *Kyla*. He is a careful listener and manages to get intimate with the ensemble and the process. The research takes place in revealing these, sometimes intimate moments that Zetterfalk registers, collects, and composes. He doesn't go deeper into the subject. He creates a void from where he can eavesdrop, and from there he watches and recreates a reality. It is evident how the borders between empiricism and creativity are exceeded. In addition he lets one process enter into dialogue with the other, and through this dialectic he creates a questioning.

In the space he creates for Norén, with vibrating close-ups of the artists' face at the moment of creation, you catch a glimpse of a romantic view of the artist that also shows in the choice of words used in the dissertation's written section such as 'works of art' and 'creative crisis'. Surprisingly, the author seems unaware of this. Zetterfalk emphasises the context as a given research perspective, and he works within two quite different contexts, but he doesn't place himself in a context. From where does Zetterfalk's knowledge, motives, and approach come from? It is as if the author withdraws from any attempt of having a position or to be a part of a historical context. The context for artistic research, inclusive dissertations, that exists in Sweden is not approached. There is a fascinating resistance to settle anywhere. And in the meeting with Norén's strong subject, and with the specific production practices of *Riket*, Zetterfalk is overshadowed.

The unfulfilled intention to include a third artwork in the study, a fictional film, as a kind of synthesis of the two studies, creates a lack, or leaves an absence, in the dissertation. Zetterfalk himself said that he thus lost "the relationship between Norén's scream and my own". Could it be that Zetterfalk is searching for his own artistic subject, which can take shape only in the aftermath of this research process?

Another aspect of the dissertation discussed during the public defence of the doctoral thesis, was the use of references, which were considered insufficient and in many instances unscientific. What happens with the content of knowledge when "people become authorities in the wrong subjects?" This regards the example of an art critic that made a statement about the humanities in the dissertation. You could also ask: What happens if one perceives the work from

4. The argument refers to Cecilia Lagerströms article "Artistic Research in the Performing Arts – In Search of a Poetics", in the coming issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies*, 2009.

an artistic perspective? In the art world it is an accepted method to borrow, steal, and use references from widespread disciplines, using it as a sounding-board for your own work. Through finding unexpected connections important questions can be put forward. In this way art has a capability to shape, give form to, represent and create tensions.

In an artistic research project there will often be many different references at play. They can consist of themes, objects, methods, body, memory, or even epistemologists and artists. They are all decisive references that refer to the work. None of them are worth more than another. A statement from Gadamer is therefore no more 'scientific' than the Swedish "trubador" Evert Taube's⁵ way of creating storytelling songs. This is an egalitarian perspective of references and experiences.⁶ However, what is extremely important in this context, is to identify the basis of knowledge, that is the researcher's own artistic practice. The seemingly 'shallow' juggling with references from various fields is rendered possible by the firm foundation of the researcher's own artistic expertise, but this is where Per Zetterfalk runs into certain problems.

Zetterfalk's meeting with Norén and the production company for *Riket* shows that he is unsure of his own position, and that maybe he should have had a clearer strategy. Maybe the task was too much for him to handle? He writes:

*[T]o do both a dissertation and create in an artistic form contains two difficulties, and how is it possible to achieve qualified results of two different types during the same timeframe that one would normally have to do one.*⁷

Attempts to embody both the reflective and productive role in such an undertaking could easily create a type of schizophrenia. There are parallels within the history of music: Franz Liszt, early in his life was regarded as a considerably more interesting critic than composer, he was accepted as a musician because he was such a divinely gifted interpreter at the piano. The risk of getting caught between the traditional scientific field of the humanities and the traditional artistic field is considerable, if the individual does not have a sound footing within either field.

Per Zetterfalk's work accentuates the importance of aesthetic reflection that attempts to create understanding by means other than the conceptual. His work refers to the fundamental problem of modern aesthetics, the relation between the sensory and the rational, where the sensory is often conceived as something that should be captured by the rational. "Art, on the contrary, gives form to something that can not be expressed in words, that which can not be translated into something else."⁸

Language is an important tool for artistic research. When methods, theories and perspectives in art as well as science meet, it is imperative that it is not the scientific framework that is used to describe and 'take hold of' the sensory in art. We mean, that the power of arts' ability to *speak indirectly*, is an indispensable feature that needs to be taken into account. The artists' way of examining, forming associations, and twisting perspectives is a skill that may enrich science. Humans' 'Inter esse' between different poles of existence and consciousness can perhaps best be deepened through art: the giving of shape or form as a field of knowledge. Here the researcher's role is central, as 'the ego', the subject, cannot subordinate itself to the object.

It is obvious that Per Zetterfalk, through his research, has gained an insight

5. Zetterfalk, p. 33.

6. For a thorough discussion see Lagerström, op.cit.

7. Zetterfalk, p. 27.

8. Zetterfalk, p. 54.

into Lars Norén's artistic process (which he portrays with sensitivity). He should also be praised for the courage to throw himself into the complicated and revealing process that the making of a reality series involves. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of his dissertation is the tension created between the study's two objects. He pits high culture against popular culture, generating unexpected connections as a result. The subtle displacements between reality and fiction that Zetterfalk identifies in both Norén and *Riket*, mirror each other on many different levels. Zetterfalk makes direct comparisons between the questions that Norén and the TV team worked with, comparing them on equal terms and thus making the questions concerning the individual, collective, power and evil, become legible in a multi-dimensional way.

Zetterfalk's object of study is the specific and the unique, but it is important to point out that his research questions are possible to translate into other fields of art, the same problems that confront Norén would most definitely concern a prominent conductor, and the production of *Riket* has its parallels in the popular song contests.

As the opponent Koskinen pointed out, Zetterfalk's work is a valuable contribution to the ongoing development of artistic research. His critical analysis of the contradictions within the field, where he constantly found himself in a situation of negotiation, can clear way for a more open discussion within artistic research in Sweden.

In his afterword Zetterfalk wrote: "My work is an example of how artistic creativity can be a method for research, but also how research work can be a method for artistic development".⁹ Per Zetterfalk has no doubt contributed to a greater understanding of the artistic processes of two different genres. However, it is questionable whether he has contributed to 'artistic development', if judged from criteria's based on film and art practice. It raises the issue whether artistic research should really be looked upon as a duality, as a bearer of two separate quality systems, or as a field in its own right.

9. Zetterfalk, p. 255.

Translated by Sonia Wichmann

References

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