

SUMMARY

A pioneer in his field, Knut Ström (1887–1971) was a Swedish scenographer and director, who became the first professional scenographer in Sweden. He had an early international career in Düsseldorf during the 1910s but later worked in Göteborg for 41 years. He made visual revolution in Swedish scenography putting his name at stake to navigate between technology, critique and audience. The aim of the study has been to expose, understand and explain Knut Ström's scenography and visual world. Three questions – who was Knut Ström, what did he strive for and what did he do? – have helped in the work. The source material consists of scenographic sketches, costume sketches, scenographic models, photographs, posters, prompt books, reviews, texts written by Ström himself and interviews with his relatives.

The thesis, with its ten chronological chapters is geographically grounded. Case studies with scenographic angles are alternated with analyses of Ström's personal experiences, professional positions and staging of himself. A selection of Ström's scenographic work at Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf, Lorensbergsteatern and Göteborgs stadsteater is examined. Gordon Craig's and Adolphe Appia's theories about dramatic art and a formal analysis based in art history have been used as methodological tools in combination with a semiotic approach in the exposure and analysis of these.

Theoretically the study has been carried out using the idea of a translating place inspired by Jacques Lacan's concepts the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. The thesis has delivered a number of empirically supported studies of visual worlds. These imaginary collage are crisscrossed with desire and structures at a symbolic level. The dimension of the real can appear as a disturbance or impossibility. Ström's theatrical works are related to their contextual connections in a stepwise historically based process. It has been essential to illuminate political, aesthetic, economic, media, and class factors. In the concluding discussion below some signifiers in the Lacanian sense of the

word are highlighted. These can differ in expression and charge, and change form, but still be interconnected in structures. They hold together something like a baffling web. Through, with and against these words which attract or repel other words Knut Ström's scenography and visual world are developed.

THE EARLY YEARS: AN OPPOSITIONAL STRUCTURE

Knut Ström was born in Piteå 1887. The family hurriedly moved to Stockholm after the shop they ran had gone bankrupt. In the father an artistic ambition as a watercolourist can be noted, which never came to any great expression. In Stockholm the father ran a business, while his wife and her sister did needlework. Knut Ström never received any academic education, but he was in a world where an enterprising person would make his way. What he learnt at the Tekniska skolan's (Swedish school of Arts and Crafts) evening classes was basic artistic training. Ström first worked in Carl Grabow's decorating studio which took on a wide range of commissions. Thereafter he joined Thorolf Jansson's studio, which made sets for the Royal Theatre. He also had a private teacher in painting called Wilhelm Gernandt. Ström's early paintings, watercolours and drawings show both artistic talent and high ambition. Already here one can see that *visual art* is a present signifier.

In 1907 Ström got to do the scenography for Strindberg's *Oväder* (The Thunderstorm) at Intima Teatern and was given – if only temporarily – a place in a context where his creative talent was utilized and appreciated. Which were his imaginary models? He appears in one way or another to have picked up the modern artist's role and the work at Intima Teatern gave this picture clarity. Ström seems to have thought quite highly of himself and was not pleased with the work at either of Grabow's or Jansson's studios. He may be described as *cheeky*. This attitude to the surrounding world in Ström functions as a signifier which can be given many forms. Some of these which turn up later are recklessness, fearlessness, insolence,

outspokenness and a revolutionary temperament. This is all through Ström's career woven in with the signifier *visualization*. The visual is seen as a competitor for the spoken word, it makes the critics sharpen their pens, it becomes charged with fear of the radical and change in society. At the same time the visual is tempting when it shows forth different reflections of people's self images and views of the world. In this double-edged field of tension Ström and his theatre images operate in more or less conscious ways.

In 1909 Ström departs for Berlin on a grant. In Berlin Max Reinhardt is the big name, everyone has to relate to him whether they want to or not. Ström has problems finding work, especially the kind of work he wants and he hardly has money for food. In these real circumstances he refuses to accept a failure. Using some "less than nice" tricks, as he calls them himself, he succeeds in breaking into the sector of theatre industry and through this becomes a technically skilled scene painter. He works his way up in the hierarchy, but when he ends up in a position of responsibility he rebels against the structural system. Ström refuses to be a bureaucrat and together with a friend he makes alternative sketches at night. In these early works one can see what ideas and principles he already has acquired at this time. He starts putting a Japanese inspired circular artist's monogram on his sketches, which is the first version of the signature he developed later on. The new expressions can be understood as a rebellion against what – simply phrased – is associated with the 19th century. Ström is one with this movement and you can say that he is part of an avant-garde where his ambitions are nourished. The self-confidence is there; when he applies for work he emphasizes his artistic ability.

What in retrospect may seem amazing is that the young Ström at all managed to get by in Berlin. The odds were not very good. However the capacity for work was one key to his success, as was his cheekiness. He managed to express himself visually in ways which satisfied the radical ideals of the period and at the same time there was a personal artistic address in the sketches. It was also important that he learnt to speak and write German fluently.

In late autumn 1912 Ström was employed at Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf which was a reform theatre. He married in 1913 and two of his children were born in Düsseldorf. Ström was happy and meant to stay in Germany. Through the Theatre Academy which was run by Schauspielhaus Düsseldorf he received what one may call a higher schooling with theoretical elements. Ström positions himself during this phase as a person that writes and who through articles introduces new ideas to a Swedish readership. His writing is both firm and full of understanding of the possibilities and dilemmas of visualization. Ström is given a key role in the theatre's work with Strindberg and he both translated and staged Strindberg's works. This shows both an analytical reading skill and a gift for language. *Oväder* was his debut in the double role as scenographer and director. His professional title was Künstlerischer Beirat, a wide function which included technical as well as artistic overall responsibility. In Düsseldorf Ström developed his monogram into a flexible and expressive signature which among other places can be seen on a curtain for *The Yellow Jacket*. This *signature*, that already started to take shape in Berlin, is a complex signifier which can be tied to concept of self and new ideas for the theatre. In the works from Düsseldorf you cannot help but be struck by how well Knut Ström is in command of different visual artistic practices, such as for example the watercolour.

Technology in a wide sense is a signifier which appears to be structuring for Ström's life and work. It turns up again and again and is charged with conflicts and desire. Technically based and spatially systemized structures are basic in Ström's way of creating scenography. His system is developed and refined over time – to sometimes become practically invisible – but the method of working is already more or less completed in Düsseldorf. In the basic system Ström incorporates pictorial semiotic components which both carry his hallmark as well as being operational in a number of productive ways. Ström

used a system of standardized construction units which considerably facilitated the construction of the scenography and the changing of sets. You can say that he worked with jigsaws in multiple dimensions. Ström's systematic thinking is found in sketches for different productions. The solutions are relative to each other very varied; what unite them is that they can be described as coherent systems. A challenge at this time was to be able to bring about many changes of sets smoothly. The space could be physically transformed with the help of curtains, mobile platforms and a revolving stage. It was also permeated by another kind of movement, something you can call atmosphere, presence or maybe in a metaphorical way fragrance. Imagination and stylization were among the starting points, as was the emphasis on colour and patterned, formal and material features. Ström also worked with close-ups and perspectivist placing of objects. Actors and stage architecture co-varied with light formations on the cyclorama and light used in other ways.

In *Peer Gynt* there was an organically designed construction above which a pictorial frame appeared. In *Faust* Ström used an arched construction where background images could alternate whilst the stage consisted of a podium which had been built out into the auditorium. Here is a way of thinking which is about making passages and connections on several levels. In a production such as *The Yellow Jacket* Ström's scenographic solution can be compared to a box. In *Ett drömspel* (A Dream Play) it was a fragmentary and continuously fluid collage he tried to attain. In *Brott och brott* (There Are Crimes and Crimes) he worked with a quiet but dramatic gap in the images. In *Brända tomten* (After the Fire) you find the tree structures typical for Ström as well as a dominant eye-catcher in the form of a black gable. In many productions there are examples of expressive details: an object or a form has been given a sharp colour, or is outlined against the horizon in a clear way. What is summarized above are traits which Ström carried with him in all of his artistic work. The expressions were strong in colour and form, but in the sketches a sensitive feeling for nuance and detail can be seen. Ström's

reusing of his own signs, his *quotation* of himself, is a marked signifier. In writing Ström spoke about long-term work and about building a relationship with an audience who understood the new means of scenic expressions. This was prophetic – he stubbornly stuck to his line during his time in Göteborg and throughout his long career.

Ström stands out during the years in Düsseldorf as a creative and driving force, but there is also a downside where his fearlessness seems to have no boundaries. Several incidents show that he lived dangerously and was exceedingly close to getting into trouble. His interest in the Spartacist movement is one of the factors that made the situation dramatic. Towards the end of the war the political turbulence increased and Ström's children had rickets. In 1919 Ström accepted the invitation to come to Lorensbergsteatern in Göteborg. He was well aware that he would have to start again with reform work when back in Sweden.

LORENSBERGSTEATERN: DIALECTIC VISUAL WORLDS ———

Lorensbergsteatern, inaugurated in 1916, had been equipped with modern stage technology. The time's desire for modernity in the form of machines was big. One critic spoke for example of the revolving stage's rush – the sound was not perceived as a disturbance but a sign of modernity. The technology was difficult to maintain and it was not until the autumn of 1919, when Knut Ström and Per Lindberg, a young, passionate and well educated director, took on the work, that it could be integrated into the productions in artistically adequate ways. Their collaboration led to what you call the modern theatre's manifest breakthrough in Sweden. Ström had his third child at the beginning of the 1920s and the Ström family settled in the city. After the first year's successes economic factors in society contributed to the decrease in audience interest and the situation for Lorensbergsteatern became difficult. When Lindberg had left the theatre in 1923 Ström chose to stay. He assumed heavy responsibility during the difficult years in the mid 1920s. Thanks to this

a continuity was kept in the theatre's often severely criticized work. When Torsten Hammarén became director of Lorensbergsteatern in 1926 Ström could more markedly focus on his own creative work.

When Per Lindberg was director the scenographer Ström was not mentioned in the theatre programmes to begin with. Everything should fit within the director's overall responsibility. The word decorator was not appropriate for what Ström did and no new concept was available. Both Ström and Lindberg worked for a professionalization of theatre work. One of Ström's tools in the work process was a model scene, that is to say a contraption for working out scenographic transformations. He had brought an advanced theatrical gauze technique from Germany, which he further developed during his Göteborg years. Ström also invented different machines for stage technology and his work with "flat light" was among the new things. The ambition to create physical connections between stage and auditorium continued at Lorensbergsteatern.

Ström's debut *Stor-Klas och Lill-Klas* (Stor-Klas and Lill-Klas) – which he both directed and created the scenography for – is a good example of how he worked with the new theatre ideas. An expressive passage frames the stage – it is like an eye or an objective. Noisy and colourful expressions are mixed with sensitively formed and partly physical environments where individual signs give life to the image. Contrasts between red and blue are modes of effect which are put into play here – this recurs throughout Ström's career. In *Peer Gynt* the stage was filled with a gigantic movable hill, a symbolic personification of the main character, which was then deconstructed during the course of the play. *Mäster Olof* (Master Olof) was a production where the drama's inherent knots and contradictions were built into the stage picture. The scenographic flow in *Danton* (Danton's Death) was made up of a series of physically animated light images in colour. In *King Lear* a jagged, square framing of the stage was used in combination with steep platform constructions. This created a flat visual space which almost physically pressed onto the spectator. In *Romeo and Juliet* the scenery changed playfully before open

curtains. *Chitra, Till Damaskus III* (To Damaskus III) and *Konung Oidipus* (Oedipus the King) are among the productions where the work with light was prominent. Together with other modes of effect light becomes colour, form and volume, it structures the space and works as a dramatic co-actor. Ström's work with light is one of the things which profile both him and Lorensbergsteatern.

If you strive to do something which "the people" see and to some extent like, then an empty auditorium can encompass real dimensions in the Lacanian sense of the word. Professional theatre workers have techniques for dealing with so called audience flops, but the techniques do not take away the painful emptiness. During the early years at Lorensbergsteatern Ström made several attempts at mixing something farcical and burlesque with the so called artistically designed. It did not go very well, but Ström was notoriously stubborn. He kept at it until he through the imaginary world of the performance could put a hearty laugh from the audience between himself and the potential failure. At the end of the 1920s he had developed an ingenious play-machine where classics would be transformed and genres mixed at high speed. *Järnvattnet i Madrid* (El acero de Madrid) and *Much Ado about Nothing* are two examples where the pun, the image and the movement are combined in unexpected ways. This is also true for a different type of performance, namely *Macbeth*, where socially anchored satire, codes of modernity and modernistic principles of formation interacted. It was loaded to modernize classics the way Ström did when there was a priority of "literary history" interpretation. The directly amusing features and the seductive visuality could be perceived as border dissolving and thereby threatening.

In the radical *Hoppla, vi lever!* (Hoppla, We're Alive!) it became even clearer that Lorensbergsteatern wanted to – and probably also succeeded in – performing Berlin theatre in a Göteborg way. Ström's scenography functioned as a physical world of images created with light, which could carry both distancing and topical visual flows. This should be viewed against the hard political polarization of the time. You can

see how modernism as an aesthetic expression causes fear by being associated with socialism and communism. From the late 1920s the rising Nazism was present in the critique and also in direct actions in the theatre.

In media the new visual expressions were to a large extent associated with technology, regardless of the intention to have it incorporated in the world of drama. It is also striking how much media attention the scenographic aspects had during Ström's time at Lorensbergsteatern. The critique's reactions included praise, but Ström's productions were also met by upset, challenging and sometimes brutally bandy words. The conflict between word and image is present in these discussions, as are the anti-modernist movements. When dramatic themes were given visual form the expression could be perceived as disturbing and revealing. This happened in *Kung Midas* (King Midas), one of the more run down performances. Another example of conflict is when a sooty environment is set against the religiously coloured ideals of purity of the time as in *The Nightingale in Wittenberg*.

It is paradoxical that the director of the Museum of Art, professor Axel Romdahl, had problems with the visual touch of Ström. Romdahl, who had a wide competence, was an important participant in the cultural debate. His criticism can be related to an overall set of problems around visuality, hierarchy of genre and the formation of canon. That Ström in his scenographic work was inspired by a wide range of historical and contemporary lines in art and styles are among the things that this study has shown. In some sketches made for productions in Göteborg there is a flavour of visual artistry. When Ström paints the almost luminous Wittenberg or the leaning houses in the *The Merry Wives of Windsor* he places himself in an independent position within a modernist tradition where you find Paul Klee and August Macke.

Film is a signifier which crops up again and again. When Ström came to Göteborg he wrote a text where the "sensational" expressions of film were discussed in relation to the theatre. In this you find an important challenge. Ström's works relate to film in several ways. His schema of visual

flows, his close-up thinking, his cutting technique, his expressive visual frames and croppings – all this makes one think of film.

Towards the end of the 1920s the planning for the future Göteborgs Stadsteater intensified. Ström actively took part in the construction of the stage technology.

Lorensbergsteatern was a place where the work on a general level was structured by the vision of becoming a city theatre. You can say that the situation was characterized by a fundamental and productive lack and that this generated a desire which continuously sought new expressions. Ström's theatre work became an active and integrated part of this structure.

He found a way to use avant-garde inspired expressions and at the same time have the audience catch on. It's obvious that the images on stage have a reciprocal relation to the political and ideological questions of the time. Characteristic of many productions is Ström's aspiration to mix genres and to work with mobile constructions which can surprise the audience. A close relationship to the home audience was established at the end of the 1920s and the critique stated that the theatre had acquired its own style. One dimension in this was Ström's dialogical scenography. The many successes led to Knut Ström having a national breakthrough in the years around 1930.

GÖTEBORGS STADSTEATER: THE STRÖM EFFECT AND THE ART MACHINE

When Göteborgs Stadsteater, which was a technically very advanced theatre for its time, was completed in 1934, Ström placed his own signature on his door in the building. This marking can be interpreted as an owner's mark: he belongs there, he creates there and he has an extensive technical instrument at his disposal. The advanced stage technology instrument which Ström created for Stadsteatern can be compared to a gigantic spoor or print with contradictory and complex dimensions. One of them has to do with the views of the critique. Notwithstanding the artistic

incentives Ström's productions sometimes became synonymous to "technology theatre". That Ström was upset becomes evident in statements from the time at Stadsteatern. It was either too much or not enough technology and regardless of which, the judges' eyes were coloured by technology. The critique also had problems with mixed genres and experiments. Ström tried for a summer to work with film himself. He was disappointed and he thought film was too mechanical. Instead he began using the film medium for stage images. Ström found there was an interesting synergy effect between film and scenography. Ström's way of combining the gauze technique with film can be described as pioneering when it was tested in *Vår ära and vår makt* (Our Honor and Our Glory). Later he sometimes sneaked in technical solutions which were close to unnoticeable, as in the slow change of scenes in *Rid i natt* (Ride This Night) or the sun shade in *Körbärsträdgården* (The Cherry Orchard).

The technology resulted in Stadsteatern becoming less dependent on employing many stage workers, which was important for economical reasons. When the national theatre organisation Riksteatern expanded Ström offered to create a standardized system for Sweden's theatres, which has bearing on a political level. Ström described himself as a revolutionary but he was a Social Democrat. He wanted the state to finance the theatre so that good art could be created for "everyone". It says something about his position in the symbolic system that he was awarded a couple of the country's most prestigious badges for merit, Vasaorden and Nordstjärneorden. At the same time this bothers him; he does not want to be established in such a way.

Ström wrote a couple of texts about the technology he had created for Stadsteatern. In addition to this he commented more or less drastically on theatre issues, but you cannot say that he took part in the debate in more qualified ways. His serious comments were formulated on stage in space and images. The productions at Stadsteatern span a wide field, but structurally they are all based on a systemized thinking. Ström's theatrical works are thoroughly constructed into

the smallest detail. Through this, art could at best be given space, but the perfection could also create suffocating situations. It can be noted that Ström said that he wanted someone to rebel against the perfect expressions.

Let us take a closer look at Ström's art machine, which I choose to call his multifaceted instrument of visualization. The proscenium area is meticulously designed. It can be described as a magic zone with many opportunities to catch, direct and form the spectator's gaze. This border area can be associated with a way of thinking which permeates the entire space and involves all its technical aids. Just as before Ström often used distinctly shaped objects in the front parts of the stage. How the stage space was arranged was hence a central issue. The stage's lowered floor could through a system of tracks be filled by flat stage wagons. The orchestra pit could be covered and joined with the front rows by stairs. It was also possible to work with a platform, a bridge out into the auditorium, a trick we recognize. The stage back part is surrounded by a permanent cyclorama, which is not only a high wall but also an instrument for theatrical creation. With the help of lighting the graded scale from darkness to light is here fulfilled. The wall is a fixed object which turns into infinity, space and maybe a starry night sky. In the work with lighting it was not only the difference between darkness and its opposite which interested Ström but light as colour and almost physical form. He worked with flat light, light in layers, light as space and light as a physical actor. These means of effect co-varied with an often movable stage architecture which could amaze the audience. *The Merchant of Venice* can be stressed as an example of this. The colour contributed to giving the image perspective and depth. Warm hues create closeness while cold hues increase the distance. One of Ström's challenges was to create a visually mobile colour feast – better than film – which could draw large groups of audiences.

In Ström's theatre system visuality, transformation, movement and bodily incitement are emphasized. The scenography is constructed to experiment with and structure the visual perception. When this meets the expectations

of the audience contemporary visual complexes are activated. For example a spruce in *Rid i natt* can become a carrier of the tensions during the wartime military preparedness. In *The Tempest* and other productions it becomes evident that Ström – as before – often quotes himself and that his work as an artist is kept together by this. The quoting was done in creative and varying ways, and new generations of theatre audiences could not know what was repeated.

An object which markedly stands out in Ström's visual imagery is the naked, but sensitively shaped tree structure. Ström gladly works with different elements which function as exclamation marks against the cyclorama. The curtain is a potential passage and a sign which is varied in almost indefinite ways by Ström. Something closed can be opened, rooms or new worlds appear or are layered over by his innovative work with gauze. An interesting aspect of the walls in his scenic rooms is that a sort of movement has been worked in with shadows, gaps and rhythmic formations. Ström built the visual worlds so that the spectator's eye would move into different aspects of the drama. In *Oväder* the eye was led along a street but also toward the mystery and the elusive in life.

Movement on many levels is, as has been made evident, a basic signifier in Ström's scenographic works – but also on a societal level: the labour movement, change, revolution... It was not only the scenic elements which had to be mobile. In the early sketches of movement he worked with bodies in close interaction with stage architecture. The mobile scenography could also structure environments which stand out as almost photo realistic. Ström had a wide range and he mixed his modes of expression well. You can say that he worked with directing space or choreographing space something which also included the actors' interaction with the scenography. Ström's many sketches in the prompt books often show choreographed bodies.

Owing to his concrete presence in the City of Göteborg and through the media Ström became a local celebrity, something which I would claim influenced the reception of his productions. *Knut Ström* became a signifier himself, for good and

bad. He was recognized by his looks, his way of dressing and his bicycling. When the audience and the critique went to the theatre they expected to encounter something which carried his hallmark. Perhaps they met the local statue *Poseidon* from some humorous angle, an ingenious game machine or dancing local buildings. To this you can link the signifier *outspokenness* alternatively insolence which has followed Ström from the start. His statements can be perceived as indiscriminating and without respect – which probably was intended. That he was tired of being associated with technical theatre shows up in what he says. But the outspokenness has several dimensions, where aspects of class, social groupings and academic education can have bearing.

Ström stepped forward as the city's own theatre creator and could from a relatively stable platform work with expressions which actually were quite avant-garde. This was seen as a style of its own, something Göteborgian and on a political level it was about democratizing processes. The imaginary collage shows Ström as a *working class hero*, but the different images of him are hardly compatible. He stands out as a complex person full of contradictions. He expresses himself through a visual language which in many ways is overwhelming. It is detailed, nuanced and of course filled with presence of the moment – this cannot be recreated.

At Stadsteatern Ström's professional contributions were mentioned in nuanced ways in the theatre programmes and he stood out more clearly as director. This gave the scenographical work a more formal framework and status. One aspect of the professionalization of scenography was that Ström did not want to let in artists willy nilly at a theatre. He meant that it was not enough to know how to paint when the images are created by lighting, architecture and movement. This can also indicate that art and his own artistry was a loaded issue for Ström. The innovative use of references to art history as *The Raft of the Medusa* and *The Resurrection of Christ* in *The Miracle at Verdun* makes it possible to also place a theatre image within a field of art. Even in a cow painted from behind, as in the sketch for *As you Like It*,

you can see both genre and artistic finesse. Knut Ström made his last scenographic work in 1960. He died in 1971.

Here I would like to come back to the expression "nifty practitioner" which has been used about Ström. He was without doubt gifted with a practical turn of mind, but it was about a combination of systematic thinking and innovative ability which simply does not fit within the definition of the word "nifty". You could say that Ström had an intellectual capacity and a psychological sensibility which was mainly visually expressed. It is worth noting that an artist's visual statements could cause as many reactions as Ström's work did.

Translation Henrika Florén