

A short note on beginnings and time

To every art project, there is a beginning. A birthplace for the themes and the dilemmas that sets things in motion. Shaping things to come.

More often than not, these beginnings reside in a hinterland. In a hidden landscape, where the themes and dilemmas themselves stays unformulated and hidden. What's left is the artworks: The texts, the sketches, the mistakes and the results. The starting-point gone, forgotten or out of reach, only to be found as traces and traits, like an unknown father or a lost genealogy devoured by time and overthrown by new dilemmas, ideas or themes that has taken its place.

One of the many challenges and benefits of artistic research is that this starting point has to be formulated, one way or the other, as a research-question. The question might be well formulated or not, but at the end of the research period, it is time to revisit them. To look back at the beginning to see where it all started. Not necessarily to see whether the question has been answered or not, nor to see if the project has been successful in confronting or discussing these questions, – but to ask them once more to figure out whether they were actually valid, and whether one actually understood them. Whether they still catch ones interest, and then look at what journey they brought about?

This is the time to ask these questions all over again, and see if they can offer new revelations, or at least some steps forward to unmask ones own motifs and agendas. To find out why one started to ask this question in the first place?

Beginnings deals with time. And with narration.

The notion of beginnings saturates our society. The idea that everything has a starting point, that there is a place where the journey begins and a specific road that takes us from there to wherever we are headed. And on this journey it is all about finding something, producing something. About getting somewhere. It is as if we split our lives into these events of "before " and "after". As a tool for understanding yes, or as an organizing principle in a narrative it can work, but as a fact, as a real entity for this research project for example, is it really true? Does this place exist? Is everything that happens in it pointing back towards the same spot, and does it fall into the neat categories called "before" and "after"?

I have always been muddling around with these thoughts: the now, the before, the after. The feeling of time. How we live in it. How it surrounds us. With doublings and mirages. The subjective quality of it. How my feeling of time is different even to my husband, who I live so close with, and whom I share so many of my experiences with, – and it's not just time as a subjective experience, as an existential entity you might call it, that puzzles me, but the concepts and understandings that surrounds it. What languaging praxis we use when talking about it. How it in some ways is an absolute and measurable thing called metric time, and at the same time a subjective and flexible thing that can be stretched and portrayed in an endless variety of forms, for instance in dance and literature. How it always exists, whether we like it or not – both outside and inside the subjective experience. That there is what we can call at least two times that we live in, at the same time. One could call it the time of the clock and the time of the self.

For Albert Einstein, time was just an illusion, a stamp that our minds put on the events that happens "out there", and today physicists are starting to question their knowledge of time and space all together. Stating that the relationship is not at all as stable as we thought. That it is all about scale, and that the way we measure time and space in earthly proportions might be logic and correct here, but out of synch if used as measuring criteria in the

vastness of planetary space. Still its there. We can feel it. And we know it's there; looking up on a stary sky, listening to the Hubble Space Telescope as it recreates the sound stars make, that other time. The time of the universe that surrounds us.

Playwriting as all writing is expositions of time.

Language recreates it, so to say. Representation and organization of time is one of playwriting`s most essential compositional tools.

Presenting the subjective time, a measured/metric time – and the duration of the “whole” or the "universe", even combining them, are just some of the options available in a space/time composition like a play or a performative text. Here time works its magic everywhere. It moves and shifts and modulates inside the text, not just chapter for chapter, or between the chapters. Not just scene for scene, sentence for sentence, – but inside the words and utterances themselves. The affective and soundlike qualities of them can expand time, punctuate it, stretch it or run away with it: Say or write the word *soothing* – and time lingers and stretches and stays. Say or write the word *blunt* – and time becomes dense and hard and short, as if the word just fell straight out of the sentence, too heavy for the sentence to hold on to. Say or write the word *hesitant* – and time starts to stutter. Say or write the word *run* – and time has already run away with it.

This fascination with the flexibility of time within the text and within words and utterances, has always been present in my writing. Also in my novels and in my plays. I think of my texts as containers. The composition holds everything in place, but inside it I can set time free. There, as long as it plays by the rules set by the logic held by the composition, it can behave how it wants.

There is such a liberating potential in time-based art (film, music, dance theatre etc).

The fact that I work with fiction, makes the possibilities endless, since fiction is also a producer of new and impossible worlds. There is a potential there in the form itself not only for portraying time, but for expressing it. Even elaborate on it and contemplating it. In his books *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2* Gilles Deleuze gives a lot of focus on how film deals and operates with time. Inspired by Bergson`s duree, and Augustin`s first contemplation on time and man, he points to the simple fact that time is a diverse phenomenon connected to subjectivity. And due to that, it can be both smooth and metric. Event and duration at the same time. It can be measured in the tick of a clock and the sequence edited accordingly, and at the same time cross-edited with a person having a personal experience of that time. For instance a close up of a face reacting to it. As such, for us who see this montage, time can be represented both factual and subjective at the same time. And these two "realities" do not need to add up. The tension that derives from it could also be productive. And as such, art`s way of representing time can be as measurable as unmeasurable. As steady as it is in flux.

Deleuze tries to create a terminology of how time is portrayed differently in cinematography. And his terms stayed with me. His languaging, offering terms as the crystal-image, a non-chronological-time as well as metric time etc., inspired. Writing on the crystal images, he explores Tarkovsky`s film *Solaris*, and offers notes on the productivity of the hybrid form. Even seeing the hybrid film as an intersection between the virtual and the actual. In *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*, he also ties these artistic ways of expressing time to structures of dreams and an exploration of the function of our memory.

I wrote the play *S O A R E* during the period 2012 – 2014. When I started exploring the material in 2015-16, I tried to unmask its ethics and its aesthetics. Thats when I discovered that *S O A R E* not only handled some other topics than my previous plays, but that it also offered a specific attitude towards time. In *S O A R E* I stretched and doubled time as in many of my previous work, and I also added some meta-aspects to it, as the character Raket rewinds and replace the recordings from her surveillance camera in the hotel where she works, offering the potential to rewind or “re-do” the scenes. But what really interested me was how the play made use of the performative text`s possibility to combine many forms of time, and many different points of views in the same fictional universe. This hybridization-process was, as I revisited it, all of a sudden self-evident. Almost as evident as it`s clear references to the Old Testament with its doomsday-ending, its biblical names, and this strange narrator, and character – the figure named One.

In *S O A R E*, time was both subjective, actual and metaphorical. The play works as a container for an assemblage of different time-modes consisting of a fast forward metric time (for instance as Samuels waits in his bunker implementing a pre-planned and computer programmed drone attack, launching a missile attack that is already pre-set by his command), and an emotional and subjective experienced time, as Samuel re-lives the event

of this drone-attack gone wrong over and over again. At some points both these times are present in one and the same scene.

These scenes then exist in proximity with other scenes and other time-modes. For instance the time represented through the figure/character One. He or she experiences time different than all the other figures in the piece, because he is omnipresent. As a space and time-time event, he can be both here *and* there. In what was, and what's yet to come. The characters Rakel, Anna and Ewo on the other hand, operates in the here and now everyday life, and it is the co-existence of these scenes, and the different time-modes intermingling that creates this particular hybridization.



From student production at NTNU.

But what really puts the way time is portrayed in S O A R E aside from my other plays, is its “*end-game*”.

At the end of the play everything culminates in a kind of biblical metaphor, or a Deus ex Machina. A “divine” or nature-born intervention that belongs to the allegory, or the myth – somewhere outside a timeframe that is at all measurable.

Reading this ending, my colleague, playwright, author and pedagogue Øystein Stene, said: this will not do. You need another act. He even considered introducing a metaphorical divine intervention like this cheating. But still, till this day, the end stands in both versions of the play. It is as if I can not offer a “human” answer to the deep tension that operates in the text, and that tears its characters apart.

I think I wrote it as an outcry. I was in pain. It was a kind of ethical tension in my own life that I could not free myself from, and it ended up in the play: I see all this, it says – and I cannot change it. I know all this, and it does not influence my actions. It was as if the act of seeing and the act of doing had lost all connection.

In my research, I started to look at that feeling of ethical tension and the artistic explorations it produced. I understood that it was not a constructed or intellectual pain, but a real one, with real psychological, even physical implications. It was so to speak: in my mouth.

My first go at verbalizing it came with the monologue I made for the production *State and Extacy* together with my stage collective STATEX in 2016 (See monologue from State and extacy [here](#)). Since then it has been influencing my thinking and my work all through this research period. And as I write this, related texts are still morphing and growing (see also the text [Our daily discomfort](#) and [Entities and Multitudes](#)).

The tension that produced S O A R E, was deeply rooted in me. At the same time, it was an answer to something that went on outside me. A present I kept on colliding with. This shaped my texts as it shaped me. And out there, in that present exists the embryos of so many other texts, as potential beginnings. So many of them missed. Thoughts forgotten. Motives hidden. Mind-set and meetings out of sigh.

As I see it, this world and what goes on in it, is contagious, and I am tainted as everything around me is tainted. I'm tainted with what I read in the news this morning. With sentences I have overheard, articles I have read. I hardly slept last night. I lay there tossing and turning until I fell asleep and it all revisited me in my dreams.

If it all starts somewhere, states the Swedish writer Peter Fröberg Idling, in his wonderful and bewildering hybrid of a novel, *Pol Pot's smile* from 2009 – if one can even say that there is a beginning, or rather, that the one leads to the other. Returns, or just seemingly returns. Circulates maybe.

Maybe it all starts where history starts? Or that that it starts all over again? Or that it's all just one grand continuation (Fröberg Idling *Pol Pots leende*, Stockholm, Bokförlaget Atlas 2009).