

TO REMEMBER IS A RISK OF FORGETTING – MIMESIS AND CHRONOTOPE IN ARTISTIC PROCESS

associate professor **Mimesis Heidi Dahlsveen**

Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Abstract

A performing storyteller is completely depending on the memory. In the process of making a performance the storyteller must make some choices regarding the memory. This article is based on a musical storytelling performance. Through using the research question: what possibilities does the chronotope and mimesis provide in an artistic working process towards an oral storytelling performance? the author looks at the concept of mimesis as a process and chronotope as a clarifying term. According to Catherine Heinemeyer, a chronotope is applicable because it is not only about the artistic experience, but the metaphor places the artistic work in contemporary political, economic, and social tendencies. This helps identify ways of behaving in a practice [Heinemeyer 2020]. Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) relates Aristotle's mimesis to poesis, which means art, and it is therefore only within the art that mimesis is effective [Ricoeur 1991].

The author has used examples from the storytelling performance to understand the concept of mimesis and the metaphor chronotope better.

Keywords: *oral storytelling, performance, artistic research, chronotope, mimesis.*

As I remember it

As a performing storyteller I am depending on the memory. I find stories in my own life, I need to remember the structures of the stories I am telling, and I am using traditional stories like folktales and myths – meaning the cultural memory. This article explores the use of the metaphor chronotope and the concept of mimesis as a

Culture Crossroads

Volume 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol22.446>

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ISSN: 2500-9974



wedge in artistic research, based on a musical storytelling performance. The musical storytelling performance *Vår*¹ combined source material from Norse mythology, *fornalder saga*² and the autobiographical meaning episodes of my own life, with field recordings of Norwegian landscapes, song, and percussive music, mixed and manipulated by a composer/musician. Whilst the music was essential in the effect/affect of the performance, in this article I will focus on the work done by me as a storyteller. Oral storytelling is described as a vivid, contextualized and situated event influenced by those present [Lwin 2010] in a storytelling situation.

Vår evolved between 2017–19, and after several studio performances in 2019, the 2020 pandemic moved the production online. In 2021 and 2022, the performance was live streamed from a Norwegian Laftehus in Oslo, Norway, to a global audience assumed to be in their own domestic settings.

The stories in a storytelling performance are very often traditional material (such as folk tales and the like), autobiographical material or a combination of this, as it was in this performance. The main story in the performance is about the female warrior Hervor taken from an old Norse saga with the title: *sagaen om Hervarer og Kong Heidrek* [Thorarensen 1847]. Hervor is a woman who becomes a warrior and travels to retrieve the magic sword Tyrping in her father's grave.

In addition to this main story, autobiographical episodes and Norse mythology were used, as mentioned, and the performance also included a small lecture. Working with material from vastly different sources requires an artistic attitude that can embrace these sources. I believe the key to this may lie in the metaphor chronotope and the concept of mimesis. Therefore, the research question is:

What possibilities does the chronotope and mimesis provide in an artistic working process towards an oral storytelling performance?

The first memory

My very first memory. I am sitting in a turquoise kitchen. I am sitting in a drawer, a big one. I am probably playing that the drawer is a boat. We have been on the island where I later grew up, we have been rowing in a boat. But right now, I am sitting with my eyes closed. I am holding my hands over my ears. It is dark around me. Through the darkness, I hear the thumping sounds. I hear the sounds of him hitting her [Dahlsveen 2021].

In the quote above, there is a memory told from childhood. That is how I remember it, and this is important, because what really happened may have been

¹ *Vår* means in Norwegian both spring and our, both meanings was part of the performance.

² *Fornalder saga* is Norse material and is described as stories that deal with the period before Iceland was inhabited, these stories combine the historical with the magical.

something slightly different. When I am telling this memory, the memory has been through a process to make it “tellable”. In other words, there is a process between an experience or a memory, and what is told. This, I believe, is illuminated through the chronotope and mimesis.

The excerpt – the personal memory – above was used in the performance. My personal memories were told episodic, framed by the story of Hervor. The story of Hervor influences my perspective on the memory and how I tell it. Something is emphasized over other choices I could have made in the telling of the memory: Boat (Hervor travels by ship) and a father’s presence (Hervor grows up without father and still decides to follow his footsteps). The memory is not alone but it is framed by models of thought. The models of thought are created by the way I interpret the saga.

There is sensitivity present that affects the artistic process and expression. On the one hand, the episodic memory is helped by the Norse material, on the other hand, the memory is also processed with a regard to the present. The episode mentions other people (he and her), the memory was surrounded by a shame I as a storyteller had to pay attention to. There are also others who “own” this memory, and I must balance between an artistic need to convey what for me is an important narrative and pay attention to others who do not want to remember.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) claims that human is fundamentally chronotopic [Bakhtin 1981: 95], because we experience through place and time. Like in the memory above, the time is indicated through “me sitting in a drawer” – I am a child, and the place is the kitchen. Time is also visible through the actions mentioned in the quote like closing my eyes. A chronotope was initially associated with the fictional novel and should serve as a generic analysis tool on artistic choices a writer made. Bakhtin took the idea from the theory of relativity [Gaasland 2000: 91]. Furthermore, Bakhtin indirectly mentions that a chronotope is also applicable to other cultural areas than the novel [Bakhtin 1981: 84]. For example, Catherine Heinemeyer uses the metaphor to describe various practices in oral storytelling with adolescents [Heinemeyer 2020].

A chronotope refers to the simultaneous occurring in historical periods [Bakhtin 1981: 84], i. e., that a set of artistic expressions from the same period will have similarities when it comes to the construction of place and time. According to Heinemeyer, a chronotope is applicable because it is not only about the artistic experience, but the metaphor places the artistic work in contemporary political, economic, and social tendencies. This helps identify ways of behaving in a practice [Heinemeyer 2020: 60].

A chronotope is based on how a human experiences her reality and how this is transferred to a literary work [Bemong & Borghart 2008: 3]. There is then a connection between the social situation one is situated in and the artistic expression

that arises in this situation. The memory in the quote is surrounded by another story in the performance, a story from the saga, this context makes me focus on something in the memory. The reason for why I remember this memory, is based on the saga.

The chronotope can provide access to human actions in their own biotopes [Bemong et al. 2010: IV] as I can reflect on why the memory has received the construction it has in the quote above. A chronotope acts as a bridge between the artistic and the real world [Lawson 2011: 385] and exists in interaction with the historical time [Steinby 2013: 117] I experience. The memory above is based on an experience, but how to bring this memory into something tellable – into a chronotope? Here, the concept of mimesis can be of help.

Mimesis is often associated with the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC), and mimesis is understood as imitation or representation [Halliwell 2012], this is a challenge, as representation is time-dependent and will appear different at different times [Nyrnes 2002: 256]. For example, elements of the saga represent a reality that is not applicable today.

According to Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) Aristotle's mimesis relates to poesis, which means art, and it is therefore only within the art that mimesis is effective [Ricoeur 1991]. Mimesis is an artistic process and clarifies the work towards a performance [Willbergh 2008: 12]. Mimesis is, to me, a concept that deals with choices and means of creating closeness and dynamics in a narrative. Mimesis is also a process consisting of phases that temporally follow each other. Ricoeur's triple mimesis can be used as a methodical tool that moves an experience into a narrative; and finally, an artistic experience for the listener through three phases, here called mimesis phase one, two and three.

To not let go

By focusing on the chronotope, I discover challenges that I have to solve. This, for example, applies to place. As a storyteller, I do not memorize a script, I learn a structure that often builds on the places mentioned in a story. Working with Norse material, as most of the performance was based on, was for me locating the places in the story. There is sparse information that is conveyed in the sources, but the location of the characters is enough to create an image of the historical time in which the Norse story has its reference. Considering the chronotope, it is conceivable that time is taking place in the topological. Topology or places are central in the Norse material, places help to give meaning to the message [Schneeberger 2018]. It is the architectural places that take precedence in the Norse texts. The social ranking is placed in seating, it helps the memory to place the characters [Hermann 2018].

Time is another challenge when it comes to the Norse material. A memory itself does not come as a structured event, in transition from remembering to narrative,

choices must be made. Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) argued that the selection of memories and structuring of them is influenced by society’s preferences [Halbwachs 1992]. In this project, I discovered that time also has an ethical function. The transfer of the saga of Hervor has already been through a process of selection, I do not know what the anonymous writers have omitted or extended and amplified in their written versions of the saga, but the structuring of the saga must have been influenced by the time in which it was written down – supporting the idea of the chronotope. Temporality has an ethical dimension because one stands between the safeguarding of tradition and addressing the contemporary. Time has omitted or changed information in the story. Furthermore, I tell the story into a new contemporary and change the narrative accordingly:

One day when Hervor was out walking in the woods, a group of slaves came walking towards her. They surrounded her, pushed, and pulled her. She pushed back, one of them fell to the ground.

He got up and said, “You, daughter of a whore. You are no better than us. You do not know who you are, but we will tell you ... You are the daughter of a whore, your mother lured a slave and slept with him, you are the daughter of a whore and a slave.”

Who am I? I who grew up without a father.

*The very first memory I have is that I am sitting in a turquoise kitchen ... (..)...*¹

Who am I? Hervor stood before her grandfather. The Earl sat in the high seat, now an old man. Hervor’s voice rumbled in the hall: “Who am I. If I do not know where I am from, how am I supposed to know where I am going?” [Dahlsveen 2021]

In the quote from the performance, I am telling about how Hervor got the first impulse to become a warrior. When she was born, her familial story was hidden from her.

I show that I use both the collective/cultural and the autobiographical memory. The quote also shows a parallelism – “who am I” is a question that both I as a character in the story and the character Hervor asks, and the scene shows some violence towards women. Regarding the chronotope, the main story locates the scene in a forest, on one specific day, the other scene – my memory, is also “one day”, located to a kitchen, the melting of the two scenes is in the question: “Who am I?” before I transport the story to scene in a hall. In the process of these memories, the typological presence in the material became important. The typological presence is

¹ See the previous page for the memory from the kitchen.

about decoding a text by placing motifs next to each other [Wellendorf 2011]. In this performance, it was to compile motifs from the Norse material with motifs from the autobiographical material. That is, I picked topics from one story and compared them to topics in the other material.

One motif is that Hervor is being subjected to violence. She is also violent: she is born with a “jotun’s/giant’s anger” [Gjessing 1899], the story tells us. I thus had a protagonist who was both exposed to and who herself was violent. This made me look at my own memories of violence and I found several episodes where I was subjected to and was violent or observed violence. I had to select. I chose to focus on my lack of relationship with a father, as this was something mirrored in Hervor’s upbringing without a father. I then had these pieces of text that came from different times and places – different chronotopes. But these different chronotopes are merged in my telling, as a storyteller I am located in a specific time and a place and I as storyteller situated in place and time manage to structure these chronotopes into one performance.

The triple mimesis

The work of finding material for a storytelling performance is located in **mimesis phase one**. Piet Verhesschen claims that an understanding of Ricoeur’s triple mimesis could help one in understanding the process between experience and a narrative [Verhesschen 2003]. The first phase – **mimesis one** – is lived life [Willbergh 2008: 87]. This is where one discovers the potential in an event, one discovers a structure the narrative can have, recognizes elements that make up a narrative, such as temporality [Verhesschen 2003: 453].

Over in the next phase, **mimesis two**, the semantic is shifted and negotiated into something that becomes applicable [Østern & Angelo 2016]. I create a narrative out of the experiences. When composing a text or in my situation a performance, one understands how actions are interconnected, one sees meaningful structures, symbolism, and the temporal essence [Ricoeur 1984: 56]. Based on this, I can create a plot where the events have been given motivations, the events will be filled with how, why, who and the like [Ricoeur 1984: 54]. In this phase, operational actions are taken to “bring about a synthesis between heterogeneous components like actors, means, purposes, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results and so on” [Verhesschen 2003: 453].

In the final phase of mimesis – **mimesis three**, the past must be made present in the moment of now [Ricoeur 1984: 55] in the listener. I must bring the material to life, tell it in a way, that allows listeners to envision it. Through mimesis, the material opens to “as if” – the fiction [Ricoeur 1984: 64]. In this way, mimesis is located in the pace between memory and the world of listeners [Ricoeur 1984: 71].

I had to create an order in the material for the performance, which does not necessarily need a time chronology in which one begins with childhood and ends with death, even if these two events are present. A key element here, is to distinguish I as a storyteller from I as a character in a memory. This also because there are several “I” characters I had to tell about in the material, the I in a character of a child and a youth, were among them.

Even if memories are fragmented, it can still appear as an unbroken text through an I as a storyteller [Morris & Maclaren 2015]. The storyteller’s I, is the one that connects it all. As long as this I keep an order in the leaps, the listeners will potentially be able to create a timeline for themselves. In the beginning of the performance, I as a storyteller, established a firm chronotope in a here and now situation, together with the audience. This I did by speaking about where we were, what time we were in. Such a process also leads to the cultural memory being influenced by the personal memory and amplifying the past as something that is being perspective through the present.

The storyteller and the memory

For me as a storyteller, the memory is considered from two perspectives. One is about extracting “raw material” from my own life as the basis for a story, then it is about reworking this into an expression, and I must remember this reworked story.

Remembering is something that is deep within us, we use it all the time, often subconsciously and without questioning it. It is such a smooth part of our lives, that we do not notice it [Casey 2000]. Edward Casey argues that remembering appears as a quasi – narrative, in the sense that the memory resembles a narrative, but lacks some essentials to make it a story. One of the elements missing, might be a clear narrative voice [Casey 2000: 43].

The starting process with this performance, started with entering an empty room with the landscapes of the memories and the stories. Working from memory to a story is not a linear process but entering a landscape and sort the way to what should be the building blocks for, for example, a performance. For the storyteller, loci are also about treating a text as a landscape and start working in the place that gives a sense of something. In *Vår*, I did not start the working process with the beginning of a story, as I did not know what the beginning would be. I began with the place in the story of Hervor that I considered to be a turning point, the scene I remembered best from the first encounter with the story, the place where Hervor calls out to her dead father, asking him to raise from the dead. Based on this, I improvised words, movements, and sounds:

The grave

Suddenly, a bright light rose, as if the sun had fallen down and threw the sun’s rays up into the sky.

She followed the light until she came to a pile covered in grass.

It was a burial mound.

“Father wake up

You who are buried

with the sword by your side

Wake up and give me your sword”

Father

is dead

My father died alone in his apartment.

“Father wake up

I, your only child, want to wake you up.

Give me the sword that divides the wind in half,

the sword forged for blessing and curse” [Dahlsveen 2021].

In this quote from the performance, you can see that the scene in the story is at the burial mound. In the performance, I must deal with two places: the imaginary world of the story and the physical space I find myself in. I add a description to help the listener see a burial mound: *covered in grass*. This is mimesis phase three, the story should become alive in the listener. In the perspective of the chronotope, how can I make this place and time come alive?

In a storytelling performance, there is a performative relationship between storyteller and listener [Aadland 2016]. The listener’s ability to imagine what is happening in a story is helped by the storyteller’s use of a diverse language, using both the body, the vocal and the verbal. The listener is present with an inner participation [Nagel & Hovik 2016].

The bodily is important for Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, he connects it to the concept of “presence” which is about having a spatial relationship with the world and its objects [Gumbrecht 2004: 130]. For Gumbrecht, the presence is a sensuous, bodily, and spatial state [Gumbrecht 2004: 116]. Presence is being in touch, whether literally or figuratively, with people, things, events. Presence is thus the place that creates experiences, and you are in a material contact with the outside world [Kleinberg 2013].

Josette Féral also believes that presence is based on the presence of the body, but that the bodily presence is not enough, there must also be a quality present [Féral 2012]. This essence of quality is that those present have a presence. At the same time, it is also about a perception. Thus, presence is not only about the physical, but also about the intellectual: “Making experiences depends on thought and memory. It is about creating a resonance in the one who experiences; subject locates something in itself, recognizes and associates with own memories” [Féral 2012: 32].

The body becomes a place of space, and this forms a repertoire of movements and gestures. In a performance, this repertoire is finely tuned. To make the listener enter “my chronotope”, I use my body and vocal to give an imaginative sense of time and place.

In the quote above you can see that there is a brief violation, which disturbs the imaginary feeling of being by the grave “My father died alone in an apartment” [Dahlsveen 2021]. This is an attempt to disrupt the listener’s room of experience, perhaps to annoy, so that they become aware of their own presence and the moment of now: where they are at what time.

Conclusion

Initially, I asked the question. What possibilities does the chronotope and mimesis provide in an artistic working process towards an oral storytelling performance? I think I am only at the beginning of investigating this further. Mimesis, for me, becomes a clarification of phases in a process, and by being aware of the process, the goal is to be able to create a chronotope that gives the listener both something to reflect on and to imagine.

Through mimesis, I become aware of how memory is working without it becoming less true than the experience on which it is based. The chronotope gives me artistic clues to use, while at the same time wanting to break with stuck patterns to construct an artistic work.

Oral storytelling is a poorly articulated area when it comes to the artistic methodology. By using already existing philosophical concepts, the storyteller can further develop her artwork and the performative art scene.

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