

Artistic Research and Development (Artistic R & D) and Rhetoric – an outline

*Words are important
because they are not
the most important
(Utaker 1992)*

The aim of the paper

Research – also in the arts – is usually described, explained, discussed and read through theory and vocabulary from a traditional theory of science. That means that the focus is on method and content. But often we are not satisfied with a terminology that does not capture what we experience to be the fascinating and even essential aspects of the arts. My aim here is to reflect upon the Artistic R & D – both research in, and research on – from a rhetorical point of view. I find a rhetoric perspective important for the arts since the arts have their own rhetoric, their own discussion of form: “Form is the foundation for everything that creates meaning” (Lilja 2004). The main focus will be on what I call “the topology of art-research”. My background for doing this is a doctoral thesis in rhetorical didactics (Nyernes 2002), and a current position as a research-leader of the project “Art-didactics” (NFR 2004-2007).

A rhetorical perspective – some premises

This paper is based on some premises that I will present to you as an introduction.

Rhetoric is an important, but not well enough explored field in the theory of research as a whole. Usually we say that research has got to do with exploring the truth. And the truth should not be liable to ‘mere rhetoric’. A premise here is to put rhetoric in the very centre of research-work. When is rhetoric an important view in works of research? Always. Rhetoric qualifies research. Rhetoric gives important theoretical perspective on research. Rhetoric also gives guidance for the practise of writing. That is so because research is (also) a work of language – from the composition to the detail. Rhetoric is the other side of every research-sheet.

‘Art as such’ is a romantic illusion. Art never exists in an enclosure. One may say that there is a *metonymy* between art-practice and rhetoric. There will always be language –

spoken and written – surrounding the art or the artistic process. This is so both in the creation of art, the reception of art, the art as a research-process, or the guiding of art-research. This is so even if the artistic research mainly is using the tools and language of the discipline itself. Instead of ignoring the accompaniment of verbal language, one ought to focus on what these surroundings do to diminish or strengthen the work of art. (This is of course relevant also for pictures, film, CD, music – all kinds of ‘other’ languages besides the work of art itself. But here I focus on the verbal language in connection with the art-research).

It is important that artists themselves develop a rhetorical competence. This is so because artists experience the gap between artistic processes and the verbal language used to describe the same process.

When language is used, one moves into a well-established landscape of texts, genres, vocabulary, modes of expressions, concepts. To familiarize oneself with this landscape, a landscape that is there even before you get started, will not damage the art. Oral and written language is not necessarily an enemy. Remember: Language is an art as well. Language may be used in both poetic, narrative, argumentative and logic ways. On the opposite: to be unconscious of language is to be ruled by it. “Language is a more active subject than we are ourselves, a subject that rules us and our language” (Johannesen 1994:68).

But we cannot use language to whatever ends.

These premises do not mean that I will use the rest of this paper to teach you smart ways of becoming a better writer. Instead I will say something about why it is – and ought to be – difficult to write well. If you don’t find academic writing or the language-part of artistic research difficult, then I suspect you are in trouble.

But then – what is rhetoric?

“The tradition that through all times has been responsible to educate an individual *to* form by educating it *through* form, is the rhetorical tradition” (Rørvik 1996:53). But that does not mean that rhetoric only is form. Good rhetoric is content. And it is not right to talk about *the* rhetorical tradition. Rather we should talk about different attitudes towards rhetoric. In the plural. For this occasion it is informative to differ between classical rhetoric and new rhetoric. *Classical rhetoric* is to know what you are saying, and why you are saying it. That is a strategic perspective in the working with language. You have an aim or goal, and you use verbal language as a tool to get there. *New rhetoric* is to know that you *don’t* know what you are saying and why you are saying it. When we talk about research and rhetoric our position should be in between: to use language in a conscious way while we at the same time remember that research also has a rhetoric dimension. The rhetorical tradition will lead us into

the rules and historical dimensions of language – both theoretical and practical, both logical and esthetical, both concerning details and whole genres.

The research-process and the topology of research

Research is a pioneer work, a work of creating some kind of clarity out of chaos. In the theory of research one could talk about this clearing up both in a temporal and a spatial way – research from a rhetorical perspective has both a temporal and a topological dimension.

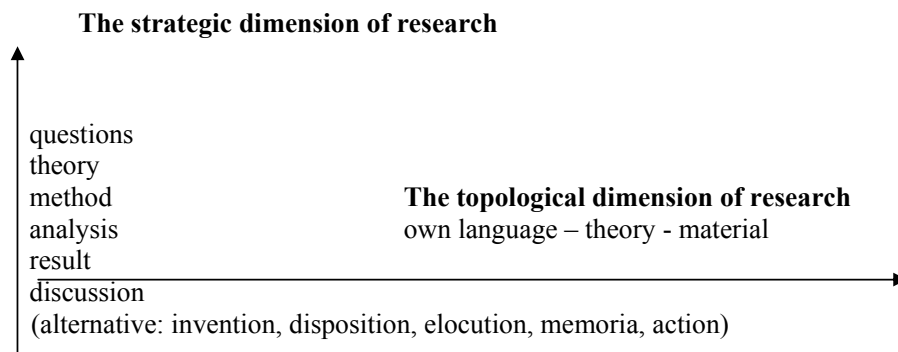


Figure 1: The strategic and the topological dimension of research

Merknad: Om du ger figuren ett namn så är det lättare att hänvisa till den i texten.

Usually we talk about research as a process. The process is divided into different parts: research-questions, theory, method, analyse, debate. The research-process is of course not this straight forward, but we make our work more decisive by dividing the process into these distinctive stages.

Important from a rhetorical point of view is that these stages do not focus on the language in the research, they do not focus on the form-side of the theory of science. But methods are ways of moving in language, theory is a system of language and so forth. Rhetoric is also a theory of working in language as a process. What happens to the understanding of the research-process if we use the rhetorical vocabulary on the stages in making a speech – ‘inventio’, ‘dispositio’, ‘elocutio’, ‘memoria’, ‘actio’ – in describing the research-process? That would make us focus upon the strategic dimension of the research-process, and its verbal aspects. In a strategic conceptualization the researcher uses the language as a tool in his or her project. This means that you work with language through the

whole research process: We do not think of it as content (or topic, subject) plus form, but rather the relationship between content and form in all the stages of the process. Language is not a way of writing after you have discovered something, instead writing is embedded in the research process.

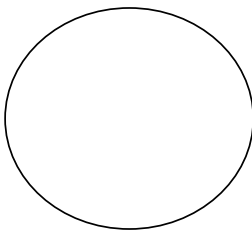
But language is more than a tool. It is a space for unfolding, a space that exist before we start doing the research. The rhetorical theory tells us that the invention (*inventio*) constitutes the important first phase: *inventio* is an orientation in what is called the landscape of the subject or topic. That means that research also is a question of orientation in a landscape that already exists. One may say that knowledge is to know a landscape. To know a landscape is to know the topology of knowledge. In this paper – that will be the focus from now on.

The topology of the Artistic R & D

Perhaps ‘topology’ is an unfamiliar word. The original greek phrase is ‘*topos*’, pl. ‘*topoi*’ (and in latin ‘*locus*’, pl. ‘*loci*’), and it means ‘place’, ‘spot’ – or rather ‘geometrical spot’. It is the same word as in ‘topography’ – geographical spots. Topology means spots or places in the language, places you pass frequently. It resembles the T-marks of hiking-paths in the mountains. A topological perspective in research shows how research is a question of orientation in a landscape of texts.

What are the main *topoi* or places in a dissertation or a research-project? We can distinguish between three main language-places (*topoi*): the researchers own language, theory, and the material / the research object / the artistic process. I will comment on each of them.

Own language



Theory (systematic language)



(a border of verbal language)

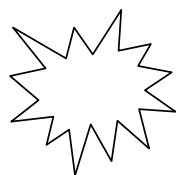


Figure 2: **The topoi of the artistic R & D**

The artistic process is always – in different ways – accompanied by, or embedded in, the researchers *own words*. That language contains everyday phrases, concepts from more or less internalized theoretical knowledge, phrases from prose (to prose = to speak in a boring way!) as well as fictional forms: metaphors, analogies, parts of narratives. I have drawn this topos like a circle in the model, because I want to stress this kind of language being organic, it depends on the situation. This language is necessary in developing questions, reflecting upon what we are doing, and deciding where we want to go.

It is an important step towards a more precise language to be able to identify the different parts and pieces of this everyday language. Such awareness is not easily accomplished. One problem is that what we call ‘own language’ is not really our own. Language is first of all a cultural product. We do not invent new concepts and phrases, we are born into a cultural mode of expressing ourselves. A researcher needs to develop meta-consciousness on her or his everyday language – not because we should get rid of it, but because we in research have to be as conscious of our language as possible.

Another problem is that verbal language is both an artistic and a logical tool. And from a rhetorical point of view the border between those modes of expressions is not easily drawn. Take for instance the role of the metaphor in science. Metaphors are both the important figure in poetic language, but at the same time play an important part in building theories. One may say that metaphors make the language precise in a sensuous way. When working with everyday language one runs into the paradox of precision: there is a poetic dimension in the core of every everyday expression.

Theory is systematic language. Theory is also ideology, principle ways of viewing the world. But when it comes to the language-part, theory is a systematic way of viewing. The system is a set of conceptual functions (Deleuze and Guattari 1995b). Systematic means

concepts that have functional relations. In the model this topos is marked a square, telling us that it in some ways an artificial language, an artificial, constructed way of viewing the world. Theory is a type of general language, not linked only to one example or case. When we choose one theory, we exclude others. Theory is clearing up a situation by means of selecting some, and excluding other perspectives. One may say that this is the core of academic working methods.

The energy of the project is *the artistic process, the field, the material, the research object*. Research object is the field we want to explore. This could be ‘creativity in the classroom’, ‘the process of drawing’, ‘writing poetics’, ‘composing’, and so forth. I do not here distinguish between being in the artistic process, and studying it from the outside. It is important to stress that we can never reach this object ‘as it is’ by way of verbal language. But “words are important because they are not the most important” (Utaker 1992). In the model I have drawn a border to make us remember that we can never transcend the research object in a pure way. We can only understand aspects of the object, aspects shown through different modes of expression, different genres. Examples of this different kind of expressions are descriptions, narratives, so-called qualitative interviews, statistical observations and so forth. Different research-methods are in fact different ways of using the language. The mode of verbal expression chosen is dependent on what our research-questions are.

The dissertation or the artistic R & D is *the relationship* between these three topoi. When the project is to be developed one has to try and identify the three different topoi, and also the relationship between them. Method means a way of moving in the language. Method is a way of moving between these topoi. What kind of questions do we pose? Where do our questions come from? Do our questions derive from theory or from everyday-myths? How can we develop the questions? How do we combine our own words with theory? How do we observe the object through our own words? How do we move from theory to research-object? What possibilities and limitations does different kind of theory give to our work? What kind of possibilities or restrictions lies in the material itself? Why does the research-process take one direction, and not another? To write a dissertation or to develop the artistic process one has to ask that kind of questions over and over again, in different stages of the work. That means that the researcher constantly has to move between these topoi while trying to develop consciousness of where he or she is.

For a researcher from the art-field it should not be strange to move ahead in a work in this spatial way rather than in a linear, straightforward way. It should not be strange either that form matters – also when it comes to the language part of form. The research-process is also a

creative kind of work. But a dissertation or a artistic product is a way of mapping the moving around between these three topoi, it is a way of presenting your consciousness about that kind of topology of knowledge.

Exploring the language-border

I do not like the concept 'translation' from one language to another when you write about an artistic process. In fact, you work in different modes of expressions, where there are quite different rules. I think it is better to talk about the relationship in terms of the different kinds of perceptions the verbal language can offer.

Different genres do not define what one is able to grasp, but they give the content a *direction*. One may say that the researcher by means of genres will explore or stretch the border of language, and in that way at the same time both point out and put into shade aspects of the object. Arguments for this should be developed thoroughly. But here I will exemplify for short.

The *narrative* is personal and time-structured. It puts a subject in the centre, even where the actor has been rather passive, or is ruled by forces outside control. Besides, the narrative creates causality-relations where there might be none.

What is it making a *description*? What is the difference between an arithmetical and a poetic description? One may wonder how a 'thick description' according to the theory looks like. Is it just going ahead, describing?

The mode of the *interview* can either be consensus or conflict. The interview could be the unbearable lightness of the research.

And how do *theory* and *reflection* show in verbal language? It shows in the combination of examples and argumentation. That means a combination of narratives and systematic languages.

What is a *definition*? When do we use definitions? What is the function of a definition? What is the difference between defining a concept and exploring it in a research process?

How does *subjectivity* show in verbal language? It has certainly not much to do with the use of 'I' in the text. Instead, perhaps we recognize a distinct author in the way he or her balance between the different topoi mentioned here.

One could ask if the interesting combination of topoi is the *essayistic* one. The essay combines something argumentative, something narrative and something poetic – in a reflective way.

The research-result: Indifferent art-dissertations

The result of the research might be presented in many ways: a traditional dissertation, a dissertation with an experimental form, the combination of an artistic product and a verbal description or verbal analytical discussion, a performance, and so forth. In that way one is now really at the border of creating a tradition. But in my opinion the model (figure 2) can be useful when pointing out and discussing guiding and quality in research – including artistic research. Independent of presentation-form of the artistic research, all the tree topoi should be developed during the research-process. That means that there are at least two pitfalls. For short one may say that an indifferent research is a research that combines two of the topoi, and do not include the third one.

The type of research that only combines the researchers own language with systematic, theoretical language is bound to get dull and dry. This is the researcher who can read a huge pile of books, articles, dissertations, and write reports on each of them in his or her own language. This is an important activity in getting to know earlier research. But often the report is written in a general way without respecting on the one side what kind of questions the researcher wants to pose, and on the other side without respecting the language and different ways of expression in the different theoretical texts. That kind of dissertations (or parts of dissertations) often ends up being neither this nor that, just something common in between. Like drinking lukewarm water. To make a good report you have to develop a distinct way of reading – or one may say – a sensuous way. Research can of course be of the theoretical kind. But in that case one must look upon the theories as the material, and explore that kind of object by viewing it from another kind of theory.

Another pitfall is the type of research that cuts short of theory. By that I don't mean only the lack of a chapter of theory (that is not disqualifying at all), but more the lack of interest in moving from the private sphere of experience into an inter-subjective language. Sometimes you hear art-researchers explain the lack of systematic perspective given by theories with the argument that theory damage the arts, and that it is especially important for artists just to express one's own personal experience. Many of those kind of texts or products, that moves only between the two topoi 'own language' and material, are uninteresting to no others than readers in the private sphere. Or they are embedded in indifferent theoretical perspectives. Others again may turn out to be interesting essays. But it is a question if one can call it research.

You do not shuffle in the language while doing research.

A minor research

There is a tendency in the long ongoing discussions on research in the arts (Refsum 2004) to discuss whether the concept of research is suitable for the research-process in the arts. That kind of discussion tends to be not fruitful, also because the idea of traditional research is too narrow. Some of the research and research-methods in the humanities and in the social sciences more resembles than opposes artistic R & D. The rhetorical perspective that I have presented in an outline here is a way of bringing the art-research-discussion to a more concrete level.

Language matters. In my newly started project on art-research my aim is to try and develop these thoughts in connection with the study of examples of artistic R & v D.

But of course we need to understand the art-research also in a theoretical way. We need a theoretical vocabulary both when discussing artistic R & D, when developing such research, and in guiding research practice. I find the analogical concept to Deleuze' and Guattari's 'a minor literature' (Deleuze and Guattari 1995), namely 'a minor research', suitable as a start. It is not the time and place to present those thoughts thoroughly in this paper. But let me just state that 'minor' does not mean small. It is true that the French word 'mineur' (from latin 'minor') as an adjective may stand for among many things 'small', 'un-significant', 'secondary', 'un-considerable', 'un-authoritative'. It can also mean 'minimized' – like in the expression 'un art mineur' – as opposite to the sublime art, the Art with a capital A. And 'minor' in musical terminology stands for 'in the minor key' as a contrast to 'in the major key'. But 'minor' also has to do with mining – a deep way of digging, something undermining, exploring (Stene-Johansen 1994).

Deleuze and Guattaris perspectives on research are interesting from an artistic point of view. They point out the necessity of a distinct language, of creating new concepts, and the importance of working with details. And that form makes a difference. And Deleuze and Guattari stress the importance of studying singularities, and of how a work creates functions. So maybe the learning process is the other way around – traditional research has a lot to learn from artistic research. But either of the kinds will gain on consciousness of the verbalization-process.

Litterature

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