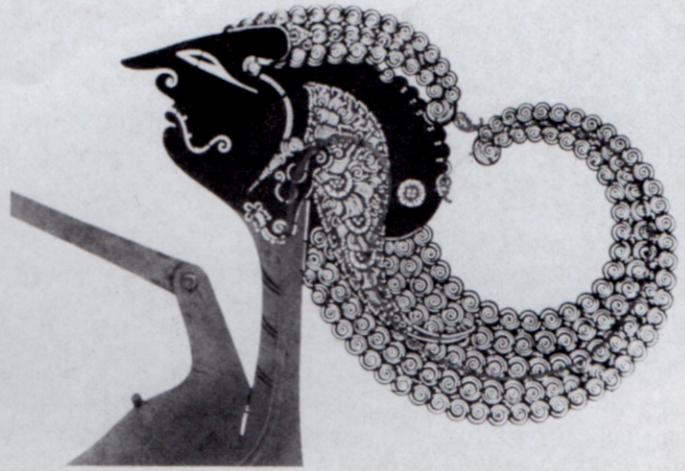


Theatre and Visual Arts : Some Parallellisms

by Jukka Miettinen



Visual arts and theatre¹ are connected and related to one another in many ways. From the viewpoint of art-and theatre-historical studies, this intimate relationship has not yet been taken full advantage of. In this and forthcoming articles, my intention is to figure out parallellisms between theatre and visual arts in Southeast Asia and, also, to show by some examples how these parallellisms could be utilized both in art-historical and theatre-historical research.

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kok, where SPAFA gave me the opportunity to get acquainted with the Documentation of Traditional Dance and Dance Drama Project. I owe my thanks to my friends both in Thailand and Indonesia who have helped me to understand their culture.

The first one of these articles is a general introduction into the parallellisms between theatre and visual arts. The second article handles this phenomena in India and Burma. Classical Khmer culture and Thailand are dealt with in the third article and, finally, the fourth article is dedicated to Indonesia.

The various forms of art during a certain period or legacy have their common sources in collective beliefs and ideals. A certain musical tradition can be comparable to its contemporary architecture as the visual language of theatre has its counterpart in visual arts of the period.

Behind this phenomena, there are concrete factors: the claims of religion and aesthetic conventions. In the western world, the breakthrough of modernism at the turn of the century broke the unity of culture into various schools of thought and expression, whereas the classical periods of both Europe and Asia represent eras when all

art forms served collective ideals with uniform style.

Visual arts can be of most valuable help in trying to decipher lost theatrical traditions. As a western example of this, one could point out to the classical forms of Greek and Roman theatre, which can be reconstructed not only with the help of literary sources but also with the indispensable help of mosaics, paintings and sculptures.

The same methods could be applied also in Asia if the decisive difference between Asia and Europe is kept in mind. In Asia, there are numerous theatrical traditions with centennial - at times even milenial - unbroken and living tradition preserved in detail up to our times. They all have their distinct ways of expression and ideals of beauty, which are comparable with respective traditions in visual arts.

From the point of art-and theatre-historical studies, these parallellisms are of primal importance. By studying visual arts, we can get information about lost traditions or about the history of a certain living tradition. Likewise, knowledge of conventions in theatre can help iconographical interpretation of paintings and sculptures.

Most studies dealing with Asian theatre begin with periods so re-

¹ In this connection the word "theatre" stands for all "stage arts" i.e. dance, dance drama, mask plays, shadow and puppet theatre etc.

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mote that early painting and sculpture provide one of the most valuable research material. However, no such extensive studies are available in which the art historical material, relevant to theatrical studies, were collected together from the region of whole Asia.

Such interdisciplinary studies, nevertheless, have their pioneers. The late Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, father of Indian art history, and the still practicing researchers, Kapila Vatsyayan in India and in Indonesia, Edi Sedyawati, who has studied some parallellisms between visual arts and theatre in his native land, are among the most important pioneers.

Theatre and visual arts have a common demoninator: they both make something to appear, they visualize their contents. They also apply the same elements, the human body, forms, colours, space etc. Visual arts and the theatre of a certain period use inevitably same conventions - such as symbols and

compositions. In Asia, both visual arts and theatre are deeply rooted in religion. This religious source lays for all art restrictions and demands of sacred art.

Visual arts and theatre meet one another also on a very concrete level. Besides the fact that both forms of art illuminate the literary tradition they both share, they also meet when it comes to visual details of the scenario, masks, costumes etc.

When authentic stage-sets are used, they reflect the impact of visual arts of the period when the theatre form was created. In traditional Asian theatre, however, actual stage settings were originally rarely used. In many cases, performance took place on an empty stage, sanctified like an altar. The visual solutions of such scenes are often connected and linked to conventions of religious art. At times, a tableaux is designed in the form of an altar.

Theatrical masks are a form of



A mask used in Indonesia

sculpture. Various types of masks might be repeating ancient artistic intentions. Again, at times the masks are given the same veneration given to cult objects. The masks veil the individuality of the performer, and he turns into a timeless God, Hero, animal or monster. The use of masks brings the theatre one step closer to the visual arts.

The performer's costume perfects the illusion of an animated statue or painting. It also gives a decisive characterization on the human body and its movements - the same characterization that was given to human body by fashion and visual arts of the era.

Theatre and visual arts often share also the same notion of space. A good pair of examples is that of a baroque-stage in Europe and a Kabuki-stage in Japan. Same perspectives, aberrations and illusory effects which characterize European baroque painting were also used on the baroque-stage. The



Scene behind the wayang performance

kabuki-stage, on the other hand, is broad and low like Japanese horizontal scroll paintings.

Puppet-and shadow-theatre combine in an interesting way elements from both visual arts and theatre. As objects, puppets belong to the realm of visual arts but when they are used they become living theatre. Of all forms of puppet-theatre, shadow-theatre comes closest to the art of painting. The use of only two dimensions, a surface without depth, and static serial-like scenes are all features clearly reminiscent of painting. In some cases, it can quite clearly be shown that shadow-theatre has originally developed from the art of painting. Puppet-theatre, on the other hand, comes closer to sculpture with its three dimensions, and at times these puppets can be even seen as moving versions of their contemporary statues. The very realistic marionettes of Burma and Japan with their

moving eyes, jaws and bending joints, are a close imitation of actual theatre performed by living human beings.

Interaction between puppet-theatre and "living" theatre has been decisive in Southeast Asia. Many forms of theatre have adopted their narrative material and visual language straight from the puppet-theatre. Very often also, the dance technique imitates movements of the puppets.

Above I have briefly tried to show how closely visual arts and theatre are related to one another. Not only do they share the same narrative material but also - as visual arts - make use of same visual and expressive laws. These parallelisms can be used both in the science of theatre and art history in multiple ways. Here are some examples:

1 Early painting and sculpture



Puppets, as objects, belong to the realm of visual arts.

give information about lost theatrical traditions and about the history of present-day theatrical conventions.

2. Acquaintance with the conventions of traditional theatre can be helpful in the iconographical interpretation of paintings and sculptures.
3. Due to the close relation between theatre and visual arts, one can preserve information helpful also for studies of the other: theatre can provide a missing link for art historical research and vice-versa.
4. Parallel changes of style in visual arts and theatre provide material for wide ranging historical conclusions.
5. Shadow play approximates the art of painting in its two dimension and static picture like scenes. In Indonesia, shadow play and painting have a very close relationship: the traditional wayang paintings use the same figures and compositions of shadow play.
6. Puppet theatre has given the aesthetical ideal for many theatre genres, e.g. Burmese dancer imitating the dance of a marionette.
7. As objects, masks belong to the art of sculpture but in their use, they are an important element of Living Theatre performance such as Balinese Topeng mask, a noble character.
8. Thai puppets are representations of characters from the Ramakien. In this regard, puppet theatre comes close to the art of sculpture for they are the moving versions of their contemporary sculptures.