

# I saw it with my own eyes. The power of messenger reports and teichoscopies on stage.

Dr. Peter G.F. Eversmann  
Universiteit van Amsterdam  
Netherlands

## Introduction

Films, novels and theatre plays tell stories. But in theatre and film this happens in a different narratological mode than in the novel. The action and the characters are shown rather than described. The spectator perceives the events and doesn't have to conjure them up for the mind's eye from a spoken or written text. It is this principle -known as ostension- that functions as one of the major characteristics in distinguishing theatrical performance from other art forms -especially literary ones- and it is also recognised as the leading principle that underlies the specific form and structure of the drama text. That text distinguishes itself from the literary story by the relative invisibility of a narrating instance and by mainly consisting of direct speech – and in this respect it is telling that descriptions or stage directions are designated as the *secondary text*<sup>1</sup>.

Just to give one, rather normative, example of this narratological reasoning on how stories are told in the theatre I quote from a certain Hasselbach who already in 1890 wrote in his *Overzicht der Stijlleer* (Introduction to stylistics):

Also the drama creates an image of life/the world -just like the epic poem and the novel do- but here the events should not be narrated, they must be *shown*. [...] A drama - the word itself meaning *action* - should therefore consist of a sequence of important events that quickly, without unnecessary delay, develop before the eyes of the audience. [...] It follows that the main requirements for drama are action and character drawing/delineation of character. But stories and lyrical utterances are not completely banned; they can even clarify or embellish the [dramatic] poem, provided that the playwright takes care that they do not take up too much room and are fittingly embedded at the right time.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, the emphasis on showing action that speaks from this quote is somewhat biased and isn't alltogether confirmed by theatrical practice. There are specific moments when, on stage, stories are told instead of shown and when, moreover, one should not designate these stories as 'clarification' or 'embellishment', but rather deem them as rather important -if not crucial- in furthering the action and developing the plot. These are the moments when characters relate in words parts of the action that remain invisible for the audience and/or the other characters. One can think for example, of prologues that are worded by a character or memories that are told – but also the so called messenger reports and teichoscopies. The messenger report deals with events from the more or less recent past, while the teichoscopy (from the Greek, literally meaning: a view from the wall) is referring to simultaneous actions: a character recounts what

<sup>1</sup> Cf. for example Pfister, M. *Das Drama. Theorie und Analyse*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1977, chapter 1 and 2.

<sup>2</sup> Hasselbach, P.B., *Overzicht der Stijlleer*. Breda: P.B. Nieuwenhuijs, 1890, p.45-46. (translation PE)

is going on in the world of the play at that same instance – but not visible to the spectator since it is happening in the wings, outside the frame. (note???????)

The specific ontological status of messenger reports and teichoscopies in the theatre -told and not shown- merits by itself a somewhat closer look at these phenomena. But there appears to be even more: in the already mentioned novel and in the film we do not find these kind of stories. Also with modern playwrights and in the theatre of today there hardly seems to be a place for the story of the messenger. And if, sporadically, one encounters a kind of messenger situation where, for example, soldiers return from war and want to relate their story – then it is not so much the content but rather the incomprehensibility, the unwillingness to listen and the mechanisms of social rejection that are emphasized.

### **A classical messenger report: Euripides' *Medea***

But let us not run ahead of things and first take a look at a classical messenger report from *Medea* by Euripides. The entry of the messenger in the production of this play by the La Mama Repertory Company from New York, under the direction of Andrei Serban stands out in my memory as an especially moving and truly theatrical moment. This production was brought to the Netherlands by the Mickery theatre in 1972. It employed two languages - ancient Greek and Latin- and there was no translation or subtitling so a modern day audience couldn't understand a word. Nonetheless, the expressive acting style and background knowledge of the story resulted in an exciting production that could be understood moment by moment. One of the high points in the mise-en-scene was the moment that the shackled Medea is left alone on an otherwise dark stage; after having sent away her children with some gifts to Kreousa – her rival for Jason's love. Then a desperate cry from the palace is heard, coming closer and growing louder to a deafening pitch, till a messenger hurls himself, half stumbling, onto the stage a burning crown in his hand. At this sudden horrified outburst a shock goes through the audience and the burning diadem symbolizes the terrible story to the spectators who have just studied the programme and hence are familiar with its meaning. At the time the ensuing monologue in a strange, incomprehensible language was really unnecessary in order to understand what had happened. However, if one could have understood the words, the report would have given a very vivid description of the events that had just taken place inside the palace. These are some passages from what the messenger has to tell us and Medea, but now in intelligible English:

*Enter a MESSENGER.*

MESSENGER: (...after having told how her children gave Medea presents and she has put them on...)

Then suddenly we saw a frightening thing. She changed  
Colour; she staggered sideways, shook in every limb.  
She was just able to collapse on to a chair,  
Or she would have fallen flat. Then one of her attendants,  
An old woman, thinking that perhaps the anger of Pan  
Or some other god had struck her, chanted the cry of worship.  
But then she saw, oozing from the girl's lips, white froth;  
The pupils of her eyes were twisted out of sight;  
The blood was drained from all her skin. The old woman knew  
Her mistake, and changed her chant to a despairing howl.  
One maid ran off quickly to fetch the King, another  
To look for Jason and tell him what was happening  
To his young bride; the whole palace was filled with a clatter

Of people running here and there. (...)

; and she lay speechless, with eyes closed.

Then she came to, poor girl, and gave a frightful scream,

As two torments made war on her together: first

The golden coronet round her head discharged a stream

Of unnatural devouring fire: while the fine dress

Your children gave her — poor miserable girl! — the stuff

Was eating her clear flesh. She leapt up from her chair,

On fire, and ran, shaking her head and her long hair

This way and that, trying to shake off the coronet.

The ring of gold was fitted close and would not move;

The more she shook her head the fiercer the flame burned.

At last, exhausted by agony, she fell to the ground;

Save to her father, she was unrecognizable.

Her eyes, her face, were one grotesque disfigurement;

Down from her head dripped blood mingled with flame; her flesh,

Attacked by the invisible fangs of poison, melted

From the bare bone, like gum-drops from a pine-tree's bark —

A ghastly sight. Not one among us dared to touch

Her body. What we'd seen was lesson enough for us.

But suddenly her father came into the room.

He did not understand, poor man, what kind of death

Had struck his child. He threw himself down at her side,

And sobbed aloud, and kissed her, and took her in his arms,

And cried, 'Poor darling child, what god destroyed your life

So cruelly? Who robs me of my only child,

Old as I am, and near my grave? Oh, let me die

With you, my daughter!' Soon he ceased his tears and cries,

And tried to lift his aged body upright; and then,

As ivy sticks to laurel-branches, so he stuck

Fast to the dress. A ghastly wrestling then began;

He struggled to raise up his knee, she tugged him down.

If he used force, he tore the old flesh off his bones.

At length the King gave up his pitiful attempts;

Weakened with pain, he yielded, and gasped out his life.

Now, joined in death, daughter and father — such a sight

As tears were made for — they lie there. (...)

*Exit MESSENGER.*<sup>3</sup>

This messenger report of the beginning of Medea's revenge (later more horrible things will follow when she murders her children, but that is another matter) incorporates some characteristic elements that can serve to clarify functions and effects of eyewitness accounts that messenger stories are.

First of all: it's a monologue. Messenger reports are relatively long chunks of text that although they are directed at one or more persons and can be interrupted by a question or an exclamation form a closed and self contained whole. Or, to adopt Muka\_ovsk\_'

<sup>3</sup> Euripides, *Medea and other plays* (transl. Philip Vellacott, 1963) Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976, p.52-55.

terminology<sup>4</sup>, there are virtually no semantic changes of direction or reversals: the messenger doesn't jump from one subject to another and the actions are told chronologically. In other words: messenger reports are trying to convey the events in a more or less objective manner and are principally structured as 'and then....and then....and then....'.

Secondly this coherent story is told by a specific kind of character - the messenger - who in some translations is also called a servant, a slave, an attendant or a soldier. This messenger is part of the cast and is a 'real' person within the internal communication system - participating in the action; but at the same time he or she is also an impersonal figure without development or the true characterization of a psychological background. Almost always the messenger speaks on stage only once: to convey that one message, to tell that one extended story. In short: the messenger has one very dominating function within both the internal and external communication system: the referential function of giving new information on an aspect of the action that is further not shown.

By the way, to my opinion it are just these two characteristics that account for the fact that such messenger reports are so popular in acting schools: on the one hand a self contained, monological story and on the other a relatively abstract and impersonal (or even: objective) dramatic figure. As practice material for beginning actors and actresses these classical messenger reports are hardly surpassed. Even more so because the content of the stories is usually very dramatic. We deal not with just average, run-of-the-mill stories, but with accounts of eye witnesses that have seen terrible things. For example in Euripides' Medea: the plastic and vivid description of the doings of the poison can easily be compared to the effects of nerve gasses or napalm that we know from modern day warfare. And this is the case with messenger reports in general: atrocities that transcend ones imagination, suffering, horror, war, inhuman torture, rape, murder, fear and violence – these are the usual elements that make up a messenger report and it goes without saying that such material is more rewarding for an actor than having to describe a leisurely, uneventful stroll through the park.

## **Functions of the messenger report**

And with the content of the messenger report we also touch upon one of its functions: the fact that by using this device theatre makers can circumvent taboos. Instead of showing live rape or murder - and in doing so crossing the boundaries of decency - these things are now told. Where good taste forbids the explicit image, words can help out. Instead of appealing to the sensational and to feelings of cheap horror the audience is being confronted with the facts of the related story through their own *imagination*. We cannot avert our eyes or turn away in shock, thinking 'Oh well, it's only theatre and make-belief', because there is nothing to turn away from: there is only an evocative story. And here one should also realise that the often minute descriptions in these messenger reports can evoke before the mind's eye the details of the related horrors to even those theatregoers that are sitting in the utmost back rows of the auditorium.

And the latter points to maybe an even more important function of messenger reports: efficiency. Not only is it within the confines of certain esthetics inappropriate to openly show terror and violence but it is also hard to realise these things technically. It is just much more simple and much less costly to employ a narrator than to have twenty or more actors enacting a battle scene. A realistic depiction of say a shipwreck or the beheading of a stage character is

<sup>4</sup> Muka\_ovsk\_, J., *Kapitel aus der Poetik* (übers. W. Schamschula) Frankfurt: 1967. Cf. also Pfister 1977, p.180-184.

quite a task for the theatre technician and the results of his efforts are often laughable, but the playwright has no difficulties whatsoever in describing such things in an imaginative way. Special effects like burning crowns on the head of an actress and flesh melting from bones are maybe not impossible to realise in the theatre, but technically and economically this costs the messenger less effort and the producer less money. In other words: the physical restraints of real space and time that are unequivocally linked to the theatrical situation with live actors, further sometimes the economic usage of stories on stage.

Connected to all this there is a third obvious function of the messenger report that derives straight from its definition: to sketch a part of the world of the play that is not visible to the spectators and, in doing so, to extend and constitute that world. The theatrical space is formed by the scenic, physically perceptible space plus a virtual, diegetic space that the spectator deduces to be there from signals in the production. In other words: a character that enters the stage is not coming from the wings and the dressing rooms, but from a part of the fictional world that just happens to be invisible. And that world doesn't have to be restricted to spaces that are in the immediate vicinity of the scene, but can extend -in the fiction- to an entire universe.

With regard to this we sometimes find a distinction being made between adjacent virtual space -directly contagious with the scene- and virtual space that lies further away. This means that -as Scolnicov has illustrated with regard to Greek tragedy- also messengers can come from nearby or far away. She draws a clarifying parallel with painting when she points out how playwrights consciously employ different locations within the virtual world in order to give relief to the fiction and the place of the scene within it:

As in some perspective paintings the action that unfolds in the foreground is given depth by two differently distanced planes which form its background. The best indication of these two planes in the play is provided by the two messengers, indifferently called in some translations 'messenger' and 'attendant'. But the Greeks called the one *angelos* the other *exangelos*, or the messenger who told news from a distance as opposed to the messenger who told what was doing in the house or behind the scenes.<sup>5</sup>

In other words: the story of the messenger and the space where he or she is coming from help to establish the scenic space within the geography of the virtual world. And although we will not always find two different 'background planes' -more or less are also possible- Scolnicov's analysis shows nonetheless how stage figures coming from outside give substance to the world of the play and make it believable – especially when the convention of the 'unity of place' is adhered to.

## Teichoscopies

Extending the scene and giving it a place within the fictional world is also a clear feature of teichoscopies that, contrary to messenger reports, describe contemporary events in the adjacent virtual space that can be seen by the characters on stage, but not by the spectators. A good example of such a teichoscopy can be found at the end of Rosmersholm when the housekeeper looks out of the window and describes the suicide of Rosmer and Rebecca:

*[... The room is empty for a moment. Then MRS HELSETH opens the door on the right.]*

---

<sup>5</sup> Scolnicov, H., 'Theatre space, theatrical space and the theatrical space without' In: J. Redmond (ed.) *The theatrical space*. (Themes in Drama - 9) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.11-26.

MRS HELSETH: Miss, the carriage is — *[Looks round her.]* Not here? Out together at this time? Well, now — I must say that's —! Hm! *[Goes out into the hall, looks round, and comes in again.]* Not on the garden seat. Well, well. *[Goes to the window and looks out.]* Good gracious! That white thing there —! Yes, upon my soul, they're both standing on the foot-bridge. God forgive the sinful creatures! If they're not putting their arms round each other! *[Screaming loudly.]* Ah! Over the bridge — both of them! Out into the mill race. Help! Help! *[Her knees giving way, she holds herself up, trembling, by the back of the chair and can scarcely get the words out.]* No. No help here. The dead mistress has taken them.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that the events offstage coincide with what happens on stage makes that the teichoscopy is often somewhat different in character than the messenger report. This is most of all apparent in the status of the stage figure. With a teichoscopy this is more often a leading part that has an active role in the plot and who we see in not just one but several scenes. This means also that the description of the events is more often colored by the perspective of the character that speaks the teichoscopy. Contrary to the messenger report the teichoscopy is not only a dry, 'objective' account of the events; it rather shows the reaction of a figure and clarifies his or her character. We are not only told what is happening but are also given an insight into the psychology of the intermediating stage character.

An obvious and well known example is the scene from Schiller's *Mary Stuart* where count Leicester stays behind on stage while his love Mary is taken to the scaffold at his command. The soliloquy that follows is also a true *vision-du-dedans* (a view into the inner life of a character that enables one to present his or her thoughts and feelings) in which Leicester expresses his despair and describes the execution of the Scottish queen that is taking place directly outside — invisible to the audience.<sup>7</sup>

By the way: it should be noted here that this is a somewhat special form of a teichoscopy since Leicester also doesn't see the execution while he describes it; he only hears what is going on. So maybe in this case we should talk about a *teichosaudy* instead of a teichoscopy.

### **Telling the truth: the effectiveness of messenger reports**

Although teichoscopies are more subjectively coloured than messenger reports both phenomena have one thing in common that wasn't discussed yet: their **truthfullness**. Messenger stories and teichoscopies are always telling the truth: the events that are related are - within the boundaries of the fiction - real events. Only in very rare instances a messenger lies, but if this is the case the audience knows it and can appreciate or abhor the deceptive qualities. To my knowledge there is no case where it turns out later that a messenger has told a lie to both spectators and the other stage characters. Messengers and teichoscopists are always right. The stories may be told in very subjective and colored ways, but the audience is not supposed to think for example that Leicester is just imagining things and that Mary Stuart doesn't die. And no one will doubt the death of Nestor and Kreousa since the messenger has been there himself and has seen with his own eyes the terrible workings of the poison. This absolute truthfullness is part of the powerful quality of messenger reports and ensures their effectiveness. The spectator knows that the related events are true and that -especially in the case of messenger reports- they are told by eyewitnesses that are 'ordinary' people. In this regard the messenger report works in two ways. First of all the phantasy of the spectator is activated and stimulated because he or she has to imaginatively conjure up the events from

<sup>6</sup> Ibsen, H., *The master builder and other plays* (transl. Una Ellis-Fermor, 1958) Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976.

<sup>7</sup> For this example cf. also Pfister, 1977, p.278-280.

what is told in words. Secondly the story that is presented doesn't focus only on the events but also -and specifically- on the human reaction to those events. One could even say that the narrated action is more or less subordinated to its presentation – to the impact that witnessing the events has had on the narrator. It is the reaction of the messenger that gives the story depth and relief. And seen from this angle the subject of the messenger report lies not so much in the atrocities that are related, but rather in the impact of them on innocent bystanders who just happened to be present and who have to describe the horrific events as well as they can.

One can hypothesize that the ordinariness of the messenger coupled with the stimulation of the imagination enables a great measure of involvement from the spectator. As already remarked: not showing the events denies the audience the usual escape of '*oh,..it's only theatrical play and stageblood*'. And the fact that the story is told by eyewitnesses who might have been our neighbours leaves more room for emotions than the average news report and may further the spectator's empathy with the world of the play. Of course we are on speculative ground here, but it would be interesting to use reception research to investigate whether in some cases a suggestive account by a messenger could be more haunting than a meticulous enactment of the events themselves.

In any case: the ordinary human quality of the messenger is part of the challenge for the actor or actress who faces the task of enacting such a dramatically interesting character: terrible events that are emotionally moving must be communicated in the utmost clear, coherent and correct manner without having had any journalistic training. Besides: the messenger knows that he or she is the bearer of bad news that will spell disaster for the receivers. Thus it is no surprise that messengers are often reluctant to give their account and fearfull of the reactions of their listeners. .

### **The absence of messenger reports in novels and films**

After these preliminary remarks regarding characteristics and effects of messenger reports I would like to consider the two connected questions that were posed in the introduction. First: why don't messenger reports occur in the neighbouring disciplines of theatre – novels and films? And second: why don't we find them in contemporary drama?

A comprehensive answer to these questions –also taking into account some of the exceptions- requires in depth research and lies outside the scope of this exploration. So I will restrict myself here to some suggestions that might serve as a basis for further discussion.

Let's start at the easiest question: why are there so few messenger reports in the novel? The explanation is relatively simple and stems from the structural characteristics of this art form: since there already is a narrator who describes the action there is no need for a second one who –at a certain moment- has to take over in order to communicate a part of the events that the first narrator cannot or will not tell. Of course: in a novel there can be stories within a story or events can be told from different perspectives – but having a narrator who invokes a one-time messenger who then more or less takes over the narrative task doesn't seem a very natural way of telling stories. Such a setup is rather artificial and forced. Even more so because the recursiveness results in distancing the reader -the narrator tells how events are being told by a messenger- while the actions could also be described more directly.

It is harder to give an answer for the film. After all this is a multimedial art form that –at least superficially- has a lot in common with theatre. Still we hardly find any messenger reports or teichoscopies here; not even with film adaptations of theatre plays. There are several reasons

for this, but in my opinion the main two are the flexibility and the supposed ‘objective’ truthfullness of the camera.

In film the camera can move around the fictive world at will: it can go anywhere, shoot from any perspective, it can zoom in and out or jump to another place or time, etc. In short: the camera as narrating instance frees film makers from the fixed perspective that is characteristic for the spectator in a theatre and it can -just like a messenger- manipulate the attention of the audience, letting them concentrate on certain details and so on. In addition to this the mechanical workings of the camera give the impression that it is an objective eye that only registrates ‘reality’. Of course, in the final analysis we know this is not true, but we fall into the trap time and time again: with regard to the truth we prefer images over accounts from eyewitnesses. And it is precisely the emphasis on visuality that the audience seems to demand. Perhaps it’s the influence of television, but nowadays also with fiction movies the spectators apparently are not satisfied with suggestive shooting. Rather, they demand meticulous registration of the most horrifying and bloody details – if at all possible in close up and/or slow motion. And why would film makers employ characters that have to be believed on their word when they can also show the events in (filmic) ‘reality’ and at the same time can appeal to the appetite for sensation?

In this respect the film industry can go very far indeed. Even to the point where, as was already mentioned, in adaptations of stage plays in which there is a messenger it is not at all unusual to cut this figure and replace it with pictures of the ‘real’ events. But in doing this one has to pay a price: the audience has to forego the human reaction of the messenger and the imagination is no longer stimulated. As a result suspense structure and emotional impact of a story can change drastically. For example: part of the effect of ‘The Good Hope’ by the Dutch playwright Herman Heijermans lies in the fact that for quite a long time both spectators and stage characters are uncertain about the fate of the fishing rig and her crew. At long last the irrevocable truth is revealed through a telephone call (that takes the place of the messenger here) in the following scene:

*(The telephone rings. Clementine closes her book)*

THE BOOKKEEPER: Mister Bos has gone out. The phone rang also a while ago.

CLEMENTINE (*listens*): Yes? – Father is not in. – How long will he be, Kaps?

THE BOOKKEEPER: Maybe two or three minutes...

CLEMENTINE (*startled*): What did you say? A hatch with the number 47 -and (*trembling*)- I can’t hear you - (*screams, drops the horn*)

THE BOOKKEEPER: What is it? What is it?

CLEMENTINE (*shocked to tears*): ...I dare not listen any more... O, O!

THE BOOKKEEPER: Is it the coast guard?

CLEMENTINE (*passionate*): ...Barend is washed ashore. O God, now it’s all over!

SAART: Barend?.... Barend?...

CLEMENTINE: 'A telegramme from Nieuwediep –a hatch – and a body....

BOS (*enters*): What is happening here? – Why are you crying?

THE BOOKKEEPER: A message from the *Hope*

BOS: A message?

THE BOOKKEEPER: The coast guard is on the phone

BOS: The coast guard? – Move over. –You, go away: what are you staring at!

SAART: I -I (*exits frightened*)

BOS (*on the phone*): Hello! Who’s speaking? – The coast guard? – A telegramme from Nieuwediep – north of the Haaks – I can’t understand a word! Stop that crying – a hatch you say? – Forty seven... - Yes that’s goddamn bad – that’s – the body –

already in a state of decay – it's Barend, he signed up as the oldest one in the family... - Recognised by whom? – Whom? - O – The *Expectation* has docked in Nieuwediep with some damage and skipper Maatsuiker has recognised him? – Earrings, yes, yes, silver earrings – that doesn't matter any more. - So it's not necessary that we send someone from here to identify the body? – Yes, it's a bloody disaster! – Our village has not been blessed indeed. Yes - yes - Well – we have to bow to Gods will. – Yes, yes – Personally I had no hope left. – Thank you. - Yes. – I would like to have the official report as soon as possible. I'll notify the assurancecompany. Goodbye! (*throws the horn back on the tiller*) I'm just devastated - twelve men.<sup>8</sup>

In a movie version of the play from as early as 1935 the scene is a lot shorter. Note how not only lines and characters have been cut, but also that even the washed up hatch that is referred to in the telephonecall is visualised:

*(The telephone rings. Clementine enters and answers)*

CLEMENTINE (*listens*): Yes? – Father is not in. – How long will he be, Kaps?

THE BOOKKEEPER: Maybe two or three minutes...

CLEMENTINE (*startled*): What did you say? A hatch with the number 47...

*[cut to a shot depicting the hatch that is washed ashore. Then cut back to]*

CLEMENTINE: I can't hear you – what?..... (*clearly shocked*)...I dare not listen any more... (*hands over the phone to the bookkeeper*)...Barend is washed ashore.

*[cut to villagers leaving their houses and assembling to hear the news. Cut back to Clementine and the bookkeeper who now have been joined by Bos]*

BOS (*to the other two*): Our village has not been blessed indeed. I'm just devastated - twelve men.

It is possible for the film to shorten the scene because the spectators already know that the *Good Hope* with all hands has perished at sea. And they know this since they have seen themselves how the ship went down some time before. Or, as the text on the videocassette proudly states: "Contrary to the play this film makes use of the specifics of the medium by adding the storm at sea to the story". But this adding of the storm results in a totally different kind of reception of the scene - since the audience is now knowing more than the characters and most of the reactions of shipowner Bos are left out.

### **The absence of messenger reports in modern drama**

Finally I would like to make a few remarks on the question why in modern drama we hardly find any messenger reports? Of course, there are exceptions –such as the moving account of the fall of Pnomh Penh in Marguerite Duras' *L'histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, Roi du Cambodge*, that is remarkable also because it's a war story told by a female messenger - but on the whole the playwright of today foregoes the use of messengers or teichoscopies. One of the reasons for this we have just encountered when Herman Heijermans uses a telephone instead of a human messenger. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards new means of communication such as telegraph, telephone, radio, television and computers take care of the contact between the virtual world and the scene on stage and make messengers superfluous.

<sup>8</sup> Heijermans, H., *Op Hoop van Zegen* (translation by the author).

But apart from this there might well be other factors that play a role here. One could, for example, point at various epic and performance-like tendencies in modern theatre that are geared towards the denial of illusionary ‘as-if’-worlds. We no longer look through the proscenium arch at virtual make-beliefs. Theatre makers no longer want to create a full fledged illusionary world; they are rather concerned with the physical aspects of the presentation, the psychology of the characters or the thematic aspects of the theatrical situation. And with the lack of this kind of illusion there is less room for messengers or teichoscopies.

Of course there are monologues in modern drama, but these are ego documents in which one stage figure tells us extensively about his or her life. In other words: these stories don’t form a part of the action, but they are the action itself. Hence they are no messenger stories in the sense that they are directed to other stage characters in the fictive world as well; they only address the audience. Besides: these stories conform to postmodern thinking as they tell us a subjective truth and not **the** truth. In todays theatre - as in todays society - there seems to be no place for the absolute trustworthiness of the messenger report. Eyewitnesses can no longer be believed on their word because we have become used to the fact that one should take into account several perspectives on any event. Reports have to be confirmed by at least one other source and the principle of speak and counterspeak must be adhered to at all times. We demand tangible facts – if at all possible visual documentation on the spot – rather than personal experiences. The soldier that comes back from the war is no longer trusted and the asylum seeker has undoubtedly a hidden agenda and will depict the situation much worse than it really is. Reports for truth committees are not really attempts to find out what actually happened but are rather treated as a means for collective therapy and reconciliation. And that ones memory cannot be trusted because it is prone to suggestive manipulation, is a platitude that goes without saying. Even important sport matches that are brought to you live, have to be commented upon by at least two television reporters in order to clarify multiple viewpoints. In brief: where truth itself has become fluid and where there are just subjective outlooks on that truth, there the efforts of a single messenger are doomed to fail – no matter how rhetorically or persuasively they are expressed.

## Conclusion

Perhaps this is not bad and there are enough productions of classical plays so that messenger reports on stage can still be savoured. But it might be that there is also a dark side to the above model of truth that reduces messengers to mere subjective reporters. The consequence of this model is namely that not only the eyes of the other can’t be trusted any more, but also that ones own perception becomes doubtfull. ‘I saw it with my own eyes’ is no longer a valid source of knowledge about the world.

What this can lead to is sketched by Samuel Beckett in one of the few, but at the same time very appealing, examples of teichoscopy from twentieth century dramatic literature - *Endgame*.

In a daring tour-de-force Beckett psychologizes in this play the theatrical means of the teichoscopy in such a way that one not only gets an insight in the mind of the character that describes what happens off stage, but that one also realizes that the act of looking itself becomes the main subject.

The space in which Beckett situates the play is a closed off interior with two small windows high in the back wall. According to several well acknowledged interpretations this space can be seen as a metaphor for the human mind: it is as if the spectator sees the inner side of a skull in which the two small windows represent the eyes. In the play we see the homunculus Hamm

who is paralysed in a wheelchair. For his information on the outside world he is dependent upon Clov who sometimes climbs a ladder in order to look out of one of the windows. The alienation of this situation and the mistrust that goes with it provide us with a painfull picture of Hamm's isolation. So, it's no wonder that the outside world is apparently empty, void and desolated. And it's also no wonder that at the end of the play Hamm remains behind alone, devoid of any human contact.

In this way Beckett succeeds in adding a new dimension to the teichoscopy whereby this means of telling a story is used as a tool of reflection on the human condition and on the problem of perception. And of course on the whole question of (theatrical) spectatorship as well, because in the end even the audience is unsure whether Clov is speaking the truth or playing a game.

But here we touch upon the problem of the trustworthiness of stage figures and that is a problem that doesn't exist with the classical messenger reports and teichoscopies. So with *Endgame* we come to the end of this preliminary exploration into two specific modes of storytelling in the theatre. An exploration that, I hope, has shown that further research on messenger stories is certainly in order and that especially in the fields of comparative mediastudies and reception research interesting results can be expected.