

The Dramaturgics of the Newspaper Page

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A catastrophe can happen more or less suddenly, unexpectedly. The event can also be more or less accessible to media coverage, depending on geography, topography or weather conditions. No photographs were taken of the *Titanic* when it sank in April 1912. Drawings depicted some of the most dramatic events. The situation was quite different in the case of the explosion of the helium dirigible *Hindenburg* at its landing in Lakehurst, New York, in May 1937. Twenty-two photographers were on hand when 36 of the aircraft's 97 passengers died in the flames. Never before had a major accident been so well documented. The next day, the *New York Post* carried seven pages of pictures, *The Daily Mirror* nine pages, and the *New York World-Telegram* had 21 photos. This was the first time in journalism history when the story was told (primarily) in pictures. A similar case was the explosion of the American space shuttle, *Challenger* at its launching in January 1986, in which the crew of seven astronauts died. In this case, the documentation was mainly in moving pictures, transmitted 'live'. The dramatic event could be witnessed on television screens the world over.

The sinking of the Baltic ferry, *Estonia*, in September 1994, was like the sinking of the *Titanic* in that, with one remarkable exception (see Plates 13 and 14), the accident itself was not documented photographi-

cally. The coverage of the rescue operation was, however, extensively documented. Indeed, in this respect the *Estonia* catastrophe was quite incomparable. Eager to the point of giddiness, news media served a shocked public a kaleidoscopic mixture of cruel death and heroic rescue, of cynical egoism and selfless solidarity in the desperate struggle for survival. They were quick to spotlight the heroes and the villains. Re-enactment followed upon re-enactment, each version being repeated countless times over.

Fiction or Faction?

In his book, *Faction as a Mode of Expression* (Faktion som udtryksmiddel, 1990) Peter Harms Larsen notes that faction, can be understood in two different ways: (1) as fictional content – the product of someone's imagination – communicated in the form and rhetoric of a non-fictional genre, or (2) real – true – facts and events communicated in the form and rhetoric of a fiction genre.

The first case is hardly applicable here. The *Estonia* did sink, and hundreds of passengers did die. It is the second meaning that I find relevant, and identifying the fictional elements in the coverage forms an important part of my study.

In the following I will use the term '*discourse*' in the sense of a statement or for-

mal expression consisting of both text(s) and illustration(s). A discourse is thus internally coherent; it has its own grammar, its own expressive norms. It can be a whole newspaper page or a sequence of pages and spreads. Discourses are often constructed so as to permit interpretation on multiple levels. In the following will discuss these levels in terms of three gross alternatives:

- a) *The interpretation is based on the pictures in the discourse.* This case is not common, but it does occur. Pictures have a fascination of their own and they call attention to themselves. Théodore Géricault's famous painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*, from 1819 continues to attract great numbers of visitors to the Louvre in Paris, even though most of them haven't the faintest idea of the documentary background to the motif, viz., that Géricault rendered a real event: the rescue of survivors of the foundered frigate, *La Méduse*. The drama as such can be archetypical.
- b) *The interpretation is based on the pictures and the headlines (plus captions).* This is probably the most frequent in the case of newspapers and materials that are consumed in haste or on a routine basis, such as commuting. Even if one manages to read bits of the stories, the browsing reader's main impression in such cases is formed on the basis of a hasty interpretation of pictures-and-headline/caption. Could it be that this level of interpretation is actually the most persuasive? Be that as it may, the influential potential of the interplay between picture and heading is a cardinal principle in advertising.
- c) *The interpretation is based on the discourse in its entirety*, i.e. pictures, headlines and copy. This in extenso alternative requires not only commitment on

the part of the reader, but also time. A classic rationale for presenting mixed discourses is that pictures and headlines attract the reader's attention to the article, the epic element in the discourse. Modern newspaper pages would appear to be designed to appeal to readers who use strategies b) and c), but we should not exclude the possibility of a), either.

The Dramaturgics of the Newspaper Page, or: The Page as Rhetoric

The newspaper page or spread has yet to be analyzed as a *drama*, as a particular form of visual and verbal expression. Newspaper content has been described in its epic form, as reportage or narrative, and even in terms of didactics, the informative and opinion-forming functions. But it has not been conceived of as a stage on which a drama is performed, in episodes during a given period of time. It is easy to see why. Traditionally, newspapers have told their stories in the copy, with pictures, 'art', playing a decidedly subordinate role. Thanks to modern graphic technology, however, pictorial journalism has undergone a profound transformation, especially in the tabloid and boulevard press, and especially in coverage of disasters and other sensational events.

The dramaturgics of the newspaper page is not the product of individual journalists and photographers who each bring their straws to the stack in the form of copy and 'art' from different sources and scenes of events. It is the creation of a team of editors working with pictorial editing, layout and headlines. It is this team which dramatizes reality, creating on the basis of the material at hand the dramatic discourse which readers will partake of. The rationale for considering the discourse a drama lies in the pictures; it is primarily the pictures which provide the sensation of being 'a fly on the

wall', of being an invisible witness (cf. Harms Larsen op. cit., p. 152).

The picture not only creates a sense of presence, but also imparts facts. We readers are served a factual account, though it may be scanty, of what has happened or is happening. This conveys prestige on the discourse as a whole, but it does not preclude the creation of fictions through context. Aided and abetted, for example, by headlines, copy or reconstructing illustrations. It is these hybrid forms which make up the category, 'faction'.

Television has long been seen to produce factional content. I think it is important that we examine newspapers, especially the tabloids, in this light, as well. I have, for example, classified the 'art' I have collected on the *Estonia* catastrophe according to a classic Aristotelian typology: *dramatic*, *epic* and *didactic* discourses. Under the influence of Renaissance philosophers I have also tried to identify a *lyrical* mode of expression used in discourses which convey 'atmosphere' and various emotional climates in connection with funerals and other commemorative ceremonies.

Catastrophes of the magnitude of the sinking of the *Estonia* always give rise to trauma, to a collective state of shock, which has to be processed. One should see the duties of the mass media to portray events – to dramatize, mythologize, and reconstruct and otherwise convey the details of major events and the feelings they arouse – in this light. People need to partake of commentary to still their anxiety and to counter the inevitable suspicions. They need to be told why the accident occurred, the sequence of events, how the event was dealt with, and they need to identify possible heroes, persons in positions of responsibility, as well as culprits, if any.

In the case of the *Estonia*, the media were quick, perhaps too quick, to fulfill

their audiences' needs. In their ambition to be first with pictures some newspapers definitely ran afoul of their ethical codes. The front page of Stockholm tabloid, *Expressen* 29 September 1994, which carried portraits of several of the passengers is a flagrant case in point. At the time the pictures were printed the newspaper had no knowledge as to which of the passengers pictured had gone down with the ship, which were among the recovered dead, and which had been saved. Publishing the portraits was clearly a faux pas. At the same time, we must recognize that many of the dramatic and lyrical discourses in the press after the disaster were touching and thought-provoking. Again, I especially have in mind the tabloid press, which dares use headlines to the hilt to set the scene, letting blow-ups carry on a dialogue, while they also account for the visual appeal of the reportage, page after page, spread after spread. Research to date has tended to dismiss the tabloids as sensation-hungry commercial 'rags'. That they, too, have ambitions is made clear time and again in their coverage of the *Estonia* catastrophe. Their ambitions concern primarily the dramatic and lyrical discourses, whereas the more 'serious' papers, with their relative emphasis on text at the expense of 'art', provide the epic and didactic discourses.

Four Modes of Representation

The photos and graphics from the *Estonia* catastrophe exceed all previous Swedish media coverage of such events, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The pictures relate or explain all the phases of the drama save the foundering itself – albeit two amateur photographs capture that, as well (see Plates 13 and 14).

As noted above, Swedish tabloids presented the story in such a way as to allow

readers a free choice regarding the level of interpretation: e.g., picture + headlines or the entire discourse, including copy.

All news stories are epical in the sense that there is a narrator – one or more journalists – who relates something to the reader. As a reader of epical journalism, I am precisely as close to or distant from the event as the journalist/narrator. In a dramatic presentation the situation is different. There is no intermediary; I become 'witness' to the event. Eye-witness photographs impart this sense of presence, backed up by the accompanying headlines and captions. They seem to speak to the reader directly from the scene, rather than having been arranged after the fact. The function of the headline is not to provide structure or perspective on the event, but to put the reader on the scene. Captions, too, can be used to the same end.

Most of what has been said about the dramatic mode is true of the lyrical mode, as well. Here, too, I can, unmediated, immerse myself in the pictures and headlines. Whereas the dramatic mode expressed action, motion, conflict and dialogue, lyrical presentations evoke calm, quiet, unison, and inviolability. The lyrical image strives for harmony, and accompanying headlines and captions enhance this striving. Functional headlines toward these ends are not only tautological, they also defuse elements in the picture which might detract from or contradict the intended mood or 'atmosphere'.

Modes of presentation may also be discussed in terms of planes of expression. Dramatic and lyrical modes require only a single plane, namely, the scene on which the event transpires, is portrayed, acted out, and so forth. The epic mode involves a second plane, as well: that of the narrator. When a team of editors use pictures, headlines and layout to achieve these dual

planes, it is then up to the reader to decide which of the discourses is relevant.

The didactic mode, like the epic, has two planes: the scene of the event and the narrator's vantage point. But in the didactic mode the narrator is not so much a narrator as a pedagogue, a teacher. This implies a different, more demanding role for the reader/viewer than in the case of epic modes. The reader must be willing to assume the role of pupil: to respond critically to propositions of various kinds, to ponder analyses and logical arguments. This difference has brought some researchers in the field of dramaturgics to speak of a third plane in the case of didactic presentations. I, for my part am not convinced. Whatever the case, the important thing is not how many planes there may or may not be, but simply that we are aware of the difference between epic and didactic presentations, and that we realize that the receiver assumes different roles in the respective cases.

The newspaper coverage of the *Estonia* disaster includes a good number of essentially didactic presentations. Interestingly, some of them are non-textual. Maps describe wind speeds and directions and the location of the vessel; sequences of drawings show the ferry in cross-section, how it gradually filled with water, listed more and more, and finally foundered. Many pictures of a didactic nature concern the much-discussed bow visor, and how one might go about salvaging the wreck.

The plan in the initial phase of the study was to let the four modes of expression form thematic categories and apply them to the newspaper 'art' in the *Estonia* coverage. Fairly early on in the work, however, I found it necessary to add two additional themes: one for the pictures of the ship as it foundered, and another for the pictures taken of the wreck on the bottom of the sea. Thus, the material has been organized ac-

ording to six themes: 1. *Pictures of the sinking ferry*, 2. *Dramatic presentations*, 3. *Lyrical presentations*, 4. *Epic presenta-*

tions, 5. *Didactic presentations*, and 6. *Pictures of the wreck*.

Dramatic Discourse I



Expressen, pp. 16-17, Wednesday, 28th September 1994: By means of a giant illustration (drawn by Helén Rasmussen) showing the *Estonia* as the life-boats are being set afloat, the Stockholm tabloid attempts to visualize the catastrophe. The heavy

headline, **MAY DAY, ESTONIA!** heightens the sense of emergency and the need of immediate assistance. The lesser headline, **And then not a sound...**, indicates that the help that might have saved the ship came too late.

Dramatic Discourse II



Aftonbladet, pp. 14-15, Wednesday, 28th September 1994: **"It was Hell"**, the Stockholm tabloid quotes helicopter pilot Ronnie Larsson as saying. And he adds (in the lesser headline): **"Bodies were floating in the water everywhere."** Despite 30-foot

waves and 60-mile-an-hour winds (27 m/s), Larsson managed to rescue six survivors out of the water. The main picture in the discourse (a photo taken by Björn Elgstrand) is reminiscent of a classic Christian *pietà* (the mourning of Christ on Golgatha).

Lyrical Discourse I



The centre spread in *Aftonbladet*, Sunday, 6th November 1994: **950 candles for those claimed by the sea**, proclaims the headline accompanying a black-framed photo from Grisslehamn. Bibbi Johansson's evocative

photo, in which the glimmer of memorial candles puts a small crucifix pendant in focus, shows only one of about one-hundred people who attended a memorial ceremony six weeks after the catastrophe.

Lyrical Discourse II



Aftonbladet, pp. 8-9, Monday, 3rd October 1994: The theme of this and the preceding spread (pp. 6-7) is memorial services and people in mourning. One of the four pictures in the discourse is from a chapel on the Finnish island of Utö [closest to the scene of the catastrophe] and another is from a church in the Estonian capital, Tallin. A text in the lower right-hand corner instructs rea-

ders to continue on to the next page: "**Silvia in tears. P.T.O.**" Here we see the royal couple, Queen Silvia crying openly. The photo in the middle to the right shows Crown Princess Victoria, who also represented the royal family at the memorial service held in the cathedral adjoining Stockholm Palace.

Epic Discourse I



This spread from *Aftonbladet*, 30th September, is a typical example of how pictures, headlines, captions and magnified excerpts from the article can be used to create a level of interpretation that expresses the meaning of the story without the reader having to read it from beginning to end. Kent's injured right hand which he displays to the

photographer evokes the life-and-death struggle which took place in a life-boat; only six of sixteen on board survived. One of the excerpts exclaims "We clung to each other every minute of the five hours we sat in that boat." The headline, "They gave each other a promise for life" signals "To be continued...".

Epic Discourse II



It was not the following week, but more than three weeks later that the world-famous rendez-vous of survivors Sara Hedrenius (aged 20) and Kent Härstedt (29) took place. The supper tête-à-tête, which was an

Aftonbladet exclusive, took place in the privacy of a luxurious suite in the Grand Hôtel Saltjöbaden, near Stockholm. (*Aftonbladet*, 22nd October 1994)

Epic Discourse III



10th November, *Aftonbladet* declares: [The ship's] **Speed sank the Estonia**. The big picture shows Captain Aarvo Andresson closest to the camera. The caption explains: "Captain Aarvo Andresson, pictured here with helmsman Avo Piht on the bridge, was upset that the *Estonia* was behind schedule." When the same photo was first published two weeks earlier in *Expressen* (23rd

October), journalist Thomas Mattsson reported a rumour current in *Estonia* that the helmsman was alive, but had been hidden away by the Swedish management of the shipping line. Estonian seamen were reported to have recognized Piht in Rostock; his name also initially appeared on the list of survivors.

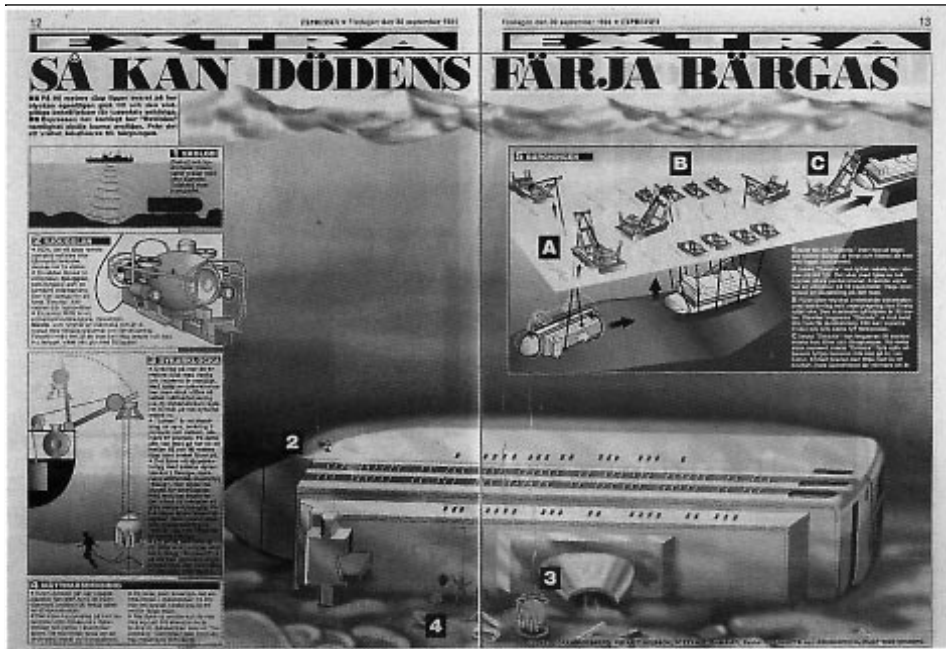
Epic Discourse IV



Under the headline, **Why didn't you do something?** *Aftonbladet* (5th October 1996) takes the Director-General and Director of Safety of the National Administration of Shipping and Navigation to task. Niklas Modig's photo of Director-General Stenmark is at once provocative and heroic.

Stenmark accepts the challenge and poses, minuscule in relation to an enormous fore bow, on a quay in Värtahamn (Stockholm). He rejects all criticism concerning prior problems with ferries' bow visor. His gaze fixed on the horizon, Stenmark declares, **"No one to blame for the catastrophe"**.

Didactic Discourse I



Expressen, pp. 12-13, Friday, 30th September 1994: A version of the salvaging theme. The lead paragraph states: "... *Expressen* outlines how the mystery of the *Estonia* can be solved. From localizing the wreck on the bottom of the sea to salvaging it." Around a large drawing of the wreck of the *Estonia* lying at the bottom of the sea, the paper's

graphical team outlines the five measures that would have to be taken in order to bring the wreck up to the surface and to a dry dock. The discourse, composed of picture and text, is clearly formulated and well executed. For that reason it is likely to have fired the hopes of next of kin that the ship would be salvaged.

Didactic Discourse II

70 **FÄRJEKATASTROFEN** 10 oktober 1994

Första bilden av dödsfärjan

I dag video-filmas vraket

Åtti timmar efter katastrofen har de första videofilmerna tagits. Bilderna kommer att visas i eftermiddag.

I dag har video-filmer gjorts av vraket. De första bilderna kommer att visas i eftermiddag. Bilderna kommer att visas i eftermiddag.

ESTONIA LIGGER PÅ HOGER SIDA

Åtti timmar efter katastrofen har de första videofilmerna tagits. Bilderna kommer att visas i eftermiddag.

SÅ TOGS SONARBILDEN

Åtti timmar efter katastrofen har de första videofilmerna tagits. Bilderna kommer att visas i eftermiddag.

Aftonbladet, p. 10, Sunday, 2nd October 1994: First picture of the fatal ferry is what the paper calls an image of the wreck taken with sonar equipment on board the research vessel, *Suunta*. The wreck lies on its starboard side at a depth of roughly 80

m. 'Balloon captions' around the diffuse, shadowy image indicate the aft, the smokestack and the fore, with the bow port missing. The discourse is didactic, as the illustration to the lower right confirms.

From the Sunken Ferry I



The front page of Aftonbladet, 27th April 1995.

From the Sunken Ferry II



Aftonbladet, pp. 6-7, Thursday, 27th April 1995: All five pictures in the discourse are photographs taken of a transmission on TV4 earlier the same day. The programme showed footage from a video film from inside the wreck made by divers from the British firm, Rockwater. The footage was taken in early December 1994. The caption under the main picture reads: "Divers found total devastation inside the vessel. They had to break in doors and cut through metal plate to make their way through the chaos.

In the course of their perilous investigation divers estimated that between 100 and 300 corpses might be brought up to the surface..." There was no sign of devastation or chaos in the footage shown on TV4. The "mystery hand" appearing in the photo in *Aftonbladet* belongs to a diver, not a corpse – a matter hotly debated in the media after publication. The video recording in its entirety (eight hours of tape) convinced government officials not to try to salvage the vessel.

The Sinking Ferry II



Expressen, pp. 6-7, Thursday, 10th November 1994: The epic sequence of photos is typical of *Expressen*. Here we are presented with what might be called a meta-discourse, i.e., a discourse that depicts (be-speaks) another discourse. As for the picture – which appears again on the right-hand side of the spread – it can be analyzed on yet another level, a meta-level: Level 1. The original photo, Level 2. The photo-

graphing of the photo together with the photographer Mikael Öun and, finally, Level 3: The photographing of the photographing of the original photo, together with Jannu Aser, the man identified in the photo after its publication. The history of the photo is virtually pounded into the reader's consciousness. It is, to my tastes, too explicit, too heavy-handedly rhetorical.