

Visual Narrative and the Deconstruction of the Female Image in Jon Fosse's Suzannah

Baozhu Lu

*Inner Mongolia University, Zhaojun Street, Hohhot, China
3446807246@qq.com*

Keywords: Jon Fosse, *Suzannah*, Visual Narrative, Female Image

Abstract: Jon Fosse's play *Suzannah*, inspired by the real-life story of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen and his wife Suzannah, narrates through monologues, centering on "waiting" and "memory". This paper uses Mieke Bal's visual narrative theory to analyze the play's visual effect from encoder, code, and reader dimensions, with a focus on Suzannah's female image. The play dissolves linear time via the temporal-spatial juxtaposition of old, middle-aged, and young Suzannahs, showing her life changes. The "third eye" implies her unacknowledged support for Ibsen's creation, while silence amplifies her inner depression. Crucially, from the reader's view, Suzannah's on-stage image is shaped by the male gaze—framed as a figure stuck in waiting and trivialities—starkly contrasting with her real historical image as an independent woman. This paper deepens understanding of Fosse's minimalist techniques and offers a reference for exploring female representations in contemporary drama.

1. Introduction

Jon Fosse has won the 2023 Nobel Prize in Literature for "innovative plays and essays that give voice to the unspoken". As a Norwegian national treasure, he has staged more than 1,000 plays worldwide and has written and adapted more than 70 of his own plays. He has also written numerous novels, essays, poems and even children's literature, which have been translated into more than 40 languages. Many critics call Fosse "the greatest playwright ever since Ibsen".

The 2004 play script *Suzannah* is a highly experimental masterpiece by Jon Fosse. With Henrik Ibsen's wife as the prototype, the work breaks the linear time, presenting three images of Suzannah on stage simultaneously. In *Suzannah*, Jon Fosse makes the everyday life of Ibsen and Suzannah into many fragments rather than grand narration, in order to give a summary and prediction of Ibsen's history. Through monologues, memories and emotions are connected. This work not only continues Fosse's symbolic creative style but also focuses on the issues of female images and literary heritage, making it a key text for studying Fosse's narrative techniques and perspectives on gender.

2. Literature Review

The study of Jon Fosse and his works began very early in western countries. In general, their

studies are more professional and original. They are good at giving comprehensive and incisive assessments to Fosse including his achievements and restrictions, which could push the further studies of Jon Fosse and the progress of the development of drama. The scholar Daria Ioan pays little emphasis to the general feature of Jon Fosse's dramas which previous scholars has studied clearly. Ioan focuses on national stereotypes and believes it is very important to study the feedback in different countries in her essay *Issues in the reception of Jon Fosse's plays*[1]. Sarah Cameron Sunde's essay "Silence and Space: The New Drama of Jon Fosse" focuses on her understanding of the character action of "do nothing" in Fosse's works while rehearsing them[2]. In the book *I Am the Wind*, David Muller discusses the recurring image of the "ocean" in Fosse's plays[3]. Except those general texts about Jon Fosse's writing features, there are also essays addressing specific works, such as the masterpiece *Someone is going to come*.

As for the studies on *Suzannah*, there are several professional papers which study *Suzannah* from different perspectives. Maren Anderson Johnson is concerned on the way of how to use Fosse's biographical drama to construct the marriage between Fosse and *Suzannah* since it is impossible to find the truth behind their marriage[4]. And he is more interested in how Fosse explains the talent of Ibsen by using the *Suzannah's* assessment. Connie M. Amundson in her paper "The Immensity of the Conscious Experience of Age" explores the representation of age in *Suzannah*, with the aim to introduce Age theory into Norway's drama. She also encourages the creation of unique and various means of narrations about age[5]. Another scholar Kyle Korynta discusses how the traditional influence of Ibsen is changed in *Suzannah* with postmodern techniques. He said that because from the modern perspective, Ibsen tradition is seen as something irrational and hinders the process of creation, so it is necessary to overcome it[6].

3. Visual Structure of *Suzannah*

This section examines the images and emotions of the young, middle-aged, and elderly *Suzannah* on stage. It then delves into the mechanism of temporal-spatial juxtaposition and fusion—despite occupying different temporal and spatial dimensions and being unable to perceive one another, they are interconnected through monologues and memory fragments. This facilitates the dynamic transformation between the past and the present, dissolving linear time, amplifying women's inner struggles, and filling the historical gaps in Ibsen and *Suzannah's* marriage.

3.1 Introduction of Three *Suzannahs* respectively

In this drama, three *Suzannahs* are presented on the stage, and they are old *Suzannah*, middle *Suzannah* and young *Suzannah* respectively. In other words, the drama features *Suzannah* at three different stages of her life. But they can't see or hear each other as if they are divided by walls. Three *Suzannahs* express their own thoughts and feelings suited to their different ages, which are called soliloquies. Here Jon Fosse doesn't use the traditional narrative techniques from beginning, rising parts, climax to endings. That is to say it doesn't have plots. Jon Fosse applies the device of stream of consciousness in drama, that is, the drama is full of inner workings of characters. It is concerned with freely flowing feelings of the characters and thoughts, half thoughts and shadows of thoughts moving back and forth in memory. He uses the device of spatiotemporal juxtaposition. The background is changing with the alternations of human mind. With the result of that, the space is endowed with great tension and abstractness, and consciousness is transformed into a three-dimensional spatial structure. Because of which, the readers or the audience can freely change the perspective from young *Suzannah* to middle *Suzannah*, from middle *Suzannah* to old.

Young *Suzannah* tells the story before the marriage between her and Ibsen, the period of meeting and mutual affection. Young *Suzannah* falls in love with Ibsen. She is a little inferior and constantly

saying that she is not as beautiful as other girls. Although Ibsen is very short, young Suzannah still believe that he is her true love. Magdalene-stepmother invites Ibsen for lunch but Ibsen still doesn't come. Young Suzannah is waiting and expecting.

Middle Suzannah is also waiting. Today is her son Sigurd's birthday. She has prepared the dinner, but Ibsen and Sigurd are still going for a walk along the streets before dinner. During the waiting, she can't help thinking of Ibsen's mistake and his affair with a servant girl. He likes the young girls very much and he will look at the young girls at the street. Suzannah is unsatisfactory with her looking.

Old Suzannah is the major character of the drama. The drama begins with old Suzannah's soliloquies and her conversation with Ibsen, but Ibsen never appear and never answer. It seems that young Suzannah and middle Suzannah derive from old. Old Suzannah is depicted as a housewife. She is preparing for her birthday and waiting Ibsen and Sigurd. She cares for nothing but trivial things such as food, clothing and she is a little chanting. At the end of the story, the wait ends because Ibsen has been dead.

3.2 The Juxtaposition and Fusion of Three Suzannahs

The major structural feature of this work is the juxtaposition and combination of the past and present. The memory of Ibsen is the core event. The first act provides a detailed review of the core events through the narration of the old Suzannah and the re-enactment of the memory scenes in her mind. This technique is very common in dramatic works. Fosse often allows different ages of a person to meet in the stage, such as the past self and the present one and future one, just like hallucinations, memory or soul entanglement. In his plays, Life of the past, present and other times, different stages of words and feelings, permeate and encounter in the text. Careful observation is required to understand when and by whom these words are coming from, and to understand what effect is made from the spatiotemporal juxtaposition. There is no absolute fixed point in time, and no fixed words. The same sentence can be said by several people in different time and space.

In *Suzannah*, the two senses or three characters alternatively appear. Jon Fosse make old Suzannah see her own past at certain times—young Suzannah and middle Suzannah begin to appear on the stage. Actually, those times will appear with the mental activity of the character. For example, at the beginning, old Suzannah is talking to Ibsen or maybe herself. She said that she wanted to close the window because of her rheumatism, and then she looked at a door, behind of which we can sense the existence of Ibsen. Then old Suzannah began to think of Ibsen's affair with a servant and her association is going on to the streets of Bergen. At this time, young Suzannah go on the stage, she continues the thoughts of old Suzannah and tells what has happened on the streets of Bergen. But we should also notice that the space and time not only achieve juxtaposition but also change from juxtaposition to fusion. According to the narrative, young Suzannah enters through a door, she walks over to the laid table, puts the final touches to it, and the old Suzannah continues, as if she is unaware of the young Suzannah. Old Suzannah seems to doesn't know the existence of the young and middle. Sometimes old Suzannah will break the walls deliberately and tell the past story to the audience face to face. Old, middle and young Suzannah belong to three different spaces and times although they appear on the same stage and what is special is that space-times go from parallel to intersecting. The appearance of young Suzannah and middle Suzannah is a kind of memory.

In order to attract the interest of the audience, most playwrights will shorten the time frame of their plays by using the "play of the past" to promote the development of "play of the present". And this device can avoid the loose structure of the play due to the excessive span of time and space of the plot. What presented to the audience is not events that lasts one or two hours, but the events that

have passed, that serve as an opportunity for the development of a drama. The occurrence of past events promotes and creates the drama of present dramatic events. Therefore, from the perspective of its structural form, the real present time and space are the main structure of this drama, and the past time and space supplement the narrative, so that the present and the past tense echo and integrate with each other.

The technique of time-spatial juxtaposition contributes to the presentation of stagnation. Three Suzannahs live in different years, sometimes they stare at each other, as if watching the mirror herself. It expresses the different thought and mental development of Suzannah which reflect from the side the different attitudes to Ibsen. This juxtaposition of time and space not only dilute the external contradictions, it can also strengthen the contrast of the same person in different periods, and amplify the internal nature of life.

So as long as the structure and three different perspectives are become clear, the audience can get more understanding of the work and learn more about Ibsen from the monologues of Suzannah.

Now we should refer back to the purpose of the writing, it is to figure out why Suzannah fired the letters between her and Ibsen and give a retrospection to Ibsen's daily life. The audience can get a hint from the drama. Some monologues are taken as examples.

"The middle Suzannah: why doesn't Ibsen come

The old Suzannah: I wish Ibsen would come

The young Suzannah: Ibsen will come soon"

(Fosse,2011,p.70-71) [7]

In their waiting, it is obvious that Ibsen was always absent in some important times. Jon Fosse depicted Ibsen as an irresponsible husband and father. The reason why he didn't come is maybe he was staying with other young girls based on the fact that all three Suzannahs tell us that Ibsen like beautiful girls and she was ugly. The drama is concerned about Ibsen but he never appears. Whether he was alive or not is even unknown. Now that the major character is old Suzannah. According to old Suzannah, Ibsen has been dead and he was buried, so all the answers of above three statements are negative, it means Ibsen would never come. Therefore, the audience can know the reason why Suzannah fire the letter. That is because Ibsen was not only a drunker, but he also didn't perform the basic duty of a husband and father.

4. Visual Images in Suzannah

This part centers on the "code" in Mieke Bal's visual narrative theory, revealing Suzannah's character image. The oppressive apartment space, ample silence and pauses externalize her inner loneliness, anxiety and helplessness, highlighting her repressed state trapped in marriage. The core symbol "eye" further deepens her image—her ability to perceive Ibsen's "big eye" talent and her status as the only one who knows the "third eye" not only demonstrate her profound understanding and support for Ibsen, but also imply her role as an "observer" in this relationship, reflecting her complex character of being both dedicated and lost in herself under the shadow of the literary giant.

4.1 The Image of "Environment"

As for the setting of *Suzannah*, it is the apartment of Suzannah. Her apartment is a little bit suffocating and depressive. This kind of visual impression is helpful to express the inner world of old Suzannah as what have been discussed in the previous part.

The characters in Jon Fosse's plays more like long time silence or pause. In *Suzannah*, there are nearly one hundred times of pauses. The Suzannah's monologues are full of pause when she saying something important. She always tends to stop rather than going on, even though sometimes the pause is ungenial. Three Suzannahs are restless, disappointed and lonely, and a large amount of

silence can't relieve the depressed mood, instead, it brings more embarrassment and low blank. This kind of silence makes the environment and character seem to be frozen on the stage and makes the effect of visual white space. And at the same time, the audience can have more time and space to understand the inner world of the character.

In general, in Fosse's writing, the smooth plot and the large number of lines and pauses in his script are full of absurd meanings. Fosse's drama is the re-inheritance and development of "static". The story relies on pause and silence to reflect the inner contradictions and conflicts of the characters, and the internal and external environment is static. The static nature of the environment emphasizes the living state of human beings, which is a deeper reality.

4.2 The Image of "Eye"

In *Suzannah*, the image of "eye" is the most confusing and difficult to understand, but it plays an important role in how we understand Suzannah and Ibsen. The visual symbol is also an essential part in Ibsen's literature. If the audience understands the meaning of "big eye" and "a third eye", then they will have a deeper knowledge of the role of Suzannah played in Ibsen's life. The word "eye" is repeatedly appeared, such as the followings:

"The old Suzannah:

because there's a bigger eye
and the big eye
it knows

The middle-aged Suzannah:

and his eye
he has that big eye

The young Suzannah:

he looks so strange
with one big eye
and one small eye"

(Fosse, 2011, p. 40)[7]

At first, young Suzannah is attracted by the literal "eye" of Ibsen. She thinks he is very strange with one small eye and one big eye. She is not mature and experienced enough to tell the literary value of the eyes but only focus on the aesthetic value. Then with middle Suzannah and old Suzannah continue the talk, the meaning of this big eye becomes clearer and clearer. The big eye is actually the tool Ibsen used to observe and experience the world. It is because of this big eye that makes him to see things in a unique way, so that he became a genius in his field. And this big eye is also the source of his literary creation. Jon Fosse put Suzannah at a higher place and endow her with the power to know her husband's excellent talents. When Suzannah takes notice of the big eye, then she has the power to control this eye, that is, the way Ibsen used to understand the world. However, although Suzannah knows the existence of the big eye, she doesn't understand the things that the big eye sees.

Then the underlying meaning of the third eye is what makes this drama more complex, so the audience needs to figure out what it really means. Only Suzannah knows the existence of the third eye, even Ibsen himself doesn't know, as old Suzannah says "Ibsen didn't understand himself because he couldn't see his own eyes. He didn't know about his third eye." As the only person who knows the existence of the third eye, Suzannah seems to have a super and indispensable power which contributes to the resourceful production of Ibsen's works. The third eye gives him the ability to view the world in a better perspective. From this, it seems that Suzannah is a great partner who knows that Ibsen is a genius. There may be another explanation that it is Suzannah who is the third

eye. She undertakes the role of the eye which helps Ibsen in his literary creation whether as a careful housewife or someone else. Without Suzannah, Ibsen can't manage his works and she must be around him. Because in the play, Suzannah know Ibsen better than himself. She says that Ibsen didn't understand himself and what he writes, he was too submerged in his own literature to enjoy others' and he was always unhappy when writing. The reason mentioned by Suzannah was that Ibsen writes them not because there is anything meaningful but because he has been given the gift of grief. So, all of these words have presented that Suzannah played an important role in Ibsen's life.

From the image of the "eye", the audience know how the relationship between Suzannah and Ibsen is shifted to the cooperative relationship. And it is undeniable that Henrik Suzannah is the prerequisite for Henrik Ibsen to become famous. Suzannah is the person who provide the sight for the Ibsen and without whom he will not make such a big success. In general, Suzannah is highly valued and put into a high position. What's more, Fosse uses the technique of symbolism and dig into the function of the visual image to make a more detailed narration to Ibsen. Jon Fosse denied that Ibsen has any consciousness of his big eye and the third eye, just as he denied the existence of Ibsen in this play. As a result of which, the role and hole of Ibsen is reduced and in contrary, the role of Suzannah is reinforced. It becomes the exclusive right for Suzannah to know the existence of the eyes. Finally, this drama is actually concerned about Ibsen, however, he doesn't have the right to speak for himself and the right is given to Suzannah. People begin to be interested in exploring the characteristic and life of Suzannah and the ways she contributes to his husband position as a literary giant. This kind of interest lead to the discussion of the third part.

Moreover, the repeated use of the word "eye" also contributes a great dramatic effect of creating an atmosphere of stagnant, which shows the loneliness of Suzannah.

In this play, except the word "eye", much of the dialogues are repetitive, with one Suzannah repeating the words of another. Among his unique expressions, the repeatability of language and the dynamic poetic quality are recognized by artists and critics as Fosse's aesthetic characteristics. A large amount of repetition creates a sense of heaviness and makes people in an irritable atmosphere. What is repeated is not the language, but the huge emotional pressure in the characters' hearts, which shows the people's sense of loss, frustrations, and the attempts to find relief in the play from different levels. Repetition also makes the story and action stagnant. People stay in a situation in which they are unable to move forward or backward. People have no outstanding actions. "Fosse destroys the normal communication between people through the way of language repetition, conveys the difficulty of people relying on language communication and understanding, and highlights the meaninglessness of language in expressing reality" (Zhou,2024).[8]

Suzannah sleeps, cooks, prepares dinner, does chores, and waits. She can do everything, but everything is stagnant. Because we can clearly feel that the only action for all Suzannahs is waiting, and it seems that the waiting for Ibsen is still going on at the end of the story. This stagnation leads to the dilution of dramatic conflict, but reinforces the presentation of internal conflict, conveying a sense of hopeless or prospective future will not come. The complex life is presented on the stage with more abstract dramatic techniques.

5. The Reader's Perspective of *Suzannah*

From the perspective of the readers, the drama is full of certain biases and limitations in its portrayal of women. Whether these biases are in purpose or not, they can be taken as a part of the author's actions. This phenomenon can be analyzed under the theory of The Gaze.

The Gaze, as a concept created by Laura Mulvey, defines the current situation in which the male perspective is dominant in film and visual culture (Mulvey,1989)[9]. The Gaze emphasizes the dynamics and power structure of viewing. The male gaze is built on the premise that women are

viewed, women become innocent people who are presented with beauty, and men become bystanders of the subject viewer. This kind of gaze hides behind the male desire to explore and dominate women.

With the increasing growth of women's consciousness, The Male Gaze is created by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film", incorporating feminism into the academic study of gaze theory. The male gaze, as a social and cultural phenomenon, treats women as the one to be viewed by the sight of the males. Laura Mulvey believes that the binary opposition pattern of "men see, women are seen" is formed in Hollywood classic movies (Mulvey, 1975), so does in the play *Suzannah* [10]. Men always exist as the subject of desire and right, while women exist as the object of desire and the object under male control, which ensures the central voice status of men. Behind the action of "seeing", there is explicit gender consciousness and male gaze.

Therefore, the creation of *Suzannah* by Fosse is based on his own perspective. In this play, *Suzannah* is described as a housewife who just concerned about trivial things such as making dinner, tidying up clothes. And she is depicted as a minor character who is subjected to Ibsen and spend all her life waiting for his husband. She constantly doubts that his husband has love affairs with beautiful girls and talks about the same thing from time to time.

What's more, *Suzannah* is depicted as the inspire of Ibsen that helped Ibsen become successful playwrights by sacrificing her own life. *Suzannah* leaves readers the impression of loss of sympathy, tendency of irritation, strong desire for control. Readers may not know the real image of *Suzannah* because of lack of knowledge, so they will simply regard *Suzannah* as a common housewife.

Even some critics think that the image of *Suzannah* in *Suzannah* is unreal to some extent. Sidsel Marie Nilson, author of *Ibsen in Italy*, was very unhappy with the show's portrayal of *Suzannah*. Nilson wrote in her article "Is this *Suzannah* Ibsen?" She said that *Suzannah* is a funnier, smarter, and livelier woman than is portrayed, hence the show is not faithful to historical records [11]. She wrote that the content of the play does not shed any new light on the historical *Suzanne* Ibsen. Sissel Hamre criticized like that "Where is the confident and strong-willed *Suzannah* who supposedly inspired and directed her *Henrik*?" [12]. Ibsen scholar Astrid Sæther also believes that *Suzannah* deserves a better portrayal. Sæther writes that the TV production provoked her to write the first full biography of *Suzannah* because it did not portray the real *Suzannah* [13]; she was too simply presented and she was presented from a male perspective which portrayed her in a secondary role as the unsympathetic, cross, and controlling wife of Ibsen.

Although the real *Suzannah* is an independent, creative and passionate woman, the author still tries to sacrifice the life of *Suzannah* and exchange it for the success of Ibsen. So, it is very hard for the readers without profound knowledge to find the real *Suzannah* in the play created in the male gaze.

6. Conclusion

This paper employs Mieke Bal's theory to analyze the depiction of *Suzannah* in Jon Fosse's work. Fosse's portrayal of *Suzannah* at various stages of her life blurs temporal and spatial boundaries, emphasizing themes of waiting, memory, and silence. The narrative accentuates her emotional isolation and internal confinement through the use of pauses, repetition, and a restrictive domestic setting. While Fosse's portrayal is artistically innovative, it ultimately reinforces a gendered perspective that subordinates *Suzannah*'s identity to Ibsen's literary legacy. This paper not only sheds light on Fosse's minimalist and symbolic techniques but also raises critical questions about the portrayal of women in contemporary drama. It suggests that future research could further explore the ethical dimensions of biographical reinterpretation, as well as the potential for feminist reinterpretations to reclaim marginalized female voices in dramatic literature.

References

- [1] Ioan, D. *Issues in the Reception of Jon Fosse's Plays*. *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai*, 2010, 55(2): 87-101
- [2] Sunde, S.C. *Silence and Space: The New Drama of Jon Fosse*. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 2007, 29(2): 65-72.
- [3] Muller, D.G. *I Am the Wind*. *Theatre Journal*, 2012, 64(1): 128-129.
- [4] Johnson, M.A. *Jon Fosse's Suzannah: Illuminating Henrik Ibsen's Genius Partner*. *Theatre Journal*, 2014, 66(4): 589-591.
- [5] Amundson, C.M. *The Immensity of the Conscious Experience of Age: Exploring the Representations of Age in Henrik Ibsen's Peer Gynt and Jon Fosse's Suzannah*. Seattle: University of Washington, 2023.
- [6] Korynta, K. *Altering Henrik Ibsen's Aura: Jon Fosse's Suzannah*. *Ibsen Studies*, 2017, 17(2): 154-176.
- [7] Fosse, J. *Plays Five*. London: Oberon Books, 2011: 40, 70-71.
- [8] Zhou, Q.H. *On Fosse's inheritance and development of Beckett's dramatic aesthetics*. *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*, 2024, 35(3): 121-130.
- [9] Mulvey, L. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989.
- [10] Mulvey, L. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. *Screen*, 1975, 16(3): 6-18.
- [11] Nilsen, S.M. *Var Dette Suzannah Ibsen? [Was This Suzannah Ibsen?]*. *Aftenposten*, 2004-01-18(12).
- [12] Dagsland, S.H. *Suzannah Den Ventende [Suzannah, The One Who Waits]*. *Bergens Tidende*, 2005-04-16(45).
- [13] Sæther, A. *Suzannah: Fru Ibsen*. Oslo, Norway: Gyldendal, 2008.