The Concept of Metatheatre: A Functional Approach

Andrés Pérez-Simón
The Concept of Metatheatre: A Functional Approach

Andrés Pérez-Simón

Introduction: anti-illusionism and modernist theatre

A common denominator of modernist dramatic works is the fact that they foreground the conventional nature of the theatrical stage. The separation between stage and audience is now a porous one, subject to constant revision. Nikolai Evreinov’s *A Merry Death* (1909), for example, revisits the legacy of the *commedia dell’arte* in order to arrive at a new interaction between stage and auditorium. The figure of Pierrot, converted to a disoriented and melancholic character, speaks for the authors who want to redefine the institution of theatre in a time when their artworks are treated as just another commodity. This is not an isolated case, as Pierrot recurrently appears as a tragicomic figure during the modernist years embodying the tension between the idea of an autonomous art (art for art’s sake) and a new theatrical praxis. In *A Merry Death*, Evreinov reveals the subjection of commercial drama to bourgeois mores when the actor who impersonates Pierrot confesses at the end of the play that he has enacted the role of offended husband against his friend Harlequin only because it was the proper thing to do before an audience. Another good example of this critical practice is Josef and Karel Čapek’s *The Fateful Game of Love* (1911), a play whose action takes place in a permanent “now,” a present tense to be actualized in every performance. This game or play (the word *hra* in the title has, in Czech, both meanings) consists in the staging of the conventional plot of love and jealousy by a *commedia* cast introduced by Prologue, a theatre-manager who is only worried about the economic success of the play. The troupe of actors who play the roles of fictional actors are perfectly aware of the presence of the spectators, and they engage in discussions that range from the (awful) taste of contemporary audiences to the existence of a censorship of an economic and moral nature.
The two examples cited above contrast with the basic tenets of illusionist theatre as they appear codified in a critical tradition that goes from Denis Diderot to Konstantin Stanislavsky. Diderot, one of the first theorizers of the illusionist fourth wall, conceives theatre as a succession of tableaux unified by the artist’s single point of view. This idea of dramatic tableau, as Roland Barthes observes in his essay “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,” implies the existence of “a pure cut-out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness, remains unnamed, while everything that it admits within its field is promoted into essence, into light, into view” (70). The “irreversible and incorruptible” stage exerts a unifying control over the spectator’s gaze, thereby determining both the observer and the observed. In the twentieth century, Stanislavsky also endorses the existence of a fourth wall separating stage from viewers. In fact, he regards the presence of the spectators as an anomaly, for they are an obstacle to the actor’s natural retrieval of subconscious energy. The goal of his system of acting is, precisely, the correction of this anomalous situation. To “restore the natural laws, which have been dislocated by the circumstances of an actor’s having to work in public,” Stanislavsky explains, a system of acting “should return him to the creative state of a normal human being” (Building 281).

In stark contrast to Stanislavsky’s view, modernist theatre sees the existence of theatrical audiences as a constitutive characteristic of the theatrical event, not as a factor to be corrected or neutralized. The appeal to the audience is usually made through the laying bare of the artistic devices, an operation that breaks the illusion of reality and demands a critical involvement on the part of spectators who are not treated as simple voyeurs. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the ideal of a total dissolution of the barrier between stage and audience was progressively substituted by a critical approach to the fourth wall, as dramatists and directors reflected on the ideological implications of this physical separation. In this respect, the theory and practice of Brecht’s theatre represents the most coherent attempt to reevaluate the distance separating stage from audience. Brecht’s dramaturgy matures in a context of increasing politicization of the stage, usually from left-wing activists who, like Piscator, were inspired by the activities of the Russian artists in the early Soviet years. The Wagnerian mystic gulf, the great symbol of the separation between stage and audience, was perceived with mistrust by those artists and thinkers who saw filling the orchestra pit, as Benjamin would put it, as the most urgent task of contemporary theatre. Brecht, continuing but also reforming Piscator’s orthodoxy, preferred to foreground the division between stage and audience instead of merging both realms with architectural reforms.

Metatheatre: a theoretical incursion

There is a corpus of modernist dramatic works, epitomized by those of Brecht and Pirandello, that responds to what one can expect from a theatre that comes preceded by the prefix ‘meta’: self-reflectivity, a critical relationship to previous models and, even though it is a very generic idea, complexity. The distinction between self-referential and mimetic dramaturgies is, in the final instance, a question of theatrical levels rather than an absolute separation of two irreconcilable essences. In this respect, William Egginton observes how “there can be no theater that is not already a metatheater, in that in the instant a distinction is recognized between a real space and another, imaginary one that mirrors it, that very distinction becomes an element to be incorporated as another
distinction in the imaginary space’s work of mimesis" (How 74). It is not by accident that scholars such as Elinor Fuchs, Martin Puchner, and Alan Ackerman, as well as Egginton himself, have advocated in recent years the adoption of the term ‘theatrical’ or ‘theatricalist’ in lieu of the more popular ‘metatheatrical.’ Be it through the mediating presence of asides, prologues and choruses, the incorporation of puppets commenting on the stage action, or the adoption of theatrical traditions that foreground the artificial nature of the stage (commedia dell’arte, Chinese and Japanese classic theatres), there is no need to present a play within a play in order to emphasize the artificiality of the theatrical stage. But, what is the origin of the “meta” prefix in the field of theatre studies? The idea of metatheatre or metaplay first appeared in Lionel Abel’s collection of essays Metatheatre, published in 1963. Abel coins this term to define “a comparatively philosophic form of drama” (v) characterized by its self-conscious nature. In contrast to the catharsis-oriented Greek tragedy, Abel argues, the hero in the works of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Calderón remains “conscious of the part he himself plays in constructing the drama that unfolds around him” (167). The device of the play within a play, so important in the Baroque, is present in works such as Hamlet or Life is a Dream, yet Abel indicates that the concept of metatheatre goes beyond the use of this specific device:

the plays I am pointing at do have a common character: all of them are theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized. By this I mean that the persons appearing on the stage in these plays are there not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them. What dramatized them originally? Myth, legend, past literature, they themselves. . . unlike figures in tragedy, they are aware of their own theatricality. (134-135)

The notion of metatheatre is not exclusive to one artistic period. Abel applies it to the self-reflexive dramaturgies of such modern playwrights as Pirandello, Genet, and Brecht. At the core of Abel’s theoretical edifice stands his argumentation about the impossibility of tragedy in baroque and modern drama due to the “theatricalized,” self-referential condition of these two periods. One of the great advantages of the concept of metatheatre is the fact that, once it has been liberated from historical constraints, it becomes a valid analytic tool for the study of historical series. As Puchner puts it in his preface to Abel’s collection, “Nineteenth-century realism and naturalism thus are for modern drama what Greek tragedy is for baroque drama, namely, the “realist” precursor of the later self-absorbed metatheatre” (Introduction 14).

Abel’s idea of metatheatre can be traced back to the early 1960s, when the prefix “meta” enjoyed extraordinary prominence among art critics thanks to Clement Greenberg’s theorizations of abstract painting. Abel was also responding to a parallel movement that took place in the area of literary theory in the wake of Jakobson’s famous study on the six functions of language. As it is well known, Jakobson presented his model of six functions of language at the 1958 Indiana Conference on Style. His paper “Linguistics and Poetics” was published two years later in the proceedings Style in Language, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok, and any further commentary about its influence on twentieth-century literary theory would be redundant here. In the pages to follow, I propose a historical reconstruction of Jakobson’s model in order to demonstrate how his 1958 classification descends from the tradition of the Prague School (a research group he cofounded in 1926), and to what extent it diverges from the Prague School project of interartistic semiotics. In particular, I argue that, by rendering Mukařovský’s original aesthetic
function as the poetic function, Jakobson closes the door to the inclusion of social and ideological phenomena in the realm of literary criticism.

Jakobson’s six elements of verbal communication are the following (I am reproducing here the graphic arrangement presented in “Linguistic and Poetics”):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXT</th>
<th>ADDRESSER</th>
<th>MESSAGE</th>
<th>ADDRESSEE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONTACT</td>
<td>CODE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And the functions corresponding to these six factors are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REFERENTIAL</th>
<th>EMOTIVE</th>
<th>POETIC</th>
<th>CONATIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PHATIC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METALINGUAL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In strict terms, only two of Jakobson’s functions can be considered new contributions. More exactly, it is only the case of the metalingual function, for the concept of the phatic function is derived from Bronislaw Malinowski’s anthropological research, as well as the transmission model of communication developed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in the 1940s. In “Linguistics and Poetics,” Jakobson defines the metalingual function as the one that predominates “Whenever the addresser and/or the addressee need to check up whether they use the same code” (69). Metalingual operations are present in our everyday exchanges, and their importance is particularly visible in the processes of language learning. My claim is that the metalingual function cannot be made equal to metatheatre due to the fact that there is no position of outsideness in theatre that can be compared to the abstract patterns of utterances such as “The word “apple” has five letters” or “Could you rephrase what you just said?”. Even in the case of Brecht's ‘epic’ devices, what occurs is a shift of attention to the theatrical conventions—a focus on the message itself, in linguistic terms—rather than a description of the code from an outside position.

If the metalingual function is not the linguistic equivalent of metatheatre (with all the connotations of self-awareness, self-reflexivity, etc., present in the latter), the most plausible solution would seem to be the adoption of Jakobson’s poetic function. The substitution of the poetic for the metalingual function, however, does not produce a totally satisfactory solution either. In order to prove the insufficiency of Jakobson’s terminology, I propose a close reading of the definition of the poetic function in “Linguistics and Poetics”: 

TRANS-, 11 | 2011
The set (Einstellung) toward the message as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language. The poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function, whereas in all other verbal activities it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent. This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects. (69-70)

Jakobson became familiar with the concepts of Einstellung (set, orientation) and dominant in the early 1920s, when he was one of the most active members of the so-called Russian formalist school. The idea of palpability can also be traced back to these years, since it is a translation of oščutimost’, a term Shklovsky coined to describe the consequences of deautomatizing effects. The formalist origin of these three concepts demonstrates the existence of multiple theoretical layers in Jakobson's famous model. In addition, his talk of “the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects” is evidence of the legacy of the Prague School, an intellectual endeavor he joined in 1926 as one of the founding members of the Prague Circle. This dichotomy of signs and objects is central to my argumentation, as I will show later, but there are other aspects of the poetic function that deserve special attention now. I am referring to the very use of the adjective “poetic,” a terminological decision that limits its range of application to the realm of verbal art. Why does Jakobson restrict his analysis to linguistic materials? In 1958, when he delivers his paper at Indiana, Jakobson is especially interested in the development of a “poetry grammar.” Having arrived in the United States in the early 1940s, he devoted himself exclusively to linguistic research for more than a decade—it is in this period that he writes his famous paper on aphasic disturbances. Then, when he returns to literary studies in 1958, he is convinced of the existence of an empirical criterion that demonstrates the existence of the poetic function. It consists, as he puts it in “Linguistics and Poetics,” in the projection of “the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination” (71, his emphasis).

Leaving aside the phatic and metalingual functions, incorporated by Jakobson to his 1958 model of communication, the other four functions are known to Prague scholars as early as the mid-1930s. The key difference here is that, instead of a poetic function, Mukařovský speaks of a multivalent aesthetic function. Jakobson himself adopts this terminology in his Prague years, as can be inferred from “The Dominant,” originally a lecture he delivered in 1935. To prove my statement, I will simply quote two brief excerpts from “The Dominant”:

In the referential function, the sign has a minimal internal connection with the designated object, and therefore the sign in itself carries only a minimal importance. (44)

a poetic work cannot be defined as a work fulfilling neither an exclusively aesthetic function nor an aesthetic function along with other functions; rather, a poetic work is defined as a verbal message whose aesthetic function is its dominant. (43)

The first excerpt anticipates Jakobson’s theorization of the relation between sign and reality; in the second excerpt, one can see how Jakobson speaks of the aesthetic function even when the work in question pertains to the realm of verbal art (“a poetic work is defined as a verbal message whose aesthetic function is its dominant”). It is evident how, in the context of the Prague School comparative semiotics of art, the aesthetic function appears as a more encompassing concept than Jakobson’s later poetic function. Therefore, if one proceeds in accordance with this wider approach and substitutes the aesthetic for the poetic function, the result is the following chart of artistic—not only linguistic—functions:
We thus arrive at a four-function model that can also be rendered in terms of 3 + 1: three communicative functions plus one aesthetic function. The main precedent for this hybrid scheme is Karl Bühler’s organon model of language, published by the German psychologist and linguist in 1934. In his Sprachtheorie, Bühler distinguishes three functions of language: Darstellung (presentation), Ausdruck (expression), and Appell (appeal). These three functions correspond to the three elements of verbal communication and, in consequence, are always present in the communicational exchange. The functions do not exclude each other and, depending on the predominant orientation of the speech, one can speak of an emphasis on the referred object (presentation), the speaking subject (expression) or the utterance’s recipient (appeal). Bühler’s Sprachtheorie takes everyday verbal communication as the basic, non-marked situation of analysis, a move that constitutes a radical departure from the practice of the philosophers of language, philologists and linguists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Bühler’s research is directly relevant to the evolution of Prague School semiotics because his organon model situates language in an intersubjective paradigm, therefore compensating for the limitations of Husserl’s phenomenology (Mukařovský’s most direct philosophical influence). For, in contrast to Bühler’s model, Husserl confines language to the inner realm of expression. Husserl distinguishes between two types of signs: expressions and indications. As Peter Steiner explains, indications, for Husserl, are merely contextual signs, while “the true realm of expressions is the solitary mental life, where words do not indicate because their meaning is directly “present” in the subject’s consciousness” (“In Defense” 416). Very different from Husserl’s description, Bühler’s shifts the attention to the use of verbal signs in a contextual social interaction, and signals the path for Mukařovský’s later incorporation of social aspects into a comprehensive semiotic theory. After reviewing the terminology in Bühler’s organon, the group of four artistic functions appears as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRESENTATIONAL (Darstellung)</th>
<th>EMOTIVE / EXPRESSIVE</th>
<th>AESTHETIC</th>
<th>CONATIVE / APPELLATIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

In Mukařovský’s own account, “As a presentation (Darstellung) the linguistic sign functions vis-à-vis the reality signified by it; as an expression it appears in relation to the speaking subject; as an appeal it is addressed to the perceiving subject” (“Poetic Designation” 67-8). The idea of a presentational function, often translated (incorrectly) into English as “referential,” highlights the capacity of the sign to produce realities (world-creating signs). This creative facet is less explicit when the concept is translated as
referential function, as Jakobson does in “Linguistics and Poetics.” With respect to the expressive and appellative functions, terms equivalent to the emotive and conative functions in Jakobson’s model, the difference is not substantial.

Mukařovský expands upon Bühler’s Sprachtheorie by conceptualizing a fourth function, the aesthetic, which brings to the fore the structural components of the artistic work. This idea of an “orientation toward the expression itself,” an expression that Mukařovský uses in several of his essays of the 1930s, has been too often misunderstood as a simple translation of the old principle of art for art’s sake. Yet what Mukařovský argues is precisely the opposite of this, for it is due to its aesthetic orientation that the work of art is able to weaken the transparent relation between signs and reality. The illusion of transparency that is inherent to realist-naturalist drama (theatre as a slice of life) epitomizes the tendency toward informational redundancy or, to put it in linguistic terms, lexicalization. Contrary to this, the presence of non-mimetic codes in modernist theatre foregrounds the fact that the stage is not a passive copy of external reality, but a space that now questions ‘lexicalized’ identities and clears the ground for new social and ethical evaluations.

In lieu of conclusion

Once these terminological changes are implemented, the circle seems finally closed, and Jakobson’s model can be now traced back to the four-function model developed by Bühler and Mukařovský in the 1930s. The existence of an aesthetic rather than a (linguistically determined) poetic function, however, does not totally resolve the question of how aesthetic and non-aesthetic elements interact in the history of art. This is something that goes well beyond the limits of the present essay. As a final note, I would like to mention Mukařovský’s own struggle with the ambivalent notion of the aesthetic function.

At first glance, it seems a safe move to define the aesthetic function as the predominant one in artistic realms such as literature, sculpture, etc. Nonetheless, Mukařovský denounces the limitations of this theoretical stance when it comes to explaining the presence of the aesthetic function in the society of his time:

as soon as we go beyond the realm of art, difficulties arise. On the one hand, we continually find ourselves attempting to consider the aesthetic function as something secondary which may exist but is not necessary; on the other hand, the aesthetic function compels our attention outside of art so frequently, turns up in so many of the most varied manifestations of life, and even appears as an essential component of habitation, dress, social intercourse, and so forth, that we must think about its role in the overall organization of the world. (“The Place” 31)

Writing in 1942, Mukařovský finds himself needing to explain the particular nature of the aesthetic function in an epoch when “life outside of art has become very strongly aestheticized” (“The Place” 32), a statement very similar to Benjamin’s well-known words on the fascist aestheticization of politics. In fact, Mukařovský refers to the “aestheticization of physical culture” (32) as one example of the strong presence of the aesthetic function outside art.

Despite their antithetical conditions, the crisscrossing of the practical and the aesthetic functions is frequent both in art and in everyday life. In fact, Mukařovský notes, the art of theatre constitutes a paradigmatic case of the practical function appearing “frequently coupled with, indeed even blended with, the aesthetic” (“The Place” 47). In “Significance
of Aesthetics,” a paper also written in 1942, Mukařovský reformulates the dichotomy practical/aesthetic function in terms that echo Shklovsky’s concept of ostranenie:

An absolute restriction to the practical attitude, of course, would unmistakably lead eventually to total automatization, to a restriction of attention to already obtained and exploited aspects. Only the aesthetic function can preserve for man vis-à-vis the universe the position of a foreigner who keeps coming to unknown regions with fresh and keen attention, who is constantly aware of himself because he is projecting himself into the surrounding reality and is constantly aware of the surrounding reality because he measures it with himself. (“Significance” 22)

Mukařovský’s theory of functions is not free from contradictions, especially when it comes to codifying a function, such as the aesthetic, which can only be defined in negative terms. The unresolved aspects of Mukařovský’s model have to be explained, at least in part, by the hostile historical conditions of his late structuralist thought, which coincides with the German occupation of Prague. And Mukařovský would never resume his research on this issue after War World II, as he had renounced structuralism in favor of Marxism in order to keep his professorship at the Charles University of Prague. Despite its unfinished condition, Mukařovský’s functional division is of particular value when applied to modernism, a period characterized by the blending of the two functions studied by the Czech scholar.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Notes

1. See Puchner’s introduction to Abel’s Tragedy and Metatheatre 1-4. As Puchner observes, it is in the late fifties and early sixties “when the literature, painting, music, and theatre produced in the first half of the twentieth century are canonized, when prominent scholars engage the often hermetic, puzzling, and complex works of high modernism, introducing and explaining them to the academy and to the a wider public. The formulation they commonly use is that these difficult works do not seek to represent the world, but are rather “about” art itself…. There existed no art form in the twentieth century that did not acquire, sooner or later, the prefix meta” (Introduction 2-3).

2. In “The Place of the Aesthetic Function,” Mukařovsky gives the example of the goldsmith’s and the baker’s craft to prove how the aesthetic function is present in elements with practical functions—for him, the color and the smell of the baker’s craft are also aesthetic elements. He concludes that there is “no sphere in which the aesthetic function is essentially absent; potentially it is always present; it can arise at any time” (35). Mukařovsky criticizes architectural functionalism because Corbusier “proceeds from the premise that a building has a single, precisely delimited function given by the purpose for which it is built” (37), an unambiguous position that limits the buildings to a single function.

3. As Michael Quinn notes, Mukařovsky constructs the category of the aesthetic function “negatively, that is to say, nowhere and everywhere” (“Negative” 51). Quinn criticizes the graphic arrangement proposed by Jakobson in 1958, and later by Steiner in his introduction to Mukařovsky’s Structure, Sign, and Function, because in both cases the aesthetic function stands in an equal relation with the rest of the functions. In Quinn’s view, “Mukařovsky’s free aesthetic function inherits, at the level of communication ethics, the political difficulties of access and exclusion that have troubled Schiller and other post-Kantian theorists. The difficulty of the logical status of free aesthetic functioning seems to me to be the reason why the borderless aesthetic is so resistant to graphic illustrations like Steiner’s and Jakobson’s” (“Negative” 54-5).
ABSTRACTS

This essay reviews the highly popular concept of metatheatre or metadrama, whose first formulation appeared in Lionel Abel's collection of essays Metatheatre in 1963. Abel's contribution in the field of theatre studies took place in the wake of Roman Jakobson's model of six linguistic functions, which Jakobson had introduced in a conference held in Indiana five years before the publication of Metatheatre. In my review of Jakobson's model, I argue that neither the metalinguistic nor the poetic function can fully explain the existence of multiple self-referential, anti-illusionist devices in twentieth-century dramaturgies (a few examples from the modernist years are discussed in my essay). In order to shed new light into Jakobson's model, I propose a return to the four-function model developed by Jan Mukařovský, the most important critic of the Prague School, in the late 1930s. Mukařovský expanded upon Karl Bühler's Sprachtheorie (with the functions Darstellung, presentation; Ausdruck, expression; and Appell, appeal), by conceptualizing a fourth function, the aesthetic, one that brings to the fore the structural components of the artistic work.

El presente ensayo examina el hoy muy popular concepto de metateatro o metadrama, que apareció por primera vez en Metatheatre, de Lionel Abel, una colección de ensayos publicada en 1963. Esta contribución de Abel al campo de los estudios teatrales se basó en el modelo de seis funciones lingüísticas de Roman Jakobson, que Jakobson había presentado en una conferencia en Indiana cinco años antes de la publicación de Metatheatre. Al analizar el modelo de Jakobson, argumento que ni la función metalingüística ni la función poética pueden explicar correctamente la existencia de múltiples mecanismos autorreferenciales y antiilusionistas en la dramaturgia del siglo veinte (en mi ensayo, hago mención a algunos ejemplos del periodo modernista). Para ofrecer una nueva lectura del modelo de Jakobson, propongo un retorno al modelo de cuatro funciones desarrollado por Jan Mukařovský, el crítico más importante del Círculo de Praga, a finales de los años treinta. Mukařovský expandió la Sprachtheorie de Karl Bühler (con las tres funciones Darstellung, presentación; Ausdruck, expresión; y Appell, apelación), al añadir una cuarta función, la estética, que destaca en un primer plano los componentes estructurales de la obra artística.

AUTHOR

ANDRÉS PÉREZ-SIMÓN

Andrés Pérez-Simón trabaja como profesor visitante de literatura española en Indiana University. Es doctor en Literatura Comparada por la Universidad de Toronto, donde antes completó también su Másters en la misma especialidad. En España escribió su primera tesis doctoral en el campo de la literatura inglesa, con un trabajo sobre el teatro de James Joyce y el capítulo “Circe” de su novela Ulysses. Completó estudios de Periodismo y de Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura Comparada en la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. En la actualidad, trabaja en la preparación de un manuscrito sobre teatro modernista europeo, con especial atención al corpus experimental de
Federico García Lorca. Además de su trabajo en el campo de los estudios teatrales, Pérez-Simón tiene especial interés en la traducción literaria y en la novela hispánica del periodo de entreguerras. Ha publicado artículos de investigación sobre Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel de Cervantes, Carlos Saura, Tom Stoppard y James Joyce, siempre desde una perspectiva comparativista.