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THE PHENOMENON OF THE VOICE IN THE LATEST RUSSIAN
DRAMA

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Abstract

The article explores the problem of functioning of the Voice (often detached from the character) in contemporary Russian drama. This ploy is associated with the phenomenon of grotesque cleavage of the character's consciousness, as well as subjective syncretism which is indicative of the dramaturgy of this period. The analysis was carried out on the materials from over twenty plays by different playwrights. The research revealed the scope and the characteristic features of the manifestation of the Voice (as a discourse of the 'grotesque character') such as: the submission of the subject of the utterance, the signs of switching into the realm of imagination and fantasy and, in particular into the sphere of metatheatral reflection. The study also brought to light the issue of the form of rhetorically expressed representation of the author's vision and the form or the method of (self) identification of the character and, thereupon, the reader/spectator. The phenomenon of the Voice gains (acquires) the most distinct and concurrently overt expression in fairy tale dramas, in plays with fictional, fantastic character as well as in dramatic texts with distinctively expressed metatheatral features (with autoreflexion). It also manifests itself in dramas in which the processes of personal (self) identification of the subject of utterance were employed as the subject matter.

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1. Introduction

The sound of the Voice (often detached from the character) appears to be a characteristic feature of Russian drama at the turn of the 21st century. The phenomenon concerns various styles and directions, works of multifarious playwrights, e.g. Kolyada (2019), Yablonskaya (2014), Stroganov (2019), Bogacheva and Utkina (2019) and others. It primarily applies to the plays which vividly present the grotesque fragmentation of the consciousness of the subject of speech. The analysis of voice manifestations allows us to identify new trends in the poetics of the utterance and concurrently in the processes of (self)identification of the character perceived as the presence of the Other in the character's utterance. The act (often the source) of reverberation of the sound of the voice expands the format of the play and the performative potential of the reader's/viewer's ideas regarding the resources of this theatrical phenomenon. I use the concept of performative potential in the understanding proposed by Krajewska (2017).

2. Problem Statement

The issue of the voice in contemporary dramatic texts is hardly scrutinized due to the lack of awareness that the voice can manifest itself outside the subject of utterance. The accumulation of cultural knowledge about the phenomenon of the voice, about the characteristics of its sound and perception, has allowed us to analyze how the category of voice manifests itself in the poetics of the play. In the analyzed plays the effect of the presence of voice is associated with the phenomenon of "the grotesque subject". Based on the researchers' observations on the phenomenon of the grotesque subject in the utterance we disclose the mechanisms of manifestations of the Other in the consciousness of the subject of speech as well as the implementation of the processes of crisis of the subject's identity. We would also investigate how the sound of the voice, and concurrently the silence, compensate the absence of the subject, or the idea of him.

3. Research Questions

The basis of the study constitute the observations on the manifestations of the splitting of the consciousness of "the grotesque character" in contemporary Russian drama in connection with the functioning of the phenomenon of the Voice in the poetics of the play.

The grotesque (subjective) neo-syncretism, according to literary scholars (Lagoda & Pavlov, 2011), enables us to discern the boundaries of the subjects' consciousness, the sphere of (self)identification and the mechanisms of its destruction. It also aids comprehension of the phenomenon of amalgamation of author's/character's and the reader's horizons as well as the forms of manifestation of the dramatic subject regarded as a carrier of multi-subjective utterance. The entrance of the researchers into the border zones of grotesque subjectivity analysis, for example, into the contact zone of the grotesque and fantastic in culture (Lavlinsky, 2015), or the way of perceiving in culture not only allows us to see the scope of functioning of this phenomenon in the poetics of the dramatic text, in artistic and critical interpretation, but also to analyze mutual interpenetrations of artistic spheres. It also regards the philosophical and humanitarian, anthropological, and theatrical approaches to the study of their manifestation.

Firstly, it is essential to name and denote the scope and the characteristics of the manifestation of the Voice (as the ‘grotesque character’s’ discourse), which are contingent on various theatrical and communicative strategies of the playwright as well as on the preferences of the dramatic text, in particular on the genre features of the play, its intent for children or adults. In contemporary Russian drama we can find the following ways of manifestation of the Voice within the text of a play:

– The Voice as a substitution of the grotesque character, often in a situation of distancing or generally the disappearance of the latter. Such a ploy serves as a sign of destruction of the mimesis, as an escape into the realm of imagination, fantasy, or fairy tale. Hence, it is not surprising that it is often used in dramatic fairy tales or in plays with a fabulous plot.

– The Voice as a conventional subject of narration, associated with the author’s vision and by virtue of it with the characters’ vision. The act of its reverberance serves as a catalyst for the processes occurring inside or outside the subject’s consciousness and possesses powerful performative potential.

– The Voice as a cleaved form of the character’s, and thereby, the reader’s/spectator’s (self) identification. In such cases, it determines the nature of the action in monodrama.

– The sound of the Voice contributes to the existential repletion of the space of the action. As such, it is incorporated within the sphere of metatheatrical reflection which allows us to make a conclusion about its active participation in the dramatic action and in the process of creating the picture of the world. The Voice not only resonates in the character’s utterance without being detached from him/her, but also as a separate speech flow determining the dramatic aspect of the action.

4. Purpose of the Study

In the dramatic texts I analyze the features of the manifestation of the voice understood as a semantically significant unit in the space of the subjective sphere of the character.

5. Research Methods

In the process of the analysis I relied on the anthropological and phenomenological approaches (methods) towards the functioning of the voice presented in the works of Dolar (2006), Sarrazak (2007), Jarzabek (2006), and others. The scrutiny of the functioning of the voice in the plays by contemporary Russian playwrights: Yablonskaya (2014), Kolyada (2019), Stroganov (2019), and others is based on the study of the grotesque subject and the grotesque syncretism in the works of the scholars of the structuralist and poststructuralist schools: Semenitskaya and Sinitskaya (2013), Lavlinsky (2015), Pavlov (2018), and others. Their approaches enabled the clarification of the possible principles of the study of the subjective organization of utterances in the text of the play.

6. Findings

It is quite common that the voice separated from the character reverberates in contemporary Russian plays written upon fairytale plots. A similar phenomenon can be noted in dramatic fairy tales and dramas with fabulous plots written by Anna Yablonskaya *Thumbelina and the Butterfly* (2014), Anna Bogacheva and Daria Utkina *We turn on the fantasy* (2019). On the grounds of the analyzed dramatic fairy tales a

conclusion can be drawn that in such plays the playwrights employ the effect of estrangement of the Voice from the fairy tale character whether it is a female Voice on the telephone or intercom or the Voice of an imaginary construct, created by the children's imagination i.e. the Voice of Catfly (in A. Bogacheva's and D. Utkina's fairy tale *We turn on the fantasy* (2019)). Frequently as one of the properties (manifestations) of the grotesque subject the authors use the illusion that the Voice loses its connection with the subject of the utterance. In the fairy tale by A. Yablonskaya *Thumbelina and the Butterfly* (2014), the Voice from the radio becomes the driving force of the dramatic action (or, as specified later, in one of the stage directions, it was the Voice of the Storyteller). Although it cannot be overtly named the Voice of the author, nevertheless, it undoubtedly conveys the author's vision, self-irony, and communicative strategies addressed towards the reader/spectator.

The Voice from the radio in spite of being reproduced from the recordings, it gives an impression of being a 'live' broadcast of direct spontaneous speech. We can trace the relation between the way in which the Voice is transmitted and the figure of the conventional Storyteller, so important in a literary fairy tale. It seems that the Voice 'enters' the action when important events need a commentary, an assessment, or the storyteller's direct impact on the reader.

Thus in the context of the forest news, the Voice narrates about the miraculous appearance of Thumbelina from the magic Elf's seed given to a childless Woman by a Witch. Thereby, when the Chafer abducts Thumbelina the mysterious Voice occurs and comments the events. It also happens when the Chafer realizes that he had made a mistake leaving Thumbelina alone. It can be noted that the Voice in A. Yablonskaya's fairy tale gives the possibility to present several of its material incarnations: the Storyteller-narrator, the Wizard (whose functions are often juxtaposed in literary fairy tales), and the character. It is also worth highlighting the ironic manner of expression of the Storyteller's Voice. In his replicas he often goes beyond the boundaries of the fairy tale world manifesting himself as an absolutely real narrator who feels cramped in the fairy tale space, who wants to break out of it and to fool around.

According to Sarrazak's (2007) observations regarding the role of the voice in creating the playwright's and the reader'/viewer's 'point of view' (p. 68), it is the sound of the Storyteller that maintains the unity (integrity) of the dramatic form of the play. The ironic intonation of the narrator's voice creates the didactic convention which conveys the modern perception of events determined by the plot.

A similar remark sounds in the scene when the Swallow carries Thumbelina away from the mouse hole and at that moment the readers/viewers do not know where she vanished:

THE VOICE Kingdom Writers Union announces that due to the disappearance of Thumbelina, the chief Storyteller again fell into depression and cannot finish the story ... (he switches over). (Yablonskaya, 2014, p. 610).

The interactive role of the Storyteller is also evident in the final stage direction then the Voice narrates about the festivities on the occasion of Thumbelina and Butterfly's wedding. The Voice ironically disconnects itself from the Storyteller in a way that it seems separated, spatially distant from the character. It can be assumed that the author's competence merges with the speech of the character. Thus the

conditional separation of the voice from the subject employed by Yablonskaya (2014) in her fairy tale play serves as an artistic ploy of interactive impact:

THE VOICE The Storyteller got out of depression and merrily celebrates in the palace. The Writers Union has not decided yet which is better: whether he joyfully celebrates or whether he suffers from depression. The work is on hold. The fairy tale is still unfinished. You have listened to the news of the Royal Forest. Stay tuned and do not switch the channel. (p. 612)

The Voice, conventionally separated from the fairy tale character, often appears or manifests itself in the play as an acoustic installation of the reader's ideas, as his/her self-identification.

Having analyzed a series of plays by Alexandr Stroganov *The Greatness of the Swing* (Stroganov, 2019), by Nikolay Kolyada *From Where – To Where – Why* (Kolyada, 2019) it is noteworthy to state that the phenomenon of the Voice functions in those plays as a full-fledged character. It usually occurs in a situation when the character is absent or when it abides in a different (virtual) dimension. As a rule, such a separation of the voice in the situation of cleavage of the grotesque character occurs in a sphere of metatheatrical reflection.

In A. Stroganov's plays (Stroganov, 2019), the stage action of the voices is submitted to the laws of theatrical performance in the author's vision. Four characters from the play *The Greatness of the Swing* manifest themselves as voices. In the first scene those are the Voice of an artist called Yuzhin, who is considered by his entourage possibly (supposedly) missing and the Voice of his young mistress Angelica. The silhouettes of the figures of these characters appear in the window of the house: "Only the outlines behind the dim glass. However, their voices are distinctively heard somewhere nearby" (Stroganov, 2019). These two voices can be heard in the palette of other sounds: the rustling of clothes, breathing, and the creaking of floorboards.

These voices deliberate about completely real and substantial phenomena as if their conversation was actually happening on the stage and their remarks regard the theatrical action. For example:

YUZHIN'S VOICE Wait, don't leave. Now Carl and Clara are to enter.

ANGELINA'S VOICE A popular couple of kleptomaniacs?

YUZHIN'S VOICE Yes (Stroganov, 2019).

After that, the voices announce that they can see Yuzhin himself, walking as if he was under Rogov's escort.

ANGELINA'S VOICE What is it? Look, your twin, Yuzhin. There is some big sturdy with him. Wow, he totally resembles you. Yuzhin, who is that?

YUZHIN'S VOICE He looks exactly like me. To be more precise, he is me, in person (Stroganov, 2019).

By virtue of this duality of the real and the theatrical-fictional (imaginary), a grotesque idea arises of who the characters really are and how the others perceive them (Lavlinsky, 2012). A virtual plan of the action in which the (self)identification of the hero occurs (primarily of the artist Yuzhin who exists in the boundary space) is indicated with a single metaphorical duplication: Yuzhin's alleged fellow soldier – Antoine de Saint Exupery appears. Apparently, the nature of the vision of the world through the Voice allows the playwright to build a series of associative links (chains) in a literary context. The issue of visual projections of the voice in the dramatic text is indicated in the article *Photographic image as a communicative resource in contemporary Russian drama* (Maliutina, 2020). The sound of voices in the play is not only a sign of appearance of a virtual plan, but it also violates its integrity. The reader's idea of the single integral plot is lost. The two action plans create separate scenarios linked by the voices.

In N. Kolyada's plays, the very sound of the Voice is imagined by the characters: by the mother who hears the voice of her deceased son (*Hopelessness*), or by the heroine (She) who heard on the phone several words pronounced by her deceased neighbour and former classmate (*From Where - To where – Why*). Such an application of the Voice acquires an imaginative ability to create a theatricalized picture of the world.

The Sound of the Voice (even imaginary) allows the reader's imagination to enact (according to all the laws of theatre) the emotional drama of a lonely, useless heroine. It also enables to fill the action with an existential plan of inner emotions.

In plays in which the Voice acts as a separate subject of utterance, the dramaturgy of subject-object relations is often built on the play of awareness of the absence of a genuine source of Voice.

The mechanical transmission of the Voice (via telephone, audiotape, and computer devices) helps us get closer to the nature of this phenomenon. The recorded Voice undoubtedly allows the reader/listener to visualize the plan of expression and formal features, often objectified in the plays. Sarah West (2006) indicated some features of the 'recorded' and mechanically reproduced voice in a number of plays and scripts by S. Beckett. For instance, in his play *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) (West, 2006) the recorded voice becomes tangible and acquires a visual aspect. Thus it turns into a material object, detached from the subject, supposedly issuing it. When a lonely old and sick character (Knapp) listens to his voice recorded thirty years earlier, the effect of the Other's presence is being created. The picture of the Other differs from Knapp's current image. The author uses a form of one-way dialogue with imaginary self which resembles a spatial communication between two different people (West, 2006).

In N. Kolyada's play *From where – to where – why* (2019) from the *Pretzel* series apart the main heroine Marina (She) among the characters there are various voices reverberating from the answering machine. In the opening stage direction the author presents the exposure situation of the play: the Heroine (She) shocked by the unexpected death of her former classmate is lying on her bed and listening to voices from the answering machine: "through the answering machine she is listening to her whole little world" (Kolyada, 2019). It can be noted that the author, whose attitude is largely conveyed in the introductory stage direction, already in that part of the text has set some characteristics. On the one hand, they represent the 'I' of the heroine (consisting of multiple voices), on the other, the phonosphere of the space of her apartment. Various voices and sounds constantly reverberate in Marina's apartment: Zina the cat screams and having heard her owner's voice, it falls asleep, the phone relentlessly rings, and the voices from the answering machine reverberate, and so on. Moreover, there is also a constant sound and noise in the

background (someone plays Uzbek music, the raindrops pound, voices of passers-by resonate in the air, etc.).

Marina's voice is represented with a multilayered structure. It concerns her speech, her conversations on the telephone and beyond it addressed to herself, sent in space (or to nobody), directed to specific recipients and to that unfamiliar Voice (conventionally indicated in her utterances as 'You') which is silent and only breathes into the telephone receiver.

It is important to mention that the silence fulfils an equally important role in the phonosphere of the play as the sound of voices. The silence discourse is marked with italics six times in the text of the play. Repeatedly the lexemes: 'silent' and 'silence' accompany the telephone calls. The silence interrupts Marina's statement, separates the statement about the situation (for example, about the loss of a ring and the fact that she was given exactly the same one at a funeral from an unknown old woman) from addressing to herself and to the recipient (to the silent Voice who only breathes into the telephone receiver). In the phonosphere of the play, the silence acquires the character of a symbolic sign indicating the space where meanings are formed. This space of silence can be defined as the possibility of physical manifestation of the Other through the voice (Vorontsova & Kopylova, 2017). Apparently, it is not accidental that after the moment of silence the character of utterance acquires an emphasized auto-referential tone: one can recognize the connection of all events with the internal state of the heroine who tried to renounce the world and herself.

The broadcast and the perception of voices by the heroine leads the reader/viewer to the understanding of the impossibility of dialogue in general, the impossibility of being heard by virtually anyone. The voices reverberating from the answering machine often arise on their own despite anybody's will. Furthermore, they are addressed to themselves, and they hardly differ in nature and content of statement. Therefore, the author labeled them: the Voice of the First, the Voice of the Second (familiar men), the Voice of the First, the Voice of the Second (familiar women). It is significant that the heroine in her utterances endows the answering machine with the qualities of a conditional subject of communication. The device is presented as a source responsible for reverberating, i.e. live voice, symbolically representing an existential entity: "You are my answering machine. You are my automatic answering machine. You came to call me to answer, right?" (Kolada, online). The answering machine (the Heroine's only subject of communication) is endowed with substantial characteristics which support the status of a social organization in Marina's mind. The subjective definiteness of the answering machine is emphasized in the author's stage remarks which announce that the device peeped, clicked, squeaked, activated, blinked with a light, etc.

The voice of Yana, Marina's recently deceased school friend, sounds twice from the answering machine: when Yana was alive she made a request to communicate and to meet with the heroine, and then (after Yana's death) the voice says: "Al right. Bye Marina". It remains unclear: either in Marina's ill imagination the sounding voices produced the effect of reconstruction of what she previously heard, or the Voice is a projection of the heroine's inner state (her inner voice). As a result of the analysis of the phonosphere of the play it is possible to form an outlook regarding the phenomenon of subjective syncretism. According to some researchers (Ageeva, 2016; Pavlov, 2018), this phenomenon is characteristic of modern monodrama. The boundary between the horizons of real and possible subjects of

utterance disappears. Amongst those subjects there are Marina's potential interlocutors whom the heroine addresses on the phone, the sounding Voices which are somehow connected with Marina's various acquaintances, Yana's voice recorded when she was alive and also resonating after her death, silent and hoarsely breathing Voices in the telephone receiver, etc. All of them are associated with the sphere of the characters and the Author's voice in the stage directions. Such subjective syncretism also makes it possible to reveal the hero's attitude towards himself as to the Other, to discover the Other in his utterance (Lagoda & Pavlov, 2011). The voices that sound in the play allow us to comprehend the diversity of manifestations of the Other in the semantic zone of the subject sphere. This greatly expands the possibilities of representing the grotesque cleavage of the character's consciousness, the separation of the voices from the subject, and relatively speaking, their self-referential manifestation.

In multiple contemporary plays the character is endowed with the voice which functions as a manifestation of his/her individuality. That is, the voice determines the identity of the character's inner space.

The play *BiFem* by Petrushevskaya (2012) is a striking example of such a phenomenon. The head of the daughter (Fem), transplanted to the body of her mother (Bi) seems not to have a body of its own and, in consequence, its proper voice. Nevertheless, the head talks and its voice makes up for the lack of its own body.

For Fem, who had existed for the entire year solely as the head, artificially supported by doctors, the world around her took the form of voices. Merkotun (2013) has noted "the metaphysical dimension of this situation" (pp. 33-35). Later, she would recall that a 'female voice' had never approached her. She could hear the voice of the doctor Colin, his assistants, and the voice of her mother. However, she was deprived of her own voice.

In the space of the apartment, in which the mother and the daughter (BiFem) exist as one body, some TV men appear. They are shooting a program and all their actions are conveyed by the sound of the voice which is imparted with the function of narrating the situation. The voice of the director, just as the voice from the Dynamics, related the incident thereby acting as a narrator and a commentator of the events. Furthermore, the voice of the invisible director constantly 'fights its way' through the technical interference of faulty equipment, thereby the effect of the grotesque alienation of human consciousness is enhanced. The sound of the Director's Voice, hardly distinguishable due to technical malfunctions, can be perceived as the presence of the reader's/viewer's generalized perception. It exists outside the mother's and daughter's stage space. However, their dialogue is included (incorporated) in the context of such a perception. A similar technique also aids to organize the stage action, allowing to merge the past and present events in a single experience. This ploy activates the performative potential of the action, prompting the recipient to 'complete' in his/her perception the missing pieces of interaction.

7. Conclusion

The analysis which was carried out makes it possible to assert that most often the contemporary Russian playwrights employ the sound of the Voice (conventionally separated from the character) in plays of a fairy tale and fantastic character as well as in plays with distinct and explicit metatheatrical references. The manifestations of the phenomenon of the Voice are used to ensure existential filling of the action with

the presence of the subject in a situation when the problem of (self)identification of the character is themed in the plot of the play. In such plays, the logo-centrism of speech manifests itself even in the cases when those plays are not defined by the author as a monodrama. What is more, the external form of dialogue of several subjects of the utterance is preserved. The constitutive effect of the utterance, the conditional subject of which is the Voice, emerges in the attempt of grotesque cleavage of the character's consciousness with which the Voice is associated. As a result, the communicative situation in the play is being transformed at all levels as a project of co-existence in space and time.

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