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Reportage

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Reportage is one of the oldest techniques used in drama. In the millenia of the history of drama, epochs can be found where the use of this technique gained a certain prominence and the application of reportage became an inseparable part of numerous types of plot constructions. In general, it is any character (or character type) that may bring some news to the play and take advantage of reportage. When we are to consider characters whose primary role in any play is to report, we, for the most part, encounter a messenger (or an equivalent).

A messenger and his or her appearance in a play may easily become a target of criticism for lack of dramatic invention on the playwright's part. This is due to there being a certain amount of the "deus ex machina" quality in the presence of a character that brings news which then changes the course of the plot development in an important, often substantial way. Indeed, the arrival of a messenger who makes use of reportage, brings new information to the play's other characters (and, usually, to the audience, too), thus shifting the perspective on previous actions and setting a new course of development. What is problematic from a critic's point of view is that the information conveyed in reportage does not always follow on from the logic of the action. The development of the plot is not created by a character's deed (acted in gestures, delivered in a dramatic dialogue, resolved in a soliloquy) but a non-dramatic speech.

Reportage is storytelling, it is not "dramatic" in the literal sense. Still, it is a very effective technique in drama, as it brings information to the story and the theatre stage. For this reason, it has been an almost indispensable tool applied in various epochs and genres. An illustration of this claim are the three representative plays, which have been presented earlier: *Oedipus the King*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Glass Menagerie*.

On the other hand, there were eras where reportage was used only marginally or not at all for various reasons. As reportage, which has been noted above, thrives in the communicative function (reference to events, etc., which are not present on the stage), it follows that its use has not been as wide in those eras and styles where characters' actions are primarily put forward by their dramatic speeches, that is to say, where speaking is acting. Such a general claim may be especially made of such dramatic genres as

psychological drama or, even more recently, “kitchen drama” where the majority of the motivation for the characters’ actions spreads from what is delivered in the dramatic dialogue which draws upon the melodramatic plot based on the relationship between the characters. That is not to say, of course, that there is no room for reportage in this type of drama, the point is that reportage is not a principal action-pushing force.

Reportage has been linked to the character of the messenger in the history of drama as the most common bearer of the informative function. The messenger can even be identified as a specific character type for whom it is typical to lack a name. Due to the convention of this role, it is sufficient to call such a character a messenger as it in itself is a meaningful sign. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the messenger fulfils the following role: he or she comes, delivers the news, and leaves.

A proper messenger’s delivery causes a radical change in the course of the development of the storyline. This way, his news – of which, for the most part, is usually in the form of reportage – enters into the dramatic dialogue with other characters who understand the information as a certain type of action in respect to the dramatic plot. However, it is not the messenger’s role to deliver the news in the style of the dramatic dialogue. Information is usually in the narrative form (storytelling) rather than dramatic one (action through speech).

Besides, the messenger rarely has an opportunity to participate in a full dramatic dialogue, as it is a convention that being his or her news good, the messenger happily exits, while being his or her news bad, the messenger exits nonetheless – in flee of horror, as the receiver’s courtesy, or with his feet first. It is also in this sense that the Messenger’s remark: “The nature of bad news infects the teller” (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.2) may be understood, and which is consciously drawn upon in the play²⁵. It is understood that the messenger is not the only character in a play that delivers news. Practically any dramatic character (both main and episodic) as well as other no-name characters may fulfil the mediating function and use the technique of reportage.

The account of the technique of reportage will be limited by the following definition, which will help to create an account of it from the functional perspective. Let it be defined for the purpose of this book that *reportage conveys information which regards events and/or facts about a fictional world of a play or an actual world related to a context of a play, and comes from outside the stage frame*. The source of the information conveyed by reportage can thus lie in the fictional world of the play and be its part. In this case, reportage makes it possible to implement various features such as characters, events, and facts into a drama through other means than the dramatic dialogue and without the need to look for a suitable dramatic or theatrical representation. When reportage is applied, spatial and temporal limitations no longer apply. In other words, reportage allows the fictional world of a play to expand immensely. It is one of the techniques which bring new elements of the system of signs in a play on to the stage.

25) Yet, one may argue that the identification of a bearer of the news (the messenger or the mediator) with the news itself is rather a cultural/historical phenomenon than a dramatic device; and it is this cultural knowledge that the play alludes to rather than a dramatic convention. On the other hand, drama is the mirror of culture and from this perspective, deaths of messengers bringing bad news are not unexceptional.

The source can also be in the actual world, which creates the cultural/historical context of a play. Such is often the case of what may be labelled as “historical” or “political” drama. This label does not necessarily mean that a play is activist, that is to say, that its purpose is to change the audience’s view of historical events or the political situation, and result in action on the audience’s part. Quite to the contrary, and especially in the case of the dramas by Frayn, Stoppard and Wilson, reportage on events etc., from the actual world context of the play is addressed to the audience rather than characters.

It is in the very nature of theatre to play out dramatic texts with direct or indirect references to the contemporaneous context. To a great extent, comedy and comical effect lies in this feature of theatre. Theatre often refers to the actual²⁶ context in a performance, and, according to some, it is nigh on impossible for the theatre not to. For example, it was common for Shakespeare to refer to his audience’s actual world: “The plays can also awaken images of the off-stage space in which members of an audience lead their various and often unremarkable lives” (Brown 186). Although it is now, after several centuries, often difficult to trace back to what exactly Shakespeare was referring, what is true about his plays performed during his lifetime still holds for present-day audiences of Shakespeare’s plays.

A play can then engage with the social, moral, and political forces that actually, in real life, control how its audience lives. By reaching out from the stage into the audience’s own environment in these ways, a theatrical event can participate in the on-going processes of life. (Brown 187; for a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon in relation to Shakespeare, see 180-96)

The topic of reportage is often approached through the prism of language. Reportage has a different form than a dialogue. Its function differs, too. Therefore, to say that reportage operates as an intrusion of a non-dramatic linguistic form into a dramatic text, is in agreement with the basic differentiation of genres, more specifically of their prevalent modes of presentation. The difference was first expressed by Aristotle. Elam summarizes Aristotle’s view thus: “The distinction is, indeed, implicit in Aristotle’s differentiation of representational modes, namely *diegesis* (narrative description)[...] versus *mimesis* (direct imagination)” (100). Both modes serve to tell a story while the former does so through narrative and the latter by acting.

Pfister does not study reportage at large, but he pays attention to it in the passages where he either studies the coexistence of the two aforementioned modes, on the stage and speaks about the difference between monologue and dialogue, or where he discusses the exposition in detail. From a linguistic point of view, reportage often has such a form and content that it fulfils the informative function of language. However, the transfer of information is a complex phenomenon in a play. Pfister thus calls such instances “structures of epic communication” which include “a mediating communica-

26) The term “actual” in this context is used solely in the meaning of “the world of actuality”, i.e. the world we live in; it should not be confused with the structuralist term *aktualisace* (often translated as “foregrounding”) which expresses the quality of a text to make-strange, and thus present itself as a work of art.

tion system” (76). This view reminds us of Mukařovský’s understanding of the language functions as a hierarchy and coexistence of several functions at once, where there is one dominant function guiding the discourse. In this case, the dominant function of the dramatic language is the aesthetic function. Reportage performs the referential function, but it is subordinated to the main aesthetic function of the whole play, and the dramatic discourse as such. Pfister confirms: “The referential function dominates strongly in the conventional forms of dramatic report such as the expository narrative [...], the messenger’s report [...] and teichoscopy [...]” (106). Further, Pfister considers characters (“figures”) that deliver (“mediate”) information and the context of this information to other characters. He states that such communication “is created by figures situated inside rather than outside the dramatic action” (76). In the wording of the Prague School structuralists, an informative speech (a reportage) with its informative function takes place within the frame of aesthetic discourse.

Formally, two main forms may be distinguished as present in a dramatic text on the level of the main text²⁷. They are dialogue and monologue. It is worth noting at this point that reportage may take the form of both dialogue and monologue. The preference for the form of reportage is rather a matter of the dominant convention rather than that of the intrinsic quality of the technique. Thus, dialogue (or, rather, a duologue) and monologue are equally used as the form of reportage in classical drama, while monological – narrative epic – passages are quite often employed in the present, especially when modern communication technologies and media are used in a play (a newspaper, radio, TV – it is impossible for these media to partake in an active dramatic dialogue). Here, Mukařovský’s observation from his essay serves well to distinguish between what can be understood as the monological narrative within a dominant dialogical structure of a play. Mukařovský explains that at least two contexts must intertwine in a dialogue (the context of the speech which is the interaction of the dialogue’s participants, i.e. the “here and now” in the utterances, and the context of the subject matter which is currently discussed). A monological speech has one uninterrupted context (see Mukařovský, “Dialogue and Monologue” 86-8). In the context of a dramatic text, these are the passages when the narrative is not interrupted by the context of a specific situation in a play²⁸. Mukařovský further explains: “Monologue can [...] narrate events severed from the actual situation by a temporal distance (in literature, the narrative)” (“On Stage Dialogue” 113). In the case of narrative on the stage, what holds for a dialogue holds for an on stage monologue, too. That is, “to all the direct participants of the dialogue is added another participant, silent but important” (113), the audience.

27) The term “main text” here refers to characters’ speeches, i.e. that part of a dramatic text which is intended to be articulated. It is a direct translation of Roman Ingarden’s term *Haupttext*. It is worth noting that the counterpart to *Haupttext* is, in Ingarden’s terms again, *Nebentext* (a possible translation: “auxiliary text”), which is that part of a dramatic text which is not intended to be articulated, such as characters’ names introducing each speech, stage directions, and acts/scenes markers. For a concise overview of the *Haupttext-Nebentext* relationship, see Aston and Savona 51-9.

28) Let me stress that interruptions such as “really”, “what next?”, “wow” etc. are not dialogical from this point of view as they do not bring a second context to the monologically delivered narrative.

In addition, it is important to distinguish between the two levels on which reportage can enter a play. They are either from within (internal) or from the outside (external) of the action, thus not necessarily following on from the development of the plot to that point. In the context of the communication of information, Pfister comments: “In the history of drama, the external and internal variants have generally been roughly equal in importance as far as the prologues and epilogues are concerned” (78). We can see that Pfister sees the “structures of epic communication” as best explainable using the example of exposition – which has two meanings. He distinguishes between exposition in the classical Aristotelian sense of the word and the “expository function” in a drama. Pfister explains:

What we understand as the transmission of information at the beginning of a play largely coincides with the classical theoretical concept of the exposition [...]. If, however, we define exposition as the transmission of information to do with the events and situations from the past that determine the dramatic present, then it becomes immediately clear that, on the other hand, exposition is not restricted to the introductory phases of the text and, on the other hand, the transmission of information in the initial phase of the text is not necessarily confined to serving some sort of expository function. (86)

In this sense, what Pfister generally calls an expository function in this context may be more or less applied to reportage on this level, as they both may be looked at as “transmissions of information”. Yet, they are not identical, as not all expositions necessarily have the form of reportage or even include reportage (still, reportage is often a convenient part of exposition in the classical sense and often has the “expository function” in this sense).

The fact that reportage often has the referential function referring to *events and/or facts about a fictional world of a play or the actual world*, as proposed above, it participates in the world-making process. Through its reference, both fictional and actual entities enter the world of the play, thus enlarging it. “It is sufficient for the referent to exist as what is commonly called an *object of discourse*” (Elam 136). Once such an object of discourse is created through speech, it is a valid and undeniable part of the fictional world of a play: “It is clear that the universe of discourse is more extensive than the dramatic world as such, as constructed by the spectator [...] Whatever the speaker refers to or ostends, including himself and his context, *is*, unless we learn otherwise” (137). Reportage does not necessarily have the form of speech only – as utterances suffer from a certain degree of informational and referential “incompleteness” (129). In such cases, “the role of gesture is often crucial” (129). Even in the case of reportage, a gesture can be worth a thousand words.

