

# Types of Transsemantic Constructions in the Russian Director's Theatre of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## ABSTRACT

The article deals with the study of cognitive models that in the context of dramatic art take the form of transsemantic constructions and connect visual and mental spaces of the performance. As follows from the analysis of the performances by famous Russian directors such as Yu. Butusov, A. Moguchiy, D. Krymov, K. Bogomolov, I. Sakaev and others, four types of sense constructions are identified in the direction of mythmaking and performativity. The allegoric and pseudo-allegoric types (Myth I and Performance I) transfer theatrical signs into metalinguistic metaphors and idiomatic expressions and facilitate the transformation of metatext into a mental image. The mysterial and pseudo-mysterial types (Myth II and Performance II) cover the transformation sphere of an immanent mental image into a conceptual symbol that becomes the axis of projection between metaphoric and mythical concepts. The identified constructions help to distinguish the dominant aesthetics of a theatrical performance – metaphorical (poetic), postdramatic and postmodern.

**Keywords:** *transsemantic constructions, theatre aesthetics, Russian director's theatre, mythmaking, performativity*

## I. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the new century, common directors' strivings for postmodern and postdramatic aesthetics were clearly defined in Russian dramatic art. The fusion of sense constructing forms and experience of the embodiment of mental images of a symbolic nature by non-verbal scenic means indicate the need to search for new methods of stage action analysis. The research subject of the article are transsemantic constructions which mean a form of sense transmitting between the formal and mental spheres of perception in order to identify the aesthetic level of the performance. Scientific novelty is due to the study of the mental sphere of the theatre and the inclusion of the linguo-cognitive aspect in the theatre studies base. From this perspective, the theatrical action is considered through the prism of semantic spaces integration and the conceptualization of stage images based on signs, metaphors and symbols. The starting point is the determination of a dichotomous nature in director's works what implies the development of sense in the performance both in the direction of mythmaking and in the direction of performativity.

Transsemantic constructions alternately connect formal, semantic and mental levels of perception that are identical to the domain of form embodiments, to the domain of meaning manifestation and to the domain of

sense projection. The sense transmitting in the direction of mythmaking is organized in two ways: allegoric and mysterial. In the direction of performativity, their antitheses are pseudo-allegoric and pseudo-mysterial methods of construction. Therefore, these are four types of constructions. *The construction of the allegoric type* (Myth I) as well as *the construction of pseudo-allegoric type* (Performance I) provide a transition of dramatic signs (iconic, indexal and conventional-symbolic) into metalinguistic metaphors, metonyms and phraseological units contributing to the transformation of director's metatext into a mental image. *The construction of the mysterial type* (Myth II) and *the construction of the pseudo-mysterial type* (Performance II) covers the sphere of immanent mental image transformation into a conceptual symbol that becomes an axis of the projection between metaphoric and mythical concepts.

## II. MYTH I AND MYTH II CONSTRUCTIONS

In the process of perception of mythmaking type constructions, the spectator first comprehends the stage action in the words translating in mind visual actions into metaphoric concepts. At the same time typical expressions such as 'the death reaps', 'he wildfire of passion', 'paralyzed with fear' etc. play an important role. This contributes to the logical semantic interaction of metalinguistic denotations and their further

transformation into a mental image. Under certain conditions, the allegoric construction is able to pass into a mysterial one. In this case, the immanent mental image gains the function of a symbol and becomes the axis of projection of metaphorical concepts into mythical concepts transforming visual objects into symbols. The symbolic image in the performance can be creatively understood only as an action imbued with sense, like a planted grain that germinates at the same time up and down: as an empirical experience structured in metaphoric concepts and a metaphysical experience presented in mythical concepts. It should be noted that mythical concepts are projections into the extra linguistic mental sphere and they exist more organically at the visual level in the form of graphic images (known modifications of a circle, triangles, spiral lines, crosses, etc.). Based exceptionally on dramatic semantic and ritual actions, mythical concepts imply the possibility of a creative understanding of transcendent symbols through the plastic visualization of their action. They can be expressed in the language by the words ‘cycle’, ‘hierarchy’, ‘container’, ‘equilibrium’ and are artistic models of the laws of nature cognizable through art.

Myth I can be characterized as *the comprehending of the inner human nature (a soul) through visual personification and reflection of recognizable things in the language and phenomena of outer nature*, often identified with elements. Fire, water (in all states), earth and air are among the most widespread constituent elements of paradigm metaphors that are embodied on the stage by artistic dramatic means. As for mythmaking, Myth II is characterized as *the comprehending of the external Divinity (universe) through the visual embodiment of the inner states of a soul*. From this point of view, postdramatic theatre is a ‘theatre of states’ as German professor H.-T. Lehmann claims in his work [1]. However, it should be clarified that these are not sensory-emotional states but spiritual ones; their demonstration is laid in the script of the pro-image transformation that the actor imitates. It can be added that such characters as Hamlet, Othello, Desdemona, Faust, Medea, Richard, Lear or Khlestakov are personified states of a soul conveying in a postdramatic aspect of theatre the process of sacred transition in order to identify a demonic or divine order.

The action in the construction of the mysterial type using the terms of the French philosopher G. Deleuze activates metaphysics by dramatizing the Ideas [2] as in the performances *Medeamaterial* (2001) by A. Vasilyev or *Othello* (2001) by E. Nekrosius. However, more often, the stage action stays within the bounds of the allegoric type of the sense constructing and this kind of theatre is known as a poetical or metaphorical theatre. From the point of view of gradual theatre development of instruments for mysterial sense construction, postdramatic theatre can be considered an avant-garde

form in relation to drama but still an intermediary experimental form that has not yet separated as an individual art form.

Work of director Yu. Butusov<sup>1</sup> can be described as avant-garde but with the predominance of poetic images (metaphors) over metaphysical images (symbols). In his performances *Richard III* (2004) and *King Lear* (2006) Butusov demonstrates the skill of metatext embodiment – language metaphors and phraseological units that develop into metaphoric concepts. Some objects such as a three-legged throne in *Richard* or a table-platform and white cloth in *Lear* are able to project the sense from an allegoric level to a mysterial one creating a script of metaphysical image transformation. In Chekhov’s *Seagull* (2013) the director fragmentally masters the aesthetics of a dream and through the series of repeated scenes acted with different shades of meaning discloses an unknown layer of human relationships stimulating imagination of the audience. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that the way of post dramatic mythmaking based on language thinking can also include “dream thinking”.

The production *Salome*<sup>2</sup> by I. Sakaev (2013) can be an example of experimental transition from drama aesthetics to aesthetics of the postdramatic performance with an appeal to “dream thinking” (symbolic thinking). The image of Iokanaan is interpreted as a metaphysical transformation in Oscar Wilde’s soul (performed by one actor – Yu. Kotov) that occurred with the writer during the imprisonment because of a notorious charge. Not disturbing the integrity of the plot, the action in the performance imitates the dream creating the alternative reality through the interaction of characters with acting area. Semantic meanings include light moon glades, narrow corridors of power built on the stage, the depicting of death angels at the gates (in the manner of A. Beardsley) on a light back cloth that became a cover in the famous Herodias’ daughter’s dance, endlessly extending blood-red cloth of death enlacing the characters, their white faces and hands in black gloves. Salome’s (M. Bagolet) hypnotizing hair, her screams used with effects like physical punches, hand passes as if tightening a stranglehold on Iokanaan emphasize Wilde’s struggle and sufferings, imitating in his vision martyrdom of a prophet. Wilde’s sacred transformation ends with Iokanaan’s death and his posthumous attainment of love but not for God. Visually the prophet’s body finds itself upside down in relation to the spectator and slips down in order to rise to the stage in the appearance of the imprisoned Wilde. The mental pattern of the image transformation demonstrates the death of a divine spark that made a void in writer’s heart evincing a negative scenario. The performance is

<sup>1</sup> Butusov’s mentioned performances were staged at Satyricon Theatre n.a. A. Raikin (Moscow).

<sup>2</sup> State Drama Theatre (Nizhniy Novgorod).

characterized by the permanence of meaningful images in a gist of scenic ritual that speaks for the transitional nature of the production.

In *Oedipus the King*<sup>3</sup> (2018) by R. Tuminas the mental image of the Fate is visually embodied (vaguely resembling the famous stage curtain in *Hamlet* by Yu. Lubimov) in the form of a gigantic devilish running roller bearing down from the upstage on the characters and throwing out steam. The inalterably horizontal image of a running roller resembling a fallen tower excludes at the mental level a connection between Oedipus (V. Dobronravov) and the higher aspect of being. This distinguishes it from the eponymous performance by V. Gassman<sup>4</sup> where the transformation of Oedipus's loss and attainment of a vertical divine connection was demonstrated. Neither the black-winged Maiden (E. Simonova) nor the white-winged Jocasta (L. Maksakova) passively opposed to each other as a conventional symbol of ambivalence of first principles in Tuminas's performance do not embody in their semantic actions the mythical concept of events and do not reflect the process of sacred transformation of the image. This indicates that in traditional dramatic performances full of indexal signs the director can master more or less new instruments – iconic and conventional-symbolic signs of poetic theatre developing in the direction of mythmaking.

### III. PERFORMANCE II CONSTRUCTION

The performative construction of pseudo-mysterical type has a completely special strategic direction. It represents rather a form of communication with spectators; it aims at awakening of creative imagination (inheriting Vs. Meyerhold's idea). The stage action resembles a discrete form of a dream as a rule inspired by works of authorship as it is clearly demonstrated in works of acknowledged artists of surreal landscapes and metamorphoses R. Wilson and Ph. Genty's. The structure of the collage is not only the main feature and justified principle of organizing the formal level of performance-dream language but the main instrument for destroying the dramatic logic of semantic constructing.

Performance II can be described as *an artistic reflection of destructive mental states of society (a collective soul) comprehended or not comprehended by the spectator through suggestive perception of abstract images and symbolic scenarios of transformation*. The director working in this aesthetic direction purposefully refuses to state the sense allowing the spectator to find his or her own interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> The Vakhtangov State Drama Theatre (Moscow), on a play by Sophocles.

<sup>4</sup> It means Gassman's *Oedipus the King* (1998) by Sophocles, Teatro glassico e moderno (Milan).

The stage impersonation of a number of scripts based on a work of authorship appears as a series of director's free associations and imagination that in turn are a projection of internal states of an abstract person. The conceptual symbol is the combined image of the soul that combines the inner world of the character, the actor and the spectator into a common conceptual space of Jungian 'collective unconscious' with its fertile matter for cognitive-psychological analysis.

In contrast to the strategy of mythmaking based on metaphoric concepts, visual embodiment of internal states in Performance II can be understood mainly through mental schemes of space transformation in which a character (or characters) find expression as a subjective projection of phobias, neuroses, mental problems of modern humanity. It is carried out with different emotional levels in performances *Hamlet. Dreams* (2002) by A. Zholdak and *Hamlet/Collage* (2014) by R. Lepage. In this context, the spectator becomes the creator of his or her own language myth guided by his or her empirical and metaphysical experience and showing to different extent the ability to think in symbols.

The French philosopher J.-F. Lyotard in his article *Note on the Meaning of 'Post'* [3] unequivocally compares art-historical analysis with the process of psychoanalytic therapy believing that the study of visual plastic arts can reveal the secret of life purpose and diseases of society. The cognitive analysis of performances-dreams contributes to the process of self-knowledge that according to cognitive psychologists actively 'proceed at two levels – conscious and unconscious' [4], the latter ranks high among the theory of art as a factor of artistic creation.

The aesthetics of Performance II is characteristic of the directorial work of A. Moguchiy<sup>5</sup> whose avant-garde performances the Russian theatre expert N. Pesochinskiy calls 'unpredictable metamorphoses' similar to a dream. In theatrical interpretation of *The Three Fat Men* by Yu. Olesha *Episode I: Uprising* (2019) the director achieves numerous reminiscence effects: to the science-fiction series *Star Wars* and to *Harry Potter*, to the famous performance of Tovstonogov Bolshoi Drama Theater *Oscar and the Lady in Pink*, to S. Dali with his melting watch and other phantasm. It turns the performance into a collage full of cosmic, circus and fairy-tale space.

Containing many reflections the performance appeals to the spectators' imagination as if it offers to elicit such image similarities as planets – people, people – animals, the maiden with a scythe – the death, the maiden with a scythe – a government official. There is a persistent feeling that the whole kaleidoscope of

<sup>5</sup> Moguchiy's mentioned performances were staged at Tovstonogov Bolshoi Drama Theater (St-Peterburg)

events and characters unfolds in the mind of Gaspar Arneri (A. Ronis) who in his scenic dream becomes the center of galaxy and the axis of inversion of cosmic and terrestrial phenomena allowing the invisible things to turn into visible ones. At the same time, it is possible to assert that the complex of human problems, phobias, vices and mental states is reflected in Gaspar's sick head (it has a bloodied bandage on).

In the performance *Alice* (2014) A. Moguchiy arranges the stage action in a form of visual embodiment of the inside-out inner world of Alice (A. Freindlich) in whose memory famous characters of Lewis Carroll's fairy tale paradoxically intermingle with Alice's memories and with actress's memories. The spectators feel free to project the visual events of portrayal subordinate to the collage technique of otherness into the sphere of their own consciousness in order to split their minds and to wander with the character through the labyrinths of associative images, to keep on the course or to find themselves on the line between reality and dream, to comprehend the mental schemes of space transformation as a dialogue with themselves and to gain experience of self-understanding in the close.

The performance by D. Krymov *Seryozha*<sup>6</sup> (2018) can also be characterized as wandering through the labyrinths of dreams. It represents a series of surreal scenes inspired by L. Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*. The collage structure of events characteristic for the direction of performativity runs through the novel, reflects Anna's inner world like through the prism of someone's memories. Time and space are unpredictably transformed: on the windows-sketch boards of a stylized carriage, summer landscapes are replaced in the twinkle of an eye by autumn and winter ones. The snow bursts into the compartment as if through a gap broken in a ship, bestrews the floor on which Anna (M. Smolnikova) literally and metaphorically leaves traces.

In Krymov's production, the visual actions of characters suddenly create semantic denotations at a linguistic level in the form of metatext. Anna's falling on the slippery inclined surface of the stage is perceived ambiguously. The love for Vronsky at the time of meeting germinates in Anna like a child. When she accidentally breaks the lantern, the light goes out for everyone including the audience.

The real world of Anna and Seryozha is reflected only in memories. Beyond the reality the son is a doll, the husband is a horned deer with a sleigh bell, even Vronsky (A. Khorinyak) and his mother are model forms that can be carried backstage. Karenin (A. Bely) either saws or drills during a conversation with his wife; he practically blows off steam out of his ears and hits Anna with a long narrow table on wheels. In this

unreal world, all things through Vronsky's efforts gain a different order and even he turns upside down. Anna's housedress is replaced by an extravagant bright dress in which folds she disappears taken to pieces. The transformation of the image ends with a new round of memories, endlessly long like an umbilical cord of a child born by Anna. The umbilical cord enlaces and connects all characters into one big yarn that resembles the ball of thread that Vronskaya and Anna began to unreel in the train compartment.

It should be noted that in contrast to performances *Shakespeare's Sonnets* and *Pushkin's Fairy Tales* by R. Wilson or to A. Zholdak's production *Hamlet. Dreams* fantastically based on author's plot, scenes-dreams in the performances *Alice* by A. Moguchiy and *Seryozha* by D. Krymov are not separated from each other by darkening but quietly flow into one another as if changing the angle from one fragment of human study to another. Plastic materialization of language expressions and recognizable mental schemes of space transformation contribute to the perception of sense at the mental level of the language (in the sphere of meaning demonstration) weakening the perception of abstract rituality. In addition, actors in Russian productions enliven soliloquies with seamless dramatic intonation as if colliding with the aesthetics of postdramatism.

Thus, it can be concluded that in the same performance the interaction of opposite directions – mythmaking and performativity – can be carried out in different proportions, where mythmaking refers to the allegoric type of sense construction and performativity – to pseudo-mysterical.

#### IV. PERFORMANCE I CONSTRUCTION

The performative construction of pseudo-allegoric type reduces the empirical aspect of language thinking. The denial of sense, the purpose of collage and provocativeness strategically serve to create cognitive dissonance. It is in this type of construction that a transgressive connotation of creativity appears that according to S. Shlykova is mainly concentrated, 'in deconstructing of Christological aspect in displacement of aspects from sacred to profane, in the inversion of image embodiment of female nature' [5]. The main instrument of sense reconstruction is the principle of replacing denotations by replacing linguistic units in diachronic aspect i. e. signs in context. In the performance not the object itself but its function is visually replaced.

In the performance *Rules for Good Manners in the Modern World*<sup>7</sup> (2017) by S. Rocket, the director wittily represents the process of a child delivery as an

<sup>6</sup> The Chekhov Moscow Art Theatre (Moscow)

<sup>7</sup> The Slonov State Drama Theatre (Saratov), on a play by J.-L. Lagarce

acrobatic scene when the husband (D. Krivosov) shakes the baby out of his wife's body as if he shakes out dust from a bedcover. At the linguistic mental level, the baby is identified with the dust and the delivery – with a cleaning from dirt. The image of Motherland is also very wittily represented in the performance *Opus № 7<sup>8</sup>* (2008) by D. Krymov in the form of a giant doll with recognizable Stalin's features. The doll pins its hero Shostakovich (A. Sinyakina) on a medal and this action reduces the sacred meaning of Motherland to a murder at the mental linguistic level. Thus, the context that seems original at first sight reckons on the deep sense of things destroying their idea by creating negative conceptual metaphors.

In K. Bogomolov's performances<sup>9</sup>, one can find a wealth of material for studying the decoding technique. For example, in the performance *The Karamazovs* (2013) the sacrament of the way of death and the sacrament of life were profaned through a coffin–sun tanning bed and a prayer–hit and through birth–brewing and gravestones–water closets. In another Bogomolov's performance *Wolves and Sheep* (2009) based on the play by A. Ostrovsky Murzavetskaya (R. Khairullina) prays in front of an icon replaced by a chair hung up on the wall neutralizing the sacred meaning of a prayer. In *An Ideal Husband* (2013) compiled of O. Wilde's works Bogomolov enriches the action with quotations from Shakespeare, Pushkin, Goethe and Chekhov intermixed with vulgar hits. As a result of eclecticism, a new context changes not only the perception of characters turning the images of admired heroes into ugly fakes but also misinterprets the author's plan which is important from the psychoanalytical point of view.

In search of the psychological laws of the art impact on the human, the Russian scientist L. Vygotsky [6] found that interruption of words and thoughts conjunction, i. e. combination and selection of language units causes the destruction of the work form. In addition, the famous art critic Yu. Lotman emphasizes the destruction of memory, deleting of texts, neglecting of connections as a sign of culture destruction [7]. Vulgarity and coarse language get into classic texts and this inevitably leads to the destruction of author's context turning great ideas into the artistic garbage. From the point of view of aesthetic categories *the beautiful* in dramatic art can give experience of supreme knowledge and light, facilitate the spiritual growth of the human, clear and renew human's consciousness, intensify and expand human's ideals [8], while *the ugly* fills spectators' consciousness with garbage cutting off the possible ways of thoughts

development and facilitates to the spiritual degradation of humanity.

Performance I can be characterized as *an artistic destruction of intellectual foundation (sphere of concepts) through transgressive destruction of the form of works and mental codes of the language*. Developing theorism this type of transsemantic construction belongs to the aesthetics of postmodernism and is more *antidramatic* than a *postdramatic* theatre. However, it must be recognized that any forms of myth destruction are a natural and unpredictable manifestation of a nature opposite to mythmaking only until the balance between them is not broken and transgressive art forms are not turned into a totalitarian cult of the destruction of spirituality.

## V. CONCLUSION

The presence of transsemantic constructions in the performance indicates the egression of stage action beyond the dramatic definition. The identification of transsemantic construction types contributes to the formation of an objective idea of the qualitative director's dialogue with the author and the audience. The identification of the dominant type of transsemantic constructions despite the fixation of organic intersection of mythmaking and performativity directions allows to determine more precisely the aesthetics of a theatrical performance. So, the construction of the allegoric type (Myth I) is characteristic of the poetic (metaphorical) theatre and the construction of pseudo-allegoric type (Performance I) is characteristic of the postmodern theatre. The aesthetics of the directly postdramatic theatre is formed only at the level that corresponds to the structures of the mysterial type (Myth II) and the pseudo-mysterial type (Performance II) developing in two directions at the same time.

In the process of research, it became obvious that in modern theatre practice the metaphorical nature of stage action is actively developing into metaphysical. The metaphysics of the theater that masters the symbol as the main instrument of knowledge, takes the significance of art philosophy that according to the authoritative opinion of K. Jaspers is thinking in art and not about art [9]. This allows characterizing transsemantic constructions as intellectual constructions and their study as a cognitive process.

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