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# Morphological Mutability of Modern Critical Genres: Theatre Review as a Parody

Natallia Lysova

Faculty of Journalism, Belarusian State University, Minsk, The Republic of Belarus

**Email address:**

lysovanb@rambler.ru

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**Abstract:** It considers specific features of genre evolution of theatre reviews. Analyzing theater review transformations from the 1960s to the 2020s, the author notes that understanding the changes in the morphology of a theatrical review can help study tendencies in the modern criticism in general, and in the parody genre in particular. Reading closely theatre reviews of the literary weekly "Literature and Art" of 1960 and those of the same literary weekly of the 2020s and of the social and political newspaper "SB. Belarus Today" of the recent years, the author underscores that, unlike in the 1960s, in the 2020s journalists seem to detach from the professional circle of problems. The research marks that criticism has come to respond to journalism materials themselves (self-criticism) as well as to the cultural and social context of modern art rather than to particular fiction texts, theatrical premiers as information agenda. It also highlights that criticism and parody have a lot in common through their journalistic nature: the analysis of artistic phenomena in the modern culture. Yet, recently, in the changing medium space, criticism makes parody not fiction or journalistic text, but the communicative process, which has created some new roles of the critic, the author and the reader. It concludes that social and cultural situation around theatre determines the changes in the genre of theatre reviews in the modern outlets, putting them into pre-journalistic phase or literary-educational mode of associations and contexts. As a result, both viewers and critics develop new qualities.

**Keywords:** Parody, Theatre, Model, Imitation, Parodic Person, Criticism, Review, Genre, Culture

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## 1. Introduction

Post-journalism newest period of media has brought forward such a principle of critical text organization as a genre synthesis. Specialized outlets reduced and consequently certain readers' environments decreased. Mass media going out to the Internet with its new massive communication opportunities led to orientation to the mass medium audience. Given that the addressee of the texts has become undefined, critical remarks have undergone some stylistic changes as well.

Researchers note morphological mutability of media texts in the context of changing communication between the author (critic, journalist, or publicist) and the reader (user). A media text functions in several forms: as a printed text and as a media text (on a site, in a blog, in podcasts). Hence there is a change of the volume of texts (a tendency towards minimalistic expression) and of the informative and analytical content of the material.

Journalism researchers today, discussing the changes in the critical texts, pay attention to the changes in the language of criticism. Thus, Gruzdeva argues, "the language of criticism has changed, there occurred genre and style mixing" [1]. Modern research also emphasizes the particular variability of artistic and journalistic genres. Vladimirova and Morozov put it down to "the new opportunities for the implementation of the author's ideas" [2].

Journalists also note similar changes when discussing the forms of expression of a critic. As regards, Keshisheva observes, "thus, over the past few years, there have appeared new intonations in criticism, new ways of communicating with readers, a new language" [3]. Often, researchers associate such stylistic changes with the trends of the new postmodern culture, with the processes of monetization of art in the post-Soviet space and changes in the functions of criticism, reflected in "the existence of a serious crisis – not only of the theatrical criticism, but also of the reality in which the theater exists today", claims Litvina [4].

Changes of the journalism (in particular of the literary

criticism) happen parallel to (and obviously under the influence of) the transformation of culture. For example, in the theatrical culture there are changes in the stylistic images and formal (organizational) principles of interaction between the author and the spectator. "Postmodern theatre" offers a reflection, but not a reproduction on the stage of the dramatic text. In the "total theatre", "physical theatre" they combine all possible tricks of play: from street folk means of expression to the stage show. There are examples of another drama, also offering new genre synthesis, or ways of organization of the text, through visualizing it, giving it a poetic form, etc.

Thus, genre innovations of theatrical reviews per se are the reflection of a complicated process of changes of social and cultural situation. Looking at the research of the morphology of a theatrical review, one can study the tendencies of genre changes in the modern criticism.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The grounds for the analysis of the morphology of theatre review genre were the materials of mass media of Belarus, such as those of the social and political newspaper "SB. Belarus Today" and of the literary weekly "Literature and Art". The method was comparing theatrical reviews of the 1960s and of those of the 2010s and 2020s.

The methodology of the analysis of the theater review and parody is based on the research of the genre of parody by Y. Tynianov, A. Tseitlin, L. Grossman, B. Begak, N. Kravtsov, A. Morozov, V. Novikov, as well as on the theoretical conclusions of the authors who studied the nature of the genres of printed outlets.-Theorists of the genre typology of journalistic materials (A. Tertychniy, M. Kim, A. Bobkov, K. Zorin, and B. Streltsov) traditionally singled out informational, analytical and artistic journalistic genres, referring review to the analytical group of genres [5]. However, in the XXI century, in connection with the sharp transformation of genres, studies have appeared that reflect both the replacement of genre characteristics with formal ones (the use of the concept of "format" instead of "genre") and the identification of new groups of genres. For example, L. Kroichik and E. Chernikova name the following groups of genres: operational news, operational research, research news, research figurative [6], respectively, placing the review genre in the group of research figurative genres. Theatrical journalism researcher Tatiana Orlova argues, "A normative framework is unacceptable in journalism" and sees this as close to the principles of the development of genres in literary work. Orlova states, "Genre is a territory where the character and structure of a work is formed, where logic and psychology are combined in order to find methods of the impact on the reader" [7].

Traditionally, in the theory of journalism, parody, along with such genres as feature article, essay, feuilleton, were classified as literary-publicist genres, however, in recent studies, in this "specific form of artistic activity of a journalist", as Vladimirova defines it [8], researchers began

to identify separately satirical and entertaining genres, according to Gurevich [9].

## 3. Discussions and Results

For almost a decade, the state outlet "SB. Belarus today" has offered its own interpretation of theatre premiers in the form of reviews, signed by the penname "The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row". The author of the reviews borrowed this name from a poet Igor Shaferman, who wrote the lyrics of the song in the film "People and Models", which was a movie version of the concert of Arkadiy Raikin, a famous stage artist.

The song was performed not on behalf of another heromask, but on behalf of the actor who is derided, chased, but always has his loyal (kind and understanding) spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row. As always, the songs by A. Shaferan are sentimental and full of pathos. The song from the film "People and the Models" has become a subject of many stage and internet performances-interpretations, from elegy confessions down to parodies. The famous chorus line in the song has become the name of the theatre critic.

On the one hand, the materials of "The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row" are theatre premier's reviews. They analyze the work of the director, of the actors, etc. On the other hand, they give ample space to the "cultural context": the author places the theatre performance in the context of famous songs, films, books, events, celebrity biographies, etc. There is so much of this "parallel" context that this intellectual exquisiteness of the journalist goes over the top, his postmodern decorativeness sounds more like derision, one loses sight of his analytical thought, information agenda "swells".

In the review of the musical "Tristan and Isolde" in the National Academic musical Theatre "You don't have to be a Tristan" [10], the introduction and conclusion are reflections-visions about Gerard Depardieu walking along the Minsk plant of wines, while the author reflects on how well the actor would fit for the role of Tristan. Obviously, it is not to express dissatisfaction with the performance of the male part of the Belarusian performance.

Making use of the theoretical conclusions of a researcher of parody V. Novikov [11] we shall call such a direction in criticism the first level of parody, i.e. the parody of the performance itself. The bright cinematic figure of a foreign guest in the review helps one to pick on the negative attitude to adding foreign authors into the repertoire. "Tristan and Isolde" is the third musical (after "Blue Cameo" and "Jane Eire") on the Minsk stage by the Russian director and choreographer Nikolai Androssov, a former artist in the famous band of Igor Moiseev, a comrade and a co-creator of the composer Kim Breitburg. This is the second layer of the critical vision of the reviewer, who disagrees with the practice to prefer foreign directors, playwrights and composers. The title itself, "You don't have to be a Tristan", as an association, reminds the reader of the national (in the circumstances of the independent state) responsibility of the artist. As in the poem by Nekrasov we can read the

continuation of the line and it states with some pathos: “You don’t have to be a poet, but you have to be a citizen”. Here, obviously, it highlights the journalistic peculiarity of the text: the second layer of the parody sounds like a journalistic statement.

Apart from that, the journalist in this material parodies both the review itself and the genre of the play. Having pictured Depardieu as a new actor in the reviewed performance, “The kind spectator...” re-created him, presenting it as a possible stage parody: a performance with Depardieu as Tristan would be a burlesque, not a musical.

In one of the materials of “The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row”, “Tired with the sun” [12], written on the mono-play of the Belarusian state youth theatre “To save the Chamber Junker Pushkin”, the critic analyzes the play by M. Kheifets, the staging by A. Guziy, the work of the actor A. Gladkiy. Stylistically, he places his critical statement into the quotes from Pushkin and Nabokov and in the citations from films “The Day of Full Moon”, “Tired with the Sun” and “Mimino”. As a result, “The kind spectator” does not assess the work of the performance creators kindly. According to him, the playwright “rhymed the facts of Pushkin’s biography and the life of his awkward hero so tragic-comically”, that the hero “since childhood is so averted personally against the “the sun of the Russian poetry”, that he cannot eat”, and the director “has envisaged for the play all sorts of kunstuks”, “something thunders, rustles, clicks...” The author offers us several variations of that same parodying that Y. Tynianov described at the beginning of the XX century [13].

In this case, we are going to understand “the language” in a broad meaning, as a means of existence of fiction. The author of the theatrical review places the performance into the modern literature and cinema context, swelling the most popular phrases-signs of this culture. The chief peculiarity of this publication is the stylistic excess and unpredictable expansion of the topic. “The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row” turns into the critic of the cultural situation and makes the parody of the whole complex of relations between the authors and the spectators, including the means of current critical expression in the media. Thus, it creates a socio-cultural model of the modern culture, epitomized by the parodic person of “The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row”.

Sometimes it is hard to define the reviews of “The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row” as parodies, or to define a play as the object of the parody in them. What “The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row” presents is a full-fledged critical analysis of a play, with positive or negative assessment, where there is no “front line” of a parody – there is no parody of the play itself, its stylistics or theme interpretation. The front line is the figure of the critic, or “the kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row”, as a parodic personality, raised on the modern culture. The new critic reveals himself in the title or in some key sentences, thus showing to us “the third aspect” of a parody – theatrical and spectacle “agenda” of the modern culture.

That is what happens in the review ““Evening”: Reload” of a modern version of the play “Evening” by A. Dudarev in

the National Academic Y. Kupala Theatre [14]. Having chosen an up-to-date political slogan for the title of a theatrical review, the author does not consider the play as a political performance, but only hints at the changes in the cast, which happened because of political demarche of the active group from the theatre. That is, obviously, the second journalistic aspect of the parody. The main text of the material is a positive review of a drama about loneliness and the old age. But coming back to the figure of “The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row”, who gave the name to his statement, we have to note that this person reads the newspapers, goes to the theatre and has heard of the social digital revolution. His text refers to people working in this digital sphere, deriding them: “The poignant story about loneliness and repent is topical today as well: many IT-workers in the audience were crying”.

In the theory of journalism, one defines parody as a creation of the model or imitation of an information phenomenon. Yet, the authors highlight the difference between parody and criticism (as genre): “imitating may cause or may not cause the laughter of the audience. It doesn’t seem right to identify such laughter with the criticism”, believes Tertychniy [15]. At the same time, at the beginning of the XX century the literary scientist, writer and critic Y. Tynianov in one of his major works “On the parody” writes about parody as about criticism not so much of the particular authors, but rather of the literary process, language and musical (intonation) phenomena. He also marks the importance of the speech parody and the parodic figures for the development of literature [13]. In the materials of “The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row” we meet exactly a parodic figure, whose biography stems from the soviet times (different communicative relations between the artist and the spectator) and continues into today, when the socio-cultural situation has changed. The author imitates and creates the model of interrelations between the modern critic-viewer (a prototype of internet reflections or the so-called “civil criticism”) and the art.

The parody of reviewer’s person allows us to see the changes. It shows the changed situation of the communicative model of the relations between the author and the readers-viewers. Y. Tynianov in the theoretical notes on the parody pointed to its ability to reflect the literary evolution. V. Novikov, the researcher of the parody, marks the analytical peculiarities of the parody in analyzing the texts of the modern culture: “Parody is everywhere where there are evolutionary processes; it registers dialectical contradictions of the literary process” [11].

In the classic period of the fiction criticism, parody was a part of self-criticism. For example, in the weekly “Litaratura i mastatstva” (“Literature and art”) of 1960 there were parodies by N. Akhramchuk based on the reviews of three leading theatre critics of that time A. Sobolevskiy, G. Kolos and S. Gurich “If Shakespear was my contemporary, he would be reviewed like this...” [16].

For the single object of the critic parody, there were no plays, theatre or actors chosen. The parody aimed at the style,

stamps and the methods of analysis. The journalist marks the “fake deep-thinking” of the critic. The critic, analyzing the staging of “Othello”, noted, “The play is raw, and the fact that the audience likes it, leads us to sad conclusions...”

The search of the critics for the positive character is also made parody of: “Can a positive character choke his wife? No, and once again no! What will such a character teach the spectator? Having watched the play, ask yourself if you would want to have such a neighbor? Would you want to be friends with him? No. And once again no!”

The parody writer did not omit another “common place” of the soviet criticism, which is their failure to appreciate popular spectacular genres: “Let’s be honest and say straight away that the play didn’t work out because the quality of the drama material was low. What we see is a vivid melodrama”.

As shown above, N. Akhramchuk analyses and reproduces in the new parodic quality the texts of his colleagues, the critics. That is the first aspect of his parody that we can conditionally call stylistic parody. Behind the stamps of the soviet critics thinking there are some other tendencies shown. The tendency to use the social determination method in a vulgar way, which was widely spread at that time. Which is the second aspect of the parody, the methodological one.

In the 2000s, unlike in the 1960s, the journalist seems to detach from the professional circle of problems (of the style and the methodology analysis). The created parody person of “The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row” is an allegory of the modern image of a critic who performs in several masks, on different medium platforms.

Today self-parody hides behind the statements of “The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row”, just like new literature in the XIX century noted the negative features of the developing literary process through creating parody characters, like Khvostov or Prutkov. In the reviews of “The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row”, unlike in the parodies of N. Akhramchuk, the front aspect of the parody is the play, and the second aspect is the atmosphere around literature, or the cultural situation. The professional circle is too narrow for the modern critic, or this circle has already been disrupted by the media innovations.

## 4. Conclusions

In the theory of journalistic genres, as noted above, scientists do not link criticism to parody, marking comic effect as the separating feature. Yet we doubt that serious criticism and funny parody should be opposed. Criticism and parody have a lot in common through their journalistic nature: the analysis of artistic phenomena in the modern culture. Hence, V. Novikov who researches the genre of parody in the literature notes that the parody is beyond any genres: “...making the parody of the style and deriding the views and social behavior of the opponent are somehow internally linked” [11].

In the theory of journalism, the parody is defined as creating a model, but the critic-parodist recreates the new model (construction) of the phenomenon he makes the

parody of. In the theatrical reviews of “The kind spectator...” we met a parodic person, with an imitation of a journalist himself, incorporating the features of the soviet and post-soviet critic. The author imitates, creates a model of interrelations between a modern publicist and the theatrical art. New quality of the art, finding its expression in the concepts of the “total theatre” and “new drama”, determines such transformations of the levels (directions) of the parody.

In the changing medium space, criticism makes parody not fiction or journalistic text, but the communicative process, which has created some new roles of the critic, the author and the reader. Today the critical parody is hiding behind the statements of “The kind spectator in the 9<sup>th</sup> row”, creating new personifications of literary classics. Perhaps, by returning to pre-journalistic, literary-educational time of contexts and associations, it forecasts the post-journalistic future.

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