SPEECH AND INTONATION SCRIPT OF THE STAGE IMAGE IN THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING BY GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING

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Abstract. The article analyzes Lessing’s views on speech characteristics of a stage image in the context of the enlightenment theory of mimesis. The study pays special attention to the thoughts of this German enlightener both to the importance of intonation modulations and the pause in the speech script of an actor as a means of creating the stage illusion of a natural human life.

Keywords: imitation, natural man, feelings, actor, speech and intonation script, pause.

Most studies devoted to the analysis of G.E. Lessing’s theoretical heritage consider Lessing’s views on the dramatic art as a derivative component of his theory of drama. However, not every expert in Lessing’s works in their research addresses the thoughts of the enlightener in this regard. But those researchers who did focus on the G.E. Lessing’s considerations about the actor’s work believe that his findings provided significant reasons to talk not only about his contribution to the drama theory but also to the development of basic principles of actor’s work, and to refer this aspect to the theory of stage art of the enlightener. For example, German researcher of Lessing's theoretical heritage Klaus Treiher considers the Hamburgische Dramaturgie as an attempt of the enlightener to investigate the possibility of the theory’s applicability to the stage performance practices (Trager, 1981, p. 19).

It should be noted that Lessing has worked out the new aesthetic principles of theatrical art which were in sharp controversy with the principles of classicism and standard canons which, in his opinion, had limited the right of an artist for a realistic reflection of the realities of life, contrary to the general philosophical challenges in the 18th century. In this regard, following the new ideological and aesthetic enlightenment benchmarks, according to Lessing, the whole system of art needed “reloading” due to the fact that the task of art had turned into “true imitation of nature” (Lessing, 1936, p. 258), whereas the stage stylistics of the German theater has been still trammled by the stage canons which had been borrowed from the French classicism. Lessing has emphasized that the true imitation of nature assumed not only the “imitation of natural phenomena” but, above all, required a special “attention to the nature of our sensations and emotional strengths” (Lessing, 1936, p. 258).

In the context of the enlightenment theory of mimesis by G.E. Lessing, it is important to consider his position regarding the reform of stage means of expression. The rational convention of the classicism stage tradition failed to demonstrate the natural feelings and emotions since its aesthetics had been based on imitation of solely “beautiful nature”. Therefore, his demand for the refocusing of the actor’s work expressions, which henceforth had to reflect the inherent nature of human behavior and feelings on the stage, clearly implied outstanding revolutionary potential. First of all, that referred to the replacement of plastic and speech-intonation script of the actor’s stage behavior, in the apprehension of which Lessing was trying to find the best means of stage interpretation of the character.

In this document, the attention is paid to Lessing’s views on the speech component of the actor’s work. In order to address the problem of speech features of the character as one of the basic means of expression of the dramatic character, Lessing was analyzing the dramatic talent of Sophie Friederike Hensel who was a principal actress of the Hamburg Theater.

G.E. Lessing thought that the extremely true delivery of the dramatic text and the absence of false intonations, indicating the mastery of words and high speech culture, was a remarkable feature of the actress’s talent. Paying special attention to that acting art of S. F. Hensel, G.E. Lessing wrote: “she is able to speak the
most complicated stuff, rough and vague verses so easily and with such evident expression that they become fully understandable through her delivery, and that delivery serves as the best commentary on them” (Lessing, 1936, p. 22). Particularly, the theorist highly appreciated the extraordinary subtlety of intonation transitions of the actress’s speech palette, confirming her clear awareness of those situations in which her character happened to be. Lessing stated that Hensel’s talent encompassed any emotional transitions, she has always been surprising and always natural and true on the stage because her voice conveyed really live feelings necessary for a particular moment in every episode”.

Using the potential of speech and intonational features of the character, the actress was a master when it comes to creating the stage illusion of natural and “continuous” life of her character. In his review of the play entitled Senia by F. Graffigny staged by the Hamburg Theatre, Lessing stressed that her every word has been delivered intelligently and “has not been lost in vain”. The exactly found soul of the character and the natural existence of the actress on the stage have emphasized the fact that when she had been silent for some minutes “the play went on”. Hensel’s pauses have been full of soul vibrations, so the interior life of Senia continued “speaking” just in a different tone; and all that her character said gave the impression as if “coming from her own mind”, and that all she felt – “from her own heart” (Lessing, 1936, p. 80).

In this context, it is pertinent to mention Stanislavsky whose remarks on the importance of pauses in the actor’s work have already become paradigmatic. Dividing the stage pauses into logical and psychological, the founder of the drama art system has declared that the pause was one of the aces of the speech used for expression and strength of elocution. Stanislavsky believed that the making of the actor’s speech script was particularly important for the psychological pause, which “gives life ... to the thought, the phrase and the tact, trying to convey their implications. Whereas without the logical pause the speech is illiterate, it is lifeless without the psychological one ... " (Venetsianov, 1986, pp. 376-377). Julia Lambert, the character of the Theatre novel by S. Maugham, also uses the psychological pause as “the ace up her sleeve” because she has always remembered her mentor Jane Taitbout who had taught her the basics of acting profession, particularly the most effective scenic maxim: “Don’t pause unless it’s necessary, but then pause as long as you can” (Maugham, 1983, p. 349).

The theoretical explorations of one of the founders of the cinema art theory B. Balazs are interesting as well. This Hungarian researcher defines the pauses and silence in the sound film as a powerful meaningful element in the features of the characters (Balash, 1968, p. 87), and analyzing the great success of Greta Garbo, he finds the answer in the facial expression of “certain state of mind”, “state of loneliness and alienation” which has been most clearly expressed in the episodes of silence. B. Balazs said that during her famous pauses G. Harbo expressed that “opposition beauty” which had “caught the world” and had “affected millions of people more than any other” (Balash, 1968, p. 291). In general, B. Balazs, in his theory of close-ups and specifics of screenplay creation, chooses Lessing as “model and rule”, and the one who “prophetically, and a half centuries to come” (Balash, 1968, p. 259) has identified the most essential features of “art form, the center of which shows the human being” (Balash, 1968, p. 77).

In search of the actor's expression means, Lessing has referred to Shakespeare as well, considering the words of Hamlet in the episode with comedians as the golden rule for all actors who would like “to have a reasonable approval of the audience” (Lessing, 1936, p. 24). Among the advices given by Hamlet to strolling actors for creation of speech features of the character, the theorist distinguishes the following: a) speak just like in life - naturally and easily, and b) do not cry out words like a herald (Lessing, 1936, p. 24).

The identity of English and German approaches to the problem of stage speech are obvious: the "golden rule" of Shakespeare is consistent with the Lessing’s principle of “mixing”, so in order not to go beyond the theatrical aesthetics, the actor must “restrain” their "inner fire" that occurs due to the intense stage situations because its open demonstration may “offend” the sight and ears of the audience with excessive loudness of speech and too jerky movements. However, when experiencing the inner strong passions, the actor makes their movements and voice “moderate and soft” (Lessing, 1936, p. 25), it makes the strongest impression.

The ideal actor and example of organic natural scenic forms for Lessing was his contemporary Konrad Ekhof who had created the artistically impressive visible character with natural inner feelings, using not only plastic but speech resources of a scenic expression.

While much attention is paid to the Hamburgische Dramaturgie when it comes to finding the natural intonation in pronouncing morality tales, Lessing, in this respect too, points out the stagecraft of Konrad Ekhof as exemplary, because even “moral sentiments” and “boring tirades” were delivered by the actor with
such “dignity and sincerity” that the most preserved truth had been colored with novelty and importance, and the driest matter with excitement and life” (Lessing, 1936, p. 13). It should be also noted that the dramaturgy of the early Enlightenment was full of morality tirades, which had always been an obstacle to the delivery of the natural intonation in the actors’s scenic speech. However, Lessing underlines that the speech features of Konrad Ekhof have turned “the most routine morality” (Lessing, 1936, p. 15) into something really fascinating to spectators by the naturalness of intonation.

Much later, when he wrote the Nathan the Wise drama, Lessing “often recited” its extracts, imitating Konrad Ekhof’s style because he was sure that the play would have “impact on the spectator” if it had been well perceived by the ear” (Menzel, 1986, p. 106). G. Menzel, who is the German explorer of the late phase of the enlightener’s works, says that during all his life Lessing remembered “voice of the great actor” and had always emphasized that “the world will not find another Ekhof” (Menzel, 1986, p. 106). According to Lessing’s observations, the actor, as a result of his well-considered approach to the character, would always thoughtfully put semantic accents and, having realizing the meaning of the words of his character, would perceive them with all his “heart” (Lessing, 1936, p. 20). Lessing stated that the pervasion of the character with live feelings gave Konrad Ekhof’s scenic speech a vivid simplicity and naturalness, as “language of heart can be conveyed only by heart” (Lessing, 1936, p. 78). This algorithm when it comes to working on the character, according to the enlightener, have made the actor free from false delivery and “suspicion” that the pronounced text had been the result of “memory efforts”, rather than the specific situation of the scenic character.

Thus, Lessing was the first German critic of the New Age who had raised the question as to the necessity of radical replacement of the stage techniques of the actor's performance, and he had taken a further step in laying the theoretical fundamentals of the analysis of such techniques of the stage expression as a plastic and speech script of the character, which are considered to be the key elements when it comes to shaping the actor’s art. In this regard, the German philosopher of the twentieth century W. Benjamin, when exploring “tragedy of the German baroque drama” noted that “any art form has its own index of particular objective design of the art which is not inherent to individual works” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 121). Lessing’s theoretical thoughts served as an essential reflection of his attempt to find those only possible shaping acting techniques that would serve as a most specific means when it comes to shaping the natural human feeling. And that, since the late eighteenth century, was becoming the main demand of theatrical art in Western Europe.

References