

## *For a Revaluation of Genre Theory in Contemporary Drama*

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**Abstract:** Despite their singularities and divergences, the major dramatic theories of the twentieth century keep the classical tripartition of genres untouched. Our recent research on rhapsodic criticism has evidenced the increasingly appropriation by playwrights of elements traditionally reserved for a fourth genre, as important as epic, lyric and dramatic genres, but left aside by critical reflection because of its traditional association with “non-artistic” practices: the essayistic genre. A new theory of genres that incorporates this fourth genre into the classical triad may not only illuminate some of the main features of modern and contemporary drama, but it also allows a more accurate understanding of some of the fundamental works of Western drama.

**Keywords:** essay; contemporary drama; discursive genres; rhapsodic criticism.

Despite their singularities and divergences, the major dramatic theories of the twentieth century keep the classical tripartition of genres between the dramatic, epic and lyric modes untouched. Peter Szondi formulates his *Theory of Modern Drama* from the observation of how “pure drama” is fractured since the end of the nineteenth century by the increasing presence of epic elements. Although he criticizes the “supra-historical” conception of genres, Szondi does not question what he regards as “the three fundamental categories of poetics.”<sup>2</sup>

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2. Peter Szondi, *Teoria do drama moderno (1880-1950)* [*Theory of modern drama*], trans. Luiz Sérgio Repa (São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2001), 24.

If in fact “the evolution of modern drama departs from drama itself,”<sup>3</sup> this occurs not only through the insertion of epic elements, but also through what Jean-Pierre Sarrazac called the *rhapsodiation* of the dramatic form: from the second half of the nineteenth century on, the drama does not only become more epic, but also more lyrical. In many works (such as the plays of Ibsen and Chekhov), the intersubjective dimension gives way to the intersubjective dimension,<sup>4</sup> and external conflicts give way to the intimate drama of the characters (which does not exclude their historical dimension).

However, the simple shift from drama to epic and lyric genres is not enough to elucidate the major transformations of dramatic form over the last hundred and fifty years. Our recent research on rhapsodic criticism<sup>5</sup> has evidenced the increasingly appropriation by playwrights and directors of elements traditionally reserved for a fourth genre, as important as epic, lyric and dramatic genres, but left aside by critical reflection because of its traditional association with “non-artistic” practices: the essayistic genre. A new theory of genres that incorporates this fourth genre into the classical triad may not only illuminate some of the main features of modern and contemporary drama, but it also allows a more accurate understanding of some of the fundamental works of Western drama.

If, in the formulation that consolidates from Romanticism, the epic genre differs from the dramatic genre by the presence of an external narrator to the facts, and the lyrical genre is characterized by the manifestation “of an emotion or a feeling”<sup>6</sup>, it remains unclear in which of these three genres we could insert the logical arguments, the abstract discussions and the speculative digressions formulated in the plays of Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, Koltès and many other modern and contemporary playwrights. On the one hand, we could consider these examples as subjective manifestations of the characters (which would insert them in the lyric genre); on the other,

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3. Szondi, 27.

4. Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, *Poétique Du Drame Moderne* (Paris: Seuil, 2012), 120.

5. See Marco Catalão, “Crítica e ficção na análise do teatro contemporâneo [Criticism and fiction in the analyses of contemporary drama],” *Sala Preta, Revista de Artes Cênicas* 14, no. 2 (2014): 143–52.

6. Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

as interruptions of dramatic action that would point to the presence of an extradiegetic narrator (and therefore, to the epic genre). However, none of these alternatives would contemplate the specificity of argumentative enunciation, which is presumed to be a general rather than a subjective statement (which removes it from the lyrical genre) and a non-narrative instance (which refutes its classification as an epic trait).

The formulation of a new theory of genres makes it possible not only to suppress this theoretical gap (by adding a fourth genre to the traditional triad) but also to clarify one of the most striking features of contemporary drama: the artistic exploration of the essayistic genre in its various forms (such as the dramatic appropriation of philosophical and scientific texts, the blurring of boundaries between works and discourses about them, the exploration of the scenic potential of scientific conference). Our goal is not to propose a normalization from pure and immutable categories: as Compagnon notes, mixing, inter-artistic dialogue and hybridization are essential characteristics of contemporary creation<sup>7</sup>. We therefore think of the four genres not as definite groups of fixed works, but as transversal categories, modes of enunciation that cross all subgenres and all forms of discourse, artistic or not, to a greater or lesser extent. Turning our attention to the form and proportion in which generic modes combine, can reveal important characteristics not only of each individual work, but it can also elucidate certain recurring tendencies in contemporary artistic creation.

There are two basic types of enunciation: either we enunciate events and interactions that develop in a temporal dimension or we enunciate propositions relatively unrelated to the passage of time. In the first case, events can be narrated by a voice that necessarily places itself at some distance from events (this distance can differ to varying degrees between the omniscient third-person narration and the almost simultaneous narrative of a character who suffers almost immediate effects of narrated events) or can be presented without mediation by the voices of the figures or characters involved in the actions. As it is known, Aristotle based his theorizing on the *Poetics* in these two genres characterized by the mimesis of action, the epic and the dramatic genres.

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7. See Antoine Compagnon, "Théorie de la littérature : la notion de genre. Cours de licence, Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne," Fabula, 2001, <https://www.fabula.org/compagnon/genre.php>.

There is, however, an immense variety of statements which do not present themselves as imitations or inventions of temporal events nor as circumstantial interactions, but as descriptions, speculations and statements about feelings, ideas and reasons in which the temporal logic typical of epic and drama gives way to other kinds of relationship. Also in this case, the elements can be described from a private perspective (intimate or collective, but always with a concrete and specific reach) or can be exposed as arguments, demonstrations, theories or claims about characteristics that are posited as valid in a more general and abstract form. The first type of enunciation belongs to the lyrical genre; the second, to what we call the essayistic genre.

In the lyric mode, we enact the description of an internal object (a feeling, a fantasy, a fear, etc.) or an external one (a landscape, a concrete object, a scene). The description postulates itself as a relatively fixed crystallization, with some temporal stability.<sup>8</sup> As the descriptions are altered by the passage of time, we left the lyrical mode and enter the epic mode.

In the epic mode, we stage a situation in which someone narrates an event. Even if the narrator is involved in the facts, the narration is made at a minimum distance that allows him to stand out from the narrative matter. When the distance between the narrator and the facts falls apart, we left the epic mode and enter the dramatic mode.

In the dramatic mode, we stage one or more discourses directed specifically at a person or a limited group of people with the intention of producing some effect on this interlocutor. The statements are circumscribed to a specific situation and have a definite purpose: to move, to exhort, to convince, to inquire, to apologize, to thank, and so on. As statements become more general and extrapolate the specific circumstances of interlocution, we left the dramatic mode and enter the essayistic mode.

In the essayistic mode, we enact an exempt exposition or the objective search for some universally valid truth. Definitions, comments, and arguments are addressed to a generic interlocutor, and assertions are posited as truths independent of circumstances. If we begin to use appealing elements having

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8. I owe this characterization of lyric mode as a description to Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

the intention of touching the interlocutor, we enter the dramatic mode; if a description or narrative is used to illustrate the argument or make it less arid, the essayistic mode gives way to the lyric and the epic modes.

From those observations, we note that the acts of narration and of describing establish by themselves a distinction between the enunciating voice and the world narrated or described. In the dramatic and the essayistic mode this does not occur: in the first case, because the enunciating voice is within the referred world; in the second, because the voice pretends to be incorporeal and impartial. In the essayistic mode, it only matters what is exposed (the ideas, the arguments, the conclusions); the enunciator is postulated as irrelevant. In the lyric mode, on the contrary, although there is a separation between who describes and what is described, this separation is fluid and precarious: those who describe also say something about themselves. The description, by its metonymic character, ends up "contaminating" the subject who describes. Thus, the essayistic (as the dramatic) world posits itself as immediate; on the other hand, the lyrical world (as the epic) is always mediated by an external voice.

Thus, in the epic and lyric modes, there are two distinct discursive levels ("two worlds", as Karol Berger calls them<sup>9</sup>): that of what is narrated or described, and that of the voice that, to narrate or describe, must necessarily put itself at a distance from what it refers to (even when it describes an intimate feeling or tells a personal adventure). This separation is set aside in the dramatic mode, in which the voices are in the same plane of the facts, and in the essayistic mode, in which the voice proposes itself as incorporeal, disinterested, alien to the ideas and propositions that it exposes.

The distinction between the four genres becomes clearer in this table:

LYRIC	2 discursive levels	timeless statement
EPIC	2 discursive levels	temporal statement
DRAMATIC	1 discursive level	temporal statement
ESSAYISTIC	1 discursive level	timeless statement

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9. See Karol Berger, *A Theory of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 166 et passim.

It should be noted that, unlike the traditional triadic division, which mixes formal and thematic elements, the classification we propose is structured in strict formal terms.

It is important to emphasize, however, that the generic classification that we propose does not appear as a rigid division between irreconcilable elements, but on the contrary, as general tendencies that rarely crystallize in pure forms: it is difficult to find a narrative exempt from dialogues, a lyrical poem without reflective instances, a drama without lyrical moments or an essay without narrative passages. We are not as interested in fixed and abstract genres as in the concrete use of each generic mode in artistic works, which freely alternate between dramatic, epic, lyric and essayistic instances. Discrimination of the specific role of each instance allows us to observe more clearly certain tendencies of contemporary artistic creation and to perceive nuances that the traditional triadic division tends to obscure.

The fact that the fourth genre has been excluded from practically all the systematizations undertaken by theater and literature theorists over the last few centuries should not be surprising to us, since we traditionally associate the argumentation, exhibition and demonstration of ideas and concepts to non-artistic (predominantly scientific and philosophical) practices. However, as we have shown in part of our research, one of the most important features of twentieth-century art is the creative appropriation of the essayistic genre<sup>10</sup>. Playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht and Luigi Pirandello, narrators such as Jorge Luis Borges and Roberto Bolaño, visual artists such as Michel Duchamp and Michael Asher, choreographers such as Jérôme Bel and Xavier Le Roy explored the essayistic genre not as an extra artistic element but as a fertile space for invention.

It is not a question of simply establishing a new generic classification that will leave the artistic works and experiences more or less untouched, but rather of proposing a new way of observing aspects of individual works and characteristics of great groups that we would hardly perceive from the traditional perspective. From this new perspective, we understand in

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10. Marco Catalão, "Virtual Theater: Theory and Practice," *Art Research Journal* 3, no. 11 (2016): 92–106.

another way what Sarrazac calls the "philosophical tendency"<sup>11</sup> of an author like Luigi Pirandello. The character who "explains his role" (a recurring feature in Pirandello's work) is an important element in the erosion of canonical drama through the insertion of essayistic elements.

The move of Pirandello, who three years after the first performance of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* publishes a preface in which he comments on his own work, illustrates the extent to which drama in the twentieth century *overflows* (the term used by Sarrazac) towards the essayistic mode. The objection that the preface "is not part" of the play is not convincing: from the moment it is published, it is definitively incorporated into the work, participating ineluctably in its scenic and interpretative becoming. A preface is not "just a preface": consider, for example, the *Preface to Cromwell*, which over the years has become more relevant than Victor Hugo's own drama. Symptomatically, Sarrazac takes as its starting point from his analysis of the "poetics of modern drama" the preface, not Pirandello's theatrical play.

The displacement of action to commentary can be observed in many other authors besides Pirandello: in Brecht, of course, but also in Beckett and in a playwright like Edward Bond, who states that "the author must provide a meaning to history, what he dramatizes is not so much history itself as the interpretation or analysis that it must arouse."<sup>12</sup> This "second degree" drama demands a form more porous to speculation, digressions, and commentary that slows down and truncates action and dialogue. In this respect, Chekhov is one of the forerunners in the presentation of characters who do not only lyrically *expose* their yearnings and fears but who also speak and *lecture* on social, philosophical, and scientific issues.

From the reflection on the essayistic genre, we find that what Sarrazac calls the "novelization of drama" (its use of devices and compositional processes typical of the novel) indicates not only the recurrent presence of epic, but also essayistic elements. If, in Bernard Marie Koltès's play *In the Solitude of Coton Fields*, "each character presents himself as a thinker, a 'philosopher' who defends 'or attacks' a position",<sup>13</sup> the monologues can not

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11. Sarrazac, *Poétique Du Drame Moderne*, 25.

12. Apud Sarrazac, 30.

13. See Sarrazac, 265.

simply be lyrical, and necessarily move to the essayistic mode, as Koltès himself clearly asserts: "For me, a true dialogue is always an argument, as the philosophers understood it, but deviant."<sup>14</sup>

The insertion of the essayistic mode in the genre theory allows us to reevaluate also the innovations of Brecht, whose devices have as main function to emphasize the reflective and critical aspect of his works. Since the characteristic elements of Brecht's "epic theater" are narration and commentary, it may be more appropriate to rename it as an epic-essayistic theater. In this sense, Galileo's choice as a protagonist seems to us emblematic: handled "not ... as a hero, but as an intellectual subject to contradictions",<sup>15</sup> his figure serves perfectly the purpose of a theater in which dramatic action gives way to hypotheses, discussions, and conflicting comments about human actions. The transformation of the modern character into a person who "interrogates indefinitely about himself, his aims, his motives and his identity"<sup>16</sup> leads the dramatic form to the essayistic mode, substituting intersubjective action for comment, reflection, abstract discussion, self-analysis. The "theater of a scientific epoch"<sup>17</sup> resorts more consistently to the discursive mode typical of scientific communications (the essay) than to the epic mode traditionally associated with fiction.

With his constant activity of writing notes and theoretical additions to his plays, Brecht definitively consolidates the figure of the "playwright-essayist", already outlined in Lessing and Diderot, which extends to the present moment in names like Michel Vinaver, Heiner Müller, Romeo Castellucci, and Jean-Pierre Sarrazac himself, whose theoretical reflection on theater is as influential as his artistic production (which, on the other hand, is no longer apprehended independently but rather in correlation with his essayistic counterpart).

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14. Sarrazac, 265.

15. Sarrazac, 152.

16. Sarrazac, 217.

17. Bertolt Brecht, *Estudos sobre teatro*, trans. Fiamá Pais Brandão (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1978), 99.



Since, as Karol Berger<sup>18</sup> points out, the tendency toward abstraction is what defines modern art, in the theater this characteristic is manifested not only by the refusal of the subordination of the scene to the fable or the text, as observed by Hans-Thies Lehmann, but also by the growing prestige of the essayistic genre as the enunciative mode privileged by contemporary artists. If, in fact, in the stage experiences that approach what the German author called "post-dramatic theater" actors cannot be considered "as agents of a discourse of a director who remains external to them,"<sup>19</sup> it is not satisfactory to observe them only from their "own bodily logic;" what happens in most of these cases is a displacement of the discursive elements of the stage to its surroundings.

The fact quoted by Lehmann,<sup>20</sup> that "with notable frequency, important theatrical artists of the present day have previous experience in the visual arts", has as consequence not only the insertion of self-referential, non-figurative, abstract and random practices in contemporary theater, but also an inflation of the discursive and essayistic aspect, omnipresent in the field of contemporary visual arts. Thus, as in much of the reception of contemporary art, we are faced with works that are postulated as anti-discursive, but which only circulate and reach the public through an intense discursive production (journalistic and academic articles, interviews, catalogs and artist's books, more or less explicit statements that can no longer be seen as para-artistic elements, but rather as fundamental performative instances for the construction of the senses of the works). It is symptomatic, in this sense, that, when analyzing Tadeusz Kantor's work as one of the emblematic figures of post-dramatic theater, Lehman does not only refer to his concrete works, but also to the discourses that the artist composes with the intention of substantiating and justifying his artistic practices.

Finally, it should be pointed out that a work such as *Post-Dramatic Theater*, which at first would only be a critical exposition of certain procedures common to a set of stage experiences of a certain period, becomes an important reference for directors and playwrights, who take Lehmann's essay as a stimulus for his own artistic creations. Similarly, theoretical texts by Deleuze, Agamben, and Foucault become recurrent references to contemporary drama - perhaps more recurrent than any canonical dramatic work.

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18. Berger, *A Theory of Art*, 153.

19. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Teatro pós-dramático [Postdramatic theatre]*, trans. Pedro Sússekind (São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2007), 49.

20. Lehmann, 155.

Thus, contemporary theater is no longer conceived as *the* theater, but as a permanent state of self-criticism and self-reflection, manifested through the refusal of the centrality of the text, but also through decentered texts. From this perspective, the essayistic genre offers itself as an alternative not only to drama but also to epic and lyric discourses, moving the scenic experience in directions that go beyond the limits imposed by the critical tradition.

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