

THE FUNCTION OF METAPHOR IN MARX'S THEORY

In his Introduction to »A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right«, Marx wanted to explain the specific functions of the critic and theory (in the sense derived from German Classical Philosophy) in the case of contemporary Germany. Here he is employing a metaphor (among other metaphors and figures):

»... Man muß diese versteinerten Verhältnisse dadurch zum Tanzen zwingen, daß man ihnen ihre eigne Melodie vorsingt...«

»... and these petrified condition must be made to dance by having their own tune sung to them!«¹

Taking this as a starting point, I will try to build a case for my idea of the function of metaphor in Marx's theory.

In his »Aesthetics of Language«,² Jan Mukařovský discusses non-normative aesthetic expressions in language, and arriving at figures and picturesque denominations, adds that by frequent and common use these expressions can lose their aesthetic function and become literal. But the aesthetic effect can be reconstructed by someone who knows their picturesque origin, and thus the aesthetic effect arises again. The analysis of metaphor may therefore begin as a kind of archeological work in the field of language. Part of this work on Marx's literary style was carried out by Lodovico Silva.³

Confronted with the metaphor of dance our first thought is focused on the traditional mythical stories about Joshua's trumpets, (in the Bible there are different versions of the siege of Jericho, the trumpet version being only one among them,⁴ Orpheus' poetic power, and the fiddler with the rats from folklore. Because we know that Marx, especially in his earlier years, liked to use metaphors from Greek mythology, we are inclined to find the background in the Orpheus myth. Orpheus, the greatest poet of the heroic pe-

¹ Karl Marx: *Early Writings*, Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, London 1977, p. 247.

² Jan Mukařovský: »Estetika jazyka«, in: Jan Mukařovský: *Struktura pesničkog jezika*, Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, Beograd 1986, pp. 7—47.

³ Lodovico Silva: *El estilo literario de Marx*, Siglo Editores, México 1975.

⁴ H. H. Rowley: *The Growth of the Old Testament*, Hutchinson University Library, London 1969, p. 54.

riod, had the power to sing in a way that attracted wild animals around him as small cattle, made trees bend to listen and rocks to follow him. In is important to add that this myth entered into Greek mythology relatively late, and gives a kind of new meaning to the idea of human powers, a meaning additional to the Promethean myth which Marx, as we know, liked the most. So it would be quite acceptable to think that this picturesque mythic story is the background to Marx's aim of awakening the German people (perhaps in combination with the tale of the fiddler and Joshua's trumpets).

But it is known that Hegel was opposed to this musical part of the Orpheus myth and Jericho story,⁵ especially to the belief in the power of music, which is suggested here. So how could it be possible that Marx, a subscriber of Epicurus' free declension of atoms,⁶ and a defender of non-dogmatic theory, could use such a special treatment for his own compatriots, and establish such an exalted and, at the same time, questionable function of the theory?

Before answering this question, we must say something on the function of metaphor as such. Even in dubious and uncertain meaning and background of Orpheus myth (more proper in marxism than in Marx: in the marxist way of thinking which is so familiar to us we automatically arrive at Orpheus background of the metaphor, as we expect the marxist theory to play the role of leading fiddler, guide and agitator which creates from the wild and oppressed mobs an organised force of disciplined and conscious followers) we can conclude that the function of metaphor is to develop and even implement the function of theory.

In our times of non-focused perception⁷ the function of picturesque theoretical discourse, and especially metaphorical discourse, has to be that of concentrating attention on important points to prevent the reader from loosing interest in reading when things become too theoretical and hard to follow. But this function of metaphor in theory cannot be confused with the theoretical function of metaphor, as the fetishism of a cubist label on the windows of a night club cannot be confused with Avignon whores. So, we must insist on the aesthetic function of metaphor to understand its theoretical function.

In this task we shall go once more to Mukařovský, to his studies 'The Aesthetics of Language' and 'The Poetic Language'.⁸ They represent a further development of the theory expounded in his 'Poetic Reference':⁹

»Poetic reference is primarily determined, then, not by its relationship to the reality indicated, but by the way it is set into the verbal context.«¹⁰
 »As for poetic reference, the weakening of its immediate relationship with reality makes of it an artistic device. That means that the poetic reference is not evaluated in terms of an extralinguistic mission, but with relation

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel: *Aesthetics* III, chapter on music; in: G. W. F. Hegel: *Estetika* III, Kultura, Beograd 1970, pp. 310-311.

⁶ Karl Marx: »Razlika demokratske in epikurejske filozofije narave«, in: *Vestnik Inštituta za marksistične študije ZRC SAZU*, Ljubljana 1982, pp. 43-106.

⁷ Walter Benjamin: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/Main 1968, pp. 45-48.

⁸ Jan Mukařovský: »Estetika jazyka« and »O jazyce basnickem«, first printed in *Slovo a slovesnost*, VI, 1940; in: Jan Mukařovský: *Struktura pesničkog jezika*, Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, Beograd 1986, pp. 7-47 and 48-102.

⁹ Jan Mukařovský: »Dénomination poétique et la fonction esthétique de la langue«, in: *Actes du quatrième Congrès international de linguistes* 1936, Copenhagen 1938, pp. 98-104; or: »Poetic reference«, in: *Semiotic of Art. Prague School Contributions* (ed. by Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik), MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. and London 1977, pp. 155-163.

¹⁰ l. c., p. 156.

to the role imposed upon it in the organisation of the work's semantic unity.«¹¹

»The focus of the aesthetic function on the sign itself thus comes about as a direct consequence of the autonomy belonging to aesthetic phenomena.«¹²

In conclusion, Mukařovský summarizes the main theses:

»Poetic reference differs from informational reference in that its relationship to reality is weakened in favor of its semantic linkage with context. In poetry the practical functions of language, that is, the representative, expressive, and appellative functions, are subordinated to the aesthetic function, which makes the sign itself the center of attention.

The predominance of this latter function accounts for the importance of the verbal context to a reference in poetry.«¹³

The later papers are even more decisive. In »Aesthetics of Language« he explains that the aesthetic function cannot be completely isolated from the other, non-aesthetic functions of language, and, on the other hand, that aesthetics functions are a feature of all modes of discourse and not only those of the arts. When the aesthetic function is used in a non-normative way, its unexpected appearance immediately puts linguistic expression itself at the center of attention. The transition from the non-normative to the normative is a constant process, and the basis of all these processes is a historically determined social background (we would, very probably, say today that the ideological structures of society are the first level of such a background). In the text »On Poetic Language« we find the following statements:

1. Poetic language, as one of the functional languages, cannot be apprehended as ornamental expression, beauty is not a constant token of the poetic word, nor the emotional note, and poetic language cannot be fully characterized by concreteness (»plasticity«).¹⁴
2. »Poetic language is permanently characterised only by its function; however, function is not a property but a *mode of utilising* the properties of a given phenomenon.«¹⁵
3. »However, the aesthetic function, which thus dominates in poetic language (being only a concomitant phenomenon in other functional languages), concentrates attention on the linguistic sign itself — hence it is exactly the *opposite* of a real orientation toward a goal which in language is the message. The aesthetic orientation toward the expression itself, which is, of course, valid not only for linguistic expression and not only for poetic art but for all arts and for any realm of the aesthetic, is a phenomenon *essentially* different from a logical orientation toward expression whose task is to make expression more precise, as has been especially emphasized by the so-called Logical Positivist movement (Viennese Circle) and in particular by R. Carnap.«¹⁶

¹¹ l. c., p. 157.

¹² l. c., p. 158.

¹³ l. c., p. 162.

¹⁴ Jan Mukařovský: *On Poetic Language*, The Peter de Ridder Press, Ghent 1976, pp. 7–8.

¹⁵ l. c., p. 9.

¹⁶ l. c., p. 9.

In its aesthetic use language does not lose the extra-aesthetic functions (as designated by Bühler): referential, expressive and appellative; but its special mode always comes into focus: *self-orientation*.¹⁷ There is always a kind of tension between this self-orientation and communication in poetic language. The basic principle of this theory is no special novelty. We can find not only traces, but the real roots of the understanding of aesthetic function as self-referential and self-explanatory and self-oriented in Plato and Kant. Plato fought against the ability of art to divert the attention of public from the moral issues of the subject to the aesthetic self reference which gives a pleasure in itself, and, obviously, has a quite different and autonomous idea of morality as in his ideal state should be. For Plato, it is obvious that the aesthetic function cannot be used in a non-aesthetic way — it always prevails over other functions, and thus must be abandoned and omitted from the ideal state.

We do not understand Marx's language as poetic, even if there are some theoreticians treating Marx's works (especially the Communist Manifesto) as a part of world literature. Nevertheless, his often and abundant use of the aesthetic function and outstanding metaphorical expressiveness cannot be understood as mere ornamentation, as a quirk of individual style, or employing the figurativity where theory cannot express itself clearly. We believe that Marx's use of the aesthetic function of language has precisely the goal of self-orientation, i. e., to turn attention in this case to the theory itself and its way of speaking, and not only to its object. The tension between the self-orientation, self-reflection and self-explanation of the aesthetic function in the theoretical language, on the one hand, and communication on the other, becomes for Marx a way of self-explanation of the theoretical function, and is even a tool which makes the difference between the method of study and the method of explanation visible and possible. There are certain kinds of metaphor (those mentioned above being typical), which make possible the appearance of the historical goal and function of theory. There is no logical way of communicating this function of theory in a full sense, because only this tension between self-explanation and communication, based upon the autonomy of theory, and at the same time its potential to become a material force, could make »the petrified world speak, sing, perhaps dance«¹⁸ on the level of language. This possible function of theory, which is so important for understanding the aim of German Classic Philosophy, and especially for understanding Hegel's disagreeing heirs, is expressed in Marx's work by the use of the aesthetic function of language in metaphorical form, because these forms have the same function in the field of language as theory should have as a radical, but nevertheless non-material force of discourse.

We can find this theoretical function of metaphor, i. e., the theoretical function of aesthetic function, even in everyday language. I will not repeat the story of the Dada movement and its language phenomena, but stress that their magazine title »Jedermann sein eigener Fussball« became a metaphor of colloquial language, describing the corruption and turmoil of post-war times in Berlin. We have another example. In 1750 Count de Silhouette accepted the

¹⁷ I. c., p. 11.

¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse: *The Aesthetic Dimension. Toward a critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Beacon Press, Boston 1978, p. 73.

rotten state finances. France was nearly bankrupt, so he prescribed his remedy — public tax. Money began to flow back into the treasury. From the first moment, he became popular as a kind of national saviour. But, on the other hand, he restricted state allowances and payments from the treasury. So, the very next day everybody disliked him. This contemporary reaction made him a 'bancroteur', attaching to his name the bad taste of state and people's destruction. Next, because in that time there were special trousers à la mode, very slim ones, without pockets — this garment got the name 'à la Silhouette', because pockets, obviously, weren't of any use after he became financial adviser to the king. The third step of metaphorical use of his name was an abstract one: any popular folly or idiocy got the name 'silhouette', and his proper name became a common one. In the fourth stage, this abstract metaphorical meaning focused on one concrete object, to signify it: the shade profile portrait.¹⁹ Because the whole metaphorical process, which for the people of the 18th century was obviously a kind of mockery in the beginning and a way of understanding the novelties of economy, art, politics etc. of modernity in the end, is forgotten today, we find the word 'silhouette' quite a simple logical signifier and do not feel its metaphorical tension — a tension which explained in everyday language the typical bourgeois art of portraiture, a predecessor of photography, as the same folly as new economic policies and other novelties of pre-revolutionary times. Thus, Miss Nevill Jackson in her book on silhouettes is unable to understand why this art acquired its name. De Silhouette was quite an unimportant amateur cutter of 'silhouettes': »The silhouette took its name, but no more, from Louis XV's miserly finance minister.«²⁰

Now, we can return to Marx, but with the knowledge that even in popular metaphorical language, the language of time and place, we can find the theoretical function emerging from the aesthetic function of metaphor. But let us return to the background of Marx's metaphor of dance.

It is quite obvious that Orpheus, or Jericho, or the fiddler background of the metaphor disqualifies our idea of the theoretical function of metaphor in Marx's language. The orphic function of theory is not its self-referential and self-explanatory, but its mythical guiding function. And that is just what Marx wants to avoid and deny. He did not believe in any strictly enlightening role of theory, as his marxist successors do.

We can find a different clue to this metaphor if we reconsider the fact that Marx wrote his dissertation, a philosophical one, at a time when the philosophy of nature was still an interior and organic moment of the universal system of sciences (Wissenschaften). His dissertation as read today seems to be partly philosophical and partly scientific; and his main problem with Epicurus and Democritus lies in the field of physics, in spite of a typical focus on the problem of liberty. Marx was very keen on the natural sciences all his life, and another set of his metaphors comes from this field. The nineteenth century was the golden age of acoustics. The founder of modern acoustics, and of the resonance theory of hearing, Helmholtz, was Marx's contemporary (1821—1894). In Marx's youth and student days, the problems

¹⁹ Giselle Freund: *La photographie et la société*, Seuil, Paris 1974.

²⁰ E. Nevill Jackson: *Silhouettes. A History and Dictionary of Artists*, Dover Publications, New York 1981, p. 145.

of the theory of resonance were public knowledge. A well-known case is that noted by Hallwag in 1780, explaining that singing vowels into the strings of a piano induces them to vibrate in other and different vowels. More significant is what happened in Germany in 1825; it became one of the most important cases for the theory of resonance and forced vibrations. On St. Nicolas Day in 1825, on the Nienburg suspension bridge there was a crowd of gaping bystanders, when a military band marched across the bridge. Cold fest and mass psychosis induced the crowd to jump to the rhythm of the music. The bridge collapsed and in the cold waves of the Wesser 50 people died. Of course, this became wide-spread news of colloquial interest of great importance, a kind of proof of how the artefacts of man can turn against him and how God's will is comprehensible only to himself; and, on the other hand, it was a cause of deeper research into the field of resonance, and in the end, even caused the reform of the bridge marching step in European armies of the time (a so called mixed step was introduced).²¹ I believe that Marx's metaphor may be explained from this background, which is only superficially similar to those of Orpheus or Jericho. Here we have the strange and uncontrollable force of self-destruction caused by the mass hysteria of the general public, and the role of rhythmic music is to enforce vibration not with his own power, but through the coincidence of three rhythmic pulsations: the music, the crowd and the bridge on which they all stand. It could be expressed with another of Marx's figures: »It means that we shall develop for the world new principle from the existing principles of the world.«²²

The historical function of the theory, here expressed by the aesthetic self-referential function of metaphor, does not lie in the field of hidden theoretical truth which, like a shot from a pistol, jumps from the esoterical laboratory into the world and makes people forget their own interests and life rhythms. Its power is in the possibility of digging into this rhythm, discovering in its tune the possible cause of its own destruction.

We could now, of course, mention all the other expressions — most often metaphorical ones — which have in Marx's work the same function. But, just one example of the same kind might be enough:

»Nobody will take this as a ground for believing that a *reform of the money market* can abolish the *foundations* of internal or external private trade. But within bourgeois society, the society rests on *exchange value*, there arise relations of circulation as well as of production which are so many mines to explode it. (A mass of antithetical forms of the social unity, whose antithetical character can never be abolished through quiet metamorphosis. On the other hand, if we did not find concealed in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations of exchange prerequisite for a classless society, then all attempts to explode it would be quixotic.)«²³

Metaphor is used as a means of exploding the verbal, literal, positive function of the language, which suggests that theory and praxis can meet

²¹ Miroslav Adlešič: *Svet zvoka in glasbe*, Mladinska knjiga, Ljubljana 1964, p. 31.

²² Karl Marx: *Early Writings*, Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, London 1977, p. 208 (»Letters from the »Franco-German Yearbooks«, Marx to Ruge: Kreuznach, September 1843).

²³ Karl Marx: *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Rough Draft), Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, London 1973, p. 159.

on the usual terms of communication. Marx opposes the wind-mill fighting function of theory, denies the rights of theory in the proverbial ivory tower, and takes into consideration the controversial outcome of Hegel's philosophy. So, let's summarize:

Metaphor is supposed to be a picturesque expression of reality. Analysis is concentrated upon the object of metaphor, i. e., upon the astonishing fact that the expression 'being a rose' has to be translated as 'being beautiful' or different. Many theoreticians treat metaphor as an artistic figure, unimportant for the cognitive and informative function of language. Metaphor could not be explained as 'true', because nobody could be so naive. In fact, on the contrary, metaphor should be treated seriously. It is, indeed, a form of aesthetic function, and as such does not involve only the truth about the signified object. The aesthetic function diverts attention from the signified to the mode of signifying. It is a form of self-relating and self-explaining in language which turns the recipient's attention to the sign itself. In theoretical discourse, metaphor is not just a colloquial cosmetic, decoration. It is a form of self-reflection and self-reference which turns the recipient from the object of theory to the theory itself. Marx's metaphors have been treated as part of his personal style, some of his categories (such as 'basis' and 'superstructure') have been revealed as metaphors (Lodovico Silva). But, it was not sufficiently stressed that Marx most often uses metaphors as a manner of uncovering the function of theory, which develops »der Welt aus den Prinzipien der Welt neue Prinzipien«. So we cannot merely say: These are only metaphors, so don't use them as theoretical categories!«. We must consider their theoretical function, we must take precisely the metaphorical structure of the theoretical discourse seriously. Marx does not use picturesque expressions instead of clear and strict terms just for the art of it, or even because of lack of theoretical solutions, but as a means of theoretical self-reflection and self-orientation. Metaphor is the 'truth' of the method: a concrete abstraction which makes visible the potential of theory as a material force, being more than just an accurate reflection of objects.

Finally, a small additional hypothesis for further analysis. In Prawer's work we find many arguments for the belief that Marx had a kind of classical realistic, sometimes mezzoromantic taste, and that accounts for the usual artistic and literary references he uses in his works.²⁴ But, what Prawer really shows, and admits to, is only the literary knowledge exposed in Marx's works, his personal world literature. He does not really analyse the mode of use, the functional role of this background. It will be recalled that for the baroque and rococo taste the metaphor is the highest and most rational point of language (quite opposed to our positivist concept): because, all other artistic means translate the notion into the word, whereas metaphor translates words into notions. The distinctive part of baroque metaphorical taste is the oxymoron, a figure of speech with a pointed conjunction of seeming or real contradictions, a figure of paradox. On the other hand, the baroque and especially rococo use of metaphor builds whole sets and complicated structures into metaphorical systems of contradictions and paradoxes.²⁵

²⁴ Siegbert S. Prawer: *Karl Marx and World Literature*, Oxford Univeristy Press 1976.

²⁵ Boris Paternu: »Barok pri Francetu Prešernu«, *Književni listi, Delo, Ljubljana*, part I. Oct. 22, 1987 p. 10; part II. Oct. 29, 1987 p. 6.

Marx's metaphorical use of language, and especially literary and other metaphorical backgrounds, is still to be analysed. As a hypothesis, the idea of his possible baroque use of metaphor could be taken into consideration — of course, not in its stylistic but its functional aspect. Here we are also in the familiar neighbourhood of the avant-garde use of language and its aesthetic possibilities and functions, aimed at the destruction of one-dimensional narrative and the flat language of the bourgeois culture of the 19th century.