Characteristics of Meta-Referential Discourse in Arts

Odette ARHIP*

Key-words: *metaization, meta-reference, discourse, art, metalepsis*

This contribution brings in some of the characteristics of meta-referential discourses. The disciplines connected with arts or media and their related discourses are abundant in meta-representations. This assertion may be found in many theoretical and practical approaches. The early pursuits can be tracked before the 1970s with reference to theatre and literature. Quite slowly, in the following decades, some incentive tackling of the problem may be mentioned: meta-film (Stam 1985), meta-painting (Stoichiță 1998), meta-architecture (Witting 1979), meta-music or "music on music" (Kramer 1999). All these point to the fact that meta-reference is a transmedial phenomenon. Actually, the concepts and the toolbox used for fiction are applied in other fields as well. Regarding the basic terms, "meta-reference" and "metaization" are used in a synonymous way, but there is an inclination towards "metaization" when referring to the process itself. "Meta-reference" focuses on the result of the process. "Meta-reference" is also usually preferred because it suits to non-textual media.

Hetero-reference points to the reality outside the signs. Self-reference reveals the capacity of the signs to disclose aspects about them or about the whole system of signs (Nöth *et al.* 2008). Meta-reference establishes a second superior level, a meta-level from which both reality and the content of the represented reality may be seen. During the 20th century, logic and linguistics coined a radical difference between *language as an object* and *meta-language*, as Bertrand Russell pointed out fiercely (Nöth 2000: 53).

Taking into account this large theoretical background, the present contribution aims to synthesize general characteristics of meta-referential discourses in several genres. In these particular type of discourse, many authors prefer to make mention of performative reference (Iser 1993) with special relation to Shakespeare's poetic work (cf. *Sonnet* 18). Performative references consider contexts in which something refers to itself in a kind of auto-poetic use. Meta-referential discourses assert the necessity to impose a more frequent use of special terms as: *exophoric*[1], *endophoric*[2]. For example, many of the paintings of Goya or Magritte have

* The Ecological University of Bucharest, Romania.

[1] An exophoric element points out towards something outside the text.

[2] An endophoric element points out towards something within the text.

BDD-A1077 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 16:59:47 UTC)

endophoric elements (Stoichiță 2008). The endophoric reference implies *anaphoric reference*[3], *cataphoric reference*[4], *allophoric elements*[5] and *autophoric elements*[6] (Kallmeyer *et al.* 1986). All these elements apply to the process of making (*poien*) talking about themselves (Mahler 2006). Good and different examples are offered by Ashbery's poem *Paradoxes and Oxymorons* which is up for review in many volumes and by photorealistic paintings[7], the latter being fixed upon rendering the process of accomplishing the work than its subject matter.

Another characteristic of meta-refential discourses may be identified in the presence of metalepsis (Genette 1972). This concept has been extensively discussed and illustrated or it even produced a label-notion for the baroque age – *world as a stage*. We may offer here few others new of date examples: Michael Cunnings' novel *The Hours*, Johnny Cash's biography *Man in White*, Velásquez' s painting *Las Meninas* or E. Manet's self-portrait (Stoichiță 2007). We may also add an example from Romanian literature: Camil Petrescu's novel *Patul lui Procust*. In this Romanian novel, a metaleptic comment appears in the depiction of a street and a house being refurbished. The character stepped out of the novel in order to contemplate the makeover of a modern narrative method to build a novel. A similar, but very subtle attempt can be discovered in Eminescu's romantic poem, *Lacul*. The audience or the readers have to face an ontological question: "Am I of fictitious nature?" or "Am I real?" Theatre provides many examples of impromptu taken as part of the artistic event by the audience. On the contrary, contemporary political encounters give forth to scarce occasions in which real spectators believe by mistake that non-fictitious actions are part of the play (e.g. in 2002, Chechen rebels took the cast and the audience of Bolschoi Theatre hostage and the audience first perceived the masked men as actors). The last two samples cannot be considered as examples for metalepsis because they were not intentional. Intention stands for a compulsory characteristic of metalepsis. Anyway, the influence of metalepsis comes to light also in role-playing games or illustrated children's literature (Klimek 2009). Generally speaking, children's imagination usually rules over the real world crediting with drawn and told fairies. The concern for *poiesis* is not explicit and it is not important for the readers.

A quite special art, the music, displays also meta-referential characteristics. Since previous centuries, the titles (or the para-texts) have been used with a meta-referential connotation. At the very beginning, it was only an intention to evoke the diverse tendencies or the history of the genre (e.g. *La Valse* by Ravel – the waltzes written by Strauss or Chopin lack the definite article which defines the embedded genre; *Sinfonia* by Berio – a work with postmodern traces; *German Requiem* by Brahms, *Misa* by Schnebel). We draw attention to the first of our examples as the definite article, absent at other composers, implies here that the genre is embedded[8].

[3] Something has already been introduced.

[4] Something referred to will appear.

[5] Something is linked to other elements in the text.

[6] The element designates nothing else except itself.

[7] E.g. Richard Estes, *Bus Reflections.*

[8] "J'ai conçu cette œuvre comme une espèce d'apothéose de la valse viennoise à laquelle se mêle, dans mon esprit, l'impression d'un tournoiement fantastique et fatale", M. Ravel (Marnat 1986).

BDD-A1077 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 16:59:47 UTC)

Recently, this kind of titles have become frequent in other domains as well including the same generality of a concept, so that meta-reference comes into prominence (e.g. *Film* by Samuel Beckett, *A Movie* by Bruce Conner, *Novelle* by Goethe – Danuser 2009). All these para-texts induce the audience to recall the diachronic context of the genre. In the same manner, the composer Berio wrote *Opera*, the title having at least threefold meaning: the plural form of *work*, the common denotative meaning and that which designates the genre. A justified parallel may be marked out with Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*. At the same time, all the authors got through time periods, self-projecting as a history of art *in nuce*. Recently, several composers have created monumental musical works encompassing all the major genres and the significant traditions (e.g. *Polyphonie X* by Pierre Boulez; *String Quartet im Raum* by Schnebel). As many contributions have already argued, these attempts can be seen as a kind of meta-genre because the usual characteristics of only one genre are interlaced with those of others due to the normal necessity to adapt to a modern new apprehension (Krause 2005). A kind of conclusion compels: for music, besides other arts, is more difficult to deal with meta-referential issue.

Meta-referential discourses almost always imply heterogeneous elements mixed unexpectedly, a characteristic richly encountered in architecture. The variety of meanings is an intention and frequently a success. Probably, Charles Moore's *Piazza d'Italia* from New Orleans is the best known and a very good example. It was meant to meet several objectives: to achieve a kind of cultural lobby for the Italian community living in that city (Cf. the inscription *Popoli Italiani Novae Orleaniensae*), to offer a new *agora* for the multicultural citizens and to vivify the building activities in the town. Moore has also introduced not only a noble combination of Roman Antiquity and Italian Renaissance, but an emerging new-built element from stone and water (*wetopes*). He highlighted meta-referential elements from Giorgio de Chirico's paintings – *Piazza d'Italia* and *Gare de Montparnasse. La Mélancolie du départ*. Furthermore, this architectural complex renders the shape of a boot, typical for Italy, when it is seen from above. On the other hand, the water-play of the central fountain reveals a self-portrait of the author. These kinds of quotations from other artistic fields stand as illustrative of meta-referential discourse. Architecture points out another observation: meta-reference may be implicit or explicit. Especially, from this point of view, architecture imposes as an art having all the qualities of the language, as a German author underlined in *Inquiries into the Character of Buildings*, during the 18th century (Guillerme 1977). Quite often the architecture combines history with nature within urban landscape. Meta-design may be observed in several re-establishments. The general principle applied is that of furcation, a term which originates in Latin. The access and the internal circulation are in accordance with this principle (e.g. Ort Castle). The design of the entrance construction and of the old building, clad in perforated steel sheets, serves as an indication, focusing the gaze and framing the surroundings nature for the visitors.

Photography is another new domain in which meta-reference has appeared. Some photographers have started to organize complex photographic counterparts to famous museums and architectural elements covering many historical periods (e.g. *Museum Photographs*, *Making Time* by Thomas Struth). These pioneers of meta-

BDD-A1077 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 16:59:47 UTC)

reference in photographs have intended to create an *art space* very unconventional and open for dialogues between the viewers and the classical craft. In these contexts, a special type of *mise en abyme* may be found: a painting within a picture. There are also examples of photographs in which the people visiting the museums are eternalized as well (e.g. Candida Höfer's seria of Louvre Museum) and this submits another kind of *mise en abyme*: an *art space* within an *art space*; the museum is in the photographs and the photographs of the paintings are in the museum. It is obvious that the photographs fancy themselves as works of art. The spectators and the viewers join each others in this particular act of reception (Putman 2001).

All these major characteristics can be identified and examined in older or newer meta-referential discourses. They have appeared even in computer games, comics or radio audio-literature etc. This contribution is only an introduction into the matter further investigations and analyses being expected and necessary. The meta-dimension of arts is an incentive subject.

References

Genette 2004: Gérard Genette, *Métalepse: De la figure à la fiction*, Paris, Seuil, Collection Poétique.

Genette 1972: Gérard Genette, *Figures III*, Paris, Seuil.

Guillerme 1977: Jacques Guillerme, *The Idea of Architectural Language: A Critical Inquiry. Oppositions*, in "A Journal of Ideas and Criticism in Architecture", 10/1977, p. 21–26.

Iser 1993: Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*, Baltimore, MD Johns Hopkins UP.

Kallmeyer 1986: Werner Kallmeyer *et al.*, *Lektürekolleg zur Textlinguistik*, vol. I, Königstein/Ts., Athenäum.

Klimek 2009: Sonia Klimek, *Metalepsis and Its (Anti-)Illusionist Effects in the Arts, Media and Role-Playing Games*, New York, Rodopi.

Kramer 1999: Lawrence Kramer, *Beyond Words and Music: An Essay on Songfulness*, in Walter Bernhart, Steven Paul Scher, Werner Wolf (eds.), *Word and Music Studies: Defining the Field. Procedeeings of the First International Conference on Word and and Music Studies*, Amsterdam/Atlanta, Rodopi, p. 303–319.

Krause 2005: Andreas Krause, *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Kassel, Bärenreiter.

Nöth 2007: Winfried Nöth, *Self-Reference in the Media: The Semiotic Framework*, in Winfried Nöth, Nina Bishara (eds.), *Self-Reference in the Media*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter.

Mahler 2006: Andreas Mahler, *Towards a Pragmasemiotics of Poetry*, in "Poetica", 38/2006, p. 34–47.

Marnat 1986: Marcel Marnat, *Maurice Ravel*, Paris, Fayard.

Putman 2001: James Putman, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, London, Thames&Hudson.

Schmeling 1977: Manfred Schmeling, *Das Spiel im Spiel: Ein Beitrag zur vergleichenden Literaturkritik*, Rheinfelden, Schäube.

Stam 1985: Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, New York, CUP.

Stoichiță 1998: Victor Stoichiță, *L'Instauration du tableau: Métapeinture à l'aube des temps modernes*, Munich, Fink.

Stoichiță 2007: Victor Stoichiță, *Vezi? Despre privire în pictura impresionistă*, trad. Mona Antohi, Ruxandra Demetrescu, Gina Vieru, Bucureşti, Humanitas.

BDD-A1077 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 16:59:47 UTC)

Witting 1979: Susan Witting, *Architecture about architecture: Self-Reference as a Type of Architectural Signification*, in Seymour Chatman, Umberto Eco, Jean-Marie Klinkenberg (eds.), *A Semiotic Landscape*, The Hague – Paris – New York, Mouton.
Wolf (ed.) 2009: Werner Wolf (ed.), *Metareference across Media. Theory and Case Study*, Amsterdam – New York, Rodopi.

Abstract

The phenomenon of metaization, namely explicit or implicit auto-reflexivity, has been theoretically approached only in the latest two decades, although it has been present since quite distant historical epochs. The present contribution presents several general characteristic aspects which are connected to the apparently new domain of meta-refentiality. The interest towards this theoretic field resembles, to a certain extent, to that developed for intertextuality some decades ago. This contribution does not regard only the traditional arts such as literature in general, poetry, painting, but also the others in which meta-referentiality has been spotted later. At this point, we have in mind architecture, sculpture, music, theatre, film, photography, animated cartoon, advertisement, computer games, etc. Our contribution develops some theoretical aspects along with the various modalities which are especially proper for genres approaching meta-referentiality later. Each presentation is provided with concise commentaries and examples. A synthesis of the already known data regarding metaization is attempted. The performative aspects of the creation process are brought forward as well. The present contribution intends to be an introduction to this domain which is not vey well known or debated in our country. A special practical exception still can be mentioned. We refer to Victor Ieronim Stoichita's very interesting volumes concerning painting and sculpture, his books being recently translated into Romanian as well. Details and examples are offered for all kind of arts because this paper means to establish a fertile premise for further Romanian analyses and approaches of this challenging field.

BDD-A1077 © 2012 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-26 16:59:47 UTC)