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THE SEMIOTICS OF THEATRE

Patrice Pavis

This article is reprinted with permission from the French original published in Versus (No. 21, 1978). It is one of a number of papers published dealing with five specific questions posed by Marco de Marinis on the semiotics of theatre. The version which appears was translated by Tjaart Potgieter.

1. What is, in your opinion, the proper relation between the "semiotics of theatre" and "theatre studies" (history of theatre, theory of theatre, theatrical aesthetics, etc)?

This question brings to mind the famous debate, instigated by Saussure and continued by Barthes, about the relationship between linguistics and semiology: are linguistics only part of "this general science", semiology, of which the laws "shall be applicable to linguistics" (Saussure), or does semiology, on the other hand, model itself on the general pattern of linguistics (Barthes)? The semiology of the theatre is a recent discipline - its theoretical formulation can be placed historically (the linguistic Circle of Prague in the 'thirties) - and it is to be expected that it should try to take its place in the spectrum of studies of the performance, without invalidating the other approaches, but also not allowing itself to be devalued to the rank of a methodological "gadget" which is content to employ linguistic terminology metaphorically in connection with some mythical "theatrical communication", and sheds no new light on the performance.

In spite of the terms sciences du spectacle or Theaterwissenschaft, it should be clear from the outset that "theatre studies" could by no means claim a scientific status comparable to that of linguistics. The semiology of theatre, therefore, can neither use, by extension, the rigorous conceptual apparatus of linguistical studies, nor share their epistemological objective. What follows is that we need to ask whether the semiology of theatre is an autonomous discipline (like, for example, sociology, botany, etc.) or rather a method and an attitude towards the performance. In the latter hypothesis, semiology would not duplicate the existing approaches, but would integrate itself with them by assimilating into its theory the known results of those disciplines. It should be at the same time the propaedeutics and epistemology of the various theatre studies, reflecting on their conditions of validity, and the possibility of using the results of one area to interpret the other.

The semiology of theatre could be differentiated from other theatre studies as follows:

Interpretative criticism and performance reviewing: at their best, they "select" from the performance and text certain indices - details of production, of costume, meanings suggested by the text, the actors' performances - to build up a total meaning, discovering in the chosen signs redundancies or contradictions, confirming or refuting the proposed interpretation.

Of course, this procedure should not be disqualified by allegations of subjectivity or impressionism; rather we should recognize it as unconscious, "wild" semiology, concerned with reacting to the performance as a receiver who judges only what is perceived. What is lacking in this approach for it to be considered as semiology? Only (but this is considerable) an explanation of its analytical procedures. The selection of signs is, in fact, done without considering the problems of breaking the performance down into significant systems (découpage), of the relation between signifier and signified, of the hierarchy of signs and their possible permutations, or of the integration of the sign into the total meaning. There is no clear distinction made between the levels of "sense" (Sinn or relation between signifier and signified, or between the signs themselves) and "meaning" (Bedeutung or relation between sign and referent, between the work of art and represented reality), so that one precedes from considerations of structural coherence of the work to remarks on what the performance reveals about our everyday reality, without examining, a fortiori, the relationship between the two wholes.

Theatre history and the study of external conditions prevailing at the genesis of the work have contributed largely to the development of semiology, but in a negative way. The reaction against this type of approach has been so great as to make semiology often appear to be an anti-history of theatre, preoccupied with the final and "actual" result of the production (mise en scène) and rejecting totally the archaeological dimension of theatrical signs. The advent of structuralism has confirmed the tendency to dismiss research into the origins and historical development of theatrical forms, in order to concentrate on the internal and synchronic functioning of the system of the performance. Biographical anecdotes about authors "vulgar" sociology which regards the work as a mere reflection of socio-economic conditions, and the isolated explanation of historical facts yielded by the text have all definitively been excluded from the semiological method. It would, however, be to the detriment of theatrical semiology to deprive it of historical apparatus, even at the level of synchronical analysis of the performance. It is revealing that there is at present a tendency in structural linguistics to return to History in full force, in an attempt to go beyond the Saussurian opposition between langue and parole i.e. between "social system, independent of the individual" and "individual act of will and intelligence" (Saussure). We should refuse, therefore, to see in the parole - in theatre, the concrete realization of a work and a particular performance - a purely free and individual usage of ideological, aesthetical and theatrical codes by the author or director. For example, in the analysis of characters' dialogue, we can attempt to determine how it is influenced by the discourse formations of a certain ideology or a certain historical period, thus replacing the so-called "free" discourse of the character in the framework of its historical determinants.

The analysis of theatrical discourse could take inspiration from the very precise existing studies on social formations and enunciation (R Robin, M Pécheux, O Ducrot). One could rightly expect an explanation of the "stage

formations" of even the visual signs of the performance: why this setting, this dramatic space, these social and physical distances between characters? Where does this technique or stage object come from? Why the "smoke", the mirrors, the tiles, the quotations in original language, and all the other tics in the Paris productions of 1977? The answers to these questions will inevitably also clarify the synchronic arrangement of signs in a performance.

Dramaturgy in its contemporary theoretical meaning asks how and according to which temporality the materials of the plot are disposed in the textual and stage space. It studies both the ideological and formal structures of the work, the dialectical tension between a stage form and its ideological content, and the specific mode of reception of a performance by the spectator. In its wish not to separate dramaturgy from ideology, i.e. the formal means of transmission and the contents to be transmitted, the dramaturgical approach obviously ties up with semiology, which is also concerned with accounting for the articulation of a total signifier and its corresponding signified. But whereas dramaturgy remains at a very general level in this endeavour, by considering primarily the written text and textual and scenic macrostructures, semiology attempts the comparative operation at all levels of the performed work, and more particularly at the level of stage systems. Its methodology is also inverse, since it sets out from stage signs to reconstruct, by comparing, adding-up and checking the redundancies of signifying systems, the *double system of form and content*. Finally, and most importantly, dramaturgy remains entangled in the Hegelian problem of content and form ('True works of art are those of which the content and form are seen to be rigorously identical ...; content is nothing but the transformation of content into form' - Logik der Wissenschaft). If Hegel is concerned with a dialectical relationship between a form which is nothing but the expression of a content, and a content which does not exist unless expressed in a certain form, in practice it is extremely difficult to define form and content dialectically. That is why dramaturgical studies of a work actually proceed, in spite of Hegel's warning, either from a certain "world vision" which finds artistic expression in a certain way, or from the observation of forms to which certain contents are afterwards attributed. In semiological terms, we could say that the dramaturgical approach presupposes knowledge of the aesthetic or ideological code, according to which the engendering of the message is then explained. Instead of explaining everything by means of a ready-made structure, semiology aims to determine which structuration of the performance the spectator can set up, to what extent meaning is the object of an active elaboration by the spectator, and how the recognition of signifieds and signifiers, respectively related to signifiers and signifieds contained in the work, takes place.

The aesthetics or poetics of theatre would aim at formulating the laws determining composition and functioning of text and stage; it always aims at integrating the theatrical system into a larger whole - genre, literary theory, arts system, aesthetical category. This reduces the theatrical work to a particular case and inevitably ties it to some philosophical system which is often only vaguely defined. This is why aesthetic theories of the theatre are most frequently normative, proceeding from an a priori definition of the "essence" of theatre, and judging the work in terms of its conformity to the proposed model: the theatrical genre is, for instance, defined as centring upon conflict - which disqualifies epic theatre - or formulated as either a bastardised art (an irregular combination of codes) or total and specific (the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk). Semiology goes to work on a different level, since it is more pragmatically interested in the internal functioning of the performance, without prejudging its integration in some predetermined aesthetical theory. It is obvious, though, that the break-down into systems (découpage), the search for minimal units, the

relative importance accorded to text or stage, etc., are always the consequences of aesthetic choices, and belong, therefore, to pre-aesthetic considerations.

The theory of theatre can only with difficulty be distinguished from aesthetics; it is aimed at finding a non-normative theorization of theatrical phenomena. Following the example of the theory of literature or theory of "literarity" (Jakobson), the theory of theatre is concerned with theatricality, i.e. with specific aesthetic properties of the stage and established historical forms. We are, nevertheless, still far from a unified theory of theatre, because the problems to be formulated include the description of textual structure and of its performance, as well as the reception of the performance. Semiology and theatrical theory, therefore, unite, if not in method, at least in the purpose of their approaches.

To conclude, semiology, far from conflicting with other "theatre studies", integrates them and integrates with them; this methodological reciprocity should allow us to make better use of the results of older disciplines, while confirming at the same time their scientific status.

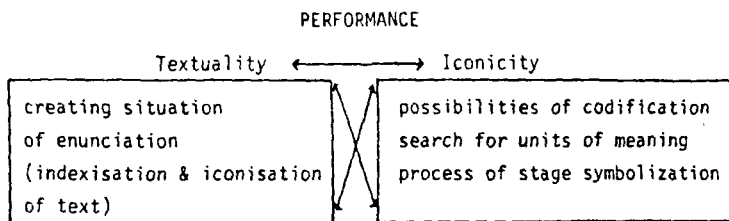
2. Until now the semiological approach to theatre has generally awarded priority to the written text, or textual level, over the performance of the text (*mise en scène*), or performance level, by considering the linguistic-literary element as the most important and significant amongst all the constituent elements of the theatre. It has even been said that the literary text functions as "invariable element" or "deep structure" of the performance. Do you agree with this position, or do you think that a semiotics of the theatre worthy of its name should necessarily be concerned with all the elements of theatre (theoretically placed on an equal level), and especially, that it should redirect its attention from the textual level to the performance level?

Since theatrical semiology has arisen in reaction against textual "imperialism" and the habit of regarding theatre as nothing but a literary genre, it may seem paradoxical to talk about a semiology of the text. When we do, it must be born in mind that the text has been restored to its place of one system among the systems of the whole of the performance. Then the question is no longer whether "textual semiology (is) opposed to performance semiology", but whether a text can be analysed semiotically before (without) the performance during which the text is enunciated. Aren't we in fact engaged in performance semiology when we reflect on the text's "situation of enunciation", and, in consequence, on the production (*mise en scène*) as a whole?

To avoid a fruitless controversy between the defendants of text or stage, I have suggested a model inspired by Peirce's typology of signs, which articulates theatrical signs according to their dominant function (iconic/ indexical/symbolic) and the nature of their relationship with the referent.¹

Instead of an irreconcilable opposition between textuality and iconicity, we should accept a "dialectical tension between dramatic text and actor, a tension based above all on the fact that the acoustic elements of the linguistic sign are an integral part of the vocal resources utilized by the actor".²

The key diagram, therefore, is no longer: Text \longleftrightarrow Stage, but:



The inter-relationship between icon and symbol becomes apparent as soon as one can follow, in the performance, the circuit of codification (of the stage, of visual elements which are supposedly "non-symbolisable") and that of decodification (of the linguistic text, which, in the theatre, cannot be understood except "visually", i.e. in the situation).

According to this conception, the text is not an "invariable element" or "deep structure" of the performance, but as much "to be created" as the production (*mise en scène*). What semiology has to explain, therefore, is the interaction between the two systems, the "construction" they can impose on each other; that which can be made of a text, and what the stage situation can say to it. What P Gullì Pugliatti³ calls the pre-textual objective (which "precedes" the linguistic transcription and stage transcodification) could, in this case, serve as mediator in the classic opposition. From the outset, however, we would have to clarify to what extent this objective is determined jointly by spatial and linguistic considerations, that is, to question again theoretically the theatricality of dramatic expression and the "discourse" of the stage.

If all the stage systems (including the textual) are equal "by right" - the stage invoking all of them to create its meaning - that does not mean that they are all always to be found on the same level or in the same relation to each other. The positivist procedure of chopping the whole into numerous systems, tacitly assuming that they function in parallels, does not allow us to go beyond simple description of the performance or to clarify the spectator's constitutive act of understanding. We have to choose a hierarchy of codes and sub-codes, keeping well in mind that the choice of a hierarchy itself is made according to an aesthetic or ideological code. This is the case, for example, with the traditional concept of action as a "unique current" which "fuses word, actor, costume, décor and music, (a current) which goes through these by passing from the one to the other or through several at once".⁴ The choice of "action" (or of "narrativity") corresponds to an ideologico-aesthetical code which obliges the spectator to reconstruct a logic of actions, linked to the linearity of the verbal message and to the cultural code of the Western narrative tradition.

Rather than proposing a static hierarchy or randomly according primacy to any signifying system, we can distinguish basic systems or "articulators" and "grafted" systems - those which are "articulated". Thus, in T Kantor's "Classe morte", text and music are based on ("articulated on") the classroom desks and the make-up/bodies of the characters. The musical and textual systems are super-imposed, because if they were eliminated, the total meaning/dead class/ could still be constructed. The meta-language indicating all the relations between articulator/articulated still has to be elaborated, as well as a theory of the linear break-down (découpage) and the modification of "articulations" during the course of a performance.

3. The theatre specialist (and, therefore, also the semiologist of theatre) finds himself in a rather paradoxical and unenviable position: he must study an object (the performance) which, as such, is never present. Indeed, none or almost none of the constituent elements of the performance exists beyond the ephemeral duration of the performance itself; nothing remains but the written text, when that exists. The following question arises: how do you think the semiotics of theatre could resolve the problem of reconstructing the sign systems which are used by a performance and which disappear with it (paralinguistic codes, codes of gesture, spatial codes, codes of stage design, etc.)? Of what use can audiovisual recordings be in this regard? (A question as yet applicable only to a few contemporary productions.)

What do we mean by "reconstruction of sign systems"? It is obviously impossible, even for a short sequence, to reconstitute all the systems of a performance. A magnetoscopic recording reconstitutes nothing - it merely records the "flux of signification" of the stage event, without isolating or structuring the various systems. It is a mere transcription or transcoding which, at best, provides information about the final product's composition of signs, but none about the signs' productivity, i.e. their reception and elaboration by the spectator. A real reconstruction of sign systems, on the contrary, should consist of defining the systems, determining their signifying units, and establishing the relations between units inside the same system, as well as between parallel systems. Rather than try to identify the signs of a system exhaustively, we must stress the important moments in the signifying sequence and clarify the various stages of the process of semiosis. If we take the example of the code of gestures, it is immediately apparent that it would be both impossible and useless to notate in some system of codification or another, all the gestural positions of actors. In the case of the biomechanics exercises photographed by Meyerhold⁵ (representing an actor in various positions, the consecutive logic of which is unknown from the start), all that can be determined is a code of rules governing the whole group of positions:

1. extreme tension of the body concentrating several incomplete movements in time and space (Meyerhold's principle of "taylorism");
2. body postures suggesting possibilities of movement without actually initiating them;
3. fixed co-ordinations of parts of the body, e.g. body bent forward - arms arched in a circle - head sunk forward, etc.

At present semiology must be satisfied with formulating some general laws of the code, attempting afterwards to reconcile this code with other systems. Often the break-down into systems does not coincide with the level of the smallest possible units. In this case the choice of an articulating system (cf. above) will reveal the "grafting" of other codes. Although the break-down into codes is done according to the matter of expression, the signifying systems must be translated into corresponding signifiers before they can be compared, reconciled, or their articulation on an articulating system studied. In this way we can avoid chopping the performance into a mass of heterogeneous signs, which happens when it is broken down into parallel systems.

This presents a more concise procedure than the inverse method used by Greimas, who starts by creating a general model of meaning, proceeds to the narrative level, then to an "actantial" model, and finally specifies and

refines his description to encompass the actual linguistic and visual manifestation. We would have to use one method to verify the other, but the "gap between manifested signs and all that precedes them must still be filled.

4. Do you think that semiotic analysis of the performance should re-examine the old aesthetical problem of specificity? In other words, do you think that the various "artistic languages" (and amongst them that of the theatre) constitute "combinations of specific codes", or, on the contrary, "combinations of non-specific codes"? Or do they combine non-specific and specific codes?
5. On the whole, do you think that at some stage a "formalization" (*mise en forme*), even if it were only of some fragments, of the performance-text (or of one of its codes), will be possible; or do you think, on the contrary, that the idea of "a-codification" expressed by Metz on cinema should be extended to the theatre also?

The "specificity" of theatre, the "language of theatre" or "discourse of the stage", "theatricality" - these are all metaphors, made attractive by the perspective of a discovery rather than by their actual meaning. Yet, nothing prevents us from verifying if semiology, which hopes to discover some rules of the organization and interaction of codes, can circumscribe a minimal group of specifically theatrical properties. But we shouldn't rest content with a semiological reformulation of the innumerable definitions of theatre; the "minimal" specificity could, in fact, be defined as the simultaneous presence - in the case of spoken theatre - of textuality and iconicity (i.e. linguistic arbitrariness and stage iconicity). This opposition is expressed variously in the antitheses acting vs. linguistic text, mime vs. logos, visual vs. acoustic, action through thought vs. action through gesture, and symbolic structure vs. uncodifiable event. The theatrical sign has a syntactical-semantical dimension (relation between sign and object, between signs themselves) as well as a pragmatic dimension (relation between stage iconicity and deixis/enunciation).

In other words, the problem is to decide: (a) whether there is a specifically theatrical sign, i.e. a unit in which stage iconisation and textual symbolisation could blend to form an irresolvable union which would be specifically theatrical; (b) whether the theatrical performance is a construction of specifically theatrical signs or, on the contrary, a "collage" or synthetic amalgam of the various stage arts (e.g. the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk) or an ensemble of systems distantiated from one another, never losing their autonomy (the Brechtian epic production).

- (a) The answer to the first question has to be, at present, negative. During a performance no theatrical sign is created in which textuality and iconicity could blend into a specifically theatrical product. The symbolic signs of the text, the visual and musical signs remain autonomous even when their combination, their disposition in the linear sequence, produces a homogenous and univocal meaning (e.g. the actor's face lit in a certain way and a certain musical refrain and mime and gesture will produce by cross-checking the signified/physical presence, demonstrative insistence/etc., but a new total and specific sign, defined by a specific signifier and the corresponding signified, will not be established). There are no "synthetic" theatrical signs in the theatre ("synthetic in the sense in which the colour green is the

"synthesis" of blue and yellow), only continuous interaction between the signifieds produced by the signifying systems. What we should examine, therefore, is the possibility of an interaction, specific to the theatre, between the codes of a performance (cf. below).

- (b) When we consider the problem of the relationship, more or less close, between the various stage arts, we are not concerned with a theoretical question involving the semiological status of codes, but with an aesthetic and ideological choice made by the director: in the Gesamtkunstwerk, where the goal is a synthesis of the arts, the director strives to produce a total illusion of a self-sufficient and closed stage world. For the Brechtian production "the actors, the set designers, the make-up artists, the costume designers, the musicians and the choreographers place their arts at the disposal of the communal enterprise without giving up, for all that, their independence" (Little Organum, par. 70). Brecht's refusal to blend the stage materials into a unique experience (Erlebnis) is to be explained by his wish to show the process of production of the performance and to facilitate for the spectator the process of decoding the performance.

The term "code" requires precise definition. When speaking of theatrical codes, we often mean the codes of a semiology of communications, i.e. substitutive systems consisting of two groups of signs translatable into each other (as in the Morse code, where one single graphical sign corresponds to each letter). At other times, "code" is opposed to "message": "the traditional opposition between langue and parole can also be expressed in terms of "code" and "message", the code being, firstly, the organization which allows the composition of the message, and, secondly, that to which each element of the message is referred in order to construct its meaning".⁶ In this meaning of the term (also used by Jakobson), the code is considered the object of a reconstruction starting from the message, the discovery of the code and the reading of the message it allows being determined by the know-how of the decoder. Semiology quite frequently switches from one usage of the word to the other, considering (1) that the codes are given, and that they need only be enumerated by tracing them in the different channels of transmission, or (2) that reading the performance is the same as deciding to use a certain code instead of another, the spectator thus creating the performance by using a chosen decoding grid (Barthes, S/Z).

G Mounin has already warned against the abusive usage of "code" for "natural language", showing that a code is the result of an explicit and pre-established convention, whereas "the conventions of language are implicit, (they) are established spontaneously during the course of the communication itself".⁷

When, therefore, we speak of the "artistic languages" (which in itself requires some theoretical justification), the existence of fixed and specific theatrical codes should not be taken for granted, or they should at least be limited to explicitly formulated theatrical conventions and rules of dramatic art, in short, to a code in the technical sense of the term.

1. Amongst the "lexicalised" specific codes we could group:

- (a) general conventions of performance: the fiction of the character embodied by the actor, the stage which signifies the world, the "fourth wall" of dramatic theatre, two-dimensional space and time (in the fiction and the performance), etc..

- (b) conventions linked to genres, historical periods, character types (e.g. farce, classical drama, Harlequin).
2. The non-specific codes are, by definition, more difficult to enumerate. Here we are concerned with codes which could also be used in everyday life or in the other arts:
- (a) linguistic codes: for instance, French as a language used at the same time by Molière, in the seventeenth century and partly in the twentieth century;
 - (b) ideological or cultural codes: everything which allows the spectator to identify the system of values contained in the meaning of the play. This is the perfect type of the "hold-all" code, unstructured and unconnected with a precise linguistic or aesthetic form. It is at this level that a study of the mechanics of response (psychological, sociological, imaginative) to the performance would occur;
 - (c) code of perception: perspective, perception thresholds, etc.
3. Mixed codes (specific and non-specific): these codes do not form a distinct third category, but would result from the use of an external code (i.e. non-specific) in the theatrical situation, causing the code to be adapted to the means of expression peculiar to the stage. This brings in question again the earlier distinction, which was made, at that stage, partly as a pedagogical means of separating what appears as particular, individual usage (parole) in the performance from a group of materials (langue) derived from various fields, and of which only the combination or global structure is relevant.

For instance, in the code of gestures, it is practically impossible to disentangle signs belonging to the actor's individual and social reality from those belonging to the gestural code of the represented character. The smallest natural gesture of the actor is transformed into an element of a codified system, since it has to be understood correctly by the public. Even the linguistic text, as soon as it is uttered on stage, becomes distinct from the same text as it could exist in everyday life or another artist in system (novel, painting, etc.). As a matter of fact, the theatrical text takes on a performance value, since it is always related pragmatically to the stage and produces the action in the act itself of its enunciation.

"Formalizing the fragments of the performance text" means conceptually reconstructing an object which never exists apart from the form in which it is perceived during the performance; it also means locating the performance (and the ensemble of semiological systems) in a relationship of interpretation with the interpreting linguistic system. Indeed, as Benveniste has shown,⁸ we must distinguish between articulating systems (those "of which the semiotics only become apparent through the grid of another mode of expression"). To "formalize" the performance, which is composed of heterogeneous semiological systems (language, gesture, music, etc.), any interpretation must interpret and categorize the stage systems by means of language, which leads to a "flattening" of the performance, by eliminating the differences in the materials.

Can we envisage a "formalization" which allows the differences to

be retained? In that case, we would have to think of a system of notation codifying gesture, melody, voice, etc., and this is far from being technically easy. Also, one would not always be able to compare these codes, because their modes of codification would have nothing in common.

The only "formalizations" that have been achieved until now are the following:

- (i) formalization of the circuit of signifiers: how one system used in relation to another, producing a certain meaning, etc.⁹
- (ii) clarifying the relations between textuality and visuality: visualization of the referent; iconic and indexical signs allowing us to move from one field to the other;¹⁰
- (iii) the dialectics of sign types: icon/index vs. symbol, relationship between the pragmatic and the symbolic;
- (iv) reconstruction of a code of priority amongst the codes of the performance; distinction between articulating and articulated systems.

But the only possible verification of such a formalization remains - and this is the specific character of theatrical art - the performance of the text, the production (mise en scène) with its pragmatic choice of codes and the relative importance assigned to them and their mutual relations. This is an extreme solution, which merely resolves through praxis what the theory can only partially formulate.

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