

THE SEMIOLOGY OF THE THEATER: TWENTY-THREE CENTURIES OR TWENTY-TWO YEARS?

As with any historical study, including that of knowledge and ideas, the progress of the semiology of the theater is subject to periodicity. The aim of any division into periods is to obtain a global view, even at the price of simplifications, but it can also bring out the hidden aspects of the phenomena under study.

The semiology or semiotics of the theater, that is, the application of the idea of sign to the art of the spectacle, has a long past, in which several stages may be distinguished, and first of all those that I would call the presemiology and the protosemiology of the theater.

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

SOME PRECURSORS: PLATO, ARISTOTLE AND ST. AUGUSTINE

Let us begin with Plato. His remarks on the subject of linguistic signs are the point of departure for an entire tradition and the reference point for many philosophers. On the other hand, the abundance of his statements on the art of the theater (especially in *The Republic* and *The Laws*) as well as his reserve, indeed his hostility, with regard to spectacles are well known. However, his theoretic work concerning the theater revolves mainly around the question of imitation. His thought on the sign and on that concerning the art of the actor do not converge in Plato except indirectly, when he speaks in the *Sophist* of the vocal sign.

It is also from the angle of imitation that Aristotle, in *Poetics*, takes up the question of tragedy and comedy. If he uses the word *semeion* in this treatise σημεῖον, especially 1453a17, 1454b21, 1456a15, 1460a17, 1462b4) it is primarily in the sense of indication, proof or natural signs (for example, a scar for recognition of a character). The derivations σημαντική, σημαίνοντος are abundantly used in Chapters 20 and 21 of *Poetics* with regard to the parts of the discourse. His formulas on dramatic art and the spectacle are found alongside semiologic terms; it also happens that we find them associated in the same sentence when, in Chapter 26, Aristotle defends the tragic art that was accused of being inferior to the epic poem: “But in the first place, the accusation is not against the art of the poet but that of the actor, since the excess of exterior signs may be found just as well in the rhapsodist, like Sosistratos, or in a singer (...)”¹. In this context, the “exterior signs” are gestures, mimicry and movements on the stage.

The Stoics, among the first theoreticians of the sign and more or less the heirs of Plato and Aristotle, had the habit of citing the example of Electra and Orestes, characters in the theater, to substantiate their reasoning apropos true and false representation. This example was used again around 200 by Sextus Empiricus.

But it was only two centuries later, with St. Augustine, that the theory of the sign (*semeion* being replaced by *signum*) was

¹ 1462 a 4-7.

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closely associated with the theater. As an example we quote from *De doctrina christiana*: “Through the play of all their members actors give certain signs to the connoisseurs and, as it were, speak to the eyes of the spectators.” And the Father of the Church went on to say:

In fact, the signs made by the actors in dancing would have no meaning if they were natural and not based upon convention and support of men. Otherwise, the public crier, when in early times a mime danced, would not have announced to the Carthaginians what the dancer wanted to express. (...) Even today, when someone enters the theater without being initiated into such childishness he gives all his attention in vain, if he does not learn the meaning of the gestures of the actors from someone else. Everyone, however, seeks a certain resemblance in his way of signifying so that the signs themselves reproduce the signified thing as closely as possible. But since one thing can resemble another in many ways, such signs cannot have, with men, a determined meaning unless a unanimous support is added.²

In addition let us mention the Greek philosopher Ammonios Hermiae (5th-6th century), a commentator of Aristotle, who used an example from the theater to oppose the “symbol or sign” to simple imitation:

(...) someone who wants to give us the idea of two armies ready for battle will choose as symbols trumpet sounds, the sound of arrows shot by the warriors, as Euripides says:

*The arrows fly through the air;
the blaring trumpet gives the signal
for the bloody combat.*

He could also have presented us with raised lances, drawn swords and a thousand other images.³

We should also note that not only is his example borrowed from a dramatic work (*The Phoenicians*) but that the philosopher takes other elements of the spectacle into account in addition to the

² *De doctrina christiana*, book II:III, 4, and XXV, 38.

³ *Aristotelis “De interpretatione” commentarius*, Ch. 1.

words, namely, figurative representations (accessories or props) and sound effects. He qualifies them as symbols, considered as synonyms for signs.

17TH-18TH CENTURY

More than a thousand years had to pass in order for the multiplication of works applying the idea of signs to the art of the theater to appear. In 1616 Giovanni Bonifacio published his book *L'Arte de' cenni* in which he makes use of the double meaning of the Italian word *cenno*—sign and gesture—to compose an entire treatise on gestural semiology, with forays into the domain of costume, musical and architectural signs.

Around 1620, and especially in France, a wave of treatises arose concerning oratorical gestures, the “eloquence of the body”, primarily for the use of preachers, a wave that did not subside until the middle of the 18th century. Although it was a matter of gesture and vocal expression, the art of the actor was rarely mentioned; the absence of terminology proper to the theory of signs lead us to consider this kind of treatise as belonging to parasemiology.⁴

But the 17th century was also the epoch of the great theoreticians of the sign. Francis Bacon, in *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum* (1623) presented a general system of human knowledge (which would be taken up by the Encyclopedists). Under the heading “Logic” he gave ample space to “the art of transmitting”, a subdivision in which, along with what he calls “grammar” (and which contains the art of speaking and that of writing), he puts the “doctrine concerning the notations of things”, subdivided in its turn into “hieroglyphics and gestures” and “real characters.” These last ideas are explained in the first chapter of Book VI:

The Notes of Things then which carry a signification without the help or intervention of words, are of two kinds: one *ex congruo*, where the

⁴ Marc Angenot has given a semiologic interpretation of the works of Conrart, Bretteville, Bary, Crevier and Dinouart in his article “Les traités de l'éloquence du corps”, *Semiotica*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1973, pp. 60-82.

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note has some congruity with the notion, the other *ad placitum*, where it is adopted and agreed upon at pleasure. Of the former kind are Hieroglyphics and Gestures; of the latter the Real Characters above mentioned (...) Gestures are as transitory Hieroglyphics. For as uttered words fly away, but written words stand, so Hieroglyphics expressed in gestures pass but, expressed in pictures remain (...) In the meantime it is plain that Hieroglyphics and Gestures have always some similitude to the thing signified, and are a kind of emblems.

He expands the notion of sign in his conclusion: “as moneys may be made of other material besides gold and silver, so other Notes of Things may be coined besides words and letters”.⁵ His conception of the sign thus seems to be broad enough to include, along with gesture, other elements of theatrical representation: we know the taste of Francis Bacon for the theater; we know the pages he devoted to various forms of spectacle.

In 1668 in France, the Abbé Michel de Pure, contemporary of the logicians-linguists of Port-Royal, produced his *Idée des spectacles anciens et nouveaux*, a wide panorama of the types of spectacle since Antiquity. The learned abbé and translator of Quintilian turned to semiological terminology with special regard to ballet. Here is his definition of ballet: “It is a mute representation in which gestures and movements signify what could be expressed in words.” And he tried to penetrate the mysteries of bodily expression when he said that dance is “in a certain concerted manner and taken from natural movements which escape bodily control according to the emotions and various agitations of the soul and which against our own desires signify the interior movements that we try to hide and keep secret.” One would say a forerunner of the “psychoanalytical” approach.

In 1718 another abbé, Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, published his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, which was often reprinted during the 18th century. Commenting on Quintilian, he looked into the gestures of dancers. And he applied semiological terminology to his analyses, especially the distinction, known since St. Augustine, between natural and artificial signs (or “institutionalized signs”):

⁵ Quoted from the English edition of John M. Robertson, *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, London, G. Routledge, 1905, pp. 522-523.

The gestures that the art called *Saltatio* taught were not always those of gracefulness and if we may so put it, deprived of meaning; they were often gestures intended to signify something intelligently, speaking gestures. Now, signifying gestures are of two kinds. The ones are natural gestures and the others artificial. (...) It is rare that the natural gestures have a distinct meaning when they are made without speaking. (...) These natural gestures have only an imperfect meaning and very often even equivocal.

Thus someone who wants to express without speaking something other than emotion is forced to turn to those artificial demonstrations and gestures that do not draw their meaning from nature but from human institutions. The proof that they are artificial signs is that, like words, they are understood only in a certain area. The simplest of these gestures are only meaningful in a certain locality; elsewhere different signs are used to say the same thing. (...) Whoever wants to say through signs and without words "My father has just died" is obliged to replace by studied and different signs, different from those he would use in speaking, the words he does not say. These signs may be called artificial gestures and in Logic, *institutionalized gestures*.

And he proceeds to the art of the theater and training of the actor:

Even though words were added to gestures in normal representations in the theater, the art of the gesture was none the less taught in the schools as an art of expression, even without speaking. Thus we may believe that the professors who taught it not only suggested all the means imaginable to make themselves understood with the help of the natural gesture but that they also showed how a thought can be expressed by using institutional gestures to express it.

Let us add that Charles Batteux wrote in *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe* (1746): "All music and all dance must have a meaning. (...) Expressions in general are not in themselves natural or artificial; they are only signs." And in an anonymous work of 1751, entitled *Recherches historiques et critiques sur quelques anciens spectacles et particulièrement sur les mimes et sur les pantomimes*, we read: "Men who performed in spectacles for the people and represented through gestures, without speaking (...) knew how, through simple movements, through signs and gestures, to express in the most perfect and sensitive way all passions, all characters, all events, in short, all that was possible."

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At the beginning of the 19th century, Joseph-Marie de Gérando (or Degérando), ideologist and disciple of Condillac, published a treatise in four volumes, *Des signes et de l'art de penser considérés dans leurs rapports mutuels* (Paris, Year VIII). In his classification of signs in three types, namely indicative, imitative and figured, he used theatrical metaphor with regard to imitative signs. But we also find an analysis concerning the art of the theater in the proper meaning of the word (Vol. I, Ch. 5):

We see that the efficacy of these signs is based on two conditions. One, that they reproduce a part of the feelings that the object itself would arouse if it were present and that in this way they awaken the image of all the others. The second, that takes itself as only a *jeu* and not for a reality. Because then the attention would be concentrated on the sign instead of on the object it should represent and, if I may say, the spectator would see only the actor on the stage and not the role he is playing. The imitative sign is, with regard to the object belonging to it, somewhat like an idea with regard to its correspondent feeling: we see in it only the model to which it refers.

These remarks present the thorny question of distinguishing the sign from its object (referent) when it is a matter of the actor incarnating a character, a question which still today is a source of confusion in the writing of some semioticians of the theater.

SEMIOLOGY AND THE THEATER: PEIRCE

The two great modern theories of the sign were conceived, independently of each other, toward the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, even though they were diffused only in the 1920's and 1930's. I am thinking of the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914).

There are no direct references to the art of the theater in the *Cours de linguistique générale*, at least in the version given by its editors, disciples of the linguist from Geneva. There is very little in the manuscript notes he left. It seems that Saussure had no interest in the art of the spectacle.

On the contrary, Peirce was fascinated by the theater from his

childhood until the end of his life. Son of a prominent Boston family, he was able to see performances in the family home and in the city. His first article, published in *The Harvard Magazine* when he was nineteen years old was on Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. Peirce's second wife was a French actress, for whom he began, but did not finish, a translation of Legouvé's *Médée*. Fragments of two dramatic works were found in his papers. He published articles on Shakespeare and wrote entries on the theater for a dictionary.

It is not surprising that we find traces of interest in the theater even in the theoretical writing of one who was essentially a mathematician and logician, one of the founders of pragmatism and modern semiotics. Euripides, Marlowe and Beaumarchais are evoked by Peirce; *King Lear* and *The Merchant of Venice* are quoted. He even referred to the realities of the spectacle in order to illustrate his semiotic reasonings. In a text of primary importance, *Meaning* (1910) he explains the relationships between the sign and its object:

The word Sign will be used to denote an Object perceptible, or only imaginable, or even unimaginable in one sense (...). But in order that anything should be a Sign, it must "represent," as we say, something else, called its *Object*, although the condition that a Sign must be other than its Object is perhaps arbitrary, since, if we insist upon it we must at least make an exception in the case of a Sign that is a part of a Sign. Thus nothing prevents the actor who acts a character in an historical drama from carrying as a theatrical "property" the very relic that that article is supposed merely to represent, such as the crucifix that Bulwer's Richelieu holds up with such effect in his defiance.⁶

And in an unpublished manuscript of 1909 Peirce takes up the delicate problem that I would sum up in an interrogative formula: "May a sign precede its referent (object)?" using one of his examples from the theater:

⁶ *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1931, vol. 2, p. 136 (2.230). Peirce evokes here the historical drama by E.G. Bulwer-Lytton, *Richelieu* (1839) which was highly successful in England and the United States.

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The reader may hesitate to admit that the Object always influences the Sign. (...) Some newspapers print certain promises as to the performances at the theatres on the following night; and how can those performances have [acted] influenced promises previously made, that have caused assemblages of the audiences without which the performances would be given up, and not take place? (...) He [the reader] will even now admit that if a given performance had not in reality been about to come off, the theatre-manager would *in all probability* not have had the confidence and consequent assurance to announce it; so that if the reader will only widen his conception of causation, so as to make it include *logical* consequence, (...) he will be able to assent to the statement that real futurity is sometimes a mental cause of the expectation of it.⁷

A philosophical reflection on the phenomenon that is today called retroaction or feed-back, that is, reaction of a virtual effect, in this case, on a cause.

SEMIOLOGY OF THE THEATER: THE PRAGUE SCHOOL, BARTHES

After the period that could be qualified as the presemiology of the theater (Antiquity and the Middle Ages) came that of the protosemiology of the spectacle (17th and 18th centuries), as well as the manifestations of the parasemiology of the theater (Peirce). Up to this point we have most often dealt with semiology AND the theater rather than semiology OF the theater. This latter, the more or less systematic application of the conceptual and terminological field *séma* to different aspects of the art of the theater, made its appearance only in the 1930's. It was the theoreticians of literature, linguists, philosophers, men of the theater gathered around the Linguistic Circle of Prague who gave the premises for the new discipline.

The work of Otakar Zich, *Aesthetics of Dramatic Art* (1931), the crowning achievement of a long activity of this theoretician

⁷ Manuscript 634, dated by Peirce 17 September, 1909. I was able to consult his manuscripts at the Peirce Edition Project of Indianapolis, and I am grateful to the director of this center, Christian J.W. Kloesel.

and teacher, took as a point of departure the thesis that the specificity of the work of the theater consisted in the co-presence of optical and acoustical signs. As for his disciples and continuators, members of the Linguistic Circle, the titles of their works published in Czechoslovakian journals clearly show the direction of their research: “An Attempt at a Structural Analysis of a Dramatic Figure” by Jan Mukařovský (1931); “Contribution to the Study of Theatrical Signs” (1937-1938) and “Theatrical Signs” (1938) by Petr Bogatyrev; “The Signs in the Chinese Theatre” by Karel Brušák (1939); “Dynamics of the Signs in the Theatre” by Jindřich Honzl (1940); “Man and Object in the Theater” (1940) and “Dramatical Text as a Component of Theater” (1941) by Jiří Veltruský. For a long time these texts were practically unknown in Western Europe and America. Translations of some of them appeared in French, English, German and Italian in the 1970’s, while others such as those of Zich are still unrecognized.⁸ Even though the Prague School was an outpost of the new discipline, because of this delay of four decades its spread coincides with the birth, in France, of the semiology of the theater that occurred independently of the experience of the Czech theoreticians.

Before going on to the 1960’s let us mention the opinion expressed by Enric Buysens, one of the pioneers of semiology, in his book *Les Langages et le discours. Essai de linguistique fonctionnelle dans le cadre de la sémiologie* (Brussels, 1943). The Belgian linguist notes that “the richest combination of semic facts seems to be that which is produced during the representation of an opera.” But to the scenic means of expression (words, singing, music, mimicry, dance, costumes, scenery, lighting) he adds the reaction of the public, the social aspect, without forgetting the participation of the personnel of the theater, the firemen and the police. It is thus the spectacle as a sociological phenomenon that Buysens is thinking of when he concludes, “in short, it is an entire world that is gathered and communicates during sever-

⁸ The best presentation in French of the Prague School was published in Poland by Irena Skawińska, “La sémiologie du théâtre in statu nascendi: Prague, 1931-1941”, *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, Vol. 25 No. 1, 1977, pp. 53-76. Italian translation in *Biblioteca Teatrale*, No. 20, 1978, pp. 115-135.

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al hours.” It is not necessary to recall that this work was published during the war, which considerably delayed the diffusion of his ideas, as was the case with the Prague semiologists.

As for Roland Barthes, two of his texts deserve to be mentioned because of their role as forerunners. In the article “Les tâches de la critique brechtienne” (1956, *Arguments*) he presents a four-point program, of which the third is the semiological approach:

Semiology is the study of signs and meanings. (...) Without being intimidated by words, it would be of interest to recognize that Brechtian dramaturgy, the theory of *Episierung*, that of detachment, and the Berliner Ensemble’s use of scenery and costume state a semiological problem. Because what is postulated by the Brechtian dramaturgy is that at least today dramatic art has less to express the real than to signify it. It is thus necessary that there be a certain distance between the signified and its signifier: revolutionary art must admit a certain arbitrariness of signs and allow a certain “formalism” in the sense that it must deal with form according to a particular method, which is the semiological method. All Brechtian art protests against the *jdanovian* confusion between ideology and semiology: we know to what an esthetic dead end it has led.

And he ends the paragraph, “The sign must be partially arbitrary; otherwise we fall back into an art of expression, an art of essentialist illusion.” Let us not forget that this article appeared in the middle of the conflict between the Brechtians and the anti-Brechtians, a struggle that led to Barthes’ being parodied by Ionesco with the features of Bartholomeus, in *L’impromptu de l’Alma* (1956).

The other, more important, text dates from 1963. It is a statement by Barthes, published in the form of an interview in the magazine *Tel Quel*. Here are some passages:

What is the theater? A kind of cybernetic machine. At rest, this machine is hidden behind a curtain. But when it is revealed, it begins to send a certain number of messages. These messages have this in particular, that they are simultaneous and yet have a different rhythm. At a certain point of the spectacle one receives *at the same time* six or seven pieces of information (coming from the scenery, costumes, lighting, placement of the actors, their gestures, mimicry and words) but some of this information is *immobile* (this is the case with the scenery) while

other information is *mobile* (this is the case with words and gestures). Thus we are dealing with a veritable informational polyphony, and that is theatricality: a *density of signs* (here I am speaking with rapport to literary monody, leaving aside the problem of the cinema). What relationships do these signs have with each other? They do not have the same signifiers (by definition); but do they always have the same signifiers? Do they *concur* in a single meaning? What is the rapport that unites them throughout a time that is often very long to this final meaning, which is, if we may say so, a retrospective meaning, since it is not in the final lines and is not clear until the piece is finished. On the other hand, how is the theatrical signifier formed? What are its models? (...) Any representation is an extremely dense semantic act: the rapport of code and acting (...), nature (analogical, symbolic, conventional?) of the theatrical sign, meaningful variants of this sign, transitions, denotation and connotation of the message, all these fundamental problems of semiology are present in the theater. We may even say that the theater is a privileged semiological object, since its system is apparently original (polyphonic) with regard to that of language (which is linear).

These two texts asked questions without hoping to answer them. They were both taken up in Barthes' *Éssais critiques*, in 1964. That was also the year in which his *Éléments de sémiologie* appeared (first in the journal *Communications* and the following year in book form). This latter work has an important place in the renewal of semiology, but the references to the art of the theater are rare and marginal. Roland Barthes would not return to the semiology of the theater; however, his role as inspirational source is undeniable, if only for the research of the author of these pages.

THE LAST TWO DECADES

At the beginning of 1968 my article "The Sign in the theater. An Introduction to the Semiology of the Art of the Spectacle", was published in *Diogenes* (No. 61). The term "introduction" as well as the phrase "sign in the theater" and not "theatrical" express the feeling of the author to have been a pathfinder or scout in a region that was still little explored. Could we speak of a specifically theatrical sign given the state in which the theory was at the time? Even ten years later, the international inquiry on this

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subject, made by the journal *Versus* (No. 21) and involving eight specialists, did not give a satisfactory answer. As to my text in *Diogenes*, it was developed to become the third part of the book *Littérature et spectacle dans leurs rapports esthétiques, thématiques et sémiologiques*, published in Warsaw in 1970, the second edition of which, slightly expanded, *Littérature et spectacle* was published by Mouton in 1975 (in the collection “Approaches to Semiotics”).

1970 was a turning-point in the history of the semiology-semiotics of the theater. Articles, studies and books multiplied in Europe and the world. The first critical bibliography by Marco De Marinis and Patrizia Magli (1975) lists eighty articles and books, mostly published after 1968. Another bibliography of the semiology of the theater, by Aloysius Van Kesteren (1984) lists more than 500 works, just for the years 1976-1981. It must be admitted that this quantitative explosion had as a consequence flagrant disparities on the scientific level. The new discipline did not escape the dangers of fashion: it attracted a number of people who were less than competent, some authors misused the term “semiology” or “semiotics” in order to follow the trend, the fundamental notions such as those of the sign, signifier, signified, referent, were often not well understood. None the less, the balance proved to be clearly positive.

Among about forty works that took up the problems of the theater and drama from the semiological point of view let us mention, in chronological order, those of Patrice Pavis (1976); Paola Gullí Pugliatti (1976); Anne Ubersfeld (1977); Franco Ruffini (1978); Achim Eschbach (1979); Keir Elam (1980); Marco De Marinis (1982); Erika Fischer-Lichte (1983); André Helbo (1983); Michael Issacharoff (1985); Walter Puchner (1985); Martin Esslin (1987); Fernando de Toro (1987); María del Carmen Bobes Naves (1988); Marvin Carlson (1990). As to the authors of articles in journals or collections, articles that advanced thought on the semiology of the theater, we mention in alphabetical order (omitting those names already mentioned): Sorin Alexandrescu, Jean Alter, Edward Balcerzan and Zbigniew Osiński, Michel Corvin, Umberto Eco, Evelyne Ertel, Ernest W.B. Hess-Lüttich, Steen Jansen, Jorgen Dines Johansen, Walter A. Koch, Wladimir Kryszinski, Solomon Marcus, Georges Mounin, Mihai Nadin, Ivo

Osolobě, Marcello Pagnini, Olga and Isaak Revzine, Eli Rozik, Cesare Segre, Alessandro Serpieri, Grzegorz Sinko, Manuel Sito Alba, Stefania Skwarczyńska. (I limit myself to articles published in French, English, Italian and German).⁹

An International Association for Semiotics of the Performing Arts was founded in 1980; it has held two conferences, one in Brussels (1981) and the other in Royaumont (1984). Other international conferences centered on the semiology of the theater or on theatrical communication have been held, especially in Paris (1977); Milan (1978); Frankfurt (1983); Rome (1983); Bochum (1984) and Oviedo (1986). The proceedings of some of these conferences have been published.

TWENTY-TWO YEARS AFTER: A PROVISORY BALANCE

Hesitant for centuries, the semiology of the theater or paratheatrical phenomena—which was for a long time only pre-, proto- or parasemiology— spread prodigiously after 1968. Even if we consider only authentically semiological works, the number of pages devoted, for twenty-two years, to the theater, examined from this point of view, is several times greater than what had been written on the subject throughout twenty-three centuries.

The balance sheet of this last period is not easy to draw up, seeing the quantity of publications and their geographical and linguistic diversity (studies in Danish, modern Greek, Catalan, Rumanian and Hungarian appeared and as for studies, for example in Japanese, few are available in English or French). We will try however to present the attainments of this young science with roots that are thousands of years old.

First, during the past two decades the semiology of the theater has been set up as a discipline aware of its *object* and its *methods*, in spite of hesitations concerning the former and the latter, hesitations that are proper to any science that has not become ossified.

⁹ As for Spanish publications, recently more and more numerous, a critical and exhaustive bibliography is given by José Romera Castillo, *Semiótica literaria y teatral en España*, Kassel, Reichenberger, 1988.

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The *object* of our discipline is the theater, as its name suggests. Now, what is the theater? This is a polysemic term, a polyvalent notion. A lively debate has divided the semiologists: must pre-eminence be given to the text or to the performance in the analysis of the theatrical phenomenon? Some had even introduced the distinction of dramatic text versus theatrical or performance text (theatrical representation), which did not settle anything since the question remained and the controversy between the *drammaturgisti* and the *spettacolisti* (to use Franco Ruffini's terms) has not disappeared.

We seem to arrive at the only reasonable answer to this dilemma: there is a room for two approaches, two tendencies, two objects for study on what constitutes the semiology of the theater in the broad sense of the term. Obviously, the semiological study of the theatrical spectacle is more complex, thus more difficult, than that of the dramatic text, given the multiplicity of the elements that form a spectacle, the plurality of the sensory channels, the ephemeral nature of a representation with regard to the written text. But the most interesting results are obtained when the two approaches are based on the same procedure, when the semiological analysis of a spectacle makes thorough use of the textual, verbal component and when the analysis of a dramatic text takes the scenic realization into account.

After the object of the semiology of the theater come the *methods*. These seem to be determined by the name itself of the discipline, "semiology." But the following question arises here: is semiology a method or a science? A question that has divided and still divides its adepts. Everything depends on the objective of the researcher. As a general theory of the sign, semiology is above all a science, for example, for the logician. On the other hand, it is a method for someone who applies the concept of sign and the notions contiguous to one or another field of human activity, for example, for a linguist, a sociologist, an ethnologist, an art historian or a specialist in theater art.

This difference has been perceived by those who, like Christian Metz, wanted to reserve the term "semiotics" (coming from Peirce) for the general theory of the sign, and the term "semiology" (proposed by Saussure) for the utilization of the concept of sign in various fields of social life. And also by those who,

like Umberto Eco, Bernard Dupriez and Francis Whitfield, called “semiology” its application to different systems of signs. Following these divergences, and for the lack of finding a broad consensus, the great majority of authors use one or the other of these terms, which have become equivalent, indiscriminately. (The reader has seen that I give preference to the noun “semiology” out of respect for Saussure, who relaunched this “science that studies the life of signs within social life.”)

To the question of knowing what the object of the semiology of the theater is, the text or the performance, I would answer: the text *and* the performance. To the second question, is semiology a science or a method?, I would answer that it is science *and* method, sometimes the one, sometimes the other.

And here are two examples of the tasks that the semiology of the theater has had to face, one concerning its object, the other its methods. As for the object, it was necessary to discard the “literary” theory of the theater. Since the end of the 19th century this has been a problem proper to the esthetics of theater art in general. It has been a matter of marking the specificity of the spectacle with regard to the dramatic text. It was essential to understand and make understood the complexity of the theatrical phenomenon, to grasp the “density” of the signs composing it; semiology, by distinguishing between different sign systems contributed to its being more clearly seen.

Second task, of a methodological type: it was necessary to escape the influence of linguistics. We have mentioned the role of Roland Barthes in the relaunching of the semiology of the theater. Although Saussurian, he did not want to go along with Saussure when the latter said: “Linguistics is only one part of this general science [semiology]; the laws that semiology will reveal will be applicable to linguistics.” For Barthes, semiology was only a part of linguistics; from that, the methods of the latter would be more fully applicable to the former. Such an attitude weighed heavily on methodology; attempts to apply certain linguistic models to the study of the theatrical phenomenon, such as a grammar and a syntax of theatrical “language”, have been a failure. Today almost everybody is aware of that.

By discarding the “literary” conception and the “linguistic” approach to the theater, the way was opened to the recognition

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of the specificity of the art of the theater as an object for analysis, especially a semiological analysis. Thus today we have the right to answer positively the prudent hypothesis given in 1979 in the article "Sémiotique théâtrale": "The hypothesis held by certain current research is that of the possibility of a construction of the theatrical object which, located at the level of underlying semiotic structures, would be able to be translated and/or to generate the *spectacle* manifested by all languages."¹⁰

CURRENT PROBLEMATICS

The field of current problematics of the semiology of the theater is extremely vast. The general theory of signs is a point of departure that is unavoidable. Equally so are the nature of the sign, its structure, the different kinds of signs, their character (natural/artificial, motivated/arbitrary). Almost all the sign systems, almost all the codes as well as the sensory channels, are involved in the semiosis, in the theatrical communication. The metaphorical and metonymical nature of signs, their semantic, esthetic and emotive value, are questions that demand an answer. Everything concerning the functioning of signs in the theater, relationships between the producers and the consumers (the public). I will limit myself to pointing out certain aspects of the problematic, in a few points that are at the same time a list of desiderata.

1. Saussure's writings seem to have been sufficiently studied and I do not think that a semiologist of the theater would find new sources of inspiration in them. On the other hand, Peirce's works, those that have been published as well as those in manuscript, are still an unexploited mine of information. It is not only a matter of searching for ideas and general concepts applicable to the semiotics of the theater in them, but to re-read all that he has written, keeping in mind his lively interest in the theater. A long and exacting task, since the chronological edition of Peirce's work that is under way (Bloomington, Indiana University Press) foresees thirty volumes, the first four of which appeared after 1982.

¹⁰ A.J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Paris, Hachette, 1979, pp. 392-393.

As for the totality of the conserved manuscripts of Peirce, they comprise around 80,000 pages and contain pleasant surprises for a semiotician of the theater and the art of the spectacle in general.

2. The reflection on the referent and, more precisely, on the application of this concept to the analysis of the theatrical phenomenon deserves to be considered in depth. Some authors are purely and simply unaware of this notion or do not feel capable of using it. Others go too far in a neophyte enthusiasm, from which come the broadest, most imprecise and often abusive uses of the terms “referent”, “reference”, “to refer to”. What we must first of all watch out for is not to confuse the sign with *its* referent (a referent in its turn may be the sign of something else, leading to a possible entire referential chain); not to confuse the signified (or the “reference” of the triangle of Ogden and Richards) with the referent and finally to keep in mind the distinction between the real referent in the literary and artistic domain. Besides, the functioning of the referents in the theater is more complicated than in a literary work. We deal with not only intra- and extra-verbal (or -textual) referents and references but also with the distinction between the intra-scenic and extra-scenic, the intra-scenic referents being subdivided into as many kinds as there are material supports (the actor’s body, scenery, sound, etc.) in a theatrical representation.

3. The art of the theater being essentially mimetic (this is a fact accepted by everyone) it is a matter of knowing what the relationship is between mimetics and the iconic nature of the signs used in the theater (the notion of icon having been objected to lately by a number of theoreticians).¹¹

4. At the center of some of the research in course is a problem that deserves special attention; it is the functioning of signs, the circulation of meanings between the sender and the receiver, as well as the interaction between the two “sides”, creators and spectators. This question concerns any process of communication, any semiosis, but it is particularly important and delicate in the domain of the theater where the emission and reception are necessarily simultaneous.

¹¹ See Tadeusz Kowzan, “Iconisme o mimétisme?” *Semiotica*, Vol. 71, Nos. 3-4, 1988, pp. 213-226.

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5. What is the signifying or semiological unit of the spectacle? Is it possible to identify it in the spatio-temporal continuum of a theatrical representation? The need for units to allow a segmentation is felt by all those who have attempted the semiological analysis of a spectacle. At the same time, this problem is the *punctum dolens* (Marcello Pagnini) or the “philosopher’s stone” (Keir Elam) of all semiological research. Must we abandon the idea of “unit” in the treatment of the representation to the profit of the idea of “semic entity” that may appear better adapted to the theatrical specificity?

6. The last four points lead us to the crucial problem, that of the specificity of the theatrical sign. Does it exist? A conclusive response has not yet been given in spite of some more or less felicitous attempts. A satisfactory definition of the theatrical sign would admit of a large number of elements, since it must take into account all the particularities: artificial, intentional, motivated, conventional, mimetic, iconic character of the sign, a sign whose referent is outside the theater, a sign intended for a double receiver: internal and external, a sign which is usually polyvalent, mobile, transformable into symbol, endowed with esthetic and affective values, functioning in configurations and/or sequences. Such a definition could not be limiting or restrictive; it would have to remain open and flexible.¹²

7. Finally, a wish of a more practical nature. We are observing a paradoxical phenomenon: up until now, we have more theoretical books on the semiology of the theater than concrete analyses of a theatrical spectacle. A *detailed* semiological analysis of an *entire* spectacle still remains to be done. Many partial analyses have been given, but none of these attempts is exhaustive nor applies to the totality of a theatrical representation. We understand the difficulties of such an undertaking: the great number of sign systems to be considered and the complexity of their interrelationships, articulations, the question of the global effect produced by several simultaneous signs, not to mention the technical problem of segmentation, the problem of signifying units or entities. However, it is in this direction that the efforts of those

¹² A definition of the specifically theatrical sign was proposed in my book, *Le signe et le théâtre* (to appear).

who wish to confirm the vitality of the semiology of the theater must now be oriented.

If a theoretical and methodological basis is necessary to carry out a work of analysis and interpretation, it is none the less true that the work on a concrete theatrical object in its turn nourishes the theoretical reflection. And if Roland Posner was thinking of general semiotics when he wrote that it “has as a goal to build a theoretical apparatus that would make possible the systematic comprehension and homogeneous description of all signifying behavior”,¹³ this formula is perfectly applicable to the semiology of the theater.

* * *

This survey of the present state of the semiology-semiotics of the theater and its objective is worth being completed by a brief observation on the subject of its usefulness. This is not limited to the speculative domain; semiological analysis of the spectacle may serve effectively for cultural enrichment at all educational levels in the broad sense of the term. If, from primary school up until doctoral studies one dissects, analyzes, explains and comments on literary texts, it is to learn to better “consume” literature, to draw the most profit from it. Nothing like that is done for the spectacle, theatrical or other. Yet, in contemporary civilization the part played by visual and audio-visual transmission of the cultural heritage as well as actual creation is growing. Even the theatrical spectacle in the strict sense is not shut up in theaters, it is more and more diffused by television, video cassettes, video discs, without mentioning the cinema and forms of the spectacle proper to the modern means of reproduction of image and sound. It is to spectacle rather than to the book that most people today owe their first encounter with Shakespeare, Racine or Becket.

A systematic instruction aimed at forming lucid, thinking, awakened spectators which would hope to give them the faculty of reception and assimilation of the culture conveyed by differ-

¹³ R. Posner, “Paradoxes sémiotiques de la parole dans *Tristram Shandy* de Laurence Sterne,” *Le Journal Canadien de Recherche Sémiotique*, Vol. 8, Nos. 1-2, 1980-1981, p. 33.

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ent forms of spectacle—the theater being the nucleus—is necessary if we want to avoid the drift due to passive over-consumption, not selective, often mind-destroying, that threatens to be intellectually, morally and socially devastating. The semiology of the theater and the spectacle in general seems adapted, more than any other tool, to this type of formation, even at the level of an elementary initiation, because it allows the spectator to penetrate into the texture of the representation, to decypher the innumerable correspondences between all the components of the spectacle, to better perceive and interpret the message, admitted or not, of its creators.

Tadeusz Kowzan
(*Université de Caen*)