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IVAYLO ALEKSANDROV

THE THEATRE PERFORMANCE IN A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

/Detailed Abstract of Doctoral Dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy/

A scientific adviser: Prof. Ivan Kasabov

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## Research Object

- Theatrical art ⇒ aesthetical, philosophical, ethical and social problematics ⇒ visual figures and concrete objects of intellectual discussion.
- Theatrical performance ⇒ symbol of histrionics ⇒ basic structural categories and functions of stage signification.
- Denotation of concrete senses and meanings ⇒ cultural discourse of performance ⇒ theatrical sign interaction ⇒ active semiosis.

### Object:

- Theatrical performance ⇒ multi-layered of significant elements ⇒ visual / intelligible image of every *secondary / other* reality ⇒ stage / perceiving subject.

## Immediate Tasks of Research

- Specification of the question about the semiotic perspective of *théâtralité*.
- Decreeing of the theatrical performance as *signifier* and formulating of the signs and the signs' constructions on the stage.
- Argueing the question concerning the *stage figure* as a basic sign attribute of *reincarnation / transformation* within theatrical reality.
- Structuring of the problem concerning theatrical communication and theatrical code as basic components in the process of activating the contents of *sense/meaning* in the mind of the perceiving spectator.
- Clarifying the systematics of *absence / presence* of signs on the stage.
- Defining the mechanism of *linguistic / paralinguistic* interaction of the performance's components in the process of creation of an active signifying convention.
- Formulation of the aesthetics of the theatrical performance as a *theatrical text*.
- Determination of the actor's radical significance in the overall semiotic discourse of the performance.
- Clarifying the concrete semiotic function of the stage space as a basic component equal to the actor's presence (actor ⇒ stage space ⇒ theatrical performance).
- Defining the character of *mise-en-scène* as a basic representative principle for the creation of a signifying stage convention.

## Remarks on the Semiotic Character of *Théâtralité*

- A theatrical text, as literature, is an object of hermeneutic research; a theatrical performance as an action, exists in consequence of that hermeneutics, this is the prime cause of its appearance.

- Theatrical performance ⇒ a product of triple-hermeneutical dependency ⇒ an audience interprets already interpreted essences, senses and meanings, which transforms them into different essences, senses and meanings.
- Constituting a theatrical *performance* ⇒ primary text (author), a hermeneutical discourse on this text-interpretation (director), secondary hermeneutical discourse on the interpretation that has already appeared – over-interpretation (spectator).
- Theatrical act ⇒ multiformity of sign-communicative systems ⇒ linguistic constructs.
- Theatricality (*théatralité*) ⇒ availability of different components ⇒ verbal expression, gestures, mimics, affectations, body and psychological conditions, visual imagery, musical and sound environment.
- Basis of communication ⇒ perceived by the contemplator (spectator) and existing as a reality on a psycho-cognitive level ⇒ *performative text*, constructed from multiple sign structures.

## PART I

### THEATRICALITY AND SEMIOTICALITY

#### Signs and Sign Configurations – The Performance Space as *Signifier*

##### Foundation:

- Semiotic investigation of the foundation qualities of the sign in a practically endless semiosis.
- Basic conception of the types of theatrical signs.

##### Theatrical signs:

- *linguistic* (verbal) / *non-linguistic* (non-verbal) (in Fischer-Lichte 1992 figured as *linguistics* and *paralinguistics*, De Toro 1995 follows Peirce, subdivided the signs as *Icon*, *Index*, *Symbol* corresponding with a verbal/non-verbal dimension)
- linguistic ⇒ *auditory* and *visual* / *durable* and *ephemeral*
- non-linguistic ⇒ *ephemeral* and *durable* / *visual* and *non-visual* (in non-verbal category)
- summary subdivision ⇒ *verbal* and *non-verbal*

### **Inference:**

- Semiotic approach ⇒ micro-world, constructed through the specific theatrical mechanism of signification.
- Specific qualities of the theatrical sign ⇒ detailed position within the stage environment ⇒ mutual penetration from one sign structure to another.
- Specific sign characteristics ⇒ aesthetics of *signification* ⇒ the theatrical act as a unique phenomenon which is the product of sign interaction.

### **Semantics of Transformation – The Stage Figure within the Context of Performance**

- *Stage figure* ⇒ complex product which is a consequence of interrelation between *dramatis personae* towards *represented character* (Veltruský 1976, 1977, 1983, also in Mukařovský 1931, 1978 - *dramatic figure*, in Zich 1931, 1995 – *actor's figure*).
- Stage figure ⇒ actor's sign ⇒ complicated structure, synthesis of elements, *linguistic* and *paralinguistic signs* ⇒ a system within the system of the entire corpus of the performance.
- Semiotic perspective of what is being *presented* on the stage ⇒ *transformation* / basic structural element of the performance.
- Theatrical action as *signatum* ⇒ producing of *signantia* (Veltrusky 1976: 593).
- An actor's presentation on the stage as a *sign of the signs* ⇒ foundation of the *acting sign* ⇒ constituting the veritable *théâtralité*.
- Theatricality ⇒ open system of *transformation/reincarnation* ⇒ transformation of *the thing* into *something different* (in Bogatyrev 1976: 31 – *transforming in a different form*).
- Systematization of sign components on the stage and constructing of the stage semiosis ⇒ actor, transformed into *image* / stage space / costume / musical environment / communication with the spectator / audience's interpretation.

### **Theatrical Communication and Theatrical Code – Aesthetical Sign Convention and Spectator's Perception**

- What is being *transformed* and its basic role for the constructing of the stage semiosis ⇒ analysis of the stage–spectator communicative system ⇒ coding/decoding of the stage-performative theatrical code by the perceiving spectator.
- Presence of a theatrical convention ⇒ relatively uniform communicative language and relatively identical encoding/decoding matrix ⇒ constituting the communicative environment between *encoder* and *decoder*.

- Every convention as much as it is possible within the artistic act is subject to demolition in the stage reality, depending on the level of that encoding/decoding.

### **Inferences:**

- Spectators' perception ⇒ dynamics of the theatrical signs ⇒ aesthetics of the theatrical signs ⇒ projection of the personal conscious artistic impulse of the perceiver.
- Sign environment on the stage ⇒ spectators' perception of objects, sounds and action ⇒ sign systems, of no value communicatively, out of the scope of the spectators' perception.
- Open theatrical communication ⇒ brightness of the code and the theatrical situation ⇒ degree of accepting/disturbing of the convention ⇒ level of reproduction of reality on the stage towards level of understanding of the perceiver ⇒ envelopment and complicity of presentation of the cultural situation itself.

### **Reflection of the Domination – The Sign as *Absence/Presence***

- Semiotics of the theatre ⇒ the basic role of the audience in the process of perceiving the performance ⇒ *absent* and *present* signs on the stage.
- Semiotics of the theatrical performance ⇒ interpretation ⇒ presence of significant process.

“The problem with semiotics is that in addressing theater as a system of codes it necessarily dissects the perceptual impression theater makes on the spectator” (*Bert O. State 1985: 7*)

- Sign hierarchy within the performance system ⇒ active interaction on the level of sign reflection with the spectator's overall competence (De Merinis 1993).
- Dynamics of absence/presence of the sign ⇒ distribution of sign process on the stage ⇒ spectator's perception ⇒ act of dynamic reflection of the spectator's semiotic awareness.
- Within the hierarchy of the arrangement of the theatrical signs a domination of one or a few sign systems is possible (Fischer-Lichte 1992).
- Semiotic domination of a separate sign or configuration/group of signs on the stage ⇒ distinguishing/decoding process concerning the sign systems on the stage.
- Presence of a concrete norm / criterion ⇒ commonly accepted level of perceiver's conventionality/competence.

- Permanent re-formulating of content and domination conditions of the theatrical sign ⇒ momentary presenting and distinguishing of a concrete sign on the stage.

### **Inference:**

- Higher degree of mobility and interchangeability of theatrical signs ⇒ complexity in determining the hierarchical mutual dependency ⇒ theatrical signs are not only physically presented on the stage, they are dependent on the dualistic game of *absence/presence*.

### **Linguistic and Paralinguistic Interaction – Sign Transmission, Representation, Active Convention**

- *Linguistic/paralinguistic* interaction of theatrical signs in three aspects of representation ⇒ verbal - verbal, non-verbal – non-verbal, verbal – non verbal and vice versa.
- Dependency of the signs on the active convention within a concrete sign system and at a given moment during the development of the performance.
- Verbal/non-verbal performance sign environment ⇒ principle of theatrical signs interaction as transmission of images (integration of the content *image* ⇒ *icon*) and words (also *images* ⇒ *icons*).
- Images (as an iconic element of static/dynamic non-verbal representativeness) ⇒ words (as a product of the linguistic verbal environment) ⇒ bearers of different variations of communicative messages.
- Complex interaction (verbal/non-verbal in unified convention) ⇒ the possible variations of sign messages significantly exceed their independent correlations.
- Complex interaction of verbal and non-verbal signs in the theatrical performance ⇒ variation of the possible significant effects ⇒ active levels of representation.
- Manipulation of a sign-image independently or in combination with a sign-word ⇒ basic principle of transmission of sense in the desired message ⇒ perceptive expression of signification within the consciousness of the perceiving spectator on a semiotic level (linguistic or paralinguistic).

## PART II

### PERFORMANCE AND SIGNIFICATION

#### The Performance as a Theatrical Text – Morphology of a Stage Signification

- Showing of a *sense* and *meaning* in a theatrical environment ⇒ analysis of the signification/communication process in a theatrical stage reality.
- Semiotic perspective ⇒ an idea for the theatrical performance as a *theatrical text* ⇒ two aspects of signification: *linguistic/non-linguistic* and *performative* (physically active) ⇒ diversity of signification on the stage.
- Theatrical performance ⇒ a defined codes complex (over-theatrical cultural codes) ⇒ secondary sign systems of performance – literature, music, fine arts, mythology, religion, the theatre itself as an art.
- The performative codes (sign systems) within the performance function simultaneously (*paradigmatic*) or linear (*syntagmatic*) ⇒ producing of signification (De Toro 1992: 52).
- Signs ⇒ sign systems in variations ⇒ spectator ⇒ principle of simultaneously/ syntagmatic relation ⇒ signification.
- De Marinis (1993) / De Toro (1995) ⇒ performative text categorization as a *macrotext* or *text of the text* (De Merinis 1993: 47-59), which is the result of the variations of partial performative texts ⇒ utterance, music, costumes, gestures, dance, graceful body movements.

#### Inference:

- The Elements of the general performative text interact and show themselves in a united sense ⇒ constructing of the theatrical text as a performative expression.

#### The Actor within the Stage Space – Semantics of Transformation

- Semantics of the actor's transformation ⇒ Aristotle's Poetics and Diderot's Paradox? of Acting ⇒ *pre-semiotics acting theories* (Quinn 1989) ⇒ basic mediators of the stage figure's concept.
- Actors' transformation (*mimesis*) ⇒ communicative channel and representative language ⇒ language presenting form / *narrative* with relation to the spectator ⇒ *stage figure*.
- Stage figure (in Otakar Zich - *actor's figure*) is a dichotomy between the perception of the actor (*dramatic character*) and the perception of the audience (perception of the *stage figure*) ⇒ dynamic dichotomy between a

material object and a sign (in the tradition of general semiotics/ the Prague School).

- The actor playing a role (*dramatic character*) transforms a dual diegetic structure ⇒ *representative* or *sign* (also in Aristotle and Diderot) ⇒ *mimetic construct* (*stage figure* of the Prague School, exists also in the practical actor's techniques of Stanislavskii 1936, Chekhov 1953, Grotowski 1968 etc.)

### **Inference:**

- The theatrical performance is constructed in line with the principles of transformation or *mimesis* ⇒ an actor imitates/transforms and represents the stage figure ⇒ concrete semiotic system, structured from multiple semiotic units (signs/codes).

### **Semiotics of the Stage – ME within the Stage Space**

- Stage space semiotical uniqueness ⇒ intellectually measurable environment concerning an actor and an audience ⇒ it isn't only a material symbol of the performative text.
- The stage space is burdened with a specific internal sense ⇒ has the entire sign characteristics of stage architectonics, including in its sign structure the scenography itself ⇒ in open context it is a *dramatic space* (in its forms: *onstage* and *offstage* [*mimetic* and *diegetic*], as well as *intra-diegetic* and *extra-diegetic* [presented by the actor chiefly on the level of *utterance* and active on the level of *awareness/imagination* considering the actors and the spectators]).
- The stage space as „constructed *in relation to the actor*” (Ubersfeld 1999: 119) ⇒ intellectual environment in the context of sign semiosis of the performance (*performance text*) ⇒ interaction between (actor/stage space) and audience in the frames of theatrical reality.
- Interactivity between the stage space and the actor ⇒ representative sign transfer between stage space/actor and in relation to the spectator ⇒ gradual visual formation of the stage illusion ⇒ significant referential function in the context of *imaginary world* of the performance.

### **Inference:**

- On the level of theatre semiosis a *signification* in the field of a visual and sense text has been engendered:
  - a) through the interaction of the actors in/with the stage space
  - b) through the interaction of the actors in/with the stage space and with the audience in the theatrical space.

## **Mise-en-Scène – The Representative Convention of the Performance**

- Analysis of the theatrical mechanism of transformation ⇒ *mise-en-scène – to-stage/transform-something-on-the-stage*.
- *Mise-en-scène* is a structural formation, theoretical construct and radical object of knowledge ⇒ it is not a profane result of the director's (artistic) intervention concerning the dramaturgical and/or performative text.
- Theatrical performance ⇒ dualistic function of the actor in the process of sign producing (*actor's discourse*) ⇒ semiotic reflection in relation to the stage space action (*stage performance*).
- Reconstruction of the performative text ⇒ a spectator perceives the entire corpus of the system which is configured by separate sign subsystems with all of the action's components – utterance, gesture/mimics/movement, stage mechanization, sound.
- Theatrical presenting ⇒ semiotic code of the creator's artistic world (director, actors, stage designer, composer, choreographer) presented as *mise-en-scène* and represented as *performative text* (an active matrix for producing sense).
- *To-stage/transform-something-on-the-stage* ⇒ existence of preliminary knowledge and built-up experience which is transformed by the creator of the performance and is supposed as understanding (i.e. what exactly will be understood by the perceiver).
- Convention: primary semiotic practice of the theatrical performance ⇒ transformation of all presented objects into signs / sign configurations of which the spectator could become aware.
- The role and influence of the collective cultural archetypes over the individual artistic activity and perception; treating of those archetypes from the aesthetical perspective.
- The aesthetics of *mise-en-scène*, in the contemporary theatrical practice, is based on the cultural experience which is stratified in the personal consciousness/unconsciousness of the theatrical artist and spectator.

### **Inference:**

- Archetypical reflection of *mise-en-scène* ⇒ harmonization of the roles of individual and collective unconsciousness (or consciousness) ⇒ a complex of mutually supplementing perspectives of an optimal sign semiosis ⇒ semiotic perspective on the stage ⇒ coordinated action and strict geometry of the movements ⇒ orderly performative line and technical vision ⇒ significant essence of the theatrical performance as a process of communication and representation.

## The Theatrical Performance in a Semiotic Perspective – Conclusion

- Theatrical performance in a semiotic perspective ⇒ materialization of the sign ⇒ direct creation of visual conception for the *presented* on the stage.
- Co-ordination in the process of analysis of the end-product and perceiving of a sense ⇒ a clear stand of a sign as a basic means of research of the performance's wholeness.
- This research project has clarified the question concerning the semiotic perspective of a theatrical performance and opens a new space for a future research initiative.
- Domination of the idea of the fundamental role of the audience in creating and promoting stage semiosis ⇒ future semiotic approach to *théâtralité* ⇒ investigation of spectator's awareness/perception of theatrical reality.
- Dissection of the *signifying process* at the theatre ⇒ fundamental role of the audience ⇒ the problem of perceiving theatrical reality ⇒ „...a new trend in the semiotic study of the theatre to be further developed” (Carlson 1980).
- Future perspective ⇒ dynamics of the spectator's perceiving as an object of research ⇒ „...the analysis of the audience's role in the spectacle, both the pure and simple decoding of the performance sign and the vastly more complex process of interpretation, has been the most neglected area of theatre semiotics and needs much more attention.” (De Marinis 1979).

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