

Reckoning with States on the Phenomenology of Theatre

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Michael Kirby once published an article in which he argued that his “structuralist theatre” was an approach to performance which might justifiably be deemed “nonsemiotic.” Drawing an analogy with Rorschach ink blot tests, Kirby declared that his theatre worked “against sending a message about something.”¹ Any meanings inferred by the spectator from the performance, he argued, would be nonsemiotic, because they fall outside of the criteria set by Umberto Eco for semiotic inference:

[Eco] explains that certain acts of inference “must be recognized as semiotic acts” but only when they are “culturally recognized and systematically coded.” This places the emphasis on a culturally established code and distinguishes private, personal, idiosyncratic interpretation from semiotic analysis. Semiotics, then, is not the exegesis of meaning, but the demonstration of how meaning derives from a particular code; unless the code itself is clear, we have only interpretation. (Kirby 106)

At the end of this article Kirby endeavors to explain just what the relationship is between his plays and the audience: it is, he tells us, a sort of formalism which “is concerned with the way the mind works to make connections between things,” and relates to the audience in a manner that creates “new emotions, emotions that cannot be derived from nature or from messages” (110, 111).

There are two main problems apparent in Kirby’s argument: (1) his dubious exclusion of any “culturally established code” from his structuralist theatre; and (2) his nebulous explanation of the consequent interaction between performance and audience. With regard to the first problem, it seems clear that the simple act of offering a performance to paying spectators entails some sort of “culturally established code” right off the bat. Moreover, where Kirby insists that any meanings which the audience educes from his work will quickly “arise

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and disappear" (110), we might reply that while this would undoubtedly make the task of semiotic analysis more difficult, it is, theoretically speaking, in no way inconsistent with the interests of semiotics. With regard to the second problem, we may object that the phrase "the way the mind works to make connections between things" is so all-inclusive as to be meaningless, and that these "emotions that cannot be derived from nature or messages" are neither demonstrated nor specifically indicated.

It appears, therefore, that Kirby's argument for the possibility of a "non-semiotic" theatre is insupportable. As Marvin Carlson has commented:

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine and perhaps impossible to describe just what such a performance would be like, since *we could talk or think about it only with the tools provided by our culture*. One would have to imagine an experience created entirely by chance, involving elements bearing no meaning, and perceived by audiences whose culture provided them with no way of making sense of this experience. The result might be something like the "one great blooming buzzing confusion" that William James postulates as the experience of the newborn baby before any differentiation of experiential phenomena has begun (675).

Assuming, then, that the possibility of a theatrical performance devoid of semiotic elements is non-existent, the question remains as to whether a theatrical performance has *any* elements which can legitimately be considered "nonsemiotic." In *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* Bert O. States answers the question in the affirmative, and it is the purpose of this essay to analyze the reasoning which lies behind this assertion.

It should be emphasized that the position of States is by no means identical to that of Kirby. The most important point of divergence is that States in no way suggests that there might be a "non-semiotic" theatre: rather, he observes that semiotic elements are present in all communication, but argues that semiotic analysis cannot account for an audience member's entire experience of the theatrical event. It is "disturbing," States tells us, that semiotics evinces "an implicit belief that you have exhausted a thing's interest when you have explained how it works as a sign" (7). In his view, semiotics is heir to the mimetic approach to criticism in that, insofar as semiotics is concerned with "signs" (and so, by implication, "signifieds"), its scope is essentially limited to referential themes. It is in this respect, he argues, that semiotics falls short, for any account of a spectator's whole experience would have to accept that attention was focused

not only on what a given work of art signified, but on the corporeal elements of the work itself. Hence, States comes to declare that “plainly there is something deficient about the referential principle as a basis for art” (5).

States offers instead an approach in which semiotics is partnered equally with phenomenology, and he cites theoretical precedent for this in Horace’s pairing of “instruction” with “delight” in the *Ars Poetica*. The allusion is useful, for such a reference to traditional dramatic criticism may help us to keep our bearings through some of States’ murkier passages. With regard to this principle, and even while acknowledging that Horace is the earliest critic to set forth such an explicit division of theatrical experience, it may be valuable to glance back to an even earlier prototype, Aristotle.

Needless to say, it is the *Poetics* which has been most influential in the history of dramatic theory, and because of its most famous passage (“Tragedy is an imitation of an action . . .”), Aristotle is associated for the most part with mimetically based theory. There are, however, other passages in Aristotle’s work where he leans a little towards a phenomenological approach. In *Politics*, for example, Aristotle writes this of education in music:

Rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also courage and temperance, and of all the qualities contrary to these, and of the other qualities of character, which hardly fall short of the actual affections, as we know from our own experience, for in listening to such strains our souls undergo a change. The habit of feeling pleasure or pain at mere representations is not far removed from the same feeling about realities; for example, if any one delights in the sight of a statue for its beauty only, it necessarily follows that the sight of the original will be pleasant to him. The objects of no other sense, such as taste or touch, have any resemblance to moral qualities; in visible objects there is only a little, for there are figures which are of a moral character, but only to a slight extent, and all do not participate in the feeling about them.²

Even in the *Poetics* he makes a related point when he argues that “Spectacle has [. . .] an emotional attraction of its own.”³ These passages suggest that even Aristotle felt that a full understanding of the arts required the incorporation of something like “phenomenological” analysis, an approach which, we may infer, could be extended at the very least to such related theatrical elements as the musical aspects of speech, or the physical attractions of actors, and perhaps even

as far as the affinities which resonate between the structure of a play and the responsive mechanisms of the audience.

Short of setting out the whole litany of quasi-phenomenological references in the history of dramatic theory, it will be helpful to take notice of a few of the more notable analogues in the work of certain theorists before moving on to the more specific philosophical context of States' approach. An argument which is especially worth looking at is Diderot's. Like Aristotle, Diderot assumes that one of the great pleasures of theatre is its resemblance to the "real" world; but this pleasure in illusion is pointedly set within the awareness of the artificiality of the circumstances. Consequently, Diderot's suggestion that those staging *Le fils naturel* should "en un mot, transporter au théâtre le salon de Clairville, comme il est"⁴ anticipates, in a way, both States' fundamental conception of the theatre as a devourer of reality and his sense of the delectation which the audience finds in this fact.

With a little care, we can even pin Diderot up against the broad distinction made by Horace (and harked back to by States) between "instruction" and "delight"; for Diderot's understanding of the pleasure the audience takes in the means of representation goes hand in hand with a firm conviction that the audience will draw instructive inferences from the use of realism:

Vous ne concevez pas l'effet que produiraient sur vous une scène réelle, des habits vrais, des discours proportionnés aux actions, des actions simples, des dangers dont il est impossible que vous n'ayez tremblé pour vos parents, vos amis, pour vous-même? (166)

[Can you not conceive of the effect that would be produced on you by a real setting, authentic costumes, dialogue suited to the situation, plain stories, dangers which would make it impossible for you not to tremble for your parents, your friends, yourself?]

Of course there is a major difference here between Diderot's and States' notions of the precise phenomenological effect which these emissaries from the real world will have on the spectator. Diderot is concerned with the extent to which these things can coax the audience into participating in the illusion; States' view, on the other hand, is tempered with a healthy measure of Brecht. Nevertheless, it is plain that they share an interest in the corporeality of these real objects, and this is an important point of common ground.

Another theorist whose work bears certain similarities to States' is Lessing. I am thinking especially of his analysis of the Laokoon statue group, in

which his approach is similar but his conclusions firmly opposed to the opinion of Aristotle quoted above. For example, there is his famous observation that:

Einen andern Eindruck macht die Erzählung von jemand's Geschrei; einen andern dieses Geschrei selbst. Das Drama, welches für die lebendige Malerei des Schauspielers bestimmt ist, dürfte vielleicht eben deswegen sich an die Gesetze der materiellen Malerei strenger halten müssen. In ihm glauben wir nicht bloß einen schreienden Philoktet zu sehen und zu hören; wir hören und sehen wirklich schreien.⁵

[The impression made by a description of someone screaming is very different from that of the scream itself. Drama, which is meant for the living art of the actor, should confine itself more strictly within the limits of material art. In it we do not merely imagine that we see and hear a screaming Philoctetes, we see and hear actual screams.]

This concept is taken up again in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, where Lessing makes the following argument:

Herr Heufeld verlangt, daß, wenn Julie von ihrer Mutter aufgehoben wird, sich in ihrem Gesichte Blut zeigen soll. Es kann ihm lieb sein, daß dieses unterlassen worden. Die Pantomime muß nie bis zu dem Ekelhaften getrieben werden. Gut, wenn in solchen Fällen die erhitzte Einbildungskraft Blut zu sehen glaubt; aber das Auge muß es nicht wirklich sehen.⁶

[Herr Heufeld insists that, when Julia is helped up by her mother, there should be blood visible on her face. He should be thankful this was omitted. The performance must never be taken to the point of repulsiveness. In such cases, it is good that our imaginations should convince us that we see blood; but the eye must not actually see any.]

Aside from the obvious differences of opinion which we might expect to find between States and Lessing over the question of what "the limits of material art" actually were, we have here an idea which could have as easily come from the pen of States as that of Lessing. In fact, there is even a particular point of

divergence between States and Lessing which points to a somewhat similar theoretical assumption. States is very much interested in the way in which the theatre stimulates a certain response in the spectator which he calls “preconventional shock” (42). Briefly, what he is referring to is that disturbance to a spectator’s expectations which is engendered by a phenomenon perceived out of its usual context, and placed on a stage.

Of course this is not a concept which is the exclusive province of the theatre. Examples in visual art abound: one thinks of Marcel Duchamp’s urinal or its more recent progeny, Andre Serano’s crucifix in urine, “Pisschrist”; of Andy Warhol’s soup cans; and of the numerous examples back through the whole history of art such as the introduction of foreshortening, perspective, shadow, and so on. There are also analogues to be found in music (such as Berlioz’s introduction of certain percussion instruments into the symphony or Bob Dylan’s introduction of intellectual lyrics to rock music); and Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* gives some sense of the history of similar innovations in literature.

What sets the theatre apart from its analogues—and it is here that we begin to see the common ground between States and Lessing—is the fact that it employs so many real entities such as human beings and chairs, rather than merely representing the objects; this is what Carlson, following Charles Peirce, has called “iconicity.” Now, the majority of theorists would hesitate to claim special status for the theatre on such grounds, or if they did, they would be careful not to carry the argument very far, for they would acknowledge that iconicity is present to varying degrees in other works of art (e.g., Berlioz’s bells or Duchamp’s urinal). Lessing and States, however, are both determined that such similarities between the arts should not be allowed to obscure their essential differences. For Lessing this means that there are certain aesthetic protocols which should not be breached; viz. agony should be variously represented according to the phenomenal character of the medium in question. For States, a son of the modern age, this means that theatre may be regarded as especially privileged as concerns the pursuit of iconoclasm—or perhaps, in light of the particular discussion and jargon, it would be more appropriate to say the pursuit of “iconoplasty.”

It appears likely that both States and Lessing, along with Diderot and Aristotle, made these arguments with the intention of rescuing the analysis of theatre from misleading abstractions. That is to say, they are all concerned to assert the importance of what the spectator *actually experiences* as against dwelling exclusively upon what she may be supposed to *understand* from the performance. As such, in the remarks cited, and in most similar passages, there is a lucid reasoning and a use of concrete imagery which calls upon the reader’s own theatrical experiences for evidential support. This is, as I say, the case with

most such passages, but whereas in the earlier examples these were isolated observations set within broader arguments, in States' case we are presented with an entire book investigating the implications of such an approach. It is not surprising, then, to find States now and then looking beyond the theory of drama proper to philosophical tradition in order to give his observations authority and cogency.

The most pertinent philosophical tradition is, of course, Phenomenology. The relationship it bears to States' work, however, is not straightforward. On the first page of the introduction to *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* States has placed a sort of disclaimer to his subtitle where he writes that his book "is not even a phenomenology of the theater, properly speaking" (1). This does rather beg the question of whether there is not a more appropriate name for what States is doing. Frankly, the answer seems to be, "No." He offers the clarification that his approach is "phenomenological in the sense that it focuses on the activity of theater making itself out of its essential materials" (1), but this is of little use if one does not have, in the first place, a clear understanding of phenomenology to which one can make adjustments.

Therefore, while States' disclaimer suggests that any attempt to draw connections between his work and that of the Phenomenologists would end in frustration, and while anything like a comprehensive précis of the phenomenological approach to aesthetics most certainly lies far beyond the scope of this paper, it will nevertheless be instructive to refer to a few of Phenomenology's more relevant ideas. I myself have been using the word "phenomenological" in a rather cavalier manner thus far, so it may be wise, for a start, to define the term as it is understood by philosophers. The definition offered by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is as even-handed as any:

In the 20th century, Phenomenology is mainly used as the name for a philosophical movement the primary objective of which is the direct investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced, without theories about their causal explanation and as free as possible from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions.⁷

The philosopher whose name is most integrally associated with Phenomenology is Edmund Husserl; consequently a sketch of the basic tenets of this school must center on his writings, especially his principal work, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Although it is extremely difficult, this book continues to stand as the central authority in the field, providing the most comprehensive introduction to

Phenomenology yet written. Because of the labyrinthine route through all the foundation work which is apparently necessary to his argument, Husserl does not get around to declaring the fundamental purpose of the work until the following passage, located in the second chapter:

In these studies we shall go as far as necessary to effect the insight at which we are aiming, namely the insight *that consciousness has, in itself, a being of its own which in its own absolute essence, is not touched by the phenomenological exclusion.* It therefore remains as the “*phenomenological residuum,*” as a region of being which is of essential necessity quite unique and which can indeed become the field of a science of a novel kind: phenomenology.⁸

In plain terms, I take this to mean that if from the consciousness of something, one takes away the something, what is left over is pure consciousness. From this (to my mind) basically Cartesian assumption, Husserl goes on to argue that the essential quality of the act of consciousness is its “intentionality,” by which he means its quality of being “directed toward” an object. Having directed itself towards an object, the consciousness embraces a multiplicity of intuitions. These may be broken down into intuitions of the “immanent” and intuitions of the “transcendent,” which we can characterize respectively as—and I am simplifying wildly here—thoughts about thinking and thoughts about other things.⁹ It is the difficult task of phenomenology to arrest the conscious act within that hair’s breadth in which it may be grasped by “immanent” intuition, but has not yet become coloured by interpretation.

The methodology which Husserl recommends for this task follows a three phase structure. Briefly, this consists of: 1) “phenomenological reduction,” in which everything in question is changed into a phenomenon knowable by some mode of consciousness (i.e., intuition, imagination, recollection, etc.); 2) “eidetic reduction,” in which that which is continuous among all the multiplicity of consciousnesses is isolated; and 3) “transcendental reduction,” the central feature of which is “time awareness,” the element necessary to any formation of meaning.¹⁰ Husserl worked on explicating this third phase all his life: it is best understood, I think, as a bridge between the immanent and the transcendent intuitions which offers, as a common context, the passage of time.

All this is very interesting, but for the purposes at hand there is little point in dwelling on Husserl’s ideas at such length if we do not trace them out through States’ argument. Beginning, then, with the last mentioned of Husserl’s ideas, there are certain links apparent between the concept of the “time

awareness” necessary to his “transcendental reduction” and some of the statements made by States regarding his concept of catharsis as a “purgative reckoning” with time, a concept which he introduces in the following passage:

. . . catharsis is our best word for what takes place at large in the theater. It is precisely a purging: what is purged, at least on the level that concerns me here, is time—the menace of successiveness, of all life falling haphazardly through time into accident and repetition . . . [A] play plucks human experience from time and offers an aesthetic completion to a process we know to be endless. The play imitates the timely in order to remove it from time, to give time a shape. (49-50)

For those who have read Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*, the book which provoked much of the current discussion of “closure” and related aspects of narrative, States’ observation will have a familiar ring and will raise the question of how the theatre may be said to have any special status among the diachronic arts where this “purgative reckoning” is concerned. The implicit response to this challenge would seem to be the same point which, as I have already remarked, is stressed by both States and Lessing: that in the theatre “human action represents human action.” So, to conflate what, for convenience’s sake, I will characterize as the Kermodian with the Husserlian, we can see how the direct representation of an action would entail the same phenomenological experience as that sketched by Husserl for a “real” action, but in meeting the transcendental ego could be said to demand a special implementation of “time awareness.”

To rephrase this idea more precisely: suppose we assume that, as Husserl argues, the transcendental ego makes a link between the subjective passing of time (sensed through immanent intuition) and the passing of time in the objective world (sensed through transcendent intuition), and thereby arrives at the concept “reality”; would the peculiar ordering (or disordering) of time offered by the fictive representation of time—that time in which the end is immanent, which Frank Kermode has identified with the Aquinine *aevum*, a “third order of duration, distinct from time and eternity”¹¹—then alter the task of the transcendental ego in a way which would educe a specific combination of phenomenological intuitions? Given the premises of the dialectic, we must answer in the affirmative.

Furthermore, if we also accept with Lessing and States that the theatre “consumes” reality more directly than the other arts, we find that we must then support States’ contention that the phenomenology of theatre is unique. Again,

such an idea may be something less than mint-new: this is pretty much the same point which Diderot makes—albeit much more succinctly—when he declares that theatre is a “different world.”

So much for the last of the concepts I have drawn from Husserl. As for a comparison of the rest of Husserl’s argument with *Great Reckonings*, it will be immediately apparent to the reader that States has no pretensions to anything like the scientific objectivity to which German Phenomenology aspired; he does not, as it were, “play hardball” with the philosophers. That may be just as well, because Phenomenology’s claim to scientific objectivity is by no means unproblematic: Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, would undoubtedly argue that such an enterprise was quixotic in that it attempts to objectify the unobjectifiable. In the Existentialist view, “being” is in a constant state of “becoming”; there is, therefore, no fixed subject which experiences but merely the stream of experience itself. States, however, never purports to offer anything more objective than a discussion of his own experiences as a representation of “everyman’s” relationship to the stage, and thus—either through shrewdness or modesty—avoids this pitfall.

Husserl’s concept of “intentionality” may cause us to glance uneasily at some of the passages in *Great Reckonings*, for experiences like the “preconventional shock” by which States is wont to set so much store hardly seem to be “intentional” in the usual sense of the word—that is to say “willed.” Reading closely, however, it is apparent that Husserl’s use of the word to refer to the directedness of consciousness toward something has less to do with “will” than what we would probably think of as “noticing” something—a concept which is not at all incongruent with States’ ideas.

Perhaps the most important point of concurrence between States and Husserl lies in their assumption that a conscious act may be said to have an existence independent of interpretation (and, we might add, the complementary assumption that this fact is of some importance). The most important point of divergence between the two men is simply that Husserl does not discuss the theatre, or, indeed, venture significantly into the realm of aesthetics at all, and for his part States does not wade very deeply into the waters of the phenomenality of consciousness. If we are to assess, then, the question of how far States may be justified in his assertions insofar as phenomenology provides a sort of “subtext,” it is necessary to move beyond Husserl to draw on the work of his successors in the field. For present purposes, the most important statement on the subject is made by Mikel Dufrenne in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*.

Dufrenne finds his argument on a carefully drawn distinction between the “work of art” and the “aesthetic object”:

The work of art is the perduring structural foundation for the aesthetic object. It has a constant being which is not dependent on being experienced, while the aesthetic object exists only as appearance, that is only as experienced by the spectator . . . As aesthetically perceived, however, the work of art *becomes* an aesthetic object. It gains a strictly aesthetic, or felt, dimension which it lacked as a work of art. This metamorphosis is contingent in the sense that it depends on a specific act of perception to effect it, but it is noncontingent insofar as the *telos*, truth, and vocation of the work of art are found in the aesthetic object . . . The aesthetic object is simply the work of art as perceived—and perceived for its own sake.¹²

This parallels the distinction States makes between theatre as semiotic object and theatre as phenomenological object. As semiotic object the theatrical performance in question may be understood to comprise a constant quantity of potential signs, whether or not they are recognized by a given spectator. As phenomenological object, a given theatrical performance can be identified only insofar as it is experienced. The difference between States' approach and that of Dufrenne is that while Dufrenne is at great pains to demonstrate that the aesthetic object comprises the significant as well as the sensuous, States, in an effort to assert the distance between his analysis and that of the semioticians, glances at the significant but affords special treatment to the sensuous aspects of the theatrical experience.

It seems fair at this point to demand plainly what the use of approaching art phenomenologically might be. What is to be gained from such an approach that would be missing from a purely semiotic analysis? Of course, Dufrenne has in part answered the question in the passage which is quoted above: the aesthetic object contains the "vocation" of the work of art. He advances this argument a little further when he reasons:

. . . if we consider the perceived object, the unity of the sensuous-as-matter and of form is in fact indecomposable. Form is form not only in uniting the sensuous but also in giving it its *éclat*. It is a quality (*vertu*) of the sensuous . . . Because of form, the aesthetic object ceases to exist as a mere means of reproducing a real object and comes to exist by itself. Its truth is not outside it, in a reality which it imitates, but within itself. This ontological self-sufficiency which form bestows on the sensuous which it unifies allows us to say that the aesthetic

object is nature. The sensuous as fixed, given form and life, finally becomes an object, constituting a nature which has the anonymous, blind force of Nature. (91)

With little difficulty, this concept of the “ontological self-sufficiency” of the sensuous as experienced through the form of the aesthetic object may be related to the concept States speaks of as “the thing” in this passage where he argues that:

. . . theater and primitive ritual, however different in social function, share an energy and structure that one can detect in the Wednesday evening play-reading group as easily as one can in the enactment of the Passion in the Easter service. The ritual in theater is based in the community’s need for *the thing* that transpires in theater and in the designation, or self-designation, of certain individuals who, for one reason or another, consent to become the embodiment of this thing. (157)

Such an understanding may very well be dismissed as mystic, but surely there must be something to be said for these sorts of considerations; otherwise our sole concern would arguably be the theatre’s efficiency as a communicative vehicle. Of course communication is an extremely important aspect of our interest in the theatre, but, plainly, nearly as important an aspect is the theatre’s capacity to give shape to our emotional or sensual energies in a manner which arouses our interest, or, as States would have it, its capacity to fulfill a certain need by providing a “thing” for the exchange of certain energies.

The discussion has, inevitably, come to the point where we must compare States’ assertions with our own experience. When all is said and done, this is the most important testing ground, for the sort of experiences which States attempts to describe are, by definition, subjective. Assuming, then, that we can recognize a number of the phenomena of which States speaks—such as the virtuosity of an actor perceived together with the action of the character whom he is playing, or the dogginess of a dog which, in our minds, refuses to be transfigured into that which it has been enlisted to represent—the important question then becomes whether States is correct in assigning these phenomena a role exterior to the semiotic. The question has been answered in part already; but with the various theoretical and philosophical contexts which have now been discussed in mind, it will be useful to confront some of the problems with States’ argument a little more directly. If we suppose States to be wrong, there are a limited number of ways in which he can be in error. To this end, I have prepared a series of challenges which seem to encompass any arguments which could

reasonably be pitched against States. These are, I think, the sort of arguments that a skeptical semiotician might present to States were he given the opportunity; I will attempt to investigate the extent to which these challenges can be met with an adequate response.

The first two of the following arguments are inherent to the semiotic approach, which does not recognise itself to be concerned with anything less than the whole of the theatrical presentation—which, in the semiotic view, is made wholly apparent through the signs it comprises. The next two arguments might be considered to be based on the logical complications of detaching ourselves from the belief that the entirety of the theatrical experience may be explained in terms of semiotic codes. It is the problem of deciding where one is putting down one's other foot as it were. The last argument is a quibble from the point of view of the history of dramatic theory with States' (tacit) claim to importance as a serious contributor to the theory of drama.

1. *States defines semiotics too narrowly.*

. . . in the present context we might define semiotics as the scientific analysis of the means, or apparatus, of the mimetic process. In other words, what mimetic theory and semiotics have in common is that they see theater as a process of mediation between artist and culture, speaker and listener; theater becomes a passageway for a cargo of meanings being carried back to society (after artistic refinement) via the language of signs. [. . . But] the danger of a linguistic approach is that one is apt to look past the site of our sensory engagement with its empirical objects. This site is the point at which art is no longer *only* language. When the critic posits a division in the art image, he may be saying something about language, but he is no longer talking about art, or at least the affective power of art. (6)

Certainly one can appreciate States' concern in this matter. Admittedly, there is too much semiotic analysis that seems less an efficient and effective means of understanding a theatrical performance than a self-enclosed language game. But is this the fault of semiotics in itself, or merely the stylistic weakness of the particular authors? Against the evidence of some of the more turgid and obscure writers who lack sensitivity to the affective considerations of their subject, there is the example of Roland Barthes, whom States cites extensively. A close examination of Barthes' work, however, reveals how frequently he assumes what

States would call a phenomenological position, just as States may often be seen to have brought a semiotic approach to bear in his own work. We do well to keep in mind the view of Dufrenne, that the aesthetic experience necessarily comprises both the significant and the sensuous. This suggests that the remark States makes about the two approaches constituting a sort of binocular vision is reasonably close to the mark. On the other hand, those areas in which States seems to drift into a slightly more polemic position against semiotic theory should be taken with a grain of salt.

2. *Everything on stage exists within a theatrical frame and therefore has significance as a referent to a system of codes.*

Certainly everything is semiotically *construable*, but do we actually apply this theatrical frame consistently? Surely we have all experienced occasions when certain elements of a performance were so startling to the audience that the theatrical illusion was broken. Moreover, there is the phenomenon of the actor's virtuosity which States expounds at length in the second part of his book. In short, one does, as States suggests, witness a play as an event in the real world as well as an illusion of an "unreal world" (119-20).

Now there is no doubt that, the theatrical illusion having been broken, there are other systems of codes which may be brought to bear upon the theatrical experience; but there remains the question of whether the audience does in fact fill in every fissure in one system of codes, or if there are moments when certain phenomena are experienced sensuously, not significantly.

To look at the question from a different point of view, we might consider what it means to bring external contexts to theatrical perception—that is to say, systems of codes which exist outside the realm of theatrical illusion. Theoretically, if the theatrical frame remains unbroken regardless of the presence of theatrical illusion, the entire world might become framed theatrically in a so-called performance of unbounded time and space, assuming that a spectator was informed of the enterprise. One would expect that the spectator would have lapses of attention, but theoretically these would not be any different from those lapses which States is arguing occur for virtually every spectator at virtually every performance. Logically, then, if all theatrical perception is semiotic, it would necessarily follow that all of perception was semiotic. I am sure that there are certain theorists who would insist that this is in fact so, but such an assertion seems to me to run contrary to common sense. Arguably, a person who engaged with every one of his perceptions of real life in a semiotic manner would suffer from a disease similar to that of the protagonist in Nabokov's story, "Signs and Symbols." What seems more reasonable is to argue that all perception is semiotically *construable*, although there are many perceptions which remain

unconstrued. It also seems reasonable to assert that, if there is such a thing as non-semiotically construed perception, it is unrealistic to believe that it can be turned off completely by the members of a theatrical audience.

3. *Supposing there are moments where understanding of phenomena as signifiers lapses, States suggests incorrectly that certain objects are more phenomenological than others.*

Dogs, clocks, children and fountains are, States argues, among the objects most resistant to theatrical use. These objects resist theatrical framing, he suggests, because of the strength of their “real-life” associations. The argument presents us with a peculiar idea to grapple with, because, at least in the case of the clock, the resistance to theatrical framing occurs because the semiotic associations with the object from everyday life are so strong that they overwhelm its representative function. Given that States has toyed with a polemic distinction between phenomenology and semiotics, we are therefore inclined in that instance to reject his argument out of hand. Yet looking at the other objects—fountains and dogs—we are moving away from the idea of a purely semiotic association and closer to a sensual association, although the semiotic is undoubtedly still important. A further complication comes into the argument when States looks at the ways in which an actor like Laurence Olivier resists our complete identification of him with the character he is playing. Clearly, it is because of the number of preconceptions we bring into the theatre with us that Olivier and these other objects resist a completely mimetic function, but in what way does that make them more phenomenological?

The problem seems to demand a restructuring of the argument. First of all, I think we must, with Dufrenne, understand the phenomenology of aesthetic experience to comprise both the significant and the sensuous; then, we can agree that *among* the various semiotic codes presented by a theatrical production, the mimetic ranks with the most important. It then seems correct to assume that the success of a mimetic code depends on the degree to which the objects presented in the production are understood as signs of a represented thing. In this context, then, we can say that there are certain objects or performers (such as those cited above) which seem more resistant than others to having their customary associations (both significant and sensual) altered in a way which allows them to function smoothly as signs within the mimetic code. It may then be said of these objects that they have phenomenological associations of a strength sufficient to resist semiotic manipulation.

4. *States does not explain the phenomenological experience fully; he is mystifying as to its real nature.*

This is undoubtedly true. States' argument often lacks the sort of rigour which we might have hoped for. This may partially be due to the style of publication: the book was originally brought out in a series which the University of California Press intended for single evening readings. The result is something like a chat delivered by an informed spectator, a fact which States cheerfully admits in his introduction. The style frequently makes for extremely engaging reading, but there are times when States leaves the reader without a strong theoretical foothold, so to speak.

My sketch of a slightly broader context for States' approach was, in part, an attempt to compensate for whatever shortcomings of theoretical rigour may exist. Unfortunately, there is only so much that can be done in this regard, for beyond a certain point one is no longer explicating States' argument, but altering it to suit the parameters of a more scientific type of discourse. In part the problem is inherent to the subject, for in attempting to articulate the experience of an object as a phenomenological whole, without dissecting it into its significant parts, there are limits to what can be said with any degree of clarity. In other words, one can go just so far in explaining a phenomenon before one begins to analyze what it *means*, and at that point, one has begun to regard the object semiotically. That will always be the greatest drawback to any phenomenological analysis.¹³

On the other hand, by comparison with the elaborate mystifications of common experiences which one encounters in the work of the German Phenomenologists, *Great reckonings* certainly sustains an admirable lucidity. If States has not anchored much of his argument to scientifically reasoned theory, to his credit he has attempted to secure a great many vague impressions in an evocation of the actualities of theatre as experienced by a real spectator.

5. States expands a tiny element of our experience into a disproportionately important role.

This point is so very subjective that it is difficult to answer reasonably. Indeed, some might complain that States has been too restrictive in the limitations he imposes on theatrical phenomena. At any rate, if we can at least agree for the sake of argument that non-semiotic aspects of phenomenology are integral to the theatrical experience to at least some degree, it is only fair to States that time be taken to review the various implications which are consequent to this premise before the reader makes his or her own judgement about its importance.

To begin with, we may once again look to the opinion which States shares with Lessing: that one of the principal differences between theatre and the other arts is evinced in the effects which ensue its use of real human action. If this idea is important, it is a distinction which carries well beyond the particular

areas which Lessing looked at, for this would be one of the most important means of distinguishing between the essence of theatre and that of film or television. Furthermore, from the vantage point of this phenomenological distinction, we have a means of asserting that the reading of a drama, no matter how replete with every imaginable description and stage direction, can never duplicate a spectator's experience of a theatrical presentation.

Of at least equal importance (although unfortunately abstruse to a degree which depletes the idea of much of its potential persuasive power) is States' concept of the "purgative reckoning" with time which the theatre affords. Given the diachronic structure of a play, we must relate this to Dufrenne's concept of form giving shape and unity to the sensuous aspects of consciousness. These two ideas are really part of the same phenomenon: an audience is cast in a certain role (or number of roles) by a performance, and to the extent to which they accept this and participate in the event, they become integrated with the material of the work of art, the piece of theatre. This is more than simply a matter of "getting caught up in the illusion," although that is undoubtedly a part of the experience. If I understand (and conflate) States and Dufrenne correctly, the essential phenomenological awareness of the corporeality of the objects in question, coupled with the participation in the process of illusion, affords a transcendental opportunity which is set apart from the usual transcendental work of the ego. It is, in a manner of speaking, an exercise which offers us a chance to alter relations with the material world. It should be stressed that States never becomes so explicitly mystical—not on such a grand scale, at any rate. The closest he ever comes is in his discussion of "the thing" that ritual and theatre share.

Finally, there is a further concept arising from the premise of the non-semiotic aspects of the phenomenology of theatre which carries implications reaching beyond the immediate field of drama to other discussions of how human consciousness may be understood. Briefly, it is this: if there are aspects of theatrical experience which are extra-linguistic—which, in other words, cannot be reduced to semiotic codes—this means that any model of the human relation to theatrical performance (even the most elaborate hypothetical model) would be incomplete. This bears a very close analogy to one of the current arguments about the impossibility of creating "strong" artificial intelligence: that is to say, of building a machine which thinks exactly like a human in terms of creativity and intuition as well as logic and memory.

Control engineering, which shares much of the vocabulary of semiotics, describes the system of codes by which any machine is able to operate as its "algorithms." Even the most advanced computer imaginable may be reduced to an algorithmic sequence, and therefore a formal system of mathematical codes. However, there is a mathematical theorem, called Gödel's theorem, which states

that “whatever formal system [a mathematician] might adopt as the criterion of truth, there will always be mathematical propositions . . . that his algorithm cannot provide an answer for.”¹⁴ A number of scientists have attempted to use this theorem to demonstrate the impossibility of strong A-I. One of the most successful and perhaps the best known such attempt is made by Roger Penrose in *The Emperor’s New Mind*. Penrose’s argument marches through relativity theory, cosmology, quantum physics and microbiology, to arrive at the conclusion that inspiration, creativity and various intuitions—including certain aesthetic insights—lie beyond the scope of any algorithmic system. Most pertinently, among the proofs he cites for this argument are the examples of “non-verbality” of thought and animal consciousness.

To bring this analogy back to the discussion at hand, we can see by inference that Penrose’s math also suggests that no system of semiotic codes would ever be able to encompass a spectator’s mind; there would always be elements of consciousness at work which were proscribed, so to speak, by the culturally established codes. If this is true, if there *is* something in the theatrical experience which is not reducible to the semiotic code, and supposing this aspect of experience to be of some importance, the natural question becomes one of where it is one might find evidence of such consciousness. At present, it seems that the most promising answers, whatever their shortcomings, are to be found in the phenomenology of theatre as States has helped us to understand it.

Notes

1. Michael Kirby, “Nonsemiotic Performance,” *Modern Drama* 25.1 (March 1982) 110.
2. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1943) Bk VIII, Ch 5, 329-30.
3. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S.H. Butcher, ed. Francis Fergusson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961) Ch. VI, 64.
4. Denis Diderot, *Le fils naturel et les entretiens sur le fils naturel* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1975) 135.
5. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon* in *Gesammelte Werke* 5 (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1955) 32.
6. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie: 9 Stück* in *Gesammelte Werke* 6 (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1954) 53.
7. Herbert Spiegelberg, “Philosophical Schools and Doctrines: Phenomenology,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., Vol. 25 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) 625.
8. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans F. Kersten (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1982) 65-66.
9. For the record, what Husserl actually has to say about this idea is the following:
By acts directed to something immanent, more generally formulated, by intensive mental processes related to something immanent, we understand those to which it is essential that their intentional objects, if they exist at all, belong

to the same stream of mental processes to which they themselves belong. That is the case, for example, wherever an act related to an act (wherever a cogitatio relates to a cogitatio) of the same Ego, or where an act relates to a sensuous feeling-Datum belonging to the same Ego, etc. The consciousness and its Object form an individual unity made up purely of mental processes.

Intentive mental processes of which that is not the case are directed to something transcendent. Such, for example, are all acts directed to essences or to intentive mental processes belonging to other Egos with other streams of mental processes, and likewise all acts directed to physical things or to realities of any sort . . . (79)

10. It will be prudent to draw attention at this point to a potentially quite confusing element of Husserl's terminology—his use of “transcendent” and “transcendental.” Transcendent refers to the objects existing beyond the structures which one's mind brings to them; transcendental refers to the aspect of consciousness which reaches beyond the subject/object division to make understanding possible.

11. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford UP: London, 1967) 70ff.

12. Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey, et. al. (Northwestern UP: Evanston, 1973) xxiv.

13. This recalls the point which Marvin Carlson made in the passage quoted near the beginning of this essay, that in speaking of anything non-semiotic, one is constrained by the fact that “we could talk or think about it only with the tools provided by our culture.”

14. Roger Penrose, *The Emperor's New Mind: Concerning Computers, Minds, and the Laws of Physics* (Oxford: New York, 1989) 416-17.



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