

Multilateral and Holistic Perspectives in Contemporary Performance Theory: Understanding Patrice Pavis's Integrated Semiotics

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The critical study of performance has only recently made its way into more mainstream academic discourse. During the second half of the twentieth-century, the “death of the author” gave birth to an expansion of traditional concepts of “textuality,” consequently elevating the status of pop culture as a legitimate object of critical inquiry. The “text” could no longer be confined to the written word (or even to an understanding of its structural composition). Instead, it became an infinite corpus, connected to and permeated by all aspects of culture (history, religion, politics, law, economics, etc.) Its “meaning” became relative, simultaneously polyvalent and ambiguous, dependent not only upon the mechanics of its production, but also upon the context of its reception. In short, the “text” exploded.

The consequences of this “explosion” for scholars working in the area of dramatic theory and criticism resulted in the official establishment of a new field during the seventies and eighties, performance studies. Of course, this is not entirely true. Performance has long-time interested intellectuals from Aristotle to Baudrillard, and it was perhaps scholars from the Prague School of Linguistics (circa 1930) who had the greatest impact on initially cultivating critical models for understanding performance phenomena. As early as 1934, for instance, Mukarovsky promoted the adoption of a semiotic perspective as a means of advancing the “objective study of the phenomenon ‘art.’” He continues: “The semiotic point of view allows theorists to recognize the autonomous existence and essential dynamism of artistic structure and to understand evolution of art as an immanent process but one in constant dialectical relationship with the evolution of other domains of culture.”¹ Consequently, contemporary “performance studies” owes much to the field of semiotics for “freeing” it from the “chains of literature” to which it had been historically bound.

This essay will, therefore, examine the influence of semiotic approaches to the study of theater and performance. In particular, we will briefly discuss the evolution of *theater semiotics* and demonstrate how the field has absorbed advancements in deconstructive and post-structural criticism. Secondly, we will examine the

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importance of theater semiotician Patrice Pavis's "model of concretization" and "theory of vectors," arguing that his work echoes a new trend in contemporary performance studies that is oriented toward multilateral and holistic perspectives in its refusal to separate production from reception, the written from the performance text, or narrative structure from ideology. It is hoped that such a study will offer insight into the current state of the field as well as to its future.

Before proceeding with the discussion of the evolution of semiotic theory, however, it is perhaps more important to acknowledge some of the many attacks and criticisms that have been launched against the field. Many scholars and artists, for example, have expressed reservations about the "totalizing" characteristics of semiotic theory, arguing that it perpetuates a singularizing and, consequently, limited understanding. For these "semiotic skeptics," theater and performance are seen as too vast and varied for any one, all-inclusive and comprehensive theory, and of course they are right. An appreciation of the various forms of theatrical expression can never be (and should never be) reduced to one vision; this is not what most contemporary semioticians support. If theorists, such as Pavis for instance, develop elaborate models to help interpret performance phenomena, this should not be read as an attempt to limit and oversimplify a work of art; instead, it should be seen as an effort to articulate and schematically "map out" the complexity of performance with the understanding that this "mapping" is never complete. Far from being exhaustive, the semiotic approach "opens the text" and represents a journey of perpetual refinement; its goal is to facilitate and encourage pluralistic analyses. Therefore, these theoretical models are, at best, "sign-posts" or perhaps even "signals" that can help guide analysts as they maneuver themselves through the labyrinth of the text that has neither a beginning nor an end.

A second argument that is often made against semiotics is that it is seen as too abstract and theoretical to be of any use to practicing artists. This is an unfortunate assumption and probably points to a more serious issue—the "under-theorization" of theater, particularly in the United States, where lack of sufficient funding for the arts in general has perpetuated a mediocre commercialization (at both the professional and amateur levels); experimentation is often sacrificed in order to meet market demands. Of course, the causes of this "under-theorization" are many; suffice it to say that the "fetish of convenience and marketability" in the technological- and media-obsessed age of late-Capitalism has, in many ways, restricted critical progress in theater arts. "Mainstream theater" has tried too hard to compete, for instance, with the special-effects of cinema rather than capitalize on the unique characteristics that separate it from *the seventh art*.

This would explain the modern-day appreciation (and perhaps obsession) for elaborate stage sets and the spontaneous applause that erupts as the chandelier in *Phantom of the Opera* makes its way across the house high above the audience's heads. All too often, "good theater" has become synonymous with technological

spectacle, resulting in a sort of fanaticism for what might be considered hyper-realism.

This is not to suggest, however, in some elitist way, that innovation is obsolete nor that technology is entirely restrictive; there are certainly many critically informed companies out there who continue to produce works that “push the envelope” in a variety of meaningful ways in their attempts to challenge and engage audiences. Nevertheless, to ignore theory is to run the risk of losing intellectual *rigueur*, to fall into the trap of complacent stagnation and perpetuate outdated modes of thinking, comforting myths even, that no longer correspond to contemporary social realities. The theater needs theory as much as theory needs theater.

To return, therefore, to the criticism of semiotics’s (in)applicability to theater practitioners, it should be understood that such criticism is usually based on an inaccurate understanding of the semiotic quest: to examine critically the multifaceted dynamics of the process(es) of performance and theatrical creativity. In fact, most proponents of the semiotic approach are themselves well-respected and very talented artists (actors, directors, designers, etc.) who utilize their understanding of semiotics to inform and guide their own practice. Indeed, most models, and especially those of Pavis, are conceived as “tools” at the artist’s disposal designed to illicit a more thorough and critical reading of the dramatic and/or performance text and, consequently, to foster and enhance the creative process of theatricalization. Again, semiotics does not seek to deny the artist her/his creative energy, nor does it seek to reduce or constrain the work of art to a singular interpretation; on the contrary, its goal is to inspire the creative process and promote a pluralized understanding of “the text,” be it written or performed. If its language seems “too technical” or “too abstract,” this is probably due to its desire for precision and accuracy. As with all relevant theory, it is nevertheless conceived with practice in mind. What follows is, therefore, an attempt to reconcile the tension between artist and theorist.

The historical evolution of the field of theater semiotics from its initial theoretical preoccupation with the possibility of exacting a single and unique theatrical sign to its more recent concerns with interculturalism has been well documented. “Theatre semiotics is a part of general semiotics and will necessarily draw from this broader conceptual basis in any study of drama and theater production.”² Thus, any discussion on the development of semiotics as a discipline inevitably leads one back to its founders, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) who attempted to articulate the various components of the “sign.” Both men supported basically a triadic model of the sign whereby something (*the signifier*) took the place of (*the signified*) something else (*the referent*); however, the more complex model that Peirce developed brought the idea of interpretation into play and divided the Saussurian *signified* into two components: (1) the *interpretant* and (2) the *ground*.³ Furthermore, Peirce’s efforts to identify a typology of signs (i.e.,

icon, index, and symbol) laid the groundwork for later theorists, such as Kowzan, who, during the 1960s, were interested in establishing a similar typology of signs for the theatre.⁴

Following Saussure and Peirce came Ogden, Richards, and Morris who continued to further develop an understanding of the nature of signs and are attributed with having accomplished three important feats in the historical development of semiotics: (1) Ogden and Richards formalized the idea of the referent as an integral part of the sign's composition, and (2) they extended the idea of the signifier to include non-linguistic forms, such as image and gesture; (3) Morris, in turn, refined the constituent parts of the sign to include "the interpreter" and, in so doing, introduced the social element of semiosis. These various models, therefore, illustrate that semiotics developed from a linguistic model that concerned itself primarily with sign production. Later, semiotics would free itself from a strictly linguistic endeavor and would venture out into a larger philosophical field while simultaneously placing focus on the social aspects of sign production and reception. The specific application of semiotic theory to theater and performance was initiated, however, by members of the Prague School of linguistics. In fact, numerous articles on this subject were published by the Prague scholars and covered a wide-range of theater topics from the semiotics of folk theater to the Chinese Theater. Two articles in particular truly mapped-out the work to be done: Jindrich Honzl's "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater" and Jiri Veltrusky's "Dramatic Text as a Component of Theater."

In an attempt to define the nature of the theatrical sign (an endeavor which has now been discarded by contemporary semiotics), much of Honzl's article actually deals with the liberation of the theatre, asserting that the stage is not necessarily confined to a particular architectural structure, but rather is a matter of function, a place where action is represented.

It does not matter whether the stage is a construction or not, that is, whether the stage is a place in the Prague National Theater or a meadow near a forest or a pair of planks supported by barrels or a market square crowded with spectators. What does matter is that the stage of the Prague National Theater may perfectly well represent a meadow, or the meadow of an outdoor theater clearly represent a town square . . .⁵

From this liberation of the stage from any particular architectural construction, Honzl continues to "free" other aspects of the theater including the actor, text, director, and so on. "We have freed the concept of 'stage' from its constructional restrictions, and we can free the concept of 'actor' from the restriction which claims that an actor is a human being who represents a dramatic character in a play."⁶ Here

Honzl insinuates that other signs on the stage can take over the role of actor and that actors are not limited to human beings alone. "An actor could be a piece of wood . . ." ⁷ Honzl ultimately asserts that signs in the theater are arbitrary, ambiguous, and unstable; a sound can become a character, a gesture can designate locale. It is this ambiguous nature of the theatrical sign that constitutes the very core of the theater for Honzl, and it is action that unifies or dictates the sign's function. "Indeed, precisely this changeability, this versatility of the theatrical sign, is its [the theater's] specific property." ⁸

Jiri Veltrusky's "Dramatic Text as a Component of Theater," as the title suggests, considered the written text as only one of the many possible signifying systems of the theater, and he intended to systematically analyze the relationship and points of tension between the written text and performance. He did not "seek to examine all the aspects of its [the written text] theatricality, but rather to focus on those features of the play which in a general way determine its place in the structure of theater." ⁹ What Veltrusky discovered was that there is tension between what he called the "semiotics of language" and the "semiotics of acting." The language system imposes itself on the theatrical act of signification via the written text which in turns produces a stable sign; the acting system works in direct opposition to the stability of the language system and "tends to divert attention from the text to the voice performance, from speeches to physical actions and even to the physical appearance of the stage figure . . ." ¹⁰ Veltrusky argued, therefore, that although the theatrical sign is extremely variable, it also does retain an element of extraordinary stability.

Thus, the Prague School semioticians played an important role in the evolution of semiotic theory for the theater by establishing the idea of the theater as consisting of a variety of sign-systems; everything on stage was now considered a sign. They also recognized that the theater had the unique capacity to give ordinary real-world objects extraordinary dramatic signification and that it was this special characteristic that made theater unique. Their systematic development and application of the semiotic point of view would later influence structuralist researchers working in a variety of different fields, from the social sciences to the humanities; they have also had a significant influence on Pavis's work which will be discussed later in this article.

By the second half of the twentieth century, France, in particular, saw a spectacular increase in the number of semiotic applications to a wide variety of topics, which included analyses of the fashion industry, mythology, and narrative, just to name a few. As for the theater, theorists such as Kowzan, Ubersfeld, and Pavis built upon and refined semiotic applications. Kowzan attempted to establish a comprehensive repertoire of signs in the theater; Ubersfeld continued to refine the actantial model which had been theorized earlier by both Propp and Greimas,

while Pavis concerned himself with the semiotics of reception and its role in the process of both textual and performance concretization.

The semiotic project did not go uncontested, however, and deconstructive criticism threatened to nullify the traditionally “meaning-centered” semiotic approach. In fact, in the early 1980s, Marvin Carlson noted a “split” in France “between semiotic theorists, attempting to analyze theatrical codes and their transmission, and certain of the poststructuralist theorists who, like Feral, were concerned with non-discursive flows of energy and libidinal displacements . . .”¹¹ Innovative and controversial post-structuralist concepts, such as “desire as absence,” “de-semioticization,” “schizo-analysis,” “energy flows,” and “simulations,” entered into the realm of theatrical discourse and were initially viewed as standing in direct contrast to the second contributory component of this division, semiotics. Carlson suggests that it was André Helbo who, in 1983, offered an initial synthesis with *Les mots et les gestes*, consequently setting the stage for the development of a new trend in theater semiotics—holism and multilateralism.

Helbo’s work dealt specifically with the post-structural controversy over the receiving spectator and the signifying production and sought to find a compromise between the two questions looming over performance studies: (1) How is the theatre-object constructed (an issue that has primarily been investigated by semiotics)? and (2) What is the role of the spectator and his/her desire (a primary concern of post-structuralists)? As Carlson points out, Helbo “suggests that this division in fact operates in theatre as an ongoing dynamic. Theatre itself is a ‘site of confrontation’ between the voice, the site of communication and the body, the site of flows of pleasure and desire.”¹² And according to Helbo, these two forces intersect at the level of the actor who expresses “sign and desire, both meaning and the denial of meaning, both real physical presence and signifier of a narrative concept that denies that presence.”¹³

The consequences of such an understanding for theatre semiotics are vast; they demand that the field move beyond the question of text versus performance, that it abandon the issues of segmentation and the definition of minimal units of meaning and forgo the desire to maintain a clear-cut division between production and reception in the generation of meaning. Instead, semiotics must begin to acknowledge the question of desire and its role in the process of signification; it must offer a global rather than a fragmented understanding of performance phenomena, and, most importantly, it must actively seek mediation between the two poles of production and reception, recognizing that they are not diametrically opposed but rather are two intersecting points on the same plane of signification. “If it wants to avoid censuring the conditions of productivity or prejudging the theatrical object, semiotics shall have to account for the construction of meaning in praesentia.”¹⁴

Following Helbo’s lead, the semiotic branch of this rupture described by Carlson, has witnessed an ever-increasing interest in the development of

multilateral, globalized, and holistic models of analysis for understanding performance phenomena. Patrice Pavis, in particular, has been at the forefront of this synthesis, stressing the importance for the return of a dialect in the field in order to better understand the relationship between sign production, reception, and theatricalization. As early as 1982, Pavis first published his model of dramaturgical analysis, which he states:

Goes beyond a semiological description of stage systems. . . . [It] asks, pragmatically, what the spectator will get out of the performance, how theatre relates to the audience's ideological and aesthetic frame of reference. It integrates and reconciles a semiological (aesthetic) perspective on the performance signs with a sociological examination of the production and reception of these same signs.¹⁵

Foregoing the temptations of his predecessors and contemporary colleagues to choose sides, so to speak, in the debate over performance versus the written text or production versus reception, Pavis hoped to connect the most salient ideological points on the grid of theater studies. He justifies such a global analytical synthesis by a rejection of what he calls *unilateralism* in theater studies. Commenting on the paradigmatic shift taking place in performance theory during the early part of the 1980s, a shift from production to reception and, consequently, from the written to the performance text, Pavis criticized many of his colleagues for failing to recognize the need for the re-establishment of a dialectic in the field. As he explains: "Production is never realized without the perspective of a potential receiver in mind; all receptive acts require the recognition of the process of production."¹⁶ His model thus represents, in many ways, the first phase in the globalization of theater and performance studies in the sense that it is a combinatorial model that seeks to understand the dramatic text both on the page and on the stage, from within and from without.

Of course, some may argue that such comprehension is impossible, that the territory to be covered is far too vast for pragmatic purposes and must be broken down into more attainable goals focusing, at best, on one dimension of the process; others may fear that the quest for global understanding will result in the loss of important detail, consequently creating a false image, an empty and homogenized "product" whose "packaging" does not contain any substance of "truth." Both arguments are certainly valid and continue to be fiercely debated in various contexts around the world, from the living room to the chambers of parliament. Unfortunately, much of the debate is based on binary schemas, on "either/or" and "if/then" oppositions. Pavis is concerned, however, with multilateralism, where "mind and body" are not necessarily two separate entities: the mind is body;

the body is mind; production is reception; reception is production. In this way, a definition of the object is only possible via a definition of the perceiver who, in turn, subjectively delineates the object's properties as they are manifested in the ephemeral flow of performance; desire defines both production and reception of the subject/object, reinforcing what Erika Fischer-Lichte implies when she states: "Each and every theatre historian [performance analyst] cannot help but delineate the object of research according to her/his own research interests and theoretical basis and, in this way, construct her/his history of the object thus subjectively chosen."¹⁷ For Pavis, then, it is not a question of "either/or" but "and."

In the English translation of his *Dictionary of the Theatre*, Pavis defines *dramaturgical analysis* as an effort "to define the specific characteristics of text and performance. It attempts to clarify the transition from *dramatic writing* to *stage writing*."¹⁸ He emphasizes that dramaturgical analysis can be undertaken by both directors/dramaturgs in the pre-production stages of performance and by spectators in post-production appraisals of the performance event. His model integrates production and reception in the interpretive process and seeks to better understand the relationship between textual fiction and contemporary reality. With his model, he is simultaneously calling for an end to fragmentation and partisan politics in theater scholarship and is advocating a reform movement based on equal representation. The primary components of this "platform" (to extend this political metaphor) include three fundamental concepts: (1) *concretization*, (2) *fictionalization*, and (3) *ideologization*. A more recent concept called *vectorization* is also important for its potential use in assuring that the global demands of this agenda are achieved.

The concept of *concretization* was first theorized by Mukarovsky in 1934. He considered a work of art as a sign composed of "(1) a perceivable signifier, created by the artist, (2) a 'signification' registered in the collective consciousness and (3) a relationship with that which is signified, a relationship which refers to the total context of social phenomena."¹⁹ He condemned the limitations of psychological aesthetics that prefer to identify a work of art with either its creator or its receivers and saw semiotics as a vital means by which to analyze objectively art's mode of signification.

Concretization is, therefore, in the simplest of terms, a reading of the text, a confrontation between the artistic signifier and an active receiver who paradoxically collaborates in the production of the signified within the confines of a given social context. This process of reading, or what some might call productive-reception, is an integral component of the comprehensive textual body and, in this way, echoes the trend toward holism by refusing to separate reader from text; it erases boundaries and acknowledges the interdependent nature of signification. "It would be wrong to consider the dramatic text a fixed entity that can be understood in a particular way once and for all. In fact, the text exists only upon completion of a reading,

which is always situated in history.”²⁰ Its [the text’s] concretization involves two primary processes: fictionalization and ideologization.

Fictionalization represents an attempt to explain how the textual and scenic productions of fiction are capable of organizing the narrative material into a story or *fable*. Fictionalization is intimately linked with ideologization and can ultimately only be understood in terms of this relationship. This unavoidable link is due to the pervasive nature of ideology, which permeates everything. Fictionalization is, therefore, primarily focused on technique, on a comparative analysis of how the story is told (either on the stage or on the page); it involves three principal domains of inquiry: space, time, and action of which we will discuss only the first in greater detail.

With theater, however, there are two systems in question: the written text and the performance text. For a director interested in staging a particular text, the study of fictionalization would be primarily a creative endeavor in which he/she attempts to “translate” written, linguistic signifiers into concrete, spatial signifiers. The quotation marks around “translate,” however, are deliberate, for it is too simplistic to view the *mise-en-scène* as an actual translation of the written text in the traditional sense of the word. As Pavis cautions: “If there is in fact an obvious relationship between text and representation, it is not in the form of a ‘traduction’ or a re-dubbing of the first into the second, but rather of a ‘translation’ with regard to a fictional universe structured from the text and a fictional universe that is produced by the stage.”²¹ By affirming that the relationship between the written text and its scenic representation is not [in French] a “traduction” but rather a “translation,” Pavis reaffirms the textual autonomy of the art of *mise-en-scène*. A “traduction” is a literal translation and implies that the written text is a “recipe” which, if followed, would always yield the same results in performance; on the other hand, a “translation” is a “trans-reading,” a “transparent reading,” whereby the relationship between the two texts remains open, dynamic, and ever-changing. With his emphasis on “translation,” Pavis does not deny the existence of a relationship between the two fictional universes, textual and scenic, but more importantly, he recognizes that the scenic enunciation of the written text is capable of infinitely deconstructing this text.

Ideology is already at play when we begin to discuss the concepts of space, time, and action in the process of fictionalization, and the articulation of the dynamic relationship among these three components represents a central goal for theater analysts. Time, space, and action are only meaningful in terms of their interdependence and connectivity. Action unravels itself in time; time transforms space; space provides the parameters in which action occurs and is itself altered by time and action. However, it is the theorization of space, that seems to have attracted the most attention from scholars, and, as Pavis explains, space has been approached from two primary theoretical points of view. The first of these perceives theatrical

space as an empty space to be filled with action, actors, colors, sounds, and so forth; the second approach views space as invisible, an all-enclosing, unlimited presence not to be filled, but rather, extended, added to by its users. The first approach implies a limitation to a certain degree, keeping the parameters of space confined and, consequently perhaps, its possible interpretations and usage as well. The second approach seems a bit more exploratory in that it promotes a process of discovery, an unending revelation and creation of spatial and textual realms.

The following microanalysis of Michel Azama's play *Croisades* and its performance by the Créations Diving Horse company in Montreal should serve to offer a clearer explanation of the complexities involved in a semiotic reading of theatrical space and the comparative work involved.²² In "sequence 8" of Azama's work, the playwright clearly indicates in the written text that this scene takes place in two different spaces. In the first "space" of the written text, the characters Krim and Ismail are engaged in conversation, seated in the middle of ruins. In the second "space," the characters Bella and Yonathan silently make their way through the ruins. Throughout this sequence, the dialogue between the characters in each respective "space" overlaps and is evenly split down the middle of the page, the first space represented in the left-hand column and the second space represented on the right. The dramatic space of this particular sequence is developed by juxtaposition, and it is to be understood that what follows in the text takes place simultaneously but in separate areas. However, these separate playing areas represent only one-half of a much more complicated spatial context. In a global (or vectorized) understanding of the text, the reader discovers that the aforementioned ruins are in fact the devastating consequence of an on-going and seemingly never-ending religious war in a place that can be described as a no-man's land. There are very few explicit scenic indications offered by the playwright to help localize the action. Sequence two for example adds only that this space is a place of commotion.

Pavis's notion of fictionalization would therefore ask: How does such a dramatic space get communicated in scenic space? In the context of the Créations Diving Horse production of this same scene, the director achieved the spatial separation implied in the written text by placing two of the characters on an elevated platform located behind the characters Krim and Ismail, who in turn, were seated downstage front on an open box-shaped object, staring straight ahead. This distancing effect helped the director to establish and spatially communicate the idea that these two groups represent opposing factions. Further contributing to this spatial sign is the inter-character proxemics. Not only were Krim and Ismail seated apart from Bella and Yonathan, but both couples were respectively huddled together closely, thus helping to reinforce and communicate the relationship between characters. Surrounding this space was a basic darkness with a few strategically placed spots to illuminate the action. This darkness helped to evoke the opaque

confusion, fear, chaos, and uncertainty of a battlefield where soldiers shoot blindly into the abyss at their enemies.

In addition to the physical placement of the characters, the costumes, makeup, props, and facial expressions also fall within the domain of space. In this particular production of the play, the characters were dressed in white, oversized uniforms and boots. One character held a rifle in hand and appeared to be on the lookout for approaching enemies. His friend, seated beside him, sported a prosthetic limb replacing his real one that must have been lost in some prior, explosive battle. The white makeup on their faces may have indicated death, fatigue, or illness. On one hand, the bizarre costumes and unique use of facial makeup reinforce the seriousness of a volatile situation. On the other hand, their grotesque and absurd nature works simultaneously to undermine the gravity of the situation by making the characters appear as clowns. A reading of the space and the objects that are a part of it clearly indicates, therefore, a conscious rejection of a strict realistic representation in favor of a hybrid portrayal that oscillates between realism and the fantastic. Such scenographic hybridization in performance parallels a similar stylistic oscillation in the written text, where *vraisemblance* fuses with the *extraordinaire*.

The second major component in Pavis's circuit of concretization involves the "textualization of ideology" or the "ideologization of the text," which focuses on the extent to which ideology infiltrates the text as well as the text's effect on ideology. This inquiry involves a theoretical conception of the text as a triadic structure composed of the following levels: (1) the autotextual, (2) the intertextual, and (3) the ideotextual. Facilitating the passage between these various textual levels is the *idéologème*, described by Pavis as "a hybrid being that functions simultaneously as a textual and ideological unit within a given social, ideological and discursive formation."²³ Let us first offer a brief definition of these terms before proceeding with an examination of its applicability.

Any discussion of the term "ideology" requires a bit of explanation. What exactly do we mean when we talk of "ideology" or an "ideological effect"? Typically, the term conjures up negative ideas of coercive political agendas construed explicitly to gain and maintain control over lower social classes. In fact, it is often considered as a tool used by the ruling class to assure its position of social dominance, thus assuming what John B. Thompson would call a "critical" identity. "Critical conceptions [of ideology] are those which . . . imply that the phenomena characterized as ideology or ideological are misleading, illusory or one-sided."²⁴

However, such a definition does not seem to correspond to Pavis's understanding of the term. For him, ideology takes on a "neutral" identity (to use Thompson's words), which "purports to characterize phenomena as ideology or ideological without implying that these phenomena are necessarily misleading, illusory or aligned with the interests of any particular group."²⁵ Such a definition implies that everything is ideological, that it permeates everything. In one way, ideology is an

external signifier that imposes itself on the perceiving subject who, in turn, is invited either to affirm or negate the veracity of its signified content. It is simultaneously honest and deceiving depending upon the openness of its receiver. Ideology is also an internal signifier, a product of its receiver and his/her social context; it is the culminating product of a dynamic relationship between individual receivers and a greater social structure that has been collectively and historically created. The text, in turn, is an individual and collective entity that cannot entirely surpass the boundaries of ideology but is nevertheless capable of expanding and transforming the parameters. Thus, to understand holistically and multilaterally the ideological effect, the analyst must look at the transformations undertaken by the *idéologème* on the auto-, inter-, and ideotextual levels.

Paavolainen offers some very succinct definitions of these terms, describing the the ideotext as that level of the text which is primarily concerned with “the prevalence of world views; ideological and psychological interpretations are most center [at this level], so that all the meanings of the work are opened up towards the external world.”²⁶ Brechtian influenced productions are perhaps the best example of an ideotextual *mise-en-scène* in their efforts to make allusion to and provide commentary about the exterior, social world outside of the theater. The intertext, on the other hand, represents the infinite number of interdependent elements which, coming from “elsewhere,” reform themselves in a text. The intertext, according to Paavolainen, “maintains a discursive relationship to earlier interpretations, also offering a possibility to future interpretations.” Contemporary performances of classical texts, such as those of Shakespeare or Molière, are considered to be particularly intertextual in their capacity to make allusion to previous (anterior) productions. Finally, the autotext “focuses on the closed-off aspect of the world created on stage: the play as well as its performance remains ‘within their own world.’” The avant-garde and symbolist stages are prime examples of autotextual *mise-en-scène* in their ability to create a uniquely self-referential theatrical universe, cut-off from the outside world and from intertextual influences. Of course, all texts retain elements of each of these dimensions (ideo-, inter-, and auto-), and, again, it is the *idéologème* that serves as the “through-line” among these three levels of textual ideologization.

In his *L'analyse des spectacles*, Pavis offers a simplified example of an *idéologème* in an analysis of Chekov's *Three Sisters*. He explains that in this text, the concept of Moscow has the dual function of representing an ideological construction as well as a textual unit that supports the narrative framework. In one way, Moscow is an ambiguous term; each character has a vaguely subjective idea as to what the city means to him/her; it represents a desire for the characters, but a desire that they cannot clearly define. This ambiguity allows the characters to exchange ideas “without committing to anything.” In this sense, a very real geographical and cultural referent is used as a primary means for narrative construction. Moscow

becomes “a thematic and narrative leitmotiv, and thus a textual unit that supports the architecture of the story.”²⁷

Although Pavis is correct to emphasize the importance of ideology in the process(es) of sign production and reception in theatrical communication, to (re)trace this process in relation to the *idéologème* remains a rather difficult goal to accomplish however, for it requires the analyst to isolate a specific kernel of ideology to be found at all levels of textuality, including the Social Context, and to specify where and how the *idéologème* transforms itself from one level to another. “Understanding the text is not a question of visualizing and representing the realities of which it speaks, but rather of connecting it to the discursive and ideological practices where its meaning is cultivated.”²⁸

In order to better understand the processes involved in the textualization of ideology, let us once again return to an examination of Azama’s *Croisades*. In this play, we could argue, for example, that the notion of “crusade” represents the *idéologème*; this would not be too far reaching since this idea is reflected in the very title of the play and is at the base of all the action. As we retraced the production and consequential transformations of the *idéologème*, we would need to contemplate its formation in the social context and its journey through the ideo-, inter-, and autotexts. The analysis of its production in the social context alone represents a significant potential undertaking because it would require the researcher to retrace the etymology and historical evolution of the *idéologème* (or *proto-idéologème*) in an effort to uncover the archaeology of its formation as a subject of discourse.

After this significant amount of work was complete, an examination of the ideo- and autotexts could then be conducted, taking an even closer look at the concept of “crusade” at the time in which the text was written or performed. For example, let us imagine an American production of *Croisades* in a “post September 11th” context. Due to the nature of Azama’s play, the actors, directors, technicians, and audience members would undoubtedly bring their memories of that event to the production; consequently, their notion of “crusades” would have a significant impact on the ideo- and autotexts. The sense of temporal, spatial, and actantial ambiguity that was originally emphasized in the written text may be sacrificed in performance in this new context. Yonathan and Ismaïl might be transformed into symbols of the opposing troupes in the contemporary war on terrorism; other characters, such as *la petite vieille* and *le petit vieux*, may come to represent world leaders who do nothing but enhance their collection of the dead; Bella may be associated with the wife of a suicide bomber who is torn between her personal and political convictions; ambiguity could potentially yield to the temptation of identification on the ideo- and autotextual levels.

Finally, the intertext would pose an even greater area for potential research since it involves an examination of the *idéologème*’s transformations in a variety of “texts.” We would need to select certain “texts” in which the *idéologème* seems

clear and which share similarities with *Croisades*. If the texts come from different periods, then an historical analysis of the diverse social contexts could be conducted, possibly bringing out certain similarities. For example, we might first consider texts that were written during the European crusades and look to see if any of the themes, motifs, or images has been transformed in Azama's text. It might also be very interesting to look at a variety of texts written during times of war and retrace the causes and effects of "crusades" in each, demonstrating how these texts seem to echo similar themes or images.

Summarily, in order for there to be a concretization of the sign, there must first of all be a confrontation between the signifier and the referent by the receiver. "The signifier must be brought face to face, by the receiver of the sign (reader or spectator), with the 'thing signified.'" The site of this confrontation is what Pavis calls the *social context*.

At the end of this confrontation, according to a series of operations (fictionalization, textual ideologization/ textualisation of ideology), the *work-as-thing* (or signifier) is associated with the aesthetic object (or signified) to produce the autonomous sign, which is thus the *concretization* of the work-as-thing read or received in a given *social context*.²⁹

The model of the circuit of concretization, as described above, represents a formalization of Pavis's theories that had begun to take shape early on in his career. Pavis hinted at many of the major concepts (vectorization, fictionalization, ideologization, etc.) prior to the actual publication of his model. In his book, *Languages of the Stage*, for instance, he attempted to provide an example of semiotic analysis in his short article "A Semiotic Approach to *Disparitions*," a play presented "in Paris at the Centre Pompidou, then at the Théâtre de la Tempête in March and April 1979."³⁰ It is, perhaps, quite useful for us to revisit this article for three primary reasons: (1) It offers a glimpse into Pavis's own application of his theories, consequently providing a larger context in which to understand the epistemology of his model; (2) it provides a discussion of a work by a playwright (Richard Demarcy) who, himself, was "one of the first theatrical theoreticians to be interested in semiotics"; and (3) it should also serve to illustrate how semiotic theory has been and can be used by practitioners (such as playwrights and directors) to inspire and inform the creative process by opening up new and abstract realms of theatrical discourse that test the limits of traditional narratological and dramaturgical approaches.³¹

Disparitions, as Pavis explains, is based on Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*. A semiotic approach to this text is particularly interesting, according to Pavis, "because a purely narrative or dramaturgical analysis would take into

account neither the specific nature of this performance nor its plastic and musical composition.”³² Pavis begins his analysis with a vivid description of the scenic space, “which contains a large expanse of shallow water . . . [that] creates an impression of frightening emptiness.”³³ This space is filled with five major objects (tents, car, table, chairs, and desks); the reflection of the water is projected onto three walls. “This space, flattened out in three dimensions, immediately suggests the metaphor of a space to be filled with visual impressions, of a polymorphous space that will have to be occupied, and of a musical score/partition into which the performance is going to flow.”³⁴ The characters, which include the Baker, the Butcher, the Beaver, the Banker, and the Captain, are placed in a semi-circle “in front of their respective implements. . . . The text is divided into eight fits (‘crises’) that recount the misadventures of the crew.”³⁵

Pavis describes the characters as “musicians,” asserting that the action rhythmically flows from one character to another, making the space function as a “score/partition.” However, in his analysis, action is viewed as only one of the possible signifying elements of the *mise-en-scène*. It not only “supports the plot,” but also serves two diverse functions in the text: (1) “as a metatextual commentary on the language” and (2) “as a play on sounds, a verbal and poetic creation that has no obvious referent.”³⁶ This results in “a complete absence of meaning that leaves the stage open to every critical interpretation of the audience.”³⁷

The difficulty, however, for the theater semiotician is the identification, articulation, and demonstration of signs and their evolution within the performance context. How, for instance, can the analyst capture the rhythm of performance, especially in a text like that of Demarcy, which relies so heavily on musical composition as its primary structuring component? Foreshadowing his theory of vectors, Pavis proposes the establishment of a network of signs in which “every visual sign is part of one or several networks of oppositions.”³⁸ It is action that holds this network together, action that functions as a “current,” flowing through the various systems of the stage, which include “word, actor, costume, scenery and music.”³⁹ Consequently, if the circuit of concretization succeeds in reestablishing the connection between production and reception via the operations of fictionalization and ideologization, it is the *theory of vectors* that allows for a more global appreciation of the dramatic/performance text and helps to resolve the previously thorny issue of *segmentation*,⁴⁰ which has historically hampered progress in semiotic approaches. Therefore, let us first take a closer look at Pavis’s theory of vectors, which was formalized only very recently, and then examine the seeds of its development in his analysis of *Disparitions*.

Taking its roots in phenomenology and Gestalt psychology, the theory of vectors (or vectorization) reminds performance analysts that the determination of meaning is dependent not only upon the division of the text into minimal units,

but also upon the linking and interconnection of these units and groups of units to a larger whole. Pavis explains:

Vectorization is at once a methodological, mnemotechnical, and dramaturgical method which links networks of signs. It consists of associating and connecting different signs in a network within which each sign has meaning only in relation to other signs. Let us suppose that, like in Chekhov's *Seagull*, a gun appears on a wall; the spectators relate it to other indices and the moment it disappears and they hear gunshots, they have no doubt that the depressed and suicidal hero has just put an end to his life. Such networks are like nets which hold the production together and prevent it from being permanently fragmented.⁴¹

Finding his influence and inspiration once again in the works of the Prague School and, more particularly, in Roman Jakobson's seminal article, "The Twofold Character of Language," Pavis proposes an "integrated semiology" based on the metonymy/metaphor opposition.⁴² In this article, Jakobson relates how his research on aphasics led him to assert and reaffirm Freud's concepts of condensation and displacement and Saussure's ideas of synchrony and diachrony in linguistic studies. In one group of aphasics, Jakobson explains, there is "an impairment . . . of the faculty for selection and substitution" and in the other group "[an impairment] . . . [of the faculty] . . . for combination and contexture."⁴³

In his experiment, Jakobson finds that when "children are confronted with some noun and told to utter the first verbal response that comes into their heads, two opposite linguistic predilections are invariably exhibited: the response is intended either as a substitute for, or as a complement to the stimulus."⁴⁴ The example that he gives is the stimulus "hut." One child responded, "burnt out," and another said, "is a poor little house." Both responses, according to Jakobson are "predicative" in that they form a "proper syntactic construction" and thus are found on the metonymic pole of language. With other children, the stimulus "hut" resulted in "substitutive reactions"; synonyms and antonyms followed, such as "cabin" or "palace."⁴⁵ These responses are said to represent the metaphoric pole of language. The metonymic pole is contiguous in that it creates a syntactical chain between stimulus and response and the metaphoric pole is substitutive in that the response refers back to the stimulus.

In terms of vectorization in performance analysis, this suggests that theater, being a communicative art, is thus subject to the same metaphoric and metonymic operating principles of natural language and that researchers must learn to recognize and determine in which mode a given sign or network of signs functions. In order to facilitate the accomplishment of such a goal, Pavis has established four major

types of vectors in representation. On the metonymic axis, there is a (1) connecting vector and a (2) cutting vector; on the metaphoric axis, there is an (3) accumulating vector and a (4) shifting vector. The task then of an “integrated semiology” is to identify “the major vector movements and the relationships between vector types.”⁴⁶ However, the procedures for doing so remain problematic in that the global desires of vectorization are confounded by the impossibility of exhaustive analysis. To remedy this situation, Pavis suggests:

It is of interest to replace the signs and vectors in a guiding schema which constantly evolves: thus the spectator does not run the risk of being submerged by insignificant details. It is better to reconstruct the network, understanding its orientation and guiding lines than be left with a disorganized mass of surplus material or useless recorded documents. Thus the description of a performance always oscillates between a totalizing demand for synthesis and empirical individualization, between order and chaos, between abstraction and materiality.⁴⁷

To return to his analysis of *Disparitions*, Pavis offers two brief examples that illustrate the importance of network functions (or vectorization). The first describes how, in the second “fit,” through a series of “semantic oppositions,” many sign systems are united “and result in a kind of synthesis or tying-up of meaning.”⁴⁸ An example that he provides concerns a scene in which “a fish tank full of water and heteroclit objects comes down from the ceiling toward the Beaver,” resulting in the reiteration and accumulation of several sign systems that causes “this ordinary object” to function “*en abyme*,” becoming “a condensed image within an image” and, consequently, functioning as “the concentration and the emblematic image of the performance.”⁴⁹ In the second example, Pavis explains how, in this text, the “discourse” of the *mise-en-scène* “is structured around each fit,” where each actor/character organizes “his own narration and his own story.”⁵⁰ There is an attempt in each “mini-plot” to include the narratives of the other characters (metaphoric axis) as well as to extend them (metonymic axis). Ultimately, it is in the narrative of the “*Captain-Metteur en scène-Author*,” where “all the narrative material is brought together and recomposed.”⁵¹

In each of these examples, we see how the processes of vectorization can manifest themselves within a text through their linking of various signs and sign-systems and, consequently, contribute to the formation of possible meanings for the receiver. These examples are taken from the early stages of Pavis’s work, but his preoccupation with providing a global rather than fragmented analysis of performance is quite evident in them. Although it took nearly twenty more years

in his career to formalize this process into a concrete model, the theoretical seeds had been sewn much earlier.

The question must be asked, however: Does such categorization (i.e., shifting, accumulating, cutting, connecting vectors) actually resolve the issue of segmentation, which it proposes to do, or does it just create more artificial categories that ultimately fragment the text once again? And finally, could vectorization be used to facilitate a more pragmatic approach to the study of ideologization? Although theoretically, one could contemplate a model to be implemented for the purposes of documenting the retrieval, transformation, and journey of the *idéologème* from its formation in the *Social Context* to its consequential appearance in the various levels of textuality via a theory of vectors, no such model has yet been conceived and the pragmatics of conducting such a study remain at best very tentative.

In spite of these few theoretical limitations, Pavis has certainly helped to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the field(s) of theater and performance studies during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Throughout his career, he has always oriented his theoretical work toward pragmatic application. This link between theory and practice has come in many forms such as the creation of a dictionary of theater organized around a thematic index that includes entries under the categories of “dramaturgy,” “text and discourse,” “actor and character,” “genre and forms,” “staging,” “structural principles and aesthetic questions,” “reception,” and “semiology.” It has also inspired his development of pedagogical questionnaires designed to illicit a holistic examination of the theatrical event from semiotic, psychoanalytic, and sociological points of view. Finally, his work has evolved most recently to include a study of intercultural practices in theater which require a re-evaluation of theory and performance from an anthropological approach.

In the end, however, theorists can use his model and theories to better understand the process(es) of theatricalization and its relationship to textual interpretation and signification; practitioners (actors, directors, designers, etc.) can use it to better refine their crafts in their efforts to enhance communication with an audience. Most importantly, however, Pavis further advances his integrated semiology by unabashedly reaffirming the dual nature of theatre, a literary and performance art, whose true essence can only be understood in terms of this duality. Such a sentiment on the importance of integrating theory and practice is echoed by the world famous director of the *Théâtre du Soleil* Ariane Mnouchkine, who states, “I don’t know of one book, one interesting book on theatre by somebody who did not practice theatre. I insist on that.”⁵²

It is this desire for the integration of theory and practice that seems to have had the greatest influence on theater semiotics, particularly within the last two decades of the twentieth century. Semiotics has had to defend itself against accusations of being nothing more than a traditional “meaning-based” interpretive methodology disguised in a new abstract jargon at a time when deconstruction and post-

structuralism captivated the imaginations of artists and intellectuals. Yet, in spite of this criticism, theater semiotics has continued to cultivate a lively discourse among scholars and practitioners—evolving, refining, and transforming itself in order to tackle the complex issues posed by contemporary critical theory.

With the advancements made by scholars like Pavis, theater semiotics may very well be on the threshold of a new synthesis, not only bridging the gap between theory and practice, but also between science and art, between rationality and mysticism. The impetus for this new synthesis lies in the desire to espouse holistic principles, to seek integration rather than separation, multilateralism rather than unilateralism, plurality rather than singularity. Most importantly, however, contemporary theater semiotics seeks to discover the hidden connections between diverse entities in a renewed spirit of interdisciplinarity that refuses to accept the artificially created boundaries inherent within academic compartmentalization. “Opening the text” may indeed involve a complete re-examination of the structures and foundations of what we know and how we know it.

Let us end with a citation from Pavis’s “Exercise in Self-Exorcism,” which eloquently offers a response to the question of semiotic theory and its practical relevance.⁵³ Pavis asks himself:

In this country of pragmatism and efficiency, what use can we find for a theory borrowed from linguistics—abstract, weighed down by jargon and far removed from human realities? How will it improve the training of the actor; the production of a show or the historical knowledge of the theatrical tradition?

His response:

You could be answered with the same vigor: how does the mixture of psychology, humanism and letters that one hears in dramatic discussions, seminars and lectures help the actor to acquire an overall view of drama, and not to be simply content with a technique of reproducing a meaning spoon-fed to him by virtue of one or another mystery?⁵⁴

Progress lies in the whole.

Notes

All translations are the work of the author.

1. Jan Mukarovský, “Art as Semiotic Fact,” *Semiotics of Art*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik (Cambridge: MIT UP, 1976) 6.

2. André Helbo, *Approaching Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) 92.
3. For more information on Peirce, see *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1931-58).
4. Suffice it to say, however, that although several sign categories have been discovered, no single and unique theatrical sign has been established, and, in fact, such an endeavor has hence been abandoned. As Pavis points out in his 1996 article, "The State of Current Theatre Research": "Analysis should not concern itself with establishing a repertory or a system of signs which would provide a framework for any performance and which could be found in every production. Such a system does not exist and enumerating signs or types of signs proves nothing, whether it be a semiotic typology of signs or a classification of performance types." *La Semiotique Appliquée/Applied Semiotics* (Toronto: <www.chass.utoronto.ca/french/as-sa/ASSA-No3/pp4.html>, 1997).
5. Jindrich Honzl, "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater," *Semiotics of Art*, ed. Matejka and Titunik, 74.
6. 75.
7. 75
8. 85.
9. Jiri Veltrusky, "Dramatic Text as a Component of Theater," *Semiotics of Art*, ed. Matejka and Titunik, 94.
10. 115.
11. Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from Greeks to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993) 513.
12. 514.
13. Qtd. in *Theories of the Theatre*, 514.
14. André Helbo, *Theory of Performing Arts* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 1987) 144.
15. Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*, trans. Christine Shantz (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998) 123-4.
16. "La production n'est jamais réalisée sans perspective d'un récepteur potentiel; tout acte réceptif oblige à reconnaître le processus de la production." Patrice Pavis, *Voix et Images de la Scène* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1985) 233.
17. Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Theatre Historiography and Performance Analysis: Different Fields, Common Approaches," *The Show and the Gaze of the Theatre: A European Perspective*, ed. and trans. Jo Riley (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1997) 342.
18. Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary* 123; his italics.
19. Mukarovsky 6.
20. Pavis, *Dictionary* 121.
21. "S'il y a en effet un rapport évident entre texte et représentation, ce n'est pas sous la forme d'une traduction ou d'un redoublement du premier dans le second, mais d'une translation et d'une mise en regard d'un univers fictionnel structuré à partir du texte, et d'un univers fictionnel qui est produit par la scène." Pavis, *Voix* 273.
22. Michel Azama, *Croisades* (Paris: Editions Théâtrales, 1989). Les Créations Diving Horse is a

professional theater company in Montreal, Canada. It was founded by Phoebe Greenberg in 1990 who produced *Croisades* in the winter of 2000 under the direction of Robert Astle. A complete application of Pavis's model to Azama's text and its performance by Les Créations Diving Horse was the subject of my doctoral dissertation: *Performance Theory and the Contemporary French Stage: Toward a Semiotic Concretization of Michel Azama's Croisades, 2003*.

23. “. . . un être hybride qui fonctionne à la fois comme unité textuelle et unité idéologique à l'intérieur d'une formation sociale, idéologique et discursive donnée.” Pavis, *Voix* 290.

24. John B Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990) 53.

25. 53.

26. All references to Paavolainen can be found in the following electronic article: “Patrice Pavis—A Good eye for Theater” <<http://www.teak.fi/teak/ACT/pavis.html>>.

27. “. . . sans s'engager à rien.” “. . . un leitmotiv thématique et narrative, et donc une unité textuelle qui sous-tend l'architecture de la fable.” Pavis, *Voix* 243.

28. “Comprendre le texte, ce n'est pas visualiser et se représenter les réalités dont il parle, c'est le raccrocher aux pratiques discursives et idéologiques où il prend sens.” 281.

29. Pavis, qtd. in *New Directions in Theatre*, ed. Julian Hilton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) 40.

30. Patrice Pavis, “A Semiotic Approach to *Disparitions*,” *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of Theater* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) 163-77.

31. 165.

32. 165.

33. 166.

34. 166.

35. 166-7.

36. 173.

37. 173.

38. 170.

39. 173.

40. Pavis describes the concept of *segmentation* as an attempt on behalf of the spectator “to analyze the overall impression left on him by the performance and to identify the units and how they function . . .” He identifies at least six different possible modes of segmentation in performance analysis: (1) external segmentation, (2) longitudinal or cross segmentation, (3) stage systems, (4) dramaturgical segmentation, (5) segmentation according to Gestus and (6) “performative-deictic orientation.” *Dictionary* 326.

41. Pavis, *La Semiotique Appliquée/Applied Semiotics* 132.

42. Pavis, *Dictionary* 331.

43. Roman Jakobson, “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles,” *Contemporary Critical Theory*, ed. Dan Latimer (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989) 22.

44. 22.

45. 23.

46. Pavis, *Dictionary* 331.

47. Pavis, *La Semiotique Appliquée/Applied Semiotics* 132.

48. Pavis, *Languages of the Stage* 170.

49. 170.

50. 175.

51. 175.

52. Ariane Mnouchkine qtd. in an interview with Adriane Kiernander in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Pavis (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1996) 142.

53. Pavis, *Languages of the Stage* 193.

54. 197.

PRAXIS

