

SPECIAL SECTION
Semiotic Analysis
of Avant-Garde
Performance

Introduction: Semiotic Analysis of Avant-Garde Performance

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The use of semiotics as the only analytical tool in performance analysis has been questioned by the Performance Analysis Working Group (PAWG) at the International Federation for Theatre Research since the establishment of this group in 1992. This concern has reflected a profound critique of traditional theatre semiotics for its exclusive interest in theorizing performance texts, on the grounds of abstract principles deduced from general semiotic theories, while very little has been done with respect to putting them to the test in actual analyses of productions. In contrast, the tendency of the PAWG was to develop an inductive method through the analysis of specific performances, which could both probe pre-existing theories and methods and hopefully propose alternative ones. Since then, after almost fifteen years of fruitful activity, additional methods of performance analysis have been found to be useful and even indispensable.

In the 2002 edition of his *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Keir Elam makes the correct observation that during the last fifteen years the semiotic approach to theatre studies has come “to lose its cultural and academic prominence.”¹ Indeed, current scholarly attitudes toward the application of semiotic methods to performance analysis range from explicit or implicit partial endorsement to radical rejection. We estimate that the reasons for such a development lie, *inter alia*, in that traditional semiotic approaches (a) developed into complicated tractates without providing the necessary tools for actual analysis—thus deterring young scholars from investing limited effort and time resources; (b) was made into, in Marco de Marinis’s terms, a “totalitarian and imperialistic” semiotics,² in the sense of appropriation of fields of research that do not fall in the domain of its charter as a general theory of signs, such as theories of fictional worlds (narratives), as illustrated by Elam

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himself;³ and (c) ignored the crucial contribution of audiences in construing the meanings of theatre performances, on the grounds of their socio-cultural baggage and psychological mechanisms, under the false assumption that all is in the text. However, this state of affairs does not mean that the relevance of theatre semiotics as such was impaired or that it has totally disappeared from the scholarly scene.

In his *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, Patrice Pavis claims that “[t]heatre semiology was born of a desire to avoid impressionistic discourse on performance.”⁴ This should be taken to mean that it was born of a desire to develop a scientific method of analysis. Unfortunately, disappointment with the possibility of developing and practicing such a method necessarily leads to the adoption of an intuitive approach to performance analysis, a position that is endorsed by Pavis himself.⁵ However, without rejecting sound intuition, a scientific method is possible and even necessary, at least for probing and confirming conclusions reached by sheer intuition. Just as literary research presupposes the mastering of language, theatre research should have at its command the semiotic rules that generate descriptions of fictional worlds. We believe, therefore, that in order to reestablish its fundamental role in performance analysis, traditional theatre semiotics should be re-considered. As members of the PAWG, we believe that the time has come to make an assessment of the state of the art: to focus on the relation of theatre semiotics to other methods of performance analysis, and to map the range of attitudes to the relevance of theatre semiotics today as a tool for studying current theatre practices.

During the years of its existence, the PAWG has published three selections of articles in *Theatre Research International* (No. 2, 1994, No. 1, 1997 and No. 1, 2000) and numerous articles in theatre journals. Furthermore, the present set of articles is a follow up to the discussion on the role of theatre semiotics in performance analysis today initiated and edited by Yana Meerzon, and published in *Semiotica* (January 2008). Both co-editors of the present selection contributed to the above *Semiotica* volume and agreed that one publication is far from enough in this renewed dialogue. One particular issue, barely touched upon in *Semiotica*, deserves special attention: the discrepancy between semiotic theatre theory and the practices of theatre and avant-garde performance. As history teaches us, the prominence of the semiotic analysis of a theatrical event diminishes if innovative practice does not stimulate theoretical exercise, and if theatre theory does not cope with artistic experimentation. Thus, it is possible that the decline of theatre semiotics in the 1990s was also due to this phenomenon: as theatre practice became less coherent in its narratives, more disjointed in its imagery, and thus more complex in its levels of communication, it became less coherent in its narratives, more disjointed in its imagery, and thus more complex in its levels of communication, it became unresponsive to theatre theory. In its turn, the latter turned unresponsive to experimentation. Theatre semiotics’ excessive concern with the analysis of its signifying system and structures led

to its ignoring issues of audience and reception. As Michael Sidnell suggests, it seems the time has come to propose “a moratorium on semiotic aesthetics in favour of a renewed semiotic praxis that comes to terms with overshadowing issues of judgements about taste, rather than attempting to evade them.”⁶

The current collection takes Sidnell’s idea as the point of departure; however, it aims not at fully rejecting the once promising semiotic methodology of performance analysis, but at repairing the damage. We asked the contributors of the present selection to focus on productions that, in one way or another, shake the habitual categories and structures of performance, and discuss the works of those theatre directors who challenge audiences by involving them in the co-making of a theatrical event. If, as Keir Elam aptly noted, *avant-garde* performance has grown out of the attitudes and terminologies of traditional theatre semiotics,⁷ then it is possible that this too has contributed to the difficulties semiotics has experienced in recent years.

Accordingly, the present selection features contributions from prominent scholars in the field who presuppose that traditional semiotics has failed in suggesting effective methods of performance analysis, especially in regard to far-reaching innovations in the last decades. Therefore, the articles reflect attempts to widen the range of objects of analysis, to combine additional disciplines, to adjust to inter-medial productions, and to redefine semiotic theory and methodology. The five essays are in active dialogue with the productions they describe and analyze—thus acknowledging that theory has to assimilate the valuable work of *avant-garde* directors and actors into the sphere of semiotic research and strengthen it.

This selection reflects two basic attitudes to the role of semiotics in today’s theatre/performance studies: one supports the use of semiotics in the analysis of performance texts, but suggests that its charter should be redefined, and the other proposes to utilize other disciplines of research in addition to theatre semiotics, or both. Significantly, the selection focuses on issues of representation and reference in today’s theatre/performance, characterized by the dominating post-dramatic, post-theatrical, post-modern, post-directorial, and post-semiotic tendencies. In a sense, therefore, it makes a historical loop: without too openly announcing their methodological strategy, the majority of the articles propose to wed a phenomenological approach with semiotic tools utilized in the early 1930s, in the works of the Prague Linguistic Circle (PLK). Tacitly, the authors acknowledge what the members of the PLK discovered, and what, for different reasons, the French structuralists and poststructuralists ignored: the importance of the process of reception and the necessity to combine theatre semiotics with other methodologies of performance analysis, such as hermeneutics, sociology, linguistics, the cognitive sciences, and psychoanalysis. Initially, scholars such as Vodička and Muška of the PLK in the 1930-1940s, and subsequently André Helbo, Marco de Marinis,

Umberto Eco, and Patrice Pavis (to name a few) theorized the processes of reception in theatre. In this selection we witness the revival of this initial tendency that never fully developed due to ideological and historical reasons. Thus, the crux of this selection lies in defining the meeting points between semiotics and other methodologies in practical application, specifically, in the analysis of contemporary avant-garde performances. It is unique in considering attempts to perceive and theorize the unpredictability of theatrical experience, the spectators' emotional and intellectual involvement in specific performance events.

The collection opens with Erika Fischer-Lichte's study, "Sense and Sensation: Exploring the Interplay Between the Semiotic and the Performative Dimensions of Theatre," which provides a perspective on the entire set in outlining the two possible tendencies and possibilities in theatre semiotic studies today: either by modifying traditional semiotics from "without" (by adding phenomenological approaches to the analysis of a performance), or by reconsidering semiotic tools from "within" (by trying to improve the semiotic method and terminology within the discipline itself). Fischer-Lichte suggests that one promising mechanism for reinstating semiotic analysis as a useful analytical tool is to shift from "semioticity," in the sense of focusing on how the meaning is constructed, to "performativity," in the sense of focusing on how the actual performance is perceived and experienced by the audience. This focus on performativity often requires a phenomenological approach that considers the particular impact on an audience.

Fischer-Lichte contends that, whereas a semiotic approach concerns itself with the conditions under which meanings may emerge out of performative processes, a phenomenological approach focuses on the performative processes as such. She juxtaposes the two methodologies. While the semiotic approach asks, "What do performative processes *mean*?", the performative approach instead raises the question "What do they *do*?" Analyses concerned with performativity proceed from the eventness of a performance and highlight those performative processes which are the result of the impact of the actors/performers on the spectators. Fischer-Lichte concludes that the semiotic and the performative dimensions of a performance are, albeit extremely different, inextricably intertwined. The analysis of any theatre production should be based on the interplay between the semiotic and performative dimensions involved. The article closes with Fischer-Lichte's analysis of Frank Castorf's 1997 production *Trainspotting* in the Volksbuehne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz Berlin.

The opening article is followed by a cohesive group of four papers that are entirely or partially concerned with the phenomenological aspects of the performance-text, and exhibit the ability to discuss simultaneously both the processes of sign-encoding and sign-decoding and the experiences of actors and spectators. The four articles focus on the analysis of post-modern, post-dramatic, experimental, or avant-garde performances, which necessitate theoretical thinking beyond the boundaries of

traditional theatre semiotics. In reviving the PLK's theoretical tradition of linking the new mechanisms of performance analysis with Western avant-garde theatre practice, this selection uses phenomenology as a supporting tool in the analysis of contemporary experimentation in performance and the examination of the ways audiences participate in creating the meanings of performance events. In addition, some articles take the discussion beyond the performance itself, e.g., to elucidate processes that constitute such events and affect spectators' cognition.

Jerzy Limon's contribution, "A Candle of Darkness: Multiplied Deixis in Roberto Ciulli's *King Lear*," views this production as an example of dual deixis in theatrical acting. He suggests a theoretical description of the mechanism of dual deixis on stage, which is implemented when each actor in the production is made to enact simultaneously a fictional actor rehearsing Shakespeare's play and a character in the new fictional play based upon the original one. Consequently, Limon argues, the staged deixis becomes multiplied, which results in the juxtaposition of several fictional time structures and in a vigorous estrangement effect. Through the complex temporal and spatial relationships among deixes, human bodies, objects, and words, the rules and the boundaries of theatre become demarcated. The article concludes that by employing the mechanisms of dual deixis, Ciulli confronts his audience not merely with a new interpretation of Shakespeare's tragedy, but also with the company's meta-narrative about theatre, its philosophy, and aesthetic attitude.

Dean Wilcox's article, "How Do You Read a Sign that No One Has Ever Seen Before? A Semiotic Analysis of Chance Driven Events," investigates instances of unintentional events in performance and traces the history of the use of chance as an artistic device back to the works of Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists. This device was subsequently embraced by later generations of performing artists, reaching its artistic apex with John Cage's influential ideas on indeterminacy. The areas of music, film, theatre, dance, and the visual arts have all been affected by these watershed concepts. Through the creation of unique, randomly generated images such events possibly trigger a dynamic phenomenological process that challenges the semiotic reading of recognizably encoded images—thus forcing the viewer to cultivate an awareness of the present moment while simultaneously drawing on past experience. As his primary example, Wilcox analyzes Brian Eno's 2006 multimedia work *77 Million Paintings*, a project designed to utilize the resources of digital media to produce an estimated seventy-seven million randomly generated images. While not a "live" performance in the traditional sense, Eno describes this work as a slow-changing "light painting" that converts nearly any space into an installation environment; he points out that with works like these the artist doesn't know exactly what the result will be. Wilcox believes that such works challenge precepts common to a semiotics of performance analysis. They emphasize the process rather than the product of sign-constructing in performance and ultimately include the elements observed by audiences whose immediate attitude to them

could not be predicted at the work's inception.

In "Mixed Media and Mixed Messages," Marvin Carlson examines *Dead Set #3*, the most recent production of the Big Art Group, one of the best known contemporary experimental theatre groups that works with the interaction of live performance, digital projections, and hand-held video. This production, which premiered in Berlin and was presented in New York in January 2007, is an excellent example of how the overlapping of semiotic messages with visual images, most of them created with technology visible to the audience, provides opportunities simultaneously to construct a narrative and make that construction itself another kind of narrative. In this article, Carlson provides a brief overview of the previous work of this important group: he discusses their experimentation with mixed images and mixed messages, and analyzes the operations of their aesthetic with particular attention to the semiotic mechanisms in their most recent creation.

"Diagrams, Formalism, and Homology in the Production of Beckett's *Come and Go*" by Irit Degani-Raz concludes this selection and suggests a way of broadening the application of "classical" semiotics of theatre by including diagrams, one of Charles S. Peirce's three subtypes of icons (image, metaphor, and diagram), which in regard to the performance as a whole has received no attention at all. This theoretical move may improve the explanatory power of theatre semiotics through the potential ability of diagrams to explicate the way the message of a performance is created and perceived. According to Peirce, the resemblance between a diagram and its object is not "sensuous resemblance" but structural homology.⁸ He emphasizes that "by the direct observation of it, other truths concerning the object can be discovered."⁹ Degani-Raz claims that there is a homology between the relations of the elements in certain fictional worlds and the relations between such elements in actual reality. In particular, she explores the analogy between mathematical diagrams and the mathematic-like diagram embedded in the construction of Beckett's fictional world. She has suggested elsewhere that by and large theatrical texts should be understood as kinds of thought experiments that provide new insights concerning reality.¹⁰ Here she examines the specific kind of theatrical thought experiment that is based on diagrammatic iconicity. She supports her thesis by analyzing the film performance of *Come and Go* included in the Blue Angel *Beckett on Film* project as a representative of this class. The homology between the fictional and actual worlds embedded in such a performance may contribute to the spectators' better understanding of their own habitual universe.

As the featured examples of performance analysis stress, the traditional semiotic method cannot be used as is; additional methods of research should supplement it. Unfortunately, promising theories are often abandoned before they have yielded their expected harvest only because of shifting fashions. We hope that this selection is a substantial contribution to the restoration of the semiotic method to its well-deserved, albeit restricted, prominence in theatre theory.

Notes

1. Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002) 194.
2. Marco de Marinis, *The Semiotics of Performance*, tr. Aine O'Healy (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1993) 11.
3. Elam 194.
4. Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, tr. Christine Shantz (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998) 258.
5. 258-9.
6. Michael J. Sidnell, "Semiotic Arts of Theatre," *Semiotica* 168 (2008):12.
7. Elam 190-5.
8. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1965-1967) 2.279. [Editors note: The *Collected Papers* are cited customarily by volume and paragraph.]
9. 2.278.
10. Irit Degani-Raz, "Theatrical Fictional Worlds, Counterfactuals, and Scientific Thought Experiments," *Semiotica* 147 (2005): 353-375.

