

The Theatre Performance: A Semiotic System

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Abstract

Of all the recent discoveries in human sciences, no event has had a more radical, widespread, and profound impact than the development of semiotics. The purpose of my study was to briefly sketch the territory of theatre semiotics enterprise using graphical representation of semiotic elements of a theatre performance. A semiotic analysis was attempted, concerned with the discovery of a possible range of graphic rules, which govern our understanding of theatre sign, but without claiming that it constitutes a comfortably established intellectual field. The field of investigation has a complexity that can be discouraging, but this very disclosure makes it particularly welcoming and provocative.

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Introduction

Semiotics can be defined as the science dedicated to the study of creating a meaning for and inside the society. As such, it analyses the processes of meaning and also those of communication and the means by which meanings are generated and interchangeable. It covers an area that cannot simply be considered as a *discipline*, because it is far too versatile and heterogeneous to be reduced to a *method*. It is a multidisciplinary science whose precise methodological features will necessarily vary from one field to another, but which is united by a common global concern—to develop a better understanding of actions and behaviours by discovering their meaning.

From an analytical point of view, theatre received far too little attention, despite the special richness of theatrical communication, as a potential area of semiotic investigation. The main purpose of this research is to examine the possibility of the semiotic breakdown of the construction of a theatre show and to suggest possible future directions of research, placed in a cultural territory of vital importance to society. These could incorporate the proposal to conceive and analyse a series of graphic models, which can be used in understanding and constructing a theatrical performance.

The research proposes to analyse the structure and not the quality of the components of a theatre performance. The discovery of a clear meaningful structure can become the formula for understanding the needs of the practitioner who is faced with a new theatrical challenge. In this research, the choice of graphic models as means of expression was an option related to the need of a clarification on the complex theory of theatrical semiotics. Graphic models clarify the important elements of theatrical sign's structure, and they can offer an ideal guide that the practitioner can use for the practical development. Graphic models cannot be made if the theatrical system concept is not dissected and researched up to the cellular organizational level. Many micro-elements must be discovered and the relationships between them must be identified (the order of the *clock wheels*) in order to outline the functioning of a giant social and cultural process.

The system is represented by a group of interconnected or interdependent entities that form, together, a unitary whole. A system, surrounded and influenced by its environment, is described, and researched, analysing its limits, structure, and purpose. Then, it is confirmed or denied by the feedback provided by its operation. The study of the social sciences may ultimately involve the application and selective integration of theories—but both types of use require a set of reference axes to make distinctions, to document points of convergence, and to develop graphical models.

Theatre is a cultural system that has general characteristics, like any other cultural system. On the other hand, it is a separate *sui generis* cultural system because it is significantly different from other systems, having a number of special functions. We define culture as something made by human beings, but opposite to nature. Every man-made product generates meaning, both for himself and for others. This phenomenon occurs because people live in a world full of meanings—a world in which everything is perceived as a meaning that must be analysed and

judged through the prism of a significance. The creation of meanings can be the main function of a cultural system. This function demonstrates whether or not something is, in fact, a cultural system.

In other words, if theatre is understood as a cultural system among other cultural systems, it means that it has, as its general function, the creation of meanings. Cultural systems do not produce meanings by themselves—they generate elements that can be loaded with different meanings: sounds, objects, colours, actions, whose meanings can be connected with a certain context. Meanings are not random attributes, they follow a set of rules, based on a code. We define here the code as a system of rules for the creation and interpretation of signs or a combination of signs.

Within a system, there are two types of codes: internal codes and external codes. The external code represents the foundation of many cultural systems within a culture. Internal codes, on the other hand, are the elements that form a single cultural system, specific and isolated. The existing code systems in a culture represent a dynamic structure, which can be constantly modified, leading to the reorganization of the entire structure. Given the unstable and still largely undefined nature of this territory, the following analysis is inevitably and extremely eclectic, taking into account many sources and ranging from classical formalism and information theory to the recent language of philosophical, logical and sociological research. The result is undoubtedly uneven, but this is probably symptomatic, generated by the concordance with the current state of semiotic function.

Initially, a terminological differentiation must be made regarding the binomial that forms the main theatrical structure. The theatre and the play—this familiar but invariably annoying distinction—, needs an explanation in this context, because it has important consequences in terms of topics and problems. Theatre refers here to the complex of phenomena associated with the performer-public transaction—the creation and communication of meaning in the show itself and the association with the (theatrical) systems that underlie it. On the other hand, the play is a fiction designed for stage performance and built according to particular (dramatic) conventions. The word *theatrical* is, therefore, limited to what takes place between performers and spectators, while the word *dramatic* indicates the network of factors, related to the fiction that is being represented. This is, of course, not an absolute differentiation between two foreign bodies, because the show (at least the traditional one) is dedicated to the representation of the fiction of the play,

and it is marking different levels of a cultural phenomenon, unified for analysis purposes.

An associated distinct separation occurs, however, when the criterion of analysis is the real object of the work of the semiotician in this area—the types of text that will represent the analytical body. Unlike the literary semiotician, the analyst of myth or the visual arts, the theatre and drama researcher is confronted with two types of textual material—quite different, although intimately correlated: the one produced in theatre and the one composed for theatre. These two potential focuses of semiotic attention will be indicated as theatrical or text-performance approaches, and also as written or dramatic text approaches.

Theatre, viewed as a semiotic system, can fulfil the function of a generator of meanings, based on a system of internal codes. To lay the foundations of this system of codes, we must find the answers to three questions which will trigger the raising of the pillars of the semiotic system of the theatre performance. What exactly becomes valid as a unit that carries meaning in theatre? In what ways and in what situations can these signs be combined with each other? What meanings can be given to these signs, both contextually and individually? "I could take any empty space and call it an empty stage. A man crosses this empty space while someone else is looking at him, and that is all that the theatrical act has to begin with" (Brook, 2014, p. 17).

To study the system of theatrical codes, one must first establish the whole process of possible and justified signs in theatre. Starting from the definition offered by Brook, we could start from the premise that the theatrical act takes place when a person A, the actor, represents a P, the character, while S, the spectator, watches (Fig. 3). The next step is to establish the repertoire of signs (minimum and maximum) created from this rudimentary definition of theatre.

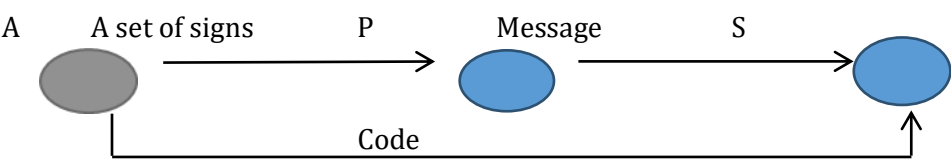


Fig. 3. Theatrical act diagram

In order for A to represent P, A must behave in a certain way, looking like P, and existing in a certain space. And in order for P to exist, all possible signs that may derive from these three factors must first be established:

1. To behave in a certain way

The way A behaves can, first of all, influence both the movement of the body and the head, thus forming the movement-generating signs—the kinaesthetic and mimic signs. The signs that are related to the actor's facial expressions include all facial movements, performed in a controlled manner and, in relation to the exterior, they are being created only at the face level. The movements of some body parts (arms, hands, fingers, feet, etc.) can be achieved both by standing still and by moving the actor from one place to another. Thus, kinaesthetic signs made through the body, and not those generated by the contraction of mimicry muscles, should be differentiated into two categories: gestural signs (referring to body movements that do not involve movement in space) and proxemic signs (which include movement through space).

Second, A's behaviour can generate acoustic signals through speech, singing, or any other sound. Unlike visual signs of movement, acoustic signs can occur independently of the actor's physical existence in space. Through speech or song, two different systems of signs can be differentiated: linguistic signs (they introduce lexical and contextual meaning to the theatrical situation) and paralinguistic signs (they refer to the way the actor interprets the text: timbre, musicality, volume). In addition to these two categories, we must mention and name the sound signs and musical signs, which build the acoustics of the performance, and which may or may not be related to the development of A's behaviour. What is important to remember is that if the actor speaks, linguistic and paralinguistic signs appear, and if he sings, linguistic and musical signs are being generated.

2. To look in a certain way

The appearance of A during the show generates a series of signs, which we could classify into two main categories: the signs of natural appearance (refer to changes of a physical nature, made for the purpose of resembling P) and the signs of artificial appearance (include all the elements deliberately constructed to portray the appearance of the character: costume, mask, makeup).

3. To exist in a certain space

In this context, we must first distinguish between the signs that concern the theatrical space from the point of view of the actors and those that make the prerogative of the spectator space, especially in the segment in which the actor moves. Signs related to the concept of space or the place where actors relate to the audience—whether the audience is placed in a circle around the actors, on one side, two or three—must be defined and differentiated from the signs of the setting that include large objects that are being introduced into the scene and remain there for a long time. The signs of the spatial concept can include or can be generated by the other signs assigned to the space: the props, the light, the projection, in this case, all the visual or auditory elements that appear in order to configure an existing space. Thus, starting from this definition of theatre, we can make the following list of possible theatrical signs: linguistic, paralinguistic, musical, kinaesthetic, mimetic and proxemic (mask, costume, makeup, hairstyles, scenographic concept, decoration, props, light, etc.). These theatrical signs can also be classified to show their functionality: auditory or visual signs, transitory or permanent (long-lasting) signs, or signs related to the actor or to space.

As I argued above, theatre does not use the original function of these signs, because it does not use them for the purpose for which they were created by the cultural system of which they are part. Consequently, theatrical signs must (at least at the level of the system they form) be classified exclusively as iconic signs. In other words, the linguistic signs produced by A denote the linguistic signs produced by P and the mimetic signs made by A become the mimetic signs made by P. Therefore, theatrical signs are not identical with the primary signs generated by the cultural system, but rather a portrayal of them as iconic signs. At a systematic level, the theatrical code contains only iconic signs that can function—from the point of view of norms and speech—as an index or a symbol.

The theatrical signs generated by the actor's act reflect their correspondent in the cultural signs. We need to know what function they have in culture, as a whole, if we want to study their effect and specificity in theatre. On the other hand, we cannot establish a clear and unequivocal connection, in terms of the signs related to the way the actor looks. We started from the idea that the mask that A wears shows the physical shape that P naturally has. This phenomenon does not

come from a cultural system but is given by nature. The mask, as a theatrical sign, denotes signs generated by physiognomy or even anatomy, representing a point of interpretation of natural phenomena. The same can be said when it comes to scenography. The scenery can show both natural spaces and man-made spaces (referring to the signs of the cultural system that belongs to painting or architecture). The decor, which reconstructs a natural space, seen as a sign, can generate possibilities of interpretation given by the respective culture, to which the space belongs.

After compiling a simple list of all the possible signs in the theatre, I tried, in this research, to develop a catalogue with all possible combinations of these signs and, thus, to discover what meaning they could have, but also what each one means for the theatrical system. After analysing and researching each possible theatrical sign, I discovered the need for explanatory graphs that indicate the semiological route that the practitioner goes through in the construction of the show, and, on the other hand, the one that the spectator discovers in the configuration of the code created for reading the show. The existence of these graphics took the study further, discovering the existence of possible links between the number of signs used in a certain category and the aesthetic form that the show develops.

Graphic models provide an easy representation for the decomposition and analysis of complex problems. When discussing graphic models, both graphic formalism and algorithms associated with mathematics are implicitly included. In fact, graphic formalism is not necessary for the technical development of the approach, but its use conveys the important structural information of a problem, in a natural visual way. Graphical operations manipulate the underlying structure of a problem, unhindered by the details of the functional and distributional connection equations. This structuring process is just as important as a high-level programming language leading to higher productivity than the assembly language. Throughout the work, I have demonstrated that theatre not only fulfills its primary function, generating meanings, but can be unequivocally included in cultural systems. Thus, a similar approach is needed in the case of theatrical analysis, as long as it is indisputably connected to the study of semiotics. Such an approach reveals, clarifies and opens the possibilities of the construction of the theatre show, both from a semiotic point of view and from a general artistic point of view. The existence of visual and intelligible landmarks, offers to the practitioner, clear and objective goals, that, once they are being achieved, can lead to a successful process.

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