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# A Semiotics of the Dramatic Text

SUSAN MELROSE

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*For Annie Ubersfeld*

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# General Editor's Preface

In the past ten years, Theatre Studies has experienced remarkable international growth, students seeing in this marriage of the practical and the intellectual a creative and rewarding discipline. Some countries are now opening school and degree programmes in Theatre Studies for the first time; others are having to accommodate to the fact that a popular subject attracting large numbers of highly motivated students has to be given greater attention than hitherto. The professional theatre itself is changing, as graduates of degree and diploma programmes make their way through the 'fringe' into established theatre companies, film and television.

Two changes in attitudes have occurred as a result: first, that the relationship between teachers and practitioners has significantly improved, not least because many more people now have experience of both; secondly, that the widespread academic suspicion about theatre as a subject for study has at least been squarely faced, if not fully discredited. Yet there is still much to be done to translate the practical and educational achievements of the past decade into coherent theory, and this series is intended as a contribution to this task. Its contributors are chosen for their combination of professional and didactic skills, and are drawn from a wide range of countries, languages and styles in order to give some impression of the subject in its international perspective.

This series offers no single programme or ideology; yet all its authors have in common the sense of being in a period of transition and debate out of which the theory and practice of theatre cannot but emerge in a new form.

JULIAN HILTON

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# Part I

# Introduction

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What are the prospects for a 'semiotics of writing for the stage' and how might we justify such a project in the 1990s? After all, it now seems that the fervour that marked early structural semiotic projects has disappeared, taking with it the aspiration and the *belief in itself*, fundamental motor of any intellectual project. More than ten years of growing contestation of the semiotic project itself seems to have vanquished many of its practitioners, who have come to doubt its espoused rationale, and to see with new alarm its 'hidden agendas' apparently aspiring to categorise and control through practices of division, inclusion and exclusion. The new suspicion of semiotics' methodologies and sites of practice, together with the new hesitation (characteristic of wider fields of intellectual practice) to construct models or to pursue globalising (or 'totalising') projects, conspire to render the focus of and the proposals for a 'dramatic semiology' academically and intellectually unfashionable as well as unsound. Today such a project seems – even to some earlier enthusiasts – to have had 'nothing to do with theatre itself'; its ugly duckling, loved only by its semiological progenitors but not by the world of theatre practice itself (Elam, 1989). The practitioner's traditional jibe that people with talent *do*, while the talentless merely talk about doing, was redirected in the 1970s and 1980s from the critic to the semiotician. Unlike the critic, the semiotician – despite Pavis' recent claim to practice "fine art" (Pavis, 1992) – had no cutting rejoinder.

For all that, nothing in this troubled climate suggests that decision-making processes, by any or all participants in dramatic theatre, are not *semiotics at work*. But *which* semiotics is at work, or indeed, *how many*? In the 1990s, alongside a **modernist semiotic analysis** which remains valid for certain aspects only of theatre practice, we now need to find means to approach those decision-making processes which are characteristic of **catalysis**, or up-building processes (where one element catalyses another, transforming both) in the diverse phenomena of dramatic theatre. Quoting tradition, to different ends, and gesturing toward other sorts of potential, I shall call what follows a 'new semiotics'. In the

terms set out by Schmitt (1990) this 'new semiotics' will be self-conscious, liable to constant update, and relatively open to the past and future of theatre practices. It assumes, *in the event*, that theatre work is always in advance of it, just out of its reach, never to be captured while its life goes on. But this does not mean, for a moment, that theatre and theory do not share a common history.

To the (jaded?) postmodern eye of the late 1980s the semiotic or semiological project seemed to betray a nostalgia for the aspirations and energetic investments which characterised *la pensée '68*: the revolutionary fervour in northern Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s which challenged established structures of authority. In the case of approaches to theatre, it challenged the widespread critical position of tertiary institutions which took as its focus practices exploring dramatic writing as the posited site and/or origin of theatre meaning, or which reduced the effects of performance to what it might be seen 'to mean' in the terms of established critical *discourse*.

We might ask as a consequence of recent disillusion with this sort of project, whether theatre semiology or semiotics is, more than twenty years after 1968, no more than history. I think not, if only because every action taken in theatre is a decision made, and each decision made entails both a system of equally available, historically specific, options refused, and a spread of implications accruing to both the option chosen *and* to those refused. If these decision-making processes and the knowledges they entail appear to be activated at lightning speed and almost invisibly by theatre professionals, there is still room in a learning situation for the acquisition of a range of analytical theatre procedures I continue to call semiotic. What is certain is that there can be no new exploration of semiotics without a brief appraisal of its rocky journey through theatre practice from the late 1960s to the late 1980s.

For theatre, what followed the carnival which accompanied the 1968 storming of the *Théâtre de l'Odéon* in the centre of Paris (a telling shift in site from the earlier storming of the *Bastille*) were not just new or renewed modes of theatre practice, but a major shift in academic orientation: away from the dramatic text, *to* the stage. But – ironically and perhaps inevitably – only in those terms that were then available. This meant the attempt to *textualise* stage

practice through the application of the terms and methods of a *semio-logy*. The textualisation took a double focus:

1. it was to be worked around principles of syntagmatic and paradigmatic combination in performance (lent readily by Saussurean linguistics which had supposed itself to be the exemplary model for all other symbolic practices);
2. it would extend to the reappraisal of the theory and practice of representation, in terms of which it might be possible not just to claim that the stage sign Y 'stands for' something perceived to exist in another dimension of widely agreed social and psychological experience, but to 'scientifically prove' (or disprove) the sorts of judgements of taste and value that the wielders of 'symbolic capital' (in theatre, the drama critic and the academic, and their discourses) have traditionally been keen to proffer.

This concern for proof, in the place of critical 'judgement', was characteristic of the taking of position with regard to knowledge which marked what Derrida (1978) called the *rupture* in critical discourse. The rupture was epistemological (concerned with the possibilities and conditions of knowledge itself), in that it separated out 'traditional hegemonic' from 'newly exploratory' projects and discourses, differently concerned with a common goal: what can be *known*, and what conditions permit us to verify (and speak) a knowledge in and of 'the world' – and its cultural practices – of which the analyst-observer and writer was herself an inextricable part. The perceived rupture was manifested as the difference between two agendas revealed in two fields of discursive practice. The first practice was marked by an implicit humanism – manifested for example in a concern for human motivation and responsibility applied almost equally to those categories of knowledge called 'the author' and 'the character' (for example, Shakespeare and Lear). The second practice thematised (or consistently focused on) its own procedures, either while applying them to text, or indeed *instead of* applying them to text at all.

In his suggestion that

a sign is a reality perceivable by sense perception that has a

relationship with another reality which the first reality is meant to evoke. Thus, we are obliged to pose the question as to what the second reality, for which the work of art stands, might be . . .

Mukarovsky (Matejka and Titunik, 1976, p. 5) – theatre critics and teachers might protest – is not telling us anything new at all. What was new, however, or rather newly re-emerging at that time, was that the theorist, schooled by a forceful political interrogation into structures of power, including those over “symbolic capital” (as Bourdieu (1984) sees uses of ‘art’ to be), sought to replace the project of appreciation of the ‘first reality’, with analysis of the *bases* for any such conventional ‘appreciation’. The traditional appreciation might include specification of hypothetical origins, of the artist’s claimed or inferred intent, and of the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of the work to live up to that intent. What Mukarovsky proposed in its place was an exploration of the perceived *first/second reality* relationship (enquiring, that is, into the theory of representation). But analysts then went further, producing a critique of the consensual hypothesis entailed by the *first reality/second reality* project: it interrogated the bases themselves for any such postulation and authentication of socially-agreed meaning-production.

In the most general of terms, ‘the work’ (for example, theatre performance) was perceived to be ‘text’, and the sorts of proofs sought were to be determined through a practice of ‘reading’ performance, whose intricacies were perceived to derive from the interaction of *codes*, piled thickly the one upon the other along the “paradigmatic axis” of simultaneity, and ordered in time along the “syntagmatic axis” of event and “narrative”. The standard against which theatre performance as text was to be measured was thus *language*, which de Saussure problematically (for the English language user) rendered as the couplet *langue* (innate) and *parole* (manifest), plus *signifiant* (signifier) and *signifié*, (signified).

This endeavour flushed forth an old question of theatre esthetics. Analysis of dramatic theatre seemed then to depend, and may still depend, on the ways we choose to answer it. The question has long been this: is theatre an art (or a practice) ‘in its own right’, and does its status demand genre-specific theoretical discourses and sets of practices, rather than those cribbed from linguistics, literary theory, or, for example, the Metz school of film theory (for

example, Metz, 1982); or is it the case that dramatic theatre combines a number of quasi-distinct practices – writerly, discursive, socio-pragmatic, painterly, architectural, ludic (e.g., gestural, mime), vocal, dance, musical, but perhaps also psycho-somatic, amongst others – such that the ‘phenomenon of theatre’ demands first to be broken down and submitted part by part to a number of diverse analytical procedures; and then to be built up once more, so that we might observe its powers of mutual modification of these apparent ‘codes’?

The range of material and approaches included in three clusters of major works – Pavis (1982, 1985, 1987), Ubersfeld (1978 and 1982b), and Elam (1980, 1989) – to which I would add a number of articles by Barthes (1982b, 1986), seems to suggest that there can be no single and stable approach to theatre. But what we need to recognise in the 1990s is that while these writers seem to have shared a common inspiration, and a common ‘ground of thought’, the ‘analytical’ (or fragmenting, down-breaking) logic each adopted in the late 1970s and 1980s is not just inadequate to the project to which they laid claim, but was confounded by their own commonsensical and felt response to effective theatre. In common sense terms, it was clear that theatre’s specificity was and remains a most peculiar *up-building* process or synergetic combination – that is, of a greater force than that generated by the sum of all constituent parts taken individually. This power through a catalysis in which the real spectators are implicated, is able to mark the *experience* of dramatic theatre neatly off from the experience of all other cultural practices. But how to include this *everyday felt* experience of theatre within the frame of ‘analysis’ – for this was the aspiration and goal.

In fact, an answer was near at hand: in the mode of expansion of analysis in the 1980s, a felt, commonsensical and anecdotal experience and response, produced ‘invisibly’ and as though naturally by hegemonically-disseminated dominant value structures determining taste and judgement in the individual as social subject, was indeed a proper field for exploration. But what such exploration entailed was not in line with the earlier aspiration: it required something other than a modernist semiology; it required something besides the belief that language and hence linguistics offered the exemplary model for all other cultural practice; and it required



a range of short-term and partial semiotic projects if it was to begin to approach what is **singular** in the experience of theatre.

It seems to me that there are adequate phenomenological bases here for me to assert that, notwithstanding the seminal qualities of the texts I have indicated above, we have hardly yet begun to talk adequately about what is – for some of us – theatre's *felt* specificity. Now, 'feeling' seems in theatre's case to be to some extent at least user-specific and particular-event-specific, and to challenge, as inadequate to that singular event, analysis of cultural practice based on the hypothesis of reiterability.

\* \* \*

In implying that dramatic theatre's specificity lies less in what we might discursively represent as its 'substance', than in the ways in which it enables the production of felt-experience, *in the event*, I am already signalling the distant horizon of the present work. The directions it will take might seem to distance it from the approaches already mentioned. But this is not the case: what we need in the 1990s are the means to expand the project of a semiotics of writing for performance so that it includes precisely what it seemed, at its most rigorous, to need to exclude.

The project for the 1990s cannot proceed without an attempt to approach the epistemes or "grounds of thought" (Macdonell, 1986) – a nicely ungrounded metaphor – which seem to have informed (or given forms to) the French and more widely northern European theatre semiotics of the 1970-80s, as it developed out of the echoes of earlier twentieth-century (for example, Prague School) endeavours, drawn into interactive scenarios with the aspirations of the late 1960s.

But "grounds of thought", although we seem historically to be able to trace their imprint, are, particularly when we lack the distance of time, curiously slippery, unbounded 'entities', which seem to appear primarily through the analyst's motivated quest amongst diverse material manifestations or their traces. It would seem that a 'field of thought' is a short-term mapping of grounds, whose rudiments are constituted by the searcher from across a range of **texts**, rather than from any given one, or from speech. However, "grounds of thought" 'themselves' are already afflicted with

**hypostasis** (fixed and objectified by an observer, *in her own terms*), from that very moment when we believe that we can perceive them, since to perceive an episteme supposes that I am looking *at* an 'it', rather than *at myself* through the frames I make available. Nonetheless (and strictly for present purposes), goals, procedures, registers and thematic fields on the one hand, and omissions (or absences) on the other, can be perceived to recur across the works which mark the heights of theatre semiotics or semiology in France.

Secondly, I would suggest that it is now clear, after the turnabouts of theory's recent history, that we need no longer proceed in the 1990s through the contestation or rejection of what was valid in the recent past. We have instead to attempt to determine what was missing from earlier projects and procedures; what was not noted or could not then be said in the authorised terms; what was hinted at; and to work then to reincorporate that missing 'something' into the larger project of contemporary knowledge. In these terms, what can now be developed in and for theatre semiotics should be seen as complementary to what was developed in the 1970s and 1980s. However, we need absolutely to note from the outset that complementarity is not simply a matter of bringing together the different on a principle of reciprocity. The joining, here, poses for us the vital problematic of performance semiotics: what transfers between at least two sets of codifications, does the *productive* bringing together of 'the one and the other' entail? In Wilden (1980), digital (sequential, unitary, boundary-marked) and analog (up-down continuum) modes are complementary, the one to the other, *in the world of human experience*. But what we perceive less clearly – because we tend to take it for granted, because it is naturalised – is something that information technology has begun to make clear, in a way that earlier semio-logies did not: the point of interest is less the two, than the site of conjunction between the two, where because of that process of conjoining itself, they are mutually transforming. Two observations emerge from this: the one can only exclude the other, take priority over the other, or become the wholesale substitute for the other, within those models of power we begin to see when we study the (dramatic) politics of knowledge. But secondly, that my uses of the semiological tradition will mean that when I select from it, I transform, in so doing, elements of it, by that action. To oppose black to white is a

cultural practice (whatever its material basis); but to make them complementary to each other is no less so, even if the process better conceals a specific human intelligence (as decodifier and recodifier), intervening at and indeed *as* their interface.

## Chapter 1

# Some Twentieth-century European Traditions Revisited

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### Traditions

The work of Pavis and Ubersfeld (close colleagues in the 1970s and 1980s at the Institute of Theatre Studies of the University of Paris (III)) reveals striking differences between the discursive approaches they separately adopt to dramatic theatre. Pavis' dictionary (*Dictionnaire du théâtre*, 1987) sets out named and alphabetically listed categories of theatre knowledge, which range from *the absurd* via *mise en scène* to *verisimilitude*, and in the most general of terms the text, unfortunately not yet translated into English, would serve as an exemplary teaching and learning tool in tertiary education approaches to a 'French theoretical' appraisal of theatre. But this approach suggests implicitly that the diverse knowledges we draw on in the context of theatre lend themselves usefully to categorisation – whereas Ubersfeld herself will note that theatre works through its *combinatory* capacity, which transforms anything having an extratheatrical 'separate reality'. Ubersfeld's *combinatoire* (combinatory quality of theatre) does not appear as an entry in Pavis (1987).

The title of *Languages of the Stage* (Pavis, 1982) is telling in the naturalisation of its own logocentricity. In referring in the introductory section ("Present Situation of Semiology") to Foucault (1966), de Saussure (1974), Greimas (1979) and Peirce (1931–58), and to the "irreconcilable opposition of two models of the sign", Pavis notes that "[w]hat will be discussed here . . . is . . . semiology and not semiotics", because theatre, for Pavis, is "*a manifestation of external discourse*" (my emphasis). What I prefer to describe as its *semiotic* workings seem, in this understanding, to be able to be