For a Phenomenology of the Interval in the Theatre performance. A Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract: Theatre, in the notional complexity to be undertaken, updates and in this update it feels more pronounced the tendencies of increasing the performing spectrum. Writing about theatre inevitably leads you to set on something, on that attribute bringing the conviction that around its analysis the appreciative matters get interesting and reveal assumptions for future analysis.

The article we propose approaches theatre in the cardinal ambiguity of meanings, namely in what we call here interval. We assume an approximate delimitation of this range, balancing and improving the center-periphery relationship, and then establish ourselves to turn the performance itself into a phenomenon, with a double implication. Making a connection between the audience and the performance is not something new, but if the significance, the midpoint of this relationship is fractured in the process transmitter-receiver, can we not think of the possibility of the interval/range as a deconstruct refuge of meanings?

This paper asserts that if hiding the meaning becomes a phenomenon itself, it will be possible to read the performance by averaging this interval in which will be found, in the articulation of the public’s reception, the association of the cultural and theatrical codes.

Key words: interval, phenomenology, meaning, performance, theatrical/cultural codes.

Any action in the context of a semiotic analysis may be subject to an ambivalent interpretation. This ambivalence is generated on the background of the relation between character, as the one that puts into action the text /

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game and goes through his play the meanings, and the actor – who is represented by the audience, the one who employs the meanings freed in its own conceptual apparatus in the view of a decoding and clarifying of the meaning.

The idea that we want to emphasize in this text has a double stake. First, we consider the theatre performance as a complex process, made from the ambivalence action-text and expressed in a semiotic analysis, in Anna Ubersfeld’s words as “a totalizing semiotic practice”\(^1\). The dependency relationship between text and action, in other words between dramatic speech and dramatic stage performance, conjugated in the active symbiosis of spectacular representation in the public mind, opens as an interval of analysis of the literal in all its adjacent aspects. Basically, behind the surface action of this overt representation that the audience perceives in the theatre performance, the text becomes a haven conducive to an interdisciplinary analysis (semiotic, pragmatic, semantic, theory of literary text, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic). Even the text itself offers an interval (identifiable), and this interval postulates, in a playful manner, a number of attributes of literary fiction and social dynamics. What we advocate is that theatre can be analyzed in the quintessence of the text staged by action, and this quintessence is itself veiled by the metaphoric and subtle appearance that text involves in relation with non-speaking (gesture and corporality).

In an attempt to approximate, and why not locate geographically the interval we are talking about, we shall start from etymology. The interval involves a period, a distance, both observable and measurable, and also implies a continuation of what was already started. In these circumstances, the interval in the context of our discussion ranks a provisional refuge of decantation, releasing some words indicators. But the terminology of the theatre text or literature has a double implication at the level of reception. On the one hand we are dealing with an etymological implication, namely that we want to know the origin and the phonetic evolution of that term, and on the

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other hand we have the opportunity to include its meaning and significance, and here semiotics and semantics come to help.

The theatre performance, in the conjugation we were talking about earlier, idea-action-text, can be analyzed as a remnant of authorial intention bound by the final result. The final form of the theatre performance is not something already given, a ready-made prepared for the audience, but the result of an improvement, a balancing of ideas or some type of compromise. It is this compromise that denotes the internalization of the subject upon himself. The text giving rise to the composition of the theatre play is not conceived as a theoretical object, subject to a possible scientific analysis, but is designed as a work of art, subject to interpretation. But beyond the imposition of an exercise of semiotic analysis of the theatre performance, we shall say that the experience of the absent interval in the theatre performance lies with the viewer’s duty at the level of a reception subject itself to an introspective exercise.

But beyond this nuanced feature which implies a specific approach adjusted by the mechanisms of cognitive psychology, we shall remain within our hypothesis and we shall affirm the possibility of an interval in the theatre performance as an elucidation of a ready-made still unfinished. Since the utterance of the text in the performance to the public perception of the text conjugated with the action on the stage (produced by actors), the interval we refer to transgresses both public perception and the communication within the expected performance.

The transgression we allude to is a forward -to-return, while the audience of a theatre performance is designed in a double posture transceiver. Excluding the performances that deserve only to be read, the theatre performance in the ambivalence text-action enables the possibility of this transgression because of the possibility of receiving and transmitting the message together with feeling. We consider appropriate to put to question a function of a feeling in the theatre performance, a function that can be thought

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2 In this case we refer to assessing Daniela Rovenţa-Frumuşani appreciation that Lorenzaccio is one of the rare examples of plays written to be read and not played. Daniela Rovenţa-Frumuşani & Romain Gaudreault (ed.), La sémiotique théâtrale. Pour connaître la science des signes, Craiova, Meridian Foundation Publishing House, pp. 214-262.
of in terms of functionality and sentimental logic conjectural with the theatre performance.

What may favor the possibility of the affirmation of the interval in the theatre performance consists of the identification emphasizing of a refurbishment at the level of communication and the facts produced by the action on the stage. In order to detail this aspect, we shall make an analogy with a peripheral topic, but adjacent to our hypothesis, namely the aesthetic existence in Michel Foucault’s work. To the end of his life, the French philosopher Michel Foucault made research on an aesthetic of existence, and in one of his interviews he said that “[...] the desire to be a moral issue, the search for an ethic of existence meant in antiquity an effort to affirm freedom and give your own life a certain form in which you could recognize yourself, to be recognized by others and in which posterity might find an example.”

There is here a nuance that we consider to be justifiable for our working hypothesis. For the Greeks, the idea of ethics was not necessary related to the idea of duty, but was assimilated especially as a virtue, and this one was represented by a form of life. But Foucault surprises a delicate phenomenon in the representation of this form of life itself for the antique Greeks. The subject itself was not a ready-made, but the object of an improvement of the subject with itself.

In the terms of this improvement, going back to the supposed existence of the interval, possible haven of metaphor and subtleness, we can configure a state of life of the theatre performance that offers the audience something more. This something more is the result of this improvement, of this negotiation of meaning between text-action and audience.

The subtleness we refer to lets space for a non-spoken, represented at the level of gesture and corporality that clarifies the meaning for the audience, but in the same time offers the signification of the audience emitted in the interval. No matter how much the gesture messages would be veiled, in this point considering so venturesome Michael Argyle’s theory from his work

Bodily Communication according to which the non-speaking language disposes of a larger primitiveness and directivity⁴, we affirm that the text has an extremely important part in the creation of a bond of meanings between performance and spectator.

Therefore, the theatre performance is not something already given, but it also has constitutes and levels of significance that the audience infers and intercepts. But this interception goes over the profoundness of a subtleness of text that the public is compelled (if not even forced) to solve. The intention of the public conjugates with its intuition to solve what the actor omitted to convey, replacing the message-word with the expressions emphasized by the actor’s gesture and body. But even the non-speaking language is subject to the same subtleness, as the form that the actor embodies with his gestures, cannot be thought as a ready-made under any circumstances. The action of gestures assumes an intrinsic standing, for it is subject to an implicit decoding, contextualized, but linked with the text.

Before the action of gestures, which is to produce, the text is first imported, it is subtly introduced in action in order to be then emitted in the area of interval of the performance. From here, the phenomenon itself is born, the central peripheral of the performance which brings the spectator closer to the meaning(s).

The public is put almost every time in the situation to search. From the significant theatre (Brecht), in which the finale addresses to the audience in a mute manner a “search for the exit!”, it reveals the idea of a theatre of consciousness that puts the public in the place of a psychologist meant to produce an act of consciousness (of the audience) upon unconsciousness (which dominates the stage).⁵

We can think of the preparation of the public to decipher the signs in terms of a relation which expects to happen, to become possible. And exactly this possibility leaves space to establishing this interval that brings together

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the empty space of the possible signs. The participation to the creation of the theatre performance belongs in equal measure to actors and public, but beyond this symbiosis able to generate force, distributed a posteriori at the level of meaning, the theatre performance succeeds to create its own space, and exactly this space is decanted such as an absent interval. And in regard to a supposed configuration of this space, we could say that this space might be full with all the meanings that the public can receive once with the performing of the performance, but in the same time it could appear as an empty space which waits to obtain meaning(s).

At one moment in time, Roland Barthes created a theatrical moral, this one being equal to attributing to each spectacular behavior a functional part, and this function would be intellectual, more than plastic or emotional. Or in the communication, or union between the meaning of the creative act and its exteriority, the spectacular intervenes as a fragmentation of the conveying of meaning from stage to public. Temptation, in the context of the semiotics of theatre, challenges the public in the exhaustive deciphering of each spectacular element, but this challenge is in a certain manner a conscious non-challenge of the public in the adventure of decoding meanings.

Regardless of drama in the contemporary theatre, we are dealing with an inflation of signs and an amplification of the expressing regime. We identify this state of fact, in what concerns ourselves, in the modality of juxtaposed perception (and from this dissolute cause) between the social gesture to which vibrates the intention of disclosing of the public and the semiotic scheme that tempts the same public. The component of the performance, going back to Barthes’ affirmations, must be an argument, and the public must identify the entire interfering process that makes up the argument. That is why the intellectual function of the spectacular must not be smothered by some parasite functions (theory of logical truth, aestheticism), it owns a strong semantic value. That is why the spectacular goes up to surface in its double manifestation – so, the theatre performance must be seen and read.

\[6^{ibidem}, p.25.\]
But could we detach from this complex territory of the theatre performance, which favors the semiotic analysis, the simple gesture and the expressive corporeality as pure significations, namely, without a possible second signification? An answer to this question would bring nearer the justified reason for reading the performance. The text always assimilates easier than the other theatre codes that the performance owns. The reading and decoding of theatre in a text obeys the rules of structure, the language favoring in this case the meaning. But the action of gesture and corporality gives the public the possibility to emit the significations in the interval, offering a fertile territory for a phenomenological analysis. Throwing exhaustively upon understanding, the signs that gesture and body offer to the public stop themselves in this interval from where they expect to be caught, namely disclosed, understood.

All these lead to the idea that the performance transgresses the territories of a supposed bipartite intimacy: on the one hand, an intimacy of the public, assimilating the reactions of the spectator in the phenomenality which is expressed by the performance, and on the other hand, an intimacy of the action in its complexity, which restrains and offers permanently the performance of the actors. Bringing into performance the permanence of a double (meaning, action, character), the performance interiorizes the last meaning which is freed to the public, challenging it in the process of understanding everything that happens on stage in the proximity of the interval.

We have to keep in mind the fact that the interval, subject to a regime of phenomenological analysis, brings closer and distances equivocally the relation spectator-performance. First of all, because the spectator “premeditates” the decryption of the meanings expressed in the performance, approximating at the level of his understanding, the enhancement/depreciation of meaning between the cultural codes and the theatre codes. The fact that “everything becomes sign in a theatre representation”, as Tadeusz Kowzan

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said, involves the spectator in defining and justifying a phenomenological analysis with the action that performs in front of him. But even this analysis supports the gauge of a comprehensible random effort. The public may know some cultural codes and even this knowledge implies a subjective experience. In what concerns the performance, it expresses a real intention of being unique in meaning, in other words, at the end of the performance the public should understand something. But it is exactly this something, definable but difficult in nuance, that indicates the interval we are referring to. The rest of meaning which is to be completed after the performance has its origin in this interval. Nothing can escape this interpretation that the spectator operates in the phenomenological analysis of the performance, but the origin of the meanings which are to be brought close to the level of its understanding locates, in the meaning of a conceptual range, in the interval.

The postulation of the semantic status of theatre, returning to Barthes’ analysis criteria, leads to the understanding of theatre in cognitive terms, not only in emotional terms as the old tradition got us used to. Thus it goes to a particular type of theatre, fonde in Barthes’ terms, so a theatre which is neither pathetic nor rational.9

The justification of theatre in cognitive terms implies a particular sort of analysis that the spectator has to do a priori and a posteriori. And in this ontological duality, the question of the interval appears again and configures a geography for localization. Before and after the performance, the spectator “breaks” the codes of interpretation, abandoning in the interval the remaining meanings, all these being deciphered next according to the associative interaction between the theatre codes and cultural codes.

The possibility of the existence of this interval asks a question regardless of receiving gesture and corporality. If in regard to the performance played in the ambivalence action-text the reading is done in the cognitive context, the deciphering being made function of the associative valences between the cultural codes and the theatre codes, the non-speaking transfers the rhythmic and harmonious communication to the performance.10 Though this new code eliminates the artificiality of the articulated language, trying to impose the illusion of a total communication, the meanings of gesture and corporality are emitted in the particular phenomenality by the rhythmic linking
of the character to itself and the implication of a third in this relation, this third being the public. Thus generated, this tripartite relation postulates the agreement between expression and significance.

Concluding, Barthes’ affirmation expressed in the limit of the theatre approached in semiotic terms, seems to be eloquent: “What is theatre? A sort of cybernetic machine. In stand-by, this machine is hidden behind a curtain. But when it is disclosed, it starts to send you a series of messages. These messages evidentiate themselves by the fact that they are simultaneous and still they have a different rhythm; in such point of the performance you get in the same time six or seven pieces of information (from the sets, costumes, lights, the place of the actors, their gestures and mimicry, words). But some pieces of information still remain (it is the case of the sets), while others change (words, gestures); so, we deal with a true informational polyphony, and this is drama/theatre, a density of signs (this reported to the literary monody and putting aside the problem of cinematography) […]. Every representation is a semantic act extremely dense: the comparison between code and game (namely between language and speaking), nature (analogic, symbolic, conventional) of the theatre sign, significant variations of this sign, bond constraints, denotation and connotation of the message, all these fundamental problems of semiology are present in the theatre; we can even say that theatre constitutes a privileged object of semiology, since its system is apparently original (polyphonic) compared to that of language (which is linear).”

Bibliography


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