
Semiotics of Theatrical Performance

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According to Jorge Luis Borges, Abulgualid Mohammed Ibn Ahmed Ibn Moham-mahd Ibn Rushd, better known as Averroes, was thinking—something like one thousand years ago, more or less—about a difficult question concerning Aristotle’s *Poetics*. As you probably know, Averroes was a specialist on Aristotle, mainly on the *Poetics*. As a matter of fact, Western civilization had lost this book and had redis-covered it only through the mediation of Arab philosophers. Averroes did not know about *theatre*. Because of the Muslim taboo on representation, he had never seen a theatrical performance. At least, Borges, in his short story *The Quest of Averroes*, imagines our philosopher wondering about two incomprehensible words he had found in Aristotle, namely “tragedy” and “comedy.” A nice problem, since Aristotle’s *Poetics* is nothing else but a complex definition of those two words, or at least of the first of them.

The novel of Borges is long and fanciful. Let me only quote two episodes. In the first one, Averroes is disturbed by some noise coming from downstairs. On the patio a group of boys are playing. One of them says, “I am the Muezzin,” and climbs on the shoulders of another one, who is pretending to be a minaret. Others are representing the crowd of believers. Averroes only glances at this scene and comes back to his book, trying to understand what the hell “comedy” means.

Semiotics of Theatrical Performance

by Umberto Eco

In the second episode, Averroes and the Koranist Farach are talking with the merchant Albuca-sim, who has just come back from remote countries. Albuca-sim is telling a strange story about something he has seen in Sin Kalan (Canton): a wooden house with a great salon full of balconies and chairs, crowded with people looking towards a platform where fifteen or twenty persons, wearing painted masks, are riding on horseback, but without horses, are fencing, but without swords, are dying, but are not dead. They were not crazy, explains Albuca-sim, they were “representing” or “performing” a story. Averroes does not understand, and Albuca-sim tries to explain it: “Imagine,” he says, “that someone *shows* a story instead of telling it.” “Did they speak?” asks Farach. “Yes, they did,” answers Albuca-sim. And Farach remarks, “In such a case they did not need so many persons. Only one teller can tell everything, even if it is very complex.” Averroes approves. At the end of the story, Averroes decides to interpret the words “tragedy” and “comedy” as belonging to encomiastic discourse.

Averroes touched twice upon the experience of theatre, skimming over it without understanding it. Too bad, since he did have a good theoretical framework ready to define it. Western civilization, on the contrary, during the Middle Ages, had the real experience of theatrical performance but had not a working theoretical net to throw over it.

We now have the chance to have both, but sometimes we are as blind as Averroes was. There are various kinds of blindness: there is blindness by absence and a blindness by excess of light. Averroes had no theatre at all; we have too much of it. If you look at the first bibliographical items on semiotics of theatre (the bibliography in VS 11 has listed 80 of them) you might be overwhelmed by the abundance of witty remarks, of skillful analyses of avant-garde pieces, but you might lack an essential definition.

Semiotics can be conceived of either as a unified theoretical approach to the great variety of systems of signification and communication, and in this sense it constitutes a metalinguistic discourse dealing with any of its objects by means of homogeneous categories, or it can be conceived as a description of those various systems insisting on their mutual differences, their specific structural properties, their idiosyncrasies—from verbal language to gestures, from visual images to body positions, from musical sounds to fashions. It shows a wide range of “languages” ruled by different conventions and laws. It can investigate those various domains either at the elementary level of their consecutive units (such as words, color spots, physical formants of sounds, geometrical or topological shapes) or at the more complex level of texts and discourses—that is, narrative structures, figures of speech and so on.

What, then, are the specific object and the starting level of a semiotics of theatre, since theatre is, among the various arts, the one in which the whole of human experience is co-involved, the very place in which complete “son et lumière” events take place, in which human bodies, artifacts, music, literary expressions (and therefore literature, painting, music, architecture and so on) are in play at the same moment? Tadeusz Kowzan, one of the leading theatre semioticians of the present time (the author of *Literature et spectacle*, Mouton, 1975) has isolated thirteen sign systems* at work in a theatrical performance: words, voice inflection, facial mimicry, gesture, body movement, makeup, headdress, costume, accessory, stage design, lighting, music, and noise. Every one of these systems has a logic in itself, and I am not sure that the list is complete. Kowzan, like many others, has rightly pointed out that the object of theatrical semiotics is the performance, or the *mise-en-scène*, not the literary text. But other authors have considered the text as the “deep structure” of the performance, trying to find in it all the seminal elements of the *mise-en-scène*. Others (from Souriau to the Greimas’ school) have studied the elementary structure of dramatic action, or *les situations dramatiques*, therefore merging research in theatre with research of narrative structures—the forerunner of this approach has been, without any doubt, Aristotle. I could continue to list many researchers and different approaches, but you might get the impression that the semiotics of theatre is nothing but an arithmetic sum of the semiotic analyses of other forms of communication.

*See p. 87 in T72 for complete chart of Kowzan’s thirteen sign systems.

However the first duty of a new (or old) theory is not only to isolate its own object but also to do it in a more essential way than before. What we ask a theory for, is to give us back an old object illuminated by a new light in order to realize that only from that point of view the object can be really understood. Is semiotics able to do that? I am not sure of it. Semiotics is a very young discipline, only two thousand years old, and it has a terrific task to perform, since nearly everything seems to fall under its headings.

One of its main temptations is to start straight away from the most complex phenomena, instead of rediscovering the most basic features of a given "language." Among the various semiotic disciplines, only their older sister (or mother?), linguistics, has demonstrated enough wisdom and prudence to avoid, at its first steps, the analysis of texts. It started with phonemes, words and phrases (and only now is trying to elaborate a transphrastic linguistics, or a theory of texts). But if you look, for instance, at the various attempts in the semiotics of literature, of painting or of architecture, you may detect a sort of "parvenu" complex. It seems that many literary semioticians would feel ashamed to study *Little Red Riding Hood* instead of *Paradise Lost*; it seems that many visual semioticians would consider themselves scientific freshmen if they studied how one perceives a square or a triangle, and feel themselves compelled to skip away directly towards "scenographies of tableaux" and sophisticated analyses of Poussin or Raphael. I fought strenuously against certain semioticians of architecture who maintained that Palladio's villas are architecture while public urinals, log cabins and dog's beds are not—refusing to understand that if there is a "language" of architecture it basically arose when the first man nailed a stick in the ground to shape a space (the space around the stick vs. the space far from the stick) or when a neolithic builder put a horizontal stick upon two vertical ones to produce the first element of that "architecture" we now admire in Stonehenge as well as in the Parthenon. The main problem of linguistics is to understand why "mama" and "papa" and not (or at least, not immediately) what they mean or why and how we understand such an incipit as "riverrun past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs."

The same is true with a semiotics of theatrical performance. In order to try to formulate it, we should begin with a positively naive attitude, assuming that we do not know what Moliere did, who Samuel Beckett was, how Stanislavsky made somebody feel himself to be an apple or how Bertolt Brecht made an apple appear to be a piece of criticism of capitalist society.

Let me start with an example proposed (without thinking of theatre) by the founding father of American semiotics, C. S. Peirce. He once wondered what kind of sign could have been defined by a drunkard exposed in a public place by the Salvation Army in order to advertise the advantages of temperance. He did not answer this question. I shall do it now. Tentatively. We are in a better position than Averroes. Even though trying to keep a naive attitude, we cannot eliminate some background knowledge. We have read not only Aristotle but also Francis Ferguson, Etienne

Souriau, Peter Szondi, Umberto Eco and Woody Allen. We know Sophocles, Gilbert and Sullivan, and *King Lear*, *I Love Lucy* and *En attendant Godot* and *A Chorus Line*, *Phèdre* and *No, No Nanette*, *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Let My People Come* and *The Jew of Malta* and *Oh Calcutta!*. Therefore we immediately suspect that in that sudden epiphany of intoxication lies the basic mystery of (theatrical) performance.

As soon as he has been put on the platform and shown to the audience, the drunken man has lost his original nature of "real" body among real bodies. He is no more a world object among world objects—he has become a semiotic device; he is now a *sign*. A sign, according to Peirce, is something that stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity—a physical presence referring back to something absent. What is our drunken man referring back to? To a drunken man. But not to *the* drunk who he is, but to a drunk. The present drunk—insofar as he is the member of a class—is referring us back to the class of which he is a member. He *stands for* the category he belongs to. There is no difference, in principle, between our intoxicated character and the word "drunk."


Apparently this drunk stands for the equivalent expression, "There is a drunken man," but things are not that simple. The physical presence of the human body along with its characteristics could stand either for the phrase, "There is a drunken man in this precise place and in this precise moment," or for the one "Once upon a time there was a drunken man"; it could also mean, "There are many drunken men in the world." As a matter of fact, in the example I am giving, and according to Peirce's suggestion, the third alternative is the case. To interpret this physical presence in one or in another sense is a matter of convention, and a more sophisticated theatrical performance would establish this convention by means of other semiotic media—for instance, words. But at the point we are, our tipsy-sign is open to any interpretation: He stands for all the existing drunken men in our real world and in every possible world. He is an open expression (or sign-vehicle) referring back to an open range of possible contents.

Nevertheless, there is a way in which this presence is different from the presence of a word or of a picture. It has not been actively produced (as one produces a word or draws an image)—it has been *picked up* among the existing physical bodies and it has been shown or *ostended*. It is the result of a particular mode of sign production. Ostension has been studied by medieval logicians, by Wittgenstein, by contemporary theorists of theatre (for instance, the Czech, Ivo Osolsobe). Ostension is one of the various ways of signifying, consisting in de-realizing a given object in order to make it stand for an entire class. But ostension is, at the same time, the most basic instance of performance.

You ask me, "How should I be dressed for the party this evening?" If I answer by showing my tie framed by my jacket and say, "Like this, more or less," I am signifying by ostension. My tie does not mean my actual tie but your possible tie (which can be of a different stuff and color) and I am "performing" by representing to you the you of this evening. I am prescribing to you how you should look this evening. With this simple gesture I am doing something that is theatre at its best, since I not only tell you

something, but I am offering to you a model, giving you an order or a suggestion, outlining a utopia or a feasible project. I am not only picturing a given behavior, I am in fact eliciting a behavior, emphasizing a duty, mirroring your future. In Jakobsonian terms, my message is at the same time a referential, a phatic, an imperative, an emotive—and (provided I move gracefully) it is esthetic. By picturing your future way of dressing (through my present one) I have, however, added the verbal expression “more or less.” My performance, which was eminently visual and behavioral, has been accompanied by a verbal metalinguistic message establishing some criteria of pertinence. “More or less” signified “making an abstraction from the particular stuff, color and size of *my* tie.” It was a rather important device; it helped you to de-realize the object that was *standing for* something else. It was reducing the pertinent features of the vehicle I used to signify “tie” to you, in order to make it able to signify all the possible ties you can think of.

The same happens with our intoxicated man. It is not necessary that he have a specific face, a specific eye color, a moustache or a beard, a jacket or a sweater. It is, however, necessary (or at least I think so) that his nose be red or violet; his eyes dimmed by a liquid obtuseness; his hair, his moustache or his beard ruffled and dirty; his clothes splashed with mud, sagging and worn-out. I am thinking of the typical Bowery character but when I think of him, I am ready to make abstractions from many



features, provided that some essential characteristics are conserved and emphasized. The list of these characteristics is established by a social code, a sort of iconographic convention. The very moment our sargeant of the Salvation Army has chosen the *right* drunk, he has made recourse to a socialized knowledge. His choice has been semiotically oriented. He has been looking for the right man just as one looks for the right word.

Nevertheless, there is something that distinguishes our drunkard from a word. A word is a sign, but it does not conceal its sign-quality. We conventionally accept that through words someone speaks about reality, but we do not confuse words with things (except in cases of mental illness). When speaking, we are conscious that something impalpable (*flatus vocis*) stands for something presumably palpable (except in cases of lying). But not every sign-system follows the same rules as the others. In the case of our elementary model of *mise-en-scène*, the drunk is a sign, but he is a sign that pretends not to be such. The drunkard is playing a double game: In order to be accepted as a sign, he has to be recognized as a “real” spatio-temporal event, a real human body. In theatre, there is a “square semiosis.” With words, a phonic object stands for other objects made with different stuff. In the *mise-en-scène* an object, first recognized as a real object, is then assumed as a sign in order to refer back to another object (or to a class of objects) whose constitutive stuff is the same as that of the representing object.

I stress this point because it makes evident a crucial semiotic question: that is, the difference between so-called *natural* and artificial signs. Everybody agrees on the fact

that words or pictures are signs insofar as they are intentionally produced by human beings in order to communicate. But many semioticians wonder whether medical symptoms, animal imprints or unintentional body movements are to be considered as signs. Undoubtedly the trace of a cat's paw on the ground means that an animal (namely a cat) has passed there. Undoubtedly if I stagger, it "means" that I have drunk a little more than is due. But can one consider those events as signs? Is there a difference between signification by means of intentional and artificial devices ruled by a convention (such as words or road signals) and signification as inferred from natural and unintentional events such as symptoms and imprints?

The semiotic approach of Peirce is, in my view, the most powerful because it proposes a unified set of definitions able to take into account both species of signs. Both are instances of something standing for something else on the basis of previous learning (or convention), and I agree with Charles Morris when he says that,

something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by some interpreter. . . . Semiotic then is not concerned with the study of a particular kind of object but with ordinary objects insofar (and only insofar) as they participate in semiosis.

I think that this is a paramount definition of the semiosis of *mise-en-scène*, since it is hard to distinguish, in such a framework, artificial signs from natural ones. What is a Chinese pot upon a table in a set design? A natural object? An artificial device? Is it representing something else?

Our drunk is representing drunkenness. His red nose has been selected as a natural unintentional event able to intentionally (the intention belongs to the Salvation Army, not to him) represent the devastating effects of intemperance. But what about his teeth? There is no specific convention establishing that an average drunken man lacks his incisors or has a set of black teeth. But if our intoxicated man possesses those characteristics, this would work very well. Insofar as the man becomes a sign, those of his characteristics that are not pertinent to the purposes of representation also acquire a sort of vicarious representative importance. The very moment the audience accepts the convention of the *mise-en-scène*, every element of that portion of the world that has been framed (put upon the platform) becomes significant. I am thinking of the sociopsychological *frame analysis* proposed by Erving Goffman in his latest book. Goffman imagines two situations, both concerning a mirror and a lady. First situation: The mirror is in a beauty parlor and the lady, instead of using it to adjust her hairdressing, inspects the quality of its frame. That seems irregular. Second situation: The mirror is exhibited in the shop of an antiquary and the lady, instead of considering the quality of the frame, mirrors herself and adjusts her hair. That seems irregular. The difference in the mode of framing has changed the meaning of the actions of the characters in play. The contextual frame has changed the meaning of

the mirror's carved frame—that is, the frame as situation has given a different semiotic purport to the frame as object. In both cases, however, there is a framing, an ideal platforming or staging, that imposes and prescribes the semiotic pertinence both of the objects and of the actions, even though they are not intentional behavior nor non-artificial items.

I should, however, stress that, until now, I have incorrectly put together natural and unintentional signs. I have done it on purpose because it is a kind of confusion frequently made by many semioticians. But we should disambiguate it.

On one hand, I can produce a false natural event, as when I purposely produce a false imprint in order to fool somebody. I can produce a false symptom by painting red spots on my face to pretend I have measles.

On the other hand, I can produce unintentionally what usually is conceived to be intentional (the most typical examples are psychoanalytic slips of the tongue or those common errors that everybody makes when speaking a foreign language), but I also can produce intentionally what is usually believed to be unintentional. For instance, his pronunciation shows that a man is, let me say, a Frenchman speaking English. The choice of English words is an intentional act, the way of pronouncing them, even though semiotically important (it means: "I am a Frenchman") is unintentional. But what about a fictional character purposefully emitting French-like phonemes in order to mean "I am French," while he is perfectly all-American—maybe a CIA agent trying to get political information by talking with a French Communist (and without knowing—obviously—that he could get the same information by reading the daily *l'Humanité*)? Is there a difference between an actor who, to pretend having been whipped, draws red lines on his shoulders and another one (a more professional actor more religiously following the principles of realism) who really wounds himself in order to get really bleeding traces?

I have no clear and definite responses for these questions. I only wanted to make clear to what an extent the elementary problems of dramatic fiction are strictly linked with the basic problems of general semiotics.

I think (and I have elaborated this point elsewhere) that the elementary mechanisms of human interaction and the elementary mechanisms of dramatic fiction are the same. This is not a witty idea of mine: from Goffman to Bateson and from the current researches in ethnomethodology to the experiences of a Palo Alto group (think also of Eric Berne's behavioral games models in *Games People Play*) everyday life is viewed as an instance of theatrical performance. This finally explains why esthetics and criticism have always suspected that theatrical performances were instances of everyday life. It is not theatre that is able to imitate life; it is social life that is designed as a continuous performance and, because of this, there is a link between theatre and life.

Let me outline an elementary matrix considering eight possible types of interaction in emitting and receiving unintentional behavior as signs. Let me list under "E" the intention of the emitter ("+" meaning that the behavior is intentional and "-" that it is not), under "A" the intentionality or the unintentionality of the reaction of the

addressee and under "I" the intention that the addressee attributes (or does not attribute) to the emitter:

	<i>E</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>I</i>
1	+	+	+
2	+	+	-
3	+	-	(+)
4	+	-	(-)
5	-	+	+
6	-	+	-
7	-	-	(+)
8	-	-	(-)

Case number 1: An actor hobbles along, pretending to be a lame person. The addressee understands that he is doing it voluntarily.

Case 2: I simulate a limp in order to make the addressee believe that I am lame, and the addressee consciously receives this piece of information, believing that my behavior is unintentional. This represents the typical case of successful simulation.

Cases 3 and 4: In order to get rid of a boring visitor, I drum on the desk with my fingers to express nervous tension. The addressee receives this as a subliminal stimulus that irritates him; he is unable to attribute to me either intentionality or unintentionality, although later he might (or might not) realize what happened and attribute plus or minus intentionality to my act.

Cases 5 and 6: Being bored by the same visitor, I unintentionally drum with my fingers. The visitor realizes the situation and attributes plus or minus intention to me.

Case 6 is also the one of the patient emitting an involuntary slip of the tongue during a conversation with his psychoanalyst, who understands the sign and recognizes that it was not intentionally emitted.

Cases 7 and 8 are variations of cases 3 and 5, with a different misunderstanding strategy.

In fact one can get from this matrix all the basic plots of Western comedy and tragedy, from Menander to Pirandello, or from Chaplin to Antonioni. But the matrix could be further complicated by adding to it a fourth item; that is, the intention that the emitter wishes that the addressee attribute to him. "I tell you *p* so that you believe that I am lying and that, in fact, I meant *q* while *p* is really the case." Remember the Jewish story reported by Lacan: "Why are you telling me that you are going to Krakow so that I believe that you are going to Lenberg, while as a matter of fact you are really going to Krakow and, by telling it explicitly, you are trying to conceal it?" The new matrix would have sixteen rows. (Recently an Italian scholar, Paola Gulli, has applied this matrix to

the well-known “nothing” uttered by Cordelia, examining the different interplay of interpretations and misunderstandings taking place between Cordelia and King Lear, Cordelia and France, King Lear and Kent and so on. But in an unpublished manuscript on rhetoric, Paolo Valesio has further complicated this analysis by interpreting the “nothing” of Cordelia as a witty rhetorical device aimed not to convince Lear but rather to inform France about her mental disposition and rhetorical ability.)

Coming back to our poor tipsy guinea pig (who, I believe, is rather tired from having been kept standing upon his platform for an untenable amount of time), his presence could be reconsidered in the light of the above matrix. In any case, we could concentrate in this bare presence the whole set of problems discussed by Austin and Searle apropos of *speech acts*, and all the questions raised by the logic of natural languages or epistemic and doxastic logic apropos of all those expressions such as, “I want you to believe, I believe that you believe, I am asserting that, I am promising that, I am announcing that, and so on.” In the very presence of that drunken man, we are witnessing the crucial antinomy that has haunted the history of western thought for two thousand years. It is known as the “liar paradox”—someone asserts that all he is telling is false.

In the same way, should the drunken man open his devastated mouth and utter something like “I love liquor” or “Don’t trust alcohol” . . . Well, we ought to face at that

precise moment the linguistic and logical set of problems concerning the difference between the *sujet de l’nonciation* and the *sujet de l’noncé*. Who is speaking, *qui parle*? That intoxicated individual? The class he is representing? The Salvation Army?

Luis Prieto has recently pointed out that in theatre (as well as in cinema) words are not transparent sign-vehicles referring back to their content (and through it to things). They are sign-vehicles referring back to other sign-vehicles, namely, to a class of sign-vehicles. They are phonic objects taken as objects and ostended as such. The statement “I love liquor” does not mean that the subject of the utterance loves liquor—it means that there is somewhere somebody who loves liquor and who says that. In theatre and cinema, verbal performances refer back to verbal performances *about which* the *mise-en-scène* is speaking.

In a certain sense every dramatic performance (be it on the stage or on the screen) is composed by two speech acts. The first one is performed by the actor who is making a performative statement—“I am acting.” By this implicit statement the actor tells the truth since he announces that *from that moment on* he will lie.

The second one is represented by a pseudo-statement where the subject of the statement is already the character, not the actor. Logically speaking, those statements are referentially opaque. When I say, “Paul has said that Mary will come,” I am responsible for the truth of the proposition, “Paul has said *p*,” not with the truth of *p*. The same happens in a dramatic performance: Because of the first performative act, everything following it becomes referentially opaque. Through the decision of the performer (“I am another man”) we enter the possible world of performance, a world of lies in which we are entitled to celebrate the suspension of disbelief.

There is a difference between a narrative text and a theatrical performance. In a narrative, the author is supposed to tell the truth when he is speaking as subject of the act of utterance, and his discourse is recognized as referentially opaque only when he speaks about what Julien Sorel or David Copperfield have said. But what about a literary text in which Thomas Mann says "I" and the "I" is not Thomas Mann but Serenus Zeitblom telling what Adrian Leverkühn has said? At this moment, narrative becomes very similar to theatre. The author implicitly begins his discourse by saying performatively, "I am Serenus." (As in the case of the drunk, it is not necessary that he assume all the properties of Serenus. It is enough that he reproduce certain pertinent features, namely certain stylistic devices able to connote him as a typical German humanist, a cultivated and old-fashioned middle-bourgeois.)

Once this is said—once the methodological standpoint that both fiction and living reportage are instances of *mise-en-scène*—it remains to ask, "How does a character speak who acts as an element of a *mise-en-scène*?" Do his words have a univocal meaning? Do they mean one thing only and nothing else?

In 1938, the Soviet folklorist Bogatyrev, in a fundamental paper on signs in theatre, pointed out that signs in theatre are not signs of an object but signs of a sign of an object. He meant that, beyond their immediate denotation, all the objects, behaviors and words used in theatre have an additional *connotative* power. For

instance, Bogatyrev suggested that an actor playing a starving man can eat some bread as bread—the actor connoting the idea of starvation, but the bread eaten by him being denotatively bread. But under other circumstances, the fact of eating bread could mean that this starving man eats only a poor food, and therefore the piece of bread not only denotes the class of all possible pieces of bread, but also connotes the idea of poverty.

However, our drunken man does something more than connote drunkenness. In doing so, he is certainly realizing a figure of speech, a metonymy, since he stands for the cause of his physical devastation; he also realizes an *antonomasia*, since he, individually taken, stands for his whole category—he is the drunken man *par excellence*. But (according to the example of Peirce) he is also realizing an irony by *antonymy*. He, the drunk, the victim of alcoholism, stands ironically for his contrary; he celebrates the advantages of temperance. He implicitly says, "I am so, but I should not be like this, and you should not become like me." Or, at another level, "Do you see how beautiful I am? Do you realize what a kind of glorious sample of humanity I am representing here?" But in order to get the irony, we need the right framing: in this case, the standards of the Salvation Army surrounding him.

Since we have approached the rhetorical level, we are obliged to face the ideological one. Our drunken man is no longer a bare presence. He is not even a mere figure of speech. He has become an ideological abstraction: temperance vs. intemperance, virtue vs. vice. Who has said that to drink is bad? Who has said that the spectacle of intoxication has to be interpreted as an ironical warning and not as an invitation to

the most orgiastic freedom? Obviously, the social context. The fact that the drunk has been exposed under the standards of the Salvation Army obliges the audience to associate his presence to a whole system of values.

What would have happened if the drunk had been exposed under the standard of a revolutionary movement? Would he still have signified "vice" or rather "the responsibility of the system," "the results of a bad administration," "the whole starving world"? Once we have accepted that the drunk is also a figure of speech, we must begin to look at him also as an ideological statement. A semiotics of the *mise-en-scène* is constitutively a semiotics of the production of ideologies.

All these things, this complex rhetorical machinery, are, moreover, made possible by the fact that we are not only looking at a human body endowed with some characteristics—we are looking at a human body standing and moving within a physical space. The body could not stagger if there were not an enviroing space to give it orientation—up and down, right and left, to stand up, to lie down. Were the bodies two or more, space would establish the possibility of associating a given meaning to their mutual distances. In this way we see how the problems of the *mise-en-scène* refer back to the problems of many other semiotic phenomena, such as proxemics (the semiotics of spatial distances) or kinesics (the semiotics of gestures and body movements). And we realize that the same semiotic parameters can be applied to the semiotics of theatre, of cinema, of architecture, of painting, of sculpture.

From the idiosyncratic character of the theatrical phenomenon we have arrived at the general problems of semiotics. Nevertheless, theatre has additional features distinguishing it from other forms of art and strictly linking it with everyday conversational interaction—for instance, the audience looking at the drunk can laugh, can insult him and he can react to people's reaction. Theatrical messages are shaped also by the feedback produced from their destination point.

So the semiotics of theatrical performance has shown, during our short and introductory analysis, its own *proprium*, its distinguishing and peculiar features. A human body, along with its conventionally recognizable properties, surrounded by or supplied with a set of objects, inserted within a physical space, stands for something else to a reacting audience. In order to do so, it has been framed within a sort of performative situation that establishes that it has to be taken as a sign. From this moment on, the curtain is raised. From this moment on, anything can happen—Oedipus listens to Krapp's last tape, Godot meets La Cantatrice Chauve, Tartuffe dies on the grave of Juliet, el Cid Campeador throws a cream cake in the face of La Dame aux camelias.

But the theatrical performance has begun before—when Averroes was peeping at the boy who was saying, "I am the Muezzin."

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