Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)
CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication
Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, 2016
ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4
Section: Language and Discourse

THE SEMIOTICS OF STAGED REALITY

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Abstract: The present paper focuses on the discourse of performing arts as constructed in Alegria - Cirque du Soleil, approaching it from the perspective of a different manifestation of the self in need of recreating reality. Hence, the aspects we concentrate on are the multimodal language, the intended/conveyed meaning and the self as framed by contemporary circus performance, a complex construct used as a means of communication.

Keywords: self, conventions, signs, performer/character, spectator/reader

Umberto Eco[1] sees semiotics as either a theoretical approach to systems of signification and communication ("a metalinguistic discourse dealing with any of its objects by means of homogeneous categories"), or 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." (Eco 108)

Contemporary circus performance has come to be seen as going beyond the general and rather simplistic and unfair labelling as popular entertainment, being now considered a professional art form whose multimodal discourse is ruled by various signs and conventions. "Circus is performative, making and remaking itself as it happens. Its languages are imaginative, entertaining and inventive, like other art forms, but circus dominated by bodies in action can especially manipulate cultural beliefs about nature, physicality and freedom. […] Circus had become a formative influence on ideas of cultural spectacle by the twentieth century." (Tait 6)

Following Eco's approach, we can state that the semiotics of this discourse belonging to performing arts would bring together different systems of communication and signification that convey artistic expressions, a complex construct which makes use of a multimodal language: stage design and the use of space, costumes, makeup, lighting, music, accessories, choreography, proxemics, chronemics, kinesics and, to a certain extent, verbal communication.

Our research generally focuses on the journey of the self and its manifestations/representations in the space provided by the written discourse (i.e. the literary discourse), yet in the present article we have decided to extend the analysis to the staged

[1] http://www.jstor.org/stable/1145112

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reality of the performing arts discourse, in our case the nouveau cirque, where semiotic engineering stands the subjective "reading" of the audience in a framed space and time, a multimodal phenomenon making use of a multimodal language, with a shift from the text/reader relationship to the performance/spectator one.

The verbal account of the written discourse, a linear narrative, is now replaced with a multimodal experience of a non-literary discourse, still telling a story, offering the literate viewer an account of the experience of the self. By means of translating the written word into a performed one, *Alegria* tells the one who "reads" its complex language about human limits and makes them fall apart, it introduces him/her into a world where the impossible becomes possible, a world which celebrates the mind and its creative power, the potent body and its ability to go beyond its weaknesses/limitations, a world where we rejoice at the very experience of life, be it reinvented or not.

> *Alegría* is *a mood, a state of mind*. The themes of the show, whose name means "jubilation" in Spanish, are many. Power and the handing down of power over time, the evolution from ancient monarchies to modern democracies, old age, youth - it is against this backdrop that the characters of *Alegría* play out their lives. Kings' fools, minstrels, beggars, old aristocrats and children make up its universe, along with the clowns, who alone are able to resist the passing of time and the social transformations that accompany it.[2]

Indeed, *Alegria* is a state of mind, and the above quotation indicates a certain reading of the performance, yet the lens we are looking through zooms in on a two-sided microcosm, with an emphasis on the latter approach. On the one hand, it is the outside world we see reflected in this circus performance, with its colorful array of dynamic characters populating it, bringing to mind Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage, /And all the men and women merely players" (*As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII). On the other hand, this miniature world is brought to its core and allows a different reading, a different level of de-codification - it stands for the world within, for the self and its challenges. Hence, in our understanding, individual performances are but different representations of the self, each bringing into the foreground a new perspective on body and mind, a reality brought to life in this space of the creative mind which, if only for some moments, annihilates the burdening reality the audience might bring with them, offers them a means of escapism and of enjoying the aesthetics of life. All these differently-mirrored experiences of the self can be understood as eventually converging into the very image of the self, a multifaceted, dynamic, complex one.

The various challenges the self is presented with are perceived as such at a deeper level that decodes certain symbols and signs of the circus language, also making use of analogies that the audience establish between what they see on the circus stage and the knowledge that they bring with them. Taking it all back to a more simplified level, the challenges are mere acts meant to entertain and awe the audience. On referring to the discourse of a circus act, Bouissac (47) emphasizes the fact that it is structured as a narrative centering around a hero and it is performed "within a cluster of verbal, musical, and visual modifiers" (95). He also furthers the idea that these acts create "the context for a challenge and stage the required moves in the real time and space of the ring" while the hero of this narrative "confronts a succession of tests and eventually succeeds in overcoming an extreme challenge to conclude the act" (47).

[2] http://www.warm1013.com/calendar/events/?com=detail&eID=880

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As to the coherence and cohesion of such a complex discourse that weaves together performers, acts, audience's expectations and everything that is brought on the stage, displayed and/or performed, there are some unifying devices which help in building the narrative and facilitate the transition from one act to another, thus making the structure hold and convey meaning as a whole.

> These recurring patterns open interesting perspectives regarding the semantic relationships which hold together the diverse acts in a circus program to form a consistent system of represented actions […] The abstract definition of a circus act as the completion of a series of actions which consist of implementing successive plans does not take into consideration that these actions are not simply performed but are staged as being easy, difficult, dangerous, or even insane with respect to normal standards. These perceived qualities which determine the emotional impact of circus acts on their audience can be made formally explicit through modal categories organized according to a single semiological grid. (Bouissac 94)

In *Alegria*, these unifying devices can be recognized in the repetitive use of some objects (for example, the mirrorless frame) or in the repetitive occurrence of some stage characters, such as the clowns, Tamir, the Old Birds, Monsieur Fleur (the ringmaster), the White Singer - the storyteller voicing the world around her as she witnesses it. Without these narrative bridges or facilitators, if we may call them so, the resulting image would be that of a postmodern fragmented self, lacking coherence while longing for it. Yet, the performance holds meaning while making use not only of all these devices that offer narrative cohesion and coherence, but also of the audience's ability to decode the signs, symbols, conventions, to attach meaning to forms, movements, acts with different degrees of semantic complexity.

In *Awakening the Performing Body*, Jade Rosina McCutcheon (26-27) employs what she calls the "transactions" between the actors and the audience, viewed in terms of "a sense of an *otherness* within us all which is connected through the act of theatre inside *the shared space*." (our emphasis). She goes on by stating that "'Otherness' brings with it a concept of another part of us, an inner part, unknown and known, recognizable intuitively and through the senses, a metaphysical attachment to the known self." As part of the performing arts, the contemporary circus mise-en-scène involves "actors"/performers and an audience as well, therefore we extend McCutcheon's view and apply it here: these transactions rooted in a sense of otherness do serve as a unifying device that implies active participation on the part of the spectators who might recognize some inner part mirrored in the stories unfolding right before their eyes.

The reading/comprehension of this circus performance is not a passive process, but an active one demanding cognitive and emotional participation on the part of the spectators, inviting them along a narrative path and making them part of the story (spectators invited on the stage, the White Singer walking among them and interacting with them, spectators being part of Slava's snowstorm etc.). All these emphasize the very idea of a story made up of subsidiary stories, of a multifaceted self made up of different choices, experiences, outcomes, longings, wish to transgress boundaries, etc. It is with this view that we bring into the foreground Tait's assertion that Cirque du Soleil "presents a very exciting visual spectacle, but as a whole entity rather than selectively dispersed within particular acts." (131)

In relating the theme(s) to the audience, *Alegria* does not rely on a spoken discourse, the stories are not orally verbalized, but performed – except the White Singer, who echoes them in sound. From the perspective of the semiotics of this staged reality, the performers

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need to be viewed as semiotic devices making use of visual and auditory signs and conventions, employing a wide range of morphological elements, as previously mentioned. The analysis of these signs and conventions that occur in the performance space and discourse is structured according to a model of semiotic analysis which de Toro discusses in his book and which furthers the following classification:

- conventions: general, particular, unique (De Marinis qtd. in de Toro 55)
- signs (the triadic sign): the icon, the index, the symbol (Peirce qtd. in de Toro 73)

On discussing conventions (55-57), de Toro takes account of the components they are defined by, namely the code, the learning process/codification and knowledge/decodification and emphasizes the fact that accurate knowledge/decodification acknowledges (cultural) changes of codes across time and space. General conventions differentiate between the world outside the performance space and the one within it, with an emphasis on the audience's awareness of this distinction; they are common to all performance and production arts. In our case, particular conventions are narrowed down to circus performance and space, including "the circus ring, the ringmaster, and the clown. These are signs of the circus style and there is either an expectation for them to exist in this genre, or a prior knowledge of their association in this specific artistic forum."[3] Unique conventions refer to a given performance and can be decoded only through that particular context, yet as Skidmore states, "a unique convention cannot be understood in and of itself, but only through its relationship with other signs, which surround it in the circus ring."[4]

Using de Toro's analysis of signs (icon, index, symbol; 73-86), Skydmore employs the clown nose as an example: as an icon, it stands for a real nose; as an index, it identifies the one wearing it as a clown; as a symbol, it evokes humour - the one wearing it is considered a comedian. The other example that Skydmore gives is Monsieur Fleur in *Alegria*, whose reading depends on the context built with the help of the morphological elements on stage and prior knowledge/experience of the archetype of ringmaster in the traditional circus. The staff Fleur carries in his hand and makes use of in order to draw the audience's attention stands for either a sceptre or a bauble; hence, as an index, it identifies Monsieur Fleur as either a jester or a person of authority, in the latter case symbolizing power. His sceptre is interpreted as either a sign of authority or of pseudo authority.

The rope ladder in this circus act is both a particular convention and a unique one: as a particular convention, it represents the trapeze ladder used by acrobats, but it becomes a unique convention when used in the snowstorm act, where it stands for a train track (a metaphor for one's life path) taking the train/traveler in a journey of the self. The clown's incomplete makeup is a unique convention, too – it is representative for the mask-and-mirror approach, hiding the self and also mirroring not only it, but also the audience, who might recognize themselves in this drama of a broken heart.

The masks of the Old Birds in *Alegria* represent a unique convention, carrying the meaning of faded youth and beauty, the former selves they long for while being stuck with a deformed body and an uglified face. The mirror frame they bring on the stage may be regarded as an extension of their emptiness, but also as a threshold between the world of the

[3] Skidmore, James. "Crossing Borders: The Multimodal Language of Cirque du Soleil" http://www.semioticon.com/virtuals/talks/skidmore.htm
[4] Skidmore, James. "Crossing Borders: The Multimodal Language of Cirque du Soleil" http://www.semioticon.com/virtuals/talks/skidmore.htm

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real and the world of the imaginary. At the beginning of the performance, as well as towards the end of it, the characters/performers step through this mirrorless frame as if they were coming out of the pages of a book, brought to life by the reader's/audience's desire to listen to stories, to witness the impossible made possible. Once the story is told, the enactors of this magical realist discourse step back through the frame, returning to their world of imagined adventures - their beautiful journey of the self is one of the creative mind.

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Performance:

Alegría. Dir. Franco Dragone

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