The Performant Function and the Referential Function in theatre

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Résumé: Pour illustrer la dynamique et l'alternance entre la fonction performative et la fonction référentielle dans le théâtre, il faut réaliser une analyse d'autres deux domaines, ayant des ressemblances de point de vue de la même alternance, le sport de performance et le spectacle de cirque. Tout en investiguant le besoin humain d'être témoin aux spectacles publics, on peut comprendre mieux sa façon de diviser l'attention entre ce que détient, dans un spectacle, une fonction performative et une fonction référentielle. Le poids de cette alternance dépend de la modalité de réaliser son double rôle de producteur de signe et du signe en soi.
Mots-clés: référence, performativité, signe, théâtre, langage comme action.

1. Theatre as imitation

Theatre fulfills many functions. Some derive from its participation in social life. As a social institution, theatre offers models of behavior, conforming to prevailing norms or not; it propagates dominant or subversive ideologies; it reinforces group cohesion by bringing people together; it provides ritualized forms of entertainment; it enables theatre professionals to earn a living and investors to make money; it channels craving for public self-expression. Such functions are encouraged, tolerated, or condemned by society, and their changes reflect the influence of social changes.

Society does not need theatre in order to achieve the goals inherent in these functions; other institutions and other media serve them as well or better. Social functions, however important, cannot account on their own for the development of theatre. In contrast, theatre always involves two other functions that define its proper and distinct nature: on the one

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hand, its reference to a story that takes place in a mental space outside the stage; on the other, its display of real performances on the stage.

When it refers to an imaginary story, theatre is involved in a process of communication; it fulfils a *referential function*, carried out with signs that aim at imparting information. From the perspective of a semiotic theory, this referential function, or referentiality, clearly constitutes the central feature of theatre. But there is also a public event, a spectacle or a show, attempting to please or amaze the audience by a display of exceptional stage achievements, that is, special *performances*. Similar to sporting events or the circus, theatre serves the *performant function*: it satisfies our natural desire to achieve or witness something extraordinary. Such performances are not communicated through signs; they are experienced directly, therefore they fall outside the operations of semiosis. However, because the performant function coexist with the referential function, and interacts with it, it cannot be disregarded by a semiotic theory of theatre. Indeed, taken together, references and performances define the dual appeal of all theatre.

Viewed from today's perspective, the focus on theatre as imitation has significant implications for semiotics of theatre. Imitation always presupposes a model, something that is imitated. Aristotle's *Poetics* first firmly established imitation as the principal source of theatre. He believed that actions to be imitated in theatre had to have an earlier, actual or probable, existence in real life. In semiotic terms, Aristotle's main components of action, people and events, are thus imitated on the stage by the means of iconic signs: actors who stand for characters that they are not but with whom they share most of their features.

This leads to two further observations. Firstly, Aristotle's theatre, when it imitates actions of men, intends to impart some information about them that is conceptualized by poets and performers, that is, the producers of signs. That information is assumed to be intentional by the spectators, the receivers of signs, who expect to understand it and react accordingly. To that extent, a theatre performance constitutes an act of communication, based on a shared knowledge of semiotic codes. In the second place, to communicate its information, theatre relies mainly on iconicity. The performant function is only grafted on the basic referential function carried out by iconic signs.

2. Theatre as action

Scholars sought to place the origins of theatre in rituals performed by primitive societies. These rituals were assumed to offer a partly mimetic reenactment of a mythical event. Imitation still played a key theatri-

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cal role, but not as a source of pleasure or learning: it served to exert a magic control over forces of nature, seasonal variations, life and death cycles, powers of gods, succession of kings, rule of law, and so forth. One could claim that theatre thus started as a form of communication, whereby the entire community, performers and audience together, addressed supernatural entities. Theories that view theatre as an outgrowth of rituals always acknowledge its referential function. Jean Duvignaud's sociological theory claims that "theatre, serves to instruct the audience in social identities and behavioral models. The referential function can also raise rebellious consciousness. Closer to rituals, "guerilla theatre" calls for a revolutionary violence, but still relies on storytelling to achieve its goals." (cf. Jean Alter, 1990: 35)

The same combination of referentiality and intent to influence people marks the speech act theory formulated by J.L. Austin. Borrowing the scheme according to which the cognitive (locutory) function of a statement can not be dissociated from the intended and actual results of that statement (illocutory and perlocutory functions), some theatre semioticians claim that a play, as a whole or in parts, is an intentional statement made from the stage to the audience in order to determine a response, and therefore always implies a triple operation: it refers to an imaginary story, it tries to influence the spectators and it causes reactions that do not necessarily respond to its intensions. Within that scheme, referentiality still prevails, since at least the intended results, if not the actual result, depend on a large degree on the communication of the story.

3. Theatre as a necessity

In most cases, communication is an action seeking to achieve pragmatic goals through the exchange of knowledge; it relates to the human being as *homo sapiens*. For Johan Huizinga, whose *Homo ludens* popularized by its title the notion of a "playful" man, all of human social activity originates in the game principle. Theatre, as a cultural institution, belongs in his category of "higher" forms of play, but the origins of theatre can be traced to "primitive" forms from even before rituals. At its source theatre does not involve any vital communication; it is a "natural" game. Huizinga was not specifically interested in theatre, but his theory promoted the idea that theatrical activity is a game. Forced to structure a chaotic reality, we train our mind for that task, at no real risk, by finding structures in all sorts of simulacra, of that reality. We practice theatre as a rehearsal for real life. From this perspective, if we acknowledged the referential function at all, we give it a minor part; it provides a pretext for the

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satisfaction of basic human drives, whereas the performance holds the centre of attention.

4. Performant function in action. Sports and Circus

4.1. Sports

Performing arts are not the only public events during which an audience watches performers in action. Sporting events also offer achievements displayed by the performers. Obviously there are differences. Sporting events are always single events, valued precisely for their unique and hence suspenseful character. Yet, within any sporting event, an action performed by an individual athlete, or by a team, is often designed as a performance, comparable to an actor's performance, and sometimes is praised as a (great) *performance*, when it manifests an exceptional achievement. Both for performers and spectators, wining is the obvious point of the event. Both performing and watching the performance are direct experiences; they need no sign to be grasped, nor do they stand for anything else.

In practice, of course, many semiotic processes graft themselves onto sport competitions. An individual performance, good or bad, is intensely perceived as an intentional sign referring to the performance of the entire group: all Romanians feel exalted when a Romanian wins an international contest. Furthermore, sporting events rival theatre in displaying many cultural signs that directly link participants and their groups: national flags or anthems, special designs on sweat shirts, jerseys or uniforms, partisan applause or encouragement. This parasitic semiosis, promoted by the media, is carried by supporters into the street, work places and homes.

But the direct experience of a competition, and the grafted semiotic identification with a group, by no means exhaust the functions of a sporting event. After eliminating their competitors, and thus sure to win, athletes will nevertheless try for a better result, even without chances at a significant record except their own. The reason resides, no doubt, in a certain sport convention. And the reason why they follow that certain convention so earnestly is because, to some extent, they probably want to gratify the "show-off" drive, to show others how things should be done. But they also seek to perform better than is expected from them, to satisfy a need for an exceptional accomplishment, to achieve what they hope to be a *performance*. Or let us take a spectator that is unfamiliar with any local athletes and has no "semiotic" reasons to grow excited as an athletes performance is nearing a record. The prospect of witnessing the setting of

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a new record suffices for him to continue watching with interest; for the anticipation of seeing something out of the ordinary. For both athletes and spectators, sporting events thus offer, in addition to other satisfactions, the chance to participate in a ritualized celebration of excellence. To that extent, they are exemplary media for the public operation of the *performant functions*.

Perhaps demonstrating excellence is not the main function of a performance. Perhaps the foremost appeal of an exceptional performance lies simply in its exceptional quality: the fact that it is unpredictable and unique. In that sense, a truly excellent sport record and a catastrophic plane accident, both extraordinary events deviating from the norm, exert a similar fascination. A simple explanation (cf. J. Alter, 1990: 56) assumes that modern existence, regulated by social and cultural norms, lacks excitement. In that view, the performant function satisfies the wish to believe that life can be exciting.

Alter believes that, deprived of its natural exercise, our drive for mental structuration of the world seeks outlets in games that do not involve our life, notably in the structuration of fictional worlds offered by theatre. It is likely therefore that we welcome, and indeed eagerly seek, all types of performances in order to satisfy at little expense our frustrated structuring drive because their quantified norms require minimal restructuring. Such at least seems to be the most general role of the performant function, evident in sports but also prevailing in theatre.

4.2. Circus

Circus shares with sports a dominant interest in physical accomplishment: most circus and sport performers are mainly expected to display muscular power, skills, and coordination. And, as in sports, circus performances concern outstanding physical achievements. But the similarity ends there. Unlike sports, circus offers no direct competition between individuals or teams, nor single events with unpredictable outcomes. It rather resembles theatre by offering runs of repeated Performances that, despite some variations, involve a repeated execution of a program rehearsed in advance. Furthermore, whereas in sports semiotic references have a parasitic, though obvious role, in circus they manifest the operation of a referential function that, again as in theatre, is fully integrated with the performant function.

True, most semiotic references in circus are not as overt as in sports or theatre. A number of signs are openly displayed – statements, hats, or props referring to outside reality, or sound and light effects underscoring the importance of an act. In each case, the act communicates an

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idea to spectators, and spectators appreciate the act as they unconsciously react to the communication. There is little question that the performant function always dominates in circus performances, even while it supports referentiality. Circus artists thus always offer a double performance. For the circus people, who determine their professional career, they must reach at least the expert norm of competence; referentiality has no place in this sheer display of skill. In contrast, performing for a naive audience only requires maintaining its trust in the extraordinary status of all acts. Often, with a semiotic sleight of hand, artists must deceive the public to believe that the most spectacular acts are also the most difficult. And the strategy requires a heavy recourse to referentiality. It is this audience-oriented performance that binds together the referential and performing functions in circus.

In a circus we trust in magic. The magic nature of the acts sets them apart from our structures of reality; we see them as extraordinary manifestations of mystery that cannot be integrated in our knowledge, and hence require no structuring. To that extent, circus performances leave intact our notions about the world. In order to fully appreciate circus events, the public must enter a pact whereby any performance will be received as a performance. Theatre has different conventions. Its basic pact, whereby everything on the stage is received as a sign, concerns the referential and not the performant function. Yet, even in theatre, certain spectators prove to be also programmed, by media or word-of-mouth, to expect and applaud performances offered by specific actors, directors or designers, regardless of their referential role. Like naive circus audiences, or amateurs of sports, such spectators are willing to trade their judgment for reliance on an outside authority, to give up exercising their structuring drive. But, in their case, that authority is neither objective, as in sports, nor magic, as in circus; it is partly vested in theatre experts.

5. Theatre. Interaction between referential and performant functions

Referential and performant functions, we noted, can interact in many ways. Both functions are exhibited in most public events but they rarely are granted an equal importance. In sports and in circus, both types of acts communicate cultural references to the audience: in sports, the performant function dominates more openly, in circus we find exhibition of skill and semiotic comedy carried out by clowns.

Theatre follows none of these patterns. It does share with circus a basic coexistence of both functions, but, in contrast with circus, it either gives them a truly equal importance or clearly focuses on the referential function. However, coexistence does not always imply a close integration.

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While operating together, and contributing jointly to the total appeal of a theatre performance, the referential and performant functions always potentially compete for the attention of both spectators and performers. For instance, producing *Hamlet*, a company is primarily expected to tell a good *Hamlet* story; their performances, achieved by a superior telling, thus naturally combine a drive for personal accomplishment with a professional respect for referentiality. In reality, however, many performers view referentiality only as a pretext, or a vehicle, for the display of their individual excellence.

Classic plays, because their stories are already well known, offer particularly suitable occasions for such a one-sided attention to the performant function. But also new plays are frequently produced for the same purpose, tailoring roles to fit special demands of of famous stars. And frequent contrasts made by critics between the dullness of a play's plot and the great performance of its actors suggests that, among the performers, the two functions do not always carry an equal weight, and that referentiality risks being damaged when the performant function dominates.

Much more evident, and perhaps more important, is the way in which the two functions compete for the attention of the audience. For, even in theory, during the process of reception, interest in the referential story and appreciation of stage performances are always mutually exclusive. Ideally, a successful staging should be transparent, permitting an unobstructed (mental) vision of the referential world. A compelling performance of Hamlet should, for the duration of the play, conceal the work of the director; sets should be taken to be the walls of Elsinore; and the identity of actors should dissolve into the personality of the characters. Yet such an ideal operation of the referential function would preclude a successful operation of the performant function. This theoretical incompatibility leads to absurd practical conclusions. By its logic, we could acknowledge the performance of an actor playing Hamlet only when, dazzling us with his skill on the stage, he would make us forget Hamlet in Elsinore, and thus fail in his mission as actor. But this mutually exclusive hypothetical process surely contradicts our experience of real theatre reception, our combined response to both referential and performant functions. The theory is obviously flawed.

The flaw lies in the implied assumption that a theatre performance is experienced within a single span of attention. In reality, our attention constantly moves from the stage, which we perceive to be real, to the story space, which we concretize in our mind. This model of alternating focuses defines the general pattern of performance reception. The sepa-

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rate focusing on performance and referentiality rarely entails separate responses to the two functions. Each response rather tends to influence the other. Spectators strongly involved in the imaginary story are also inclined to find great performances on the stage; inversely, great stage performances, while detracting from full involvement in the story, nevertheless promote interest in it.

6. Conclusions

The special status of actors derives from their exemplary functions as live performers. Any live performer always adds some idiosyncratic and unstable excess properties to the sign he or she is supposed to produce. The unpredictability of the resulting total sign reflects the responsibility, freedom and hazards of a performer's function as producer of signs.

We do not question an actor's dual role as a sign and the producer of that sign; but we applaud his performance when he performs that dual task better than merely competent actors.

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