The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama

Author Keir Elam
Published by Methuen
1980
Price: R9,35

Reviewed by Patrice Pavis

Keir Elam's book represents - to the best of my knowledge - the first systematic treatise on theatrical semiotics to have appeared in English. It is, at all events, a general introduction to this new domain - an attempt to found an overall poetics of the dramatic text and of the performance in semiotic terms. Its first merit is its great clarity, the fact that it never gives way to easy metaphor but faithfully presents several theses and approaches to this as yet imprecisely defined new discipline. It may be, at the same time, one of the last attempts at a general semiotics of theatre, before it breaks up into particular disciplines, due to progress in basic research and the ramification and deepening of our theatrical knowledge.

The division of the work into four main parts - 1. Foundations: Signs in the Theatre; 2. Communication; 3. Dramatic Logic; 4. Dramatic Discourse - indicates clearly the dichotomy between representation (1./2.) and text (3./4.), but also the desire to depart both from the performance and from the play in order to examine the very subtle mechanisms of a specifically theatrical fiction and textuality.

The first chapter, devoted to the notion of the sign - definitions, typologies, functions - is concerned, naturally enough, with the origins of theatrical semiotics in the Thirties, i.e. within the framework of the Prague Linguistic Circle and of the work of Zich, Mukarovsky, Bogatyrev, Veltrusky, Honzl. It is, of course, in the theorising of the sign and of the stage as a mode of semiotization that theatrical semiotics has its historical - and methodological - origins. The stage sign refers to itself, is detached from reality so as to become a link in a network of signifieds. Theatre has the capacity of showing directly what is talked about (ostension). It is not the referent of the sign which is visible, however. The real object, rather, becomes "the expression of the class of which it is a member" (Eco), and as Elam observes, "the thing is derealized so as to become a sign" (3.2.). But one must take care here not to assimilate such communication-through-ostension to the platonic mimesis which is opposed, according to tradition, to diegesis, i.e. to the narrative. As we will see later, the fictional world of the theatre is also, in fact, mediated by discourse and there is merely the "illusion of direct presentation of the constructed world" (4.1.3.).

The typologies of signs applied to the theatre are surveyed in a clear fashion (natural/artificial; icon/index/symbol, etc.). The Peircean distinction, taken up by Elam, of the icon as image, diagram or metaphor, allows us to specify different modes of iconicity and to connect the icon - following the work of Eco - to the notion of convention and thus of symbol. Index and icon are studied not as "pure" signs, but as signifying functions which are fulfilled within the process of the production of meaning, a

fact which cannot fail to satisfy the disciples of Peirce.

The second part of the book ("Theatrical Communication: Codes, systems and the Performance Text") takes up the theories of the semiotics of communication, and in particular the famous scheme representing the passage of information from sender to receiver. Most fortunately, Elam does not apply it mechanically to the stage-auditorium relationship, as has frequently been the case in other studies (leading to the famous "Mouninian" protest). Despite the reference to Moles and so to a cybernetic and quantitative theory of theatrical information, Elam succeeds in formulating a table of codes - theatrical, cultural and dramatic - that comprehends the majority of coded phenomena, at different levels, within the text and the performance.

As it stands, however, the scheme is somewhat descriptive and unstructured, and it would be highly useful, in the near future, to suggest an articulated structure for all these codes and above all, to reexamine the question of the ideological codes which incorporate and overdetermine all the others, serving as a common basis for encoding on the part of the author, the director and the actor, and for decoding on the part of the spectator. Elam resists the rather hasty temptation (seen in Hays, "Suggestions about the Social Origins of Semiotic Practice in the Theatre") to break up all specifically dramatic and theatrical codes into cultural and social ones, whereby one recognizes that they produce ideology unceasingly, but at the same time one is hard put to grasp the actual form they take in the world of the theatre. Instead of hoping to enumerate an exhaustive catalogue of channels and codes dissected both with reference to the performance and with reference to the spectator, it would be preferable to reintroduce certain concepts from hermeneutics, thus not attempting to align, as Elam justly remarks further on, "the producers' codes and the audience's codes, especially where the text is in any degree innovative" (3.3.2.). This prudence in formalizing the interaction of codes permits the author to avoid both an excessive dissecting of the representation at all its levels and the search for a problematic minimal theatrical unit.

The section on "proxemic relations" indicates very justly an obvious fact nevertheless often forgotten: the theatrical text is above all defined and perceived in spatial terms. All the comments on the bond between theatrical architecture, the position of the audience and the understanding of the play are very judicious, although it is always difficult to know at what point the correlations between these three elements can be legitimately established. In any case, Elam opens the way here to future studies in an esthetics of reception which examines space in its architectural, dramaturgic and gestural nature. Similarly, kinesics reevaluates movement and the interaction between characters within an overall context of utterance. "Attitudinal markers" suggest the modality whereby the text is uttered by the actor and so the meaning which it acquires for the auditor, taking full account of "Paralinguistic and parakinesic features".

This chapter on the various forms of communication involving text, gesture and actor ends logically with the activity of the spectator and his competence, i.e. his ability to recognize - and indeed to produce - the theatrical sign together with the limits of the dramatic performance, according to his perception of the frame, the role of which as a necessary convention in the stage-auditorium "transaction" has been well demonstrated by Goffman. Again, emphasis is put here on the importance of the social contract which the audience ratifies according to what it wishes to perceive

and understand, and so according to the ideological and esthetic presuppositions which imbue its reception.

The two chapters on the dramatic text - its logic and its discourse - are without question the most original in the work. Here Elam enters a territory as yet unexplored, and offers a coherent theory of dramatic fiction. The spectator, contrary to appearances, is not confronted with a world which is delivered to him ready-structured by means of the representation. He must, rather, "work hard and continuously at piecing together into a coherent structure the partial and scattered bits of dramatic information that he receives from different sources" (4.1.1.). Elam describes here the work of the inferring of paradigms by the spectator from signs given in succession and produced by different stage systems. The theory of possible worlds, borrowed from logic, provides state descriptions of fictional universes, allowing a term-by-term comparison with the actual world. This marks the end of a directly mimetic conception of the theatrical universe, seen as reproducing the characteristics of a period or of a milieu. On the contrary, the spectator has to project life in the fictional world on the basis of his own ideological knowledge, his predictions and his sense of the implications of the text. Of course, the construction of our own "actual" world is neither self-evident, not eternal, nor universal. It depends on the epistemological code of a given period. One might pursue Elam's argument a stage further and say that not only does our ideological situation make us read authors, but authors reveal to us indirectly, by comparison, the ideological laws of the world in which we are situated. The text acts, therefore, as a revealer to different periods, and each generation (or almost) will have "its" Shakespeare or "its" Marivaux.

Here again we come across what was pointed out regarding the mimesis/diegesis opposition, which continues to circulate freely in our critical consciousness. Elam quotes Searle, who in turn takes up this opposition: "A fictional story is a pretended representation of a state of affairs; but a play, that is, a play as performed, is not a pretended representation of a state of affairs but the pretended state of affairs itself". Searle forgets here that mimetic ostension is only apparently direct; in reality, this mimetic énoncé is effected by means of a multiple énonciation (the actor, the director, the lighting operator, etc.). Simply, as Elam remarks later on, "The actor will indicate the stage, the set and his fellow actors as if they were the dramatic referents themselves, so as to strengthen the illusion of direct presentation of the constructed world" (4.1.3.)). It is thus the referential illusion which makes us forget the énonciation, and so the discourse which is itself temporal and narrated by the performance, so that the poetics of drama is not necessarily but only traditionally founded on the opposition between mimesis and diegesis, theatre and narrative. This is, indeed, evident if one considers the actual practice of contemporary theatre: the theatre-narrative (théâtre-récit) taken, for example, from non-dramatic texts or, inversely, the novel consisting of a succession of "dramatic" dialogues.

This difficulty is obviously echoed in the characterization of dramatic discourse: it seems to arise from this central a priori opposition between drama and narrative. If one has so much trouble in defining the dramatic (especially in opposition to narrative and everyday discourse), it is perhaps because the distinguishing markers are not testual but are, rather, only perceived pragmatically, in a stage énonciation - i.e., through theatrical (stage) criteria. In the face of this difficulty in defining a specifically dramatic discourse (i.e. in textual terms, apart from its stage manifestation), it is tempting to identify theatricality not as a textual property but quite

simply as a criterion of the putting-on-show - or putting-in-space - of the word before the audience: a purely pragmatic criterion, therefore. To try to define dramatic discourse in absolute and intrinsic terms would surely mean, in the long run, to resort to a stylistics of the kind practised by Larthomas, Staiger or Szondi and so to search for a substance which exists independently of its production on stage. It might be objected that it is perfectly possible to read the dramatic text without going through the staging process: this is not in doubt, but in such a reading the reader cannot fail to visualize the sources of speech and thus sketch out a kind of stage production at the level of his mental representation. Here, once again, we find ourselves witness to that eternal dispute between drama and theatre, between sustainers of a dramatic specificity and the sustainers of a single criterion: the theatrical. Rather than hypothesize a specifically dramatic language (characterized by the presence of stage directions, parts and dialogue, for example), we prefer to speak of a text which is or is not articulated in stage terms: i.e. which is or is not theatrical. Only this criterion of the énonciation befor the audience (rather than an individual reading of the text) allows us to trace the line of demarcation between the text for the stage/the text for reading. There is no doubt that classical theatre manifests, in its texts, a set of features designated dramatic (of Szondi's Theorie des modernen Dramas): but this is only one possible form of dramatic language, while other practices, notably contemporary examples, display quite different characteristics.

Thus if we agree with Serpieri and Elam in making the deixis the central characteristic of the theatrical text, it is not for the same reasons, namely because deixis is "what allows language an 'active' and dialogic function rather than a descriptive and choric role: it is instituted at the origins of the drama as the necessary condition of a non-narrative form of world-creating discourse" (5.2.2.). In reality, if deixis is central to theatre, this is because on the stage it is visualisable and because it coincides with another and global deixis, that which indicates the stage en bloc to the spectator (the principle of "double communication"). If this criterion of stage presence were not in force, the deixis would function as in the read text, would be inscribed within it, so that the inscription of gesture and of deixis are equally valid for other kinds of text than the theatrical. In summary, if it is correct to say that the deixis is given beforehand, is displayed and iconized, this is only possible in stage terms (theatrically) and thanks to the effect of illusion, as indeed Elam notes very well. In fact, deixis and the fictional dramatic world are posited and constructed, then translated into discourse, and then "diegetized" or "narrativized" through different series of énonciations. Only the theatre visualizes its source, and so alleviates the deictic function inherent in all discourse by replacing it with gestures (expressions, appearance, mime, the relations between stage materials, etc.)

This mimesis/diegesis opposition does not really assimilate Benveniste's distinction between histoire and discours (which is based on two tense systems). Indeed, if one were forced to draw an analogy between the two oppositions, one would find that theatre can be defined at times as histoire (direct imitation of the world without the intervention of discourse) and at times as discours (a series of utterances by characters in a speaking situation); narrative is likewise at times histoire (the apparent absence of a speaker) and at times discours (the putting on show of several sources of énonciation: the author, characters in action and introduced by a global discourse). There

is probably also a misunderstanding, among many semioticians of theatre, concerning the notion of narrativity (the narrative system) of theatre. One is not concerned, in this case, with the surface structures of the dramatic text (dialogues, stage directions, characters with their own discourse) but with the abstract and theoretical level of a logic of actions, of a fabula reconstituted in a series of sequences. Elam is right in fearing that such a narratological approach "will inevitably sacrifice the very level - i.e. the pragmatic discourse level - at which it characteristically unfolds" (5.2.3.) But such a narratological approach is nonetheless possible. Elam prefers - so as to take account of the dialectical play of utterances introduced into discourse by the deixis - a dramatological approach, for which he provides a system for segmenting the text, based on the changes in deictic orientation between the characters, in the illocutionary force of the speech acts and in the modalities of the speakers' utterances. The example he gives from the opening scene of Hamlet demonstrates that such a survey can be very precise and useful to hermeneutics in seizing the hidden forces of the text. This method represents the most advanced practical work as yet produced by a semiotics of the text anxious to respect its specifically dramatic qualities.

Once again, however, the question arises regarding a theatrical semiotics which sets out solely from the text and which wishes to go beyond a Greimasian analysis of character, fabula and spatio-temporal structures. Elam's attempt is the brilliant result of a reflection on the dramatic text considered at the level of its visible discursive mechanisms (and not at the deep level of actantial models). One might supnose that the concrete work of staging subverts and restructures the deictic and performative indications of the text. I think that Elam would agree, since he concedes that "it is never possible, then, to determine finally and absolutely from the written text all the illocutions performed in a play" (5.4.4.). In effect the stage, as well, has through the intervention of all its sources of énonciation (mime, gesture, lighting, music, intonations, etc.) a locutionary force which tends at least to rival (and often to "devour") the strictly textual illocutionary force. To understand the performance and the text is precisely to be capable of describing the interaction of these illocutionary and performative forces.

It is, moreover, at this level - that of a general theory of actions, and so of a pragmatics of the text and of the stage - that the author would wish to operate, and offers for this purpose a study of speech acts applied to the theatre. Indeed, he has understood the importance of going beyond the opposition between lexis and praxis, between "inactive" discourse and extraverbal action. Theatrical action (especially in classical theatre which cannot put all the equipment to work) is articulated both through movements and psychological development (inasmuch as this is explicit) and through language. This account of action seems, furthermore, a means of going beyond the mimesis/diegesis opposition, since in this way it is the énonciation (be it verbal or scenic) which indicates the unfolding of the action; it is the translating into discourse (into parole in the Saussurian sense) of the textual and stage systems, regrouped sub specie actionis.

The final comparison between dramatic and everyday discourse is problematic to the extent that it presupposes a unified theory of discourse, whereby literature is not opposed from the outset to other forms, but to certain properties that it has in common with them (this being the thesis of M.L. Pratt in Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse). Such a theory is still far from being realized and for now we remain at the stage of a stylistics of deviation whereby we compare artistic text and everyday text through a series of properties in the long run very subjective and non-absolute

(coherence, order, intensity, etc.). Indeed, it is perhaps too early to undertake, as the comparison of the possible world with our world, a comparative stylistics which takes genuine account of the speech-act mechanisms, the textuality and the situation-of-utterance in the theatre and the "so-called" real world. All the same, Elam's observations, here again, outline the way to another branch of semiotics.

There are many other enriching aspects of Elam's book that might be mentioned here: for example, the bibliography raisonnee, which contains a mine of information. The very structure of the book is very well-judged from the point of view of its taxonomy and of the different roads it indicates which semioticians might explore in decades to come. Finally, what is appreciable in Elam's work is the justness of its tone and its weighing-up of results, and the serenity of its judgments - a rare quality in the jungle of university life today. Those who still do not understand the fundamental mechanisms of semiotics will be those who really do not want to understand.

Forthcoming Issues

Vol. 2 No. 2 1981: PRESS AND BROADCASTING IN AFRICA

This issue will deal with the relationship between ideology and technology, the political economy of the mass media in South Africa and offer a critique of ideology and the mass media. Other areas we hope to include are gatekeeping mechanisms in the newsroom and the role and function of broadcasting in development.

All enquiries and submissions should be directed to: Keyan Tomaselli, Jt Editor, c/o Dept of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, P O Box 94, Grahamstown 6140. Deadline: August 31st.

Vol. 2 No. 3 1981: MASS MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE

The American Journal of Popular Culture lists amongst its advisory board, experts in folklore, Black culture, football, science fiction, Western movies, baseball, discography, popular music, sociology (sic) and boxing.

To these Critical Arts would add, soap opera, styles of broadcasting, popular theatre, photo-comics, styles of demonstration and protest, rugby songs etc.

The study of these should be couched in the methodologies and theories developed by communication, semiotics, sociology and anthropology.

While the scope of the contributory articles will cover a brad spectrum, it should be noted that the board of referees to whom articles will be submitted, will assess papers in terms of the critical perspective established by the Journal in previous issues. That perstective is contextual, studying the media in terms of social history, popular culture and social structures. It seeks to establish relevant critical frameworks for the study of media in apartheid society.

All enquiries and submissions for the issue on Popular Culture may be directed to: Dr John van Zyl, Jt Editor, Critical Arts Study Group, University of Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, Johannesburg 2001. Deadline: October 15.
