The Corporeality of the Actor's Body: The Boundaries of Theatre and the Limitations of Semiotic Methodology

ELI ROZIK

In recent years, it has been widely suggested that the bodily presence of the actor (and actress) on stage marks the limits and limitations of the semiotic approach to theatre and determines the need for a more complex methodology of research.

The vast and unprecedented expansion of performance art in the last decades and the need to redefine the boundaries between theatre and other human activities lie at the heart of the problem. Focus on the corporeality of the actor has undoubtedly led to conceiving it as a common denominator of numerous artistic and non-artistic activities in which something is performed by a live person in front of a live audience. Is, then, corporeality an essential feature, providing the foundation of a wider and more complex medium, encompassing theatre and other performing arts, such as ballet, music, stand-up comedy and performance art? Or is it an accidental feature, merely blurring the boundaries between theatre and other neighbouring arts and between theatre and so-called 'social drama'? No theory of theatre can afford to ignore this problem.

The current theoretical tendency is to advocate a fundamental duality of two irreducible elements on stage: text and body. Whereas a semiotic approach would subordinate body to text, in the sense of a text being 'inscribed' on a body, the opposite approach adheres to the view that in theatre the body enjoys a kind of independence with regard to the inscribed text and is experienced in its own right. I have chosen to analyse and challenge the 'phenomenological approach' suggested by Bert O. States, who not only supports a semiotic and phenomenological binocular vision, but subordinates the text to the body.

When applied to theatre, the term 'semiotic approach' refers to any approach which views the stage performance as a text or, rather, as a description of a world by means of the particular medium of theatre. Moreover, no semiotic approach would deny that the corporeality of the actor's body is indispensable for such a description to take place, since it is an organic component of its signifying system. Therefore the question revolves around the possible functions and structural dominance of this concrete and perceptible presence under conditions of a live performance and within the context of the overall experience of the spectator. I intend to show that:

1. the corporeality of the body should be seen as a particular case of a general principle of the theatre medium, which is characterized by imprinting its images on materials similar to the models of these images. This principle includes live actors and extends to the materiality of other objects on stage, such as costume, furniture and lighting. In this sense, the materiality of all objects on stage is an integral component of the text;
2. awareness of the body of the actor—while enacting a character—should be conceived as a metatheatrical device indicating theatricality;
3. since the fictional worlds described by theatre constitute a metaphorical representation (personification) of the psyche,
experiencing the body of the actor expands personification to include the material level and lends to the theatrical performance a dimension lacking in any other fictional art; (4) since the corporeality of the actor is an integral part of the signifier level of the text, it also enters into aesthetic relations with other signifiers—in the sense of inducing aesthetic experiences such as effects of beauty, ugliness, symmetry and asymmetry—which complement equivalent types of experience induced on the thematic level, to create an overall metaphor of harmony or disharmony. I believe this dimension to be beyond semiotic methodology and that textuality is subordinated to aesthetic experience.

To focus on the materiality of a performance may lead to the conclusion that theatre has more in common with performance arts and the so-called ‘social drama’ than with other types of dramatic arts such as cinema and television drama. I intend to show this to be erroneous.

**The phenomenological approach**

In *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, Bert O. States not only poses the question of the corporeality of the actor’s body on stage—as opposed to the sign-ness of whatever is on stage—but he also attempts at providing theoretical and philosophical support for the body’s irreducible presence on stage on the grounds of phenomenology:

It seems to me that semiotics is a useful, if incomplete discipline. It has become evident to me, in arriving at my own form of narrowness, that semiotics and phenomenology are best seen as complementary perspectives on the world and on art. . . If we think of semiotics and phenomenology as modes of seeing, we might say that they constitute a kind of *binocular vision*: one eye enables us to see the world phenomenally; the other eye enables us to see it significatively. 2

It would appear that since the publication of this book, the theory of theatre has been permeated by this fundamental ‘binocular’ attitude. However, States not only restricts the functions of semiotics in the capacity of a basic and comprehensive theory of theatre—putting both approaches on an equal footing—but, by coupling phenomenology with Shklovsky’s notion of ‘defamiliarization’, he advocates subordination of semiotics to phenomenology.

States also advances a fundamental distinction between the semiotician and the phenomenologist on the grounds of focusing or not on the essence of theatre:

It comes down, of course, to a matter of perspective. Quite legitimately, to the extent that something is not a sign the semioticians would lose interest in it, and what they do in their spare time is their own (or someone else’s) business. And quite legitimately, the phenomenologists, in pursuit of the ‘essence’ of things, will subsume their sign function—along with all other possible functions—under their phenomenal characters as objects in the real world. (GR, p. 21) 3

Whereas the interests of the semiotician are restricted to the signs of a performance, the phenomenologist is in search of its essence. This is an odd opposition, since it could be assumed that if a particular text is analysed, the phenomenologist would view its sign-ness as the very path through which the essence of this medium could be approached.

The main problem with States’s approach is that he operates a semiotics of theatre which was typical of the preliminary stages in its development: namely, a semiotics which on the one hand was based on the single notion of ‘sign’, including ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’, while excluding crucial notions such as ‘syntax’, ‘sentence’, ‘predication’, ‘description’, ‘reference’ and even ‘image’ from its sphere. Moreover, speaking of the referential function of signs (and images), States ignores the fact that reference is not a function of a sign, but of a sentence. Consequently, in the course of my discussion I shall redefine some terms and introduce others which are foreign to his semiotic approach.

**Sign-ness vs. thing-ness**

States contrasts the sign-ness with the equally ubiquitous thing-ness of the very same objects on stage:
If we approach theater *semiotically* we must surely agree with the Prague linguistics that ‘all that is on the stage is a sign’ . . . As long as there is pretence, or playing, there is pretence of something, and this constitutes a bridge between the stage and its fictional analogue of the world, or, if you wish, between the sign and its various significations. However, if we approach theater *phenomenologically* there is more to be said. For, among other considerations, there is a sense in which signs, or certain kind of signs, or signs in a certain stage of their life cycle, achieve their vitality—and in turn the vitality of the theater—not simply by *signifying the world* but by *being of it*. In other words, the power of the sign—or, as I will refer to it here, the image—is not necessarily exhausted either by its *illusionary* or its *referential* character. (GR, p. 20–1)

States claims that sign-ness and thing-ness are two aspects of the same objects on stage. Such a distinction raises several questions which are central to our concerns. First, States considers that from a semiotic viewpoint everything on stage is a sign,4 but this raises three important questions:

[1] are these signs of the same kind?
[2] are they used to refer to and/or describe the very same world?

I have suggested elsewhere that for an actor to enact a character, he must produce images of human action—verbal or otherwise—by imprinting them on his own body.5 These imprinted images—usually called iconic signs—are replicas of indexical signs in the sense of reflecting human action and emotional states. An index is by nature self-referential, referring only to its producer. In contrast, acting is characterized by deflection of reference whereby the semblance of an indexical sign is referred to a character, as if he had produced it. Deflection of reference is achieved by producing both indexical signs fulfilling the function of subject of the iconic sentence (which is to identify a referent), and signs fulfilling the function of predicate (which is to categorize the fictional referent). Moreover, these iconic signs should be conceived from two perspectives: *indexical signs* of actors producing images of human behaviour; and *iconic signs* which aim at describing a (usually fictional) world. Whereas the former reflect and refer to the real world, the latter refer to and describe a construct of a world. Thus, from a semiotic viewpoint, while Veltrusky is right in claiming that everything on stage is a sign, these are signs or aspects of signs of different kinds and fulfilling different functions.

Furthermore, States implies that objects on stage can belong to (‘be of’) the world to which the signs refer (‘signifying the world’). In other words, he implies a distinction between two functions of the same objects on stage: being a sign of and being a thing in a world (‘the fictional analogue’). This duality is of paramount importance since it introduces the fundament of what he views as the phenomenological approach. The third question is:

[3] Is it possible for the same object both to describe and be [a thing] of the same world?

According to the principle of acting these functions are incompatible. The inscribed images on the bodies of the actors constitute a description, which is a combination of signs according to the rules of the medium, and as such it cannot be identical with the described world. Moreover, by definition, being a representation of the described world it is ontologically different from any such world. This is made conspicuous by theatrical conventions: not all features of a convention can be attributed to the fictional world; for example, a table painted on a backdrop does not mean that tables are thus painted in the fictional world, or a soliloquy does not entail that people in such a world speak to themselves or to audiences.

**Sign and image**

States suggests a distinction between ‘sign’ and ‘image’ which is assumed to support a transition to a kind of semiotics of theatre which is akin to his phenomenological approach:

Unlike the sign, the image is unique and un reproducible (except as facsimile); whereas the sign is of no value unless it repeats itself. . . . In other words, the inclination of a sign is to become more efficient, to be read easily . . . . In the strictly utilitarian sphere . . . the sign gets down to its referential
business with as little flourish as possible. [GR, p. 25]

I assume that ‘sign’ is used here in the Saussurian sense which is equivalent to Peirce’s ‘symbol’. The way Peirce describes ‘sign’ corresponds to the usual features attributed to ‘word’, and it is true that words become more efficient or, rather, more ‘transparent’ the more they are used. With regard to ‘image’, which roughly corresponds to Peirce’s ‘iconic sign’, it is also true that in many a case an image provides much more than is needed for its signifying function. For States, without denying its semiotic function, an image features a concrete and perceptible element which is not always sub-ordinated to its signifying function. His example is Shakespeare’s Macbeth which, taken as a sign, is extremely inefficient: ‘the play does more than is necessary in order to mean whatever it may mean [the history of a Scottish king, a study in crime and punishment]. It is, in addition, a sensory experience that cannot be accounted for by semiotic systems (for instance, Peirce’s three-fold predominantly iconic, indexical and symbolic signs)’ [GR, p. 25–6]. States contends that this sensory experience cannot be accounted for by semiotic systems, which limit themselves to the sign-ness of signs.

So, he reaches the paradoxical conclusion that from a semiotic viewpoint a playscript is more efficient than a performance of it:

If you were interested in Macbeth for the density of its significations, it would be better to stay at home and read the text. . . . In one respect, a play read and enacted in the mind’s eye is more ‘real’ than one seen on stage. . . . It is real in the sense of its springing to an imagined actuality. Whereas a theatrical presentation of the text is precisely marked by the limits of artifice: the frontal rigidity of our view, the positional determination of everything on stage, the condensation of Macbeth into a real form, the fact that the play has already passed through the screen of an interpretation by directors and actors. [GR, p. 28]

Moreover, ‘what the text loses in significative power in the theater it gains in corporeal presence, in which there is extraordinary perceptual satisfaction’ [GR, p. 29]. The claim that the difference between play-text and performance-text resides only in the materiality corporeality of the latter is not tenable; first, because it ignores that the play-text is not a full text, but a partial design of its verbal component; and, second, because it fails to notice that a performance is not only a concretization of the verbal text but also a determination of its meaning.

Although States does not specify their mode of signification, he is aware of the signifying function of images. An image is a sign representing a kind of object, and conveying a set of abstractions related to the class of such an object: it can, therefore, be used as a unit of description or, rather, a unit of thinking. For Susanne Langer, the category of ‘symbol’ includes words and images and, in this sense, an image of an object and the word used to designate it are equivalent. In other words, signs and images—in States’s terms—are signs in parallel and equivalent systems of signification and communication. ‘Images are. . . our readiest instruments for abstracting concepts from the tumbling stream of real impressions. They make our primitive abstractions for us, they are our spontaneous embodiments of general ideas.’ I have suggested elsewhere that, in cultural media, the set of abstractions conveyed by an image is mediated by natural language, which is not only the main repository of abstractions, but also lends stability to it, either in a word or an image; i.e., words and images are semantically equivalent.

Mental images, which are figments of the imagination, immaterial entities, cannot be communicated unless coupled with matter; because only entities which can be perceived by the senses can be communicated. Thus, it is because of their sheer immateriality that mental images necessitate a material carrier to enable communication of their signifying function. This is why all media employing images imprint them on matter, while each medium is defined by the nature of the matter it uses to imprint them. It is the combination of an imagistic and a material element that constitutes the signifier of what is usually termed an ‘iconic sign’. However, whereas most arts use matter which is different from that of the models of their images, thereby underscoring their signifying and communicative functions, the medium of theatre is characterized by extending the principle of similarity to the material level. In this
sense, the actor is its most representative example since s/he inscribes images of human behaviour on her/his own body.  

Macbeth is not a sign. As a description of a character the enacted Macbeth is a set of signs organized by the syntactic rules of the medium and, as a description of Macbeth’s world, it is a larger set involving descriptions of other characters and objects in it. As mentioned above, States does not present semiotic notions towards an understanding of the textuality of a performance of Macbeth.

Whereas it is true that the signifying function of images is fulfilled regardless of the nature of their materiality, it cannot be fulfilled without it. First, therefore, differences in imprinted matter do not impair the signifying function of an image, which in any case is mediated by natural language. Second, similarity on the material level does not affect the signification function of an image-sign either. However, both the apparent ‘indifference’ of images with regard to their material carriers, and the corresponding ‘independence’ of materials with regard to their images, suggest that materiality fulfils additional functions within the overall experience of the spectator. Two further questions are thus:

4. What are the exact functions of the specific nature of materiality in the imagistic/iconic medium of theatre?  
5. Does theatre differ from other imagistic/iconic arts in its effect on the spectator because of the particular nature of its materials?

I believe that these are the two main questions that States intends to answer.

Real objects on stage
The experience of the materiality of imprinted images is further problematized by the use of real objects on stage, in addition to or instead of images, for example, real furniture, garments and light—things, which according to States, ‘resist being either signs or images’ (GR, p. 29):

To what extent can these nodes of reality extruding from the illusion any longer be called images or signs? If an image, by definition, is a likeness or a representation of something, how can it be the thing itself? Again, our approach lies in the theatre’s special openness to the world of objects. A dog on stage is certainly an object (like the furniture that theater companies borrow from businessmen); but the act of theatricalizing it—putting it into an intentional space—neutralizes its objectivity and claims it as a likeness of a dog... except that in the theater there is no ontological difference between the image and the object. Consider another example, Moliere playing Moliere in The Impromptu of Versailles. (GR, pp. 34–5).

Initially, States claims that objects are assimilated by the imagistic nature of the theatrical text. Imprinted images and real objects are indeed conjointly used on stage; and it is also true that in such an ‘intentional space’ real objects behave as images. Subsequently, he claims that they also behave as images in the sense that ‘stage images (including actors) do not always or entirely surrender their objective nature to the sign/image function. They retain, in other words, a high degree of en soi.’ (GR, p. 29) States examines various conspicuous examples, such as a real clock, running water and fire (GR, p. 30). In all these cases, ‘something indisputably real leaks out of the illusion’ (GR, p. 31). Animals on stage are a good example because, in ‘an animal following its own inclinations’ (GR, p. 32), it is virtually impossible to subordinate its behaviour to its acting role.

Such examples—of what Keir Elam terms ‘iconic identity’—require an explanation. The question is: how can a real thing become functionally equivalent to an image? Following Plato, it can be suggested that ready-made objects can be conceived as coupling two components: image and matter. For example, in making a cabinet the carpenter lends material existence to a design or mental image of it. In this sense, a real object does not differ in structure from a theatrical iconic sign which also couples an image and matter similar to its real model. The only difference is that whereas an iconic sign is fundamentally conceived as intentionally constructed by imprinting an image on matter—thus creating a signifying unit—a real object is expected to be deconstructed, while its imagistic element, which is marginal to its utilitarian use, is thus foregrounded. In other words, because a real object can be put in the
context of an intentional and fundamentally iconic space, it can be used as a theatrical sign without contradicting it.

A further crucial question is, therefore:

[6] In which category, 'image' or 'real object', is the actor on stage included?

In principle, States subscribes to the view that actors produce images of human action, including speech activity in the form of iconic replicas of speech acts. However, dealing with the 'child actor' among the things that 'resist being either signs or images', States supports the idea that they are real stage objects, because they are conspicuously not identical with their characters, probably because, like animals, the child follows his own inclinations (GR, p. 32). This implies that only intentional acting produces pure images which are 'conspicuously identical' with their characters, the latter evidently reflecting a realistic bias. This contradicts the semiotic approach to theatre which views the actor's inscribed body as a text and, therefore, identity between a description of a character and a character is precluded. Intentionality, in contrast, should indeed be seen as implied in the notions of 'text' and 'description'.

Moreover, his approach fails to distinguish between two aspects in the actor's presence on stage: the producer of images of human behaviour and the use of his/her own body for inscribing them on it. As a producer of signs the actor shares the function of producer of images with other craftsmen, such as the carpenter, the costume maker and the lighting operator. As material for the imprinting of these images, the actor's body shares the quality of text with other objects intentionally made for the stage and real objects put on it. Conversely, as text he is radically different from both the actor who produces it (who is a denizen of the real world) and from the described character (who is the denizen of the fictional world). The actor thus combines producer of images and image-text in the same body and, in this sense, s/he cannot be a case of iconic identity, he is not equivalent to a ready-made object on stage.

There is a third form of signification on stage: theatrical conventions. I have suggested elsewhere that such conventions are established in case the principle of similarity—on the imagistic or and the material level—is violated, preventing thereby decoding unless the principle underlying the convention and/or its function is known. Whereas a material convention [use of material different from the models of the images; for example, the image of a night sky on a cyclorama] does not impair the decoding of an image, the use of an image different from what is described in the fictional world (for example, the use of monologue for thinking), typical of imagistic conventions, does. First, this attests to the fact that theatre cannot do without images, whether imprinted, deconstructed or conventional; and second, in all known conventions the principle of similarity is not completely abolished and the gap between different images and the fictional world is also bridged by function.

All these considerations lead to the conclusion that, from a semiotic viewpoint, shared also by States, imprinted images and real objects—although reflecting different principles of coupling images and materials—within the intentional space of theatre—fulfil the very same signifying function. The question is thus:

[7] Which is the dominant principle: 'iconicity' which underlies the imprinted images, or so-called 'iconic identity'?

These three forms of signification (iconicity, iconic identity and convention) indicate that iconicity (imprinted images) is indeed the main principle of signification in theatre, while both 'iconic identity' (by deconstruction) and convention (by its imagistic elements or function) can easily be assimilated by it. Moreover, the principle of acting (deflection of reference in particular) applies to all these three forms of signification: an imprinted image of a chair on wood, a real chair, a painted chair on a backdrop, or a cube—all these are meant to describe a fictional chair. In this sense, each of these is an actor-chair describing a character-chair.

Consistent with his binocular approach, States's semiotic vision definitely stresses theatre's ability to incorporate real objects into its imagistic nature: 'Theater is the medium, par excellence, that consumes the real in its realest forms: man, his language, his rooms and cities,
his weapons and tools, his other arts, animals, fire, and water—even finally, theater itself. Its permanent spectacle is the parade of objects and processes in transit from environment to imagery.’ (GR, p. 40) In his view too, the production of imprinted images is thus the dominant principle, which also assimilates real objects on stage. The ability of the medium of theatre to ‘consume’ real objects on stage does not, however, solve the problem of the apparent independence of their materiality.

**Illusion**

States claims that images fulfil both an illusionary and a referential function. If the referential function encompasses the processes of signification and description carried out on stage, and the illusionary function indicates a subjective sense of being in the presence of a world on stage, the question is:

[8] Is illusion compatible with referentiality?

States does not define ‘illusion’ and, apparently, it should be understood in its regular sense within dramatic theory. In claiming that a child on stage is conspicuously not identical with his character, he presupposes that ‘acting’ means creating an illusion of identity between actor and character. The notion of ‘illusion’ indeed implies such a sense of identity—spurious as it is—between stage and fictional world. However, the notion of acting does not imply illusion.

It would appear that for States such a mistaken sense of reality is best explained by the similarity on the material level typical of theatrical images: ‘the physical actuality of the actor on stage’ is ‘the whole phenomenal floor of the theater illusion . . . which, for the most part, we accept as perceptually given’ (GR, p. 34). This would imply that real objects on stage are the main inducers of illusion by enabling direct experience with their thing-ness, the naturalistic set being a paradigmatic example. States indeed underscores the similarity between images and real objects on stage: ‘In theater, image and object, pretence and pretender, sign-vehicle and content, draw unusually close.’ (GR, p. 20) He adds, ‘in the theater there is no ontological difference between the image and the object’ (GR, p. 35).

However, States is not consistent with this argument, since he views real objects as also subverting stage illusion. In analysing the anti-illusionary effect of an object, such as a clock, he suggests that this is ‘an instrument that is visibly obeying its own laws of behavior’ (GR, p. 30). This principle is implicitly applied to his other examples: children, animals, running water and fire. Animals, for example, ‘cannot categorically be depended upon’ because they may follow their own inclinations (GR, p. 34). In fact, he presupposes that real objects may manifest themselves in phenomena which preclude assimilation by the imagistic nature of a production. Consequently, in dealing with a dog on stage as perceived as ‘a dog-in-itself’ he asks: ‘to what extent can these nodes of reality extruding from the illusion any longer be called images or signs?’ (GR, p. 34) Thus, in contrast to States’s general view, it follows that what extrudes from the illusion is not their materiality, but those aspects of real objects that cannot be assimilated by the text, despite ‘iconic identity’.

The fact is, however, that children or animals, following their own inclinations (dog peeing on stage) usually elicit laughter, whether it is grasped as intentional (the director’s intention to have something unintentional on stage) or unintentional (thus intentionally excluded by the spectator from the text). In such a case, laughter should be understood as a reaction to intentional or unintentional failure, which reaffirms the principle of intentionality for the production of the text.

In dealing with such examples States’s purpose has been ‘to suggest points at which the floor (of theatre illusion) cracks open and we are startled, however pleasantly, by the upsurge of the real into the magic circle where the conventions of theatricality have assured us that the real has been subdued and transcended’. (GR, p. 34) This is a paradoxical statement since it implies that: a) sign-ness and not similarity or identity on the material level induce the sense of illusion; and b) the same objects may be conducive both to illusion and to its subversion.

The question is, therefore, whether or not such marginal phenomena (in which theatre
The boundaries of theatre and the limitations of semiotic methodology 205

fails) could be seen as the best index of the phenomenal nature of theatre? States attributes to this duality a major role. First, it allows the mind to see a dog on stage as a dog, or as an image of a dog, and ‘to oscillate rapidly between the two kinds of perception’ (GR, p. 36). Second, States conceives theatre as ‘intentionally devoted to confusing these two orders of signification’ (GR, p. 36) and confers to this confusion the crucial function of constantly revitalizing the medium of theatre:

My thesis here is that the dog on stage is a nearly perfect symptom of the cutting edge of theatre, the bête that it makes into actuality in order to sustain itself in the dynamic order of its own ever-dying signs and images. One could define the history of theater—especially where we find it overthrowing its own traditions—as a progressive colonization of the real world.’ (GR, p. 36)

Third, this ‘ontological confusion’ lies at the heart of the specific experience of theatre: ‘I am watching Olivier exist as Macbeth, and through this unique ontological confusion I exist myself in a new dimension.’ (GR, p. 47)

In other words, Olivier produces the illusion of Macbeth and also exists as Macbeth and it is this ontological confusion that enables the spectator to see himself in a new dimension.

In contrast, from a semiotic viewpoint, the notion of ‘illusion’ cannot be accepted. If the theatrical performance is a text encoded in a cultural medium, there exists an ontological gap between stage reality as description of a world and the described (usually fictional) world. If what is enacted on stage—inscribed in the actor’s body—is a descriptive text, the (fictional) referent cannot be identical with it. This can be demonstrated by the fact that, as illustrated above, some features of the stage-text cannot be attributed to the fictional world, a phenomenon which is most conspicuous in theatrical conventions. I agree that similarity or identity on the material level may induce a sense of illusion and that the spectators may believe that they experience a world, but this would reflect a misapprehension of theatre. Apart from realist theatre, most theatrical styles stress, in various metatheatrical ways, their own theatricality. Theatre does not aim at persuading the spectator that he is witnessing a world and that he is allowed to sneak a look at it, but rather aims at presenting a description of a world which is most meaningful to him.

If the notion of ‘illusion’ is an attempt to understand the total involvement of the spectator in the theatrical experience, this psychological phenomenon can also be explained otherwise. I believe that this involvement is due to the nature of the fictional world and its meaning for the spectator. I have suggested elsewhere that in most cases the fictional world is a metaphorical description of the spectator psychological state.¹ This is clearly demonstrated in cases in which the fictional world reflects and addresses suppressed layers of the human psyche. We should bear in mind that cinema, television drama and even puppet theatre also create such an involvement, without the experience of real bodies or objects following their own inclinations. In other words, the spectator’s engagement in the fiction should be understood not on the grounds of illusion, but on the grounds of involvement in a world which may shed light on his own world. In this sense, the spectator is confronted with a description of himself. States’s dictum that the spectator sees himself ‘in a new dimension’ should be accepted, although explained differently.

But the notion of ‘ontological confusion’ should not be accepted. If it is assumed that the theatrical description is a complex thought, coined in the metaphorical mode and formulated by means of imprinted images, which totally involves the spectator because of its inherent relevance to his/her psyche, there is no need for such a principle. It is the confrontation of the spectator as being with a metaphorical description of himself, which is the heart of the theatrical experience. I believe that this alleged ‘ontological confusion’ is no more than a residue of mistaken notions typical of naturalism. In enacting Macbeth, Olivier did not exist as Macbeth, but as Olivier inscribing a description of Macbeth on his own body. I cannot believe that any spectator forgets that he is in the theatre, particularly watching Olivier, who in his own acting was a master of metatheatricality. The spectator may be taken in by exceptional similarity to the real world; but his sheer amazement betrays his basic awareness of the theatricality of theatre.
Defamiliarization

It can be assumed that, regardless of whether images are imprinted (iconic or conventional) or deconstructed, the experience of their materiality cannot be reduced to the signifying function and that, in addition to their being carriers of images, materials may fulfill one function or more on other levels of organization. For States this function is ‘defamiliarization’, a mechanism which operates in two phases: first, it attracts the attention of the spectator to the materiality of images or reality of objects on stage; and second, these are defamiliarized. The ultimate aim of this mechanism is to de-automatize perception, as suggested by Shklovsky:

Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. [GR, p. 21]¹⁶

However, whereas Shklovsky advocates the aesthetic function of the experience of the artfulness of the object, States clearly diverges from this theory in assigning to this ‘technique’ the function of better cognition of the world. For States, the purpose of ‘the upsurge of the real into the magic circle where the conventions of theatricality have assured us that the real has been subdued and transcended’ is to ‘see the familiar in defamiliarization’ [GR, p. 34]. The upsurge of the real, which supposedly is accomplished by the autonomy of real objects on stage, subverts the semiotic character of the text (which has only apparently ‘subdued and transcended’ reality) and by this paradoxical change of perspective reality regains the interest of the audience and its true nature is reconsidered. The complementary claim is that ‘art is a way of bringing us home via an “unfamiliar” route’ [GR, p. 22]. Theatre—in all its forms—is thus conceived as the epiphoneme of the phenomenological approach.

States implies that his own cognitive approach is virtually contained in Shklovsky’s notion of ‘defamiliarization’. This notion allegedly captures the main function of art, which is to release cognition of reality from the bonds of signification: ‘If the objects of reality depicted in art carry some of their worldly meanings with them—and no one would deny that they do—they are now seen, by a trick of perspective, to have been partially concealed all along by the meanings.’ [GR, p. 22] In other words, real objects have to be dissociated from the signs usually used for categorizing them in order to enable cognition. Through such a mechanism, as the phenomenologist [Max Scheler] would say, the object becomes ‘self-given’, and ‘something can be self-given only if it is no longer given merely through any sort of symbol; in other words, only if it is not ‘meant’ as the mere ‘fulfilment’ of a sign which is previously defined in some way or other. In this sense, phenomenological philosophy is a continual desymbolization of the world. [GR, p. 23]¹⁷

For States images and real objects constitute an act of symbolization which has to be transcended for the sake of cognition. This implies that in a theatrical text semiosis is used in order to be dialectically negated by the experience of the autonomy of real objects, which thus becomes the most important element on stage. In fact, for him meaning is ‘parasitic’ on the phenomenological nature of theatre. Indeed, it is accepted that the price of signification is that it veils to a certain degree the true nature of things. It should be kept in mind, however, that on the grounds of the phenomenological assumption that there is no other way, this price is paid in order to get at least a fairly good technological understanding of reality.

Defamiliarization for the sake of better cognition of our world is undoubtedly a completely justified procedure, which is shared by the arts, sciences and philosophy. It can be conceived as a basic mechanism of thinking which reflects a critical attitude to preconceived reality. Not to accept reality as it appears through mediation of a priori or verbal categories of thought is not only a crucial form of thinking, but also a value in the above mentioned disciplines. Viewing the theatre as a medium supports the claim that defamiliarization can be one of its basic mechanisms. However, the claim that this mechanism reflects the essence of theatre con-

¹⁶ Art—206 Theatre Research International
The Boundaries of Theatre and the Limitations of Semiotic Methodology 207

tradicts its nature as a medium, as a means of thinking and of communicating thinking, which by definition may convey any attitude, even contrasting ones. Thinking cannot be defined by one of its particular forms: not all kinds of thinking are innovative. Not all acts of thinking result in better cognition. Accordingly, not all theatrical works reflect the intention of improved cognition of the world. ‘Defamiliarization’ thus implies a category of value, a preference for a certain kind of theatre-text.

Even if it is assumed that the general function of the theatrical text is defamiliarization, Stated’s approach runs into contradictions. First, since theatre imprints its images on materials similar to those of their real models, it can be claimed that objects are represented in their most familiar form. In this sense, defamiliarization could be better achieved by arts which use dissimilar materials, such as design, sculpture and puppet theatre; or by means of theatrical conventions, although these also eventually become familiar to the audience. In theatre, the extension of the principle of similarity to its materiality thus precludes defamiliarization on this level.

Second, if the main aim of defamiliarization is cognition, it is certainly not the case that any object on stage is its object. As mentioned above, for Stated the intention is that spectators gain a new insight into their own world. In other words, it is the alleged deliberate ‘ontological confusion’—produced by theatrical duality of imagery and reality—which defamiliarizes Macbeth/Olivier. But how does this affect the spectator, unless it is assumed that the way Macbeth is depicted bears a referential/descriptive relation to the spectator? Since such a descriptive relationship is effected by a character who is fundamentally different from the spectator, how can theory dispense with the notion of metaphor, which by definition is a form of predication by means of apparently improper terms? Stated fails to explain how such a change of perspective is achieved by merely adopting his binocular vision. It is more plausible to assume that defamiliarization may be achieved, if at all, by describing a character whose characterization and actions defamiliarize the preconceived self image of the spectator.

Whereas defamiliarization can be accepted as one of the basic mechanisms of thinking in any medium, it cannot be attributed to every phenomenon of thinking and, when it operates, it is not the alleged reality of the theatre medium which triggers it.

The semiotic approach: its limitations

Although the ‘binocular’ approach suggested by Stated cannot be accepted, the question still remains as to whether or not the materiality of the body, table or light is a dimension of the theatrical experience which can be accounted for by semiotic methodology? Material and image are the two components of the iconic signifier and, in this sense, materiality is not beyond semiotic methodology. I believe, however, that no semiotic approach can confine itself to the claim that materials used for imprinting—particularly the body of the actor—only fulfil the function of carriers of images. This would ignore the unique effect of each medium with regard to others. In the following paragraphs I intend to suggest some other possible functions of materiality, including corporeality, which should open the way to further research.

(a) Metatheatricality

The experience of the body of the actor—while enacting a character—and awareness of it, should be conceived as a metatheatrical device indicating theatricality, particularly when s/he has a known history, theatrical or other. Such an awareness emphasizes the ontological gaps both between text and producer of signs and between text and fictional world. Such gaps reveal the fact that theatre is not a world, but a description of a world—a cultural construct—in line with media which do not feature similarity on the material level.

Perhaps metatheatricality can be accounted for by semiotic methodology, but this has not yet been attempted.

(b) Personification

If the fictional mode is indeed the expression of a single psyche through a world of characters
and their actions, in contrast to the thematic mode, as suggested by Northrop Frye, it follows that a fictional world is fundamentally a multiple and complex personification of a psychical state of affairs. Personification is a specific form of metaphor that draws its associations from the human sphere and, in this sense, it is equivalent in structure and function to the mechanism of dreaming.

Since theatre inscribes images of human beings and their behaviour on live human beings, thanks to the singularity of its material medium, personification acquires an additional dimension. Since the principle of similarity expands also to the material level, it creates a special form of personification which applies to both the imagistic and material levels and, therefore, induces a sense of reality which cannot be achieved in any other art. For example, in literature personification is conveyed by the associative power of words, and other iconic arts have their images imprinted on materials different from the models of their signs, such as paint on canvas, marble and wooden puppets. In this sense, cinema and television drama, despite their final images lacking the bodily concreteness of live actors, are more akin to theatre than some forms of performance art, since the imprinting of human images on live actors precedes photography.

The presence on stage of additional objects, which also constitute images imprinted on materials similar to their models, widens the nature of the overall metaphor to include much more than personification. As the equivalent of 'personification' one could speak in terms such as 'animalization', 'objectization' and 'lightization'. It follows that a theatrical description of a fictional world—both on the levels of image and matter—can be subsumed under total 'metaphorization' of the psyche, since by operating a host of specific stage metaphors it creates a complex stage metaphor of the spectator's world.

Other arts also feature cases in which the material carrier of images becomes a part of the overall metaphor. For example, in a statue of Socrates, the white marble may induce an additional association of timelessness or eternity originating in the sense of durability attached to this material. Timelessness can be seen as a connotation of 'marble'—the material—which can be assimilated metaphorically by thoughts about the philosopher himself. Accordingly, a contrasting sense of finitude could be achieved by sculpting a human image in ice. Moreover, the sculpture of a nude woman in white marble may reject such connotations (softness vs. hardness); while absorbing others, such as transparency, paleness and beauty. If a theatrical text is a personified/metaphorized expression of the author, and presented as a personified/metaphorized expression of the spectator, the connotations deriving from the concreteness of live actors and other materials can always be assimilated within the overall metaphorical image that is the performance. It is because of the basic fictionality of what is described by the theatrical text that the materiality of the body can thus be integrated into the overall metaphorical image of the play. In this sense, the material component of the signifier is assimilated or, in States's terms, 'consumed' by the representational function.

(c) Aesthetic organization

The perceptible nature of the text, as experienced by the spectator, should be seen as an integral component of the aesthetic organization of a work of art. Since the combination of immaterial image and matter constitutes the signifier of the iconic theatrical sign, and since aesthetic relations may obtain on the signifier level, such as rhyme and rhythm in poetry or symmetry in painting, it follows that the materiality/corporeality of the stage may create an aesthetic dimension (for example, of beauty or ugliness) which can be assimilated by and integrated within the overall image of the performance. Moreover, such a dimension can match or counterpoint the aesthetic configuration on the fictional level, which can be described in such aesthetic terms as 'wholeness', 'unity', 'harmony', and 'absurd', and integrated within a complex overall metaphorical image. I believe that the aesthetic is the ultimate level of organization of a work of art and that the semiotic level is subordinated to its rules. Since the aesthetic, which fulfils a crucial role in the overall experience of the spectator, cannot be
accounted for by means of semiotic methodology, it requires the development of an aesthetics of theatre.\(^1\)

**A personal experience**

During the rehearsals of David Storey’s *Life Class* (directed by Lindsey Anderson at the Royal Court Theatre, London, 1974) I repeatedly experienced the striking presence of the actress’s nude body on stage.\(^2\) On the fictional level, most scenes of this play take place in the classroom of an art school, in which a group of male students draw from a nude female model. While the teacher eagerly indoctrinates his students into his ideology, which appears to legitimize doing anything, they interpret his words as a licence to rape the model, which they eventually do.

Lindsey Anderson decided not to wait for the (un)dress rehearsal and asked the actress to rehearse naked from the beginning. His decision was probably meant to create the psychological space needed by the actress, who was not a professional model, to adjust to her role. So, for long hours, she used to stand motionless and speechless on the podium, even while—in his unique style—Anderson commented on every nuance of actors’ performance. Most striking, in addition to her beautiful body, was her offhand manner: she did not even dress for coffee breaks and—naked—she would chat nonchalantly with us, a cup of coffee in her right hand, as if this was the most natural thing to do. Undoubtedly, however, her bodily presence could not be overlooked. While searching my memory for a good example to illustrate the possible functions of the actor/actress’s body, I could find nothing more powerful: her nakedness freely transgressed the frail borderline between her concrete corporeality (transition from stage to coffee breaks) and her textuality (nude model in the fictional world).

It would appear that this nude body best illustrates the autonomy of corporeality since, besides attracting attention, nothing was inscribed on it. In fact, while on stage, although almost motionless, the actress did perform various images of a nude model, which fittingly described the character’s action in the fictional world. Moreover, the beauty of the actress’s body was completely assimilated by the description of a fictional world in which the beauty of the fictional naked body was meant to account both for her being a professional model and for the students’ sexual arousal which led to her rape.

If the model in the life class had been enacted by an ugly and wrinkled old woman, attention to the body would probably have been equally powerful, but the rape would have acquired a totally different meaning. Such a departure from expectations would also have motivated the audience into inquiring about the intention of the director. A possible explanation could have been—convention; after all, actors playing roles which do not match their real age or sex, for various reasons which are irrelevant to this context, is not a rare phenomenon. In such cases the audience is tacitly requested to overlook the real features of the actor and focus on the meaning of their enacted images, particularly on their capacity to evoke such images despite the discrepancy. Another possible explanation could have been the authorial intention to create a grotesque image, stressing the absurdity of the teacher’s preaching. Other explanations could have been equally relevant. It is most sensible to assume, therefore, that the actress was chosen for the images she was able to project, including her beautiful body and her offhand manner. Models usually show a kind of indifference (not necessarily genuine) to people looking at their bodies and, therefore, the director’s use of the natural body and attitude of an actor is no different from using a red-haired actor to play King David or an adolescent actress to play Juliet. The natural qualities of the actor are usually assimilated and become meaningful provided that they are subordinated to the intended image of the character.

If we consider the particular fictional world of *Life Class* as a personification of the perennial struggle between wish (or rather instinct) and moral restriction, the nakedness of the actress (similarly to the dressed image of the students and their undressing during the rape) undoubtedly lent a further dimension of humanity to the metaphor. If the intention was to create a transition from a metaphor of breathtaking beauty to a metaphor of vandalism, the dish-evelled body of the actress complemented on the
sensory level the total chaos on the level of action. In this sense, the aesthetic level was also assimilated within the overall metaphorical image of the performance-text.

It would appear that since the nude body of the actress on stage may have attracted attention for its own sake, it necessarily established the binocular vision—semiotic and phenomenological—suggested by States. The function of the same attraction, however, can be explained otherwise: on the one hand her body became the imprinted matter of the set of images of a nude model she produced herself and, on the other hand, it became assimilated within the overall metaphorical image of the performance-text on the levels of personification and aesthetization. Did her nude body defamiliarize the notion of 'nude female body'? There was nothing unfamiliar to it. Could her nude body on stage have subverted its textual function? I believe that any effect it had on the audience could have been assimilated into the overall meaning of the overall image. Such a conclusion does not exclude the possibility of creating inner tension between materiality and textuality, as in the case of a naked old body. I am inclined to think, however, that even tension is eventually subordinated to the textual function. If tension is intentional, it is also meaningful.

Focusing on the materiality of a nude body on stage seems to imply that in such a case theatre is closer to nude modelling or striptease than to cinema or television drama, in which the nude body may also appear, although seemingly dematerialized because of the nature of these media. This is absurd, however, since it ignores the difference between description by means of imprinted images and reality. The spectator may indeed be aware of the actors' reality—looks, voice, typical gestures—as part of the process of acting, the process of producing signs. This type of awareness, however, stresses the textuality of theatrical performance and, rather than contradicting semiosis, it makes the latter prominent.

Conclusions

Conceiving the concrete and perceptible presence of the body on stage as an essential feature of theatre—with no qualification—has not promoted further understanding of this medium. From such a perspective, theatre becomes indistinguishable from other forms of performing arts, in particular from performance art and what is usually termed 'social drama'. Although the live body is the common denominator in most performing arts, it functions in completely different ways. First, the difference between theatre and some other forms of performing arts—such as music, opera and ballet—resides in their various codes or systems of expression. Second, although the difference between theatre and performance arts has not been theoretically established, only some of its forms fully or partially employ the medium of theatre. Third, the difference between theatre and social drama resides in the ontological contrast between a description of life and real life.

The fact that the performing body is performing in front of an audience does not entail that the performed activities are of the same kind. For example, stand-up comedy reflects superb command of language and incisive wit, but it does not describe a world by means of imprinted images. The major medium of this art is natural language, the use of which reflects the keen perception of the performer, while his verbal descriptions refer to the real world, mostly to its absurdity. Moreover, the performer usually does not describe a 'stand-upist' character, but is self-referential. Even in his non-verbal behaviour he means to indicate his own attitude to his topics. He/she is not an actor, but an observer and a critic who presents his own insights. In Goffman's terms, he projects his/her own self-image.

Viewing the principle of acting (particularly deflection of reference) as a crucial feature of theatre leads to the conclusion that cinematic and televisual drama and puppet theatre have more in common with theatre than with any other form of art or social drama—despite the fact that they do not present the concrete and perceptible body of the performer. In my view, the use of the concrete body of the actor/actress for imprinting images is at the heart of theatricality. I am aware, however, that according to some well established view, the use of the concrete body—whether for imprinting images or not—is considered the hallmark of all forms of performance. Since the experience of the
material body is not shared with other arts, particularly fictional arts, but shared with other activities to which we attach the label 'performance', including social drama and theatre, I conclude that in the latter case, this experience is only a circumstantial similarity.

If theatre is a medium, the task of a phenomenology of theatre should be cognition of the medium through better understanding of the phenomenal use of its signs, an intuition which is suggested by States himself: 'Hence the need to rounding out a semiotics of the theater with a phenomenology of its imagery—or, if you will, a phenomenology of its semiology.' (p.29) In any case, no phenomenological approach is entitled to confuse the phenomenology of the world with the phenomenology of a medium.

Eli Rozik is Professor of Theatre Studies, Tel Aviv University.

Notes


2. Bert O. States, Great Reckonings in Little Rooms (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985), p. 8. All stresses in States's quotes are mine. Further page references to this book will be given in brackets after each quotation, thus [GR, p.].

3. States writes in note 5: ‘Throughout, I use the adjective phenomenological in the sense of pertaining to phenomena or to our sensory experience with empirical objects. The adjective phenomenological, of course, refers to the analytical or descriptive problem of dealing with such phenomena.' Great Reckonings, p. 21.


5. For a detailed discussion see Eli Rozik, The Language of the Theatre (Glasgow: Theatre Studies Publications, 1992), pp. 18–29


10. In decoding iconic signs on the grounds of similarity, the degree of detail/fullness or stylization is disregarded.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., pp. 151–2.


19. I suggest that theatre semiosis in order to accomplish cognitive functions has to free itself from rhetoric and aesthetics, which I view as dealing with the experience of truth and not truth itself.

20. During my postdoctoral studies in London, 1973–4, I worked in the following theatres: The Shaw Theatre (Shakespeare’s Macbeth), The Royal Shakespeare Company (David Mercer’s Duck Song) and The Royal Court Theatre (David Storey’s Life Class).