# Archetypal Reflection of Mise-en-Scène –
## The Signifying Nature of the Theatrical Performance as a Process of Communication and Representation

by Ivaylo Alexandrov

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Antonin Artaud, under the influence of his own ideas for radical theatricalisation of the world as a "theatre of cruelty", proclaimed the idea for the ability of the stage to communicate its own unique language. He maintained that the physical space of the stage should be filled with the power of images creating a world as well as the symbols through which the viewer sees a world in which he/she feels comfortable. In order for this to occur the actors representing the world must literally be involved in the work/performance (Artaud 1938, 1958[1], Witkiewicz 1919, 1959[2]). This language presented to the audience in its overall significance, builds in the viewers what is happening to implement it in their *imaginary world*[3] and instilling in it, aggressively enough, their speech, to provoke its identity to the extreme. As noted further by McAuley:

> "The actors may have determined the emotional content of a scene, it is their physical actions in the space (gestures, move, looks) that will articulate it for the audience."[4]

The audience is one that has to *desire* its imagination to be effectively stimulated by the signifying that is happening on stage and in this sense, trigger the co-creations of the theatrical semiosis.

The relationship between the actor and space in the process of building a performative text, this powerful semiotic connection with the viewer, shows the performance as a real semiosis. Concerning the problem of stage-audience communication Pamela Howard, in her book on the set design, shares some ideas close to those of McAuley and, although only formally, close to those of Artaud:

> "The spatial image on stage is not purely decorative. It is a potent visual image that supplements the world of the play that the director creates with the actors in the space."[5]

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[1]    Artaud, Antonin. 1958 (1932). The Theater and Its Double. New York: Grove Press Inc.

[2]    Witkiewicz, Stanislaw Ignacy. 1959 (1919). Nowe formy w malarstwie. Panzwowe widawnictwo naukoweq.

[3]    McAuley, Gay. 1999. Space in Performance – Making Meaning in the Theatre. The University of Mchigan Press: 5.

[4]    Ibid.: 92.

[5]    Howard, Pamela. 2001. What is Scenography?. London: Routledge, 15.

This theatre *modelling*: staging, dramaturgy/script, mise-en-scène set design, atmosphere, acting presence (verbal and non-verbal, gesture, facial expression, physicality, movement, body sculpturing), music, light, are all, in a deep theatrical sense, defined precisely as mise-en-scène- *staging/interpreting-something-on-stage*. Mise-en-scène not only specifies the physical space of the theatre performance and its relationship with the actor, but also displays everything that is designed in it as presence (setting), mobility and signification. Objectively reasoning, the concept of *mise-en-scène* defines a strictly psychological and aesthetic platform for manipulating the physical space of the show as a performative text in a highly emotional and intellectual form determined by the cognitive activity of the audience, or what we call now: viewing expertise. Here we can point out that the mise-en-scène is this theatrical/performative matrix of perception that as a structural system of signification exists only when it is perceived and decoded in terms of meaning and importance by the spectator himself. Actually, mise-en-scène is all what we might call co-creation of theatrical performance, everything prepared by the team of the show to be visible and intellectually intelligible on the stage, but as Pavis notes "not yet perceived or described as a system of meaning or as a pertinent relationship of signifying stage system."[6]

In the modern understanding of theatrical performance, a literary text as a linguistic or symbolic environment or a *dramatic text*, is not a prerequisite for the existence of a performative text. In this sense, the director and actors, respectively, do not have to submit to the authority of the dramatic text. Of course, this in no way questions or undermines the outstanding role of the dramatic text in the process of *staging/interpreting-something-on-stage*. To emphasize what has been said here, we could refer to a distinctly semiotic position of Pavis, who perceives the *mise-en-scène* as a confrontation of *all signifying systems*:

> "Finally, the *mise-en-scéne*, the confrontation of all signifying systems, in particular the utterance of the dramatic text in performance. *Mise-en-scène* is not an empirical object, the haphazard assembling of materials, the ill-defined activity of the director and stage team prior to performance. It is an object of knowledge, a network of associations or relationship uniting the different stage materials into signifying systems, created both by production (the actors, the director, the stage in general) and reception (the spectators)."[7]

As an aesthetic act of constructing theatre reality, the *mise-en-scène* has always been perceived as an artistic medium in the process of sign representation directed at the viewer, as a perceiving observer. This intermediary role that as a final effect is projected in the mind of the viewer through his perceptual activity is the direct result of the sign message that the artist activates because of his artistic activity. We should not perceive *mise-en-scène* as just another aesthetic strategy for the proclamation of a product of art, which, in essence, is every theatrical performance. Reconstructing the performative text in mind, the viewer perceives the whole corpus of the system, configured of individual

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[6]  Pavis, Patrice. 1992. Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture. Trans. Loren Kruger. Routledge, 25.

[7]  Ibid., Loc. cit.

sign sub-systems, namely as a theatrical performance, built with all the components pertaining to action - speech, gesture/mimics/movement, mechanization, sound. The theatrical presentation is a semiotic code of the creative world by the team's performance (director, actor, designer, composer, choreographer) designed as a *mise-en-scène* and reproduced as a performative text, and also as an active matrix for the production of meaning. In the process of stage presentation, an archetype prior knowledge from the experience emerges, which is transformed by the creator of the show and is pre-set as understanding (i.e. what is likely to be understood by the perceiver), following the convention that, in essence, the primary semiotic practice of theatre performance is to transform all the obvious objects into signs/sign formations suitable to be understood. These objects could be transferred through *mise-en-scène* and the imagination of viewers in a different space and different time, as a result of the artistic transformation, since they are being presented and are presenting simultaneously. This can be seen as a semiotic multiplication of archetypes and archetypal constructs, inhabiting the mind of the artist, re-created through *mise-en-scène* and then activated as signifiers in the minds of viewers.

If we refer briefly to Carl Gustav Jung (1959)[8], we will see that the unconscious archetype of an individual is constructed outside the duality of the collective archetype relative to individual instinct. Psychologically, a collective action regulates the forms of social and individual patterns of human behaviour that could affect the creation of a product of art and its perception. Moreover, the collective archetypes exist embedded in the unconscious as concepts or pictures:

> "They also manifest themselves in fantasies and often reveal their presence only by symbolic images. These manifestations are what I call archetypes."[9]

The theory of Jung on the process of individuation can be presupposed as a theoretical parallel with respect to the influence of archetypal ideas and structures, as far as the *mise-en-scène* is concerned, and particularly in respect of the individual actor's presence and the translation of significant signifiers to the context of a collective psychology of perception (in our case, the theatre audience):

> "The concept of individuation plays no small role in our psychology. In general, it is the process of forming and specializing the individual nature; in particular, it is the development of the psychological individual as a differentiated being from the general collective psychology. Individuation is therefore a process of differentiation, /.../ individuation leads to a natural appreciation of the collective norm."[10]

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[8]    Jung, Carl Gustav. 1959. The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung. Ed. Violed Staub De Laszlo. New York: Modern Library.

[9]    Ibid.: 58.

[10]    Ibid.: 259.

In his monograph "Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art"[11] Mukarovsky focuses on the role and impact of collective cultural archetypes on individual artistic activity and perception, treating these archetypes from an aesthetic perspective. The idea of an actor as a *stage figure*, projecting in his/her mind a fiction for an imaginary audience to which it will forward the necessary communicative information and, in turn, trigger specific concepts/images in the observer/perceiver, is based on similar ratiocination of collective archetypes as is recognizable in the immediate audience (similar idea can be found in Bogatyrev 1976[12]). The deep archetypal reflection of *mise-en-scène* harmonises the roles of individual and collective consciousness as a set of complementary perspectives in an optimal sign semiosis. Semiosis, which (on the stage and in the flow of coordinated action and strict geometry of the movements in the style of an ordered performative articulation and technical vision) stresses out the signifying nature of the show as a process of communication and representation. Mukarovsky takes the product of art (in this case we directly consider theatre performance in terms of *mise-en-scéne*) as sign interaction within the opposition intentional/unintentional in respect of the active roles and thinks the actor as one producing meaning, while the viewer – as one who understands this meaning:

> "Intentionality allows the work to be perceived as a sign, unintentionality as a thing; hence the opposition of intentionality and unintentionality is the basic antinomy of art. /.../ Intentionality and unintentionlity are semantic, not psychological phenomena: the semantic unification of a work and the negation of this unification."[13]

Mukarovsky theorized on the opposition intentional/unintentional in respect of the perception of a product of art exactly as a structural component in a global sense, and of the artefact as a fundamental principle of perception:

> "Unintentionality is therefore a concomitant phenomenon of intentionality, /.../ a certain kind of intentionality. /.../ Although they are in constant dialectic tension, intentionality and unintentionality are essentially one. The mechanical – no longer dialectic – antithesis of these *two* is semantic indifference about which we may speak when a certain part or component of a work is indifferent for the perceiver, when it is outside his effort at a semantic unification." (author's emphasis)[14]

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[11]    Cf.: Mukařovský, Jan. 1978. Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art. In: Structure, Sign and Functions. Selected Essays by J. Mukařovský. Eds. and trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 89-128.

[12]    Bogatyrev, Peter. 1976 (1938). Semiotics in the Folk Theater. In: Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions. Eds. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik. The MIT Press, 31-38.

[13]    Mukařovský 1978. Op. cit.: 128.

[14]    Ibid.: 125.

Mukarovsky clearly maintains that the work of art as artefact, and as a complete system, is an autonomous sign[15] and as such, "transcends reality: the work relates to reality only figuratively, only as a whole"[16], but can be seen as an autonomous multi-layered message "metaphoric representation of reality, both as a whole and as any of the realities experienced by him"[17] - from the perspective of its discursive nature (also in Jakobson 1976[18]) affecting both sides - the actor/spectator and the viewer/receiver. Here there is referential relation of the sender to the recipient and "experiences or to a set of his experiences in his subconsciousness"[19] that put into operation "the perceiver's entire existential experience, all the conscious and subconscious tendencies of his personality, upon his contact with the work."[20] In art, as a whole, the work is addressed to the individual/subject who perceives and relative to whom the act of action is aimed at:

> "Whereas in the latter the originator of the activity or product is unequivocally the only subject who matters, in art the fundamental subject is not the originator but the individual to whom the artistic product is addressed, hence the perceiver. Insofar as the artist assumes a relation to his product as an artistic product (not as an object of production), even he himself sees and judges it as particular individual, but anyone."[21]

The nature of the *mise-en-scéne*, as stage practice, highlights the particular cultural experience cultivated in the personal intellect of the spectator and the of theatre artist (actor, director, designer, composer, choreographer). Being presented in the aesthetic structure of the *stage figure* this experience regulates actor's creativity as a conscious principle and directly affects the viewing reception, as an act of unconscious perception (the automatic reflection to perceive what is being displayed). And as a finale, here we can successfully refer to even the super-intellectual position of Gilles Deleuze:

> "A new theatre or a new (non-Aristotelian) interpretation of the theatre; a theatre of multiplicities opposed in every respect to the theatre of representation, which leaves intact neither the identity of the thing represented, nor author, or spectator, nor character, nor representation which, through vicissitudes of the play, can become the object of a production

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[15]      Ibid.: 119.

[16]      Ibid., Loc. cit.

[17]      Ibid., Loc. cit.

[18]      Jakobson, Roman. 1976. Is the Cinema in Decline. In: Semiotics of Art. Eds. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 82-92.

[19]      Mukařovský 1978. Op. cit.: 96.

[20]      Ibid.: 122.

[21]      Ibid.: 94.

of knowledge or final recognition. /.../ Instead, a theatre of problems and always open question which draws spectator, setting and characters into the real movement of an apprenticeship of the entire unconscious."[22]

In the semiotic perspective of *mise-en-scène* (and in the very theatrical performance) it is essential to emphasize, despite some modern theatre practices, that vocal (verbal) components of a show play a pivotal role affecting mostly the *stage figure*. Along with the physical appearance and presence of the actor and his stage mobility, it is language, as a tool, that is the other key component of the collective conscious creativity and communication between stage and audience. As pointed out by Fischer-Lichte: „The most important function of language in theatre derives from its use by the actor: here A's [actor's] words signify X's [character's] words."[23], and they are specified and indicated through the viewers' activity, through the cooperative audibility of the audience. As a regulated method of communication between actor and audience, the aesthetics of *mise-en-scène* is both a means of stage impersonation and a channel for the conveyance of signals produced by the actor on stage. And thus, both verbal and auditory components of the actor's interpretation - sound, rhythm, gesture, acting speech - are the radical sign correlates of this communication. And as we mentioned at the outset of this study, the actor's gestures, body movement and facial expression are the essence of non-verbal communication in the theatre.

Here we would venture to mention, in brief, the psycho-linguistic theory of Karl Bühler regarding the language as a communicative method, which develops the Platonic understanding of language as "*organum* for the one to inform the other of something about the things".[24] Taking language for the most important system of human communication, Bühler creates a threefold semiotic model with three main components: sender, recipient and message (relating to a similar idea for a three-fold structure of the sign and the principle of three-dimensionality Sebeok 2001[25] is also noteworthy). In linguistic communication, the verbal message, according to Bühler is a "concrete acustic phenomenon".[26] It introduces a ternary relation, which by its very nature is a symbol, meant to be sent, respectively – to be received/accepted. As a result, this three-fold communicative relation produces "a complex, linguistic sign"[27] that Bühler further defines in his three-fold semiotic model as follows:

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[22]     Deleuze, Gilles.1994 (1968). Difference and Repetition. Trans. Poul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 11-26.

[23]     Fischer-Lichte, Erika. 1992 (1983). The Semiotics of Theater. Trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L Jones. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 20.

[24]     Bühler, Karl. 1990. Theory of Language: The Representational Function of Language.  Trans. Donald fraser Goodwin. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 30.

[25]     Sebeok, Thomas. 2001. Global Semiotics. Bloomington: Indiana Uiversity Press, 135-145.

[26]     Büler 1990. Op. cit.: 34.

[27]     Ibid.: 35.

"It is a symbol by virtue of its coordination to objects and states of affairs, a symptom /.../ by virtue of its dependence on the sender, whose inner states it expresses, and a sign by virtue of its appeal to the hearer, whose inner or outer behavior it directs as do other communicative signs."[28]

If we look carefully, the reasoning of Büler is very close to the views of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure perceives the functioning (through interdependency) parts of the linguistic system as interaction in and with the system itself. For him, the sign language connects the signifier and the signified (Saussure himself names them - concept and acoustic image [*concept* and *sound pattern* or *signification* and *signal*]) and in his theory he points out that the linguistic nature is possible only when there is an association of the signified/signifier, while it is impossible when one of the two elements is excluded. It is thanks to the dual nature of the linguistic sign that becomes possible for the designation (signification):

"A linguistic sign is not a link between sign and a name, but between a concept and a sound patern, /.../ the combination of a concept and a sound pattern. We propose to keep the term *sign* to designate the whole, but to replace *concept* and *sound pattern* respectively by *signification* and *signal*."[29]

Language according to Saussure, is also „dual unity of langue and parole" where *langue* is precisely the language system, and *parole* is „the actual speech".[30] The model of Bühler analyzes the communicative process as a system of three functions with special respect to expressiveness, linguistic interaction and representation (components directly affecting the *mise-en-scéne*). *Organonmodell* (Bühler 1934)[31] is a popular model referred to strictly in the field of semiotics and one expressing the mutual reflection of „three essential tensions in any speech act"[32] and in this sense, we can conclude sticking back to Quinn that:

"The organum, the artifact (signifier) at which the three tensions meet, becomes the locus of three aspects of meaning. The subjective role of the sender provides the expressive aspect. The relation of sign to thing is the referential aspect. And the relation of sign to receiver constitutes the conative aspect."[33]

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[28]    Ibid., Loc. cit.

[29]    Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1959. Course in general Linguistics. Trans. Wade Baskin. New York: McGraw-Hill, 67.

[30]    Culler, Joanathan D. 1986. Ferdinant de Saussure. Ithaca: Cornel University Press, 40.

[31]    Bühler, Karl. 1934. Sprachtheorie. Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache. Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer Verlag.

[32]    Quinn, Michael. 1995. The Semiotic Stage. New York: Peter Lang, 25.

[33]    Ibid., Loc. cit.

According to Büler, the above three aspects of the system are a function of the language as communicative model where the sound „is a mediating phenomenon, a mediator between the speaker and the hearer"[34] and it varies from point *A* to point *B*. It's not the same for the sender (or the subject of communication) and the perceiving addressee (or – the object). Being varying in the context of the sound environment, these specifics put it at the base of each verbal communicative act. Büler reveals the primary value of the signifying verbal signal in human communication in terms of the perceptive response of the perceiver. This signal is a form of symbolic construct and as Büler maintains, in its essence, it is the basis of every linguistic act:

> "The origin, the source of human and animal communication with signals is in the action of individuals; in its practical dealings with the environment he needs and uses signals."[35]

This signal, as part of a functional communicative model of language, could be seen as a social and communicative factor of this language, as well as a social function, expressing the human relationships within the personal environment and surroundings, and in the context of a global *socium*. In this respect, we can interpret this signal as a semiotic field, organized as a binary system based on individual characters and symbols that allow the individual to establish contacts and create messages, intelligible for both sides.

If we here, very briefly, go to Edmund Husserl we can see that a different theory may be developed and it rejects the psychological approach to the study of language, postulating the pure grammar of „language as such".[36] Husserl, unlike Büler, perceives language as „the central system of signs, the natural prototype of each expression invested with meaning" and also examines it as „the logical function of the basic grammatical categories common to all languages"[37], understanding the sign as an indicator of the existence of the meaning itself. Husserl sets the distinction between things taken for granted and things as they appear, i.e. phenomena and emphasizes the critical importance of perceptual or interpretive abilities of the awareness of sign articulation of things in language:

> "It really makes no sense at all to talk about things which are 'simply there' and just need to be 'seen'. On the contrary, this 'simply being there' consist of a certain mental process of specific and changing structure, such as perception, imagination, memory, predication, etc., and in them the things are not contained as in a hull or vessel. Instead, the things come to be constituted in these mental processes, although in reality they are not at all to be found in

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[34]      Büler 1990. Op. cit.: 37.

[35]      Ibid.: 40.

[36]      Erlich, Victor. 1969. Russian Formalism: History, Doctrine. The Hague: Mouton, 62.

[37]      Ibid.: 61.

them. For 'things to be given' is for them to be exhibited (represented) as so and so in such phenomenon."[38]

This supports the present idea that at the level of linguistic communication the function of the receiver/perceiver is of a co-author and co-editor of the product of art that through the mutual communication with the sender resonates in terms of theatre and theatre performance due to the bipolar communicative activity between actor and spectator. It is this communicative environment that supports the system of transmitting meanings through messages, characteristic of the performative text in the logic of the *mise-en-scéne*.

From everything said here, we can conclude that the *mise-en-scène* is this logical semiotic perspective of theatre performance that combines sign structures of the different systems and regulates the cardinal relationships between physical and verbal (vocal) action of the actor, the sound and physical atmosphere of the stage, the linguistic, intellectual and psychological reflection relative to the experience of the world, the communicative realia of sender/receiver or actor/audience, the cognitive mechanisms of interaction between the visual representation of the stage and the perceptive reaction of the audience. We could think of *mise-en-scène* as a structural formation, a theoretical construct and a radical object of knowledge, and not just as a profane result from the director's (creative) interference with the dramatic and/or performative text. At the end, building on what has been said up to this point, it could be noted that we tend to perceive the *mise-en-scène* as a level of a meta-text or a text going beyond its basic parameters as well as one defining the mutual coordination between the *play* (*drama* or *dramatic text*) and the *show* (*performance* or *performative text*). The *mise-en-scéne*, as a *meta-text* represents the ultimate aesthetic form of each piece of theatricality (as a show) constituted within the integrity of its sign order, the natural intermediary between stage and audience. And as a conclusion to what has been already said it would be sufficient to refer to Pavis, who perceives the *mise-en-scène* precisely as a universal language of theatricality (*théâtralité*) although admitting, in this case, that such a meta-text could not exist independently, separated from the whole:

> "Nowhere does the metatext exist as a separate and complete text; it is disseminated in the choice of acting style, scenography, rhythm, in series of relationships (redundancies, discrepancies) between the various signifying systems. It exists, moreover, according to our conception of *mise-en-scéne*, as the vital link in the production/reception chain only when it is recognized and, in part, shared by an audience. More than a (stage) text existing side by side with the dramatic text, a metatext is what organizes, from within, the scenic concretization; thus it is not parallel to the dramatic text, but, as it

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[38]     Husserl, Edmund. 1964. The Idea of Phenomenology. Trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 10.

were, inside it, being the result of the concretization circuit (circuit involving signifier, Social Context and signified of the text)."[39]

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[39]     Pavis, Patrice. 1992. Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture. Trans.  Loren Kruger. Routledge, 34.