

THE BODY SEMIOTIC IN THE THEATER

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In this paper I intend to address changes in the status of the body of the speaking subject with reference to a specific cultural mode of expression, the theater. In the history of the representation of the body we can trace how the iconic, motivated body of medieval high semioticity is suppressed by the emergence of the mechanical world model, and then it becomes thematized, marketed, and virtualized in the postmodern. There is hardly a cultural arena more suitable for the investigation of this process than the theater. By its very nature, the theater addresses and foregrounds representational problems, since it is itself a game with an unsurpassable representational insufficiency. The stage wants to conjure up the presence of that which is not present, and the belief in the (im)possibility of this is characteristic of the specific culture's semiotic attitude. If a sign is that which we can use to lie (Eco), at the heart of the theater we find the scrutinizing of this lying. At the same time, the theater thematizes not only the nature of representation, the working up of the sign, but also the central agent of that representation, the human being, as body and soul, flesh and spirit, as either union of or gap between signifier and signified.

As a representational laboratory, the emblematic theater in the English Renaissance uses various techniques to stage the body in order to come up with an answer to the question of the epistemological crisis of the period. This paper relies on "semiography" as a critical approach which combines the interpretive strategies of iconography and semiotics to map out the systems of images that were employed in the representational logic of the emblematic theater. A detour will be made to examine the phenomenon of the anatomical theater of the Renaissance.

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This paper sets out to survey the relationship between the fundamental semiotic disposition of culture and the signifying status of the human body in that culture. The investigation will focus on one specific mode of social expression: the theater, which foregrounds and thematizes the questions that a culture might have about the nature of the body and the nature of reality, as well. I will argue that a semiotic typology of cultures can help us arrive at a typology of theaters. In that typology the theater will be understood as a laboratory of the epistemological perplexities in the historically specific culture.

I

In working out the concept and the methodology of semanalysis, Julia Kristeva suggested back in the late 1970s that it would be possible to typologize cultures on the basis of the signifying status of the speaking subject in them. Her thesis finds support and a strong analogy in Yuri Lotman's semiotic typology of cultures, which is based on the specific culture's attitude to the very nature of the sign and the nature of signification. At the same time, poststructuralist theories in the semiotics of the subject have demonstrated that it is impossible to theorize the status of the human being in semiosis without opening up the phenomenological abstraction of the ego for the heterogeneous basis of signification, that is, the psychosomatic, corporeal structure of the subject. It follows that the general semiotic disposition of a cultural establishment is characterized not only by a belief in the high or low semioticity of elements of reality; and not only by the historically specific ideas about the inner signifying capacity or incapacity of the human being; but also by the relation of that culture to the concept of the corporeal, the presence or non-presence of the body in social discourses. The semiotic body is always present in semiosis as the material engine that generates the drive to signify, and it is treated very differently in different cultures. It is on this basis that I maintain that a particular semiotic world model is greatly characterized by the status of the body, which will be examined in the typology of theaters as either the Other of culture or a potential locus of subversion.

Lotman in his typology of cultures differentiated between two different world models. The *Medieval world model* is based on high semioticity, an understanding of the world as text, and the elements of that world as written and directly motivated signs of the Absolute. In this world model the universe is an ordered hierarchy of symbolical correspondences, and the iconic nature of reality results in what Lotman calls high semioticity—every element of reality is inherently meaningful on several levels of meaning. The polysemy of reality creates an interpretive attitude, a fundamental semiotic disposition in the human being.

The *Enlightenment-type world* model will desemioticize this world, and replaces the pan metaphoric and interpretive attitude to reality with empirical investigation that yields solid, unambiguous and not polysemous factual data. The new world model is syntagmatic, mechanic, and no longer tolerates the proliferation of meanings through metaphors, symbols, allegories and emblems as was the practice in the Middle Ages. The vertical Great Chain of Being is stretched out horizontally into a railway road in the age of reason, and the key metaphor of the Book of Nature is replaced by that of the Clockwork Universe.

This model comes to a halting point with the crisis of the “project of modernism” in the 20th century, with the questioning of the belief in our capacity for the total appropriation of the world and the mastering of ultimate truths. It is arguable that the much-debated period of the postmodern has, until now, been a transition from modernism (which will never be finished) into a third world model in which the new status of the sign is defined by the logic of simulacra and virtualization. As Baudrillard contends, in its new definition reality is now “that of which it is possible to create endless reproductions.” Analogies and si-

milarities between the Renaissance and the postmodern become manifest when we understand both periods in semiotic terms as transitions between opposing world models. In such epistemologically uncertain periods we can observe an intensified semiotic activity in culture that strives to map out new ways of getting to know reality.

Together with the changing of the above world models, the status of the body and its relation to the human being have also gone through definitive metamorphoses. The body in the Middle Ages is an iconic image of God, it gives way to a body as the Other of the cognizing ego in Cartesian philosophy, and then this self-identical and dematerialized modern subjectivity becomes very bodily, corporeal and, later on, more and more virtual in postmodernism. The abstract and incorporeal, “deadly subjectivity of modernism” (Barker 1984) goes through not only a process of desubstantiation, but also a gradual virtualization in which the seeming presence of the body will always be postponed by the signifiers of ideology that fashion the identity just as well as the body of the subject.

II

In the present paper I intend to address the above changes in the status of the body of the speaking subject with reference to a specific cultural mode of expression, the theater. As has been outlined, the iconic, motivated body of medieval high semioticity is suppressed by the emergence of the modern, and then it becomes thematized, marketed and virtualized in the postmodern. There is hardly a cultural arena more suitable for the investigation of this process than the theater. The theater, by its very nature, addresses and foregrounds representational problems, since it is in itself a game with an unsurpassable representational insufficiency. The stage wants to conjure up the presence of that which is not present, and the belief in the possibility or impossibility of this is characteristic of the specific culture’s semiotic disposition. The history of the theater can be well described as the history of the art of lying, especially if we employ Umberto Eco’s definition, according to which a sign is that which we can use to lie. The theatrical sign foregrounds this nature of the sign, and at the heart of the theater we find the scrutinizing of this lying.

At the same time, it is not only the nature of representation, i.e., the working of the sign, that the theater thematizes, but also the central agent of that representation, the human being, as body and soul, flesh and spirit, as either union of or gap between signifier and signified.

III

In a very sketchy historical survey of the theater, it is the medieval semi-dramatic, liturgical stage representation that provides us with the greatest amount of iconicity. In the high semioticity of the medieval world model, reality is inherently iconic, because every element of the universe directly partakes in the

divine principle. Elements of this reality possess an inherent signifying capacity which is guaranteed by God, the ultimate signified and the great scribe, who disseminated in the cosmos the icons of his own image.

However, this iconic link with the source and the guarantee of all meaning is not altogether transparent, since our world is a fallen, corrupt image of the heavenly order—we see through a glass, darkly. This relationship between the actual and the divine world goes through a peculiar typological inversion on the stage of the liturgical theater. The Biblical truth and the providential story acted out on the stage are not only a “representation”, but they become the real Reality, the type—a faithful and true union of the allegorical actor as icon on the one hand, and the truth, the meaning of God on the other, which directly informs and motivates the icon. Our world, the actual reality is degraded here into a corrupt, deformed replica of that reality which is ostended on the pageant platform. Our world as antitype will be fulfilled and realized in the type of the heavenly order. In the ritualistic enactment, the union of Word and Flesh once again takes place, as was promised by Christ, the pure signifier, who was not separated by any trace of *differance* from the meaning it signified. Consequently, medieval liturgical drama poses no representational insufficiency, because the functioning of the actor’s body and the stage object as icons are guaranteed by God, the source of their being.

In order for *literary drama* and theater to develop, the representational insufficiency which separates reality and representation, and characterizes the theatrical cosmos, needs to come to the surface. There needs to open up a gap, an uncertainty between the allegorical body and what it signifies in order for the audience to feel an interpretive task and challenge presented by the stage. This representational insufficiency is not only inherent semiotically in any theater and any representation, but it also characterizes the entire philosophical climate during the epistemological crisis of the Renaissance. The emerging of the mechanical, horizontal world model of the Enlightenment desemioticizes the formerly iconic nature of reality, the inherent signifying capacity of the elements of the universe is taken away. However, the new, scientific and empirical methods of knowledge are not firmly in place yet. The theater, as a laboratory for the testing of the widening gap between things and their supposedly guaranteed meaning, thematizes this *process of desemioticization*, which, as we see, is also a process which results in the deiconization of reality.

The protagonists of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama no longer act out the union of flesh and spirit, body and originary meaning: they much rather foreground the inner split that culture and the human being are based upon. The actor on the Renaissance stage never really aims at cheating the spectator into believing that the person on the stage is not an actor but Hamlet, Prince of Denmark; that the little branch of a tree is not an emblem of the forest and fertility but an actual wood; or, that the trapdoor is not only emblematically but actually the gate to the Castle of Lucifer. The stage here problematizes a basic semiotic issue of culture. What kind of a sign is the human being, or any element of reality? The human being, as represented by the Renaissance actor, realizes

that it can never coincide with itself, can never be present to itself, it no longer carries within its guaranteed meaning. Reality moves from the iconic into the indexical phase, when we can only suspect or hope for the causal relationship between the creation and a Creator, but the direct, motivating proofs are lost, the center is dislocated, order is questioned in the universe. As the epistemological uncertainty of the period increases, so does the suspicion that the nature of reality and the human being may be merely symbolical, a matter of social and ideologically specific convention. The continuously thematized and questioned metaphysical status of the sovereign is one example of this process.

The protagonists of the Renaissance stage are engaged in a desperate attempt to become icons, because complete self-realization would be nothing else but the direct uniting of being and meaning, body and name. However, these characters now and again end up with the realization that they carry no inherent meaning, no self-present, guaranteed link with an *origo* of meaning: it is rather their identity which is always generated by the actual role assigned to them in the network of social self-fashioning.

In this theater, the body ceases to be a locus of the iconic union of flesh and spirit. It rather becomes a *representational technique* which provides the protagonists with a chance to produce iconic meanings, or, more precisely, the most unquestionable signs. The body will be a site of experimentation, a stage representation that could momentarily unite the ever increasing gap between the signifier and the signified in the production of death, or, in Lacan's words, the densest sign of death, which is the cadaver. The Renaissance and Baroque stages are littered with corpses not only to satisfy the sensationalism of the contemporary audience, but also because the protagonist, in order to dominate the discursive space around itself, has to manufacture corpses, because it is the cadaver the meaning of which is most unquestionable, the author of which is real author. Turning one's own self into a corpse is thus total mastery of self and of meaning, no matter how ironic it is. This sometimes happens only partly, when, for example, Hieronimo bites own his own tongue at the end of *The Spanish Tragedy*, in order to retain to himself totally the meanings he wanted to be the author of. Hieronimo's lines over the corpse of his son ("To know the author were some ease of grief," II.v.40)—encapsulate in a quite post-structuralist wording the semiotic point of Renaissance tragedy. And this is also why this stage favors so much the traveling and trafficking of parts, i.e., metonymies of the body. Fingers, hands, heads, corpses are sent and displayed, because a control of these would be a control of the desemiocized body, and of the world that has a more and more questionable signified.

The Cartesian philosophy of the Enlightenment world model radically suppresses the presence of the body in the social and the semiotic arena. The ego of the cogito dwells in a *homogeneous subject* that is endowed with a transhistorical human quality. It is an entity that is transparent and identical to itself, consequently the heterogeneity of the corporeal cannot be part of this subjectivity. By this time, discursive knowledge and social symbolization provide the subject with a skin that will not let the body surface and manifest itself as something

uncontrollable, something other than the conscious, rational *individuum*. The undivided Cartesian subject of Western metaphysics will also be the transcendental ego of phenomenology which dominated semiotics and structuralist linguistics until poststructuralist theories of the subject.

The new world model avoids polysemy, aims at collecting the one and only authentic empirical truth about elements of reality, which are no longer parts of an ordered hierarchy of iconic correspondences, but articles in a sequence of cause and effect relationships. It is interesting that this world model, which desemiotizes reality, tries to produce the most iconic, that is, the photographic theater: a stage that aims at being an illusionistic replica of reality. The highly symbolical, emblematic theater of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance was made possible by one fundamental and centrally guaranteed iconic nature of reality, which led to the interpretation of the universe on several levels of meaning. This is why a sword on the emblematic stage can be a sword, a cross, an emblem of justice, an attribute of God and the King and Time which delivers justice—the tradition of *Veritas Filia Temporis*—, a mirror of the king and of the nation, etc. Once reality loses its inherent signifying capacity, the sign itself becomes suspicious, it is to be avoided, so that reality can only be copied on the stage. That copying is never full, never perfect: this is what became clear in the epistemological crisis of the Renaissance, and this is why the persistent metatheatrical perspective and the metadramatic intrusions systematically break the illusion of a separate dramatic world on the Renaissance stage. Several traditions of involvement and stage-audience interaction also participated in this metatechnique.

The body in the bourgeois theater will be fully enveloped by the Word, by social discourse: it can no longer function as a site of semiotic experimentation for full signification. The modernist subject will be constituted in and through language, but, at the same time, it will define itself through the misrecognition that it is a master, a user and controller of that language. Characters on the bourgeois, realistic stage will be compact *individua* of an illusionistic theater that will tend to forget the metatheatrical tradition of the Renaissance, which systematically foregrounded the problems of signification.

IV

It will only come with the crisis of the modern and the deconstruction of the Cartesian subject that the character on the theatrical stage starts problematizing the heterogeneity of the subject and the representational capacity of the theater again. General theories of signification and the semiotics of the subject can no longer ignore the impact of the Freudian revolution that inverted the Cartesian hierarchy between the human being and language. From the early 1970s on, in the experimental postmodern theater there is a growing awareness of the split that defines the human being as a heterogeneous structure which is dependent on the ideologically determined working of the signifier on both the conscious and unconscious modalities of signification. The body emerges in this theater first as a potential locus of subversion, a dimension where the power of the

signifier could be bypassed to arrive at a direct experiencing of reality. The body functions as an icon of the real, and through the testing, penetration, ostension of the body it seems to be possible to escape from our ideological determination. However, the poststructuralist realization of the total symbolic enveloping of the subject will soon dawn on the postmodern theater as well, and bodies become textualised, fragmented, liquidized, incapable of functioning as a solid basis for any sovereignty, autonomy of the subject. The body, just like the formerly sovereign Cartesian *individuum*, will be deprived of any inherent signifying capacity, and will be constituted according to prefabricated patterns that are circulated in the cultural imagery of the specific society. Two examples from postmodern drama will demonstrate this. The Hamlet-character in Heiner Müller's *Hamletmaschine* wants to reside in his blood, brains, excrement, to take refuge from ideology in the immediacy of the body, which offers itself as a potential locus of resistance. As opposed to this, the characters in Adrienne Kennedy's plays have multiple selves, multiple names and bodies, and they are articulated as momentary crossing points of different discourses and cultural images. Through a microphysics of power, to employ Foucault's term, the constitution of the body will become just another discursive technology of power. Any referentiality of the sign to an existing, primary, originary reality becomes more and more questionable, since it is no longer empirical reality that tests the validity of signs, but the cultural-ideological power that is invested in them. It does not matter whether the Michael Jackson body really exists when millions of youngsters want to have, and to become like, that body. In this respect, the formally iconic body turns into a wholly symbolized virtual construct, an element of simulation, and ceases to be an access to the Real.

V

On the basis of this outline of the history of the body semiotic, we can establish a typology of theaters in relation to the world model of the culture in which the specific theater functions. The semiotic disposition of culture will determine whether the dominant theatrical mode can play with the problematic of representation, or it rather tries to conceal the representational insufficiency of the stage, and makes every attempt to create the illusion of presence. We find that relatively stable periods /the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment/ with a fixed world model only allow for a theater which believes in and disseminates the possibility of full representation. Transitory periods, however /the Renaissance, the Postmodern/ allow for *metatheater* to emerge as cultural practice, which thematizes the problematic nature of semiosis. This theater becomes a productive practice in that it dislocates the spectator from their comfortable subject positions, and urges them to have a metaperspective on the representation on the stage in particular, and on *Representation*, i.e., ideology in general. Adapting Julia Kristeva's typology of signifying practices (Kristeva 1984: 86) I will call the former, symbolically fixed mode *phenotheater*, while the latter I call *genotheater*, indicating that it tests and opens up the limits of signification.

The high semioticity of the medieval world model ensures a fully allegorical representation, and a belief in the guarantee of meaning behind that representation. This will be the basis of the emblematic theater in the Renaissance, which employs a relatively small number of stage objects that can evoke a multiplicity of meanings on several levels, based on the audience's readiness to interpret signs. This semiotic disposition is inherited by the Renaissance audience from the medieval world model, and relies on a wide range of iconographic traditions, ranging from the *memento mori* through the *danse macabre* to emblems of the *ars moriendi*. However, these traditions are used in the emblematic theater to investigate epistemological problems that already foreshadow the world model of the Enlightenment. Early modern culture uses the emblematic theater, because it cannot get rid of the iconographic traditions yet, but it stages the binarisms /seeming-being, appearance-reality, show-substance/ constitutive of modern questions concerning the nature of meaning and semiosis. The persistent metatheatricity of Renaissance theater prevents the stage representation from the attempt to become full semiosis, to reach the impossible closure of representation.

The world model of the Enlightenment will replace the *emblematic genotheater* by the *photographic phenotheater*, because it needs to believe that reality can be discursively known and represented. Simultaneously, the power of the image will be replaced in this theater by the power of the word, an early example of which is Shakespearean drama. "Words, words, words", as we all recall.

VI

In the history of Western civilization, we know of three main cultural practices that publicly displayed the body. Two of these are well known—the public execution and the theater were social forms of the ostension of the body. It is the third form to which I would like to take a little detour here, and this is the theater of anatomy, which had its start in the early 15th century, and was in its full vogue in the late Renaissance and the early 17th century. To introduce this cultural phenomenon, I will briefly refer to a number of representational traditions.

The body and the cadaver are the themes of several iconographic-emblematic traditions starting from the Middle Ages. The *memento mori*, the *ars moriendi*, the *exemplum horrendum*, the *contemptus mundi* and the *danse macabre* traditions all used representations in which the central element was the body as the metaphor of mortality and death. We can perceive a process of "purification" in these traditions, in which the closeness between the represented corpse and the contemplating subject is gradually reduced. The iconography of the cadaver goes through a metamorphosis as we move from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. The burial sculptures, reliefs and paintings used to display demonical, allegorical monsters, disemboweled bodies and abject creatures, but by the Renaissance these are transformed into the more grotesque and less abject skeletons of the dance of death, which directs mortals to the grave in a carnivalesque mood. By the end of the Renaissance, the crystal-clear emblem of the *memento mori* tradition will be

an almost obligatory accessory on the garments of the aristocracy: this emblem is the skull, which is the central signifier in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, for example. By this time the flesh, the really abject part, disappears from the bones.

The thematizing of the body, the production of corpses in the Renaissance theater will be a representational technique that aims at coming up with an answer to the epistemological crisis of the period. This practice does not only stage the commonplace skull of the *memento mori*, but it experiments with the dissolving of the body and the staging of the abject through metatheatrical techniques in order to involve the spectator in a *total effect* that seems to result in the *immediacy of experience*. Using and expanding the emblematic-iconographic traditions, the emblematic theater becomes a laboratory of signification where the *abjection of the body* tries to go beyond the binarisms and indeterminacies of appearance and reality, and through this effect it strives to establish the full presence of the signified. A presence which is then problematized by metatheatricality. This is the body, together with the imagery of brutal violence, sexuality, mutilation and heterogeneous corporeality, that will be absent from the theater of the bourgeoisie, which will be based on the concept of the unified subject. Among other techniques, it is the presence of the *theatrical anatomy* that distinguishes the Renaissance emblematic theater from the photographic theater of stage realism, and this theatrical anatomy had a concrete practice to rely on.

Indeed, it was the social practice of the *anatomical theater* in which spectators could best experience the presence and the secrets of the body. By the Renaissance, the public anatomy lesson became an institutionalized social spectacle, the popularity of which almost equaled that of the public theaters in London for example. Just like the other traditions, the theater of anatomy also went through metamorphoses of a semiotic nature during the period between Mondino de Luzzi's lesson and Rembrandt's painting of Doctor Tulp in 1632.

The first documented and important dissection was performed by Mondino de Luzzi in Bologna in 1315. This was only attended by medical students, but by the 1530s hundreds of people fill the permanent theaters of anatomy in Padua and Bologna. The dissection is done by a surgeon, and the professor himself presides over the action as a mediator between God, his Text and the corpse. The objective here is to demonstrate the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm: we find the same order under the skin as in the entire universe.

The anatomical theater is an epistemological breakthrough, since the interiority of the body was a secret to the public eye in the Middle Ages, and it was only revealed in accidents, executions or on the battlefield. However, the real purpose was not simply to open up and dissect the body, but the lesson and the procedure that followed. The anatomy is the act of reassembling the body after the dissection, according to strictly coded and ritualized steps. Although the Pope gave his consent to Mondino's dissection already, the process was still considered to be a kind of a violation upon the creation of God, so the ritual was understood as a public atonement for the epistemological curiosity which helped people peep under the skin of things.

By the 16th century the dissection and the lesson are performed by the pro-

fessor himself, who appears to identify with the corpse. Vesalius in the 1530s inserts the cadaver into a new verticality by hanging it on ropes to have easier access to the bones. In a certain perspective the dissected corpse is still alive in the anatomy theater, and the anatomy lesson becomes a drama in which the reconstitution of the body reveals the order, the *telos* of the structure. In this drama the anatomist is already more of a performer than a central figure of authority.

The changes in the format of the anatomy theater reveal changes in the general attitude to the presence and the nature of the body in culture. The heterogeneity of the body will be an unwelcome presence in the culture of the Enlightenment world model, which will try to cover the corporeal with new discourses of the cogito. A different drama is taking place in the anatomy lesson of Nicholas Tulp, as we see in Rembrandt's famous painting. The expression on the faces reveals not so much an epistemological curiosity but rather horror and distance: Tulp opens that from which the Cartesian subject will keep separating itself.

VII

I cannot investigate here to what extent the theater of anatomy had an influence on the representations of the body in the Renaissance theater. I believe, however, that the changes in the theater of anatomy and its representations are parallel with the changes of the function of the body in the theater. Simultaneously with the decline of the interest in the theater of anatomy, the emblematic theater will gradually turn into a photographic theater by the 18th century, which puts the skin back on the represented characters. The abjection of bodies, the crossing of boundaries will no longer function as a representational technique in the new theater, since it wants to articulate homogeneous, compact subject positions for the spectators. To return to our initial typology, the emblematic theater as genotheater still functioned as an anatomical theater which opened up the subject for its heterogeneity in the middle of the epistemological crisis of early modern culture. It is this anatomizing of the body which will be absent from the photographic theater.

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