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## Yuri Lotman and the Semiotics of Theatre / *Iuri Lótman e a semiótica do teatro*

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### ABSTRACT

The semiotician Yuri Lotman wrote decisive contributions to the field of semiotics of literature. However, throughout the 1970s he expanded his universe of interests beyond the literary text contributing to the study of cinema, fine arts and even Russian nobility's code of behavior. In this article, I introduce Lotman's writings in the field of theatre semiotics to demonstrate how the Russian semiotician brings important considerations to a field until then underexplored within semiotic studies. His reflections on the nature of the theatrical space, on the relations between text and code, on the role of theatre semiotics, and on the theatrical *ensemble* enlarged the path opened by the Linguistic Circle of Prague and anticipate discussions that only recently started to be explored by the semiotics of theatre.

KEYWORDS: Yuri Lotman; Semiotics of theatre

### RESUMO

*O semioticista Iuri Lótman escreveu contribuições decisivas no campo da semiótica da literatura. No entanto, ao longo dos anos 70 passa a ampliar seu universo de interesses para além do texto literário, trazendo contribuições para os estudos do cinema, das artes plásticas e mesmo das normas de etiqueta da nobreza russa. Neste artigo pretendo introduzir as contribuições de Lótman no campo da semiótica da cena e demonstrar como o semioticista russo realiza reflexões importantes em um campo até então pouco explorado dentro dos estudos semióticos. Ao analisar o caráter do espaço teatral, as relações entre texto e código, o papel da semiótica teatral e do ensemble cênico, Lótman retoma o caminho aberto pelo Círculo Linguístico de Praga e antecipa flancos de interesse que só recentemente seriam explorados pela semiótica teatral.*

*PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Iuri Lótman; Semiótica do teatro*

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At the end of *Semiotics of the Stage*,<sup>1</sup> one of Yuri Lotman's longest essays on the language of the theatre published in 1980, the theoretician concludes his considerations with an impacting affirmation: theatre is a true "semiotic encyclopedia" (LOTMAN, 2002, p.431).<sup>2</sup> And that is because the stage, composed of multiple and varied aspects such as dramaturgy, illumination, scenography, sound design, the body and voice of actors and actresses, as well as the very posture of the spectator in the audience, assembles innumerable other sign systems in the same system. Thus, if the "semiotics of art occupies an important place in the general theory of sign systems" (2002, p.402),<sup>3</sup> the semiotics of the stage occupy a privileged inside position because varied types of art and their respective artistic problems are linked to it.

Lotman reached a substantial conclusion that reveals simultaneously the privileged status and the condition of multiplicity of theatre as art. However, it is curious to note that Semiotic studies until the 1980s did not debate it at length, especially if compared to the volume of studies produced about other semiotic systems, such as the ones of literature, visual arts, and even cinema.<sup>4</sup> But that does not imply that this science, preoccupied with the processes of communication and signification, left theatre completely aside.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Prague Linguistic Circle theoreticians had already developed important debates on the semiotics of the stage. These linguists were under the strong influence of Ferdinand de Saussure and Russian Formalists' structuralism. The theoreticians of this period had to deal with the fact that the study of theatre as language was a field to be explored considering the little theoretical contributions on this system. One should keep in mind that, beginning on the seventeenth century, European theatre praxis assimilated the strict neoclassical formulations, which had Boileau's *L'art poétique* (1898) as their greatest advocate. These formulations

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<sup>1</sup> In Russian: Семиотика Сцены.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from Yuri Lotman's works that are not available in English were translated from the original in Russian. In Russian: "[...] энциклопедией семиотики."

<sup>3</sup> In the original: "семиотика искусства занимает важное место в общей теории знаковых систем."

<sup>4</sup> Lotman acknowledges that "the semiotics of theatre is an important part of this complex problem [the general theory of signs] and, so far, understudied" in the beginning of the referenced article (2002, p.402). In Russian: "Семиотика театра — важная и до сих пор еще мало разработанная часть этой сложной проблемы."

predicated a skewed recuperation of Aristotle's *Poetics*<sup>5</sup> rigorously following the three units rule to the achievement of verisimilitude, as well as the idea of comedy and tragedy as pure genres with strict internal rules and associated to a rigorous thematical and procedural decorum (ROUBINE, 2003, pp.14-40).

Such beliefs, strictly centered on the dramaturgical text and on the staging of realistic illusion, suffered great shocks that were a result of the romantic recuperation of the Shakespearian dramaturgy from the end of the eighteenth century (considered impure by many neoclassic scholars). These shocks were also provoked by the dramaturgical productions of Ibsen, Chekhov, Maeterlinck, and Strindberg by the end of the nineteenth century. These plays problematized not only a closed notion on the three unities (then cemented by Eugène Scribe *well-made play*) but defied the very language of the theatre as support. Meanwhile, theatre directors, such as Antoine, Gordon Craig and Konstantin Stanislavsky, gradually challenged such theatre *doxa* once its rigidity was an increasing deterrent to the development of all the potentialities of the scenic phenomenon (ROUBINE, 2003, pp.138-168). They initiated an intense process of language research produced in dialogue with the dramaturgical text but going beyond in such a way that notions like *ensemble* or actor's training received non-traditional definitions.

A great part of these stage directors were involved directly with the development of their own practices – so much so that many of their conceptions spread through manifestos, occasional articles, through memory, or through the notes taken by actors who worked with them. Only later in the 1930s substantive theoretical formulations would accompany and try to systematize these novelties in the development of theatrical scenes.

A decisive essay to this first boost within Semiotic studies was *The Aesthetics of the Art of Drama* by Otakar Zich, published in Prague in 1931. Throughout the twentieth century the *Aesthetics* became a type of “bible” of the Czech theatre. Despite not being a typical structuralist study, it had ostensive influence on subsequent semiotic studies and, in an unprecedented way, offered a consistent body of concepts through

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<sup>5</sup>ARISTOTLE. *Aristotle's Poetics*. Translated by George Whalley. Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press,1997.

which Theatre studies could move considering a semiotic perspective. Zich departed from the belief that theatre established an interdependent relation with other systems but denied that any of them could prevail in the moment of the characterization of the scenic phenomenon. The theoretician had in mind the prior European tradition that conceived the dramaturgic text – the literary system – as central within theatre. Furthermore, Zich elevated the performance to the condition of decisive component and sufficient to the creation of drama work. This was fundamental to the very confirmation of Theatre studies as a discipline in the first half of the century in combination with his conception of theatre as a language oriented to an audience (PŠENIČKA, 2014, pp.71-72).

Jan Mukařovský, another member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, published in Prague also in 1931 the essay *An Attempt at a Structural Analysis of a Dramatic Figure*.<sup>6</sup> Considered a foundational text in Theatre studies, Mukařovský examines the gesture in theatre departing from an analysis and categorization of Charlie Chaplin's mime.<sup>7</sup> However, his main contribution is the understanding of the dramatic performance as a complete sign unity, or a "macrosign" (MUKAŘOVSKÝ, 1973, pp.342–349). The signifier is the play with all of its concrete components; the signified is the "aesthetic object" that resides in the "collective consciousness of the audience."<sup>8</sup> To Keir Elam the advantage of this approach is that it "subordinates all of the contributing elements in a complete unified text in addition to acknowledging the value of the audience as the ultimate producer of meaning" (ELAM, 1987, p.5).

Nonetheless, it was Piotr Bogatyrev, an important scholar on Russian folklore, who provided a clear definition regarding the insertion of Theatre studies in Semiotic studies. In 1938, in his first essay *Semiotics in the Folk Theatre*, initially published in Czech, Bogatyrev dealt with how the stage radically transforms the nature of objects. That is, an object that has no special meaning beyond its direct and practical use (a piece of wood or a chair, for example), onstage is subsumed by a significant power that

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<sup>6</sup> MUKAŘOVSKÝ, J. *An Attempt at a Structural Analysis of a dramatic Figure*. In: BURBANK, J.; STEINER, P. (ed.). *The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*. Translation by the editors. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978. pp.171-177.

<sup>7</sup> Mukařovský later wrote about theater semiotics in important essays like *Stage Language in Avant-garde Theatre*, from 1937 (MUKAŘOVSKÝ, 1988, pp.229-222).

<sup>8</sup> In Portuguese: "consciência coletiva do público."

attaches new attributes to it (the wood becomes a symbol of violence or the chair immediately converts into a throne and a symbol of power):

on the stage things that play the part of theatrical signs can in the course of the play acquire special features, qualities, and attributes that they do not have in real life. Things in the theater, just as the actor himself, are transformable. As an actor on stage may change into another person (a young person into an old one, a woman into a man, and so forth), so also anything, with which the actor performs, may acquire a new, hitherto foreign, function. The famous shoes of Charlie Chaplin are changed by his acting into food, the laces becoming spaghetti (*Gold Rush*); in the same film two rolls dance like a pair of lovers. Such transformed things, used by the actor in his performance, are very common in folk theater (BOGATYREV, 1976, pp.35-36).

This process of *semiotization* is what allows for the object to gain symbolic meaning and to integrate the text of the spectacle (BOGATYREV, 1976, pp.33-50). Thus, theatre signs point firstly to their own function as signs but also to other possible signs that do not equate to their material purpose or immediate function. It means that, in pointing to the *denotation* to which the object traditionally refers (the costume of a character or the decoration of a house onstage), these signs also turn to a series of secondary *connotations* according to the political, social, and cultural backgrounds of audience members. Thus, the costume as well as the house decoration, beyond their immediate signs, can also become signs of royalty, poverty, vulgarity, ostentation – that is, they are *signs of signs* (BOGATYREV, 1976, p.33).

Afterward, Jirí Veltruský synthesized also in Czechoslovakia the formulations posed by Bogatyrev that “all that is on the stage is a sign” (1940 *apud* PAVIS, 1999, p.332),<sup>9</sup> which means that every component of the stage is subjected to the connotation-denotation or semiotization-dessemiotization dialectics. When the stage front curtain opens, a universe saturated with meanings immediately absorbs the audience. Meanwhile, any break in the stage dynamic (an external noise, a sneeze in the audience, an actor that forgets the script lines, or the association that a spectator makes between the manners utilized by the same actor in different plays) can function as an

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<sup>9</sup> PAVIS, P. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

interference. It withdraws from an object its secondary meanings bringing it back to a condition of denotation or dissemiotization.

Similarly, in 1940 in Prague, Jindřich Honzl worked with the idea that a simple item can represent different dramatic functions on the stage in the text *The Dynamics of Signs in Theatre*.<sup>10</sup> He affirms that “there are no absolutely fixed representational relations” (ELAM, 1987, p.9), thus highlighting the incomparable flexibility, variability, and multiplicity of senses that a sign can achieve in theatre. As one can see, the Prague Linguistic Circle was the first to explore and theoretically systematize this process. Lotman, as many other semioticians who preceded him, returned frequently to this subject.

Notwithstanding, after this first wave of studies in the 1930s and 1940s, little was written about Stage semiotics. Only in the 1960s, through studies like those of the Polish author Tadeusz Kowzan, did formulations in this field receive new impetus. In *The Sign in the Theater*, Kowzan describes the specificity of the theatre phenomenon departing from the ideas of the unity of the spectacle, of the understanding of the stage phenomenon through its division in semiotic unities, and the elaboration of a typology of signs. To him, the fact that everything in theatre is a sign allows for the classification of these signs in *natural* and *artificial*. A cause-effect relation conducts the former while the latter suffers from a direct intervention of the human will and its senses (KOWZAN, 1968, pp.52-80).

Later, Kowzan himself warned about the risks of transplanting the work conducted by linguists to Theatre Semiotics. One of these practices consists of identifying minimal linguistic unities and their distinctive pairs. According to him, the search for a signifier’s smallest unity would excessively fragment the global character of the stage phenomenon. That is, “[a] better idea would be to identify a body of signs making up a *Gestalt* that signifies as a whole, not merely through the accumulation of signs” (KOWZAN, 1975, p.215 *apud* PAVIS, 1999, p.327).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> HONZL, J. *The Dynamics of Signs in Theatre*. Translated by I. R. Titunik. In: MATEJKA, L.; TITUNIK, I. R. (ed.). *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976. pp.74-93.

<sup>11</sup> For reference, see footnote 8.

This representational impulse to create a semiotic model based on a typology of signs was at large the project of a generation of scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, among whom is Algirdas Greimas. Although theatre was not the focus of his studies, Greimas' actancial models and his narratology also inspired applications in Theatre Semiotics. However, as highlighted by Pavis (1999, p.328),<sup>12</sup> these concepts bring to Representation studies a series of typological generalities that often do not encompass the specificity of theatrical representation. This is because the model surrounding the actants – those who do the action or receive it, according to Greimas, – turns specifically to a focus on the theatrical text and its articulations in a plot intrigue and its characters. The risk is precisely not to contemplate other elements that compose a scene overlooking the audience's interpretation and reception processes. Such typology reaches an abstract scheme, anterior to cultural and ideological elements that can operate in the context in which the theatre gestures occur.

As emphasized later by many Theatre Semiotics scholars, such impulse towards a previous abstract typology and a minimal theatre sign was vain. According to Anne Ubersfeld, it is not even possible to speak of a theatre language since there is not an isolated theatre sign equivalent to a linguistic sign. A "theatre sign" is in fact a "superposition of signs" in which the vertical and simultaneous piling of signs can convey many things at the same time. Thus, it is not possible to think about communication in theatre on the same terms of a linguistic scheme that is regulated by the relation among source-code-message-receiver. The representation can be described as a system of signs capable of communicating, however, through a complex series of sources, a series of messages, and multiple decoders (UBERSFELD, 2013, pp.9-13).<sup>13</sup> In addition, Lotman stressed that against this scheme lies the fact that there is no coincidence even between the codes of the source and the codes of the receiver, once the audience tries to decipher what happens on the stage. It is within this process of establishing a new codification, of constructing a new meaning that resides the pleasure of the audience (LOTMAN, 1972, p.33). Likewise, Erika Fischer-Lichte denies the possibility of a common theatre code capable of offering the same communication

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<sup>12</sup> For reference, see footnote 8.

<sup>13</sup> UBERSFELD, A. *Reading Theatre*. Translated by Frank Collins; edited and with a foreword by Paul Perron and Patrick Debbeche. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1999.

structure to different emerging contexts of the stage phenomenon since different theatre traditions work with different bodies of signs (1992, p.11)

Therefore, the attempts to establish codes strictly for theatre or even a hierarchy between them is not productive:

It is preferable not to try to establish a taxonomy of codes in advance but rather to observe how each performance builds or conceals its codes, weaves its *performance text*; how the codes evolve throughout the performance, how we go from explicit codes or *conventions* to implicit codes. Instead of considering the code as a system buried in the performance that is to be updated by analysis, it would be more accurate to speak of a *process of establishing a code* by the interpreter, for it is the receiver who, as hermeneut, decides to read a particular aspect of the performance according to a particular, freely-selected code (PAVIS, 1999, pp.328-329; emphasis in original).<sup>14</sup>

This critique to the idea of a fixed code in theatre, which Patrice Pavis voices, has as its axis the criticism to the positivist inflexibility and an exclusive focus on the message. He attaches more relevance to a hermeneutic perspective that takes into consideration the source-interpreter position responsible for the very installation of a code. The audience also has a decisive role in this interpretation that happens in many levels, since it looks at the group of signs and their relations associating them to the audience's own repertoire. The result is a semiotics less centered on a mechanical decoding of signs and more open to an object's historicity and positionality.

Nonetheless, these critiques to a taxonomic semiotics centered on the search of a minimum sign were only formulated on the field of theatre in the 1980s and 1990s. A great number of the scholars of the period, who dedicated their investigations to a systematic study of Stage semiotics, such as Erika Fischer-Lichte, Anne Ubersfeld, and Patrice Pavis, rarely refer to the few but enlightening essays by Yuri Lotman. Curiously, Lotman not only synthesizes a great part of what the Prague Linguistic Circle formulated, but also resolves some of the complications posed by the 1970s' semiotic Theatre studies.

The whole trajectory of Yuri Lotman's Semiotic studies departs from a critique of tradition based on models. The scholar never wrote exhaustively about the concept of

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<sup>14</sup> For reference, see footnote 8.



sign. He moves away from the Peircean tradition that is centered on the sign and advocates for a focus on the text as the basic entity of culture. Thus, the text is both product of communication and the most important object in Semiotic studies (SEMENKO, 2012, p.78).

Already in 1973, during the process of elaboration of a series of essays about culture as text, Lotman writes *Theatre and Theatricality in the Order of Early Nineteenth Century Culture*<sup>15</sup> and *The Stage and Painting as Code Mechanisms for Cultural Behavior in the Early Nineteenth Century*.<sup>16</sup> Both essays are part of his efforts to comprehend a “poetics of daily behavior.” Lotman conceives individual behavior as a historical category moving away from impersonal and insensitive approaches to history and demonstrating how semiotic systems can exercise influence on daily life. He analyzes the behavior of Russian aristocracy from the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century and indicates how they structure a theatrical daily behavior inspired by literature (considering their gestures, and their communication in French), like in a performance. The source of such inspiration was French culture, which had already placed theatre (with its playwrights and actors) in the center of nobility’s life (LOTMAN, 1992, pp.269-286). Likewise, theatre shared with painting some vocabulary (stage, *tableau*, act, etc.). The latter incorporates from the former a predilection for a stage behavior based on immobility and discretion, which also seemed to structure ways to self-introduce and act in the everyday of Russian nobility (1992, pp.287-295).

However, in these essays as well as in *Painting and The Language of Theater: Notes on The Problem of Iconic Rhetoric*,<sup>17</sup> from 1978, in which Lotman addresses the theatricalization of the costumes of characters portrayed in eighteenth century’s paintings and how this would influence usual clothes of the Russian aristocracy, Lotman just touches on the stage phenomenon and on the idea of theatricality without further

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<sup>15</sup> LOTMAN, Y. *Theatre and Theatricality in the Order of Early Nineteenth Century Culture*. *Soviet Studies in Literature: A Journal of Translations*, nº11, pp.155-185, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> LOTMAN, Y. *The Stage and Painting as Code Mechanisms for Cultural Behavior in the Early Nineteenth Century*. In: LOTMAN, J.; USPENSKIJ, B. *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*. Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1984. pp.165-176.

<sup>17</sup> LOTMAN, Y. *Painting and The Language of Theater: Notes on The Problem of Iconic Rhetoric*. In: EFIMOVA, A.; MANOVICH, L. (ed.). *Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993. pp.45-55.

developing them. It is only in the essay *Semiotics of Cinema*,<sup>18</sup> from 1980, his one and only extensive study about the subject, that the specificity of the stage phenomenon was improved. However, Lotman returned only sporadically to stage semiotics and the idea of theatricality to illustrate studies on other semiotic systems.

These essays compose a period of amplification of Lotman's semiotic horizon beyond literature. It includes studies on "culture in its most diversified manifestations: theatre, cinema, painting, social behavior etiquette from the nineteenth century, the functioning of the human brain, etc." (VOLKOVA AMÉRICO, 2012, p.89).<sup>19</sup> In 1973 the Russian semiotician had already published a monograph about cinema semiotics and about aesthetic problems in cinema, which reveals not only the versatility of studies that composed the universe of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School (2012, p.91), but Lotman's disposition to explore fields beyond the traditional and classic literary canon.

Lotman begins *Semiotics of the Stage* following a typical path of semioticians: He recuperates his perspective on semiotics and establishes a determined standpoint. According to him, semiotics is a science about relations, about transmitting messages, about understanding, and about the forms of codification among human beings. Therefore, by dealing with such relations, semiotics is a science profoundly social. Thus, since art is a means of relation and knowledge, it is also semiotic by nature. And so is theatre, so far an art form not sufficiently explored by Semiotic studies (LOTMAN, 2002, p.401).

Lotman addresses precisely the problem of a Stage Semiotics departing from a broader perspective: *the theatre outside theatre*. This means that a correct comprehension of this phenomenon depends on looking beyond the practices occurring in theater buildings. According to the author, theatre is on the level of *semiotic behavior* (*znakovye povedeniya*) because, even though in everyday life a person can move, gesture, and speak, their intention is practical and not utilitarian. However, in festivities, games, celebrations, rituals, dance and play, the disposition of these behaviors is different, special – due to the presence of costumes, sounds, and even intonation, which creates a

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<sup>18</sup> LOTMAN, Y. *Semiotics of Cinema*. Translated by Mark Suino. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976.

<sup>19</sup> In Portuguese: "cultura em suas manifestações mais diversificadas: teatro, cinema, pintura, etiqueta de comportamento social do século XIX, funcionamento do cérebro humano etc."

distinct sphere of time and space (2002, pp.403-404). At this point it is inevitable to think on how a series of social routines organize around such events reinforcing its distinct character: special dates are created for these events, as well as the sale of clothes with a variety of accessories; there is a distinct space to determined celebrations with music and specific decoration... In the case of theatre, there are many specific behaviors: in Britain, seven-thirty in the evening is always the time for a play to begin. There is also murmur in the *foyer*, the sellers of goodies who appear in front of the audience, closed curtains (or open in a less traditional performance) before the beginning of a performance, ambient music, the announcements that precede the presentation, among others. Every item emphasizes signs and symbolic behavior of gestures, sounds, lights, and words that appear on the stage.

However, despite the didactic distinction, Lotman highlights that in real life these two spheres (*direct* and *semiotic behaviors*) interact and influence each other. Here, *playing (igra)* becomes a direct example. Playing is a fundamental part of theatre and simultaneously spreads throughout everyday life. To Lotman, playing is the synthesis of a practical/direct behavior and a semiotic behavior: a dog plays with another and pretends to bite (but does not really hurt his playmate); a person does not run, but gestures as if they are running; one does not die, but they feel moribund; one does not love, but it feels like they are in love (2002, pp.404-405). Here it is fundamental to accept the rules playing and their ludic aspect. Otherwise, there will be confusion:

[...] when the “make believe” disappears – playing is destroyed. Thus, children frequently dive into the game and lose the sense of the situations’ conventionality: the war game becomes a “real” fight. Here goes an episode of the Pugachev war’s time heard by Pushkin from Krylov: some children started to playact the “Pugachev war.” “They paired up into the guard group and the rebels group and the fights were considerable.” Then emerged a hostility that was not ludic anymore, but real (LOTMAN, 2002, p.404).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In Russian: “[...] когда исчезает ‘как бы’, разрушает игру. Так, дети часто ‘заигрываются’, теряя ощущение условности ситуации: игра в войну превращается в драку ‘всерьез’. Вот эпизод из эпохи пугачевской войны, записанный Пушкиным со слов И. А. Крылова: дети, затеявшие ‘игру в пугачевщину’, ‘разделились на две стороны, городовую и бунтовскую, и драки были значительные’. Возникла уже не игровая, а настоящая вражда.”

However, in the case of playing, it is fundamental to highlight that it does not conceive the existence of a non-participant. This means that every person involved surrenders to the ludic aspect and the very presence of an audience could break its existence. In this sense, considering the audience of a traditional theater, playing does not necessarily cease to exist. On the contrary: the audience is transformed in a co-participant of that ludic activity. The audience starts to be part of it from the moment the curtains open and the stage action begins. Some contemporary theatre experiences (such as the tropicalist dazzlement of the *Teatro Oficina* or even the *Teatro Fórum* and the *Teatro Invisível*, by Augusto Boal in Brazil) tried to take the audience's condition of co-participation to its limits. They required sometimes a more direct corporeal integration, sometimes a more active political-discursive involvement. That is, they tried to break with a supposed passivity of the audience (even though, according to Lotman, this is not possible) to recuperate in theatre playing what it has of more intense: the creation of a mechanism to activate a creative consciousness in which participants are guided through "a complex and dimensionally varied continuum of possibilities" (2002, p.406).<sup>21</sup>

After moving on from the realm of the more general game, that is the departure point to understand a Stage Semiotics, as I showed previously, Lotman concentrates on the very theatre and reaffirms it as the realm of a specific language that allows for the relation between author/actors and audience. That is, differently from Anne Ubersfeld, who believes that it is not possible to think about theatre as a language (at least in Saussurean terms, in which minimal elements that composed it can be isolated), Lotman believes that this is feasible but that it would be *naïve* to understand a language of the theatre absolutely and "simply" outside certain cultural forms. Lotman likely has in mind the fact that the naturality of a theatre language is constructed inside specific social relations. Thus, the *Cavalo-Marinho* ("Seahorse"), a theatrical celebration typical of Brazil's *Zona da Mata* ("Backwoods") is more natural and comprehensible to an audience from Pernambuco than to a Japanese audience familiar with the *nô* or *kabuki* theatre. The latter audience will notice more the specificities of the theatrical language from Brazil's north region since some of the cultural forms of Brazil can be foreign to this person.

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<sup>21</sup> In Russian: "в сложном и многоплановом континууме возможностей."

Yet, Lotman advances on studying elements that seem essential to specify the language of the theatre in relation to others. The first of them is the *artistic space of the stage* (*khudozhestvennoe prostranstvo sceny*). He is responsible for assigning to the stage the type and measure of the *conventionality of the theatre* (*teatral'naya uslovnost'*) (2002, p.407). The space of theatre has its own characteristics, despite the great degree of variation within different moments and cultures. Anne Ubersfeld departs from the same notion proposed by Lotman and synthesizes the fundamental marks of this theatrical space: it is a circumscribed place, multiple (the stage-audience dichotomy), that always commits to the imitation or ritualization of something that is codified by the “stage traditions of a given era and place” (UBERSFELD, 1999, p.97).<sup>22</sup> This conceptualization can leave aside more contemporary attempts to eliminate the stage-audience separation. It also departs from a notion of representation that has been contested in the last decades. However, even if this conceptualization seems somewhat conservative, it has never ceased to exist.

To Lotman, the quest for a realistic theatre is vain. The very division established by the theater room (by the stand in the street theatre or by the arena in a plaza), which imposes a separation between stage and audience, generates a noise in the search for a full realism. This unfamiliar situation that sets up the game is in itself unnatural. After all, there is not anything natural in an immobile room concentrated in an action happening in front of people. Borrowing from Pushkin, Lotman calls it *consistent improbability* (*uslovnnoe nepravdopodobie*) (LÓTMAN, 2002, p.407).

Lotman explores some fundamental dichotomies that structure the relations formed between these two spheres of the theatrical space. The first one is the opposition between existence and inexistence. To him, the dynamics of theatre imposes a movement of annulment of the audience's space starting from the moment that the stage action begins. Once more, Lotman has in mind a form of theatre popular in the 1970s and 1980s Soviet Russia: that in which the division between stage and audience is strict and the audience's field of vision is defined by what happened on the center of the stage.

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<sup>22</sup> For reference, see footnote 11.

However, even though Lotman's exemplifications are limited, his formulation has a large reach. For instance, there is still a tendency to prioritize what is inside the field of vision in various types of theater, like the Brechtian, in which actors change clothes onstage to indicate the change of a character, or Ritual theatre, where the audience is constantly invited to join the rite and, therefore, to pay attention to its "real" surroundings. Regardless of how much one searches for the break of illusion or ritual integration, the members of the audience (or participant) do not change their focus of attention to details outside the space of the stage. That is, theatre art requires a present recipient and this presence benefits from attention to the stage action in that space. At the same time, it is this presence that guarantees the *variability* (*variativnost'*) that turns theatre in such a unique phenomenon (LOTMAN, 2002, p.409). Specifically, it means that, though the conventionality defines each space, there is a dialogical relation between the stage and the audience that is inherent to theatre: silences, noises, and even the audience's more visible signs impact the action and can alter it. Obviously, the same is true from the perspective of the stage towards the audience through a variety of stimuli (LOTMAN, 2002, pp.409-410).

Another fundamental opposition that is also constitutive of theatre is the dichotomy between the meaningful and the not-meaningful. Here, Lotman follows what was posed by Jirí Veltřuský, who affirmed that "everything on the stage is sign", to convey that the stage is distinguished by its "high level of sign saturation" (LOTMAN, 2002, p.410).<sup>23</sup> Every movement in theatre becomes a theatrical gesture, any word contains different layers of meaning, and everything has a variety of detailed meanings. Obviously, the opposition is constituted through the off-stage discourse, through the trivial use of movements, words, and objects from real life. However, this opposition becomes complex because in theatre the receiver is doubled: something is said to a character onstage but, at the same time, to the audience. The actor might know what will be said on the sequence and what specific gestures and objects mean, but the character ignores their complete meanings. Likewise, the audience, differently from the character, knows what happened before and what was happening when the same character was outside the stage. As illustrated well by Lotman, "To Othello, Desdemona's napkin is a

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<sup>23</sup> In Russian: "высокой знаковой насыщенностью."

cheating proof; however, to the audience, it is a symbol of Iago's perfidy" (2002, p.411).<sup>24</sup>

This same double dynamic is what constructs irony in Anton Chekov's plays. In *Three Sisters*, the audience, more than the characters, have access to the depth of what occurs on the stage. Already in the first scene of the first act, Olga speaks to her sisters about the past and the present. Meanwhile, the Baron Tuzenbach and the army doctor Chebutykin are behind the columns in the dining room completely oblivious to what they are discussing:

OLGA. Today it's warm, the windows can be thrown open, and the birch trees aren't even budding yet. Father was put in charge of a brigade and we all left Moscow eleven years ago, and I distinctly remember, it was early May, why, just this time of year, everything in Moscow would already be in bloom, warm everything would be bathed in sunlight. Eleven years have gone by, but I can remember everything there, as if we'd left yesterday. Oh my goodness! I woke up this morning, saw the light pouring in, the spring-time, and joy began to quicken in my heart, I began to long passionately for my beloved home.

CHEBUTYKIN. To hell with both of you!

TUSENBACH. You're right, it's ridiculous.

[MASHA, brooding over her book, quietly whistles a tune under her breath.]

OLGA. Don't whistle, Masha. How can you! [*Pause*]

Because I'm at the high school all day long and then have to give tutorials well into the night, I've got this constant headache, and my thoughts are those of an old woman. As a matter of fact, the four years I've been working at the high school, I've felt as if every day my strength and youth were draining from me drop by drop. While that same old dream keeps growing bigger and stronger...

IRINA. To go to Moscow. To sell the house, wind up everything here and – go to Moscow. . .

OLGA. Yes! Quick as you can to Moscow.

[CHEBUTYKIN and TUSENBACH laugh.]

(CHEKHOV, 2007, pp.884-885).<sup>25</sup>

Olga shares with her sisters' memories that are already known by the characters. Irina and Masha know that the sun shines over Moscow and the gardens are blooming at that time of the year. In this moment, the dialogue becomes similar to a soliloquy,

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<sup>24</sup> In Russian: "Платок Дездемоны для Отелло — улика ее измены, для партера — символ коварства Яго."

<sup>25</sup> CHEKHOV, A. *Three Sisters*. In: SENELICK, L. (ed.) *The Complete Plays: Anton Chekhov*. Translated and annotated by the editor. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. pp.882-965.

which Chebutykin and Tusenbach immediately interrupt. And such interruption is more noticeable to the audience than to Olga, since the two army officers are in another room talking about a different subject. The whole conversation between them could happen in normal voice, like a constant noise over what is said by the character in the foreground, but Chekhov promoted a construction that allows for only the following passage to get to the room where the sisters are and to the ears of the audience: “CHEBUTYKIN. To hell with both of you! TUSENBACH. You’re right, it’s ridiculous.” If for Olga this manifestation can sound only as the inconvenience of having guests who speak loudly, to the audience it is inevitable that it works directly as an ironic counterpoint.

A shock of semiotic effects occurs onstage. That centralizes not only what is said (and how it is said) but also the sign group that operates to the conformation of this phenomenon. Therefore, the preference of authors to any literary tendency to tell if their characters’ lines reproduce or not the everyday speech is not important. By norm, the sign saturation that constitutes the scene does not allow an aspiration to the real, but only to the verisimilar.

However, to Lotman, one should not reduce theatre to this one dimension. Theatre is both real and illusory:

It is real because the nature of the sign is material; to be converted in sign and to be converted in a social phenomenon, the meaning must be realized in a material substance: value must assume the form of monetary signs; the thought assumes the form of the union of phonemes and letters, expresses itself in ink or on marble; merit, coated with “signs of merit”: ranks, uniforms, etc. The illusory aspect of a sign consists in the fact that it always appears, it designates something distinct of its exterior aspect. To a sign it is necessary to add the fact that in the sphere of art, the polysemy of the dimension of the content increases significantly. The contradiction between the real and the illusory composes this field of meanings in which every artistic text lives (LOTMAN, 2002, p.414).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In Russian: “Реален он потому, что природа знака материальна; для того чтобы стать знаком, то есть превратиться в социальный факт, значение должно быть реализовано в какой-либо материальной субстанции: ценность — оформиться в виде денежных знаков; мысль — предстать как соединение фонем или букв, выразиться в краске или мраморе; достоинство — облечься в ‘знаки достоинства’: ордена или мундиры и пр. Иллюзорность знака в том, что он всегда кажется, то есть обозначает нечто иное, чем его внешность. К этому следует прибавить, что в сфере искусства многозначность плана содержания резко возрастает. Противоречие между реальностью и иллюзорностью образует то поле семиотических значений, в котором живет каждый художественный текст.”



Theatre signs play with reality regulations to intensify a ludic dynamic. Here, Lotman makes a productive comparison between theatre and cinema, a similar art. According to the author, despite the presence of members of an audience that face forward to see what is being presented both in theatre and in cinema, their perspectives are completely different. In cinema there is a fundamental mediator between the audience and what occurs among the characters: the camera. The focus established by the camera works as a type of filter, which provokes certain configurations in the space of cinema differing it from the space of theatre. Camera lenses can select only what seems interesting. It can give life or visibility to an object, for example, when it is positioned in the foreground. This does not happen within theatre, a sign system in which an object alone cannot receive such visibility. Furthermore, the scenography in theatre has a modeling aspect. This means that scenography defines the space restricting its possibilities. However, in cinema, scenography is usually more easily perceived (not through mental efforts like in theatre) as the appearance of a real model (LOTMAN, 2002, pp.418-419)

Beyond the defining aspect of the theatre's space, Lotman also highlights the specific semantic relation configured between text (message) and code. When addressing text, the Russian scholar is not referring to the notion of dramaturgy. He refers to the text of the theatre as the general text of a performance considering its "expressed," "delimited," and "one meaning" aspects (2002, p.420). This script is conformed through a complex relation among different subtexts: 1) the verbal text of a play; 2) the text of the directors and actors' performances; and 3) the text of image-music-light. Such complexity of the theatre's texts also arises from the fact that the general text of a scene does not have the same stability of the general text of visual arts or cinema, for example. The general text of theatre is always changing and updating itself.

For instance, when a director and the actors of a play produce a text, they need to deal with all the readings that are present in the tradition of that text, be it from previous productions, the reviews, or even from social imaginary. This means that for the audience, the signs of the theatre are saturated with additional meanings when playing with this illusory-real dynamic. At the same time, these signs are fed by the

memory of the stage (what happened before and what can happen after), by the memory of the history of theatre (a play always dialogues with tradition and the previous productions of its script), and by the memories of the audience that are present during the performance. The members of an audience link their own experiences to what they watch (LOTMAN, 2002, p.421).

In this sense, it cannot be said that the general text of theatre is free: it is always created in relation to what already exists about that text in the tradition, to what the audience thinks about it, and to what is possible inside the tendencies of a particular time. However, this text enjoys a type of freedom that is very potent: the director intervenes with conceptions, the actors put their experiences and their corporeality in dialogue with the text; the scenography, the environment, the music and the very mood of the audience always generate new results that are different from the ones achieved before. There is a constant exchange that is never mechanical but always tense. The members of an audience, for example, project their expectations in relation to a text to what they are watching. The text evokes in the audience approval or disapproval, understanding or misunderstanding, comfort or discomfort. These exchanges produce one of the reasons of the updating power and the fascination generated by theatre:

A message's transmission-reception process throughout a performance should not be compared to a procession of signs in a rigorously foreseen sequence. It is comparable, though, to a battle of ideas in which, even though the military chief had foreseen, and the general had rehearsed many times the combat in their heads and on the map, unexpected reactions inevitably pop up here and there. These unexpected reactions require improvised immediate responses. Thus, the final result can never be foreseen (LOTMAN, 2002, p.423).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In Russian: “Процесс передачи — получения сообщения в ходе спектакля следует сопоставить не со считыванием однозначно расшифровываемых знаков в строго предусмотренной последовательности, а со сражением идей, в котором, хотя полководец предусмотрел общий план и многократно прорепетировал сражение в своем уме и на карте, неизбежно то там, то здесь вспыхивают неожиданные стычки, требующие немедленных импровизированных реакций, а окончательный исход никогда не может быть предсказан.”

Curiously, the presence of strong military images is acknowledged to clarify a very specific procedure of a scene. Lotman's explanatory procedure was already pointed by Ekaterina Volkova Américo in her work about Lotman's main semiotics concepts showing how they enriched his work (2012, p.36).

Evidently, Lotman is referring to a tradition in theatre that is still centered on the dramaturgical text that inevitably needs to dialogue with expectations from the audience and the tradition. However, even contemporary experimental productions or those that are not guided by the centrality of a literary-theatrical text face what is possible within each period. That is, as avant-garde as they can be, these productions still face the criteria and possibilities that are assigned historically.

For Lotman, other structuring notions of this system are conventionality and naturality. The semiotician clarifies that it is fundamental to distinguish *semioticity* (*znakovost'*), which addresses similarities or conventionality in relation to designated objects, from the concepts of naturality and conventionality. According to him, conventionality relates to the “orientation of one or another artistic movement to a certain type of text-reality relationship” (2002, p.424).<sup>28</sup> That means that each aesthetic movement evaluates a text’s link to the real world as more natural or more conventional. That explains my previous comment that for a Japanese person in an audience, for example, the specificity of the *Cavalo marinho* (“Seahorse”) theatrical celebration is more apparent precisely because, by being foreign to a culture, it is more difficult to evaluate its level of conventionality or naturality. Hence, to Lotman, qualifying a production as better or worse in terms of realism, or more or less attached to reality, has no evaluative capacity because they are mere different orientations of a system in regard to its level of conventional relation to reality (2002, pp.425-426).

Finally, the Russian philosopher progresses to a tendency that only later would gain real attention from semioticians and theatre scholars: *theatre pragmatics*. While many 1960s and 1970s scholars limited themselves to studies that proposed abstract and general models to the comprehension of theatre, Lotman preferred a pragmatic interrogation of theatre subjects, which was also done by some members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, such as Honzl, Bogatyrev, and Veltruský. It meant an immersion into the context of the theatrical representation with all its inconstancy and variability:

[...] the staging is conceived as a “semiology in action” that may or may not erase the traces of its work but always reflects

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<sup>28</sup> In Russian: “ориентацию того или иного художественного направления на определенный тип отношения текста к реальности.”

on the establishment and decoding of its signs. The director inclined to semiology (R. Demarcy or C. Régy, for instance) “thinks” in parallel series of signs, is conscious of the dosage of the materials, sensitive to redundancies and the correspondences between systems: plastic, musical, spatial diction, gestures in accord with the rhythm underlying the text (PAVIS, 1999, pp.329-330).<sup>29</sup>

Such dimension is what secures that the semiotic act of theatre will not consist only of a mechanical transmission of a message from a source to a receiver. Instead, it should entail a constant conflict between what is said or presented onstage and how this is received by the audience. The latter, less than a passive subject, is coparticipant in the communicative process. The members of the audience gets in touch with the stage *ensemble* – that is able to connect every known art to theatre promoting the “unity of the diverse and the diversity of one” – and to this group brings their own experiences that are responsible for a complex and powerful web of associations elevating the variability of senses of the stage to an exponential category.

Lotman is able to synthesize a great part of what had been written until then about theatre semiotics. His formulations about the semiotic behavior of objects onstage (the creation of an environment of exceptionality that distinguishes the space of the theatre from others) recuperates the tradition initiated by the Prague Linguistic Circle, which pointed to a process of semiotization through which objects were transported onto the stage. Likewise, Lotman undeniably advances the field by conceiving the theatrical phenomenon as a text that cannot be understood outside certain cultural and social conventions.

Though Lotman still bases his considerations on a type of theatre produced in the late 1970s in Russia, which, as I point out, limits the reach of certain concepts, he explores notions that would later become essential to theatre pragmatics. Lotman attests to his capacity to go beyond the theoretical and theatrical context around him by presenting the notions of stage variability and the role of the audience in deepening interpretations that compose the meaning of a theatrical production. He also attests to his ability to present long-lived concepts useful still today. His fascination with theatre,

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<sup>29</sup> For reference, see footnote 8.

this sign system capable of travelling in time while simultaneously being gifted with exceptional variability, is what marks the ending of his essay and inspires theatre scholars until today:

Every art form is connected to the problems of artistic relations, that is, of semiotics. However, few of them touch upon such diverse and multifaceted aspects of it. From makeup and mime to the norms of behavior of a spectator. From the ticket office to the ritualization of the “theatrical atmosphere”- everything is semiotics in theatre. Its types are so complex and diverse that the stage with good reason can be called an encyclopedia of semiotics (LOTMAN, 2002, p.431).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In Russian: “Все виды искусства связаны с проблемами художественного общения, то есть с семиотикой. Однако немногие из них затрагивают столь разнообразные и многогранные ее аспекты. От грима и мимики до норм поведения зрителя в зале, от театральной кассы доритуализованной «театральной атмосферы» — в театре все семиотика. Виды ее столь сложны и разнообразны, что сцену с полным основанием можно назвать энциклопедией семиотики.”

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