

Rokem, Freddie

Mimetic and non-mimetic aspects of space in the theatre: some reflections following Jindřich Honzl's "Dynamics of the sign in the theater"

Theatralia. 2014, vol. 17, iss. 2, pp. 60-70

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/130878>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Freddie Rokem

Mimetic and non-Mimetic Aspects of Space in the Theatre: Some Reflections Following Jindřich Honzl's "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater"

What are the relations between the building or the site where a performance takes place and the fictional space of a specific performance? Are these two spatial entities – the building (or the site) and the fictional space – mutually inter-dependent and does the building inform or become a part of (or 'included' within) a specific theatre performance? Can we claim that the semiotic features of the stage and the auditorium as an architectural entity in some way prescribe or even determine what can be shown on a particular kind of stage? And finally, how do these semiotic systems interact during a specific theatre performance; what is their influence on the communication between the actors and the spectators?

In what follows I will present a few preliminary suggestions how to confront these issues. The focus of my presentation is the difficult-to-define borderline between the building (or site) where the performance event takes place and its mimetic dimensions, through which the scenography or scenery as well as the acting and all the other elements of a particular production create a specific fictional world, determined by plot, characters and circumstances. The basic issue I want to raise here, which hopefully summarizes all the questions I have posed in the opening paragraphs is how and to what extent the semiotic coding of the stage and the auditorium, which initially may seem to be a neutral, non-mimetic feature of such an event are connected to the fictional, mimetic aspects of a theatrical event, even determining what kind of action and characters can appear in such a space.

Jindřich Honzl's seminal essay on the "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater" from 1940 provides a good starting point to explore these issues. According to Honzl,

[t]he stage has no other function than to stand for something else, and it ceases to be a stage if it does not represent something. [...] it does not matter whether the stage is a construction or not, that is, whether the stage is a place in the Prague National Theater or a meadow near a forest or a pair of planks supported by barrels or a market square crowded with spectators. What does matter is that the stage of the Prague National Theater may perfectly well represent a meadow, or the meadow of an outdoor theater clearly represent a town square, or a section of a square in a marketplace theater represent the inside of an inn, and so on. (HONZL 1976: 74)

Honzl basically argues for an arbitrary relationship between the theatre 'building' or theatre space and the fictional space, similar to linguistic signs, where "[i]ndeed, precisely this changeability, this versatility of the theatrical sign, is its specific property" (HONZL 1976: 85).

However, and this is no doubt also an important aspect of the Structuralist project, the transformability of the signs on the stage have to be complemented by an analysis of their more fixed material basis. Honzl seems to evade this issue by saying that "the stage has no other function than to stand for something else, and it ceases to be a stage if it does not represent something." What I would like to explore here is rather in which sense the theatre building and in particular the size and shape of the stage and the auditorium become integrated within the fictional world of a certain production or even in a certain style or genre of theatre. This does not exclude the possibility that certain forms of theatre are more open towards a dynamic relationship between the material sign and what it 'stands for', and the Avant-Garde theatre Honzl himself had experienced could no doubt be described as such. But in order for the possibility of this openness to exist it must also be possible to identify a norm based on a more fixed semiotic process.

It is possible to point at a chair and call it a 'car', a 'bed' or anything I want it to be. Any object can in fact be transformed into a 'car', a 'bed' or a 'chair', by naming and pointing at an object. But – and this is an important difference between linguistic signs and objects – at the same time as the chair can become anything we want it to be on the stage through a consistent use of a set of ostensive procedures, the object that is transformed also preserves its material basis as that 'chair' which has become transformed into something else in front of our eyes, imbued or enriched by 'theatrical', but not by 'real' magic.

Therefore, we have to pay attention to the **tension** between the **materiality** of this object – its 'chairness' which makes this piece of furniture designed for sitting, or what we in different languages call a 'chair', '*ein Stuhl*' or '*une chaise*' – and the particular **codification** of this object as a 'car' or a 'bed' within the specific fictional context of a particular performance. It is when this tension is acknowledged that the theatricality of the material objects on the stage begins to emerge, drawing attention to their theatrical function. One possibility for discussing the "dynamics of the sign in the theatre", where the sign is a well-known material object or visual sign, would be the dynamic interaction between simultaneously treating this sign as an arbitrary linguistic sign and a specific material object. And what

I want to point out here is that even the seemingly ‘neutral’ materiality of the stage contains some clearly identifiable semantic features, while it, at the same time, as Honzl claims “has no other function than to stand for something else”.

Before analyzing the theatrical space in terms of the interaction between the materiality of the stage and the ostensive codification of the objects and the fictional space more in detail, I want to make a brief comment on the notion of ‘materiality’ in the theatre based on some ideas developed by Bertolt Brecht. In *Der Messingkauf* (The Buying of Brass), a comprehensive theoretical project which Brecht began working on in 1939, but which remained uncompleted at the time of his death 15 years later, he sketched a series of dialogues between a Philosopher who comes to the theatre to meet four people who earn their living from working there: a Dramaturg, an Actor, an Actress and a Light-technician.

They take time to talk with each other, seated on the stage during four consecutive nights, after the performance of each night has ended, when it is still warmer on the stage than in the office of the Dramaturg where they could just as well hold their conversations. But it is of course important that they choose the stage, after the evening performance, while a stage worker is putting the scenery for the performance of the next day in place. These discussions take place in what could be described as the material basis for the performance. And when necessary – during these discussions – the theatre people present a scene from a classic play or from one of Brecht’s own dramas, read a poem written explicitly for *Der Messingkauf*, or even one of Brecht’s earlier theoretical texts, like the essay “The Street Scene” where he argued that the epic theatre is based on a form of ‘demonstration’ where a witness reports about a car accident he has just seen to the bystanders who have gathered around him but have not seen the details. All of these presentations and demonstrations problematize the notion of the materiality of the theatre.

The dialogues themselves start with the Philosopher entering the theatrical space asking the people of the theatre what they are actually doing when they practice their art. He introduces himself by saying that he has a particular interest for coming to the theatre which is,

the fact that you apply your art and your whole apparatus to imitating incidents that take place between people, with the result that one feels one is in the presence of real life. As I’m interested in the way people live together I’m interested in your imitation of it too.

And, somewhat later he continues:

The particularity of my interest so strikes me that I can only compare myself with a man, say who deals in scrap metal and goes up to a brass band to buy, not a trumpet, let’s say but simply brass. The trumpeter’s trumpet is made of brass, but he’ll hardly want to sell it as such, by its value as brass, as so many ounces of brass. (BRECHT 1965: 15)

Transferring this 'strategy' to the semiotic analysis of the theatrical space, it is of course crucial that the chair can signify any object we want it to signify, or – using Honzl's example – that the stage of the Prague National Theatre can represent a meadow. But before reaching this level of analysis we must first examine the material from which the instrument that makes it possible to create music is manufactured, or with regard to theatrical practices, analyze the constitutive features of the stage itself, the material machinery which makes it possible for the spectators to perceive and interpret the meadow or any other scenographic setting that can be presented on this particular stage.

The 'brass' (the material from which trumpets are made, but also for making other instruments) and the 'stage' (for 'making' scenography in order to create a fictional world) are not on the same 'level' of abstraction, but they undoubtedly have their composite nature in common. Brass is an alloy of copper and zinc¹, which when the two metals are mixed together, creates new qualities that are not typical of either of their constituting elements. This is also true of the 'stage' as the material basis (the brass) from which the composite theatrical space is created when the stage is combined with a specific scenography representing a particular fictional world. And as I will argue later, the proscenium stage, regardless of whether it is located in the Český Krumlov Castle or in the Drottningholm Palace in Stockholm is a hybrid combination of two representational systems of space: a three-dimensional architectural space and a two-dimensional, pictorial mode for representing space.

It is also possible to point at a similar combinatory, hybrid strategy in the art of acting, where the artist him- or herself is the material from which s/he – on the basis of a dramatic text – creates a work of art, while at the same time the physicality and the personality of the actor as a professional artist can still be clearly distinguished. The actor/performer is the only artist who uses his or her own body as the material for creating a work of art, creating a unique loop of simultaneity and self-reflexivity. This activates at least two semiotic codes, where one is the natural body and one is the aesthetic body, again creating a hybridity of signifying systems. I am, however, still not sure how far we can take this notion of a double semiotic coding in the theatre, including the tensions between the 'linguistic' characteristics of an object on the stage and its materiality, on the one hand, and the combination of coding systems, on the other. But it is certainly an aspect of the theatrical signification process that has to be examined in much more depth than I can do here. The question we finally have to raise is if the theatre privileges the hybridity of its signs and how this in turn influences other forms of visual representation, like painting, photography and cinema as well as contemporary Avant-Garde performances and installations.

One of the reasons for raising these issues is the basic historical fact that the theatre has always insisted on erecting buildings that were specifically devoted to this art-form, enveloping both actors and spectators in the real time of the theatrical event. The Classical Greek or Roman theatres, the Elizabethan stages, the Baroque theatre buildings and their

1 Bronze is copper and tin.

developments into what we generally call the Realistic theatre, including the broad range of Avant-Garde developments at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, to theatres that were characterized by prefixes like ‘Chamber’, ‘Intimate’, ‘Free’, ‘Art’ etc., were solely erected for presenting theatre performances, just like temples and churches were built for the sake of religious worship and rituals.

However, the technologies for spatial representation and reproduction invented in the 19th and 20th centuries have created novel possibilities and paradigms which seem to be less dependent on a certain kind of building for making theatre. Site specificity, the use of gallery spaces, found spaces etc., have upset and even subverted the more traditional forms of semiotic coding for making performances. Honzl is no doubt aware of such possibilities, but does not consider the distinction between the two kinds of spaces for making theatre, the spaces explicitly built for making theatre and those which have another primary function than making theatre.

The semiotic modeling of the traditional theatre spaces that were created exclusively for making theatre – and I will exemplify by referring in particular to the Baroque tradition here – must be seen as an integral aspect or characteristic of the theatrical event, including its fictional aspects. In order to clarify this principle I want to distinguish between at least three inter-related principles regulating the processes of perception and interpretation of space/scenography in traditional forms of the theatre. The **first** draws attention to the hybrid two- and three-dimensional semiotic modeling of the theatre space, based on the use of the one-point linear perspective developed by the Baroque tradition; the **second** focuses on the entrances, the presences and the exits of human and in particular of the non-human agents to, in and from this hybrid scenic space; and the **third** examines the hermeneutic strategies and the philosophical concerns activated by the two first principles, in particular through the audience perception and interpretation of the human/non-human split, a specific performance conveys.

My basic claim is that the theatre enables the spectators to measure and evaluate their own humanity (physically, emotionally and ethically) in relation to the human/non-human divide, in particular through the entrance of supernatural and divine figures into the hybrid container of the stage, but also by the absences of such non-human creatures. Finally, this sense of humanity must be considered in relation to the still constantly recurring failures in the world around us, historically as well as from a contemporary perspective, in order to grasp and to express what we perceive as our own, truly human proportions.

I am not claiming that our contemporary performance practices are evading these issues (by not using exclusive theatrical spaces), but rather that the traditional forms of theatre developed specific modes of expression aimed at activating the hermeneutic processes through which the spectator is invited to confront what it means to be a human. While contemporary performance practices have frequently developed other means for dealing with these issues (which are not part of my present discussion) my claim here is rather that the visual language or the ‘stage machinery’ developed by the traditional theatres provided

a more or less stable semiotic basis for confronting these crucial issues, constantly reformulating them within a basic and gradually evolving spatial framework.

(I) The semiotic modelling of the scenic/scenographic space

The first step is an analysis of the semiotic modelling of the space located at the meeting-point between the scenic and the scenographic space. This analysis obviously runs the risk of oversimplification, but if we begin by looking at how the notion of linear perspective has been applied within the Baroque theatre tradition, it is possible to establish certain basic principles. The first feature we need to account for is that the stage floor of Baroque theatres, but also in much more recent ones, is frequently constructed in a gradually ascending angle towards the back of the stage. Regardless of the depth of the stage and the angle of the floor in relation to a 'normal' room (which obviously has a flat floor), it is usually quite easy to see that there is a difference of the height of the stage between the front and the back of the stage. The most obvious functional reason for such an ascent of the stage towards the back is that the actors in the back will not be completely hidden by those in front of them, compared to using a flat stage floor. And for the sake of visibility this elevation is also usually complemented by a symmetrical elevation of the rows in the auditorium, so that the spectators do not obstruct those behind them, ending with the galleries in the back.

However, this kind of elevated stage space leads to some interesting complications. How do we actually account for the fact that the tormentors (i.e. the hanging curtains at each side of a stage that block the wing area and sidelights from the audience) gradually become smaller towards the back of the stage, because of its gradual elevation, at the same time as they are frequently placed closer to each other the further away they are from the audience? On the one hand, even if it is irregular this is a three-dimensional architectural space where the fourth wall has been dismantled, constituting the proscenium arch, and where the back-wall is much smaller. But even if this stage space is somewhat irregular, diminishing in size towards the back of the stage, it certainly has a volume within which the actors/characters are able to appear and act.

At the same time, however, some basic compositional features of this three-dimensional space have been 'borrowed' from the two-dimensional medium of painting, applying techniques of foreshortening to establish a one-point perspective according to the conventions of painting. This directs the viewer's gaze towards a focal point situated behind the back-wall of the stage. And because of the foreshortening effects, this back wall is as a rule significantly smaller than the proscenium arch. Just as the art of painting has frequently depicted scenes with 'theatrical' characteristics, the Baroque theatre adapted some of the compositional two-dimensional techniques of perspectival 'distortion' developed by the art of painting that were used to create the impression of a three-dimensional space on a flat canvas.

The conclusion of this far too sketchy analysis is that the scenic space is constituted by a fusion or combination of two- and three-dimensional principles of representation. The spectators are exposed to a three-dimensional space that, in effect, is magnified through the use of the two-dimensional techniques of painting, with the intention of creating the impression of a space that is significantly larger than its actual volume, just as a flat canvas gives us the impression of volume if it is carried out correctly. One of the more intriguing consequences of the application of the two-dimensional principles of pictorial representation in an architectural (three-dimensional) space is that the perception of the human figure positioned on the front of the stage generally becomes reduced, while at the same time, because of the principles of foreshortening, the same human figure appearing at the back of the stage is perceived as being larger than its actual size in relation to its scenographic surrounding.

This reversal of the real and perceived dimensions of the human body can even create quite an uncanny effect. On the one hand, it is based on the painterly two-dimensional representational principle (the laws of perspective) that a greater distance away from the onlooker is equal to being smaller in size, in particular in the top half of the canvas as well as being centrally located, where the back wall of the stage is located. But at the same time as the space itself is designed according to principles of a foreshortening perspective, the actual size of the human figures appearing in this centrally located, elevated space does not change accordingly and therefore, from the point of view of the spectators, these figures become magnified. This effect is reversely mirrored in the front stage area, where the human figure becomes diminished in relation to their surroundings and the perspectival scenography, because in order to appear to us in their natural size they should actually be much larger than the human body. In the backstage area the human body becomes magnified, while in the front it becomes diminished.

(II) Entrances, presences and exits, in particular of non-human agents

In order to explore the consequences of these preliminary distinctions, I will now briefly examine the entrances of the dramatic characters into the scenic/scenographic space, their forms of presence and appearance within this space as well as their departures or exits from it. This regulatory process of entrances, presences and exits is crucial for the relations between the characters and the narrative in theatrical performances as well as for the relations between the dramatic figures on the stage and the spectators in the auditorium. This process also constitutes a fundamental organizational principle of the theatrical space and the *mise-en-scène*, and it is inscribed and even in many cases quite fixed within the dramatic text, while at the same time presenting almost unlimited possibilities for realization in performance.

The fact that Nora, bringing a Christmas tree and gifts for her family, is the first character to enter the stage in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and that she is the only character who is present on the stage throughout the play except for one scene (when she dances the tarantella at the party of her upstairs neighbours) reinforces the significance of her departure and final exit from her home, her marriage and her children in the very last scene of the play, after having returned her wedding ring to her husband. This final exit upset and even shocked contemporary audiences. As a matter of fact, all of Ibsen's realistic plays can be viewed as meticulously orchestrated configurations of entrances, presences and exits of the characters taking place in equally planned interactions with the scenographic arrangements on the stage: the furniture, the windows, the doors and the paintings on the walls.

The scenographic instructions in most of Ibsen's realistic plays also point at the use of one-point perspectives, frequently directed towards a point that is clearly visible for the spectators, like the rising sun in the last scene of *Ghosts* or the painting of general Gabler in *Hedda Gabler* that is hanging on the wall in the backroom, Hedda's private space. This is also the space where, after drawing the curtain she commits suicide with one of the guns she has inherited from her father. Sometimes though, the focal point cannot be seen by the spectators, like the footbridge from which Rebecca and Rosmer jump, committing suicide in the last scene of *Rosmersholm* as they are observed through the kitchen window of the Rosmer mansion by the maid who is reporting this to the spectators. What these focal points have in common, though, is that they represent a crucial aspect from the past of the protagonists, with which they are unable to cope and which for different reasons destroys them. Ibsen's use of the focal point is usually psychological, related to human pain and weakness. The rising sun in the last scene of *Ghosts*, for example, is a personification of Oswald's father, from whom Oswald has inherited the fatal disease that is now putting an end to his life. The rising sun, the revolver and the footbridge represent different versions of retribution, psychological features that have become externalized through some form of the *deus ex machina*-device.

Examining the Baroque theatre tradition more carefully, which Ibsen obviously also did, we see that the focal point located on or behind the back wall of the stage is the *locus* where the supernatural beings make their entrances through the *deus ex machina*. This device consists of the sudden and unexpected appearance of a divine figure on the theatre stage in the back stage area, the aim of which is to unravel the otherwise insoluble predicaments of the humans, usually bringing the performance narrative to a closure. The entrance of the *deus ex machina* is usually also accompanied by some form of visual illumination representing divine light. The rising sun in *Ghosts* is an uncanny transformation of this divine illumination, adding a psycho-physical dimension.

In its literal sense *deus ex machina* - 'god from the machine' - comes from ancient stagecraft in which an actor playing the deity would be physically lowered by a crane-like mechanism onto the stage area, already hinting at the elevation that the Baroque theatre achieved by the ascending stage floor. Such supernatural interventions were quite promi-

ment on Greek and Roman stages, and they continued to be an important theatrical device in the medieval and Baroque theatre as well as in the forms of theatre continuing these traditions, actually until our own time. Already during the classical period, however, this device was not universally commended: Aristotle argued that “the unravelling of the plot [...] should arise from the circumstances of the plot itself and not be brought about ‘*ex machina*’” (*Poet.* Book 15), protesting against its irrationality.

The *deus ex machina* can also be seen as a meta-theatrical device through which the theatrical medium self-reflexively examines its own conditions and limits. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is no doubt one of the most prominent examples of how the supernatural, with the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet’s father, activates the theatrical machinery through the dramatic action. Already in the first line of the play, the arriving guard who is afraid that he will encounter the ghost asks, “Who’s there?”, and in line 21 of the first scene, Horatio (or Marcellus, depending on which of the early editions of the play we consult) asks, “What, has this thing appeared again tonight?” These questions immediately introduce the supernatural into the fictional world of the drama. But ‘this thing’ is not only the ghost of Hamlet’s dead father; it is the performance itself, appearing *again* tonight in front of the spectators. The appearances of gods as well as other supernatural figures like dybbuks, ghosts, demons, angels, devils etc. are inherently theatrical. And they constitute an integral aspect of the theatrical machinery through which the scenographic language is stabilized while at the same time being open to a broad range of interpretations.

Here we can clearly see how the stage as a ‘container’, with its complex semiotic double coding, literally ‘makes room’ for a certain kind of action and theme. The echoes of the supernatural that come from the final appearance of the sun in Ibsen’s *Ghosts* does not signify the entrance of a benevolent divine figure who has come to rescue the humans. The light of the sun is rather a form of retribution that stems from the now dead father-figure.

(III) The philosophical/metaphysical dimensions

The ancient device of the *deus ex machina*, rather than gradually disappearing after declarations of the death of God, has shown a surprising persistence on both theatrical stages and movie screens in modern and contemporary fictional stagings. Alluding to the Ur-stage in Western representation, Plato’s image of the cave in *The Republic*, Nietzsche declared in *The Gay Science* that,

[a]fter Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave – a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. [...] And we – we still have to vanquish his shadow, too. (NIETZSCHE 1974: 108, 167)

The persistence of fictional representations of the supernatural as well as their shadows in contemporary performances is remarkable and creates both an uncanny as well as a fruitful discrepancy between these representations and the secular approach with which the theatre grapples, even if the supposed religious/ritual roots of the device are still somehow *visible*.

Many thinkers have confronted the challenges posed by Nietzsche. Among them Ernst Bloch in particular explored the possibilities of the arts to represent a utopian state, a 'no-place' where history will reach its end and fulfilment and where some form of otherworldly, supernatural existence is chronotopically revealed, in temporal as well as in spatial terms. The *deus ex machina* can be seen as such a chronotopos.

In an essay on Bloch, Jürgen Habermas emphasized the spatial dimensions for the understanding of this utopian open-ended futurity in Bloch's thinking. The formulations Habermas proposed for discussing Bloch's ideas are highly relevant for the modern theatre where the stage for a short but powerful, fictional moment can be transformed into a space where the void that was previously occupied by God, becomes filled again by some incarnation of a Nietzschean eternal recurrence. According to Habermas we learn through Bloch that,

God is dead, but his locus has survived him. The place into which mankind has imagined God and the gods, after the decay of these hypotheses, remains a hollow space. The measurements in-depth of this vacuum, indeed atheism finally understood, sketch out a blueprint of a future kingdom of freedom. (HABERMAS 1969: 313)

How free the blueprint of the modern theatre can make the spectators, and if, indeed, we are really able fully to appreciate and interpret these 'aesthetic symbols', remains an open question. The modern theatre and many of our contemporary performance traditions are attempting to fill these voids in our systems of thinking, often just by making us painfully aware of them, like Brecht in *The Life of Galileo* or Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*. The modern theatre can even be perceived as the *locus* trying to find the thread leading to this 'kingdom of freedom', even if the awareness that this kingdom itself can probably never be reached, prevails.

Bibliography

- BRECHT, Bertolt. 1965. *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. Transl. by John Willet. London: Methuen, 1965.
- HABERMAS, Jürgen. 1969. Ernst Bloch – A Marxist Romantic. *Salmagundi* (1969): 10/11: 311–25.
- HONZL, Jindřich. 1976. Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater. In Ladislav Matějka and Irwin R. Titunik (eds.). *Semiotics of Art*. Cambridge: MIT University Press, 1976: 74–93.
- NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. 1974. *The Gay Science*. New York: Random House, 1974.

Summary

Jindřich Honzl's seminal essay on the "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater" from 1940 serves as the point of departure for discussing the borderline between the building (or site) where the performance event takes place and its mimetic dimensions, through which the scenography or scenery as well as the acting and all the other elements of a particular production create a specific fictional world, determined by plot, characters and circumstances. The basic issue I raise here is how and to what extent the semiotic coding of the stage and the auditorium, including its two- and three-dimensional semiotic modelling systems, which initially may seem to be a neutral, non-mimetic feature of such an event are profoundly connected to the fictional, mimetic aspects of a theatrical event, even determining what kind of action and characters can appear in such a space.

Keywords

semiotics of theatre, Prague Structuralism, props, scenography, modeling systems, perspective, *deus ex machina*, Jindřich Honzl

Freddie Rokem (rokem@post.tau.ac.il) is the Emanuel Herzikowitz Professor for 19th and 20th Century Art at Tel Aviv University where he teaches in the Department of Theatre Arts. Among his many publications are *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance* (2010), *Strindberg's Secret Codes* (2004) and the prize-winning *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (2000).