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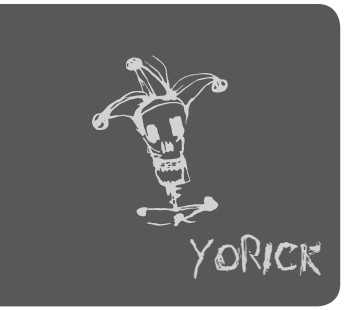

Patrice Pavis

Semiology After Semiology

In memory of Anne Ubersfeld

It would be banal to remark that semiology has almost disappeared from the radar screens of theatre research, that it is no longer hailed as the pilot discipline of human sciences. But it would also be equally naïve to believe that it has simply been replaced by another, a better, more modern, or more performing, method: performativity, phenomenology, deconstruction, cognitivism, etc. Ten years after Keir Elam's postscript to the re-edition of his *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (ELAM 1980), time might have come to reassess the current state of semiology. It would be presumptuous to predict which practices will prolong the different disciplines that evolved from the semiotic turn in the sixties. But we might have gained enough historical and critical distance in order to serenely evaluate what remains from theatre semiology. What remains "from our love stories, our happy days"[1]? Why is semiology "a memory which haunts us ceaselessly"? It might be the right moment to remind ourselves of the location of semiology and how, in spite of missed opportunities with numerous old and new disciplines, it all the same still helps us to confront the new challenges of theatre and performance studies.

1 Lyrics to song by Charles Trenet "Que reste-t-il de nos amours?" (Que reste-t-il de nos amours ? / Que reste-t-il de ces beaux jours? / Une photo, vieille photo, de ma jeunesse. / Que reste-t-il des billets doux,/ Des mois d'Avril, des rendez-vous? / Un souvenir qui me poursuit sans cesse. / Baisers volés, rêves mouvants.)

I. SEMIOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SIXTIES, SEVENTIES, AND EIGHTIES

1) Reasons For Its Appearance

A. *Emergence*: Semiology owes a lot to Barthes' *Mythologies* (BARTHES 1957), particularly the different types of semiology applied to arts and cultural performances. These different semiologies aimed at describing their object in an objective and autonomous manner and at making an ideological critique of it. As for the theatre, the university of the sixties finally consented to taking the performance as its object, and no longer only the dramatic text. It began to study closely *mise en scène* and the means to interpret, analyze and notate it (not always making the distinction between these three processes, however). At least from the second half of the nineteenth century on, one knew that the *mise en scène* is the aesthetic and political object that one must take into account. However the pre-68 university, still asleep, and dramatic criticism, still impressionistic, thought that an ephemeral performance cannot be the object of a description and even less of a theorization. Performance analysis became then a central discipline of theatre studies. Semiology appeared as a method for upsetting concepts, of approaching the theatrical of performative object.

B. *Theatre language* became the main metaphor of semiology, a metaphor which might sound questionable from today's point of view, but which was then necessary to encourage analysts to approach a performance in a systematic way as an organized structure, as a semiotic system. The ambiguity of the term lies in the confusion with the concept of *mise en scène*. Theatre language refers to an idea, or even an idealization of the theatre; to a supposedly universal comprehension of theatrical signs; to a presupposed essence of the theatre. And this was indeed the conception of theatre people such as Grotowski and Brook in the sixties and seventies. In the semiological theory *mise en scène* is different from performance. Where as performance is an empirical object, neutral, not yet analyzed, a collection of forms and signifiers, *mise en scène* presupposes an organized thinking, a system, a theoretical notion.

C. A "Questionnaire"[2] was the result of all these observations: it is based on the Structuralist assumption that all sign systems function together. Questions and categories are numerous, and not all are relevant for a given show. The "Questionnaire" applies above all to the classical type of *mise en scène*, which centres around the director with clearly exhibited staging options, from which one can reconstruct the story told. It should therefore be considerably adapt-

2 Pavis, Patrice. Questionnaire. In id. *Dictionnaire du théâtre*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1996: 278–280.

ed, and even avoided for postdramatic performances. But what questions shall we dare to ask, if we don't want at the same time to fall into a pedagogical, or even demagogical discourse?

2) Reasons For Its Permanence: Semiology maintains itself as a coherent ensemble of tools for the analysis. For several reasons:

A. *The spotting of signs*: When we attend a performance, we certainly can choose to get carried away by the emotions, rhythms and materiality of the show. But at some point, we cannot avoid to recognize signs in the performance. It happens whenever we try to translate signifiers, matters, into signifieds, i.e. give a meaning to any material aspect; or whenever we, in a given signified which we intuitively grasp, look within the show for indices, signifiers that correspond to this signified.

B. "The interdependence of signifier and signified" is, according to Saussure, the main characteristic of the linguistic sign: this sign is arbitrary because there is no relation of motivation between the sound (the auditory image) and the idea (the associated signified). Saussure compares the sign with a sheet of paper: on one side the signifier, on the other side the signified. One cannot cut a side without cutting also the other. But the segmentation on one side does not correspond to the segmentation of the other: language is not a nomenclature that would segment the world according to its own units. The same for the performance: the signifiers that ones spots and segments do not correspond term for term to precise ideas or references to the world. The spectator perceives things, they cut units in the signifying matter without automatically accessing signifieds, which are cut differently. Like for language, the form of signifiers cannot be isolated from thought; it constitutes, imagines and makes out this thought. The way we perceive the stage, this is what gives performance its meaning. But who can help us in the segmenting and reading of the signs?

C. *The reading of signifiers and signifieds* does not depend entirely on the spectator, it is guided by the organization of the performance; in other terms by the staging, its composition, its internal structure and its reference to reality. This dramaturgy is more or less visible, it lets us cut signifiers and signifieds more or less easily and relevantly. In a 'classical' dramaturgy, where space, time, actions help us segment unambiguously the show according to its signifiers and signifieds, this show will seem to us readable, we will forget about the deciphering of the signs, with the risk however that the *mise en scène* results in a too obvious, redundant, boring '*mise en signes*' (putting into signs). Inversely, in a postclassical or postdramatic dramaturgy, the segmentation will be anything but clear, it will seem arbitrary. That is: the logic of the signifier will not automatically lead to a readability of the signified, i.e. of

the dramaturgical system. There will be no large spatio-temporal and actantial blocks to give us an interpretation of the *mise en scène*, which is like an encounter of signifier and signified, between sound and meaning. We will have a hard time following what is being told on the syntagmatic, narrative and temporal axis and also a hard time associating, on the vertical, paradigmatic axis, motives with other motives, which are imaginary, but absent.

D. Thanks to the *actantial model*[3], the mass of signs, of perceptions, of reading hypotheses do not stay chaotic for very long, they get organized as soon as we are able to structure the main actantial forces of the story in general and all the narratives constituted by all semiological systems at work in the *mise en scène*, which is the first task of dramaturgy. The peak of the semiological approach coincided with the invention of the actantial model, a system that regroups all forces in any narrative, be it verbal or visual. Thanks to this guiding model, *mise en scène* could establish itself, the director could become the author-ity, the controller of signs. This mastery, however, almost simultaneously meant the crisis of a closed and centralized model; it could only lead to a questioning of the performance as too directive and closed because of the dramaturgical and staging choices of a central instance. From the seventies, a crisis of semiology comes on top of several other crises: the crisis of classical dramaturgy (as writing and as dramaturgical analysis), the crisis of *mise en scène* seen as too authoritarian, of structural theory, of a theorization cut off from the new performative practices.

We might have expected too much from a semiology conceived as an explanation of the world, when at the same time this discipline cut itself from many other disciplines, theories or anti-theories, from more radical ways of thinking, when times were changing and the "master narratives" (LYOTARD 1971), the great explanations, the hopes for a critical theory of alienation, faded away, like a mirage on the horizon.

II. MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

A continuous series of misunderstandings, of missed opportunities over the course of the last thirty of forty years: this might be a possible explanation for this mirage, this disaffection, or even this rejection of semiology.

3 Cf. Greimas, Alquirdas Julien. *Sémantique structurale*. Paris: Larousse, 1966. And the way Anne Ubersfeld used the actantial model in *Lire le théâtre*. Paris: Editions sociales, 1977.

1) Reason For the Change

A. "*Aesthetic theatre*", be it a *théâtre d'art* or an experimental theatre, has become a minority with the newly established field of cultural performances and performance studies. These cultural performances of all kinds are more enumerated and listed than described or theorized. Their anthropological description remains empirical and rarely structural in the sense of Lévi-Strauss' *Structural anthropology*. Theatre and its semiology become withdrawn, cut themselves off from these new practices. They become a minority aesthetic, do not try to profit from these ethnological or sociological experiences. Semiology itself does not perceive this change of paradigm: we have moved from *mise en scène*, a mimetic and literary instance, controlled by just one artist, to performance, a cultural, performative instance, bound to the doing, decentered, collective, refusing the *author-ity* of a director.

B. *Postmodern or postdramatic theatre*, which appears at the very moment – and this is obviously not by chance – when semiology is running out of steam and modifies its relationship to the spectator. The question is no longer, "What does this mean?", but, "What effect does it produce on me?" We have moved from meaning to sensation, from signification to produced effect. One asks no longer, "Where are the signs?", but, "How do they act?" The spectator no longer has to interpret the work and its signs, but to enjoy them as one enjoys a visual work exhibited in an installation around which the viewer is invited to walk, aimlessly and at its own rhythm. We are therefore drifting towards a "relational aesthetics consisting in judging the works of art according to the human reactions that they figure out, produce or elicit" (BOURRIAUD 1998: 117).

C. *Explanatory theories* are no longer on demand, while at the same time, paradoxically, critics keep referring to contemporary philosophers, from Heidegger to Derrida, from Ricoeur to Lévinas, from Žižek to Badiou, which, incidentally, annoys the 'real' philosophers, Badiou particularly.

D. *Dramaturgy* loses its position of looking down, controlling meaning, of being a vantage point for observing semiology. We move from a dramaturgy of the signified, of the production of meaning to a dramaturgy the signifier, i.e. of reception and of formal analysis of rhythms, gestuality or visuality. After semiology and classical dramaturgical analysis, we could talk of "postdramaturgy".

2) Only Sketched Encounters

For these missed or only sketched opportunities, the theatre artists and the theoreticians are equally responsible. Apart from very rare exceptions (Antoine Vitez in France, Giuliano Scabia in Italy, Rex Cramphorn in Australia), semi-

ology and theatre art were never close friends! A lack of trust, and sometimes of respect, was the source of this falling out of love.

However, other missed opportunities have deeper causes; they can be explained by a methodological incompatibility which no synthesis or negotiation could ever erase. A few counter-propositions are made.

A. *Energetical theatre*, Lyotard presents in a short article ("The tooth, the palm"), a radical critique of the semiological enterprise, more precisely semiology applied to theatre. Lyotard imagines a theatre that represents nothing, does not represent anything, consumes itself in an intensity, an intensification. This energetic theatre "does not have to suggest that this means that; does not either have to tell it, as Brecht would like. It has to produce the highest intensity (by excess or default) of what is here without any intention" (LYOTARD 1973: 104). This energetic theatre would (we must speak in the conditional as Lyotard asks himself the question) if this is "possible, how" (LYOTARD 1973: 104) to signify, to represent something, it would no longer signify anything, but produce intensities, "events", "actions" in the sense of Cage. It would even go beyond Brecht's attempt to make theatre signify in a critical manner in political life, or beyond Artaud, who in fact only replaces Western theatre of text and psychology with something "which again will be a language, a system of signs, a grammar of gestures, of 'hieroglyphs'" (LYOTARD 1973: 100). Lyotard refers to Zeami, to his notion of flower, to a high quality acting. Instead of a representation of anything, he proposes a "search of intensity", an "energetic intensification" (LYOTARD 1973: 98). According to Lyotard, theatre must leave the mimetic stage for the "*dispositif*" [dispositive, apparatus]: "Under the name of *flower* one looks for the energetic intensification of the theatre dispositive. Elements of a total 'language' are cut and linked so as to produce, through light transgressions, through overlapping of nearby units, effects of intensity" (LYOTARD 1973: 98). Only rarely have the concepts of sign and representation so radically been criticized as in this conception of intensity. This is something semiology should think about in its pretension to transform everything into signs. But how can we combine the energetic model and the demand of an explanation through signs? The theory of vectors only gives a partial answer, a compromise which needs to be tested through analyses of contemporary "postdramaturgical" (even more than postdramatic) performances, the type of performance that lies beyond any explanatory dramaturgical analysis.

B. *The theory of vectors* is one of these possible answers, or rather one of these theoretical compromises. It aims at replacing the study of isolated and static signs by a vectorization of different series of signs of the *mise en scène*, which the spectator or analyst can decipher, as a kind of "dream work" ac-

cording to Freud, Lacan, Jakobson and Lyotard in *Discours, Figure* (LYOTARD 1971). It is based on the hypothesis that a *mise en scène* is comparable to a collective dream of the artists that the spectators are given to see and to decipher, to receive, sometimes also to verbalize. The signs are not only combined, caught in a dynamic process, but they correspond to four types of vectors/vectorization, according to Freud's dichotomy of condensation and displacement in the motives of the dream, which are called the accumulators vectors and the connectors vectors. The cutters vectors are the ones that interrupt the flow of the connectors; the shifters vectors allow us to move from one level to the other.

We can imagine *mise en scène* as a vectorization that, at the level of production, is suggested by the director and all the participants of the show; but also as a vectorization that each spectator has to perform according to their own interpretation in the sense of the dream work. Therefore the spectator can chose: either to start from different analyses of sequences, of sign vectorizations; or let themself be guided by a global intuition, before checking it and basing it on indices and evidence from the analysis of the *mise en scène*. Practically speaking, the spectator oscillates incessantly between an interpretative synthesis and a semiological analysis. *Mise en scène* is at the same time a production of signs by the director and a reception of these signs by the spectator. But any production implies a reception and vice-versa. In both cases and in both direction and sense, it is always a vectorization. This vectorization helps us open up the all too narrow semiological analysis, make the connection with the production and analysis of *mise en scène* and thus allow a perspective on the creative activity of the spectator.

C. *Cultural Studies*, even more than Performance Studies, is one of the disciplines which semiology forgot to include in its original programme and its updates. After they had appeared in the 1960s in England and in the United States, they developed in the 1990s, after the phase of post-Structuralim and deconstruction, thus confirming a return to sociological and political preoccupations, a new awareness of environment, media and globalization, and more recently of the systemic crisis of world economy. Having emerged at the same time as semiology, they found themselves in competition with it, or even eclipsed by it, thus waiting for their time, the last decade of the previous century, thus revealing the shortcomings of any purely Structuralist or semiological analysis. They also, however, broke down in numerous studies of all kinds. Because Cultural "Studies" is defined and named by a term that indicates the addition and the autonomy of *studies,* and not a dominant methodology; Cultural Studies does not feel compelled to define its field or to announce a particular method, as was the case before the arrival of post-Structuralism,

post-Modernism or the post-Dramatic. The very eclecticism is probably what frightened semiology, particularly theatre semiology, which considered Cultural Studies and Critical Theory only popularized, simplified and vulgarized European traditional disciplines such as sociology and Marxism. This misjudgement, this snobbism of old continental Europe was fatal to any connection of semiology and Cultural Studies.

D. Things, however, are changing: semiology can no longer neglect Cultural Studies without condemning itself to going round in circles. It is needed in order to judge new forms of performances: from "Rimini Protokoll" to "She She Pop", from "L'avantage du doute" to "Das Plateau", we can see how chunks of reality enter the stage, for instance persons who play their own part in front of a theatre audience. To account for the globalization of theatre, theory needs a model that goes beyond the one of cultural exchange in the intercultural theory of the 1970s and 1980s. This model of intercultural study was wavering too much between a semiology of communication and a resolutely anthropological and sociological approach. With a certain idealism and naïve optimism, it still believed in cultural exchange, in communication, and thus in semiology. This might have been a last attempt to save the old critical, elitist, communitarian world, the already archaic aesthetics of the Functionalism, of structure, of causal explanation.

The extension of European text-based theatre to all potential globalized forms will surely be a chance for semiology and its *aggionamento*. It will force us to reassess theatre business, to confront it with all kinds of performances, to think in the framework of cultural globalization.

E. *Phenomenology* is often mentioned as an alternative to semiology. Bert O. States is a rare exception: he made the point, as early as 1985, in his book *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre,* that semiology and phenomenology are complementary. His is a classical argument among the most frequent reproaches done to semiological analysis: to fragment the performance and to take the global, and by definition indivisible, impression, not sufficiently into account. State, however, is careful to explain that the spectators have to perceive the materiality of the sign; that they should not reduce the sign to an idea, but appreciate its phenomenological quality and thus experience the world in a lively manner.

Semiology has often been reproached, and rightly so, for providing only a superficial analysis of a few signs and distinctive features. Semiology has indeed never been open to the materiality and the identities of the bodies. It functioned as a neutral, exterior and pseudo-objective decoder. The analysis of the body of the other has always been the weak link of old semiology. This approach did not find the means of an analysis beyond the signs of recognition

or the detailed, but not always relevant description of gestures. But as soon as one approaches body in its entirety, questions its constant identity changes, observes how the spectator shows some kinesthetic empathy, semiology, if allied with phenomenology, can hope to illuminate the use of bodies in the theatre, in the performances and in the most diverse situations.

Phenomenology understands human consciousness as an embodied experience: since the human being is always embodied, his thinking is always embodied too. We are always situated within the world, physically engaged by a kinesthetic empathy with what we observe.[4]

F. *Performativity* has been the most efficient remedy against a too smoothly running semiology. This challenge is not a new one, as the "performative turn" had already been prepared by the linguistics of performatives (J. L. Austin) in the late 1950s. Performance Studies, which came into existence in the 1970s, has become, particularly since the 1990s, the main way of situating theatre studies in a framework with extensible, or even infinite limits. Performativity, in the 1990s, has become the main way of describing the formation of the identities of all kinds and a crucial heuristic principle. It marks the end of this change of paradigm, of this performative turn, which partially replaced semiology as a discipline and *mise en scène* as the final stage of Western theatre.

It remains to be seen if this theory – some people might even say: this theoretical imperialism – of performance will help us to highlight the study of theatre (of Western 'aesthetic' theatre) and the study of all other cultural performances. It is already a good thing to look at the theatre of *mise en scène* (the "Theatre of Art") no longer only from a structural-semiological point of view, but also in the larger perspective of cultural performances and of performativity. Not only does this relativize a sometimes too narrow and self-assured aesthetics, but this helps us understand better how theatre associates itself with other genres than itself. 'Our' (Western) theatre has evolved so much that the methods of analysis and the expectations have themselves considerably changed, up to the point that we can no longer have a panoramic view on theatre and its theories, and even less on the surrounding social and ethical reality. We have to content ourselves with examining several types of *studies*, each dealing with partial aspects of the theatrical phenomena. Each aspect, often not really caring for its environment, sets its limits (while not necessarily acknowledging its methodology): aural (or sound) studies, i.e. the studies of the sound component of the performance, media studies, body studies, gay and lesbian studies, gender studies, etc. In the case of theatre semiology, the

4 Foster, Susan Leigh. Mouvement's contagion: the kinesthetic impact of performance. In Tracy Davis (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008: 46–59.

specialty of visual studies seems the most relevant and fruitful for a renewed semiology.

G. *Visual studies* is not a new field, an aspect which semiology would have overlooked. It is a new way of seeing. This is precisely what Maaike Bleeker made quite clear, continuing the research of Mieke Bal: "We are always involved in what we see, even when seeing seems 'just looking'" (BLEEKER 2008: 162).

In associating itself with visual studies, semiology overcomes definitively its wait-and-see policy, its 'objective', neutral, disembodied, falsely scientific attitude. It discovers the spectator's corporality, takes into account the manner how it looks at, sees and relives the theatre. It questions the ways of seeing, the ones already used by the spectator and those which the staging makes them discover. Thus enriched by visual studies, semiology regenerates itself thanks to phenomenology and anthropology. The spectator has to "put oneself into the body" of the other, perceive kinesthetically their movement, experience these bodies in their cultural relativism, their identity, their socio-cultural conditioning. Many other studies have dealt with theatre. Semiology has surveyed them, but had no time or competence to go deeper or even only to confront them and resituate them in a general study.

III. CONCLUSIONS

1) Running Away and Saving Oneself?

All these missed opportunities, these fleeting encounters between semiology and the long series of "turns", from the linguistic and semiotic turns, respectively in the 1950s and 1960s, to the more recent cultural and performative turn have not been so negative. They are a proof that semiology is well, provided one saves it.

Saving, rescuing the semiology of theatre? It won't be necessary, thank you.

Saving semiology from theatre? This would be the worst solution! Semiology must, on the contrary, challenge a theatre that is completely renewing itself. It should not fear to be behind on the theatre: this is in the nature of theory to always arrive too late, when all is finished. Semiology is only dangerous if it does not open itself unto the world, if it demands only one single type of theatre or if it deals with all types of theatre and of performance by using the same remedies.

Or do we have to save theatre from semiology, that is to spare theatre the semiological approach? This is what the post-Dramatic claims to have done: to

have saved theatre from the reading grids and from the questions that no longer touch on the analyzed object, because, "precisely" this object is no longer analyzable, it is non-narrative, non-mimetic and meaningless.

In order to be saved and to run away and rush off, semiology must extend itself (which does not mean to survive oneself) in those new and old disciplines that it all too long neglected. And inversely, all these post-Structuralist disciplines would need the coherence of semiology. Otherwise, all these "turns" would make them leave the right track.

2) Disappear?

Semiology thus is not near or ready to disappear. What is disappearing is rather the theatre as semiology knew it, in Prague in the 1930s, and in the whole world from 1970, or even 1989. In its extreme version of today, spectator and actor have disappeared: they no longer meet, except maybe at both ends of the media. There is no way one could decode signs produced live and in common to spectator and actor. And no way to distinguish radically between live presence and mediatized communication: "We need to see the relationship between live and technologically mediated forms of performance as fluid rather than bounded by a binary opposition, and (that) we may experience liveness in our interactions with technological agents…" (AUSLANDER 1999: 112).

On top of this disappearance-appearance of the object of theatre, we find the frequent disappearance of the borders of the work, which seems diluted in the public space: for instance in the theatre of intermediality. Sometimes the work itself pushes its limits, as for these works "in gaseous state" (MICHAUD 2003) where only the aesthetic experience and the sensation of the receiver count; sometimes the social space, the public space, the *Offentlichkeit*, the world of politics, of activism, of political demonstrations, of public or private sphere absorb the performed work. One could then fear that semiology would no longer be able to operate, for lack of an object to analyze. But the work always ends up reconstituting itself, returning to a solid, or at least liquid, state. So semiology only evaporated for a while so as to better reconstitute itself elsewhere, better adapted to its new object.

3) Deserting?

This almost magical process of appearance-disappearance of the work and of semiology (which seems to chase the work with a butterfly net) intrigues and attracts post-Structuralist thought. Poststructuralim asks itself: could it be that semiology, when driven into a corner, might become a moving way of thinking as deconstruction (Derrida), a textual cooperation (Eco), or "the energetic intensification of the dispositive of theatre" (LYOTARD 1973:99)?

"What remains from our love stories? What remains from these happy days?" What remains from the semiology Saussure imagined? Nothing and everything. Nothing if one refers to a grid of analysis, to a questionnaire, a type of analysis, a safety net. Everything if it abandons the Saussurian dream of being a pilot science for the more humble task to become, for all these numerous, mind-blowing disciplines, a mere shunting. The task and future of semiology after semiology is therefore to imagine a location of exchange, a crossroads, where all these theories and hypotheses transit. A discipline that foresees, accepts, but always postpones its own end: its finality as well as its completion.

And thus it won't be necessary to desert.

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He has published a *Dictionary of theatre* (translated in 30 languages) and books on semiology (1976), *Performance analysis*, *Contemporary French dramatists*, and *Contemporary theatre*. His most recent book publication is *La Mise en scène contemporaine*, Armand Colin, 2007. English translation, Routledge, 2012.

Summary

Patrice Pavis: Semiology After Semiology

Eighty years after the beginning of semiology of theatre within the Prague Linguistic Circle, and forty years after its heydays in Western Europe, it might be time to assess its presence today. After examining the reason of its reappearance in the seventies, the so-called crisis of semiology from the nineties on is reconsidered as a series of missed opportunities for semiology and Theatre Studies. A few suggestions are made how to connect semiology with other methods and disciplines, not in order to rescue 'our science' (which does not need our help), but to adapt and complete the semiology of our times within a new theatrical, performative and cultural context. It is hoped not to become too nostalgic, although this danger should obviously not be underestimated as well.

Patrice Pavis
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