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DOES IT MAKE SENSE?

– A semiotic approach to the analysis of the signs and their signification in puppetry and visual theatre



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Each performance builds a language: a language set by the artist-s; a language read by the audience-s, a language based on visible and audible signs. As a puppeteer, I have been interested in the signs that are approached and worked in their materiality. Signs in which materiality conveys the meanings. I propose to focus our attention onto what I consequently called “material-thinking” or “puppetry-thinking” signs.

In the course of this essay, I wish to explore some questions that accompanied me as a puppeteer during my studies, and are likely to follow me after still. What are signs (and more specifically puppetry signs), how do they relate to reality, how do they relate to each other and how do they convey meaning?

Semiology – the “science” of signs – is one way to find answers. It offers analytical tools that unfortunately remain often purely theoretical, a playground for specialists. This essay is an introduction to some of the semiotic terminologies and tools, proposing practical uses for them and drawing examples from various works I had the chance to discover during the course of my studies. It is written as a study material for all puppeteers, but also for anyone interested in applying puppetry thinking into his/her art form.

The third year students of the puppetry department (academically named Nestas1014_NU) to whom I had the opportunity to give a class on the subject, accompanied me through my reflexions. I thank them for their patience, their humour and their interest.

In the hope that this essay can help the reader someday,

KEYWORDS:

Puppet theatre, Visual theatre, Semiology, Semiotics, Signs, Meaning, Metaphor, Metonymy, Symbol, Seme, Denotation, Connotation, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes.

Perrine Ferrafiat

DOES IT MAKE SENSE?

– Semioottinen lähestymistapa ymmärtää merkkejä ja merkityksiä nukketeatterissa ja visuaalisessa teatterissa.

Jokainen esitys perustuu omalle luodulle kielelleen: kielen luo taiteilija; kieltä lukee yleisö, kieli perustuu nähtävälle ja kuultaville merkeille. Nukketeatteritaiteilijana olen ollut kiinnostunut merkeistä, joita on lähestytty ja työstetty niiden materiaalisuuden, aineellisuuden kautta. Merkeistä, joissa aineellisuus välittää merkitystä. Keskittäkäämme huomiomme siis merkkeihin, joita minä näin ollen kutsun ”aineellisen ajattelun”- tai ”nukketeatteriajattelun”-merkeiksi.

Tässä tutkielmassa tahdon perehtyä kysymyksiin, jotka ovat syntyneet nukketeatteriopintojeni aikana ja, jotka todennäköisesti tulevat seuraamaan minua vastakin. Mitä merkit ovat (tarkemmin, mitä ovat merkit nukketeatterissa), kuinka ne ovat liitoksissa todellisuuteen, miten ne liittyvät toisiinsa ja miten ne välittävät merkitystä?

Semiologia – merkkioppi eli oppi merkeistä – on yksi tapa löytää vastauksia. Se tarjoaa analyyttisiä työkaluja, jotka valitettavan usein jäävät vain teoreettiselle tasolle, spesialistien leikkikentäksi. Tämä tutkielma on johdanto semiotiikan terminologiaan ja joihinkin työvälineisiin, ehdotus joistakin käytännön tavoista käyttää noita työkaluja, sekä muutamia poimittuja esimerkkejä teoksista, joihin minulla on ollut mahdollisuus tutustua opiskelujeni aikana. Työ on kirjoitettu oppimateriaaliksi kaikille nukketeatterin tekijöille, mutta se on tarkoitettu myös kaikille niille, jotka ovat kiinnostuneet soveltamaan nukketeatteriajattelua omaan taidemuotoonsa.

Toisen vuoden (tuolloin) nukketeatterilinjan opiskelijat Turun Taideakatemiasta (tarkemmin nimettynä Nestas1014_NU), kenelle minulla oli mahdollisuus pitää kurssi kyseisestä aiheesta, olivat kanssani kun kävin läpi mietteitäni. Kiitän heitä heidän kärsivällisyydestään, huumorintajustaan ja kiinnostuksestaan.

Toivoen, että tämä työ voi auttaa lukijaansa jonakin päivänä.

ASIASANAT:

Nukketeatteri, Visuaalinen teatteri, Semiologia, Semiotiikka, Merkki, Merkitys, Metafora, Metonymia, Symboli, Seme, Denotaatio, Konnotaatio, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes.

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To the second year students of the puppetry department
To Katerina Fojtikova, for her professional and human support
To Satu Kivistö, for her presence and her morning eggs

1 INTRODUCTION

I like to think of art as an **act of translation**. As performing artists, we do not copy and paste the world – if ever we even could, if ever it was of any interest. We *read* life and *translate* it into **signs**, that is, into something that stands for something else, a shape whose function is to carry our intended meanings. Eventually we give these signs *to be read* by audiences. During the course of my studies, I have found most fascinating the artistic ability to find within ourselves the signs that would best translate what has drawn our attention; how we investigate what stands in front of us through our own intimate reality, our perceptions and impressions, in order to excavate the signs that we will share with an audience.

So, puppeteers translate – by the means of puppetry – the world they live in. But what are the means of puppetry? In my practice, I do not necessarily draw on the object ‘puppet’ to express myself, and yet, I consider myself as a puppeteer, I think with the tools of puppetry. Rather than to speak of contemporary puppet theatre as an established genre with a set of rules, Henryk Jurkowski - Polish scholar and specialist of puppet theatre - proposes to understand contemporary puppetry as a set of ‘atoms’ ready to be combined:

“In the course of the 1950s and 1960s, all the elements of puppet theatre were atomized. There exists now an unlimited number of ‘atoms’ just waiting to be introduced as components into new theatrical ‘units’” (Jurkowski 1983, 130)

From my personal experiences as a puppeteer and as an audience, I assume that those ‘atoms’, those signs, have in common that they rely primarily on their **materiality to convey meanings**. I regard puppetry as a way to approach the

theatrical sign, a working process, which I shall refer to as ‘**puppetry thinking**’ or ‘material thinking’ in the rest of this essay.

Puppetry thinking does not mean puppet theatre, not even puppet. A puppet can be used in terms of actor theatre or storytelling (ibid. 131-135), letting all puppetry thinking behind. In parallel, “atoms” of puppetry thinking are more and more often introduced in various performing art forms (ibid. 130). Puppetry thinking is a process in which the **priority is given to the materiality** of the sign to express meanings, a process in which **physical materials are worked in their materiality**. By materials, I obviously mean all that can be touched or seen such as objects, puppets, spaces, lightings, human bodies, textures, matters, etc. But I also include sounds, texts, voices, time, etc. The only requisite for a material to enter the realm of puppetry thinking is – as said – to be primarily worked within its physicality. A word may be used only as a mere tool to carry an intended meaning; it may also be taken as a physical object that can be chewed, stretched, broken, stressed... In this second case, this word belongs in my view to puppetry thinking.

In the course of this essay, I wish to explore further the nature of puppetry thinking signs and to analyze the creation and transmission of meaning in the context of a performance, bearing in mind four questions that accompanied me during my studies as a ‘puppet thinker’:

- What are signs?
- How do they relate to reality?
- How do they relate to each other?
- How do they convey meaning?

In order to do so, I shall draw theoretical tools from the semiotic theories for one essential reason: semiotics is the ‘science of signs’, social science established in the late nineteenth century, which “investigate[s] the nature of signs and the laws governing them” (Saussure 1916, see Chandler 1994). It offers detailed analytical tools that unfortunately remain often purely theoretical, a playground for specialists, but would enable us to find some answers to our questions, to deepen our

understanding of our practice, to specify the nature of puppetry thinking, and to be aware of its social implications. In my practice, semiotics has also been an inspiration to find stage material and a tool to develop further images that came intuitively. However, it does not replace intuition and should come to support our creative process, not replace it. It provides us with a very useful set of tools, but those should remain on the level of tools and not become artistic rules.

This essay is a semiotic approach to puppetry thinking signs. It is divided into three main sections:

- **The first section** is an long introduction to the theories of the sign, which will familiarize the reader with semiotic terminology, ground a basic understanding of the structure of signs in general and puppetry thinking signs in particular, and, last but not least, establish two essential distinctions between (1) the signs and reality and (2) the materiality and the immateriality of the signs.
- **The second section** is centred on the puppetry thinking signs. It provides the reader with a classification of these signs, with tools to analyze them in details and with the understanding of an essential feature undergoing their combination within performances.
- **The third section** exposes the principal modalities of signification of the signs. Part of these modalities result from the cultural context in which a sign is introduced. The others result from an artistic decision.

This essay is built as a study material for puppetry students but also for all those who wish to draw material thinking elements within their art form. Consequently, for each semiotic tool introduced, we shall first expose the general theory, illustrate it though practical 'material thinking' examples and finally draw the repercussions of the theory onto our artistic practices.

In the hope that this essay can help the reader someday,

2 THEORIES OF THE SIGN AND THEIR APPLICATION TO PUPPETRY THINKING

The sign lies at the core of both the semiotic theories and the performances. It allows communication between human beings; it is the bearer of meanings. But what is a sign? How is it structured? How does it relate to reality? How does it relate to other signs? Can we classify them according to their nature?

This first chapter is a long introduction to the main theories of the sign, mainly those of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). As we glanced through their essential contributions, we shall observe their impact on the understanding of puppet thinking signs, and search what in the general theories constitute the essence of our 'atoms'.

But before we dig into the theory, let us introduce one fundamental aspect of audiences, an aspect that justifies our journey towards the comprehension of the signs: their natural semiotic abilities.

2.1 Homo significans: the human ability of 'making' sense.

From a semiotic point of view, human beings are readers and writers of the world, beings of sense and senses who look in their environments for grids to read. They are, so to say, *homo significans* (Chandler 1994). Charles Sanders Peirce – one of the fathers of semiotics – considers that “*we think only in signs*” (Peirce 1931-58, 2.302). In our everyday life – whether consciously or not – we make sense from what comes to our perception and we call upon perceptible signs to communicate our intended meanings.

In the context of a performance, it is all the more so, for every sign is – or feels – significant, intended. Consequently, the audience reads every single sign that appears on stage, whether the sign entered the space arbitrarily or intentionally, whether it is a detail or not. (Aston and Savona 1991, 99). Being conscious of

this fact does not mean that we, as theatre makers, have to become control freaks determining every single detail of the performance. But we should be aware of our choices, between conscious signs and intuitive signs, between deliberate and instinctive decisions. And we are naturally gifted with the minimum required tool: the ability to produce signs and empathically read them as if we were not the authors, as if we witnessed them for the first time.

Michel Laubu, founder of the company Turak,¹ retells how, during one open rehearsal, a high school audience understood that the whole story had something to do with death. This interpretation was at the other end of what the actor-puppeteers intended. Searching for the origin of such reading, the company spotted one gesture that contaminated the meaning of the entire play: one actor had taken off his hat and placed it by his heart. “For the students, this gesture was a sign of reverence, similar to the one we perform next to a dead body. The students couldn’t imagine anything else”. Michel Laubu had to take this gesture out of the play. Human beings do not need much: they immediately start reading. (Laubu 2010)

To make the vocabulary of this essay somewhat clear, by “read” I do not mean only intellectual reading, for we feel maybe more than we think. **Reading can be emotional, rhythmical, unconscious, a resonance² within our whole being.** The students in the case of Michel Laubu did not know from where their impression had come. They simply felt the sign; its expressivity carried their imagination. And most importantly, regarding to puppetry thinking, it is the materiality of the sign that carried such reading of the audience towards an immaterial concept.

2.2 Materiality, immateriality and dynamism of the sign.

There are, in my view, three key features of the sign that should be considered to approach puppetry thinking from a semeiological perspective: the materiality, the immateriality and the dynamism of the sign.

¹ www.turak-theatre.com

² I consciously use here a term borrowed from the phenomenological terminology.

“A sign is a **thing** which causes us to **think** of something **beyond** the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses” (Augustine, Book 2, 1,1)³

Already in the 5th century, Saint Augustine touched upon the essence of the sign. A sign is something **physical** (i.e. that can be perceived by the senses). A sign **exceeds itself**: the **thought** of something. “Puppetry thinking”, being based on the materiality of the sign, has a space - and I think a role - to investigate and invest this physical aspect of the sign. Yet it is not narrowed by the materiality, but awakes - **beyond itself** – thoughts, that is, something **immaterial**. We take or build signs (ready-made or intentional artefacts); we dive in the signs of the everyday and not-so-everyday life, deepening their materiality first and bringing them then to another plane of reality. “Meaning does not exist in some abstract realm of thought but always involves the concrete. It is not only physical images, actions or words are necessary to communicate meaning; rather, meaning itself is born in the marriage of material object or action and immaterial concept – in the sign” (Counsell 2001, 2). As puppeteers, we travel from the material, within the *concrete*, in order to allow the immaterial to inhabit it. We *stage* the encounter of materials and thoughts.

Charles Sanders Peirce adds to the Augustinian definition the dynamic aspect of the sign:

“A sign or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign.” (1931-58, 2.228)

Rather than a static element, the sign initiates a movement in the person it addresses, in our case, in the audience. This movement is not mathematical, narrowed down to equality. It is a creative movement, for the one who receives the sign builds from it a new sign, sometimes equivalent, sometimes different. He/she is actively participating. As artists, we can accompany the formation of this “other sign”. However, because a sign is dynamic, we cannot control what comes to the audience’s minds.

³ I underline

As we read Charles Sanders Peirce's definition more closely, a question arises, that can draw important consequences regarding to stage signs: what is the difference between "something" and "something, which stands for something"? In other words, what makes the difference between a thing and a sign?

2.3 The dialectic of the sign and the thing



Picture 1 René Magritte, The betrayal of images 1929

In the everyday life, a thing is only a thing until it is invested with meaning by a human being. "Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (Peirce 1931-58, 2.172). Semioticians go even a step further, stating that signs are not the things they refer to (in semeiological terms: **the referent**). "The referent is other than the sign, which the sign points to or stands for: an object in the world" (Thwaites ym. 2002, 35). The word "snow" is not cold: it is not snow; it is a sign that stands for the snow. To take a visual example, René Magritte's painting, *the betrayal of images* (1929) illustrates this idea bluntly in regard to fine arts: '*This is not a pipe*'. It is a representation of the pipe, not the pipe itself.

Because the sign and the object are essentially distinct from one another, a sign can trigger the thought of what is distant (in space or time), absent (for a while or forever), unattainable. A photograph of a family is not the family, but signifies it. The portrait of a sister in the wallet is not the sister, but a sign one can keep close while she lives at the other end of Europe. All objects – especially those marked by the passing of life or charged with our personal experiences – have the ability to **re-call**, to **re-mind**. They maintain in some material form the idea of the thing to which they refer. This is maybe one reason why these signs fascinate us so much, why as humans we need to keep **concrete signs** that

present an **emotional potential**. Through them, we can literally *grasp, hold on* the thing it stands for. Agnès Limboos, Belgian artist specialized in object theatre, searches constantly for objects, which she calls the “true objects”. They are objects that are already “charged”, that “have already lived, that have already been used, that already have a story – a biography – though it remains unknown from the artist who finds it” (Rhéty and Corniquet 2012). Such objects “summon up the collective imagination”; they are “inhabited by meanings and significations” (ibid.).

Regarding to the stage signs, the question is ambiguous. Is the thing a thing or the sign of a thing? Is the radio in *Post mortem* simply the ‘object’ radio (and thus not a sign, but the object); is it the sign of a radio (since it is not a functional one, but rather indicates the idea of a radio), or is it the sign of something beyond the radio (in this case, the sign of hope and fear, of death and religious belief)? “On the one hand, we wish to assert their status as signs (...), but on the other hand, we encounter the irreducible and unavoidable materiality from which the signs are constituted”: they are simultaneously signs and segments of the world, the signs of something else as well as the signs of themselves, their own referents so to say (Proschan 1983, 18).

Based on this double reality of theatrical elements as “things” and signs, Tadeusz Kantor describes in *Credo* how he inducts the meanings from what he **concretely** sees, from what happens **really**, from the “**segments**” of the world.

“In a corner, there is a table with a dark lamp on it. Bent figures of accidentally met people are looming over the table. **Maybe** they are playing cards, or **maybe** they are bent over the dead body of the Shepherd killed by Telemachus” (Kantor 1942-44, 35)⁴

With all the stage elements, he creates the “circumstances that will make the illusionary dramatic reality believable and concrete” (ibid.). In the *Impossible theatre*, he emphasizes on the idea that “Actors can only represent themselves. They do not imitate, they do not represent anybody; they do not express anything but themselves” (ibid. 1969-73, 101). The nature of the stage sign/object allows the transformation of an “illusionary” theatre into a concrete theatre, a theatre within reality. This is in my opinion one of the reasons for which his performances were so powerful.

⁴ | underline

As artists, the duality of the stage sign/object allows us to choose the nature of our performance. Following Kantor's manifestos, we can root it in the reality of the objects. We can also go towards the Brechtian distancing, underlining and increasing the distances between signs and referents. We can finally play on the dialectic between these two extremes.

Such concern is of most interest in our researches and will affect our practices as theatre makers. However, we shall acknowledge that audiences – based on the human nature of investing things with meaning – rarely comes in the theatrical space without taking things as signs. Moreover, as demonstrated by Jindrich Honzl in 1940, the nature of the stage sign/object lies in its capacity to refer not only to itself but also to something else than itself. A meadow certainly can stand for a meadow but also for anything our fantasy wishes it to be, if we invest it with the freedom given by making performances. We can thus continue our semeiological journey, assuming together with Jindrich Honzl that “everything that makes up the reality on the stage (...) in every case stands for other things. In other words, dramatic performance is a set of signs” (1940, 249).

We shall start this journey by getting acquainted with the Saussurean theories of the sign, which gives us tools to understand, from the point of view of puppetry thinking:

- The distinction between the material and the immaterial parts of the sign;
- The interdependence of the signs within a sign system (in our case, within a performance).

2.4 The Saussurean Sign

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) is a Swiss linguist most known as the father of semiology. His interest was drawn on the signs themselves: what are their structures; how their meanings are formed within the sign systems and how the structure of a language influences our understanding of the world.

Though the Saussurean theories relate exclusively to linguistics – that is, to the written and spoken languages – they constitute the founding principles of structuralism. Roland Barthes developed the semiological tools for visual languages, popular culture, advertisements, etc; Claude Levi-Strauss based on semiology his analysis on ethnology and mythology; the Prague structuralists (Petr Bogatyrev, Jindrich Honzl, Jiri Veltrusky...) studied – among others – theatre, folk theatre and puppetry through the Saussurean legacy. The contributions of Ferdinand de Saussure are at the core of analyzing any kind of languages and thus give us tools to approach ours: the language of puppetry thinking.

2.4.1 Two continuums

“Philosophers and linguists always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula” (Saussure 1916, 6)

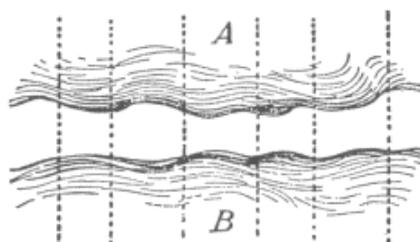


Figure 1, Ferdinand de Saussure, continuums, cours de linguistique générale. 1916

According to Saussure, the world is constituted of two continuums: one immaterial *A* (the plane of ‘jumbled ideas’, of thoughts), and one material *B* (the ‘vague plane of sounds’ which in our case could be the ‘vague plane of *materials*’). By the act of language, human beings perform cuts in both continuums so as to create independent sequences combining a sound/material and a thought/immaterial. Each cut creates a sign that can be thus communicated. However, Saussure underlines the fact that such act is not natural, but highly cultural. The cuts result from a human decision. Their places

define our reading and understanding of the environment: it is our grid to read the world⁵. Every language defines its own categories (Crowe 2010, 18).

René Magritte seized the visual aspect of the continuum: “Sometimes the visible shapes of objects, in real life, touch each other as to form a mosaic” (the words and the images, 1923). He was thus artistically free to decide where to set physical borders on materials and thoughts, where to perform his cuts. Paintings such as *Les compagnons de la peur* (1942) and *Le modèle rouge* (1937) displace our conventional sequencing, disturbing the viewer – shaken in his habits – in order to invite him to open his perception, to learn how to see differently.

In the process of creating a performance, we are endowed with the same artistic freedom. We can extract from the two planes of the continuum (material and thoughts) the signs that will constitute the language of the performance. We can combine (conventionally heterogeneous) elements to build new unities; we can divide (conventionally homogeneous) elements. As puppeteers, we also shake the continuum between animate and inanimate.

2.4.2 The dyadic sign

From his distinction between a physical and a conceptual continuum, Ferdinand de Saussure logically established his dyadic sign, that is, a sign presenting two interdependent parts. In our art form, such distinction enables us to better understand (1) the process of attaching meanings to materials, (2) the effect of misusing conventional relationships between thoughts and materials.

2.4.2.1 Theory

The Saussurean dyadic sign consists of two intricate elements: the signifier and the signified.⁶ I reproduce the Saussurean sign hereafter:

⁵ Comparing for instance the amount of words to describe snow in French (2) and Finnish (over 30), we can understand that though we may perceive the same weather condition, I as French speaker am unable to define what it is. Finnish people have performed more « cuts » on the continuum « snow », so to say.

⁶ In Finnish “merkitys” ja “merkitty”.

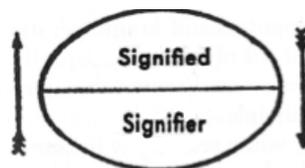


Figure 2 Ferdinand de Saussure, The dyadic sign,
Cours de linguistique générale, 1916

The Signifier is the form that takes the sign, its **pure materiality** as it is perceived by the senses. The signified is a **mental image** of the sign, its conceptual, immaterial aspect (Fiske 1990, 44; Thwaites ym. 2002, 31).

The arrows represent the process of **signification**; they unite dynamically the signifier and the signified in the human mind. The physical perception 'points to' or 'invokes' the concept and vice versa. They affect each other (Thwaites ym. 2002, 31). There cannot be one without the other: a signifier will bring the *homo significans* to search for the signified; a signified will take a shape as soon as it is grasped or communicated. In Saussurean terms, there is an *articulation* between the two (Saussure 1916, 6).

2.4.2.2 Puppetry thinking, "signifier search signified"

As we create performances, we often call upon the Saussurean articulation. One scene of *Continuous curve*⁷, a performance created by Pavel Semchenko and Maxim Didenko provides us with a perfect illustration of such process. One character (Pavel Semchenko) creates a sequence of signifiers that he reads in front of the audience. He then acts according to the signified he attached to each signifier. Such activity lies behind the creation of many puppetry-thinking performances, where the material leads the creation of meaning.

The technique of *devised material* or *listening to the object*, taught by Rene Baker - English puppeteer and puppet thinker - relies in most part on the process of attaching signifieds onto signifiers. The performer is asked to explore

⁷ The video can be found here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y55zBjTqwcl

a given physical material (puppet, cloth, object, body, etc.), without having in mind any intended meaning or intellectual analysis. He *listens* to the materiality. The outside-eye, often the director, selects from this exploration the signifiers that awake emotions, interest and/or thoughts. He/she selects the signifiers that *talk* to him/her, but does not necessarily yet know *what it talks about*. It is only after those two essential preliminary steps that a precise signified is attached to a specific signifier. Such method allows us to find stage elements that our mind alone could not have imagined. We do not invest the material with meanings before hand; we let it offer a sequence of potential signifiers that we invest with meanings.

2.4.2.3 Uses and misuses of the signifier: surprise and emotions

In our work, we can also mislead the audience, using a signifier that calls another signified than the one expected. Such unconventional use of conventional or familiar signs can have a very pleasurable effect: we are surprised to look at things from a new point of view; we excitingly wait for new misuses. This is a common feature of most successful object theatre performances I have seen. One example among others, in *TraFika* – a performance directed by Ishmael Falke and Sandrina Lindgren – the characters communicate exclusively by means of road signs. According to the actions of the actors, the meanings of the same road signs vary, and a road sign for ‘factory’ (signifier) will signify either a factory (conventional signified) or a lit cigarette (unconventional signified). By such play around the two sides of the sign, the audience remains actively reading, participating in the performance rather than passively receiving.



Picture 2, Ishmael Falke and Sandrina Lindgren, *TraFika*, 2012

Besides its playful application, the misuse of the signifier can lead the audience towards a highly emotional experience, as it is the case in *Post-mortem*, a performance directed by Romain Landat in 2011. The play recounts the process of grief: a sister cannot accept the death of her brother during the Second World War. The entire performance stages her progressive acceptance of the fact. If we resume the play in semiological terms, the sister refuses to acknowledge that the signifier “my brother” contains the signified “dead”. Romain Landat translated his plot within the sign used for the brother: a “live human being” (signifier) signifies a “dead human being” (signified), that is its exact opposite in our everyday understanding of ‘alive’ versus ‘dead’. The audience only completes the signification of this sign at the end of the performance. The theatrical **recognition** of the two components is very emotional. We acknowledge his death at the same time as his sister; together with her we accept to let his image go.

2.4.3 The arbitrary nature of the Saussurean sign

After acknowledging the fact that a sign unites a signifier and a signified, Ferdinand de Saussure questioned the nature of their relationship. He concluded that Signifiers and Signifieds are combined arbitrarily. This contribution to the analysis of the sign – though insufficient in regard to the non-verbal signs – gives to the performing artist a space of freedom but also bestows him with responsibility.

2.4.3.1 Theory

As we saw previously, the cuts performed in the Saussurean continuums are not natural but the fact of human decisions. Logically, the sign resulting from these cuts is by nature **arbitrary**: the signifier “has no natural connection with the signified” (Saussure 1916, 5). In other words, the word “dog” does not bite, and “an object is not so attached to its name that one cannot find for it another one which is more suitable” (René Magritte, words and images, 1927). The sound [dog] in English is as arbitrary as [koira] in Finnish and [chien] in French.

Besides the rare cases of onomatopoetic signs, there is no external motivation leading to the combination of a signifier and a signified. The sign is built by establishing cultural **conventions** between its users. In the absence of such conventions, or if a user is not aware of them, the sign will remain incomprehensible. The signifier [koira] will not mean anything to me until I have learnt the particular convention of the Finnish language, leading to attach to the signifier [koira] the idea of 'dog'.

The arbitrary nature of the Saussurean sign applies to most linguistic signs, that is, to the field of his study. However, it remains insufficient regarding to the analysis of non-verbal signs. The clear division between arbitrary and motivated cannot express the multiplicity of possible combinations between signifier and signified⁸.

The conception of the sign as arbitrary – though incomplete for a thorough study of puppetry signs – can be an artistic source of inspiration: it frees the artist and the audience from the everyday conventional associations.

2.4.3.2 The arbitrary sign and the artistic freedom

The notion of the arbitrary nature of the sign leaves an open space to the artist. If a signifier is attached to a signified arbitrarily, that is, by a human autocratic decision, then anyone can combine freely signifiers and signifieds. Artists are empowered to create at will "poetic associations between signifiers and signifieds" (Crowe 2010, 20). René Magritte, once again, provides us with many illustrations of a playful and artistic use of semiotic theories⁹. In *La clé des songes*, the image of a horse is associated with the word 'the door', that of a clock with 'the wind'... While observing the painting, the viewer is taken away from his everyday use of the signs and, shattered, he "rediscovers the ordinary" (Crowe 2010, 20).

⁸ The Peircean classification of the signs provides us with a more penetrating insight in terms of visual and aural signs. We shall come to it in the chapter 'The Peircean sign »

⁹ see the collection of paintings *La clé des songes*

Allegé and *to allegé*¹⁰, two performances created by Clément Layes, give shape on stage to the researches of René Magritte. Clément Layes and his fellow performers systematically rename objects. A mop is called ‘dream’; the action of the ‘mop/dream’ thrown onto the ‘water spilled/ocean’ is called ‘poetry’. In the audience, we smile as it colours and opens our conceptions of ‘mop’, ‘dream’ and ‘poetry’. As we watch the performances, we also surprisingly feel light and free, liberated from the weight of the everyday conventions. The naming of objects reminds of children play, but also, more generally, of the human ability to reinvent the everyday use of language, to deepen it by the misuse of well-known signs, and to not get caught within established cultural uses.

2.4.3.3 The arbitrary sign: questioning cultural habits in performances.

We do not, in our everyday use of signs, question nor take distances in regard to the combinations of signifiers and signifieds. The time of the performance can be used to shaken this passivity. The Brechtian theatre researched on the arbitrary nature of the sign, increasing voluntarily the distances existing between signified and signifier so as to invite the audience to reflect consciously on the matter of the play. The aim was not only that of poetry (though it partly was) but also that of political statement: ‘Dramatic art should not so much express the real as signify it. It is thus necessary for there to be a certain distance between the signified and the signifier’ (Barthes 1956, 339). In order to avoid illusion, the signs ‘must be partially arbitrary’ (ibid.).

The artist is able to take this distance, a distance that **awakes** the audience and questions its cultural habits. The artist investigates meanings, using the ‘freedom that men have to make things signify’ (ibid.). There is no such rule in puppetry thinking that would limit the object “mousetrap” to signify “mousetraps”, the human actor to signify “alive”. There is no such need as to copy-paste the world to re-present it on stage. We can work the reality to be seen differently, to invest it with the human ability to imagine. Conscious of the arbitrary nature of the sign, we can choose to be awake rather than passive.

¹⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgsDArj4wZc (2’00 to ending) and vimeo.com/18969833

2.4.4 The Value of the sign

If the dyadic sign can be analyzed through its individual relationship between a signifier and a signified, Ferdinand de Saussure stresses in his analysis the fact that a sign does not mean by itself. It does not mean either by its relationship to reality. It means by its relationships to the other signs belonging to the same sign system (Crowe 2010, 36). This determines the **value** of the sign:

Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others" (Saussure, 1916, 8).

The following schema represents the value of the sign:

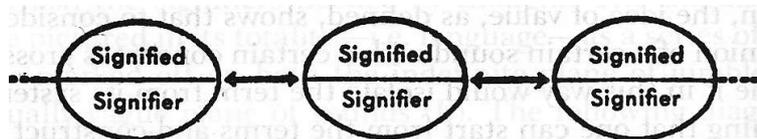


Figure 3, Ferdinand de Saussure, the Value of the Sign, Cours de linguistique générale, 1916

Language is based on a differential system. The meaning of a sign is limited by the meanings of the others. 'Proof is that the value of a term may be modified without either its meaning or its sound being changed, solely because a neighboring term has been modified' (Saussure 1916, 9).

As we create performances, we must be aware that the meaning of each sign depends on the other signs also participating to the performance. If we take away, bring a new sign or transform one, it will alter the meaning of every other signs. In the performance *To the end of love* directed by Anna Ivanova, the main character receives a white negligee from her husband. She discovers little by little that many women were given the exact same present. If her negligee was not white but pink, her jealousy would have no ground, for hers would stand out, leaving the others in the background as mere faded love memories. But because the five negligees are exactly similar in colour and shape, she is just one woman among many in the life of this man.

2.4.5 Syntagm and paradigm

As the meaning of the Saussurean sign depends on its relationships with other signs, Saussure distinguishes two axes of relationships: paradigmatic and syntagmatic, the axis of selection and the axis of combination.

2.4.5.1 Paradigm

The paradigm is "a set from which a choice is made and only one unit from that set may be chosen" (Fiske 1990, 57). A paradigm gathers signs that share some **common characteristics**. Each of this sign is clearly distinguished from the other by **distinctive features** (ibid.). The paradigm is the place of possibilities; from these possibilities, I must select one. This choice is significant: "Where there is a choice, there is meaning, and the meaning of what was chosen is determined by the meaning of what was not" (Fiske 1990, 58).

There is an infinite amount of paradigms, for they can be extremely narrow or broad. There is a paradigm of puppet manipulation techniques, one of scales, one of negligee design, one of woman garment, one of road signs, etc.

Regarding to puppetry thinking, the most important, in my opinion, is how much we dig within our paradigms. Rene Baker rightly notes that puppets have only 5 distinct emotional states in 99% of the puppet performances (i.e. happy, sad, angry, surprised and scared). These puppeteers did not investigate the paradigm of 'human emotions'. But if the paradigmatic work were done, the puppeteer would find himself able to choose among no less than 72 emotions. Another typical example of shallow paradigms is that of rhythms, stuck between middle slow and middle fast in most scenes of most performances. What if we open our range of possibilities? I believe both the puppeteer and the audience would gain from such work.

In order to avoid shallow paradigms, we must first set the limits of the one we wish to work on (emotions, rhythms, sounds, textures, negligee design...). Once we have delimited its field, we could spend a few minutes searching for its set of signs, and then only choose the appropriate one that serves best our intention.

By doing so, the sign will not belong to the realm of stereotypical, superficial and middle-size signs. It will give a 'colour' to the performance, a depth. Most importantly, it will be the sign that really suits the meaning we intended.

2.4.5.2 Syntagm

The syntagm is the combination of signs (each chosen from its paradigm), combination that is produced according to the rules or conventions of the language. (Fiske 1990, 58). By combining them, the signs affect directly each other and delimit each other's meaning: Ishmael Falke places next to him a factory road sign, and we understand that he has become a factory worker. The context affects the sign to the extent that one same sign can signify very differently according to what happens to or around it.¹¹

The syntagm unfolds in both space and time. It is the way we serve the meaning. Choosing the order of the signs, the rhythm and the space of their appearances, are three essential syntagmatic decisions, especially in the case of visual theatre. A play on variations of the order, rhythm and space will create perfectly new meanings, new stories. It can constitute a starting point to writing the dramaturgy.

Regarding to the rules of combination, the 'grammar' of theatrical language, there is no general fixed convention as there is in spoken language. They differ from performance to performance as each of them established its own set of rules (Jurkowski 1983, 131; Aston and Savona 1991, 91). In *TraFika*, one syntagmatic rule could be as follow: the characters can communicate with only through road signs, one after another, a "ping pong" grammar so to speak.

¹¹ For more details, see 2.6, The transformability of the sign

2.5 The Peircean sign

While Ferdinand de Saussure was mostly interested in the structure of the sign as a unit in combination with other units, regardless of their relations to reality, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914), an American semiotician and a philosopher, was concerned with the way we make sense of the world (Crowe 2010, 22) and thus with three aspects of the sign: the sign itself, its users and the external reality (Fiske 1990, 42). Consequently, the Saussurean dyadic sign transforms with the Peircean contribution into a triadic sign, that is, a sign composed by three interdependent elements.

2.5.1 The triadic sign

“A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, create in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign, which it creates I call the **Interpretant** of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its Object. It stands for that **object**, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the **representamen**” (Peirce 1931-58, 2.228)¹²

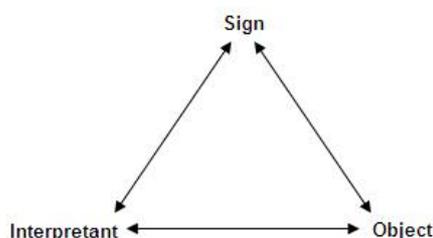


Figure 4, Ch. S. Peirce, the tryadic sign, see Fiske 1990. 42

The sign (or sign-vehicle or representamen) is similar to the signifier as defined by Saussure, that is, the physical aspect of the sign. It can take any shape (words written or spoken, photographs, sounds, objects...).¹³

The Interpretant is similar to the Saussurean Signified. It is a mental image or concept. Peirce however emphasises the fact that the interpretant is produced both by the sign **and** by the user’s experience of the object (Fiske 1990, 42).

¹² | underline

¹³ For the list of performing signs that respond to the ‘materials worked in their materiality’, see 2.4 *an attempt of classification*

This implies that that the interpretant varies from user to user. The meaning is not fixed, as it would be in a dictionary. Its 'limits are set by social conventions' and 'the variations lie in the social or psychological differences between users' (Fiske 1990, 42). Interestingly, Peirce does not distinguish between the speaker (the user who produces the sign) and the reader (the user who receives the sign). By doing so, he considers that they have an equivalent 'creative input' (Fiske 1990, 42), that is, the same responsibility.

Applied to puppetry, this has a double impact: the representamen I produce brings for me an interpretant that is personal. The representamen witnessed by the audience will produce in each spectator a more or less different interpretant. This is why two persons who assist to the same performance share the same experience of the representamen, but not the same interpretant. One simply need to discuss what he has "seen" in a show to understand that his interlocutors did not exactly "see" the same.

The Object is the thing that is referred to by the sign. I shall call it the **referent** in the rest of the essay, in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding between the 'object' as in Peircean terms and the 'object' that is used as sign in visual performances

The double-ended arrows signify a direct relationship between each element, but also stress the fact that each component can only be understood in relation to the others (Fiske 1990, 42). However, as we already discussed (2.1.3), the question remains whether there is a direct or indirect relationship between the sign-vehicle and the referent. Ogden and Richards (1923) proposed an alternative to the Peircean triadic sign, which I think is more accurate and underlines this more-or-less-direct relationship

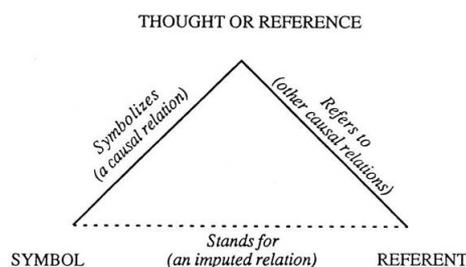


Figure 5, Ogden and Richards 1923, see Fiske 1990. 43

(Some remarks on terminology, a constant difficulty in semiotic studies... Ogden and Richards use the word Symbol for the Peircean Sign and the Saussurean Signifier; they use "Thought or Reference" for Interpretant or Signified)

2.5.2 Classification of the signs

Acknowledging the importance of the referent in the construction of the sign, Peirce organized the signs in regard to the type of relationship they established with reality. While Saussure mostly differentiated the signs between arbitrary and motivated, Peirce proposes three categories: Icon, Index and Symbol. We shall introduce each of them first theoretically, and immediately draw some of their contributions for our understanding of the theatrical signs and more specifically for the 'atoms' of puppetry.

"There is three kinds of signs which are all indispensable in all reasoning: the first is the diagrammatic sign or *icon*, which exhibits a similarity or analogy to the subject of discourse; the second is the *index*, which, like a pronoun demonstrative or relative, forces the attention to the particular object intended without describing it; the third [the *symbol*] is the general name or description which signifies its object by means of an association of ideas or habitual connection between the name of the character signified" (Peirce 1885, see Counsell, 10)

2.5.2.1 Iconic signs

The iconic sign presents a direct **resemblance** to the object it represents. The relationship is analogical. It is thus the easiest sign to read and recognize. We should however remember that if those signs seem to be a reflection of the real, they are not the things themselves (Rose 2001, 78; 83). To put it simply, the puppets in the works of Ilka Schönbein represent Ilka Schönbein; they are not Ilka Schönbein. Part of Kantor's work however was based on bringing back the sign to being its own referent, to suppress the dialectic of the sign.

Theatre seems to be mostly iconic (Elam 1980, 23). The referent is alike the sign itself "in some respect or capacity" (Peirce 1931-58, 2.228). However, the interest in the theatre comes from the **degree of likeness, of similitude** between the sign

and its referent (Elam 1980, 23). The similitude is flexible and it falls to the audience to make the analogical work, to find the resemblance and to connect the sign to its referent (Elam 1980, 25).

We can also consider puppets as icons for animate beings (Green and Pepicello 1983, 155). There exist however many levels of iconicity, from detailed imitation to minimalistic or stylized puppets. The masks of Ilka Schönbein in *Voyage d'hiver* are perfect illustration of high iconicity, she even emphasizes the iconicity by altering her own face¹⁴; traditional glove puppets present established facial features, emphasizing not a relation of iconicity between a precise character and the puppet but between a type and the puppet; puppets may also simply rely on anthropomorphism, the human ability to read “human” in any given object.



Picture 3, Ilka Schönbein, *Voyage d'hiver*, 2003



Picture 4, Gianluca di Matteo, *Pulcinella*, 2002



Picture 5, Quoiwasmitä, *Iarnvith*, 2010

2.5.2.2 Indexical signs

In opposition to icon, **indexes do not re-present** at all the thing they refer to; they serve to **point at** something. There is a direct **correlation** between the sign and the thing it signifies, but the thing itself is absent. Smoke is an index for fire; wet clothes may be an index of rain...

In theatre, indexes are extremely useful in that they focus the attention without imitating the meaning. They also have the ability to frame the audience look (Elam 1980, 26). In this latter aspect, lighting is one essential stage index.

¹⁴ Video on www.dailymotion.com/video/x4m9pj_ilka-schonbein_creation#.UY9dBc3jkmk (13'08 to 14'25)

Regarding to puppet theatre, the notion of index has been regarded as highlighting the essence of the puppet, notably by Thomas A. Green, William J. Pepicello and Jiri Veltrusky:

While the puppet is an icon for an animate being, the fact that inanimate objects are actively manipulated by a human agent in order to simulate life is more important in puppetry. The puppet and its action become indexical of human agency, and this indexicality may become even more overt in performance. (Green and Pepicello 1983, 155)

The puppet is an index of human activity, regarding to three essential aspects:

- Speech, which "signifies not only the speeches but also the speakers and sometimes the addressees" (Veltrusky 1983 71).
- Motion, which cannot be without the intervention of a puppeteer. In fact, the presence of a visible puppeteer is in itself an illustration of the indexical nature of puppetry (Green and Pepicello 1983, 157). His/her presence creates a tension between:
 - o The iconic side of the puppet (perceived as independent actor) and
 - o The indexical side of the puppet (indicating the human action)
- Its essence as human artifact. The existence of the puppet in itself implies the action of creation off stage by a puppet builder or on stage by a performer.

I think that this indexical nature of the puppet should be extended to all objects, for they carry with them their past and present relationship with human beings. Most object theatre makers look within the objects for their "biographies", that is for the human stories they were the witnesses of (Rhéty and Corniquet 2012). Indexicality might be one of the reasons for which objects and puppets have the ability to awake strong emotions in the audience. The inanimate is an indexical sign of the animate; it is **charged with humanity**:

"I prefer objects which, in my opinion, have some kind of inner life. Like in the esoteric sciences, I believe in the conservation of some content in the objects; objects that were touched by human beings in a certain excitement of their sensibility. The objects, effectively charged in this manner, are then able – under some conditions – to give back these contents. Near them, some association of ideas and analogies appear, coming from the shivers of our own subconscious" (Jan Svankmajer, 1995)

2.5.2.3 Symbolic signs

While both icons and indexes are motivated signs, the Peircean symbolic signs are characterized by the total absence of motivated connection between the sign and the meaning it carries or the object it refers to. In the Saussurean terms, they are the arbitrary signs.

Thus their understanding depends exclusively on convention, agreement or established rule between the users. If, as stated by Henryk Jurkowski, "learning the signs is a general requisite for proper understanding of all messages" (1983, 124), it is all the more so in the case of symbolic signs, which cannot be understood without preliminary agreement.

In *TraFika*, symbolic signs are at the core of the understanding of the performance, which is built around the reading of road signs. In itself, there is no reason for a red triangle to mean 'danger'. Convention only allows the reading. Ishmael Falke and Sandrina Lindgren relied on the pre-requisite knowledge of road signs by their audience.

2.5.3 A fourth category: the plastic signs by the group μ

The three Peircean categories, though they offer a space for deep analysis, fell short to describe the works of abstract painters. In their practice, the use of colours, shapes, textures, etc. cannot be analyzed in terms of icon, index or symbol. Consequently, in 1992, a group of contemporary Belgian semioticians - the "group μ ", founded in 1967 - published *the treaty of the visual sign*, in which they established a fourth category of sign, additional to the three Peircean categories: the **plastic sign**¹⁵. This theory offers the possibility to accept the materiality of the sign and its inherent expressivity, without systematically making of it an iconic sign. It is an answer to the concern of many fine artists such as Henri Matisse: "When I put green, it does not mean grass; when I put blue, it does not mean sky" (1972; see Roque 2010) or Fernand Léger: "the colour is true, realistic,

¹⁵ The adjective « plastic » does not refer to the synthetic material but to the artistic plasticity.

emotional in itself without having to link it to a sky, a tree, a flower. Colour has a value in itself" (1965; see Roque 2010). The group μ considers that the materiality (colour, texture, shapes, etc.) of an artistic sign can be taken and experienced for itself.

The difficulty with the plastic sign is that a same sign such as a red circular stain can be read both as iconic sign (a balloon, a sunset) and as plastic sign (idea of circularity, warmth...). A same signifier can be read in the two ways (Roque 2010). The difference lies in the kind of attention that is given to the sign; it does not lie in the sign itself. It is a way of reading that mostly depends on the viewer, not on the artist. Georges Roque, philosopher and art historian, considers that the choice of reading varies according to the Jakobsonian functions of signification: the iconic reading happens when the referential function prevails, that is, when the reader looks for an equivalent in the world; the plastic reading when the poetic function prevails, that is, when one "puts the emphasis on the message for itself" (Roque 2010), when the artistic event is taken as such.

2.5.4 A flexible classification

The Peircean categories are valuable tools to understand the nature of the signs brought on the stage. However a sign can rarely be limited to one single category. It rather often belongs simultaneously to several categories of signs: a sign can be iconic **and** indexical **and** symbolic **and** plastic. For instance, the traditional glove puppet Pulcinella can be taken - simultaneously - as an icon of the character type named 'Pulcinella', an index of the puppeteer, a symbol the Italian culture and a plastic sign of energy.

Both F. de Saussure and Ch. S. Peirce's contributions are in most part deconstructions of the sign: between materiality and immateriality and between the sign and reality. Such distinction is highly valuable for the understanding and analysis of puppetry thinking as well as for finding new sources of inspiration. But I wish to underline the fact that these theories are **tools to think**, not to limit thoughts. Any analytical tool must be carefully handled: reality cannot be reduced to schematic categories; it resists analytical divisions.

3 TOWARDS PUPPETRY THINKING SIGNS

Having in mind the **general theories** of the sign, and notably those of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, three questions arise regarding to the specificity of puppetry thinking signs. These questions will lead the present section of the essay:

- What are the **signs specific to puppetry thinking**?
- Can these signs be **deconstructed** in order to deepen our analysis and to find our stage materials?
- What is the main characteristic undergoing the **combination** of puppetry thinking signs?

3.1 An attempt of classification

As we established it in the introduction and throughout the previous section, puppetry thinking signs are characterized by the emphasis made on their materiality. In other words, **the signifier is given priority over the signified**¹⁶.

Following the example of Tadeusz Kowzan (1968) and largely inspired by his classification of the drama theatre sign system, I attach here an attempt to organize the signs corresponding to "puppetry thinking". This is a list of the 'atoms' waiting to be introduced and combined in future performances (Jurkowski 1983, 130). This list was started in 2012 together with the 2nd year puppetry students of Turku Arts Academy. It does not pretend to be exhaustive (though I try). The reader is warmly welcome to improve and develop it.

¹⁶ However, to avoid misunderstanding, the signifier will always call upon a signified. As we saw with the Saussurean theory of the sign, there cannot be a signifier without a signified nor a signified without signifier. Puppetry thinking gives priority to the material, it does not abolish the meaning attached to it.

| SIGNS | ATTACHED SIGNS | CATEGORY | VISUAL-AURAL | TIME-SPACE |
|-------------------|--|---------------------|----------------|----------------|
| WORDS | Understandable - obscure | SPOKEN TEXT | AUDITIVE SIGNS | TIME |
| | Rhythmical patterns | | | |
| VOICE | Source | | | |
| | Pitch | | | |
| | Volume | | | |
| | Pace | | | |
| MUSIC | Altered - Natural | INARTICULATE SOUNDS | AUDITIVE SIGNS | SPACE |
| | Source | | | TIME |
| | Volume | | | SPACE |
| SOUNDS | Rhythm | STAGE | VISUAL SIGNS | SPACE |
| | Source | | | TIME AND SPACE |
| LIGHTING | Texture | STAGE | VISUAL SIGNS | SPACE |
| | Colours | | | |
| | Angles | | | |
| | Visible - Invisible | | | |
| | Type | | | |
| SETTINGS | Pace | STAGE | VISUAL SIGNS | SPACE |
| | Mobile - still | | | |
| | Materials | | | |
| | Space Composition (directions, distances, relations) | | | |
| | Scale | | | |
| | Shapes | | | |
| | Textures | | | |
| THEATRE SPACE | Colours | STAGE | VISUAL SIGNS | SPACE |
| | Style | | | |
| | Volumes | | | |
| | Neutral / Charged | | | |
| HUMAN BEING | Indoor / Outdoor | HUMAN | VISUAL SIGNS | TIME AND SPACE |
| | Architecture | | | |
| | Hair style | | | |
| | Make-up | | | |
| | Costume | | | |
| | Whole body / fractioned body | | | |
| | Actor - Manipulator - Performer... | | | |
| | Visible - invisible | | | |
| | Movements | | | |
| | Directions | | | |
| Gestures | | | | |
| Rhythm | | | | |
| Breathing pattern | | | | |
| | | | | TIME |

| | | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| PUPPET AND OBJECT (ANIMATED OR INANIMATE) PROPS INCLUDED | Materials | INANIMATE / THINGS | VISUAL SIGNS | SPACE |
| | Scale | | | |
| | Shapes | | | |
| | Textures | | | |
| | Colours | | | |
| | Style | | | |
| | Attached – Disconnected parts | | | |
| | Historical charge | | | |
| | Ready-made or built | | | |
| 2D - 3D | | | | |
| ANIMATED PUPPET OR OBJECT | Manipulation technique | | | TIME AND SPACE |
| | Movements | | | |
| | Directions | | | |
| | Gestures | | | |
| | Rhythm | | | |
| | Breathing Patterns | | | |
| MATTERS | Acted upon or acting upon | | | TIME AND SPACE |
| | Movements | | | |
| | Textures | SPACE | | |
| | Colours | | | |
| | Natural / Artificial | | | |

Table 1 Classification of puppetry signs

Notes on the table:

1. One could add to this table the signs that appeal to taste, smell and touch. I left them aside, for I have rarely experienced them as “manipulated”, and as “intentional”. They often happen to either be there (a hot theatrical space, a smelly fish...) or only create an atmosphere without defined meaning. However, a good example of intentional olfactory sign could be found in *Life is a bed of roses*¹⁷. Barbara Mélois perfumes the stage with rose-smell toilet spray before the audience comes in, signifying the human quest to re-create artificially the conditions of its happiness. Blind puppet performances would constitute an interesting corpus to study it thoroughly.

2. I have arbitrarily separated visual and aural signs, in order not to subordinate the latter to visual signs. The “source” of sounds can obviously be the objects, the settings, the theatrical space, the matter or the human being.

3. From the list of signs, one can draw those that are most significant: not all, not all the time. Regarding to the puppet as an example, Veltrusky marked that the ‘vivification’ (i.e. enduing the inanimate with life) of puppets does not depend on one single component: “they are not always set in motion, and speech is not always part of the performance. [Animation] results as a rule from a variety of procedures and their combination” (1983, 88).

¹⁷ video: barbara-melois.fr/eau_de_%20rose.htm

3.2 The smallest signifying units: deconstructing the sign

The signs we have exposed as puppetry thinking signs can be freely combined within a performance. It is however useful to analyse the signs further. A sign is a unit, which awaits deeper exploration. The following paragraphs introduce a – widely adapted – theoretical tool that may enable us to dig into the signs: the seme analysis.

3.2.1 Definitions: Seme analysis, isotopy and allotopy.

Seme analysis is an analytical tool that does not directly belong to semiotics – though semioticians may refer to it¹⁸. It comes from a branch of linguistics: the **semantics**, that is, the study of meaning of linguistic units. The seme analysis consists in extracting **from the signified** of a sign its smallest signification units, units that cannot exist independently: **the semes** (also called semantic features). It is carried out as ‘objectively’ as possible, on the level of denotation (i.e. the basic literal meaning) with the aim of finding out the distinctive features that limit the value of a sign.

The seme analysis, carried onto the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axis, also provides us with two additional concepts: those of isotopy and allotopy.

- The **isotopy** is the repetition (or recurrence) of one seme within several signs or in a sentence. On the syntagmatic level (i.e. in the case of the scenes or of the overall performance), it will assure a consistency. (Détienne 2004). On the paradigmatic axis, the isotopy defines the content of the paradigm, the seme shared by all its elements.
- The **allotopy** is a rupture in the isotopy in the syntagmatic axis. It is highly meaningful. This is for example the case in metaphors. (ibid.)

¹⁸ www.signosemio.com/index-en.asp

3.2.2 Practical adaptations and applications of the seme analysis

Seme analysis is a tool I have found most useful in many occasions in my work as a puppeteer. But in order to apply it to puppetry thinking, I take the freedom to adapt it thoroughly.

- Rather than 'objective', I suggest to widen the analysis to the subjective point of view, following the question: what does this sign means for me as an artist and what does it mean to other people?
- I propose to apply the analysis on both levels of the signifier and of the signified

If we accept it in this way, such seme analysis allows us to:

- Deepen our understanding of the sign we place on stage (and thus prevent misunderstandings with the audience, especially in respect of connotations)
- Find the physical material most adequate for a signified,
- Find the signified most adequate for a signifier,
- Discover the signifying places of variation within a sign (and avoid the "nice" images, that is the one-note images that do not mean so much),
- Smoothen the transformability of the sign, the transitions in its various meanings and so keep the audience to follow
- Understand why a metaphor, a metonymy and, to a lesser extent, a symbol fail to be understood
- Check whether or not there is a consistent line between all the signs of a performance, that is, an *isotopy*.

3.2.3 The signifier-seme-analysis

On the level of the pure signifier, the signifier-seme-analysis consists in listing all physical elements of the material we have in front of us. It can also be done mentally, but each material being unique, I think it is worth applying it to the

concrete material. This activity - in the case of puppetry thinking - is carried onto the material as it is (1) **still**, (2) **put in motion and** (3) **source of sounds**. To give the same analysis a more poetic name, it is the time of *listening to the material* (Rene Baker).

- **Still**. Detailed description of the signifier: colour, shapes, marks of life or use (scratches, stamps...), textures, constituting materials (glass, bone, metal, etc.), size, resistance, functionalities (joints, mechanisms, opening system etc.), amount (one, two, three, many), time frame, style, artefact/ready-made, etc.
- **In motion**. List of all movements that are coming from the material with a human input. This list is better done in a video format, for words often do not suffice to explain the qualities of a movement.
- **In sounds**. List of sounds produced **by** or **through** the material

In the case of texts or sounds (worked in their materiality only), this analysis must be adapted by paying special attention to time (length, rhythms, pace), patterns (consonance, alliteration, harmonies, repetition, etc.), source, pitch, “texture”, volume, harmonies, etc.

Such exercise will provide us with a deep knowledge of the material (which is essential to our work) and with a few paradigms to draw from, paradigms **unique to this very material**. After it, a chair is not just a chair; it is *this very* chair. We will also be the owner of a bank of physical information that can be used later to support the meanings we intend.

Moreover, during or after the same-analysis exercise, associations will form in our mind (we are *homo-significans*: it is in our nature). I suggest marking down those associations, which provides a list of potential signifieds, from which we can choose the most suitable ones. It is advised however to separate the one who – without any intention, free from interpretation – produces the signifiers (the performer), and the one who reads the signifieds (the director, or outside eye). The initial signifier is progressively charged with a chain of signifiers, some expected of course, but also many unexpected, many that would not have

come to our mind without this preliminary exploration. Those ‘surprise’ signifiers are not arbitrary intellectual decisions, they come **from** the material; they **belong** to it. The feeling of forced meaning is avoided; that of sincerity is brought up. As puppeteer, it is one of the greatest pleasures I can get.

3.2.4 The signified-seme-analysis

The signified-seme-analysis is more difficult to conduct than the previous one, for there is little concrete to rely on. We work on the level of concepts, of ‘mental images’ to use the Saussurean terminology. It is more subject to personal interpretation and cultural backgrounds. As we search for the semes, I advice to be both very objective and very subjective, allowing associations to come up. We can later decide which semes to highlight and which semes to let go.

However, in order to avoid finding exclusively self-centred semes, it has proven itself useful to open to other subjectivities. Cécile Thévenot and myself within the *Theatre Moufles* often call on a process of interviews. We ask people to tell us what a concept – a signified – means for them. We can thus open our analysis to other points of view and to semes that would have never come to our minds.

The signified-seme-analysis has also often provided me with an adequate signifier, following the natural process of associations. As human beings, we cannot stand long facing a signifier without a signified or vice versa. To give a shape to this process, we shall analyze one concrete example: the concept of ‘snow’.

I shall use the signified ‘snow’ for two reasons. One is that Cécile Thévenot and myself used it in *Saanko Iuvan*, and we have gone personally through this process. The second and most important reason is because there is a large tendency in puppet theatre to use for the concept ‘snow’ (and other related weather conditions) what I call ‘flat’ or ‘half-empty’ signs. If we need ‘snow’ on stage, unless we cool down the theatre space to minus degrees and use a snow-system, we have to find a *translation*, a sign. Most performances use

cotton wool for its convenience, without any deep or personal reasons. Because the signified-seme-analysis was not done at all, cotton wool is there only a mere imitation of white and soft brought up on stage.

First we shall list the semes of 'snow':

'**white**', 'cold', 'meteorological', 'natural', '**in winter**', 'muffled sounds', '**silence**' '**sleep**', '**natural blanket**', '**soft**', 'crystals', 'ice', 'layer', '**many**', 'geometrical shapes', 'water', '**beautiful** or 'dirty' (December or April...), 'cocaine' or 'heroin' (slang), '**weightless**', 'ski' or 'sludge', 'material to construct' (snow sculpture), 'melting', 'mild', '**sound of cracking muffled steps**', '**fall**'...

There can be more, but I limit myself here. The semes I have underlined are those that provided us with the signifier and the possibility to develop the whole scene that we brought on stage in *Saanko Iuvan*. From the seme analysis (and particularly from the semes 'sleep' and 'blanket'), the concept of snow found in our minds a signifier in the white feathers of a pillow. The scene went as follow: I placed the pillow on my face as a mask ('sleep' + 'blanket'). We had made a cut where the mouth of the mask could be ('silence'), and from there I pulled white feathers ('white' + 'many' + 'soft' + 'weightless' + 'beautiful') that dropped slowly down ('fall') behind a window where "winter" was written on a piece of paper ('in winter'). Cécile remained silent until I went on walking, pulling silent words from my pillow-mouth ('silence'). At each step, Cécile softly removed crunched brown papers from the piano ('sound of cracking muffled steps').

Thanks to the seme analysis, we found ourselves with a visual metaphor. We shall study more thoroughly the question of metaphors on stage during the second half of the essay. But we can already notice that the more semes are shared by the 'concept' and its metaphorical *translation*, the easiest it is to read by the audience. In theory, one seme in common suffices to create a metaphor¹⁹. But if the feedback from the viewers about one sign is again and again "I don't get it", it may prove itself useful to check the semes.

¹⁹ We shall study this aspect more thoroughly in the chapter 3.5 *metaphor*

3.2.1 Remarks

These analyses do not need to be carried out for every single sign. We can also trust our intuitions. But when we encounter a difficulty to be understood or when a sign needs to be clear for the audience not to be lost, it is very practical and useful. When creativity gets stuck, or when we feel overwhelmed, it eases the process of building images, for it is very concrete. Instead of fighting with the general, we can rest and tackle our difficulties by starting from the small ends of the stick.

Through the same analysis, we can also find the places of contrast and transform our given material so as to create tension, that is, a reality other than the external – normal – reality. This is the place of the artistic freedom, of the artistic reality. We simply need to ask the question: what if I ... ? What if I break one leg of the chair? What if I tear off the dress? What if I change scale? What if I change the time frame of that object? Etc. By acting on the pure signifier, we transform partly or dramatically the overall meaning of the sign it belongs to.

I believe that contrast is essential to the arousal of meanings. If there is no contrast, there is no dynamism and images fall flat. We have to bring out the disparity within the signs, but also between the signs. This is essential to puppetry thinking and will constitute the subject of the next chapter, giving an answer to the question we formulated in the beginning of this section: what is the main characteristic undergoing the combination of puppetry thinking signs?

3.3 “Bringing out the disparity” of the signs (Jiri Veltrusky)

In the everyday life, we are rarely aware of the different elements that are combined together to produce a picture or a message. We see them synchronically as a whole. In the theatrical environment however, it is different. As an audience, we know that “everything on stage is a sign”, “that everyone and everything placed within the theatrical frame has an artificial or pre-determined meaning”. We pay attention to every detail to the extent that “Even if something has arbitrarily entered into the frame, it is read as significant” (Aston and Savona 1991, 8 and 99).

Veltrusky, in his analysis of puppet and actor theatres, describes the creation process as one of “breaking down and building up” the global picture. From each signs, the theatre maker eliminates some components, modifies others, adds new ones, reorganizes their mutual relations, etc. (Veltrusky 1983, 98).

In the particular case of puppet theatre, the process of building up necessarily involves “bring(ing) out the disparity of the signs involved and the way they combine” (Veltrusky 1983, 78). Because the object ‘puppet’ cannot move nor speak by itself, the signs that are homogeneous in real life are deconstructed in puppet theatre. Veltrusky characterizes the puppet as a threefold sign, where the physical object, the source of the movement and the source of the voice are separated. And the puppet’s physicality itself can also be deconstructed, breaking up its parts (“in stead of a full puppet, we saw its elements as pars pro toto”, Jurkowski 1983, 143). The puppeteer is consequently free regarding to how the signs can be combined (Veltrusky 1983, 78) and “the copy elaborated on the stage is not destroyed but shattered, scored, freed from the metonymical contagion of voice and gesture, soul and body, which entangles our actors” (Barthes 1977, 177).

According to Veltrusky, the interest lies in the way signs are combined together. They “may be mutually supportive, complementary, subordinated one to another, contradictory, etc.” (1983, 105):

- The signs can be used in the same direction, so as to increase the intended meaning. In this case, the reading of the signs by the audience is clearer and the expressivity of the puppet enhanced. Veltrusky evokes a performance of the Théâtre du Petit Miroir, in which “the puppeteer stamps with his own feet while he invests the puppet with motions signifying the character’s walking heavily or stamping in anger, and the puppeteer’s whole body shakes whenever the puppet is to shake” (1983, 74). However, the perfect harmony of all the signs tends to create one-note performances, to undermine the deepening of meaning.
- The signs can be combined in **contrast**, which increases theatricality, gives flesh to the performance and brings up in the audience the sense of the unexpected. The tension born from contrasting elements

increases the depth of the meaning and the creation of another reality, a reality of the artistic. According to Tadeusz Kantor, “It is the contrasts, unable to co-exist peacefully and brought together by force, that create new values and the totality indispensable for the existence of the work of art. In theatre, this totality is achieved via the process of balancing the contrasts between diverse scenic elements, such as motion and sound, visual forms and motion, space and voice, word and motion of forms. As far as the cognitive aspect of theatre is concerned, these contrasts must have sharp edges, come as surprise, shock, and lead to the creation of tension between two separate and incompatible realities and objects.” (1942-44, 41).

I believe that “bringing out the disparity” is an essential feature of puppetry thinking, as it derives from the very nature of the puppet itself. It can thus be extended to any material, approached in a puppetry thinking manner. The list provided in the previous chapter intends to offer to the director or puppet performer a tool from which experiments can be made. The signs listed await being deconstructed and reconstructed, deepened with the help of the same analysis, combined in endless ways and “the atoms obtained [to be used] to construct new units that exist only as theatrical beings” (Jurkowski 1983, 129). The specificity of each performance will depend on how the atoms will be combined. There is no limit to the amount of possibilities, but that of our own dreams, playfulness, courage and creativity.

4 MODALITIES OF SIGNIFICATION IN PUPPETRY THINKING

“A meaning, which overflows the object’s use” (Barthes 1985, 252)

A sign’s primary function is to mean something for somebody. But how does it mean? Semiotic is not a mathematical science where one signifier equals one signified. The sign is rarely straightforward: it is open, open to be invested with meaning. It awaits to be invested.

The modalities of signification regarding to puppetry thinking are dual, resulting from both cultural habits and artistic choices. On the one hand, a sign signifies according to the culture in which it is introduced. As artists, we must be aware of this aspect of sign, for we cannot prevent cultural readings to form in the minds of in the audience, but we carry a social responsibility regarding to our choices. On the other hand, a sign signifies through artistic choices. As puppeteers, we can literally *make sense* of the material; make sense of the signifiers. And the other way round, we can find out what shape a signified could take. Freed from the everyday obligation, we can play on signification and maybe in some occasion, re-open meanings that have been lost of sight by the over-practical and over-functional ways of living in modern societies.

4.1 Monosemic – Polysemic – Pansemic

One given signified could have only one signifier, but it is far from being the rule. One signifier can have many signifieds; one signified can have many signifiers (Proschan 1983, 21; Thwaites ym. 2002, 35).

Based on Jacques Bertin’s works, we can understand the signification of signs according to three categories: monosemic, polysemic and pansemic signs. (Dantier 2008)

Monosemic signs have one signified for one signifier. They rely on arbitrary conventions and the conventions must be set prior to the reading of the sign. Typical monosemic signs are mathematical symbols, graphics (where the code is established by a legend), etc. The amount of monosemic signs present in an act of communication defines a high level of logic and rationality (Dantier 2008).

In the case of theatre, monosemic signs rarely come to stage as such: they are partly used within their monosemy, mostly beyond it. Once again, *TraFika* provides us with a very clear example. In the every day life, road signs are monosemic signs (and it is better this way in order to avoid recurrent accidents). In *TraFika*, those signs are first used in their monosemic aspect: *right turn* is *right turn*, *left turn* is *left turn*. However, based on the iconicity of road signs, Ishmael Falke and Sandrina Lindgren transgress the monosemy, and the sign indicating a direction quickly becomes a *deadly arrow*. In other terms, they turned monosemic signs into polysemic ones.

Polysemic signs are the most common signs in human communication, and the most common in performances. One signifier has several possible signifieds. The signification is partially open: it depends on the context and on the cultural background of the user. It is both relative and subjective. The reading of Polysemic signs **can be guided**, however, **it cannot be limited**. The amount of polysemic signs defines the richness of a language (Dantier 2008). Kantor's image of the men around the table in *The return of Odysseus* is a perfect example of a polysemic sign: those men **could** be playing cards; they **could also** wake a dead body.

Pansemic signs are an extreme form of polysemy: a signifier is - in theory - open to any signified. The interpretation is absolutely free, left for the user to decide (Dantier 2008). Colours can be pansemic signs on stage, if one doesn't lead them to being polysemic but invites the audience to experience "blue" for the sake of blue. It is not an easy task to ask the audience members to turn their *homo-significans* nature off, to experience the sign rather than try to read a specific meaning. I have noticed that very small children are most expert in accepting pansemic signs and enjoy it. Rather than forcing meaning in children

performances in our attempt to give them very clear images, I trust we would gain to leave some space for pansemic signs. Maybe could one even dream of a pure pansemic dramaturgy...

| | <i>Audition</i> | <i>Vision</i> | <i>Interpretation</i> | <i>Use of the object</i> |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|---|---------------------------|
| <i>Monosemy</i> | Maths | Graphics | Limited = "Objective" | "Naturalistic" |
| <i>Polysemy</i> | Words | Figurative | Relative = "Subjective and Context guiding" | "Metonymic Metaphoric" |
| <i>Pansemy</i> | Music | Non-figurative | Free = "Subjective" | "Open" "Poetic" |

Table 2 inspired by the works of Jacques Bertin

4.2 The Barthesian denotation, connotation and myth

Besides the rare cases of monosemy, the materiality of a sign do not limit the interpretations, but is rather open to a multitude of potential signifieds. Puppetry thinking, by giving priority to the signifier, is subject to the **uncertainty of the reading**. In order to prevent misunderstandings between the audience and ourselves, we should become aware of the different ways a sign may signify. We should especially pay a particular attention to **the impact of the socio-cultural context** in which a sign appears. Because of his interest in the modes of reception of signs, Roland Barthes (1915-1980) – French semiologist and structuralist – provides us with essential theories and questionings on the matter, through the key concepts of denotation, connotation and myth.

4.2.1 The 1st and 2nd order of signification: denotation and connotation

Roland Barthes' interest in the negotiation of meaning between the sign and the reader led him to develop a theory of the *two orders of signification* (Fiske 1990, 85).

The first order of signification is defined by the relationship between signifier and signified and between the sign and its referent (Fiske 1990, 85). Its model corresponds to the Saussurean sign that we analyzed in the first chapter. It is the **denotation** of the sign. In simpler word, the denotation is the literal reading (Chandler 1994), the stable part of the sign, the dictionary definition. In *Post mortem*, a black dress is a "one-piece garment for a woman, consisting of a skirt and bodice, of black color" (Oxford online dictionary).

The second level of signification arises when a sign as a whole becomes a signifier for a new signified. It happens beyond the Saussurean sign, as represented hereafter in the case of connotation:

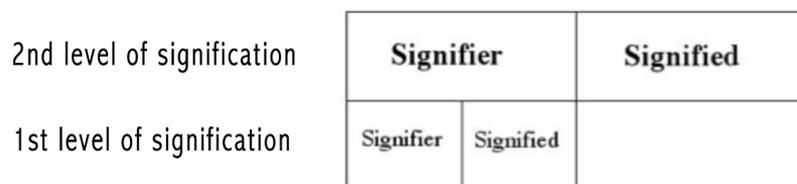


Figure 6 Roland Barthes, connotation, 1964, 90

Connotations belong to the *second level of signification*. They are unstable, that is, they vary according to the socio-cultural and personal background of the reader as well as to the contexts in which the signs appear. In other words, connotations are emotional, subjective, and contextual: "the human part of the process" (Fiske 1990, 86) and innumerable. To take a simple example, one can look at the connotations of colours and appreciate how much they vary from one culture to another: white is connoted with 'grief' in Asia, with 'purity' in Europe...

Most importantly in the case of puppetry thinking, connotations are **built from the signifier** of the first level of signification: it is the physicality of the sign that carries the connotation – by opposition to the myth as we shall see later (Fiske 1990, 88). Thus, as "puppetry thinking" relies on the materiality of the signs (on their signifiers), our signs are highly subjected to connotative readings. The same black dress in *Post-mortem* - read on the connotative level in Western culture (and in western culture only) - is a sign "mourning", "death" and "grief".

As we introduce a sign on stage, we should pay attention to its potential connotations. Because we know what we mean by the sign we use, we often don't read the whole signification brought by our signs. But the audience member does not read our mind, he/she rather reads - unconsciously - all connotations and those might be at the other end of what we initially meant. And because we often work without the support of spoken text but with pure signifiers, we should be particularly careful and spend a bit of time analyzing open-mindedly both the denotations and connotations of the main stage elements. Michel Laubu, conscious of the risk of getting blind during the creative process, invites test audiences to the rehearsal and simply asks the question "what did you see?" The answers assert whether or not an undesired connotation invited itself in. (Laubu 2010)

The question arises: how can one direct the audience to the intended connotations? First by **introducing the sign in a context**. The "mourning" connotation of the black costumes in *Post-mortem* is guided through the neighbouring signs: the music (funeral rhythm played live on an organ), the presence of crucifixes on stage, the photo of a man placed on a radio transformed as an altar, the severed heads of toys... Secondly, by the **directing choices**. Taking the example of photographs, dear to Roland Barthes, the denotation is what is photographed (a street); the connotation is how it is photographed (soft focus, hard focus, framing...) (Fiske 1990, 86). In performances, this "how" can be achieved through all surrounding signs: quality of lighting, use of scale, rhythm of action, pace of the scene, body language and gestures, direction and space composition, framing the audience's look etc.

There are endless possibilities to translate a given “what”. So the choices made regarding to “how” are never innocent. Choices are subjective and subjectivity belongs to the realm of connotation.

4.2.2 Is denotation really denotation?

The difference between denotation and connotation seems to be safe and simple. It is not so simple; it is even less safe. We understand it from the cultural nature of the sign, which is a product of the human action. Thus, there are no objective signs as such. Barthes argued later in his career (1974, see Chandler 1994) that denotation is a form of connotation: the connotation most commonly accepted in a given community. Denotation claims to be taken as true, it pretends to objectivity (Thwaites ym. 2002, 63). But in fact, we easily read connotative values as denotative facts. “Denotation is not so much the *natural* as the *naturalize* meaning of the sign” (Thwaites ym. 2002, 65).

Taking the black dress again, the dictionary’s denotative meaning includes “garment **for a woman**”. What - if not cultural habit - makes a dress a denotative sign of womanhood? In Western European culture, the ‘woman’ aspect of ‘dress’ was naturalized; it is not natural. Most importantly, it is not questioned but widely accepted in a tacit agreement. As performers and directors, we have the possibility²⁰ to question this false-nature, to question these cultural habits. Appearances can be deceptive, especially in the case of denotation.

In *Amours monstres* (monstrous loves) - a performance based on the story of Elephant Man - the company *Les lendemains de la veille* based its dramaturgy on the deconstruction of such ‘naturalized’ meanings. It questioned the denotation of ‘monsters’ as ‘monstrous beings’ and its attached set of connotations ‘inhuman’, ‘savage’, ‘beasts’, etc. The company first comforted the audience in its “naturalized” meanings. But half through the play, the humanity of the ‘monsters’ was unveiled’. The prejudices of the audience were broken

²⁰ the duty in Barthe’s view 1956, 337

into pieces. Deconstructing the naturalized connotations can be the starting point of a whole performance and undergo the entire search of physical signs. Such work is, in my view, a strong and healthy contribution to the development of human societies.

4.2.3 Myths

If connotation is the second level of signification based on the signifier, **myth** is the **second level of signification based on the signified**. By myth, Barthes understands “a culture’s way of thinking about something, a way of conceptualizing or understanding it” (Fiske 1990, 88)²¹. It is a political statement The Barthesian myth results from the colonization of the minds by the values of the dominant social class in a given culture. Barthes’ demonstration intended to unveil the ideological and political constructs of myths. Racism, the roles assigned to genders in the society (what is a woman’s role, what is a man’s role) or the economic system constitute typical myths and though they vary through the historical and geographical contexts, they are taken as natural by many of its contemporaries. As denotation, the danger of myths lies in their ability to *naturalize* their history: they seem to be true, universal, eternal and fair. (ibid. 90)

The myth pre-exists the sign, but the sign activates the chain of related concept belonging to the myth in the mind of the reader (ibid.). This is a well-known tool for most advertisers; we just need to take a look at advertisements to understand it. As artists, we must be aware of such processes. If we need to find a signifier for the signified ‘woman’ and bring a beautiful doll on stage - without questioning or contrasting it in some way - we involuntarily take part in the perpetuation of a myth. **The choice of the signifier is not innocent**, and should result from a reflection: what do I want to mean by choosing this very signifier for this signified? What are the cultural implications? Most importantly, was my decision coming from me or from my cultural background? I do not

21 And not the ancient traditional stories

imply that all the elements of myths are to be avoided; there are also positive myths (like gender equality). I only wish that we did not take on stage the whole package as granted.

As for denotation, the deconstruction or exploration of myths can be the subject of a performance. In *Like a fish out of water*, my artistic final work, the aim was to deconstruct the myth of the “immigrant’s successful integration”, that is, the myth of the willing adaptation of an individual into a new culture in which he finds his place and becomes a new ‘family member’. In contemporary societies, integration is unfortunately also often conducted in the denial of cultural diversity and in the suppression of personal identity. But this side of reality is hidden behind the successful integration myth. To reach my goal, I used the three actresses to perform within the myth, to believe in it. They portrayed the everyday women who accept in real life such myth as granted, and, by the mean of exaggerated actions, give to the audience the possibility to witness it.

Deconstructing a myth does not however mean judging. The empathy of the audience went to both the immigrant character and the officers. Myths simplify things; they are comfortable. As artists, one of our roles is to give a space for the audiences to observe with a distance their own mythologies, using consciously for this purpose signs that call upon the myths. We also carry the responsibility to research and collect information, work on contrasting signifiers, so as to avoid falling into lifeless stereotypes and participate in another myth.

While denotations, connotations and myths are given cultural facts of which we shall be aware, the meaning of a sign can also result from an active artistic choice. These meanings can be achieved by way of association (on the syntagmatic axis) by way of substitution (on the paradigmatic axis) or by an arbitrary decision. In the first case, we obtain a metonym, in the second, a metaphor, in the third, a symbol. The next chapters will cover these three essential modes of signifying in regard to our practice as puppeteers.

4.3 Metonym

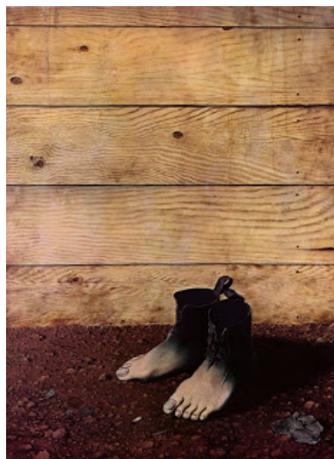
As the audience enters the theatrical space in TraFika, it observes the stage design: a table, two chairs, a radio and a painting hanging in the air behind the table. These four signs allow the spectator to complete the whole picture of a middle class living room. What stands there is a metonymy.

4.3.1 A Definition and two visual illustrations

Metonymy is the association of signs that belong to the same plane of reality: as in the case of indexes, there is a relation of **contiguity** between the sign and what it stands for (Fiske 1990, 95). A metonym points at something it relates to: "One sign is associated with another of which it signifies a part, the whole, one of its functions or attributes, or a related concept." (Thwaites ym. 2002, 52).

Because the metonym is contiguous of its intended meaning, it is a sign easily understood. To use a semiotic terminology, metonymy does not require additional coding in order to be read. It is obvious enough in itself.

Rene Magritte was visually often inspired by the metonymic transfer of meaning, and provides us with many illustrations. I reproduce here *Le Modèle rouge* (1935) and *La recherche de l'absolu* (1965). The first is a metonym of content (feet) for the container (shoes). The second offers a visual example of a part (leaf) for the whole (tree).



Picture 6 René Magritte, *le modèle rouge*



Picture 7 René Magritte, *La recherche de l'absolu*

4.3.2 A tool to find the materials to be brought on the stage

Thanks to the nature of metonyms, we do not need to copy reality as it is. We do not have to bring a boat on stage to represent a boat: a single sail or a ship's wheel suffice. If a tree stands in the midst of the theatre space, it is a whole forest that may form in the mind of the viewer. And, to use Magritte's metonym, we could easily imagine a tree out of one single upright leaf. Maybe with a bit more imagination, this leaf can in turn become a forest.

Contemporary puppet and object theatre - because of their aesthetic tendency towards economical stage designs²² – often draws on the principle of metonymy.²³ In our practice, metonym can be a very practical tool to find what a stage design could be made of. Once we have decided what are the space and the atmosphere of a given scene or performance, we can search for the most suitable metonym, that is, the **material** that will allow the audience to complete our intended picture. Agnès Limboos, Belgian object theatre specialist, carefully picks her metonyms: she “looks for the objects that, **in their materiality**, have **the potential to locate** most accurately the action, the frame of the action and the intention she wishes to share.” (Rhéty and Corniquet 2012). In her performances, one to two objects suffice to fix the frame of the scene: a yellow taxi on a table, and we are in New York; a miniature bed and a married couple figurine and we assist to their honeymoon; a wolf combined with a howl and the atmosphere is filled with anxiety (Rhéty and Corniquet 2012).

Such process can also work the other way round. In this case, it is the found object - an object that 'talks' to us - that will lead our choice of the space in a scene or a play. Then the question we need to ask ourselves is what this very material could stand for, in contiguity to its materiality. And there might be several different answers, for a given metonym is not limited to one meaning: “a part could represent several different wholes” (Honzl 1940, 251). With one single material, we can develop throughout the play different spaces and atmosphere.

²² But also, to be fair, for technical and financial reasons that can influence our aesthetical choices

²³ The hanging painting in *TraFika* has no other role in the performance than to provide the audience with sufficient information to complete the full interior design.

Metonyms are however not limited to stage design. They prove themselves also most useful in discovering what a puppet could be made of. Petr Bogatyrev, sharing his interest on the matter of puppet design, remarked: “marionettes and other puppets from the modern theatre are often interesting because of the material they are made of. Puppet makers somehow find material that most clearly expresses the puppet’s nature” (1983, 58). In my view, Bogatyrev’s “somehow” can be achieved through a metonymic or a metaphoric process²⁴. In *Iarnvith*, a performance directed in 2010 by Maija Linturi and in which I had the chance to perform, the puppet of a father was built using such metonymical process. First, we discussed the “nature” of the character: a widow who found a refuge from his grief in reading constantly newspapers. Through the newspaper, he could escape from a painful reality. By metonymic contagion, we decided to build the face of the puppet from the same newspaper he always carried around. In the same performance, all the forest characters - fairies of the other world – were constructed by using pieces of wood found in the nearby forest.

The technical aspect of our work as puppeteers and puppet thinkers could always be taken beyond its technicality: the choice of material can be worked so as to carry meanings. It is a sign of its own, and thus signifies to the audience. Metonymy is one way to make sense of it.

4.3.3 A tool to find the movements on stage

In regard to puppet manipulation, the economy of signs is a condition to clear meanings: if everything “wiggles at the same time”, nothing is to be read but an overall impression of chaos (Veltrusky 1983, 95). Metonymy is thus a very practical way to approach puppet animation, since one selected sign stands for a wider whole it expresses.

But the use of metonym can bring us further. In the course of her teachings, Rene Baker regularly invites her students to find **one single feature** (one single sign) that could evoke the meaning intended (whether it is an emotion, a natural

²⁴ We shall come to the metaphoric process in the next chapter, though not about puppets.

element, an animal, a character, etc.). Guided by her directions, my classmate and I realized that by drawing one sign out of one paradigm (rhythm patterns, breathing patterns or body position, space composition or movement directions etc.), in other words by choosing one single metonym, we could translate almost anything in any given material. A hand could become a balloon stuck in a tree on a windy day, just by repeating its rhythmical pattern. A stick transformed in front of us into a shy character then into a belligerent one; it turned into a squirrel and finished being a small grass brushed by a soft wind. A sequence of independent metonymic movements allowed us to transform completely any material.

Interestingly, the quality of the metonym depended on its precision. If a puppeteer presented on stage the preconceived, stereotypical “idea” of “squirrel rhythm”, the picture was too general and the reading remained blurred, undefined. It could be a squirrel but it could also be a bird, maybe a rabbit. If the same puppeteer went to observe squirrels in the nature or in YouTube and from his/her observations found his metonym, the reading was extremely clear: it could **only** be a squirrel.

4.3.4 A space to be filled by the imagination

As we have seen, and hopefully clearly demonstrated, the metonym indicates the meaning; it does not re-present it. It hints the direction of the referent. In semeiological terms, metonyms do not work iconically but indexically. So the audience is not given the whole, and it becomes its responsibility to build the rest of the syntagm, the rest of the picture. The metonym guides the viewer, but invites him/her to be part of the creative process: “the spectator is engaged in a project of creative collaboration (...) in the interest of a more complete realization of the performance” (Aston and Savona 1991, 160).

The spectators are given a space to imagine, a place of freedom to be invested by each viewer’s own individual subjectivity. Michel Laubu explains that “as an audience, [he] execrate[s] when everything is told and no space is left for [him]” to imagine. He consequently defines his artistic works as “giving only the tracks to

see”: “We are here to cultivate the imagination of the spectators; all we can is to till the soil in the imaginary garden that belong to the spectators. That’s why I am interested in working with tracks.” (Laubu 2010)

4.3.5 The non-innocent choice of the metonym

The choice of the metonym is however never innocent nor free from consequences. “The selection of the metonym is crucial, for from it we construct the unknown reminder of reality” (Fiske 1990, 95). Because metonyms are ‘powerful conveyors of reality’, because they imitate the ‘truth factor’ of the natural index (i.e. smoke for fire), they affect the imagination of the viewers and influence their perceptions of the whole reality (ibid. 96). John Fiske exposes brightly the political consequences of the choice of a metonym through a photograph published in the Observer review in 1976. By its metonymic nature, this photo formed in the viewer a picture of **all** young and black people being aggressive and bitter (for complete analysis, see Fiske 1990, 104-8). The choice of the example affects beyond the reality it exemplifies: the example easily becomes the general truth in the mind of the viewer. In this sense, stereotypes are the extreme form of cultural metonymy where a type stands for the whole. One Muslim is a terrorist; all Muslims are terrorists; all terrorists are Muslims.

As artists, we thus carry a social and political responsibility regarding to the choice of our metonym, for the participation to a myth is never very far away. In some cases, we can play with it, since there is undoubtedly a *cliché* pleasure. Agnès Limboos’ performances often rely on widely shared cultural metonyms (like the yellow taxi for New York), but in her case there are little political consequences. It is a benign –maybe even positive – cliché: a cliché that calls upon and reinforces the community’s cultural identity.

However, in the case of *Like a fish out of water*, we had to pay special care to the boy character as metonym for children immigrants. Sarune Peciukonyte and myself discussed for a long time before deciding what physical features the immigrant puppet should present. We did not want to stick the boy into the

metonym of black immigrants or into that of the Arab revolution. We wanted to open the metonym to all the children.

4.3.6 Serving the metonym

So far, we analyzed synchronic metonyms, that is, metonyms that are given as a whole at once. But it is not necessarily the case and metonym can also be served in time, bringing the audience with us in the creative process of fulfilling the picture. Joan Baixas, in *Terra Prenyada* opens his performance with such metonym. He holds a sheet of paper that becomes the screen for a projected photograph. The picture is old and thus connotatively charged with melancholy. First we see the face of a child, looking straight at the camera, obviously from a poor social-background. Building the rest of the picture, I had in mind the child standing at the door of its home, in one of the poor streets of an industrial city (some 'poor background'), together with his parents and siblings (some 'child'). Out of this metonym, I built a traditional family picture (some 'looking straight at the camera'). Zooming out Joan Baixas opens the metonym to more informational elements: the child is not alone: he is surrounded by other children, all facing the camera. My image of the family fades away and I imagine these young children, neglected by all (some 'no adults'), left to themselves to survive (some 'group') in the big and hostile city (some 'poor background', 'childhood'). A picture straight taken out from *Oliver Twist*. In the final zoom, the children stand on the track of a railway. My image of the city fades out; the children are on the move (some 'railway'), in an anonymous countryside, their future lying at the end of the railway (some 'childhood'), but that we cannot see.

Though the complete pictures awaken in my mind by the different metonyms (zooms) vary, they had a strong influence on each other. The family and the city fade out, but remained in the background of my picture. As the disappeared, replaced by new elements, they became the past of this first child. "There remain in our minds all the associations (...) that originated during our first glance (...)" (Honzl 1940, 251). Without any other activity than serving progressively the metonym, Joan

Baixas told me the whole story of this one child. Developing a metonym through time is one possible form of dramaturgy, given by the material signs only.

Any of the material signs classified in 2.4 could be worked through a metonymic approach. Metonym, in this respect, embodies some of the key features of what I call puppetry-thinking: the depth of meaning within the simplicity of the expression, the use of the material in its materiality to convey meaning beyond itself and an ability to open in the audience a wide world from one single detail. In puppetry thinking, so to speak, less is more.

4.4 Metaphor

4.4.1 An example: the mouse traps of *Post-Mortem*



Picture 8 *Post mortem*, directed by Romain Landat, 2011

I propose to illustrate the following paragraphs with a metaphor taken from *Post-mortem*, performance directed by Romain Landat in 2012. Central to the performance is a long scene, which retells the death of the brother - together with many other men - in the course of a battle during the Great War. Through visual and aural means, the scene relies mainly on a very powerful metaphor: 'war is a set of mousetraps'. The scene proceeds - in short - as follow: accompanied by the sound of drumming, a commander of the French army draws from a table several maps that he places so as to plan the next battle. From the drawer of the table, he takes out a whole set of **mousetraps** that he places with precision on the maps. His task achieved, the focus is zoomed in and the battle consists in him placing empty frames in the mousetraps and

triggering most of the remaining ones. Broken crucifixes come down from the ceiling into the frames. The central crucifix falls in the midst of the mousetraps and breaks to pieces: the remains of the brother's body.

Though there is much to say in this scene, we will concentrate our attention onto the metaphorical relationship between mousetraps and artillery in the isotopy²⁵ of 'war'.

4.4.2 Carrying across

In ancient Greek, a metaphor is to 'carry' (= *phora*) 'across', 'from one place to another' (= *meta*). The essential mechanism of metaphor lies in its etymology: it is the transportation of one sign into the place of another, the substitution of one sign for another in a sequence, and thus the transfer of the characteristics of one object to another (Crowe 2010, 42). So to say a metaphor is a displacement. The transported sign is the **vehicle** (in our case, the mouse traps); the sign it replaces is the **tenor** (the artillery). The metaphor is a **phrase** or a **frame** (the all scene) that is suitable for the tenor (isotopy), in which the vehicle is arbitrarily placed (allotopy).

César Chesneau Dumarsais (1730) defines the metaphor as "a figure of speech, by which we **transport**, so to say, the proper signification of a word in another signification that is suitable for it **only by virtue of a comparison that exists in the mind**" (see Michel 2001, 305). A metaphor is not an imitation of reality; it results from the **imaginative ability** of human beings to **create associations**. Unlike metonymy, which is bound to the principle of contiguity (and so to a certain extent of realism), there is no limitation to the amount of metaphors. The only limitation lies in the human creativity and imagination.

²⁵ The recurrence of a seme within a syntagm

4.4.3 Tension and creation

4.4.3.1 Tension

Metaphor builds a ‘semantic clash’ (Molino ym. 1979, see Détienne 2004). At its core is a **meaningful anomaly** resulting from the association of a tenor and a vehicle that do not belong to the same plane of reality. Their central semes differ. Mousetraps are meant for the domestic environment against mice and small rodents. Artillery is meant for the battlefield against human beings. To use the mousetraps in a context (or phrase), in which ‘war’ is the recurrent seme is a semantic absurdity, in other words, an **allotopy**²⁶.

To be more precise, metaphors rely on a **semantic tension**. For the association to happen in the human mind, the vehicle and the tenor must present a **set of shared semes**, an *intersection* (group μ , see Michel 2001, 308). If I replace ‘mousetraps’ by ‘snowflakes’, the metaphor collapses, it feels empty: there is nothing to hold on²⁷. In parallel, the tenor and the vehicle must also present a **set of antagonistic semes** so as to give rise to a new and significant meaning. If I replace ‘mousetraps’ by ‘army tanks’, there is no metaphor but a perfectly literal and logical affirmation. “If the common part is necessary to convincingly ground the pretended similarity, the part that is not common is not less necessary to create the originality of the image” (Group μ , see Michel 308). I shall add: to create the meaning of the image.

Analyzing the mousetraps through the seme analysis (both on the level of the signifier and that of the signified), the second year puppetry students and I came up with the following list:

/to kill/ - /mechanical/ - /invented by human/ - /FOR MICE/ - /DOMESTIC USE/ - /metal/ - /wood/ - /trap/ - /deceive/ - /violent/ - /sharp sound/ - /one shot/ - /cruelty/ - /efficient/ - /brutal/ - /geometrical shape/ - /rational/ - /action-reaction/ - /quick/ - /no chance/ - /to save food/ - /sorrow/ - /fear of accident/ - /anonym target/ - /painless/ - /torture/ - /object/ - /trigger/.

²⁶ Rupture of the isotopy

²⁷ Or so little: see 3.4.4 *From zero to absurd, and in between*

The semes in bold letters are shared by ‘mousetraps’ and ‘artillery’: they allow the association to happen and facilitate the reading. The semes I underlined are subjective semes (mostly connotative) that will colour the tenor and vary from viewer to viewer. The semes in green are the antagonistic semes, and interestingly, those are essential semes in the definition of the mousetraps. The men and the mice, the domestic and the national collide. There is a space for new meanings.

4.4.3.2 Shattering the old to leave space for the new

“You need an “as if” to look at the world; you need an “as if” to explain the world.”
(Horace Romano Harré)

In daily life, one function of metaphors (defined by Lakoff and Johnson) is to provide answers to our need of “making sense of the everyday” (Fiske 1990, 93). The use of spatial directions is a particularly common type of metaphor that we find in expressions such as ‘*low* social background’, ‘feeling *high*’... Claude Levi Strauss describes such process as the ‘**logic of the concrete**’: all human societies express existential abstractions through the vehicle of concrete experiences (ibid. 94).

The metaphor alters our conception of things as it shatters the boundaries of our mental categories by the contamination of meanings. The established order of meanings oscillates (Calargé, 2008). To use the Saussurean terms: the value of the signs changes, leading to a slight displacement of our cuts in the continuums. After the scene of *Post Mortem*, the trivial reality of mousetraps contaminates our perception of the concepts of ‘battle’, ‘soldiers’, ‘commander’ or ‘Great War’. The myth of the national sacrifice is crashed down since the life of a man is only worth that of a mouse.

The group μ clearly explains the process of contamination: “The metaphor extrapolates, based on a true similarity put forward by the intersection, it affirms the similarity of the terms as a whole. It extends to the two terms an attribute that only belongs to their intersection” (Group μ , see Michel 2001, 308). Formulated as an affirmation, relying on iconic signs (Elam 1980, 28), the metaphor gives a concrete and physical shape

to “dreams that are meant not to send to sleep but to awake” (Camille Goemans see Michel 2001, 307). Close to dreams, Paul Ricoeur considered that the metaphor oscillates between proper and improper uses, between submission to reality and boundless invention. The improper in the tangible reality becomes proper in the spiritual²⁸ reality through the metaphorical creative dialectic (Calargé, 2008). Puppetry thinking – in its close relation to the materiality of things, to the potential meanings that can arise from it, and to its inherent freedom – carries within its nature the description made by Paul Ricoeur.

The dialectic – set up by the co-presence of two terms in semantic tension – gives rise to meanings, which exceeds the vehicle and the tenor if taken separately:

“The co-presence of the vehicle and the tenor results in a meaning (...) which is not attainable without their interaction. That vehicle is not normally a mere embellishment of a tenor which is otherwise unchanged by it but that vehicle and tenor in co-operation give a meaning of more varied powers that can be ascribed to either” (Richards 1936, see Détienne 2004)²⁹.

The tension between the vehicle and the tenor allows the rise of a new meaning, which collapses as soon as one term is taken away. It gives a possibility to express what cannot be expressed through our everyday categories. It is the advent of a new signification; the metaphysical takes shape in the physical. A metaphor opens a door between the spiritual³⁰ and the concrete. But its nature is ephemeral, and as soon as the metaphor is gone, it cannot be translated in other terms. The meaning fades out, leaving in the human soul a memory of its experience. The metaphor is a phenomenological experience; it resonates beyond the intellectual. (Calargé 2008)

²⁸ In French, the word ‘spiritual’ is not limited to religious connotations, but opens to all human aspirations beyond pure physical experience.

²⁹ I underline

³⁰ Once again, I use the term beyond its religious acceptance.

4.4.4 From zero to absurd, and in between.

Even though the aim of a metaphor is essentially to shatter the known boundaries of reality, we should distinguish between the different types according to whether or not the metaphor achieves this goal. Following the works of Cédric Détienne (2004), we can observe three main categories:

- The *metaphorical hapax*: a metaphor without any ground. As in our example - “war is a set of snow flakes” – one really needs to search in order to find the origin of the association³¹. In the audience, such metaphors tend to either “feel symbolic” or to “feel inaccessible and uncomfortable”. The shared set of seme is turned down to minimum and does not concern the definitional semes of the vehicle and tenor.
- *The conventional metaphor*, that is, a **new** association of terms based on pre-existing patterns. Metaphors such as the one we follow in *Post-Mortem* belong to this category. As an audience, they “feel metaphoric”.
- *The metaphor zero (or dead metaphor)* is a metaphor that belongs to the everyday language. It is not recognized as metaphor, all tensions have disappeared. For example, to say “the feet of the table” (‘pöyden jalka’) does not sound metaphorical, yet it is. These metaphors can form an interesting base for visual inspiration. We can realize them literally and by doing so re-awake their tension³². As an audience, such metaphor is a source of great pleasure, based on the principle of recognition.

4.4.5 To read or not to read?

The readers or spectators are responsible for the reception of the metaphor. They can be divided in two categories: cooperative and non-cooperative. The non-cooperative spectator will either: take the metaphor literally - accepting the

³¹ According to both Molino and the group μ however, one can always find a common seme and a reason for the metaphor to be validated (Détienne 2004)

³² In our example, we could simply put on tights to the legs of the tables

co-presence of the terms as natural - or refuse the metaphor completely and stay on the absurd aspect of it. A young children audience may belong to this category and take a normal that army commanders set mousetraps. Autistic people may on the contrary receive the metaphor as pure violence, as a shock that does not open any new meaning but shatters their entire comprehension of the world (Catherine Wearing, see Détienne 2004).

The cooperative reader will go through different steps, that though they happen instantly can be declined as follow (Détienne 2004):

- He/she identifies the semantic anomaly, the allotopy. The metaphor appears immediately as strange in the context in which it is set.
- He/she reduces the absurdity by using the context and search for the *intersection*, that is, the common semes in both vehicle and tenor within the phrase.
- He accepts the contamination of both terms and the metamorphosis of his mental categories. He welcomes the arousal of a new meaning that cannot be formulated otherwise than by the very metaphor he/she experiences.

Because of the human nature of the reader, the perception of a metaphor will vary from one subject to another. It is dependant on the social, cultural and personal experiences of the reader.

However, we can wonder whether a metaphor is to be read or not. Paul Ricoeur remarks that the metaphor resists to the intellectual understanding, but remains beyond conceptual limitations. A metaphor is always alive, vivid³³, open for interpretation. It cannot be closed, saturated, emptied. It cannot be mastered for it says always more than it says. This is the reason why a metaphor cannot be translated. Its translation is the death of the metaphor. (Paul Ricoeur, see Calargé 2008)

³³ **Vive** in French

René Magritte and Paul Nougé go further, wishing that the viewer accepts the metaphor literally “as a wish of the spirit that what it expresses exists in reality; and further, as a belief in this reality in the moment it is expressed (...) We can come to hope for a lasting metaphor, a metaphor that takes away from the mind all possibilities to return.”³⁴ (Paul Nougé 1956, see Michel 2001, 304). “To answer the question ‘What does this image means?’ would be to make the Meaning, the Impossible, look like a possible idea. (...). The viewer can see, with the greatest freedom possible, my pictures as they are, trying like their author, to think about the Meaning, that is, the Impossible”³⁵ (René Magritte, see *ibid.* 306). The metaphorical act of displacement is thus more to be experienced than understood; it should awake not the intellect but the person as a whole. The metaphor is an invitation to see without questioning, or questioning with the emotions, the spirit and the senses.

4.5 Symbol

Plus to metonyms and metaphors, a third way to signify is the symbol. The term “symbol” is often found in analytical literature. It is one of these very polysemic terms that are filled with different - and sometimes contradictory - definitions according to the context of their use. I copy hereafter (almost) in extenso the chapter written in *Key concepts in Communication and cultural studies* (O’Sullivan ym. 1994, 312-313), for I wish the reader to be able to understand the term whenever he/she encounters it.

Broadly, a sign, object or act that stands for something other than itself, by virtue of an agreement among the members of the culture that uses it (...)

(1) Shannon and Weaver, Ogden and Richards, and Berlo, tend to use the word in a broad sense as referring to any type of sign. This use should, where possible, be avoided. (...)

(2) Peirce uses the term to refer to a category of sign where there is no resemblance between it and its object. (...)

³⁴Original text: “C'est au pied de la lettre qu'il conviendrait de la saisir, comme un souhait de l'esprit que ce qu'il exprime existe en toute réalité, et plus loin, comme la croyance, dans l'instant qu'il l'exprime, à cette réalité. (...) C'est ainsi que l'on peut en venir à souhaiter une métaphore qui dure, une métaphore qui enlève à la pensée ses possibilités de retour”.

³⁵Original text : “Pouvoir répondre à la question : « Quel est le 'sens' de ces images ? » correspondrait à faire ressembler le Sens, l'Impossible, à une idée possible. [...] Le spectateur peut voir, avec la plus grande liberté possible, mes images telles qu'elles sont, en essayant comme leur auteur de penser au Sens, ce qui veut dire à l'Impossible.”

(3) Freud uses it to refer to an object or act that stands in place of something that is taboo or unpleasant to think of. In the Freudian use there is some resemblance between the symbol and what it stands for, even though this resemblance may be indirect or metaphoric. A penis is symbolized by a watering can.

(4) Barthes uses it to refer to an object or act that stands for an abstraction or a value. A gold coin can symbolize wealth; a shepherd and lamb can symbolize the relationship of Christ to his followers. Religious practices and social rituals are frequently symbolic in this sense, for example, a christening or the exchange of gifts at Christmas.

There is also a literary and artistic use of the term, which is similar to uses (3) and (4) in so far as it includes a resemblance between symbol and object. In literature and visual art, the symbol demands attention in its own right, sometimes even demands more attention than that which it stands for.

As John Fiske, I prefer to use the Peircean definition of symbol. Taken in this acceptation, the use of a symbol on stage either:

- Requires an agreement between stage and audience, explicitly made during the course of the performance (such as in the performances by Clément Layes)
- Relies on a social or cultural preliminary tacit agreement. In the performance *Like a fish out of water*, the green stamps and the red stamps in the immigrants' bureau did not need any introduction. European audiences commonly acknowledge that green stands for "yes" and red for "no", even though such signification is absolutely arbitrary.

If a symbolic sign is not introduced nor known beforehand by the audience, its signification remains closed. In order to fully comprehend the meanings of highly codified performances (such as Nô theatre, Katakhalis dances or *TraFika* by Ishmael Falke and Sandrina Lindgren), the audience must learn how to read their symbolic system of signs. On the other hand, the ignorance of the signs can also lead to a feeling of pure poetry, of freedom of the sign, which can be enjoyed for itself, without a need for an intellectually fixed signification. It all depends on the viewer.

A symbol is also a cultural statement. It grounds the performance into a particular culture and comforts the cultural identity of a given community. Because of this aspect, symbols mostly belong to the Barthesian second level

of signification: it awakes connotations and myths. If we look at the crucifixes in *Post-Mortem*, the object symbolizes the Christian Faith and consequently brings up connotative semes such as /hope/, /resurrection/, /sacrifice of the Christ/, /belief/, /death/, etc. and triggers its correlated myth (that of “The Good Christian’ among others).

By itself, a symbol is static: the meaning is fixed by agreements between the members of a culture. But performances are dynamic: most signs develop in time and space, affect and are affected by the surrounding signs. What interest me on the matter of symbols brought on stage is their reactivation, the ability we have to set them again in motion, to allow them creating meaning. The crucifixes in *Post-Mortem* are first mere symbols, participating to the stage design. But by their destruction, here and now, their meaning is revived and shattered. They stand for the men (and on the iconic level, there is a human icon on each crucifix) whose faith did not prevent their death. Whenever we take a symbol, I would suggest paying attention to whether we use those symbols actively or passively, whether we mean through them or are meant by them. If we bring a crucifix, let us ask ourselves what actions can we perform onto it so as to activate and transform its set of significations.

4.6 The transformability of the sign

As we have seen in regard to the Peircean classification, a sign is rarely limited to one category. If one mode of signification is privileged upon another during a scene, the same sign might reappear a minute later through a different way of signifying. Signs have, between the hands of the artist, the ability to transform.

4.6.1 Towards a semeiological dramaturgy

“In practice, a single sign is capable of taking many meanings.” (Thwaites ym. 2002, 40).

Throughout various studies on theatre and puppet theatre, Prague structuralists emphasized the fluctuant nature of signs on stage. They defined theatrical signs by their *mobility, dynamism, transformability*: a signifier can stand for different signifieds and its overall signification depends on the context of its

appearance. (Elam 1980, 12). "Any stage vehicle can stand, in principle, for any signified class of phenomena: there are no absolutely fixed representational relations" (ibid. 13).

Regarding to puppetry thinking, we must be aware that one sign does not need to be limited to denotation, connotation, metonym, metaphor or symbol, icon or index. In fact, the transformability of the sign characterizes particularly well puppetry thinking, for our aim is to find from the material its own expressive potentials. As we explore a given material, it is very unlikely that it offers only one possibility of signification. In our case, the difficulty lies rather in 'killing the darlings' that do not serve our intention. It is easy to change sign for every image, but it is more rewarding – in my point of view – to dig in the material we chose and extract from it the meaning we wish to carry to the audience. I find myself most interested in witnessing the transformability of the same sign throughout a performance. There can be, so to say, a semeiological dramaturgy of the signs.

4.6.2 An example: the window frames in *El drama del desencantado*

El drama del desencantado, directed by Rene Baker, provides us with a very valuable example. Based on a short text by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the performance retells the story of a "disillusioned man who threw himself out of a tenth storey apartment and whilst falling saw through the windows the private lives of his neighbors [until] at the instant of crashing against the pavement he had completely changed his view of the world and had reached the conclusion that the life he was abandoning for ever by the false door was indeed worth living." (Gabriel Garcia Marquez). We will now go through some of the ways in which the window frames transform throughout the performance their mode of signification.

- **Denotation:** throughout the performance, the windows are often used to signify windows, remaining on the first level of signification. The man sees through them the life of his neighbours. Human actors look by the window, through the window, stand at the window, etc.
- **Connotation:** Because windows are architectural thresholds between inside and outside, between private and public, between open and

closed, they offer various connotations according to their physical state. Each episode plays on a specific connotation triggered by contextual semes such as /open window/, /closed window/, /curtains drawn/, /flowers/, /fixed/, /mobile/, /one/, /two/ etc. For instance, curtains drawn on a closed window connotes /hiding/, /intimacy/, /withdrawing/, /secrets/, reinforcing the emotional effect of a scene on domestic violence and murder. The audience as a witness is both powerless and put in the position of a voyeur.

- **Metonym:** In two occasions, the windows stand for an entire building. We have, by contiguous relation, a part for the whole. The choice of the windows' shapes (stretched rectangles) influences the audience's completion of the metonym; we picture high and narrow buildings, not massive and large ones. We imagine the length of the fall, the fear of height, the inevitable death. The reading of the metonym is eased by a dramatic scale change: the puppet shrinks so as to respect the proportions existing in real life between human figures and 10 storeys construction.
- **Metaphor-metonym:** One window serves to represent the coffin of the falling man. In my opinion, we have here a case of metaphor-metonym. In itself the picture is metaphorical "they carried his window to the graveyard", (semantic clash between 'window' and 'coffin'). The window is coloured with /death/, /body/, /closed forever/. But because we know that the man committed suicide by jumping out of the window, we have a cause-and-effect relationship, a contiguity ('he stepped in his coffin through the window'). We tend towards metonym that allows us to avoid the cliché of a funeral. The metaphor-metonym elevates the casual to the poetical.
- **Metaphor:** The windows are the vehicles of a very widespread linguistic metaphor, common to many (if not all) human societies: 'A window on ...' ('the soul', 'the world', 'the mind', 'the intimate' etc.). This metaphor is extended to the entire performance. What I find most interesting here is that it is taken literally, giving a concrete

shape to one of the most common human way of making sense of the abstract.

- **Symbol:** I did not find any symbol in the Peircean sense. We could however read a scene in which all windows are turning on themselves as a symbol without agreement. It is a symbol, so to say, that has a signifier but no agreed signified. Because of the mystical, ritualistic atmosphere of this scene, I believe that many audience members – in their homo significans nature – tried to read it, and probably made the necessary agreement signifier-signified within themselves.³⁶

4.6.3 Polysemy and transformability

The *transformability* of the sign increases accordingly to its polysemic potential. The polysemy, in turn, increases its ambiguity (Proschan 1983, 22). Consequently, the less a sign offers meaningful features, the more it is polysemic and thus opened to interpretations and transformations.

Looking at the windows from *El drama del desencantado*, we understand that to prefer one reading above the other, we must rely on the contextual elements: contextual semes (i.e. curtains, open, closed...), actions of human actors onto the sign (looking through the window, carrying it as a coffin...), scale, movements, etc..

Applying the transformability of the sign to the puppets, Petr Bogatyrev observes that the puppet's face "changes its expression depending on the movements of the puppet's entire figure, on how it is directed by the puppeteer, and on its words" (Bogatyrev 1983, 57). Obviously, the puppet didn't change its facial expression, but the audience projected/imagined the transformation of the face so as to adapt the features to the 'emotions' of the puppet. The context not only affect the meaning of the sign, **it affects its materiality** in the eyes of the audience. In other words, the context – that is, the co-presence and interaction of signs on stage – affects both the signifieds and, more surprisingly, the signifiers.

³⁶ More academically, we shall read the signs 'window' in this scene as pansemic or polysemic signs, that is, signifiers potentially open to many or to all signifieds.

4.6.4 “The polarization of new meanings”

Jindrich Honzl analysis of the set construction in Meyerhold’s play *The Death of Tarelkin* emphasizes an essential aspect of the transformability of the sign: “**the polarization of new meanings**”. He observes that while the audience tries to make sense of the stage design, made of a crane and a circular object, many associations arise. The set design is in turn read as a meat grinder, a circular window, a round cage, a huge mirror etc. It “could have suggested any number of things, but none of them without ambiguity” (Honzi 1940, 251). Finally, guided by the actor’s action, the reading is fixed on the signified “prison cell”. But most importantly: “simultaneously, there remain in our minds all the associations of form that originated during our first glance at the said prop. The idea of a “meat grinder” in combination with the idea of a “prison cell” acquires a mutual polarization of new meanings” (Honzi 1940, 251)

Honzi acknowledges the fact that the different meanings carried out by a given sign – whether they are intended or not – do not vanish, but remain in the minds of the audience. The sign is charged throughout the performances by various meanings. These meanings, in turn, affect and colour each other. As audience, our perceptions grow together with these transformations: it opens our perception of the world. The concepts we had before entering the theatre space are shaken; they shatter to let the space of a new perception to be born. What used to be far apart is joined within the materiality of the object and its semeiological development. The creative tension allows us to look back at what we thought was ordinary. As we watch the performance, as we experience the materials brought on stage, we “become more permeable” to the world (Laubu 2010).

5 CONCLUSION

As we achieve our journey throughout the semiotic theories applied to puppetry thinking, I wish to share a short text written by Vsevolod Meyerhold that will bring us back to the issue brought up in the introduction:

“There are two puppet theatres: The director of the first wants his puppets to look and behave like real men. Like an idolater who expects the idol to nod its head, this puppet master wants his doll to emit sounds resembling the human voice. In his attempt to reproduce reality ‘as it really is’, he improves the puppets further and further until finally he arrives at a far simpler solution to the problem: replace the puppets with real men. [...] The puppet didn’t want to become an exact replica of man. [...] *The other director realizes that* on stage things are not as they are because it is like that, but because that is how the puppet wishes it – and it wishes not to copy but to create”. (1913, in Bogatyrev 1983, 53)

Taking the second director as a model, puppetry thinking is a way to respect the essence of the material, to listen to the materiality of its signs so as to find out what *it wishes* to say. Semiotics may accompany the puppet thinker in his researches, providing him with many tools to detect what Roland Barthes described as the ‘shivering’³⁷ of the material.

To quote once again Rene Baker, the puppet thinker ‘does not force the material’; he/she accompanies it to convey meanings. And while the sign maintains a relationship to reality, it should not be compelled to imitate the reality ‘as it really is’, but rather be brought onto the stage to reawaken the audience’s perception of reality, to shatter the cultural habits and “make the stone *[feel]* stony”³⁸

³⁷ Roland Barthes, 1964, 232. « Tremblements » in French

³⁸ (Scklovsky 1965, in Aston and Savona 1991, 7)

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