

I GENERAL REMARKS

1. THE FOUR PARTICIPANTS TO TRANSFERENCE

Source: The 1st World War

Death of a soldier

His sister receives a letter that announces his death. Her journey from denial to acceptance: THE PROCESS OF GRIEF.

Through: Romain Landat

With: Human beings

Objects (passive + active)

Puppets

Voice

Text

Sound

Space

For: An audience of homo-significans

2. AN ACT OF COMMUNICATION

This is an act of communication

- from the performers and Romain Landat,
- to the audience,
- through the set up of a language: puppetry, using materials according to their nature (maps, shawl, letter, instruments ...) and beyond their nature (puppets, mouse traps, frames).
- to express grief

3. WHY THIS SOURCE... AGAIN

Why to tell this kind of story? Often, the sources taken for performances are the same ones (how many Alice in Wonderland, Punch and Judy or War stories!!). For the 1st World War, there are almost no participants left alive. But it comes again and often. What does it bring to contemporary audiences who never had to face such subject except in the history books?

- The “**metaphor of far far away**” (Théâtre du Soleil). Hélène Cixous, in an interview given to a journalist about *Drums of the dams*¹, explains that to tell on stage extremely contemporary and emotional subjects one has to take distance. Théâtre du Soleil is a very political, engaged French theatre company. Their shows deal with subjects such as boat people, self-destruction of a society, immigration... But (almost) always do they set their stories far in the past or in mythological times (*The French Revolution*, Euripide’s tragedies...), or far to the East – what they call their “Asian metaphor” (*Drums of the dam*). According to Hélène Cixous, the audience cannot accept the intellectual, emotional and physical message of the performance if it hits directly in the face. If both the story and the meaning are immediately relevant and disturbing to the audience, the spectators might tend to close themselves and to refuse being moved. By using distance on the level of the story, by **transferring** the message into another setting, the audience can accept to feel, to share the experience given on stage more easily. *Post Mortem* deals with the subject of grief, of the loss of the dear ones. Death still strikes since the end of the World Wars, people keep dying. *Life is a mortal disease*². But by giving allowing distance to be taken, the process of grief can be experienced, not the despair consecutive to the unfair loss of a family member.

Remark: this is a directing choice. It is also possible to hit the audience straight in the face and to do rightly so. But the effect is totally different. Just one more thing to bear in mind...

- **Story versus History**. The First World War is covering chapters of History Book, forming a collection of facts, studied by scholars as objectively as it can be. But the angle taken here brings us back from the sequence of facts to the human experience, from the collective destruction to the individual tragedy. In a context where wars fill up pages in the newspaper (the Lybian war, for instance, was ongoing during the rehearsing process of *Post Mortem*), Romain reminds

¹ Unfortunately only available in French on the website of the company...

² Boris Vian

indirectly the audience that beyond the statistics, there are human beings, brothers and sisters, grieving.

- **The memorial weight of objects.** The objects are charged with memories. In the company of men and women, objects received some humanity. They are the recipients of the memory of those who lived around, of those who used them... As puppeteers, it is our work to bring up the memorial weights of objects, to read humanity or dehumanization, to accept and use their emotional charge on stage. In *Post-mortem*, Justine is gathering objects that carry the life of her brother. She shuts herself in the signs of his brother's existence. But objects cannot prevent his death (yet she sets them as on an altar, as means of prayer). They however can prevent her from living her life. Because it is memory – past – they are charged with, and because she surrounds herself with them, she closes herself in a time that is no more. She closes the door of her own future. Interesting paradox, objects are dead (in the sense of non-animated, not to get into any polemic of the humanity and spiritual charges of objects here), and this is where Justine wants to read the signs of life, the sign of her brother's animation.

II. READING SIGNS

1. THE HOMO-SIGNIFICANS SYNDROM

Justine is given signs to read by those who have already accepted the brother's fate.

- they wear black mourning clothing
- the letter brought
- the severed-head toys

For the first two, the signs are one-sided, obvious in their meaning. Justine refuses to look at them. Her turns of the head are clearly marking a denial in reading the signs.

For the severed-head toys however, the signs are not obvious. They can be read in two ways: as token of childhood or as deadly signs (we will study them more thoroughly later). Justine accepts to take them as she can decide what she wants to read in them. She placed them on the radio, altar to life and hope, a superstitious construction meant to protect the one who left for the war.

→ As audiences, we read all these signs at the same time as Justine. We are placed in the same situation. And because she is a human being, we know she is a homo-

significans. It is part of our humanity. And we are given to observe how she refuses to read signs that are so obvious.

→ At the end of the first scene, the text coming out of the radio confirms our reading as audience. The voice of the brother announces his own death. Justine is not there however to hear it.

One detail: the semiotic journey of the radio. The sign radio is particularly symptomatic of

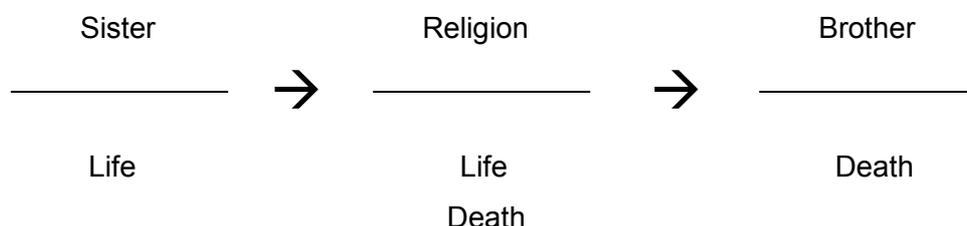
- the importance of the point of view taken by the homo-significans
- the pluri-signification (several meanings) of one sign
- the way meanings can fade from one to another.

The radio is the place from which news were coming from the war front. The only updated information source, an indirect link from those who stayed and those who went to risk their lives. It is a space a constant hope and fear, of good and bad news. Mostly it is the space of uncertainty.

Justine places her hope on the radio. She makes it – from her point of view – the confirmation of her brother's life.

But she builds an altar out of this radio (photo, tokens of her brother, objects). By doing so, she unwillingly adds a second meaning to the radio. Religion is about life **and** death. The figure of Jesus, nearly systematically placed above the altars in French churches, is a sign of death and eternal life (but not on earth) for Christians.

Finally, the voice of the brother clearly brings the radio on the death side. He announces his fate through the speakers.



2. DETAILED STUDIES

We can apply semiotics to every single sign of the performance according to the 4 dimensions of the language approached by our meaningful science:

- The signification of the signs themselves.
- The process of signification in context:
- The process of coding.
- The process of communicating

This is a very exhaustive tool, and so a time-consuming one. Obviously, there is no need to apply it to every discovery through the whole rehearsal and creative process. However, it can show itself being extremely useful if:

- applied to the essential signs of the play: they give a conscious insight of their meaning(s), open wider possibilities. If any sign comes again and again, through different angles in a performance, I strongly suggest you spend some time on it...

- applied to the very first sign: the first minutes of a show are essentials, the audience will read everything according to them. Check if you are clear (or unclear) enough.

- applied when you get stuck. You know a sign is right, but somehow it doesn't quite work. The emotional effect is not the one you want. The sign is too straight-forward or too abstract to be emotional (exactly at the point where you want the audience to cry)... The solution might come up with semiotics...

- applied to get inspired. There is a point where we go round and round in our own bubbles. Taking another point of view, more analytical, will definitely open the bubble and develop the performance.

A. **CASE STUDY #1: THE SEVERED-HEAD TOYS**

a. The signification of the sign itself

First, we simply observe the sign as it is, out of the overall context of the performance. What this sign evokes for us? The list is never fully exhaustive, but you should try to find as many answers as possible. And for everyone the list will be different.

For the heads, here are some key significations:

- Childhood (< toys)
- Play (< toys)
- old (< appearance) (→ It brings up the signification "memory")
- broken (< missing part)

- cruelty (< severed heads)
- humour (< appearance)
- incomplete (< absence of the body, incomplete figures)
- pain (< applying human feelings to the head cut)
- death (< severed heads)

b. The signification of the sign in context

Then, you can observe

- what the context enhances
- what the context refuses
- if there are new meanings or special nuances
- how the sign affects and is affected by the other signs

Pay special attention to contrast. This is a key to creating meanings that are not expected. Contrast and depth of meaning go hand in hand. Meaning comes from the friction between two realities. Let's here mention Tadeusz Kantor, authority in the contrasting genre:

"I think that a whole can contain near to each other barbarism and subtlety, tragic and fat laugh. I think that a whole is born from contrasts and that the bigger the contrast, the more this whole is felt, concrete, alive (...) Fly away, as if it was the Plague, from the expression through parallel forms (movement, sound, speech, form). It is a flat, naturalistic illustration. If the contrast has a power of action, it is always justified, even though it goes against the common sense." (Independent Theatre)

This list of analysis could be continued. I give here a first reading, yet quite complete.

In order to be as exhaustive as possible, a bit of pragmatism helps. You can take all the significations found in the sign itself and check how they work in context with the other signs.

1. The severed-head toys are brought by a man and a woman wearing mourning outfits, in the rhythm of a funeral.

- Death of their owner
- Memory of a past that will not come back

2. They are received by a girl in colourful dress (by contrast with the mourning clothes)

- She refuses them as death signs, they are only dear memories.

3. The toys are taken from the ground (carpet) to an altar

→ From careless play to objects of prayer, to symbols of life (for Justine)

This aspect is emphasized by the position of Justine's body: first as a child making her doll house, then as a woman praying at an altar: we go from the harmless childhood toys to symbols of her belief.

4. The physical condition of the toys and Justine

→ The meanings of "broken", "incomplete" and "pain" that belong to the toys contaminate Justine. She is now "broken", "incomplete", "in pain", even though she doesn't want to see it... yet (cf #2).

5. The toys at the funeral: contrast between playfulness and grief

→ From the harmless cruelty of the childhood to the harmful cruelty of the war

→ **Emotional**

→ Pay a short attention to the fact that comparing war and child play is a very commonplace. Because it is not made obvious here (we don't see a child or toys with a gun "playing war") but still refers to a usual image, widely culturally acknowledged (everyone sees how much children love playing war), it is touching us, yet not intellectually. We feel the contrast, we understand it emotionally.

6. The toys humorous appearances and the seriousness of the overall context (rhythm, music, funeral clothes...)

→ Everything becomes absurd: the war makes no sense.

→ Death doesn't make sense

→ Life (embodied by the meanings of "childhood" and "play") doesn't have its place here any longer.

c. The process of encoding

A short reminder of the four coding levels

- **Indexical**: the material presents a direct, causal relation to its meaning. It is clearly motivated.
- **Analogical**: the material resembles its meaning, but is not immediately connected. It shares a common aspect, but differs in the others.

- **Symbolical:** the material has no direct relation to its meaning, or this relation has been lost. They usually tend to be very cultural. These signs have to be coded if they do not use codes already set by pre-existing conventions, for they are arbitrary.
- **Poetical** (or absurd): the material has no direct relation to its meaning, but refuses the code. It means without meaning (this can be polemical, but I stand for it for now until you or I prove me wrong). This is very subjective and relies on the audience welcoming an image without wanting to set a meaning to it...

The severed heads can be read through the 3 first coding levels

- indexical: from the childhood (< toy)
 - first level of reading is a funeral of the childhood, funerals Justine doesn't want to see.
- analogical: broken, cruelty, death (< heads without bodies)
- symbolic: the absurdity of war (< the contrasting context)

Some people may see a poetic coding, but this can only last until the code is given, quite shortly after. Moreover, the indexical level is very strong, it is difficult not to read it.

d. The process of decoding

What are the elements given to the audience so that people can read the image?

1. The context, clearly that of a funeral, gives a grid to read

- the music
- the clothing
- the rhythm
- the set design
- the use of space

2. The focus and the care of the actors (can be qualified as religious)

- It is clearly too much care given to old, broken, useless toy heads: it draws our attention to it as very meaningful objects. We want to read them.
- We touch the fundamentals of the Christian faith: hope, life, death.

3. The clear codes to read the severed-headed toys are given twice

- the letter (someone died: the owner ?)
- the text coming out of the radio (the owner is Justine's brother. He is the one who died)

→ On purpose the clearest codes are given only afterwards. The audience feels the tension, the emotions before it understands it consciously. I believe the sense of absurd is essential for the play (born from the contrast). We get emotionally involved by a situation, before we understand all the elements of the situation.

e. Some conclusive remarks

All this etude is only possible because of the trembling of the object, because an object is inherently offering possibilities.

By this study, we can

- Explore potentialities: what this object wants to tell ?
- Play around with the context (giving special care to the use of contrast)
- Check our encoding system: if we have one level only, we can probably add more. If we have 3, we can narrow it down...
- Check the decoding tools given to the audience. Should they be given earlier, later? Are they too straight-forward? Not enough?

B. CASE STUDY #2: ROMAIN

I will study Romain shortly, yet he could deserve a longer analysis. He offers a very different kind of sign than that of the severed-head toys. This is a way to show you that the possibilities are endless, but the consequences are very strong, and give to the whole performance its specific meanings and emotional strength (or weakness).

The sign itself

- a young man
- average early 20th century clothing
- middle/lower class
- musician
- alive

- back

In context

The sign "Romain" is a combination of paradoxes

→ Mourning (space where the mourning man and woman come and stand, instrument) // Not mourning (clothes, not a funeral tune)

→ Belongs to this space (always there) // doesn't belong to this space (back audience, cannot move)

→ Close to Justine (age, clothes, space) // Far from Justine (no contact)

Encoding

Indexical. He is the man who died. Not a symbol, not an analogy, but straight forward.

Decoding

The code is not given, hints only

→ The paradoxes of his signification in context: there is something awkward about this man.

→ The light changes: he is the last one seen every time the voice of the brother comes out from the radio.

→ As he plays organ, the instrument squeaks loudly

→ He only can stay on stage when (his) death occurs.

The code is given in the end

→ As he speaks, we recognize his voice as being the same one as that of the radio. The text doesn't give any possibility of misinterpreting.

→ We are placed in the exact same situation as Justine. As her, we felt he had died, we somehow knew it, but didn't accept it. **We experience the discovery of the truth simultaneously with the main character.**

This can happen, because naturally we cannot accept a live sign to signify a dead sign. There is an essential semantic conflict animate / inanimate. The inanimate object representing an animated being is much more acceptable as it requisites an outside action (rarely people refuse to accept a puppet as a human). But a living human signifying a dead man is a difficult step that is not taken easily if the code is not clearly given.

An interesting subject to meditate on...

C. SOME KIND OF CONCLUSION / REMARKS

On stage, we re-present (and not copy)

→ Theatre gives the freedom to step outside of the logical rules of life :

- A dead man does not sit, playing organ to his own grieving ceremony, in the sitting room

But we understand the feeling of presence the one who dies leaves in the space he has lived in. We project the unreal into reality as we say "*it is as if was sitting here*"

People coming for mourning would not bring the heads of toys

But the image works because real objects carry the memory of humans (memorial function) and multiple significations. Objects are signs ready to use. They are *ready-made* for puppeteers.

→ The sign come **in stead of**. It gives a space between itself and what it represents. It give the space to the audience for interpreting, but also for emotionally being involved. s