DETERMINATION OF THE BASIC SEMIOTIC UNITS IN THE FIELD OF DANCE

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ABSTRACT

Semiotics as a science that studies signs, messages and codes is most often associated with linguistics and literature. The connection of the music and dance field with semiotics opens up opportunities for reading and decoding of the ascents that have not yet been or not sufficiently treated. General semiotic concepts will be applied in the field of dance, and their range, structure and function will be defined. Peterson Royce exposes the view that it is not possible to make a direct equalisation of the elements and its classifications that are functional in linguistics in comparison with performing arts concretely dance, due to a completely different concept and structure of the material. Hence, the attempt is to make classification, analysis and comparison of the generally accepted semiotic concepts with what is applicable in a dance performance. Theatrical / dramatic semiotics, which are significantly larger than the sources associated with dance semiotics will be considered. If we refer to the opinions of Mukařovsky regarding the definition of the basic element – the sign - and accept his classification of performance systems, we can get possible answers on this issue. The capacity and shape of a dance sign is determined and depends on the performance processes. The sign is encoded, recoded and interpreted. However, as a basic irreplaceable element of this analysis we use the dancing body, which is fundamental for modelling and coding.

Key words: dance, semiotics, sign, dancing body

A dilemma is initially imposed on how to reveal dance structural characteristics, whether to approach general analysis of all performance segments and accompanying elements (costume, musical accompaniment, scenography and other elements of performance) or rather by selectively determined components?

Without pretending to offer a new methodology, we rely on the existing and already scientifically verified procedures. Following the theoretical corpus treating art, we will invoke some accepted existing determinants. The conclusions and attitudes assumed by numerous eminent theoreticians will serve as initial grounds. Some semiologists and structuralists treat an artwork as a unit composed of several internally connected parts. Jan Mukarzovsky, one of the representatives of the Prague School, writes in the text *Structure, function, sign, value*: "The work of art is a highly complex sign: each of its components and each of its parts is a carrier of partial meaning" (Mukarzovsky, 1986, p. 210). The Russian semiotician of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School Yuri Lotman in his capital work *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (2005) that considers primarily literary texts also comes to the conclusion that the work of art is a complex sign in which a multilayer structure with precisely set rules is bundled. Charles Sanders Peirce in his interpretation also equals/unifies the sign with big, complex wholes. It may also be much more than a simple sign. We accept this concept or model of semiotic analysis in which the entire performing text with all accompanying components is aligned with the sign having a complex coherent organization.

Before we define the sign-performance itself, we will briefly refer to the term sign. The sign is a two/three-tiered unit, depending on the manner of its interpretation, or semiotic school. The Euro-linguistic movement, the founder of which is Ferdinand de Saussure, interprets the sign as a two--tiered model composed of a *signifiant/signifier* and *signifier/signified*. The signifier is a form possessed/obtained by the sign, while the signified is a representation/image/concept. The signifier is variable and may vary depending on the various composition in different languages, while the signified is related to a single representation/association/idea. Unlike this school, Charles Sanders Peirce and Charles W. Morris provide a different concept of the sign, where the two-tiered model is supplemented by a third or fourth element.

> This process, in a tradition which goes back to the Greeks, has commonly been regarded as involving three (or four) factors: that which acts as a sign, that which the sign refers to, and the effect on an interpreter in virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to that interpreter. These three components in semiosis are called, respectively, *sign vehicle*, *designatum*, and *interpretant*, the interpreter may be included as a fourth factor. (Morris, 1975, p. 19)

The first component is the sign vehicle, corresponding to the signifier according to Saussure, the signified in this case is identified with *designatum* and the *interpretant* translates/interprets the relation between the signifier and the signified. Or differently interpreted, *represent* – name for the example form possessed by the signed, *object* – content or object to which the sign refers and *interpretant* – individual perception of the sign. The newly introduced component, interpretant, is the third pillar through which subjectivisation is achieved, some general terms and meanings are specified. This model-triad might be more acceptable in relation to the treatment of the work of art; namely due to this new feature, for example new value obtained by the sign itself provides opportunity for specification.

Irrelevant of the selection of the concrete sign model, at this level of analysis, it is important to position the relation:

work of art (performance) = sign

In this phase, we will apply a deductive method that will allow us to detect the most significant spheres important for the concrete study. Writing about the structure of the artistic text and its analysis, Yuri Lotman makes an essential comment: "There is no syntagma in the order, but syntagma in hierarchy – signs will be related as Matryoshka dolls, they nest into each other" (Lotman, 2005, p. 48). The performance (in this case movement) – sign is composed of a complex structure integrating a number of levels. Beginning the process of analysis and segmentation of "Matryoshka dolls" (Russian dolls are the set of wooden dolls of decreasing size placed one inside another), it is necessary to detect the nucleus of the sign, or the basic element that is imperative of the performance itself. In this case, we cannot invoke or use structures that are immanent to spoken or written language due to the existence of essential differences. Interpretation of spoken or written content, if you have the decoder, or if you know the language of the message, is rather simple compared

to interpretation and the palette of possible and sometimes drastically different ideas related to interpretation of the movement. The linguistic sign is arbitrary, while kinaesthetic and audio sign is not. They possess wide and not concretized meaningful capacity that is associative. In some forms of East Asian theatre there is codification and close relation between some moving units with concrete meaning. In such cases, they are read as related and continuous text. For example, the *mudras* in Kutiyattam Theatre in India and *Xiu* in Chinese dances with sleeves obtain a character of arbitrary signs, the content of which is precisely and decidedly determined. Anya Peterson Royce came to an identical point of view, highlighting:

> The search for levels comparable to the phonemic, morphemic, lexemic, and syntactic is taken as a given. It may be a fact that we are distorting the phenomenon of dance by forcing it into a taxonomic system designed for a qualitatively different kind of phenomenon. This type of comparison may ultimately tell us that we have to deal with dance on its own terms" (Royce, 2002, p. 201). Hence, our task is to determine the structure of dance performance ourselves, to escape from the "scientific imperialism of linguistics, which nowadays is not only subjected to theatrology (or, particularly, literary science!) but almost to humanistic sciences. (Lužina, 1996, p. 25)

The dilemma related to the method of determining integral parts/levels of dance performance material initiates a consideration of the existing practical experiences. The answer to the question is obtained in one of the extremely modern dance options – postmodern dance, which experimenting with the form and content provides a nonstandard artistic product. The *flosculum* promoted by the creators of postmodern dance, or its conceptual pioneer Yvonne Rainer, discloses relevant marginalized creative issues. She declaratively rejects everything that so far created theatrical work, saying:

> NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendence of the star image no the heroic no to anti-heroic no the trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or be moved. (in Au, 2000, p. 165)

The creators of postmodern dance exclude scenography, costume design, lighting effects, music, a defined choreography and scenario, an established lexical base, and even scene as a defined space (performances were performed on streets, roofs, in museums, parks and so on) and determined time (performances start without announcement and the duration is not specified). Their experimental performances help us define the reduction levels, or possible rejections. They propose a form that manages to overcome almost all defined norms and rules of theatrical performance and become a *high-ranking* case in which the boundary of performance and life is very thin but still exists. "That constructs a totally nihilistic attitude to all means of theatre art and staging" (Zdravkova-Djeparoska, 2001, p. 238). Creators of the postmodern performance tend to entirely reject all stage elements. In each of these choreographic experiments - Rainer's pieces by way of excluding trained dancers and using "raw" material in performances, Trisha Brown with her new spatial settings on façade walls and roofs, Twyla Tharp with indefinite duration and space of her works - the authors managed to oust all ancillary/additional media in a stage performance, except for one – the performers themselves. Without performers/dancers, performances cannot exist. This allows us to impose in this case another relation of the equation through which the term sign-performance is narrowed by being positioned into the narrowest of frames, expressed as follows:

<div align="center">**performer/dancer = sign.**</div>

I would like to analyze the classification made by semiologist Tadeusz Kowzan (1998) who defines 13 integral elements – semantic systems of a theatre performance:

1. Speech,
2. Intonation,
3. Mimics,
4. Gesticulation,
5. Movement,
6. Makeup,
7. Headdress,
8. Costumes,
9. Equipment,

10. Stage setting,

11. Lighting,

12. Music,

13. Autonomous sound effects.

Although Kowzan is primarily focused on drama performance, we can also apply those perceptions to dance art. The first five stage systems refer directly to acting expression, the next three are supporting ones connected again to the actor, while the last five can function autonomously. We again come to the conclusion that the carrier, although in this case segmented expressive carrier, is creative live matter. Hence, a segregation of the nucleus is confirmed in a sign-stage performance – dancer/performer, noted as nucleus/centre of the performance. The following concentric circle "bigger Matryoshka doll" positioned immediately to the centre are the additional assets – costume, makeup, musical accompaniment, equipment and so on. They, through the example of postmodern dance but also through numerous examples of the existing research resources, confirm that they can (and do not have to) be omitted or partially excluded. For the most part of his creation (except for re-choreography of classic works), choreographer George Balanchine omitted scenery and minimized lighting design, while the costume was simplified and unified to the maximum with all groups of performers. To avoid the omission of other groups subject to our research, as an example only, we would like to indicate social dances (irrelevant of the period or style concept in question), where the costume element is identified with daily clothes and has a utilitarian function. This indicates that performance is not causally determined by applying additional, accompanying effects (concretely particular costume). The above may be presented by the following graphic scheme:

dancer/performer

additional performative systems
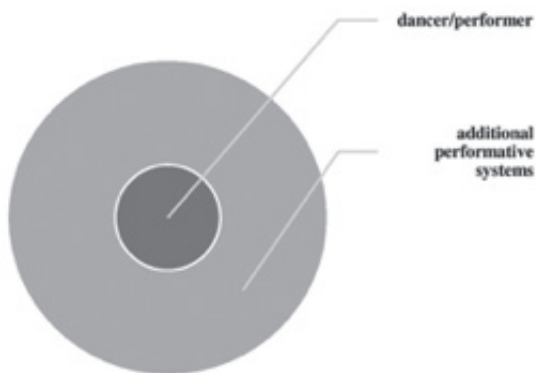
Artistic performance imposes a range of preconditions to be satisfied in order to realize the stage dance work. The preparatory and performance process, displacement and conditions of fulfilment, by themselves, presuppose the fulfilment of special, technical, organizational and other preconditions, thus giving the body a new meaning in advance. Theatre in the contemporary post-industrial society falls under the sphere of cultural offer connected to entertainment or filling spare time beyond all existential levels of action (like it was in archaic societies). Social dances in contemporary society are part of the corpus related to the free choice in organization of individual activities, and they drastically differ from the artistic dance, while the body status changes its function. The social dance implies an active position, while in a theatre, the spectator (in most cases) is a passive follower of what is being performed. For the same reason, the body in theatre performances, the performer/dancer's body, integrates different semantic codes and analogous messages that will be detailed below.

Susan Leigh Foster in her book *Reading Dancing* (1996) provides her own interpretation of artistic dance. She uses Roman Jakobson's basic communication scheme:
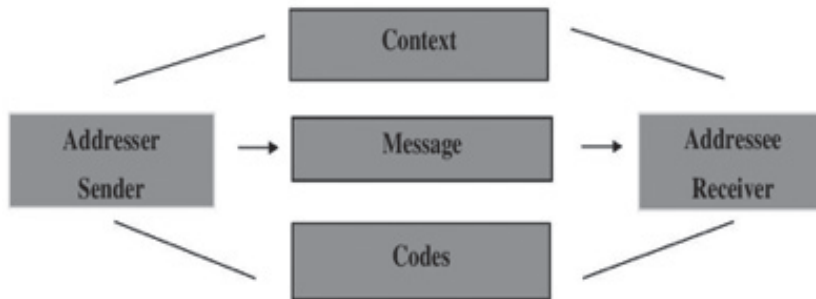
She readjusts Jakobson's scheme to correspond to the context of dance or theatre. The message in this scheme is dance and the codes are choreographic codes and conventions. In this communication system, the choreography (considering dance performance) as sender (addresser) and the spectator as recipient (receiver, addressee) are the two final elements in the scheme. Text or the message in Foster's scheme is segmented into two factors – dancer and dance (1986). "Every art has its own instrument and means of expression. An instrument of dance is the human body; and means – the movement" (Graham in Cohen, 1988, p. 162). This binomial is a key for detecting the body function in artistic performance. The body, as we concluded at the very beginning, is a carrier of the message and if positioned in a different context it obtains a different meaning. Social dances are collective, making status, age, family and other type of distinctions. For example, in Macedonian folk dances, costumes were a manner of recognizing members who are in or out of marriage. Artistic dance is a sphere in which the body is the main instrument and the main goal in the creation of the act of art. The context (both narrower and wider) is significant; however, as demonstrated by the postmodern dance, it can be deleted or, more precisely, relativized. Into the narrower context, we position the stage semantic systems determined by Kowzan. Of the thirteen mentioned, artistic reduction results in the exclusion of ten and existence of 3rd - mimics, 4th - gesticulation and 5th - movement (with possible cancellation of 3rd and 4th in some extreme forms). In a performance, everything can be extracted except the dancing body. In the wider context, which includes social, political and ethical norms and criteria, they are not a condition for the body in the artistic performance. Some political and religious systems, in which the body, in particular the female body is repressed through codes of dress, behavioural norms and so on, are an exception. Noting that in such societies dance is not developed, for example artistic dance does not exist in some countries (in such a form as is confirmed in developed societies).
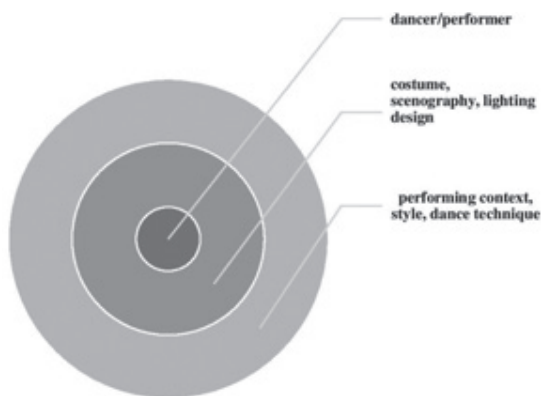
In artistic performance, the body is a material that needs to be modelled, shaped, and cultivated through educational procedures. The dance is a result of cultivation of the movement apparatus and its dance determination. The dancer's preparatory process for stage performances can even extend to one decade, articulating the seriousness of imposing movement matrices that are not standard/natural. As a supporter of classical dance, André Levinson highlights: "The dancer's technique is not a mechanical action; it is a physical effort that permanently enhances beauty... It is the soul of the dance; it is the dance itself" (Levinson, 1988, p. 139). Martha Graham emphasizes: "Practicing for example technique is important; in the dancer's thought it is only, however, a means to achieve his/her goal... Strength, freedom and spontaneity is achieved with the help of practices" (Graham, 1988, p. 163). These citations unambiguously confirm the need for trained, shaped bodies skilled to perform a concrete dance task. This inaugurates the basic presumption, and that is the colonization of the body as expressive material.

The choreographer – dancer connection builds a specific relation. While choreography is a scene text passed by each performer through his/her own body apparatus, it covers a number of levels – intellectual, emotional and physical discourse of shaping/reproducing the role. The classic performance imposes strict performance rules where the space given to the transformation of the choreographic content is not particularly wide. Creativity in the field of the standard ballet repertoire is mostly realized in the part of conceptualization, building and conducting of the character. Semiotician Kowzan

emphasizes the following characteristics: " In classical ballet there is an oscillation between strictly conventional figures (this is demanded by the tradition) and expressive demands of the story" (Kowzan, 1998, p. 221). In her analysis, Marina Konstantinova comments on the performances of Aurora from the Sleeping Beauty by the most notable ballerinas from the Mariinsky and Bolshoi Theatres in Russia.

> Aurora – Kurgapkina significantly simplified the character, and it was bright, cheerful, and at times glaring, virtuously demonstrating plausibility and glamour... Aurora Kolpakova signifies a modern intelligent girl, who accidently enters a fairy-tale situation, in which she is not lost but she deals with the occurrences – she raises them to the level of a dream or a metaphor but not reality. The plot of Kolpakova is in the background, and foremost are three acts filled with classical dance. (Konstantinova, 1990, pp. 208-210)

Modern dance provides more creative freedom to the performers, who have not only reproduced the kinaesthetic template but complement it through the form especially popular for this stylish line – improvisation. "First, I practice with the dancers, then I give them movements and actions to be performed in the dance, but I do not expect them to repeat them exactly as I do. It is my job to find a way for dancers to move as they would move themselves and to get the most out of it" (Cunningham, 1988, p. 233). The performer/dancer is the last link in the process of creation of the work; in fact, the dancing body according to all the noted features becomes a work of art. Although in the beginning of the 20th century, Andrei Levinson wrote about the ballet, this quote refers to all scenic kinaesthetic forms: "The task of the ballet – is to create forms through the mediation of human plastics in front of the eyes of the audience" (Levinson, 1918, p. 74). Hence, the existing schematic view obtains the following format, for example content:

dancer/performer

costume, scenography, lighting design

performing context, style, dance technique

Only scenic arts (like the new forms of performance, body art and so on) create live artistic works whose existence is time-limited. Dancers transform their meaning by stepping on the stage, ending with the completion of the choreographic text. Any new step on the stage, for example on the performing space, in conditions of repetition of the choreographic text does not mean repetition, but creation of a new work of art that, like the previous ones, only exists in the time of interpretation. In various theatrical forms, we follow different stages in which the actor/dancer prepares "to become a work of art". The interpretation of each of these dancing bodies is not simple and they each carry a different message depending on their context. It is very important to point out that the segmentation of the sign that Lotman also defined is an exploration of the ways of functioning and physiology of the elements of a play. Through this system of concentric circles, the dominant interest is directed to the dance body. The additional circles allow us to obtain information that accrues to the basic and most important category - the body. The dancing context largely determines the meaning of the performing body and the mission that it has. In this sense, a classical ballet body in a national theatre cannot be equated with the reactive contemporary dance body that has been set and created as a response to certain socio-political trends (performances that are a part of mass protests, activist performances, etc.). In this direction, the key to interpretation is given by this step system in which all the elements are analysed, but the dominant sign is the dance body. The dance system is connected to the body apparatus; thus, this so-called "pre-expressive level" (Eugenio & Savarese,

1995, p. 195) is achieved by compulsory training before each stage performance in which dancers not only prepare their body for what is ahead, but also mentally mobilize to perform the task. The set objective – artistic creation of various style profiles (ballet, modern and contemporary dance) – is achieved through the pre-expressive phase. The process of transformation goes through several levels of action. On the one hand, it is extensive education, or colonization of the body. On the other hand, it is the process of transformation that each body experiences just before stepping on the stage. The last link in the presented scheme, the performing context, scene presence and imposition of the standards of the medium itself, is conditioned by the preparation, that is, by switching from the everyday utilitarian movement concept to the forms of artificial dance by activating the pre-expressive level. Petar Bogataryev, researcher of folk theatre, writes: "on the stage, things that fulfil the function of theatrical signs acquire specific properties, qualities and attributes that they do not possess in real life" (in Elam, 1998, p. 186).

It follows that, as perceived, a semiotic dancing body is a sign, and the sign in performance possesses the quality of a work of art.

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