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FROM PAGE TO STAGE: A DIFFICULT BIRTH[1]

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS

For a text to give birth to a performance is no easy matter. What the first-night audience sees is already an end-product, for it is too late to observe the preparatory work of the director: the spectators are presented with a gurgling or howling infant, in other words they see a performance which is more or less successful, more or less comprehensible, in which the text is only one of several components, others being the actors, the space, the tempo. It is not possible to deduce from the performance the work that led up to it; *mise en scène,* as we understand it, is the synchronic confrontation of signifying systems, and it is their interaction, not their history, that is offered to the spectator and that produces meaning.

We shall therefore not speak of the director, a private individual instructed by a theatrical institution to put his or her name to an artistic product, but of *mise en scène,* defined as the bringing together or confrontation, in a given space and time, of different signifying systems, for an audience. *Mise en scène* is here taken to be a structural entity, a theoretical subject or object of knowledge. Since the director, the 'unknown father,' is not directly relevant to us here, he will be replaced (with apologies to practitioners) by the structural notion of *mise en scène*.

It is important to distinguish between:

The *dramatic text*: the verbal script which is read or heard in performance (a difference in status which we shall examine later); we are concerned here solely with texts written prior to performance, not those written or rewritten after rehearsals, improvisations or performances (see Margin 1)

The *performance*: all that is made visible or audible on stage, but not yet perceived or described as a system of meaning or as a pertinent relationship of signifying stage systems.

Finally, the *mise en scène,* the confrontation of all signifying systems, in particular the utterance of the dramatic text in performance. *Mise en scène* is not an empirical object, the haphazard assembling of materials, the ill-defined activity of the director and stage team prior to performance. It is an object of knowledge, a network of associations or relationships uniting the different stage materials into signifying systems, created both by production (the actors, the director, the stage in general) and reception (the spectators).

The distinction made between performance as an empirical object and *mise en scène* as an object of knowledge allows one to reconcile the aesthetics of production and reception (cf. Pavis 1985).

Indeed, *mise en scène* as a structural system exists only when received and reconstructed by a spectator from the production. To decipher the *mise en scène* is to receive and interpret the system created by an artistic team. The aim is not one of reconstructing the intentions of the director, but of understanding, as a spectator, the system elaborated by those responsible for the production.

In what follows, we aim to establish a theory of *mise en scène,* valid at least for our western tradition, being the enactment— supposedly aesthetic and subjective—of a pre-existing dramatic text. Western *mise en scène* can reveal how the creation of meaning is conceived by our civilization, notably as a relationship of meanings when several sign systems coexist.

DENIALS

We shall refrain from linking the semiotics of the dramatic text and of the performance, taking care to distinguish between their methodologies and fields of study so as not to place them on the same level or in the same theoretical space, to the detriment of either. Unless the distinction between them is kept in mind, one is tempted to equate the text/ performance relationship with other traditional relationships such as signifier/signified, body/soul, content/form, literary/theatrical, etc.

In the study of a dramatic text, we shall always specify whether it is being examined before or apart from a stage production, or whether it is being analysed as a constituent part of a particular production, with due account being taken of the enunciation and color lent to it by the stage.

The two semiotics must keep their autonomy because text and performance adhere to different semiotic systems. *Mise en scène* is not the reduction or the transformation of text into performance, but rather their confrontation. Before defining the delicate relationship that exists between text and performance, it is necessary to affirm what *mise en scène* is not, and therefore to challenge some incorrect definitions that still persist. Instead of stating what *mise en scène* should not be (this being too normative a vision), we should like to determine what the theory of *mise en scène* cannot or is no longer able to affirm. We realize that in wanting to establish an abstract theory of *mise en scène* we run the risk of including, in our description of its principal operations, several normative judgments on their roles and functions, particularly as regards the resultant construction of meaning. Let us nevertheless formulate a series of denials or warnings.

1 *Mise en scène* is not the staging of a supposed textual 'potential.' It does not consist in finding stage signifieds which would amount to no more than a repetition, inevitably superfluous (see Corvin 1985), of the text itself. That would entail disregarding the signifying materiality of verbal and stage signs and positing theatrical signifieds capable of setting aside their signifying matter and eliminating any difference between the verbal and non-verbal (see Margin 2).

Any theatrical semiotics which presupposes that the dramatic text has an innate theatricality, a matrix for production or even a score, which must be extracted at all costs and expressed on the stage, thus implying that the dramatic text exists only when it is produced, seems to be begging the question. Those who hold that position would contend that every play has only one good *mise en scène* already present in the text (see Margin 3).

2 *Mise en scène* does not have to be faithful to a dramatic text. The notion of faithfulness, a cliché of critical discourse, is pointless and stems in fact from confusion. Faithfulness to what? (Cf. Fischer-Lichte 1984; Jacquot and Veinstein 1957) If to an acting tradition (often obscure in the case of French classicism), the criterion is irrelevant to modern productions. Different things are understood by faithfulness: faithfulness to the 'ideas' of the 'author' (two very volatile concepts), faithfulness to an acting tradition, faithfulness to 'form or meaning' by virtue of 'aesthetic or ideological principles' (see Jacquot, quoted in Corvin 1985) and, above all, the very illusive faithfulness of the performance to what the text has already clearly stated. If producing a faithful *mise en scène* means repeating, or believing one can repeat, by

theatrical means what the text has already said, what would be the point of *mise en scène* (see Margin 4)?

3 On the other hand, *mise en scène* does not annihilate or dissolve the dramatic text, which keeps its status as a verbal text even once it is uttered on stage, i.e. enunciated in accordance with a given situation and directed towards a much more specific meaning. Once a text is uttered on stage, it is no longer possible for the spectator to imagine the time span between text and performance, since both are presented simultaneously, even if the rhythm of each is peculiar to its own signifying system. The argument is valid both ways, and the question whether the *mise en scène* is faithful to the text is posed as seldom as its opposite, namely whether the dramatic text is faithful to its *mise en scène,* whether it corresponds to what is seen on stage, whether Molière's text is faithful to a *mise en scène* by Vitez (see Margin 5).

4 Different *mises en scène* of a common text, particularly those produced at very different moments in history, do not provide readings of the same text. The letter of the text remains of course unchanged, but the spirit varies considerably. Text is here understood to mean the result of a process that we shall call, with Ingarden (1931) and Vodi ka (1975), its concretization. Nevertheless the text is not a non-structured reservoir of signifieds, a *Baumaterial* (building material), as Brecht would say; it is indeed the very reverse: the result of a historically determined process of concretization: signifier (literary work as thing), signified (aesthetic object) and Social Context (shorthand) for what Muka ovský calls the "total context of social phenomena, science, philosophy, religion, politics, economics, etc. of the given milieu" (1979:391) are variables which modify the concretization of the text and which can be more or less reconstructed.

5 *Mise en scène* is not the stage representation of the textual referent. Moreover, the textual referent is inaccessible: what we have is at most a simulation (illusion) of this referent by means of signs which conventionally denote it. Nor is *mise en scène* the visual concretization of the 'holes' in the text which need a performance in order to take on meaning. All texts, not just dramatic texts, have holes; in other respects, however, they can be 'too full' or overloaded.

Rather than try to find these empty or overloaded areas, one should try to understand the processes of determination and indetermination performed in/by the text and the performance: *mise en scène* highlights the function of 'emptying' or 'filling' structural ambiguities (cf. Pavis 1985:255–60).

6 *Mise en scène* is not the fusion of two referents (textual and stage), nor does it strive to find their common denominator. Instead of a fusion of referents, one should imagine a theory of fiction—capable of comparing text and performance in their peculiar processes of fictionalization—made manifest for an audience by *mise en scène.* Fiction can be seen as the middle term, as the mediation between what is narrated by the dramatic text and what is represented on the stage, as if mediation could be achieved by the textual and visual representation of a possible fictional world, constructed initially by dramaturgical analysis and reading, and subsequently represented by staging. This hypothesis is not false if one is careful not to reintroduce surreptitiously the theory of the actualized referent. There is an undeniable relationship between text and performance, but it does not take the form of a translation or a reduplication of the former by the latter, but rather of a transfer or a confrontation of the fictional universe structured by the text and the fictional universe produced by the stage. The modalities of this confrontation need further investigation.

7 *Mise en scène* is not the performative realization of the text. Contrary to what Searle (1982:101–19) believes, the actors do not have to carry out the instructions of the text and the stage directions as if these had the illocutionary force of a 'cake recipe', in order to produce a stage performance. Stage directions form a 'frame' around a text, giving instructions for uttering the text in such a way that the dialogue will take on a meaning more or less 'envisaged' by the author. *Mise en scène* is, however, free to put into practice only some, or even none, of these stage directions. It is not obliged to carry out stage directions to the letter, reconstructing a situation of utterance identical in every aspect to the one prescribed. Stage directions are not the ultimate truth of the text, or a formal command to produce the text in such a manner, or even an indispensable shifter between text and performance. Their textual status is uncertain. Do they constitute an optional extra-text? a metatext that determines the dramatic text? or a pretext that suggests one solution before the director decides on another? The evaluation of their status cannot be divorced from history; although one should not forget that they form part of authorial speech, it should be remembered that the director has the choice of either using them or not, as in the case of Gordon Craig who considered stage directions an insult to his freedom. To conclude, it would seem inappropriate to accept stage directions, within the framework of a theory of *mise en scène,* as absolute directives and as discourse to be incorporated without fail into performance.

After all these denials regarding the nature of the relationship between text and performance (see Margin 6), let us now be more positive and formulate a few hypotheses about how *mise en scène* can establish links between text and stage.

MISE EN SCÈNE AS A MEANS OF MODULATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEXT AND PERFORMANCE

Instead of defining the relationship between text and performance as one of conversion, translation or reduction of the one to the other, we prefer to describe it as a way of establishing effects or meaning and balance between opposing semiotic systems (such as verbal and non-verbal, symbolic and iconic), and as the gap, both spatial and temporal, between the auditory signs of the text and the visual signs of the stage. It is no longer possible to see performance (stage signs) as the logical and chronological consequence of textual signs (even if, in the majority of cases, they are actually derived from the *mise en scène* of a pre-existing text). Text and stage are perceived at the same time and in the same place, making it impossible to declare that the one precedes the other (see Margin 7).

Stage enunciation and the concretization circuit

Mise en scène tries to provide the dramatic text with a situation that will give meaning to the statements *(énoncés)* of the text. Dramatic dialogue therefore seems to be the product of (stage) utterance and at the same time the text used by the *wise en scène* to envisage a context of utterance in which the text acquires a meaning. *Mise en scène* is not a transformation of text into performance, but rather a theoretical 'fitting' which consists in putting the text under dramatic and stage tension, in order to test how stage utterance challenges the text and initiates a hermeneutic circle between the text and its enunciation (between *énoncés* and *énonciation*), thus opening up the text to several possible interpretations.

The change in context of utterance goes hand in hand with renewed concretization of the dramatic text; a two-way relationship is established between the dramatic text and the Social Context. With every new *mise en scène,* the text is placed in a situation, of enunciation according to the new Social Context of its reception, which allows or facilitates a new analysis of the text and so on, *ad infinitum*. This theoretical 'fitting,'

this discrepancy between text and stage, the disparity between the reading of yesterday's Social Context and that of today, constitute the *mise en scène*. *Mise en scène* is a possibility for a stage enunciation, leading to a fresh text; it is always in a state of becoming, since it does no more than point the way, preparing the text for utterance while adopting a wait-and-see attitude. Therefore, not only does concretization-fictionalization take place, as is the case with any reading of a written text, but there is also a search for stage enunciators. The latter, gathered together by the *mise en scène,* produce a global performance text incorporating the dramatic text which takes on a very specific meaning. In no way does *mise en scène* resemble a piling up of visual systems on top of the text; it is, writes Alain Rey, neither "addition, nor an onion; it is (it should be) a collective project built around a language constraint, a structure made for communication" (1980:188).

The concretization process is not only determined by the historical changes; it is also a result of the individual readings of the same text by different persons.

Verbal and non-verbal: Reading actualized

Mise en scène is reading actualized: the dramatic text does not have an individual reader, but a possible collective reading, proposed by the *mise en scène*. Philology and literary criticism use words to explain texts, whereas *mise en scène* uses stage actions to 'question' the dramatic text. *Mise en scène* is always a parable on the impossible exchange between the verbal and non-verbal: the non-verbal (i.e. staging and the choice of a situation of enunciation) makes the verbal text speak, reduplicating its utterance, as if the dramatic text, by being uttered on stage, were able to comment on itself, without the help of another text, by giving prominence to what is said and what is shown. Thus *mise en scène* speaks by showing, not by speaking, with the result that irony and denial (Freud's *Verneinung*) are its usual mode of existence. It always implicitly invites a comparison of the textual discourse and the staging chosen to accompany (follow or precede) the text. By speaking without speaking, *mise en scène* (more specifically the performance) introduces denial: it speaks without words, talks about the text thanks to a completely different semiotic system which is not verbal but 'iconic.' However, this does not imply that the stage image or picture (the visual and auditory signifiers of the stage) cannot be translated into a signified. The two alternatives proposed by Michel

Corvin (1985:256) therefore seems to us theoretically distorted from the outset:

> Our relationship with the stage image therefore remains ambiguous: if it is read in all its ideological fullness, it no longer exists as an image; if one is content to receive it ingenuously, and thank goodness nobody is obliged to be a semiotician, it remains a sterile shimmer of forms and colours.

The image can be transformed into a signified without losing its value as an image; conversely, it cannot remain a pure "shimmer of forms and colours" for very long, because even the most ingenuous theatre-goer ends up by transforming this pure signifier into a signified (in semiotizing the image). Michel Corvin is, however, right when he emphasizes the polysemy of the stage image which tends to produce ambiguous and polysemous semiotizations.

Stage representation—which is comparable to dream representation—and the image parallel to the text enrich and give a reading to the text that is sometimes unexpected. *Mise en scène,* even at its simplest and most explicit, 'displaces' the text and makes it say what a critical commentary, spoken or written, could not say: it expresses, one could almost say, the inexpressible!

Although little is know at present about non-verbal processes of communication (kinesics, proxemics, perception of rhythm and voice quality), they can throw some light on the work of the actor, whose non-verbal behavior has so great an influence on the spectator's understanding of the accompanying text. *Mise en scène* and its reception by the spectator depend on the perception of the different rhythms of visual and stage discourse and the auditory and textual flow. As Michel Corvin correctly states (1985: 12), the spectator

> is submitted to a curious effect of *strabismus:* the text develops at its own rhythm with its meanderings and secrets, while the visual discourse of *mise en scène* accentuates, belies or anticipates it, introducing a direct dialogue between the director and the spectator without having to pass through the character or the words that compose the text.

Mise en scène always initiates a dialogue between what is said and what is shown and, Vitez adds, "theatrical pleasure, for the spectator, resides in the difference between what is said and what is shown…what seems

exciting to the spectator springs from the idea that one does not show what is said" (1974:42).

Change in perspective

Research into *mise en scène* and the theories thus evolved indicate a clear change in perspective, a desire to get away from a logocentric notion of theatre, with the text as the central and stable element and *mise en scène* necessarily an incidental transcription, representation and explanation of the text.

Until certain postmodernist experiments in which the text was considered to be asemantic material to be manipulated by such processes as ready-mades, collages, quotation and concrete poetry, both fiction and *mise en scène* seemed to pivot around the dramatic text. The most recent experiments in postmodernism (see chapter 3) on the non-verbal element and the new status these have accorded the text—that of a sound pattern and a signifying rhythmic structure—have not been without repercussions on the conception of the classical dramatic text and its *mise en scène,* which no longer always turns on the semantic pivot of the text. But is it so simple to escape from the text and logocentrism? Has the text at least been freed, now that it has made a timid reappearance on stage, from a relation of authority or vassalage *vis-à-vis* performance? According to Jean-Marie Piemme (1984:42)

> the text has indeed returned, but during its exile it lost any pretensions it had of being a fetish, a sacred or royal object. It questions us today without the burden of its old ghosts; our approach to the text is no longer dictated by that double-headed monster, faithfulness and betrayal.

The text resists any attempt to make it banal or to reduce it to "meaningless music" in the *mise en scène*. It continues to question the rest of the performance and to make its presence felt (Piemme 1984: 43). It is indeed a force to be reckoned with: reading a dramatic text is no longer regarded as an effortless pastime. *Mise en scène* makes it difficult, but essential, to distinguish between three kinds of reading:

the *reading of the text* as carried out by an *ordinary reader,* the kind of thing a spectator might do before going to see a performance; the problem here is to ignore the context of the text as a stage utterance, for any reading of a dramatic text calls for a concretization/representation which is a kind of imaginary pre-*mise en scène*

the *reading (by listening) of the spoken or enunciated text* as uttered in the performance; the text is here concretized, actualized in a specific context which confers on it a certain viewpoint and meaning. In actual fact, this reading is not possible without taking into consideration the third kind of reading, that of the performance text

the *reading ('decoding') of the performance text,* especially all the various stage systems, including the dramatic text. The reading of the performance text implies a perception of the way in which the text has been read by the *mise en scène,* for the reading of the text has preceded the *mise en scène* and the performance text is thus a stage actualization (an actualization by stage means) of this reading. This third reading is the result of the first two readings, and is the one peculiar to *mise en scène*.

Metatext or discourse of the *mise en scène*

In order to understand the concretization of the dramatic text by the *mise en scène,* we must look for the metatext of the *mise en scène,* i.e. its commentary on the text or the stage rewriting it offers of the text. The problem lies in locating this metatext (or discourse) of the *mise en scène*. One must be especially careful not to confuse this metatext (or unwritten text of the *mise en scène*) with the series of commentaries written on a dramatic work, particularly a classical work, which sometimes 'attach themselves' to the original text, even becoming an integral or obligatory part of it (see Margin 8). Nowhere does the metatext exist as a separate and complete text; it is disseminated in the choice of acting style, scenography, rhythm, in the series of relationships (redundancies, discrepancies) between the various signifying systems. It exists, moreover, according to our conception of *mise en scène,* as the vital link in the production/reception chain only when it is recognized and, in part, shared by an audience. More than a (stage) text existing side by side with the dramatic text, a metatext is what organizes, from within, the scenic concretization; thus it is not parallel to the dramatic text, but, as it were, inside it, being the result of the concretization circuit (circuit involving signifier, Social Context and signified of the text).

A normative, and even political, question arises: must this metatext be easy to recognize and formalize, 'laying its cards on the table', offering a battery of explicit options and theses? Or should it rather be discreet and even secret, being mainly produced— completed and 'rewritten' —by the spectator? Whatever the answer is to this question,

mise en scène as redefined here exists only when the spectator appropriates it, when it becomes the creative projection of the spectator (see Margin 9).

In order to conclude our examination of the text-performance modulation, a modulation carried out anew by every *mise en scène,* let us ask three related questions in an attempt to determine the circuit formed by the dramatic text and the Social Context:

1 What *concretization* is made of the dramatic text with every new reading or *mise en scène* and what circuit of concretization is established between the work-as-thing, the Social Context and the aesthetic object?

2 What *fictionalization,* or production of fiction from text and stage, results from the combined effects of the text and the reader, the stage and the spectator? In what way is the interaction of the two fictions, textual and stage, essential to theatrical fictionalization? This question develops the first one by specifying the effects of fiction: the pretense of a referent, the construction of a possible world, etc.

3 What *ideologization* is applied to the dramatic text and the performance? The text, whether the dramatic or the performance text, can only be understood intertextually, when confronted with the discursive and ideological structures of a period in time or a corpus of texts. The dramatic and the performance texts must be considered in relation to the Social Context, i.e. other texts and discourses about reality produced by a society. This relationship being the most fragile and variable imaginable, the same dramatic text readily produces an infinite number of readings. This last question adds to our perspective the social inscription of the text, its link with history via the unbroken chain of other texts. *Mise en scène* can thus also be understood as a social practice, as an ideological mechanism capable of deciphering as much as reflecting historical reality (even if fiction claims precisely to negate reality).

Mise en scène as discourse on emptiness and ambiguity: Imaginary solution and parodic discourse

The confrontation of the two fictions (textual and stage) not only establishes links between texts and utterance, absence and presence, it also compares areas of indetermination in the text and in the performance. These areas do not necessarily coincide. Sometimes the performance can resolve a textual contradiction or, indeterminacy,

Similarly, the dramatic text is able to eliminate ambiguities in the performance, or, conversely, to introduce new ones.

To make opaque on stage what was clear in the text or to clarify what was opaque: such operations of determinacy/interdeterminacy are typical of *mise en scène*. Usually, *mise en scène* is an interpretation, an *explication de texte,* bringing about a mediation between the original receiver and the present-day receiver. Sometimes, however, it is a *complication de texte,* a deliberate effort to prevent any communication between the Social Contexts of the two receptions.

In certain productions (particularly, but not exclusively, those inspired by a Brechtian dramaturgical analysis), *mise en scène* can show how the dramatic text is itself an imaginary solution to real ideological contradictions that existed at the time the fiction was invented. *Mise en scène* then has the task of making it possible to imagine and stage the textual contradiction. In productions concerned with the revelation of a Stanislavskian kind of subtext, the unconscious element of the text is supposed to accompany, in a parallel text, the continuous—and in itself pertinent—flow of the text actually spoken by the characters.

Whatever the reason, overt or otherwise, for wanting to show the contradiction in the fable or the profound truth of the text through the revelation of its subtext, *mise en scène* 'displaces' the text, it is always a discourse parallel to the text, a text which would remain 'unuttered,' in other words neutral and without meaning. It is therefore always marginal and parodic, in the etymological sense of the word.

A TYPOLOGY OF *MISES EN SCÈNE*?

The theory of *mise en scène* we are trying to establish allows us to eschew impressionistic discourse on the style, inventiveness and originality of the director who adds his so-called personal touch to a precious text regarded as closed and inviolate. However, the same theory is more or less incapable of answering two very frequent questions:

Is the *mise en scène* faithful?

What *mises en scène* could be given to a dramatic text?

The first of these questions is meaningless, as we have seen, for it is based on the presupposition that the text has an ideal and fixed meaning, free from any historical variations. In order to answer the second question, and to avoid resorting to the naïvities of the first, the semiotician must examine how *mise en scène* is determined according to the following modes: autotextual, intertextual and ideological (or,

preferably, ideotextual). These three dimensions, which we have defined elsewhere (Pavis 1985, 1986b) as the three components or levels of any text, coexist in any *mise en scène*. The sole purpose of the proposed typology is to examine the effect of emphasizing one of these three dimensions (but not to the exclusion of the other two).

1 Autotextual *mise en scène* tries to understand the textual mechanisms and the structure of the plot according to an internal logic, with no reference to anything beyond the text to confirm or contradict it. In this category we find productions that try—in vain moreover—to reconstruct archeologically the historical context of the performance without opening up the text and the performance to the new Social Context, as well as productions hermetically sealed around a personal idea or thesis of the director and purportedly total re-creations with their own aesthetic principles. This was the case with Symbolist *mise en scène* as well as that of the 'founder directors' (such as Craig or Appia) who invented a coherent stage universe closed upon itself, concentrating their aesthetic options in a very readable and rigorous discourse of *mise en scène*.

2 Ideotextual *mise en scène* is the exact opposite. It is not so much the text itself that is staged, but the political, social and especially psychological subtext, almost as if the metatext—i.e. the analysis of the work—sought to take the place of the actual text. The dramatic text is regarded as nothing more than a 'dead weight,' tolerated as an indeterminate signifying mass, placed indiscriminately either before or after the *mise en scène*. Staging a text therefore means being open to the outside world, even molding the textual object according to this world and the new circumstances of reception. The text mimes its referent, pretending to be substituted by it. The text loses its texture, having preconceived, extraneous knowledge and discourse added to it, and takes its place in a global explanation of the world, a victim of what Michel Vinaver (1982) has called the tyranny of ideologies. This kind of *mise en scène* completely assumes the role of mediator between the Social Context of the text produced in the past and the Social Context of the text received in the present by a given audience; it fulfills the "communication function" (Muka ovský 1970:391) for the work of art, making it possible for a new audience to read an old text. It is this kind of *mise en scène* that is being singled out for criticism nowadays, for the director is blamed for setting himself up as a 'little god' of ideology.

3 Intertextual *mise en scène* provides the necessary mediation between autotextuality and ideological reference. It relativizes every new production as one possibility among others, placing it within a

series of interpretations, every new solution trying to dissociate itself polemically from the others. Particularly as far as French classical theatre is concerned, a *mise en scène* cannot help but declare its position in relation to past metatexts. This 'interlucidity' applies to all compartments of the production: only by quoting can a stand be taken, *mise en scène* being, as Vitez (1974) said, the art of variation.

(PROVISIONAL) CONCLUSIONS

Taking a new structural definition of *mise en scène* as a starting point, we have been able to describe certain mechanisms of its reception. The theory of fiction with its two facets, concretization and ideologization, is the indispensable link in the production of meaning. It has not seemed feasible to extract from this theory any idea of what happens to dramatic texts when they are reread and produced once more; it is clearly impossible to foresee, for a given text, the complete range of potential *mises en scène*. The fault does not lie with an impressionistic theory, but with the large number of variables, especially as far as the Social Context is concerned. The necessity of linking the textual and stage concretizations to the Social Context of the audience—and therefore of relativizing any concretization/interpretation—has become apparent.

The difficulty at present seems to be that of expressing in theoretical terms the manner in which a text experiments with several possible utterances. Utterance and the overall rhythm of a performance are still inadequately defined, for it has only just been realized that these are not restricted to gestural and visual changes, but are germane to the whole *mise en scène*. It has now been understood and accepted that staging is not the mere physical uttering of a text with the appropriate intonation and 'seasoning' so that all can grasp the correct meaning; it is creating contexts of utterance in which the exchanges between verbal and non-verbal elements can take place. The utterance is always intended for an audience, with the result that *mise en scène* can no longer ignore the spectators and must even include them as the receptive pole in the circuit comprising the *mise en scène* produced by the artists and the *mise en scène* produced by the spectators.

Theatre—the dramatic text as well as *mise en scène*—has become a performance text, a spectacle of discourse as well as a discourse of spectacle (Issacharoff 1985). Theatrical production has become impregnated with theorization. *Mise en scène* is becoming the self-reflexive discourse of the work of art, as well as the audience's desire to

theorize. They want to know just how the work of art functions: "no more secrets" is today's watchword.

The modern work of art, in particular the theatrical *mise en scène,* does not exist until we have explicitly extracted the system, traced the performance text, experienced the pleasure of deconstruction and uncovered the management of the whole stage operation (see Margin 10). 'Le charme discret de la bonne régie' ('the discreet charm of good staging'): such is the name of the practico-theoretical play we treat ourselves to when we go and see Planchon's *Tartuffe,* Strehler's *Lear* or Vitez' *Hamlet* (see Margin 11).

Who would still dare speak of the 'birth' of a performance from a text, thanks to the more or less artistic 'forceps' of an all-powerful director? 'What a childish business,' thinks the semiotics of *mise en scène*. 'Structural I was born, structural I remain!'

MARGINS

Margin 1

We have no intention of entering the debate on the status of the dramatic text, the question of whether a play can exist independently as a text or whether it can exist only in performance. We merely wish to point out that one can certainly read a dramatic text in book form, but that the reader is always encouraged to imagine the manner in which it could/should be uttered, to envisage therefore a possible *mise en scène*. Cf. Michel Vinaver's survey of seventy-three French authors who were divided into autonomists (of the text: 13 percent), fusionists (of text and performance: 22 percent), radicals (a play exists only in performance: 11 percent), and the vast majority, being the cohabitationists (a play is not reading matter *per se,* but may nevertheless be read: 43 percent) (Vinaver 1987:83–8).

Margin 2

A point of view, to our way of thinking erroneous and idealistic, to which Danièle Sallenave (1987:22) has reverted:

The same text can give rise to productions of varying quality. These can be compared according to whether the text had been more, or less, actualized. ...*Mise en scène* has to do with trueness

to the text, with what Gadamer calls actualization as a *manifestation of truth* (this was already in Aristotle's *Poetics*).

Margin 3

This position is best represented, and with a great deal of rigor, by Michael Issacharoff in *Le Spectacle du discours* (1985) and in an article 'Inscribed performance' (1986): he considers the performance to be more or less, but always to some extent inscribed in the dramatic text, very little in the case of Racine, very much so in the case of Beckett or Shaw. It is undeniable that elements of the didascalia or the text suggest a possible performance, but nothing, absolutely nothing (not even the Society of Authors), can oblige the director to conform to it. Usually the director produces the *mise en scène* that he or she wants; whenever reading and *mise en scène* take place, the process of *mise en scène* is extraneous to the text and not inscribed in it, at least not necessarily. To talk about performance (or *mise en scène*) implies that theatre is seen as the enactment of the text, not as a reading inherent to the text. In order to perform (or stage) a text, one has to approach it from the outside and 'break down the (textual) house' by having it enunciated in a specific period and place and by physical bodies.

Margin 4

Here one recognizes the self-effacing attitude of *mise en scène:* the director puts on a show of modesty, saying "I serve the author, not myself" and "I don't stage myself". In point of fact, such talk is sometimes a mixture of naïvety and cunning, sometimes indicative of an authentic search to induce in the actor and the spectator a 'wavering attention' (Freud). Two examples:

1 J.P.Vincent (1982:20): "In the sense in which one generally uses the word, there was no mise-en-scène in *Peines d'amour perdues*… I tried to bring out the stage reality inherent in the text." This attitude of non-interpretation is often demanded by the authors themselves: according to them, directors should let the authors' texts speak for themselves. Thus H.Müller praises Bob Wilson's directing: "He never interprets a text, contrary to the practice of directors in Europe. A good text does not have to be 'interpreted' by a director or by an actor".

2 Now two examples of productive self-effacement: C.Régy:

> The principle of *mise en scène* that I try to put into practice is *not to do a mise en scène;* my work is rather like that of a midwife; I do not obstruct, I open up the inner walls so that the deep subconscious thoughts of the author and the actors can flow freely and reach, without having to surmount any barriers, the subconscious of the audience.
>
> Quoted in Pasquier 1987:62)

Lassalle and what he calls 'toneless theatre' offer another example of self-effacement as a creative process laying bare the subconscious: "Seghers' text *(Remagen),* itself an incandescent, condensed and essential material…passes through the bodies of the narrating actresses and provokes a kind of shock by the very force of its utterance" (quoted in Déprats, 1987:27).

Margin 5

Except of course in the case of well-known classical texts of which the spectator is seeing the nth production. Nor is it impossible for a very experienced producer to try to reconstruct the original text. Michael Langham (1983) recounts how the British director Sir Barry Jackson, when he saw a play on stage, always tried to imagine what the text was like. He adds, however, that Jackson was rather eccentric.

Margin 6

In a recent article, Marvin Carlson (1983) uses, in order to criticize them, some of our own categories that he calls *illustration, translation* and *fulfillment,* the theory of illustration wrongly presents *mise en scène* as a visual illustration for those who do not know how to read (or who read badly and want illustrations)(cf. p. 26§2). The theory of translation is based on the incorrect assumption that the text is translated into visual signs (cf. p.28§6). The theory of fulfillment, presented as the opposite of the theory of illustration, explains performance as the realization or fulfillment of the text (cf. p.28§7), rather like Anne Ubersfeld who talks about the text with holes in it which is filled up or made complete by *mise en scène* 1977:24). M.Carlson (1983:10) proposes to describe the relationship between text and performance in the manner of Derrida in *Of Grammatology,* i.e. the one is seen as a supplement to the other and vice versa:

A play on stage will inevitably reveal elements which are lacking in the written text, which probably do not seem a great loss before the performance takes place, but which are subsequently revealed as meaningful and important. At the same time the performance, by revealing this lack, reveals also an infinite series of future performances, adding new supplements.

For Carlson this theory is an adequate explanation of the infinite potential richness of the dramatic text and the incompleteness of any *mise en scène*. This Derridean vision seems to us related to the idea of Vitez who sees *mise en scène* as an art of variation. In our opinion, this notion could lead to a relativism of readings and an unending game of mirrors, distracting the reader from research based more on history and explicable, after all, by the complex variety of the parameters of reception and of any particular concretization. It is true that Vitez has recently revised his theory of variation:

I find this art of variation all the more exhilarating for having recently discovered that in actual fact, in theatre, there cannot be many more than three or four 'families' of interpretation of the character Célimène. The number of possible interpretations is of course infinite, but they can be classified under three headings at the most. Likewise there are only a few basic ways to produce Chekhov's plays and not, contrary to what I myself believed formerly, an infinite variety of productions…. The pleasure of *mise en scène* or of theatre itself is to be found in this variation; it is what is inscribed in people's memories. When one sees a performance of *Le Misanthrope,* one can compare it with another performance one remembers, and this affords pleasure. This is the pleasure of theatre. It seems to me that the same is true for translation. Translation must of necessity be redone.

(Vitez 1985:115–16)

Mesguich seems to share this 'Derridean' vision:

Appropriation—if it takes place at all—is always momentary; restitution is already present in it; in the very act of appropriation lies the act of cession, and, instead of 'Planchon has *taken possession* of Tartuffe', could one not just as well say, this is how he *gave him back*?

Le Symposium (1985:245)

Margin 7

B.Dort (1985:234–41) comes close to sharing this vision of a confrontation between text and stage, except for one important detail:

> One must now try to see theatrical performance as a game between two distinct albeit related practices, as the moment when these two practices, confront and question each other, as their mutual combat of which the spectator is, in the final analysis, both the judge and what is at stake. The text, all texts have their place. Neither the first, nor the last, but the place of the written or permanent aspect of a concrete and ephemeral event. This confrontation, at least, is nowhere near complete.

In our opinion, the text has nothing permanent about it: it is of course materialized and fixed in writing and in book form, but it has to be constantly reread, and therefore concretized anew again and again, being therefore eminently unstable: it is impossible to count on it as something unchanging and durable.

For this reason, we should understand the staging of a text as a way of putting the text to work. The production, by enunciating the text in a certain manner, constitutes a possible text: "The character of the text will determine the nature of the production but conversely the production will determine the character of the text, will by a process of selection, organization and exclusion, define which text is actually being put to work" (Eagleton 1978).

Margin 8

Cf. the metaphor of dust, created by Vitez, which is very popular in modern critical discourse. For instance Mesguich (1985:245) says: "A text is enlarged by being worked on, displaced, contaminated, re-evaluated by a director; it is 'swollen' by the affluents of its readers, its *mise en scène*. They are its dust, its blood, its history, its value, the course it takes."

Margin 9

This explains why we agree in this instance with Danièle Sallenave who, while giving the director his due, stresses quite rightly the activity of the spectator who plays the game:

We can add here another reference to Gadamer's work *[Vérité et méthode]:* his notion that, in theatre, the real actor is the spectator. The actor *plays his role* in the play, but the spectator *plays the game*. In order for the spectator to play the game, somebody had to set up the game: this somebody is the director. But when the spectator plays the game, he does not play with the director, or even with the actor, but with the text, with the idea of the text. The director has to be suppressed and even the actor has somehow to be 'forgotten' so that the idea of the text can be generated.

(1987:18)

This 'game with the text' is what we call the perception of the *mise en scène* as a structural system, in complete isolation from the person of the director.

The notion of the author of the *mise en scène* disappears, just as did the idea of the author of the text; it is 'replaced' by the concept of the structure or discourse of the *mise en scène*. It is the notion of the *author,* "invisible yet ever present" according to Flaubert, that Sallenave cites further on (p. 23).

The same metaphor of the absent author is used by Mesguich (1985: 244):

The main characteristic of this offspring who is not allowed to be naïve, this child-born grown up, is never to find out his name, never to permit himself a single word. The strategy of this illegal immigrant, this unlawful worker, this gipsy in the kingdom of theatre, is to move on tirelessly as soon as he has spoken, never to be where one thinks he is, to cross and recross the frontiers, taking them with him. His behaviour is one of ruse.

Margin 10

G.Banu (1986:50) wonders if the present-day director can still claim to be an artist, the author of a work:

Does the director's desire to create a work still have a *raison d'être*? Yes, but he has changed his tone, for he is less aggressive, less obvious.… The presence of the director is acceptable only if it is mediatized, perceptible through the presence of others.

Nowadays the director no longer wishes to impose his reading of the text: "The director only wants the text to be heard in all its ambiguity, he watches over this. He no longer wants to treat it violently, imposing strong readings on it. Instead he slips into it gently, making its secret organization his own."

We cannot but agree with this account of the director's disengagement: he does indeed try to preserve textual ambiguities. However, this is the exact opposite of neutrality and his method does not consist in letting the text speak. It is definitely not a case of textual literalness, as is claimed by J.M.Piemme (1987). Piemme sees *mise en scène* oscillating "constantly between two poles, both dramaturgically based: the pole of deciphering and that of readability" (p. 76). He suggests that *mise en scène* can "produce for the spectator a mediation space where he will find displayed, not one specific interpretation, but the text in all its literalness" (pp. 76–7). We contest this display of the text's literalness. One cannot avoid interpretation; it is impossible not to breathe into the text an interpretation from the outside. Textual literalness does not exist, or else there are as many literal texts as there are readers. A text does not speak on its own, it has to be made to speak. But this presents no problem to the director, who, like the torturer, has the means to make it talk.

Watchwords often heard today— 'one must let the text be heard,' 'one should not interfere' etc. —seem to us either very naïve or dishonest. It is not possible to neutralize the stage so that the text can speak on its own, or be heard without mediation or without distortion. Because *mise en scène* is repudiating itself does not mean that it is suddenly going to disappear, as if by magic, and let *the* text be heard.

Margin 11

What we call 'the discreet charm of good staging' is a delicate balance between what is and what is not visible in *mise en scène* as a system of meaning. Régis Durand correctly describes this phenomenon as follows:

> In order for a *mise en scène* to be perceived, the concept which inspires it must be grasped by the audience. This concept must be made visible in some way or other; if the spectator does not perceive it, he will get the impression that he has not seen a *mise en scène,* that he has seen things happening without any coherence or unity. On the other hand, if the concept is made too

visible because simplistic, rudimentary or over obvious, the work
will be systematic, giving the impression that once the system has
been understood, all the rest follows as a matter of course.

<div align="right">(1987:19)</div>

NOTE

1. I have borrowed the title 'From page to stage' from Gay McAuley's
   projects, in which she observes the work of professional actors during
   rehearsals as part of Performance Studies at the University of Sydney.

   A first version of this article appeared in Michael Issacharoff and
   Robin Jones (eds)(1988) *Performing Texts,* University of Pennsylvania
   Press, pp. 86–100.

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