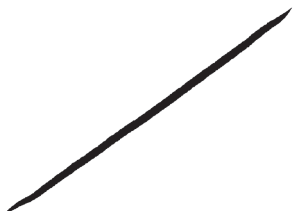


CENSORSHIP THWARTED BY SIGNS AND SYMBOLS: **A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF ROMANIAN THEATRE—1970-1980**

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Abstract: This article delves into the clandestine world of Romanian theatre during the repressive era of communist rule in the 1970s and 1980s. Faced with stringent censorship laws, theatre practitioners turned to semiotics as a covert means of conveying dissent. Through symbols, metaphors, and allegories, performances were imbued with hidden meanings that resonated with audiences, offering subtle critiques of the regime. Drawing on case studies from various totalitarian regimes, the article examines the profound impact of political oppression on semiotic development and resistance. Despite the pervasive control over academic content and cultural expression, Romanian semioticians persevered, contributing to the field's growth and innovation. The article highlights the enduring power of art as a vehicle for resistance and social commentary, even in the face of oppressive political regimes.

Keywords: TabThePAST Project, semiotics, totalitarianism, Romanian theatre, censorship, cultural resistance.

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Introduction

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behavior, allows for the dissection of visual language and communication mechanisms. This science helps us understand how various modes of communication (e.g., language, images, gestures) work together to create meaning within specific contexts. The interpretation of these signs is significantly influenced by the place and time they are observed, as well as the social situation and cultural context in which they are embedded (Barthes, 1972, p. 9).

- *Denotative meaning*
The denotative meaning of a sign is its literal, dictionary definition. For example, the word “blue” refers to a primary color situated between green and violet in the color spectrum (Saussure, 1959, p. 45).
- *Connotative meaning*
The connotative meaning encompasses the implicit and associated meanings of a sign. For instance, “blue” can connote feelings of sadness, representations of the sky and ocean, and symbolize trust, loyalty, and wisdom. These interpretations are often subjective and can vary from person to person.
- *Mythological meaning*
Mythological meanings of signs are typically ancient and transmitted across generations, often encompassing religious or cultural values and norms deeply ingrained in daily life (Eco, 1976, p. 112).

Influence of totalitarian regimes on the development of semiotics

Totalitarian regimes have marked the highest levels of individual freedom deprivation within social and political contexts. These regimes arose due to specific socio-economic, socio-structural, and socio-cultural conditions, particularly following the collapse of old monarchies after World War I, the crisis of liberal democracy, and the specific characteristics of the societies where they initially formed (Arendt, 1951, p. 88).

Fear, defined as the heightened tension due to unmet individual needs, plays a crucial role in political life. In conditions of fear and uncertainty, most people tend to choose security over freedom. Fear, as a passive element of individual consciousness, becomes a fertile ground for manipulation by authoritarian regimes. The fear of stigmatization or ostracization due to differing opinions, political attitudes, or behaviors significantly influences increased political passivity, submission, and heightened authoritarian aggression.

Art has historically served politics, monarchs, and kings since the dawn of civilization, showcasing political power and impressing subjects to garner devotion and loyalty. However, politics can sometimes have a divisive effect on art. Governments may attempt to control artistic expression to serve their agendas. Since artistic mediums can reach all social classes, art has been used as a political propaganda tool, promoting ideas with long-term negative repercussions. Conversely, politics can also inspire artistic expression, with artists using their work to comment on social issues, advocate for justice, and critique political systems or their commissioners.

While the emergence of semiotic schools cannot be entirely attributed to political regimes, their influence on semiotics' development is undeniable. Pioneers like Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roland Barthes founded the field, focusing on studying signs, meanings, and the structure of human communication.

However, 20th-century totalitarian regimes, including Nazi, communist, and fascist regimes, played a significant role in shaping semiotic interest and approaches. The intensive use of propaganda, strict media control, political ceremonies, and symbols, and pressures on language and communication provided fertile ground for semioticians to understand how political power uses signs and symbols to perpetuate its authority.

Totalitarian regimes contributed to formulating relevant semiotic questions and themes. They stimulated interest in political and power semiotics, the impact of signs and symbols on human perception and behavior, and the analysis of how communication is influenced and constrained by political context. Political

oppression and censorship under these regimes led semioticians to explore more subtle and coded communication methods, discovering the language of metaphor and allegory to undermine or avoid authoritarian control. These explorations contributed to developing more sophisticated semiotic approaches and a greater focus on signs and symbols in political and social contexts.

Case studies in totalitarian influence on semiotics

In communist Czechoslovakia, an important school of semiotics developed at Charles University in Prague, led by Czech semiotician Jan Mukarovsky, a founder of structuralism, that made significant contributions to semiotic theories (see Mukarovsky, 1978, p. 54).

In the Soviet Union, literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and his associates formed the Moscow Semiotic School despite ideological pressure from the communist regime (see Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination*, 1981, p. 112). Bakhtin developed significant theories on the semiotics of discourse, greatly influencing the semiotic study of culture and literature.

Umberto Eco, a renowned semiotician and author of *The Name of the Rose*, managed to conduct his academic work and develop semiotic theories under the ideological pressure of the fascist regime. His work had a significant impact on the field, even in highly challenging political contexts.

The Romanian school of semiotics

The influence of the communist regime on the development of the Romanian school of semiotics during Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship was profound and multifaceted. This period saw the imposition of stringent ideological control over education and research, affecting the field of semiotics in several significant ways.

Ideological control and academic restriction

The communist regime exerted tight control over academic content, enforcing the party's ideology as a mandatory framework for intellectual activities (Devlin, 2013, p. 87). Semiotics, being an ideologically sensitive discipline, was particularly vulnerable to such control. Research directions and theoretical explorations were often restricted or suppressed if deemed incompatible with the official party line. This ideological stranglehold limited the scope of semiotic inquiry and innovation within the Romanian academic context.

Censorship and Self-Censorship

The pervasive censorship and the resulting culture of self-censorship further hindered the development of semiotics (Rizescu, 2008). Scholars faced the constant threat of reprisal for any perceived deviation from the party's ideological dictates. Consequently, many academics either refrained from pursuing certain lines of inquiry or couched their findings in language that would not attract negative attention. This environment stifled creativity and critical engagement within the field (Oişteanu, 2001, p. 115).

Resistance and adaptation

Despite these formidable obstacles, some Romanian semioticians managed to adapt and resist. Researchers such as Solomon Marcus and Sorin Alexandrescu made significant contributions to the field, often working within or around the constraints imposed by the regime. Their efforts helped to sustain and develop semiotic scholarship in Romania, even under adverse conditions.

Historical development

The Romanian school of semiotics has its roots in the broader intellectual tradition of the country, influenced by figures such as philosopher Mircea Mihăieş and linguist Alexandru Graur. These early contributors laid the groundwork for semiotic studies within the Romanian context. The influence of foreign semioticians, particularly from France, Italy, and the Soviet Union, also played a role in shaping the field.

Professor Constantin Noica's philosophical work and the Păltiniş seminar were instrumental in fostering interest in semiotics and meaning. These platforms provided a space for intellectual exchange and development that was somewhat insulated from direct political interference.

The subsequent decades saw the consolidation of semiotics as a significant field of study in Romania, supported by research centers, publishing houses, and academic journals dedicated to the discipline. This period was marked by a gradual expansion of semiotic inquiry, despite the ongoing political challenges (Andreescu and Berindei, 2010, p. 88).

Directions of semiotic analysis of theatrical performances in the 1970s-1980s

• Decryption of the dramatic text

In the socio-political context of the 1970s and 1980s, the decryption of dramatic texts was a critical process. Playwrights often used metaphors, allegories, and symbols to circumvent censorship and convey social or political critiques subtly. The director's role in interpreting these layers of meaning was crucial for the audience's understanding and engagement. Here are some examples:

- *Political subtext*: the line "Those who want to appear grand, let them do it elsewhere", from I.L. Caragiale's comedy *A Lost Letter*, could be interpreted as a critique of corrupt politicians.
- *Emotional subtext*: Grigore Ureche's "You don't know what the eyes hide behind the mask" in *A Life in the Backstage* hints at hidden feelings or secrets of the characters.
- *Social Subtext*: Caragiale's "It's good to be poor when you are rich" from *The Carnival* critiques social hypocrisy and inequality.

The decryption of such subtexts involved the modulation of reading codes to align with the directorial vision, enhancing the impact on the audience. This process stimulated critical thinking, empathy, cultural identity formation, societal impact, and language evolution.

• Formulation of theatrical metaphor by the director

The formulation of theatrical metaphors by directors was guided by established linguistic and semiotic principles. Terence Hawkes emphasizes the importance of cultural convention in understanding figurative language, suggesting that figures of speech, often used to navigate censorship, became transparent yet influential within society. Repeated exposure to such language subtly reinforced societal norms and assumptions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In the context of the communist regime, iconic signs such as dynastic communism, omnipresent nepotism, suppression of individual rights, and pervasive censorship were employed as signifiers or signifieds to create new metaphors. Directors utilized these elements to craft performances that resonated with the audience's experiences and perceptions.

For example, the poetry theatre recital "On Sunday People Don't Have Nicknames" („Duminica oamenii n-au porecle") based on Marin Sorescu's work, depicted the life of an Oltenian village with humor and depth. The selection of verses from *La Liliaci* volumes portrayed the joys and sorrows of peasants,

offering a colorful, philosophically rich human universe. The performance, which premiered on May 19, 1989, exemplified the creative resilience of Romanian theatre under political constraints.

The Romanian school of semiotics, shaped by the ideological constraints of the communist regime, managed to persist and evolve through adaptation and resistance. The decryption of dramatic texts and the formulation of theatrical metaphors were critical practices that enabled the subtle expression of social and political critiques. Despite the challenges, Romanian semiotics made significant strides, contributing to the broader field of semiotic studies and enriching the cultural landscape of the country.

The importance of semiotic signs in conveying the message and subtext of performances

The role of semiotic signs in theatrical performances was crucial for conveying both overt messages and subtle subtexts, especially under the constraints of censorship. This importance is highlighted by the example of the performance “Jolly Joker,” which was initially played in Oradea but later banned in Galați. During a performance attended by high-ranking officials, the show was perceived as offensive, leading to its prohibition.

To justify the performance, members of the creative team, including Elisabeta Pop, the literary secretary of the Oradea Theatre, presented the volume by Tudor Popescu, which had won a prize from the Romanian Writers’ Union. This recognition impressed the head of the County Committee for Culture and Socialist Education, who did not agree that the text violated party guidelines, unlike the officials in Galați. Despite this, the performance was temporarily banned to appease the situation. This incident underscores the critical role of the director in bridging the gap between text and performance. The director’s interpretation and presentation filled the space between the written script and the theatrical experience, crucially shaping the conveyed subtext. The director also played a significant role in crafting and transmitting the subtext, ensuring it was understood distinctly from the overt message. Both the subtext and the overt message required an easily decipherable code among the audience, managed through a combination of semiotic signs.

In constructing a performance, directors used auditory signs (linguistic, paralinguistic, and acoustic) and visual signs (kinesthetic, proxemic, and scenographic). The careful selection of signs was essential, as an excess could lead to cognitive overload and reduce the audience’s attention and interest.

Ronald Fiuza (*A Consciência: Uma viagem pelo cérebro*, 2011) categorizes attention as automatic (triggered by new or standout stimuli) and voluntary (focused search for an object). For distinct understanding of subtext and message,

directors employed intersemiotic translation. This process involved transferring meaning through different sign media, ensuring a coherent double reading code understood by the audience.

Successful intersemiotic translation required resolving three key problems:

- *Experiential meaning*: establishing logical connections with society.
- *Interpersonal meaning*: building social relationships and creating a stance towards society.
- *Textual meaning*: generating messages with experiential, logical, and interpersonal significance.

In 1989, director Ioan Ieremia staged *Moara de pulbere* (1989) by D.R. Popescu, using intersemiotic translation to create a memorable performance. Reviews praised the show's polyphonic nature and profound messages, illustrating the dilemmas of conscience against the backdrop of a peasant uprising. The character Gabor was noted for his Shakespearean complexity, grappling with major existential issues.

Triggering the mechanism of transforming subtext into main message and mitigating the apparent message

Cultural resistance in socialist Romania involved covert critique and indirect opposition to maintain dignity and cultural values. Theatre performances were meticulously constructed to convey metaphors that would pass censorship while embedding deeper subtexts.

Abreu (2010) defines human cognition as encompassing language, memory, logic, emotions, and motivation, essentially making knowledge synonymous with perception. Cognitive semiotics, or "perceptual semiotics," as noted by Jimenez (2002), addresses how meaning is constructed and integrated.

The perception of micro and macrometaphors in a performance requires the expression and synthesis of sensory input and mental representation. Signs used in directorial construction must reinforce the reading code, facilitating the audience's effortless recognition of the subtext. This dominant integration allows the audience to transcend the apparent message and grasp the subtext.

An example is the play "Ten Laughs" by Tudor Popescu, directed by Alexandru Darie in 1987. The performance was described as polymorphic, enhancing comedy through simultaneous scenic elements. Despite censorship, the show used humor to critique socialist society, with scenes depicting the absurdities of daily life under the regime. The audience's reactions, characterized by laughter, indicated the successful conveyance of the subtext.

The Role of Semiotics in Thwarting Censorship

Romanian theatre practitioners employed semiotic techniques to convey dissenting messages subtly. Symbols, metaphors, and allegories were used to criticize the regime without overtly violating censorship laws. These semiotic elements allowed audiences to interpret deeper meanings and social critiques embedded within performances.

One striking example of this is Marin Sorescu's play *Iona* (1968), which serves as a quintessential case of using semiotics to evade censorship. In *Iona*, the protagonist is trapped inside a fish, symbolizing the Romanian people's entrapment under the communist regime. This metaphorical representation allowed the play to be performed (at Teatrul Mic on April 11, 1969) without direct political confrontation, yet the audience could perceive the underlying critique of the regime. The play's allegorical nature enabled it to bypass the censors while still delivering a potent message about the stifling conditions under which Romanians lived.

Another notable example is Tudor Popescu's *Ten Laughs* (1987), staged by Alexandru Darie in 1987 (Teatrul de Stat Oradea). This production cleverly utilized semiotic elements to critique the absurdities of life under the communist regime. Despite facing censorship that led to significant text alterations and cuts, the play's multi-layered structure allowed it to communicate its subversive message. The dialogue, set design, and staging choices all contributed to a nuanced critique that resonated deeply with audiences.

Impact of Political Context on Semiotic Expression

The political context of Romania in the 1970s and 1980s significantly influenced the semiotic expression in its theatre. The stringent censorship imposed by the communist regime necessitated the development of a sophisticated semiotic language. Artists had to be inventive, finding ways to encode dissenting ideas within their works without drawing the ire of the censors. This led to a flourishing of creativity and innovation in the use of signs and symbols in theatrical performances.

Under the oppressive political environment, theatre practitioners honed their skills in creating layers of meaning. The overt narrative often presented an innocuous story acceptable to the censors, while the subtext carried the real, critical message. This double coding became a hallmark of Romanian theatre, allowing it to function as a form of resistance. Audiences, attuned to these semiotic cues, could decode the hidden messages, fostering a shared sense of understanding and solidarity against the regime.

Conclusion

The interplay between censorship and semiotic expression in Romanian theatre from 1970 to 1980 highlights the resilience and ingenuity of artists under oppressive regimes. By employing semiotic strategies, theatre practitioners could communicate powerful messages of dissent and critique, demonstrating the enduring power of art as a tool for resistance and social commentary. This period serves as a testament to the importance of semiotics in understanding and navigating the complex relationship between art and politics.

Through the use of sophisticated semiotic techniques, Romanian theatre not only survived but thrived, offering a profound commentary on the socio-political conditions of the time. The ability to convey dissenting messages subtly and effectively underscores the vital role of semiotics in the arts, particularly in contexts of political repression. This era of Romanian theatre stands as a powerful example of how artists can circumvent censorship and inspire critical thought and change through the clever use of symbols and allegories.

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