



**According to Jiří Veltruský, ‘All that is on stage is a sign’. Using appropriate semiotic terms and critical support, discuss this assertion, making reference to elements of performance you have been involved in or observed.**

**Laura Gallop**

In this essay I use a semiotic analysis to explore the ‘model scene’ (see Figure 1 in Appendix) in our devised production *Four Minute Warning*. I wish to assert the truth in Veltruský’s assertion that ‘all that is on stage is a sign’ through demonstration of the way in which movement and costume signs directed spectator antipathy toward the character David. I concentrate my analysis on the interaction between the two chorus members who enacted a mini mime sequence by the piano during the scene’s dialogue. Their movements and costumes were encoded with a multitude of signs that communicated to the spectator the cruelty of David’s artistic endeavours.

*Semiotics* is a science concerned with how *meaning* is produced in society. In relation to a theatrical performance — a collaborative enterprise of performers, directors, designers and technical staff — a semiotic approach is useful to discover how meaning is created above the level of dialogue. ‘Everyone and everything within the theatrical frame has an artificial or pre-determined meaning’ — semiotic analysis identifies and scrutinises these elements to understand how they contribute to the spectator’s overall sense-comprehension of a production.<sup>1</sup>

The spectators of *Four Minute Warning* were presented with a panoramic view of the performance space. The raised platform in the middle of the ‘empty space’<sup>2</sup> generally foregrounded action occurring there — it being ‘distinguished from its surroundings’,<sup>3</sup> and a ‘cultural sign’<sup>4</sup> of formal theatre (the stage). However, in the ‘model scene’ spectator perspective shifted from this platform — due to the sudden movement of four previously static chorus members. Two purposefully moved across the performance space, a deictic gesture to mark their presence in the space and direct spectator attention toward them and their subsequent action.<sup>5</sup>

The two sets of chorus members then proceeded to mimetically represent the images alluded to in the dialogue between the characters David and the Master of Ceremonies: ‘So you take photos of girls’,<sup>6</sup> the MC asked David. Simultaneous to this speech act, a chorus member mimed holding a camera and ‘photographed’ his partner by the piano. ‘Movement of

<sup>1</sup> Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as a Sign System A Semiotics of Text and Performance* (Routledge: London, 1991), p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> I use Peter Brook’s term to refer to our staging, being that much of the action happened on the level of the audience space (on the floor), and the boundaries between audience and spectator were not fixed. See Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Aston and Savona, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> *Deixis* literally means pointing, and as Aston and Savona state, ‘just as the mode of dramatic dialogue is essentially deictic, so too is the use of the body in theatrical communication’. See Aston and Savona, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup> Figure 1, Appendix.

actors within a space...constitutes a codified method of generating meaning'.<sup>7</sup> In this case, the gesture of taking photos is an *indexical sign* of the photography profession as the index [taking photos] is 'causally connected...through contiguity' with the object of the sign [the photographic profession].<sup>8</sup>

The spectator was therefore able to comprehend this mini mime scene as deictically connected to the on-stage dialogue; a representation of one of David's past engagements. However, it must be acknowledged that this mime was only the physical representation of a *subworld* — that is, those 'hypotheses, predictions and projections made by dramatis personae',<sup>9</sup> in this case the mime represented the MC's doxastic world (what he believed): 'you take photos of their naked bodies and call it art?'<sup>10</sup> No admittance of truth in the MC's accusation was given by David in the scene, which therefore forced the spectator to take 'an active role in the production of meaning'<sup>11</sup> from other signs in the performance space. The mime by the piano sought to exhibit a negative image of David's photographic exploits to direct the spectator's production of meaning — to create antipathy toward David.

Using mime — gestural autonomy<sup>12</sup> — meant that the mimers exaggerated those gestures that had 'the highest communicative value',<sup>13</sup> those 'prevailing in society, whereby they [became] recognisable and thus "expressive"'.<sup>14</sup> The photographer repeatedly nodded as he mimed taking photos of his partner — a kinesic act<sup>15</sup> which relayed non-verbally, but through its 'conventional association with speech', the force of language. A head nod 'in determined communicative situations...comes close in function...to linguistic modalities usually expressed by modal operators such as "want" [and] "must"'. The spectator therefore could interpret the photographer's exaggerated head nodding (an 'attitudinal marker'<sup>16</sup>) as urging the model to continue posing for him.

The posing model's gestures similarly indexed an active physical engagement in the modelling — she leant forward for the 'camera', and held her breasts.<sup>17</sup> However, her true emotional state was more deeply encoded in her use of facial expression, 'the most obvious component of kinesic behaviour'.<sup>18</sup> The model's wearing of a half mask foregrounded her eyes (as noted in my Log Book: 'eyes in the mask are really visible DO NOT look around').<sup>19</sup> Since 'the eye is often perceived as the axis of visual interaction',<sup>20</sup> they were utilized as a sign to externalise the model's inner feeling; they 'impart[ed] to a certain outside a sense which is first found inside'.<sup>21</sup> Her gaze out into the audience indexed her discomfort with the physical gestures she was making — being that she was not visually engaged with either the 'camera' or the photographer (which would be expected if, as her physical gestures suggested, she was enjoying the process). This subtle kinesic expression, known as an 'autistic gesture', 'allow[ed] [the model] to show the audience the dialogue taking place within the character'.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Aston and Savona, p. 116.

<sup>8</sup> Elam, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Figure 1, Appendix.

<sup>11</sup> Aston and Savona, p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> Elam, p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel N. Stern, 'On Kinesic Analysis', *The Drama Review*, 17 (1973): 114-31 (p. 120).

<sup>14</sup> Elam, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> 'Kinesics is generally defined as the study of the human body as a means of communication': Khaled Besbes, *The Semiotics of Beckett's Theatre* (Florida: Universal-Publishers, 2007), p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Elam, p. 76.

<sup>17</sup> See Log Book: 4<sup>th</sup> April 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Besbes, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Log Book: 15<sup>th</sup> May 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Besbes, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La Voix ET le phénomène* (Paris: PUF, 1967), *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> G. G. Cima, 'Discovery Signs: The Emergence of the Critical Actor in Ibsen', *Theatre Journal*, 35 (1983): 5-22 (p. 22); see Log Book: 4<sup>th</sup> April 2014, 'sexy poses but disturbed face... face does enough on its own.'

The mime scene therefore deictically confirmed the MC's accusation that David '[took] [the model's] clothes off'.<sup>23</sup> This verbal accusation suggested David's active role in the process; 'you take' was repeated twice by the MC. The miming photographer's exaggerated nodding indexed his will for the photos to continue whilst the model's facial expression indexed her clear discomfort with the proceedings. The mimers' kinesic acts therefore collaboratively indexed that David subjugated unwilling women in order to make his 'art'. The production of this meaning through kinesics served to confirm the MC's doxastic world for the spectator — and thus ensured their antipathy toward David.

Similarly, the model's costume (costume being 'the most observable and permanent trait of the actor's physical presence'<sup>24</sup>) was encoded with meaning. Her fishnet tights functioned as an *iconic sign* for underwear.<sup>25</sup> They therefore deictically connected with the MC's statement that David's 'girls... [had] no clothes on. Nothing to cover their bodies, their skin'.<sup>26</sup> Having recognised the tights as an icon for underwear then, the fishnet tights were also interpretable as a *symbolic sign* for the selling of sex. 'Symbols operate by accumulation and by tradition, in accordance with social and artistic practice'.<sup>27</sup> As shown by the picture of Nicole Kidman wearing similar tights in the film *Moulin Rouge!* (see Figure 2 in Appendix), the association of fishnet tights with the selling of sex is well established in contemporary thought. The fishnets thus provided an encoded sense meaning for the spectator above the dialogue, answering the MC's question ('how many of them have you slept with David?')<sup>28</sup> without David even needing to speak. Similarly, further meaning was communicated by the extra-dialogic auditory signals of another chorus member. The orgasm sounds indexed sexual intercourse (the sounds are an *index* as they 'refer to the object denot[ed]' — sex — 'by virtue of being really affected by that object'<sup>29</sup>), and rose in pitch and volume throughout the dialogue. They contributed to the sign-system which communicated David's active engagement with prostitutes (which implied the betrayal of his wife), and so helped seal audience antipathy.

Possibly the greatest communicator of the atrocity of David's exploits was also encoded in aspects of the model's costume. Shortly before the performance extract provided in Figure 1, David argued that his models were 'over eighteen' in an attempt to justify his 'art'. However, the miming model was costumed in (along with the fishnet tights) pulled up little white socks — an *iconic sign* of school uniforms. The socks indexed the model's infancy, and therefore communicated a charge of paedophilia against David. Similarly, it is worth noting 'the physical attributes of a performer [which] are natural or given, but acquire significance on the stage'.<sup>30</sup> The tight fitting shorts and vest worn by the model character accentuated the performer's features: thin arms and legs, small breasts and hips which contributed to the spectator's reading of the model as a child. The visual signs of the actor's physical attributes alongside the little white socks infantilized the model, and therefore exposed the illicit nature of David's photographic conquests, which would ensure the spectator's condemnation of him.

As specified in my introduction, this essay has predominantly focused on the powerful signs created through movement and costume in order to validate Veltruský's notion that 'all that is on stage is a sign'. In conclusion, it is clear that such signs

<sup>23</sup> Figure 1, Appendix.

<sup>24</sup> Besbes, p. 81.

<sup>25</sup> 'An icon represents its object mainly by similarity between the sign vehicle [in this case, fishnets] and the signified' [underwear]; see Elam, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Figure 1, Appendix.

<sup>27</sup> Fernando de Toro, *Theatre Semiotics: Text and Staging in Modern Theatre* (Frankfurt: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> Figure 1, Appendix.

<sup>29</sup> Elam, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Aston and Savona, p. 107.

communicated by the miming actors worked above the level of dialogue to direct the spectator into condemning the character David. The photographer's mime with an imaginary camera indexed his profession, which enabled the spectator to parallel him with David. The photographer's exaggerated head nodding signalled his urging of the model to continue posing for him, despite her expression of discomfort. The kinesic signs therefore exposed David's exploitation of unwilling women. Similarly, the model's costume was encoded with symbols to ensure the spectator could comprehend the extent of David's cruelty. The model's fishnet tights symbolised prostitution which invited the spectator to criticise David for cheating on his wife. Likewise, the model was infantilised by her costume — she wore little white socks, an iconic sign of school uniforms — to communicate the possibility that David had engaged in paedophilic sexual practices with his art models. Above the level of the dialogue on the raised platform, these signs were powerful enough to communicate that the character David was a selfish, seedy, and shameless man, and the cumulative power of such signs ensured his damnation.

Accordingly I feel therefore that Veltruský's assertion is valid, at least in the sense of costume and movement. The power of signs to influence the audience appears to me to be undoubted, as the unspoken communication from the stage to the spectators is shown to be far more influential on audience comprehension than mere dialogue.

306 According to Jiří Veltruský, 'All that is on stage is a sign'. Using appropriate semiotic terms and critical support, discuss this assertion, making reference to elements of performance you have been involved in or observed.

### **Bibliography**

Allison, David, trans., *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

Aston, Elaine, and George Savona, *Theatre as a Sign System A Semiotics of Text and Performance* (Routledge: London, 1991).

Besbes, Khaled, *The Semiotics of Beckett's Theatre* (Florida: Universal-Publishers, 2007).

Brook, Peter, *The Empty Space* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

Cima, G. G., 'Discovery Signs: The Emergence of the Critical Actor in Ibsen', *Theatre Journal*, 35 (1983): 5-22.

de Toro, Fernando, *Theatre Semiotics: Text and Staging in Modern Theatre* (Frankfurt: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

Derrida, Jacques, *La Voise ET le phenomena* (Paris: PUF, 1967).

Elam, Keir, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Gallop, Laura, 'Performance: Theory and Practice Log Book 2014'.

Stern, Daniel N., 'On Kinesic Analysis', *The Drama Review*, 17 (1973): 114-31.

**Appendix****Figure 1**

The 'model scene' script extract from *Four Minute Warning*.

- DAVID:                   *(Panicked)* Okay! Off!
- The CHORUS is immediately silenced.*
- They take their clothes off!
- The CHORUS stand on either side of the stage, taking pictures, slow motion. The model being photographed cries as they undresses. The MC stands. He reaches out his hand to a notably distressed NATALIE, who leaves the alter and takes it. He sits her down, and moves back towards the Alter.*
- MC:                        So you take photos of girls, who are over 18. But have no clothes on. Nothing to cover their bodies, their skin, their breasts...
- DAVID:                   *(Interrupting, Seething anger)* It's art.
- MC:                        Is that what you do David? You take their clothes off and you call it art?
- David:                    Not in front of my wife.
- MC:                        You take photos of their naked bodies and call it art?
- DAVID:                   Not in front of my wife!
- MC:                        How many have of them have you slept with David?
- DAVID:                   Stop it!

308 According to Jiří Veltruský, 'All that is on stage is a sign'. Using appropriate semiotic terms and critical support, discuss this assertion, making reference to elements of performance you have been involved in or observed.

**Figure 2**

**Nicole Kidman wearing fishnet tights as the courtesan Satine in the 2001 film *Moulin Rouge!***

