

# Artaud's Hieroglyphic Sign and Böhme's Aesthetics of Atmosphere: The Semiotic Legacy of the Avant-Garde's Recognition of the Materiality of Sound

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Article abstract

Materiality of the sign/sound in theatre appears when various sensory materials remain on the side of the signifier, not trying to reach the signified but energetically pulsating from the stage instead. The semiotics of sound would benefit from exploring the process where the theatrical sign or sound is caught naked in its flight between deliverance and reception, not yet clothed in its signifying dress. Such a semiotics follows oral/aural signs becoming other signs in the area where the senses signify. I suggest that voice and stage sound/noise figure as catalysts of an intermedial flux between sensual, visual, kinetic, and architectural elements of performance, marking a legacy of the avant-garde recognition of the materiality of sound. I demonstrate this using Artaud's concept of a hieroglyphic idiom as the "expression in space [in which] objects themselves begin to speak through the collusion of objects, silences, shouts and rhythms," and through Boehme's aesthetics of atmospheres as the art of the set that creates a poetics/*technè* of postdramatic theatre focused on orality/aurality.

# Artaud's Hieroglyphic Sign and Böhme's Aesthetics of Atmos- phere : The Semiotic Legacy of the Avant-Garde's Recognition of the Materiality of Sound

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The interconnected avant-garde experiments with sound in poetry, music, painting, sculpture, and especially in performance, based on the recognition of the materiality of sound, prompted a surge of genuine interest in the orality/aurality<sup>1</sup> of theatre. Such experiments also brought about a particular dramaturgy of sound that deals with voice, noise and music, not as subordinate to the verbal or visual signs of theatre but as their equal in every respect. This dramaturgy deals with a semiosis of sound originating from two intertwined aspects of theatre : the corporeal, gestural, incantational aspect of the vocal performance (typical of Antonin Artaud and his descendants) and the architectural aspect of the stage sound (typical of the Futurist's 'moto-rumorist complex' and the Bauhaus's synacoustic and synoptic stage). The preferred use of oral and aural means in the avant-garde performance opened paths for a theatre of the postdramatic age, "a theatre of states and of scenically dynamic formations", driven by "a *scenic dynamic* as opposed to the dramatic dynamic" (Lehmann 2006 : 68).

In my 2013 book, *Dramaturgy of Sound in the Avant-Garde and Postdramatic Theatre*, I explored a contemporary theatrical method that embraces the orality/aurality of performance, allowing the scenic dynamic (based on the materiality of sound/signs) to take place of the dramatic dynamic (based on literary dialogue). The opening of the book presented the central claim I sought to develop :

The immanence, fluidity, and sensuality of the human voice and the expressiveness of stage sound – traditionally considered secondary to the primacy of the text – are essential elements of the performativity and scenic dynamics that propel dramaturgy in contemporary theatre. Here, sound reveals – or perhaps more appropriately – is performance. Consequently, the dramaturgy of sound reads/writes another type of text (one of physical theatricality) by the temporal and spatial disposition of aural objects/acts of performance. It displays voice – not only as a carrier of speech but also as an emotional, pulsional, gestural expression in excess of speech, and sound – not only as supporting music or incidental noise but also as an autonomous stage building material. (Ovadija 2013 : 1-2).

The present article revisits some of my findings from a semiotic point of view and examines what contributions to the semiotics of theatre can be drawn from the avant-garde and postdramatic concepts and practice of a dramaturgy of sound. As in the aforementioned book, I regard theatre sound primarily from an ontological and phenomenological perspective, and throughout the article I question traditional methods of theatre semiotics – especially when confronted with the meaning of sound – along lines of inquiry that recognize its *materiality*. I also focus on the shift from *semioticity* to *performativity*, which ushers a phenomenological approach in the analysis of performance.

There are three theories, two from avant-garde and one from the contemporary postdramatic moment, that can shed some light on my starting points. First is Antonin Artaud's concept of a theatrical sign as a hieroglyph that makes discursive language in theatre pointless since "there is no transition from a gesture to a cry to a sound; everything is connected as if through strange channels penetrating right through the mind!" (Artaud 1968 : 39). Beginning with a visceral gesture like a performer's cry, a hieroglyphic sign materializes onstage as theatre sound, as an "expression in space [where] objects themselves begin to speak through the collusion of objects, silences, shouts and rhythms" (*ibid.*). Second is the idea of the spatialization of sound and the principle of scenic "moto-rumorist complex" employed in the futurist "theatre syntheses" of Giacomo Balla, Fortunato Depero and Enrico Prampolini, which bring about an extension of the hieroglyphic idiom that "reinstates the volume of theatrical space in contrast to the way logical speech flattens theatrical space" (Derrida 1978 : 174). The third is contemporary German philosopher of science Gernot Böhme's aesthetics of atmosphere generated from the art of stage setting. Böhme claims, "The old aesthetics is essentially a judgmental aesthetics, that is, it is concerned not so much with experience, especially sensuous experience" (1993 : 114), and goes on to plead for a new aesthetics that will recognize an atmosphere, that is, an environment (natural or technological/man-made) as "the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived [...] that proceeds from and is created by things, persons or their constellations [...] that

articulate their presence through qualities conceived as ecstasies" (1993 : 122). Since the stage set appears as an aural, visual, and/or architectural environment, his theory easily enters theatre semiotics discourse, offering a basis for a poetics/*technè* of postdramatic performance and its phenomenological analysis, especially with respect to the orality/aurality of the stage.

Focusing on the materiality of signs rather than on their semantic or representational aspects, the avant-gardes resurrected the world of objects and energies in theatre and started creating performance by way of a kinetic sculpting of the stage. This materialist approach is characteristic of stage works by Wassily Kandinsky (*The Yellow Sound*), Italian and Russian Futurists (Fortunato Depero's *Colours* or Alexei Kruchenykh, Mikhail Matiushin, and Kazimir Malevich's *Victory over the Sun*), and the Bauhaus (Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*), to mention just a few. Their performance, to a great extent determined by the fluidity, rhythm, and dynamics of sound, ushered an obsession with stage aurality that is still alive in the contemporary stage experiments of Robert Wilson, Romeo Castellucci, and Jan Fabre. The audience of today often becomes immersed in a theatrical soundscape, an acoustic counterpart of architectural stage space where sound achieves its semiotic valence through the pre-verbal, gestural exposition of voice and structural setting of sound and noise. Such practice of today's theatre is due to the avant-garde "performative turn" and "performative generation of materiality" that "redefined the relationship between the *materiality* and the *semioticity* of the performance elements, between signifier and signified" (Fischer-Lichte 2008 : 17).

Regarding this redefined relationship, Patrice Pavis claims that :

The spectators concretely experience the materiality when they perceive the various materials and forms in the performance, provided that they remain on the side of the signifier, i.e. provided that they resist the temptation to immediately translate everything into signifieds. Whether it is a question of the presence and corporeality of the actor, the texture of his voice, or some kind of music, colour or rhythm, the spectators are at first submerged in an aesthetic experience and the material event [...] without trying to reduce the performance to a series of signs. (1997 : 213)

Now, the ensuing question arises : how can the semiology or semiotics of theatre reach an insight into such an "in-between state" where the theatrical sign/sound is caught naked in its flight between deliverance and reception, not yet clothed in its signifying dress? The complex theatrical codes (visual, aural, and kinetic) were for a long time interesting for semiology only insofar as they helped decode the overall meaning of the play. Bert States criticized a theatre semiotics that "addressed theatre as a system of codes" for failing to engage directly with the theatrical experience and establishing an "imperialistic confidence in its product : that is, its implicit belief that you have exhausted a thing's interest when you have explained how it works as a sign" (States 1985 :

7), “The danger of [such] an approach to theater”, States continues, “is that one is apt to look past the site of our sensory engagement with its empirical objects. This site is the point at which art is no longer only language” (*ibid.*). The solution lays in the fact that sonic meaning necessarily surpasses the signification and illustrative function of sound in a hierarchical system of theatrical codes. In other words, it cannot be exhausted by the representation : sound not only discloses the location, physical action or emotional state of a character, it also brings about a semiosis based on its own materiality – pitch, volume, timbre, rhythm – in short on its own ability to affect.

A case in point for the affective power of theatre sound and its semiosis is a 1988 staging of *The Phoenician Women*<sup>2</sup> by Paolo Magelli. Here, Magelli created an immersive soundscape based on our sensory engagement with sonic material, that is, with our immediate hearing/listening experience. He arranged for the audience to enter an intense aural environment long before the actors appeared on the stage. Thus, we the audience, while taking our seats, are sucked into a unique sound : the constant wailing of a boat siren, gradually increasing in volume. Deluged by a tidal wave of sound, we have to keep our heads “above water”. We have no choice but to swim in a heavy, “wet” burden of sound around us and struggle with its resonance in our bodies. After about ten minutes of the overwhelming sonic pressure, the first footsteps of the actors sound in an acoustic vacuum created by the sudden retreat of the siren. The clear echo of the *cothurni* in pitch darkness, the distinct percussive sound of steps across the empty stage, bring relief from the physical burden and the deafening opacity of the siren. But calming as the new aural configuration is, the eerie echo and imminent staccato of the rushing steps of the chorus announce further turmoil. Our immersion in a sensual sound bath of the boat siren anticipates the coming bloodshed at the Theban court. Rendered vulnerable by sheer sound, we listen to the actors’ voices, ears tuned to hear what they have to impart. And what they impart is again defined by sound – in this case, the phonetic material of speech.

In this oral/aural staging, on both ends of the scale, we are exposed to sound as a unique semiotic material : we enter the ‘reality’ of the stage immersed in a nebulous off-stage noise and end our initiation with a more distinct onstage sound of performers’ movement and speech. We sense the signification of the tragedy through our ears. Affective aural semiosis never leaves us, even in the silent hole before the change in intensity and rhythm of stage sound. What have we learned? Not much of the tragic plot that is lurking behind the presentation, at least we cannot tell what is factually happening. The tragic *telos* is sensed rather than understood. In discussing his choice of the term ‘affect’ when defining the theatre, Michael Kirby writes, “Theatre seeks not merely an effect – a response – but an affective response, an emotional and ultimately nonintellectual one (‘Bright light,’ says Webster in defining the word

'affects the eyes')" (1987 : xiv). In the same manner, in Magelli's *The Phoenician Women* the opaque sound "affected" our ears (to paraphrase the Webster's definition) and we "learned" of the tragedy because our affective state was changed by means of aural semiosis. No words can put the audience in the centre of Thebes, expecting the unavoidable tragedy with the enemy armies surrounding the city, in the way of the immersive aural space generated by the wailing siren.

### The Path of a Hieroglyph : From Flesh and Cry to Gesture and Stage Sign

In the history of the theatrical use of voice/sound as raw matter rather than as a carrier of verbal statements, Antonin Artaud deserves a special place. His inclination towards voice, vocal gesture and sound proper in theatre practice materializes as an "acoustic deconstruction of the voice, the liberation of sound from the tyranny of speech", what Denis Hollier calls "a sound system" (1997 : 208). Artaud shows his true preoccupation with sound when depicting the "theatre of cruelty" in the shape of a cry "born of the subtlety of the marrow. This is what I mean by Flesh. I do not separate my thought from my life. With each vibration of my tongue I retrace all the pathways of my thought in my flesh" (1976 : 110).

Anaïs Nin relates an anecdotal account of Artaud's 1933 lecture at the Sorbonne :

Artaud steps out on the platform and begins to talk about 'The Theatre and The Plague.' [...] But then, imperceptibly almost, he let go and began to act out dying by plague. [...] He made one feel the parched and burning throat, the pains, the fever, the fire in the guts. He was in agony [...] screaming [...] delirious. He was enacting his own death, his own crucifixion. (1966 : 192)

No one in the audience who came prepared to listen to a lecture on Artaud's theatrical method could understand it. The audience was terrified and awakened by the sound's "cruel vibrations" coming from the wisdom and pain of the flesh materialized in the performer's physical and vocal gesture. Artaud held that his theatrical language "springs from the NECESSITY of speech more than from speech already formed. But finding an impasse in speech, it returns spontaneously to gesture" (1958 : 110). This kind of emphatically oral/gestural performance thrown in the face of the spectator will reappear in the last work of his life, a 1947 radiophonic piece *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*, which was carved in vocal sound, pre-verbal utterances, glossolalia, and recorded noise more than in meaningful speech.

Artaud's well-known diatribe against words "strait-jacketed by their meanings" can be summarized in his claim that "We must first break theatre's subjugation to the text and rediscover the idea of a kind of language somewhere in between gesture and thought" (1958 : 89). This notion also gave birth to his idea of "a sound system" applied in his 1935 staging of *The Cenci*. Breaking "theatre's subjugation to the text"

Artaud turned to :

a rotating kind of spectacle that, instead of turning the stage and the public into two worlds [...] would spread its visual and sonorous burst on to the entire mass of the public. [...] Once the stage is eliminated, the spectacle can spread to the entire theater and, taking off the ground, will surround the spectator in the most physical ways, leaving him immersed in a constant pool of lights, images, movements, and sounds. (1958 : 125)

As for the sonic dimension of the performance, Artaud describes how “a thick heavy sound spreads out then dissolves, as though stopped by some obstacle which makes it rebound in sharp ridges” (1969 : 22). He envisions an aural architecture of the stage with the audience surrounded by a “network of sound vibrations” that make audible and sensible the “incarnation of great forces [...] beings roaring [...] passing like great storms in which a sort of majestic fate vibrates” (Artaud 1935). Adrian Curtin holds that Artaud

rejected the conventional, ‘supportive’ role of sound effects and incidental music in theatre, and instead developed a theatrical aesthetic in which sound attained foreground status, and functioned as a dynamic, destabilizing agent, [a carrier of the ‘cruel vibrations’ which] in the theatre should be in a function of sense perception rather than of ‘cognitive’ listening. (2010 : 258)

In order to put across those ‘cruel vibrations’, Artaud set the loudspeakers at four points in the auditorium, introducing the use of quadraphonic dissemination of sound in the theatre. In that manner, concludes Curtin, Artaud obviously “instituted a sound design *avant la lettre*” (2010 : 251).

Artaud’s script directions, staging, vocal coaching, ‘proto-surround-sound’ and musical score<sup>3</sup> in *The Cenci* represent an extension or spatialization of his hieroglyphic idiom. The very idea of a hieroglyph was born from Artaud’s attending a Balinese music/dance theatre performance at the 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition. Convinced that Western theatre imitates life while Balinese theatre re-creates it, Artaud wrote :

Once aware of this language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, and onomatopoeia, the theatre must organize it into veritable hieroglyphs,” [an idiom that] “turns words into incantations. It extends the voice. It wildly tramples rhythms underfoot. It pile drives sounds. [...] It liberates a new lyricism of gesture which, by its precipitation or its amplitude in the air, ends by surpassing the lyricism of words. (1958 : 90/91)

Soon after, Artaud’s enthusiasm for Balinese dance theatre and Gamelan music grew into the most influential theory of the avant-garde charted in his 1938 collection of essays *The Theatre and its Double*. Artaud professed “that the spirit of the most ancient hieroglyphics will preside at the creation of this pure theatrical language” (1958 : 287), and set a basis for its ‘many-hued’ form : “The overlapping of images and movements will culminate, through the collusion of objects, silences, shouts and rhythms or in a genuine physical language with signs, not words,



as its root" (*ibid.* : 124). This language truly calls for a non-hierarchical semiotic analysis of theatre where material elements earn their own signification, which isn't that of words.

The Living Theatre group's 1963 staging of Kenneth H. Brown's *The Brig*, directed by Judith Malina, emulated the routines set by *The Guidebook for Marines* in a hyper-naturalistic physical performance inspired by Artaud's theatre of cruelty. The acting method of Julian Beck, Judith Malina, and their company, direct descendants of Artaud, exhibits an extreme assertion of literal iconic identity of the performer. Keir Elam explains, "They claimed to be representing on stage precisely themselves, so that the similarity between sign and object became – supposedly – absolute" (1980 : 20). Still, *The Brig* was not only a case of absolute exposition of the performer as her/his real self, but also an example of a semiosis of sound where his oral, ritual, and gestural performance turns into a hieroglyphic idiom and creates an aural, quasi abstract musical form. Here a complex "hieroglyphic" idiom stems from a spontaneous physical and vocal gesture of performers "signaling through the flames", assuming a pattern of a rhythmical music form. Malina recalls :

Reading the disembodied commands, the numbered shouts that evoke the machine but remain transcendently human outcries, I heard clearly in my ears the familiar metal scraping prison sounds and the stamp of the booted foot on concrete. ... I urged the actors to listen to this sound; to strain to catch its modulations ... [which] they built into a steady crescendo. (1965 : 106)

Here is how Richard Kostelanetz describes the hieroglyphic idiom of the performance :

*The Brig* is a music of military noise. As the prisoners individually shout their requests for permission to cross a certain white line, I could hear a fugue developing; then on the right two soldiers are stamping their feet in 4/4 time. [...] Throughout the performance something is always moving and something is always sounding. The narrative line is a day in the brig, but there is little narrative action. The form of the performance is spatial, as meaning comes primarily through the repetition of action, rather than the development of plot. Very much as in musical theatre, movements and sounds are effectively integrated into a coherent kinetic whole. (1994 : 7)

Seemingly incongruous, his critical note is apt; it rightly identifies the continuum of the oral and aural semiosis of the performance in the parallel exercise of libidinal vocality and abstract sound structuring. True, the Living Theatre celebrated the Artaudian stage idiom of "the collusion of objects, silences, shouts and rhythms" by their exaggerated vocal mime of the U.S. marine prison drill – a visceral cry against brutality and repression. But the acoustic elements of the performance that the critic describes as structured noise converge into "a coherent kinetic whole" reminiscent of a sound installation. Thus *The Brig*, for Kostelanetz at least, presents an ideal example of an aurality of the stage that makes it a key innovative performance of the 1960s avant-garde. Obviously, the orality/aurality of this performance not only reveals an overall semiotic



and affective potential of sound but also reinstates Artaud's "many-hued" hieroglyphic idiom originally devoted to the spontaneous liberation of vocal and physical embodiment from the closure of text and mimetic yoke of conventional drama. Furthermore, it creates a new spatial reality of a stage where the hieroglyphic idiom turns into a much wider field of music, rhythm, kinesis, and aural/visual stage architecture.

Exploring a legacy of Artaud's idiom in the experimental theatre works of Richard Foreman, Meredith Monk, and Robert Wilson, in addition to their reflections on theatre semiotics, Helga Finter finds that their staging method "disarticulates the logocentric domination which governs the relation between the different signifying systems (verbal, visual and auditory) in our culture and thus brings the signifying process to light at the expense of our fixation on meaning" (1983 : 501). Her statement raises a broader question of the adequacy of Saussure's semiology in the analysis of contemporary theatre. Peirce's dynamic concept of signification as the process of signs becoming other signs is better able to follow the erosion of logocentrism in contemporary theatre caused by the avant-garde turn towards the materiality of signs (of sound) and performance (opting for presence rather than representation). This is because Peirce's semiotics deals with what is "felt before it is explicitly acknowledged, sensed before it is articulated, tacitly experienced before it is conceptualized" (see Merrell, online). Celebrating the signifying process at the expense of its customary end result, a *telos* of the dramatic script, experimental performance adheres to Pierce's concept of semiosis that flows from Firstness (which, as in the case of the subject of theatre sound, presents materiality, quality, and feeling of things) through Secondness to Thirdness, where the sublimation and/or symbolization potentially but not necessarily happens. The verbal, visual and auditory signs in this kind of theatre do not institute a hierarchy of sign systems that would guarantee representation of the text. Rather they play against each other, creating a fluctuating and immediate theatrical event, a happening in-between the media. They enter into a semiosis that, as Finter explains, determines

another distribution of the two audio-visual unities of the sign : it centers its preoccupation not on the text, but on the orality, which, on the one hand, takes the written (the seen) as spoken sounds and transforms sight into hearing and kinesthesia and, on the other hand, takes tone and sound as spatially written, thus transforming hearing to sight. (1983 : 504)

### From Synesthesia to the Synthetic Theatre and the Plastic Noise-Kinetic Complex

A particular case of the independent structural value of sound and its semiosis appears in Futurist theatre syntheses, very short stage pieces, and explosions of theatricality based on the juxtaposition of temporal, aural stage elements and kinetic, visual stage elements. It springs from

two 1913 painting manifestos, "The Painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells" by Carlo Carrà, which introduced a notion of synaesthetic, vibrational interference between colour and sound, and "Chromophony – the Colours of Sounds" by Enrico Prampolini that defined painting as an aggregation of chromatic vibrations in the atmosphere achieved through the synergy of sound and colour, which he called "the perception of sound colours" or "chromophony." However, it was Fortunato Depero who, in his 1915 abstract theatrical synthesis *Colours*, took a decisive step from synesthesia as a mix of sensory stimuli to the concrete synthesis of independent aural, visual, and kinetic stage elements.

A pioneering attempt at a kinetic sound sculpture in performance, Depero's *Colours* represents four characters or rather four objects that move and talk in an incomprehensible, abstract language of babble and noise on a stage consisting of a pale-blue cubic room with no doors or windows. Without obvious human traits, characters are described in mere physical terms: GRAY is "dark, plastic, dynamic ovoid", RED is "plastic, triangular, dynamic polyhedron", WHITE is "plastic, long-lined, sharp point", and BLACK is "multiglobe" (Kirby 1986 : 278). One cannot fathom whether it is a picture/sculpture staged according to the laws of chromophony, a sound poem transformed into a kinetic stage entity, or a synthetic theatre piece. To scrutinize the meaning of the performance would be a vain effort, but a performance it is; and it reveals the semiotic process of signs becoming other signs. The vocalizations of four abstract characters correspond to the chromatic and material essence of their own geometrical shape and colour. BLACK thus speaks with a "very profound, guttural voice", WHITE "has a sharp, thin, brittle voice", GRAY utters "animal-like sounds", while RED's voice is "roaring and crushing" (Kirby 1986 : 278). The semiotic value of Depero's *Colori* develops in the sphere of the aural, chromatic, kinetic, and plastic qualities of the stage material, exemplifying a scenography and choreography of the "plastic noise-kinetic complex". Thus it makes a passage from synaesthetic correspondences of sound and colour to a full synthesis through the plasticity and kinesis of objects, and achieves a spatial dimension on the abstract stage as a new semiotic field.

Such an ideal mode of synthesis in art and theatre is embodied in the idea of "plastic noise-kinetic complex". The term *complesso plastico motorumorista* was originally coined by Giacomo Balla and Depero in their 1915 manifesto "Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe". Their conception of the plastic noise-kinetic complex encompassed all possible forms of sensory perception and amalgamated them in a new aesthetic object defined as "poetry + painting + sculpture + music ... a noisiest-pictorial-psyche complex plasticism, onomatopoeia, graphic equivalents of noises, phono-plastic equivalents, psycho-plastic equivalents" (Apollonio 1973 : 199). Obviously, the notion was broad enough to cover material elements of theatre and to synthesize all that was seen and heard on the stage. Gradually, with its practical implementation in

theatre *sintesi* by Balla, Depero, and Prampolini, the plastic noise kinetic complex became something much wider than a physical mode of stage design. As a dynamic interaction of the fluid phenomena of light, noise, and motion in the time and space of performance, it brought together elements of the theatrical semiosis announcing the development of the “synoptic, synergetic, and synacoustic art” of the Bauhaus. Sound is considered an obvious and inextricable part of the *complesso plastico motorumorista*, a medium in which motion, noise, and key performance attributes amalgamate, creating a materiality and atmosphere of the stage.

Enrico Prampolini introduced a notion of scenic atmosphere that unites a plastic entity of set, lights, sound and the dynamic flow of scenic action, which all together invoke affective states of mind in his 1915 manifesto “Futurist Scenography and Choreography”. He considered scenography an absolute creation of noise and motion that shapes an abstract autonomous scenic event in which human bodies, objects, lights, and sounds join in front of the audience’s eyes and ears as an *attore-spazio* (space-as-an-actor) : “a personification of space in the role of the actor, a dynamic and interacting element between the scenic environment and the public spectator” (Kirby 1986 : 230). This conception of scenography is a stage/sound/light design that, by employing perceptual qualities of stage material, creates a theatrical world as a phono-plastic equivalent of the play. His theatre thus promotes stage designers as autonomous artists and not only executors of dramatic representation. With regard to the intermedial, atmospheric, and architectural value of theatre sound, this can undoubtedly be said of sound designers as well. One cannot imagine Robert Wilson’s productions without sound design by Hans Peter Kuhn and minimalist music by Phillip Glass, or of Società Raffaello Sanzio’s work without sound dramaturgy by Ciara Guidi and sound design by Scott Gibbons. They build a theatre performance as an aural entity, a sonic or spatial event in which sound becomes constitutional of the theatrical space, no longer considered as a mere sign of performance but as a performance itself. Their works undoubtedly transform our understanding of theatre sound and its semiotic potential.

### Aural Architecture of Stage and Aesthetics of Atmosphere

In his 2013 essay “The art of the stage set as a paradigm for an aesthetics of atmospheres”, Gernot Böhme explores ideas correspondent with Prampolini’s concepts of ‘scenic atmosphere’ and ‘space-as-an-actor.’ Böhme claims, “atmospheres are involved wherever something is being staged, wherever design is a factor” (2013 : 2). In the way of stage sets populated by things that “articulate their presence through qualities conceived as ecstasies,” atmospheres get created by “the manipulating of material conditions, of things, apparatus, sound and light. But atmosphere itself is not a thing; it is rather a floating

in-between, something between things and the perceiving subjects" (2013 : 3). Actually, this formulation of atmosphere concurs with the semiotic idea of "floating signifiers" and, again, holds together the complexity of a hieroglyphic idiom which emanates its "meaning" through the collusion of auditory and visual elements of the stage. So, as we have seen, designer Prampolini does exactly what philosopher Böhme theorizes : he builds a stage environment, that is, a scenic atmosphere by manipulating material elements of the stage. Prampolini's scenic atmosphere is supposed to alter the audience's affective state as corroborated by Böhme's assertion that atmospheres create "a sphere of familiarity which is perceptible in a bodily sensuous way" (2013 : 2). Both of these discourses, one avant-garde and the other adopted in the analysis of postdramatic performance, can be regarded as a practical polygon for a novel semiotic approach to a spatial idiom, one based on a hieroglyphic sign developed in contemporary theatre.

As the stage speaks to us through the atmospheres created by ecstasies of things and the bodily or emotional energy of an oral/aural performance, we have to open up ourselves to the semiosis of sound in theatre. In the acoustic space of the theatrical environment, and specifically when facing the dominant orality/aurality of the stage, we recognize a call for listening to the aesthetics of atmospheres – not a passive hearing that turns ears to the source and its location, but rather an active listening that adds something in addition to somatic or cognitive perception. That "something" comes from the semiosis of sound, a poetic process that makes a performance more than a mimetic representation. However, instead of dwelling on the opposition between sense and signification or between semiotics and semantics, the semiotic consideration of theatre sound can join Jean-Luc Nancy's critique of philosophy which "substitutes for listening something else that might be more on the order of *understanding*" (2007 : 1). At the same time one who researches sonic meaning in theatre should keep in mind that Nancy remained categorically against returning to some idealized notion of sound as pure sensual material disassociated from the process of understanding. Instead, he called for a listening "on the edge of meaning" which mediates a process that is so much more than understanding : "a resonant meaning, a meaning whose sense is supposed to be found in resonance, and only in resonance" (Nancy 2007 : 7). It is noteworthy that Nancy's emphasis is on "resonance", a word from the acoustics vocabulary! This fact has a double significance for our topic. First, it presupposes the presence of two resonating bodies – the performer and spectator/listener brought together in a co-presence (an ideal of avant-garde participative theatre), where according to Artaud "art is not the imitation of life, but life is the imitation of a transcendent principle with which art puts us back in communication" (1958 : 91). And second, the physical resonance of sound and its perceived materiality (as in the earlier case of *The Phoenician Women*)

functions as the bearer of semiosis in performance.

*Stifters Dinge* (*Stifter's Things*) by Heiner Goebbels can be taken as a case in point of aural semiosis, achieved by the generation of an audio-visual set/atmosphere concurrent with Gerhard Böhme's theory. Goebbels, who has for years stood at the forefront of sound/music/noise experimentation in theatre, remounted his 2007 "Sound Theatre" piece at the 2013 Ruhrtriennale in Duisburg as a performance and installation. As stated in the program notes, the work is comprised of "a composition for five pianos without pianists, a play without actors, a performance without performers, [...] an invitation to the spectators to enter a fascinating space full of sounds and images, a poetic invitation to watch and listen" (Goebbels 2013). All we see and hear during the performance revolves around our awakening to the materiality of objects/environments whose significance grows with the scenic atmosphere they create. "Objects in a theatre," asserts Goebbels in the program notes;

are usually part of the set or serve as props [however] central here are that the things often only serving as illustration now become the main characters : the curtain, the lighting, the images, the noises, the sounds, the voices, wind and fog, water and ice. The margins become the center, as in Adalbert Stifter, who on his mid-19th-century literary journeys dedicated himself to detailed descriptions of nature and phenomena on the margins of events. (2013)

Goebbels takes Stifter's descriptions "as a confrontation with the unknown : with the forces that man cannot master" (2008) and consequently stages his natural and technological environments or atmospheres using the signifying potential of sound and light, objects and their kinesis, together with designers Klaus Grünberg and Willi Bopp, creating a music theatre piece as an abstract/concrete equivalent to the writer's narrative. And, as Prampolini would put it, he employs aural and visual stage materials and their perceptual means to create a "space-as-an-actor" capable of inciting a certain state of mind in the audience. Or, to paraphrase Böhme, he manipulates the material conditions of the set to generate an atmosphere capable of inciting co-presence of the audience in the performance.

The *Stifters Dinge's* set consists of five prepared pianos turned to the side and mounted like a wall, amongst leafless trees and noise making machines. In front of this assemblage lie three pools, scattered with sand and flooded with water. The water surface gets hit by different lights and projections, disturbed by ice and rain drops. The fabric screens raised and lowered above the stage create a collage of light, reflection, and projected images (like Paolo Uccello's c.1470 painting *Hunt in the Forest*). Throughout it all, digitally controlled keyboards play individually (Bach's slow Italian Concerto is heard at one point). From loudspeakers located around the pools we hear aboriginal chants

from Papua New Guinea, an interview with Claude Levi-Strauss, and a reading from Stifter's prose, a fascinating tale of the solitude of the forest in deep winter. The most impressive moments are when mechanical devices set the pianos in motion and produce at times menacing and at other times vulnerable sounds from pipes, sheet metal, and stones. Towards the end they start to move with threatening slowness over the water basins to finally join in playing an agitated crescendo before receding, leaving the pools bubbling and polluted.

Throughout the performance Goebbels builds a highly dense atmosphere of images and sounds by using a kinetic mechanical set, noise instruments, lights, projections, voice and music recordings – all technologically advanced devices. Nevertheless, he does not shy away from his initial devotion to the natural elements : “It [all] came by working with the water, [...] it came by the wood and the metal and the space” (Goebbels 2013, online). Focusing on the Stifter's things, meticulously described in his tales and therefore intimidating, Goebbels does not intend to retell their story but opts instead to let the stage material speak. As Böhme would say, he articulates the spheres of the presence of things through their properties – conceived as ecstasies – and creates an active scenic atmosphere that, as Prampolini would claim, communicates the “lyrical quality” and “plastic sensibility” of the material itself. Aural semiosis revealing the acoustic nature of staged things is obviously one of the main atmosphere-creating ecstasies in Goebbels's performance. *Stifters Dinge*, first of all, relies on the signifying potential of structure, rhythm, timbre, pre-verbal materiality and immersive and affective qualities of sound.

The soundscape is dirty and mysterious [...] the tones are impure [...] replete with low, gritty discords. [...] The set groans and hums like a waiting beast. Not necessarily an unkind beast, but a disfigured one – a patient monster half in the shadows, waiting until you are more accustomed to its presence, its natural rumblings, before it starts to *really* sing. (Bell 2010 : 151)

And that is exactly what Goebbels strives to do, to let us have an “encounter with the unfamiliar, with forces beyond our control that are simultaneously alluring and terrifying” (2013, online), to listen and, maybe, to hear them sing. As Nancy proposes : “To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning [...] as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin” (2007 : 7). Clearly, *Stifter Dinge* transfers our state of mind from the state of hearing into the state of listening. By exposing ecstasies of marginal objects through their sound and creating an atmospheric ambience by a noise-kinetic-like stage action, Goebbels builds a construction site in the ear. Inviting us to listen, he invokes our co-presence in a “sound theatre” event and empowers us not only to see and hear phenomena but to communicate with a secretive sense of Being.



### Sound Sensed and/or Understood : Is There a Semiotic Solution?

All the performances briefly examined here show that for a semiotician of theatre it is no longer a question of how sound illustrates or represents a plot, character, or an object, nor how it signifies something or expresses an idea formulated elsewhere in literature or theory. It is now a question of how to deal with sound itself as an actor in the drama of things, either as an erotic material of vocal performance or as an element of a new theatricality in which sound interacts independently with lights, objects, and stage design. It is clear now that sound has become constitutive of a theatre that places more emphasis on performance, *mise-en-scène*, and the audio-visual architecture of the stage than it does on the dramatic text. However, with these questions pertaining to the avant-garde and postdramatic dramaturgy of sound, there emerges the question of how theatre semiotics can help us analyze this kind of oral/aural performance or kinetic staging method.

In conclusion we can say that the contemporary theatre semiotics should read/listen sound as a hieroglyph, as a motivated sign referring first of all to itself, aiming to become meaningful as theatre and/or performance. As Pavis says, “performance should be treated both as materiality and as potential meaning, and should never be reduced to an abstract and fixed sign”, and, in its oral/aural aspect, it should be considered as a process in which theatre sound achieves its semiotic value with the “emergence of materiality [that] forms the condition for another type of perception [and] opens an associative field of ideas, memories, sensations and emotions as signified” (Pavis 1997 : 213). Here, sensation or affect does not necessarily turn into sense or effect; signifiers do not necessarily turn into signifieds at the end. Consequently, the semiotics of theatre sound is given an option to look into how this emergence of materiality (or atmosphere created by the ecstasy of things) opens new communicational, affective and associative fields, rather than reducing sound to one of the several codes that contribute to the “typology of sign systems” standing in a hierarchical order, with dramatic text and its signification at its top.

According to Home-Cook, “Theatre is *staging* perception : we are being called to reflect upon the intricate connections between the senses and the role of the body in the perceptual event. Sound in theatre first and foremost is *felt* : but this phenomenon is not at odds with semiotics; signs are sensed and senses signify” (2011 : 108). Therefore, theatre sound resists the inclusion into a reductive signifying system but rather lives in its own materiality emanating through the ‘ecstasy of things’ (Böhme), an extension of objects and live performers into the aural atmosphere or an immersive soundscape. As a major marker of corporeality and kinetic stage structure (in its oral/aural aspect, of course), sound earns its semiotic and performative potential independently of the customary dichotomy between signifier and signified – it plays in-



between. Instead of reading through this dichotomy, the semiotics of theatre sound should listen to it “on the edge of meaning” (Nancy) and follow a dynamic process of signs becoming other signs. It should *entendre*, keeping both senses of the French word – to listen/hear and to understand – always alive. It should try to reach a somewhat oxymoronic “sonic meaning” of theatre in a process of performative generation of sound’s materiality that calls for inclusion of its phenomenology in the performance analysis. Only then will it be able to escape the hierarchical code structure of theatre signs and analyze the roles of both voice and sound as catalysts of the intermedial flux between the independent audio-visual and kinetic elements of the contemporary stage.

## Notes

1. Orality and aurality are two intertwined sonic aspects of theatre. The first mostly covers vocal or gestural performance while the other pertains mostly to (not necessarily vocal) stage sound and its architectural value. I am using them together, with a slash in between, in order to emphasize a continuum of the oral and aural performance in the parallel exercise of libidinal vocality and abstract sound structuring that is essential for a semiosis of sound in theatre. This continuum is corroborated by the concepts of hieroglyphic sign and an aesthetics of atmosphere examined in the article.
2. Euripides’ *The Phoenician Women*, directed by Paolo Magelli, a production of the Theatre Marin Držić, Dubrovnik, performed at the 1988 MESS festival in Sarajevo.
3. Roger Désormière’s score, a twenty-one minute mixture of short pieces of music, vocalizations and sound effects (held at the Audiovisual Department of the Bibliothèque nationale de France) features cathedral bells, echoing footsteps, metronomes running at different speeds and intensities, voices and whispers, wind and thunder, percussive ‘factory’ noise, and even, a novelty of the time, *ondes martenot* sound.

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## Abstract

Materiality of the sign/sound in theatre appears when various sensory materials remain on the side of the signifier, not trying to reach the signified but energetically pulsating from the stage instead. The semiotics of sound would benefit from exploring the process where the theatrical sign or sound is caught naked in its flight between deliverance and reception, not yet clothed in its signifying dress. Such a semiotics follows oral/aural signs becoming other signs in the area where the senses signify. I suggest that voice and stage sound/noise figure as catalysts of an intermedial flux between sensual, visual, kinetic, and architectural elements of performance, marking

a legacy of the avant-garde recognition of the materiality of sound. I demonstrate this using Artaud's concept of a hieroglyphic idiom as the "expression in space [in which] objects themselves begin to speak through the collusion of objects, silences, shouts and rhythms," and through Boehme's aesthetics of atmospheres as the art of the set that creates a poetics/ *technè* of postdramatic theatre focused on orality/aurality.

**Keywords :** Signifying Materiality; Avant-Garde; Theatre; Voice and Sounds

## Résumé

Au théâtre, la matérialité du signe et du son émerge lorsque divers matériaux sensoriels demeurent du côté du signifiant, ne visent pas à atteindre un signifié, et s'offrent comme une pulsation émanant de la scène. Une sémiotique du son gagnerait à explorer le processus par lequel le signe ou le son est capturé à nu dans son passage entre émission et réception, pas encore recouvert par les effets du sens. Une telle sémiotique suit les signes auditifs dans leur devenir autres, là où les sens acquièrent une signification. Je suggère que la voix, de même des sons de la scène, servent de catalyseurs au sein d'un flux intermédial qui regroupe les éléments sensoriels, visuels, cinématiques et architecturaux propres à la performance. Il s'agit ici d'un héritage laissé par l'avant-garde et sa reconnaissance du rôle joué par la matérialité du son qui fait appel à Artaud et à son concept de langage hiéroglyphique, véritable "langage dans l'espace, langage de sons, de cris, de lumières, d'onomatopées [que] le théâtre [...] doit [...] organiser en faisant avec les personnages et les objets de véritables hiéroglyphes, et en se servant de leur symbolisme et de leurs correspondances par rapport à tous les organes et sur tous les plans" (*Le théâtre et son double* [146]); et à l'esthétique atmosphérique de Böhme comme art de la scène capable de créer une poétique/ *technè* propre au théâtre post-dramatique ciblé sur la dimension sonore.

**Mots-clés :** matérialité du signe; avant-garde; théâtre; voix et sons

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