

# “All the World’s a Stage”: Theatricality as a Key Concept in Cultural Studies

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## **Abstract:**

*In this paper, I present a broader interpretation of theatricality, which can be a useful basis for research in cultural studies. The reader is also provided a historical overview of the concept of theatricality. We are given some insight into Russian theoretician Nikolaj Evreinov’s theory of theatricality. Further on, I present an overview of the influence Evreinov’s ideas had on theatre studies. According to me, four aspects can be distilled from Evreinov’s concept of theatricality: that of the performance, that of the mise-en-scène, that of physicality, and that of perception.*

**Key words:** *theatricality; Nikolaj Evreinov; performance; mise-en-scène; physicality.*

The seventeenth century, just as the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, can be characterized as a period during which the prevailing symbolic order underwent a process of collapse. In the first case, the teaching of similarities lost its popular appeal, and gradually was replaced by the order of representation. In the second, it was that very order of representation that entered a state of crisis (see Foucault, 2002). While in the seventeenth century the metaphor of ‘*theatrum mundi*’ or ‘*theatrum vitae humanae*’ and a related new concept of theatre served as an answer to the crisis, at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century the introduction of the concept of theatricality – as well as the avant-garde theatre movements – fulfilled a similar purpose.

In Elizabethan England, professional public theatre emerged at a time when the teaching of similarities was no longer prevalent. The old rituals they were based on failed to work, or, if they still did, they were denounced either as pagan (as with the rites of May), as conscious deceit (as with exorcism rituals) or as superstition (as with the Eucharist). The underlying principle of ‘*significando causare*,’ rooted in the teaching of similarities, was no longer generally accepted.

In these turbulent times, a public theatre was established. It was open throughout the year and took place in special buildings located either on the other side of the river Thames in the south of the city, or beyond the city limits in the north. The new theatre had an ambivalent relationship to the old rituals. On the one hand, it broke away from them implicitly by asserting a very particular concept of theatre; explicitly, it took recourse to the old rituals by ridiculing and reviling them, or even by altering them in a particular manner. Shakespeare, for instance, transforms the ritual structure of the rites



of May in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; in *Twelfth Night* he makes fun of rituals of exorcism, which in *King Lear* he turns into a dramaturgical function. Webster in *The Duchess of Malfi* relates to charivari; he denounces its practices as instruments of power, of which individuals make use in order to push for their own, often insidious interests. They could hardly be misunderstood as meaningful community-building rites.

A new concept of theatre emerged in which the principle of 'significando causare' was superseded by that of 'agendo significare.' The actions on stage were to be received as signs – not, however, as signatures as in the teaching of similarities but in terms of the binary sign model as it was later elaborated by Descartes, the *Logique de Port Royal* or Leibniz.

This might lead us to conclude that the emergence of a professional public theatre paved the way for overcoming this crisis. Yet this conclusion holds true only to a certain extent. It does not take into account the devices through which Elizabethan theatre sought to create – on stage and in the minds of the spectators – the illusion of a fictive world. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play of the craftsmen presents a form of theatre unable to achieve this and therefore it does not live up to the standards of this new concept of theatre. Peter Quince's long prologue robs the spectators of any chance to get involved in the actions that follow. He reveals everything beforehand, "At the which let no man wonder" (Shakespeare, 2017).<sup>1</sup> In order to prevent any narrative illusion from emerging in the minds of the spectators, Wall confides in them "[t]hat I, one Snout by name, present a wall, / And such a wall; as I would have you think" (Shakespeare, 2017, V.1.155f.). Lion finds soothing words: "You Ladies, you, whose gentle hearts do fear" (Shakespeare, 2017, V.1.217.). Moon breaks character and declares frankly: "All that I have to say is to tell you that the lanthorn is the moon; I, the Man I' th' Moon; this thorn-bush, my thorn-bush, and this dog my dog" (Shakespeare, 2017, V.1.250–52). Thisbe, finally, rather politely says goodbye to the spectators in the play before she dies: "(Stabs herself) And farewell, friends; Thus Thisbe ends; Adieu, adieu, adieu. (Dies)" (Shakespeare, 2017, V.1.336–38). All of them exploit so excessively the medieval convention of directly addressing the audience that the difference between the actor and the character remains glaringly evident the entire time, so that no illusion of a fictive world can take shape. It is small wonder that the spectators therefore respond with ironic comments that relate to these devices:

Demetrius: Well roar'd, Lion.

Theseus: Well run, Thisbe.

Hippolyta: Well shone, Moon. Truly, the moon shines with a good grace.

Shakespeare, 2017, *Ibid.*, V.1.257–60

While in this case the external communication between actor and spectator dominates, drawing the spectators' attention to the device of representation, the internal

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<sup>1</sup> The first quarto edition of the play dates to 1600.



communication between the characters is supposed to serve as guiding principle in professional theatre, allowing the spectators to focus their attention on the fictive world represented on stage. The actors are expected to act in a way that the spectators will be able to receive and understand their actions as those of the characters they are playing. The spectators should never become aware that they are watching the work of actors but follow the illusion of fictive characters. For the entire duration of the performance the spectators should take for granted the transformation of the actors into their respective characters.

Hamlet's address to the actors can be read along those lines:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus; but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. [...] Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor; suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for any thing so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it makes the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve [...].

Shakespeare, 2016, III.2.1–7, 14–32<sup>2</sup>

The theatre will function as a distancing model for the spectator only if the actor plays his role in a way that enables the spectator to focus solely on the character and not on the actor. Yet this approach is not to be mistaken for, say, David Garrick's psychological-realistic style of acting or that described in Diderot's *Paradox of Acting*.

It seems, therefore, that theatre did not, in fact, overcome the crisis. The crisis rather unfolded in an unforeseen manner and thus manifested itself in a very special way. The teaching of similarities had become obsolete, while the new concept of representation, although foreshadowed, had not yet established itself.

The actor playing a role appears to be participating in the magic of the old rituals and thus disguises the crisis of the teaching of similarities. At the same time, his roleplay reveals the latter as a delusion. For it launches a seemingly unsolvable game of deception between being and appearing, which lays open the ineffectiveness of the category of similarity. All that is in the world no longer seems to be connected to each other by way of similarity; on the contrary, the similarity is exposed as mere appearance that does not correspond to any being. On stage a boy plays the part of a girl; because of his girlish appearance spectators might take him to be a girl. In front of the spectators this girl

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<sup>2</sup> The first quarto edition of the play dates to 1603.



dresses up as a boy and declares that s/he will play this role – she, who ‘in reality’ is a boy. In this case, is roleplay disguise or transformation? Does it grant access to a person’s true self or does it obstruct such an understanding? And which self would that be – the roleplaying actor’s, the character’s or the perceiving and interpreting spectator’s?

The crisis of the teaching of similarities in Elizabethan England not only resulted in the foundation of professional public theatres where experts of transformation, disguise and deceit displayed their art. It also led to the publication of a flood of treatises dealing with self-knowledge, such as John Frith’s *A Mirror or Glasses to Know Thyself* (ca 1533), Sir John Davies’ *Nosce Teipsum* (1599) or the English translation of Philippe de Mornay’s *The True Knowledge of a Man’s Own Self* (1602).

The acting thus exposed the ambivalence surrounding the new concept of theatre with regard to the crisis of the teaching of similarities; on the one hand, it exacerbated the problem and, on the other, it veiled it; it added fuel to the fire while at the same time appearing to overcome it. It was this ambivalence that gave a new topicality to the old saying of *theatrum mundi* or *theatrum vitae humanae*. The old symbolic order of similarities was already crumbling and losing its meaning, while the new symbolic order of representation had not yet taken hold. Theatre was seen as a model for dealing with problems arising in the real world as well as in daily life, which might explain the proliferation of the theatre metaphor in the seventeenth century.

In the late nineteenth century, however, the model of representation that had developed over the course of the seventeenth century entered into a crisis of its own. The best-known formulations of this crisis in German literature came from Nietzsche and Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Nietzsche’s *Vierte Unzeitgemäße Betrachtung* (1876) and Hofmannsthal’s *Brief des Lord Chandos* (1902).

From our perspective, we can summarize the crisis in the following three sentences:

- 1) The available signs are not analogous to the objects they are meant to signify; i.e. they are unable to represent them adequately.
- 2) The link between signifier and signified is not stable, as was assumed before, but fundamentally unstable; signifiers can float freely and may be connected to different signifieds.
- 3) Since the ego has made the disturbing experience “that he is not even master in his own house” (Freud), the subject is unable to constitute a stable self; it decentres and dissolves into a sequence of momentary, fragmentary selves.

These three sentences describe the crisis of representation as a crisis of perception, knowledge, the subject and his/her identity.

This cultural crisis resulted not only in the emergence of different forms of avant-garde theatre that used this watershed moment as their point of departure, but concomitantly also led to the formulation of new theories of theatre. The Russian theoretician Nikolaj



Evreinov (1879–1953), for example, developed a theory of theatricality, which was meant to explain such crises as fundamental to all forms of culture.

In 1908 Evreinov introduced the term ‘teatral’nost’ (theatricality), which was already being used in other contexts, in a lecture entitled *Apologia for Theatricality*, held at the theatre of the eminent actress Vera Komissarzhevskaya (1864–1910) in St. Petersburg. Evreinov had received his law degree in 1901 with a dissertation on the history of corporal punishment in Russia, and entered the service of the Ministry of Railways as a lawyer, a job he quit in 1910. He gave the lecture at Komissarzhevskaya’s theatre in his part-time position as director succeeding Vsevolod E. Meyerhold, who had left the theatre in 1907, as his artistic principles could no longer be reconciled with Komissarzhevskaya’s. By that point, Evreinov was already rather experienced in matters of the theatre. He had founded his own theatre, the ‘Altes Theater’ or ‘Old Theatre,’ which, as the name suggests, placed a programmatic focus on updating past epochs of European theatre for the contemporary stage. Its first season (1907/08) centered on medieval French theatre, while the second one, which came about only in 1911/12, addressed the Spanish theatre of the Siglo de Oro. His work on the concept of theatricality also mostly fell into this period, which is reflected in his many writings. In our context, besides the *Apologia*, the two essays *The Theatricalization of Life* (1911) and *Theatrocracy* (1915) are of importance (see Lukanitschewa, 2013 and Kalisch, 2002).

These treatises don’t debate theatre as a specific art form—though this is also discussed—so much as they define the term theatricality as a fundamental human instinct. Evreinov writes in his essay “Theatrocracy:”

Beside the survival, sexual and other instincts, I have succeeded in discovering the instinct for transformation in human beings, i.e. the human instinct to respond to images received from outside with other images, which they have randomly created at the level of pre-aesthetic transformation of visible *nature*. After careful consideration, I have named this the instinct for theatricality (...) to be understood as the absolute law of creative metamorphosis of our perceived world.

Evreinov, 2017a, 14

The instinct for theatricality is here defined as the instinct for metamorphosis—*preobrashenie*—and for transformation—*transformacia*. Both terms evoke a very specific semantic field. *Preobrashenie* points towards the holiday of the transfiguration of Christ, which is celebrated on August 6 in the Orthodox Church. The term further serves as translation of the Greek *metamorphosis* and implies the corresponding range of meanings, which largely tally with those of the term *transformacia* (Kalisch, 2002, 144). The instinct for theatricality can thus indeed be described as the instinct for metamorphosis.

In his various writings Evreinov attempts to prove that this instinct is innate to human beings and therefore present in all cultures. As a result, his examples span



human history from “early man” and “indigenous peoples” to the—mostly European—religious, social and political history up to his own present. Based on a host of ethnological literature that was available at the beginning of the twentieth century, Evreinov draws the conclusion that the “early man” was virtually gripped by a “mania of metamorphosis.” This was evidenced by

[...] tattoos, piercings of the skin, cartilage and teeth in order to insert feathers, rings, pieces of crystal, metal or wood (pelele), knocking out of the incisors, pulling out of hair, deformities of the skull or the feet [...].

Evreinov, 1923a, 31

Not just the jewelry, which Evreinov first refers to, but the most important events, situations and stations in the life of the “early man” were determined by the desire “[t]o be someone other than yourself!” (Evreinov 2023a, 31)

Early man, just like man in late civilization, turned almost everything into a purely theatrical performance—the birth of the child and its education, hunting and marriage, war, tribunal and punishment, religious ritual and, finally, burial. His whole life consists of that (...). He theatricalizes life and it thus achieves its truest meaning: its metamorphosis into *his* life.

Evreinov, 2023a, 33

As he continues through human history via the history of the Greeks and Romans, during which “theatre (...) was at the forefront of public interest” and “dominated and ousted (...) all others” (quoted by Evreinov, 2017b, 18) as Karl Borinski, whom Evreinov quotes, asserts, Evreinov addresses the Church’s battle with “this dominant position of theatre:”

It eagerly wanted this dominant position in everyone’s lives for itself. But the idea of theatre achieved a decisive and incontestable victory at the beginning of this significant battle. The lot fell on the Christian ascetics to first express their contempt for martyrdom publicly—in the circus arena!—and the faithful sons of the Church had to first show themselves to the heathen world—as actors in this tragedy foisted on them!—, in a bloody public display. This is what the fatal debut of the Christian martyr looked like given that the ancient world lusted for circus games.

Of course such scenic performances did not cause the Church to develop a taste for the theatre and yet it had to structure its entire liturgy according to theatrical principles, whether it initially liked it or not.

Evreinov 2017b, 19

The “invasion of theatre into the liturgy” (Evreinov 2017b, 19) that Evreinov notes here is further made plausible with references to Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* and relevant studies of the historians Mikhail Reisner, Max Burckhardt and Karl Friedrich Tiander. In his above-quoted essay *The Theatricalization of Life* Evreinov expands his



perspective to include cultures outside of Europe. He claims that in China “the intensity of theatrical sentiment is so high that no banquet can be held without the participation of actors who offer the guests a true theatrical menu consisting of fifty to sixty plays” (Evreinov, 1923a, 36). For the Indian cultures he mentions as an example the performances of the great epics in Pondicherry, “which go on for four to seven consecutive nights” without the five to six thousand spectators leaving the venue in between, because, as Evreinov or his source assumes, they “have no strength left to leave this place of greatest temptation and go home” (Evreinov, 1923a, 36).

In the remainder of the essay, Evreinov returns to European cultural and social history. He mentions the Spanish and French cultures of the seventeenth and eighteenth century respectively as particularly pertinent examples for the almost comprehensive theatricalization of life. He thus claims that in Spain literally

[...] everything turned into theatre: an inquisitional trial with masked judges and hellish instruments of torture, grandiose burnings of heretics [...]; where even the crude trade of the butcher became a beautiful performance of bullfighting.

Evreinov, 1923a, 38

To Evreinov, courtly life in France appears thoroughly theatricalized—to an extent that in his opinion

[...] the rivalry between real life and life on stage went so far that nobody could tell which of the two was more theatrical. Here and there you relied on the most fustian, rehearsed phrases, on the camp refinement of bows, smiles and gestures. Here and there you wore costumes for the purpose of self-exhibition that were as decorative as rooms, castles and gardens. Here and there you saw a lot of white and red make-up. Beauty patches, lorgnons and very few ‘real’ faces (...). Here and there you wore incredible wigs (...) and, finally, here and there you had a culture of courtesy that produced creatures of a wholly different nature from those created by God.

Evreinov, 1923a, 39

Interestingly, Evreinov sees the French Revolution as an event that was to draw awareness to “the theatrical affectation of this hierarchy of life” (Evreinov, 1923a, 39) without, however, breaking with the principle of theatricality itself. Instead, he defines it as a form of theatrical egalitarianism. It

[...] merely changed the production and exchanged roles by bringing everyone together on a scenic common ground: to depict each other as equals. In order to generate a purely theatrical egalitarianism they first tackled the costumes: the painter David painted the costume of the ‘free citizen,’ the actor Talma adapted it for the stage and the people (...) got changed. The wigs were burned, the pigtails were chopped off and you started greeting each other with a clenched nodding of the head that alluded to those who had died on the guillotine. The passion for theatricality did not even spare the corpses of the beheaded. They were placed in painterly compositions: in poses of



conversation, as if flirting with each other, in pathetic and pornographic poses. They played with them, sang to them, danced, laughed and made fun of the absurd appearance of these actors who knew to play their ridiculous roles so very badly. (...) In short, the Great Revolution was as political as it was theatrical.

Evreinov, 1923a, 39

The instinct for theatricality not only dominates religious, social and political life but also affects all other cultural aspects—even including economics. Only theatrocracy could explain

[...] the tremendous success of advertising, the specific phenomenon of our epoch, the essence of capitalist society, which characterizes the entire modern order so garishly (...). That the entire miracle of advertising, which serves as justification for spending 100,000,000 Francs in France and several hundred million dollars in the United States of America, that their whole secret, which now embarrasses dozens of honorable scientists, lies in the simple art of a printed *mise-en-scène* of the advertised object, in other words—in applying elements of *theatrical* seduction, of demonstrative illustrations down to the garish, compressed, powerfully animated language of advertising. For only the theatrical form holds the *optimum power to seduce* the masses.

Evreinov, 2017b, 27

From “early man’s” jewelry to the advertising strategies of contemporary capitalism, Evreinov seeks to prove that the instinct for theatricality has existed in all human beings at all times and in all cultures as the instinct for metamorphosis out of which ultimately all cultural creativity arises. The point is not to create a “counter world” to the “real” world via theatricality. Rather, Evreinov sees all cultural manifestations as being enabled and made possible through the instinct for theatricality. For this instinct aimed to turn the conditions found in one’s—initially natural—surroundings into cultural creations or to contrast existing cultural creations with others that spring from one’s imagination. Culture was ultimately to be seen as a product of the instinct for theatricality. Therefore, the term theatricality must advance to the single-most important keyword of cultural studies. Without it the process of permanent change in the most diverse of cultures could hardly be explained.

Nikolai Evreinov’s formulation in his article *Apologia teatral’nosti* (1908; *Apologia of Theatricality*; Evreinov, 1923b) embraces a concept of theatre which defines theatricality outside the frame and scope of theatre as an art form or even theatre as a social institution. In order to be able to construct a precise and comprehensive definition, Evreinov explored highly diverse disciplines such as sociology, ethology, history of criminal justice, political and cultural history and psychology. His aim was to reveal the workings and basic function of theatricality in each of these fields and in this respect, he might be regarded as a precursor to today’s scholars of cultural studies. Evreinov’s efforts led him to define theatricality as a pre-aesthetic instinct. This





definition might appear too broad and too general to allow any useful application. Still, it must be emphasized that Evreinov was the first to recognize and pose the problem of how, in what respect, and to what extent the concept of theatre can be identified and applied as a cultural model beyond a purely metaphorical use of the term.

Attempts to trace back the origins of culture to a single source—here the instinct for theatricality—are, however, always subject to accusations of simplification. At the same time, they are frequently debated anew, mostly in order to prove that they are unsuitable as a general explanation.

In this respect, Evreinov's theory is an exception. Though he was occasionally criticized for simplifying the discussion in Russia before the October Revolution, his theory was hotly debated. After the Revolution, however, Evreinov still emerged as a highly successful director, evidenced impressively by his mass production *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, which took place on the original site in Petrograd on the third anniversary of the October Revolution on November 8, 1920, and attracted 160,000 spectators.<sup>3</sup> Yet he did not develop his theory of theatricality further. It was forgotten or intentionally disregarded even before his emigration to Paris (1925).

Later theories that revolve around the concept of theatricality partly don't even mention Evreinov. The sociologist Erving Goffmann's book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which in its German translation bears the apt title *Wir alle spielen Theater* (literally We are all playing theatre, meaning All the world's a stage), was published in 1956, i.e. three years after Evreinov's death in Paris, and explains daily interactions with recourse to the theatre metaphor without mentioning Evreinov's works (see Burns, 1972). However, the concept of theatricality fundamentally differs from the theatre metaphor insofar as it assumes that the instinct for metamorphosis is an anthropological given, or it defines it as such. A wider discussion of Evreinov's theory as well as attempts to productively develop his concept of theatricality further only took place from the 1990s onwards.<sup>4</sup>

In the field of theatre studies, it was only in the 1970s that discussion on theatricality was taken up again – without reference to Evreinov however. In her pioneering study, *Theatricality* (1972), Elisabeth Burns proceeds from the assumption that the concept of theatre is historically and culturally determined. Therefore, she argues, theatricality cannot be defined as a particular mode of behaviour or expression, for it does not depend on “degrees of demonstrativeness” (Burns, 1972, 2). Instead, Burns suggests, it is “determined by a particular viewpoint” and, accordingly, she defines it as “a mode of perception” (Burns, 1972, 13). It is the particular perspective which determines whether

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<sup>3</sup> For further reading on the performance see, amongst others, Dalügge, 2016, 329–384, and E. Fischer-Lichte, 2005, 97–121.

<sup>4</sup> See here Lukanitschewa, 2013 and Kalisch, 2002 as well as the section entitled ‘Theatricality’ (guest ed. E. Fischer-Lichte) in *Theatre Research International* (Fischer-Lichte guest ed, 1995); Fischer-Lichte (ed.), 2001; Münz, 1998; Pearson, 1987; Pearson, 1992; Schramm, 1995.



a situation will be regarded as theatrical or non-theatrical. By modifying Goffman's concept of framing and referring to Brecht's technique of making gestures quotable, Burns strives to delineate the factors that determine and shape the mode of perception which she locates in social conventions. Insofar as these conventions are not developed within the theatre alone but also in culture in general, she proposes a history of theatre which is to be realized as a history of perception and its social and cultural conditions.

Burns must be given credit for having shown a viable way of explaining theatricality as the common denominator of theatre and culture, or as the focus in which both intersect and coincide, in her definition of it as a mode of perception.

Later scholars who deal with the question of theatricality agree, in principle, with Burns inasmuch as she insists on the historicity and cultural determination of the concept of theatre. However, they do not all share her conclusions. Joachim Fiebach (1978), for example, refers to Brecht's *Straßenszene* (Street scene) to argue that the definition of theatricality must be based on the consideration that it is not only a mode of perception but also a mode of behaviour and expression.

In his *Arbeitsjournal* (6 December 1940) Brecht writes:

As the result of the explorations undertaken in the STREET SCENE, one should describe all other kinds of similar everyday theatre; discover every moment where theatre is part of life, in the world of erotica, business, politics, law, religion, and so on. One should study the theatrical element in customs and rites; I've already worked a little on the fascist theatricalization of politics but alongside this, one should also study the everyday theatre that the individual performs with no audience, the secret "play". In this way, one would encompass the most elemental need for aesthetic expression.

Brecht, 1973, 204

Given the premise that the concept of theatre is historically and culturally determined on the one hand, and taking Brecht's ideas on everyday theatre, on the other, Fiebach concludes that there can be no single criterion for a general definition of theatricality beyond the fact that it is a process of production whose product is "consumed" and which vanishes within the process of being produced. In order to comprehend and define theatricality as a mode of behaviour and expression, it must be described and analysed in terms of a particular epoch in a given culture. For, obviously, no mode of behaviour and expression can be defined as theatrical *per se*. Accordingly, in *Die Toten als die Macht der Lebenden* (The Dead as the Power of the Living) (1986), Fiebach embarks on a project to define and analyse theatricality in different epochs of different African cultures as a particular mode of communication which foregrounds the body as the main means of presenting a role and self-presentation.

The concept of theatricality in the 1970s also gained a certain prominence in theatre semiotics, despite its very different contexts and functions. At the risk of oversimplification, two principle directions can be identified which, in a way, can be related to the concepts put forward by Evreinov, although they do not refer to him directly. In



his *Dictionnaire du théâtre* Patrice Pavis compiles definitions which aim to represent “les éléments indispensables à tout phénomène théâtral” (Brecht, 1973, 397). Pavis proceeds from a narrow, purely aesthetic concept of theatre. Consequently, theatricality is defined as “ce qui, dans la représentation ou dans le texte dramatique, est spécifiquement théâtral” (Brecht, 1973, 395) or: “la théâtralité s’oppose à la littérature, au théâtre du texte, aux moyens écrits, aux dialogues et même parfois à la narrative et à la ‘dramaticité’ d’une fable logiquement construite” (Brecht, 1973, 396). Since these definitions are based on the narrow concept of theatre as an art form only, they may for the purpose of this discussion, be left aside.

In *The Semiotics of Theatre* I have defined theatricality by referring to the particular relationship between the signs brought forth by and the semiotic processes being performed within different cultural systems, on the one hand, and theatrical signs and sign processes, on the other. I have argued that in a certain sense, theatre involves the “doubling up” of the culture in which it is played: the signs engendered by theatre denote the signs produced by the corresponding cultural systems. Theatrical signs are therefore always signs of signs.

This has two important consequences. First, since theatre produces signs using heterogeneous material which can, in principle, be identical to the material of any cultural system, the human being and its total environment may function as theatrical signs in their specific material quality. Secondly, however, whilst human beings and the objects of their environment in every culture always exist in certain communicative, practical and situative contexts which do not permit a human being to be replaced by another or by an object at random or vice versa, mobility is the prevailing feature in the case of the human body and the objects from its surroundings which are used as theatrical signs. Here, a human body can indeed be replaced by another body or even an object, and an object can be replaced by another random object or a human body because in their capacity as theatrical signs, they can signify one another. The material existence of the human body is not of interest to the theatre because of its uniqueness nor its specific functionality alone, but foremost in terms of its ability to be used as sign of sign.

Accordingly, theatricality may be defined as a particular mode of using signs or as a particular kind of semiotic process in which particular signs (human beings and objects of their environment) are employed as signs of signs – by their producers, or their recipients. Thus, a shift of the dominance within the semiotic functions determine when theatricality appears.

Helmar Schramm has drawn some conclusions which open up new perspectives on the use and function of theatricality at the intersection of theatre and cultural studies. In *Preliminary Studies Towards a History of the Concept of Theatre* (1990) (see Schramm, 1990) he sets out to construct three different frames of reference to investigate historical material on the concept of theatre: 1) theatre as a metaphorical model; 2) theatre as a rhetoric medium; 3) theatre as an autonomous art. Schramm underlines that such frames



of reference are not to be applied in succession, as for example, 1) the seventeenth century, 2) the eighteenth century and 3) the nineteenth century; rather all three are often found to co-exist, overlap, compete or even contradict each other in writings of the same period, depending on the kind of discourse dealing with theatre. His exploration and evaluation of a huge body of thoroughly diverse and multifaceted historic material leads to the conclusion that theatricality may be understood and defined simply as an element functioning in different discourses within a range of disciplines that are devoted to cultural studies such as sociology, ethnology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, the historical sciences, art history, cultural semiotics and so on, as well as theatre studies. The notion of theatricality depends on the respective discourse as to what kinds of cultural, social, political events and processes are regarded and addressed as theatrical and what kinds of arguments are used to show the existence and functioning of theatricality in everyday life.

Therefore, it seems a potentially fruitful approach to examine the use, function and meaning of “theatre” in different discourses when dealing with the relationship of theatre history (or theatre studies in general) to other disciplines and with the circulation of terms, concepts, theories and methods between them.

To conclude: Four aspects that seek to flesh out and at the same time modify Evreinov’s concept of theatricality can be distilled from these theories:

- that of the *performance*, which is defined as the process of representation through body and voice before physically present spectators and comprises the ambivalent interplay of all factors involved;
- that of the *mise-en-scène*, which is defined as the specific mode of the use of materials and signs in the production;
- that of *physicality*, which results from factors pertaining to the representation and the material;
- that of *perception*, which refers to the others, to the audience members, the spectators and their role and perspective as observers.

Since a performance comes into being as the interplay of the other three aspects mentioned, theatricality could also be defined as the specific *mise-en-scène* of bodies with regard to a particular form of perception, which on the one hand is performed, but can, on the other, also be used in texts, images, film and other media—as, for example, in advertising, as Evreinov points out. In this respect comparable to Hellmuth Plessner’s hypothesis of self-dissociation, of establishing distance from oneself (see Plessner, 1982), theatricality could also be understood as an anthropological condition that calls for metamorphosis: human beings face themselves/another in order to compose an image of themselves as another, which they can then reflect on through the eyes of another or see reflected in the eyes of another. Theatricality therefore means a process of metamorphosis that always simultaneously aims at the perception of one’s self through others.



One more aspect of Evreinov's concept of theatricality is that it lays open transformation as a fundamental principle of culture. Unlike evolutionary theory, which highlights transformation in a particular direction—from 'lower' organisms to higher and more complex ones—, the concept of theatricality focuses on cultural processes of transformation that are initiated and carried out by human beings. Accordingly, they cannot be described and defined as quasi-natural processes of development but represent creative processes that aim to deliberately change given circumstances.

That is to say that any symbolic order, once established, will necessarily culminate in a crisis. For the instinct for metamorphosis proves to be decisive for all cultures, since it is an anthropological given. According to the theory of theatricality, there will always be transformations – however, it remains unpredictable which ones will take place, what turns they will take and what kinds of crises they will lead up to. While the metaphors of 'theatrum mundi' and 'theatrum vitae humanae' successfully served the purpose of dealing with the crisis of the teaching of similarities, the concept of theatricality was intended to provide an explanation for the inevitable fact that all symbolic orders ultimately end in crisis, since human beings are always in need of transformation.

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