

1. Drama and the dramatic

1.1. A critical summary of existing theories

1.1.1. The continuing influence of normative and deductive theories of drama

Our efforts to put forward a descriptive and communicative poetics for a historically and typologically extremely diverse corpus of dramatic texts have not been greatly assisted by previous theoretical discussions of the dramatic genre, which all tend to elevate a historically specific form to an absolute norm, thereby narrowing the concept of 'drama' in a most decisive way.¹ This was already true of Aristotle's theory of drama. Although he derived his theoretical categories epagogically from the text corpus of Greek tragedies and although it was not his intention to establish a norm, his description of drama as the 'imitation of an action' in speech, involving closed structures of time and space and a particular set of characters, not to mention his concepts of catharsis and hamartia, have, since the Renaissance at least, been considered as the norm for dramatic texts.² The same is true of the dramatic theories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which, based on the classical tragedy, European Renaissance drama and the plays of German and French classicism, identified conflict as the essence of the dramatic (G. W. F. Hegel, F. Brunetière, W. Archer *et alii*). Others used Hegel's subject–object dialectic as a point of departure to define drama as a synthesis of epic objectivity and lyric subjectivity (G. W. F. Hegel, F. W. Schelling, F. Th. Vischer *et alii*) and allocated to it the temporal dimension of future (Jean Paul, F. Th. Vischer, G. Freytag *et alii*) or the distinctive quality of suspense (E. Staiger).

This deductive and historically one-sided way of thinking in triadic generic systems continues to exert considerable influence on academic teaching and research. The epigonical and normative poetic theories of drama that have resulted from this have been undermined by a number of influential dramaturgical experiments in the course of the twentieth century (such as the Bauhaus notion of abstract theatre, Antonin Artaud's 'theatre of cruelty', Brecht's epic theatre, the 'theatre of the absurd', the multifarious forms of street-theatre and happenings, the experimental dramas of Peter Handke or Robert Wilson) and by the increased interest in

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historically varied and even non-European theatrical traditions³ to such an extent that they can only be taken seriously if one chooses to ignore these phenomena.

1.1.2. The structuralist deficit

The continuing influence of this normative and deductive tradition on contemporary research is all the more detrimental in that it has only recently been compensated for by a few initial attempts to put forward a descriptive, structuralist theory of dramatic texts, such as those that have already been applied to narrative and lyric texts. The reasons for this are both scholastic and methodological.

First, the multimedial unity of the dramatic text was disrupted by the institutionalised separation of research into literary and theatre studies. The consequence of this was a strong bias towards either the printed page or its presentation on stage. Secondly, important new developments in literary analysis, such as Russian formalism and New Criticism, with their preoccupation with language theory, have neglected a genre whose expressive qualities are not exclusively verbal – namely drama.⁴

There has been decisive progress in two other areas, however: first, in historical poetics, which has counteracted the prevailing tendency to define particular historical forms as normative absolutes, and secondly, in semiotic analysis, which interprets the dramatic text as a complex verbal, visual and acoustic supersign activating various sociocultural codes.⁵ We have attempted, therefore, to integrate the results reached in these areas into the present study.

1.2. Dramatic speech situation and dialogue

1.2.1. Narrative versus dramatic speech

Of the qualities that enable us to distinguish narrative from dramatic texts, one of the historically most consistent may be defined on the level of the 'speech situation'⁶ as the communicative relationship between author and receiver. The beginnings of a text typology of this kind may be found in the third book of Plato's *Republic*, which draws a distinction between 'report' and 'representation' according to whether the poet is speaking himself, or whether it is the characters who are allowed to speak. From this 'speech criterion' he is then able to propose the following method of classification, namely,

that there is one kind of poetry and tale-telling which works wholly through imitation, . . . tragedy and comedy; and another which employs the recital of the

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poet himself, best exemplified . . . in the dithyramb; and there is again that which employs both, in epic poetry . . .⁷

Thus, dramatic texts may be distinguished from epic or narrative texts in that they are consistently restricted to the representative mode, the poet never allowing himself to speak directly. Of course, in the light of recent narrative theory, one might object that even in narrative texts it is not the author himself who is speaking, but a fictional narrator created by him. Nonetheless, this objection does not detract from the fundamental importance of this categorical distinction. For, whilst the receiver of a dramatic text feels directly confronted with the characters represented, in narrative texts they are mediated by a more or less concrete narrator figure.

1.2.2. A communication model for narrative and dramatic texts

The diagrams of the communication models for dramatic and narrative texts included in this section should help to clarify this distinction.

a) Narrative texts:



This model classifies the sender and receiver positions according to the various superimposed semiotic levels. S4 stands for the actual author in his socio-literary role as the producer of the work, S3 for the 'ideal' author implied in the text as the subject of the whole work, S2 for the fictional narrator whose role in the work is formulated as the narrative medium, S/R1 for the fictional characters communicating with each other through dialogue, R2 for the fictional addressee of S2, R3 for the implied 'ideal' receiver of the whole work, and R4 for the actual reader – that is, not only the reader envisaged by the author, but also other, later ones.⁸ The dark-coloured area represents the 'internal communication system' (L1 = level 1) of the text, the light-coloured area the 'mediating communication system' (L2) and the superimposed levels L3 and L4 the 'external communication system', first in idealised form, then in its real form. Depending on the particular 'narrative situation' (F. Stanzel), 'authorial narrative' requires that positions S2 and R2 be occupied by fully independent characters, 'I-narrative' requires that S2 should be occupied by one of the characters that function on L1, and 'personal narrative' that positions S2 and R2 should fade out into a transparent, disembodied medium of narration. In this respect there is a certain similarity between personal narrative and the dramatic communication model.⁹

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b) Dramatic texts:



The difference between the two models¹⁰ may be seen in the fact that, in dramatic texts, positions S2 and R2 are left vacant, thereby eliminating the mediating communication system. This 'loss' of communicative potential in comparison to narrative texts is compensated for in two ways, however. First, dramatic texts have access to non-verbal codes and channels which are able, in part, to take on the communicative functions of S2 and R2, and secondly, aspects of the narrative function may be transferred to the internal communication system – for example by means of the type of questions and answers from S/R1 designed to inform the audience more than the protagonists do themselves. Having already established (in our historical analysis of the narrative communication model) that the modern form of personal narrative reflects a reduction of the mediating communication system and thus an approximation of narrative to drama we must now, in a similar way, qualify the dramatic model in the face of drama's tendency to produce 'epic' structures (see below, 3.6.). These include, for example, the chorus in classical tragedy, the allegorical characters in medieval morality plays interpreting their own roles to the audience with homiletic directness, the explanatory and interpretative functions of 'para-texts' (R. Ingarden) in the form of introductions, prefaces or extended stage-directions, and, finally, the introduction of commentator or producer figures in modern 'epic dramas'. Nonetheless, the creation of a mediating communication system in drama is always interpreted as a deviation from the normal model of dramatic presentation. As a fundamental principle, then, this model retains its validity and heuristic value.

1.2.3. The absolute nature of dramatic texts

The absence of a mediating communication system – resulting in the unmediated overlapping of the internal and external communication systems – is what conditions the 'absolute nature' of the dramatic text with regard to both author and audience, and it has been manifested on stage most accurately in the realist convention of the so-called 'fourth wall' (see below, 2.2.1.).

It is only as a whole that a drama belongs to the author and this link is not an essential component of its existence as a dramatic work. A drama exhibits the same absolute quality with regard to the spectator. A dramatic utterance is not addressed to the spectator any more than it is a statement by the author.¹¹

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The absolute autonomy of drama that Szondi talks about does, of course, not really exist. It is fictional, and may therefore be broken at various times – by an aside, a monologue *ad spectatores* or by commentary from the chorus, for example – causing alienation and the awareness of its fictionality. Here, too, it is the disruption of the communication model by this kind of apparent ‘short-circuit’ of levels L1 and L3/4 which underlines the model’s significance.

1.2.4. The time–space structures of narrative and dramatic texts

In the absence of the mediating, fictional narrator (S2) from dramatic texts, the time–space continuum associated with it – i.e. the one which, in narrative texts, spans the time–space continuum of the world presented in the narrative – does not apply. In narrative texts, the variability of these two deictic systems of reference allows all sorts of arbitrary rearrangements of time–space relationships to be made, especially in the chronology of the narrative, topographical juxtapositions, the stretching and shrinking of narrative time, and the extension or restriction of locale. Dramatic texts, on the other hand, lack the fictional narrator as an overriding point of orientation. Here, it is therefore the time–space continuum of the plot alone that determines the progress of the text within the individual scenic units. Seen from the perspective of the implied author (S3), it is only the act of choosing the various scenic units with their respective time–space proportions and relationships towards the plot as a whole that is of intentional and communicative relevance – whereas the invariable continuity and homogeneity of time and space within the chosen scenic unit is a condition of the medium of drama, and thus, finally, of the dramatic communication model (see below, ch. 7).

At the same time, the elimination of the mediating communication system in dramatic texts creates a sense of immediacy in the action on stage in the way it enables both the dramatic text and its reception process to take place simultaneously. Conversely, in narrative texts the time-scale of the narrative is eclipsed by the time-scale of the narration process, thus distancing the narrative into the past. This temporal immediacy of dramatic presentation is *one* of the prerequisites for its physical enactment on stage.

1.2.5. Dialogue in dramatic and narrative texts

Whilst the narrator’s discourse and that of the fictional characters quoted by the narrator overlap in narrative texts, the verbal utterances produced in the course of the multimedial enactment of a dramatic text are reduced to the mono- or dialogical speeches of the dramatic figures. This limitation

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is the second key precondition that is indispensable for the enactment of drama on stage. In other words, the characters are allowed to present themselves directly in their role as speakers. It is therefore the figures' speech, and, above all, their dialogical speech, which constitutes the predominant verbal matrix used in dramatic texts – something that was scarcely even acknowledged in Aristotle's essentially plot-orientated poetics, and that was all but ignored until the dramatic theories of A. W. Schlegel and Hegel gave it the recognition it deserved. In 'lyric' and narrative texts, dialogue is but one of a number of optional formal elements. In drama it is the fundamental mode of presentation.¹² In it, the relationship between plot and dialogue is a dialectical one, since the dramatic dialogue is, in Pirandello's words, an *azione parlata* or spoken action.¹³ Since dramatic dialogue is spoken action, each individual dramatic utterance does not just consist in its propositional expressive content alone, but also in the way it is itself the execution of an act – whether in the form of a promise, a threat or an act of persuasion etc. Therefore, the performative aspect described by speech-act theory is always present in dramatic dialogue. Even at the most general level this condition of the performative aspect always applies:

There is something which is at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering.¹⁴

As a speech-act, the dramatic speech constitutes its own particular speech situation. This is in contrast to dialogue in narrative texts, in which the fictional speech situation can be constituted by the narrator's report; and unlike philosophical dialogue, for example, dramatic speech is bound to that particular situation. This has been pointed out emphatically by the dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt:

If dialogue has to arise out of a situation, it has to lead to a situation, to another one, certainly. Dramatic dialogue occasions forms of action and endurance, a new situation, out of which a new dialogue arises, etc.¹⁵

1.3. Drama as a multimedial form of presentation

1.3.1. The dramatic text as a scenically enacted text

The criteria outlined in the previous sections, namely the omission of the mediating communication system and performative speech, are indispensable, though in themselves still rather inadequate preconditions for a model of dramatic communication. Taken on their own, these criteria would force us to identify as dramatic texts such historical forms as, for example, the Victorian 'dramatic monologue' of Tennyson and Browning¹⁶ or novels written entirely in dialogue form. There is, however,

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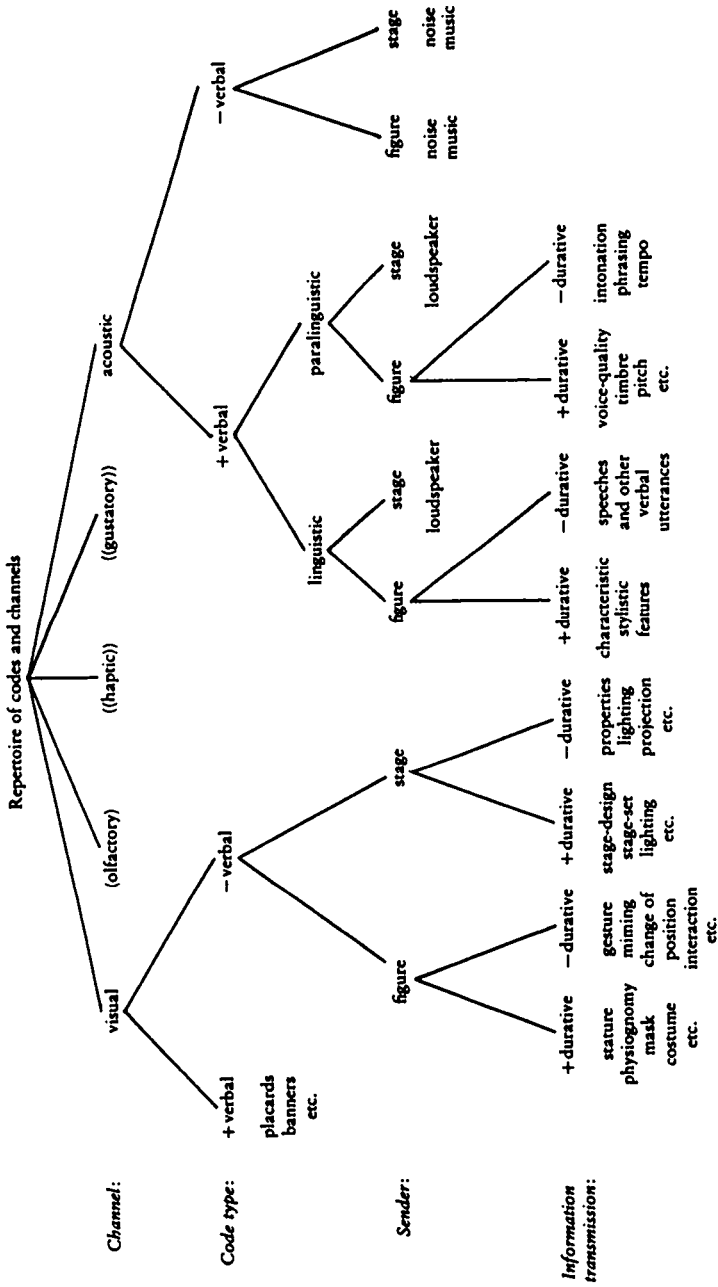
one criterion which enables us to distinguish between such literary forms and drama: the multimedial nature of dramatic text presentation. As a 'performed' text, drama, in contrast to purely literary texts, makes use not only of verbal, but also of acoustic and visual codes. It is a synaesthetic text.¹⁷ This important criterion provides the starting point for any semiotic analysis of drama. Similarly, S. Jansen distinguishes between the *plan textuel* and the *plan scénique* and M. Pagnini between *complesso scritturale* and *complesso operativo*.¹⁸ Both definitions correctly regard the dramatic text as the scenically enacted text, one of whose components is the verbally manifested text. These two levels may be distinguished by their differing degrees of stability and/or variability, for whilst the verbally manifested text is normally fixed orthographically, and thus remains historically more or less stable, the scenic component of the stage enactment is variable – a fact clearly demonstrated in modern productions of the classics, even in those that do not alter the written text in any significant way.

The scenic level itself may be divided into two components by implementing the same criterion of stability versus variability. First, there are those elements of the stage enactment which are either explicitly demanded by the literary text, or at least clearly implied by it, and secondly, there are those which are the 'ingredients' added by the production. Such ingredients are always present, even in the most 'authentic' productions, since the very physical presence of the multimedial text always adds a surplus of information to the literary text. This dual-layered aspect of dramatic texts has resulted in two often strongly diverging types of interpretation: the purely literary interpretations of the verbally fixed text substrata, and the various productions and enactments of the texts on stage.

1.3.2. The repertoire of codes and channels

Dramatic texts have the potential to activate all channels of the human senses. Over the centuries, of course, dramatic productions have been restricted almost exclusively to texts employing acoustic and visual codes alone. Exceptions to this are more recent developments such as happenings or ritualist theatre, which also experiment with haptic (physical contact between actors and audience), olfactory and even gustatory effects.¹⁹

The dominant acoustic sign system is usually language, but this may be accompanied or replaced by non-verbal acoustic codes such as realistic noises, conventionalised sound effects (bells, thunder etc.) and music. Similarly, the visual component of the supersign 'dramatic text' presents itself as a structured complex of individual visual codes. The most impor-



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tant of these are the stature and physiognomy of the actors, choreography and the grouping of characters, mime and gesture, mask, costume and properties, the size and form of the stage itself, the set and, finally, lighting.²⁰ This set of components is integrated into the dramatic text as a system of interdependent structural elements. The relationships that exist between these various components will be the subject of the following paragraphs.

We have presented, in the form of a diagram, the repertoire of the codes and channels that are employed in dramatic texts (see diagram, p. 8). Our first classification criterion has been derived from the structure of human sensual perception – that is, from the five senses as channels for conveying information. As we remarked above, the vast majority of dramatic texts has exhibited a clear preference for the visual and acoustic channels, whilst the remaining senses of smell, touch and taste have been activated extremely sporadically, and then almost exclusively in the modern theatre of the avant-garde. An example of the use of touch was given in *Paradise Now* (1968) by the ‘living theatre’ of Julian and Judith Beck, in which the audience was invited to join the actors for the great love-scene and then to be carried into the street on the actors’ shoulders. Since these channels are activated so rarely, however, they have been placed in brackets in the diagram, and further classification of information mediated by them has been omitted.

The second classification criterion is the type of code used. Of particular semiotic relevance in this context is the distinction between verbal and non-verbal codes and the further subdivision of the verbal codes into linguistic and paralinguistic codes. Generally speaking, the linguistic code is a ‘symbolic code’, whose signs are based on an arbitrary set of conventions. This means that the relationship between the sign and the signified object is unmotivated. At the same time, however, the majority of signs belonging to the paralinguistic and non-verbal codes are either ‘indices’ that are related to the signified object physically or contiguously or ‘icons’ which represent the signified object by being similar to it.²¹

Thus, within the supersign of the dramatic text, codes of varying degrees of standardisation operate together. Whilst the linguistic code represents a strictly standardised system of rules that guarantees a relatively high level of explicitness in the decoding process, the non-verbal indices and icons are much more ambiguous. As a result, this frequently leads to marked differences of interpretation.²²

In the external communication system, however, this horizontal juxtaposition of the various code-types is transformed into a vertically arranged hierarchy. The text appears as an iconic supersign, within which even the transmission of symbolic and indexical signs has been iconised into a fictional model of real communication. This iconic supersign is itself

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determined by comprehensive secondary codes – i.e. the numerous literary and dramatic conventions and genres – and is transmitted by the distributive channels open to dramatic texts. It has not been possible to show this process directly on our diagram, simply because it takes place on a more comprehensive plane.

The third classification criterion derives from the fictional sender of information. Put rather simply, we distinguish between character and non-character – i.e. the stage. Thus, costume is related to character as the properties are to the stage, for example. However, shifts in these relationships may occur, as a result of which a property might be so strongly associated with a particular character that it becomes a part of his or her costume, or, conversely – as in a masquerade or travesty – a character might become so far removed from his or her costume that it becomes a property.²³

Our final classification criterion refers to the characteristics that apply to the various ways of transmitting information. In this context, we distinguish between durative and non-durative elements, according to whether the same single piece of information is being transmitted over an extended period of time or whether new pieces of information are continually being transmitted. The difference is merely relative, however, and the decision to allocate a particular sign to one or another of these categories depends on the length of the observation period. Thus, the transmission of information by the set within a closed scenic context is generally durative, whereas in the course of the text as a whole, with set-changes between scenes and/or acts, it is generally non-durative. The structuring of this part of our diagram was therefore based on relative values and general tendencies alone and would have to be revised before it could apply to certain individual texts or historical text-types. In a large number of modern texts, for example, developments in stage technology have made it possible for the set, lighting and even stage-design to change from durative to non-durative.

Listing these criteria has underlined and clarified our thesis that the multimedial dramatic text contains more information than the literary text. Not even the purely verbal component of the supersign 'dramatic text' can be determined from the orthographically fixed text alone, since there are a number of unpredictable, paralinguistic variables of both a durative – such as the voice-quality of the particular actor – and non-durative kind – such as intonation, tempo and the use of pauses etc. – which are introduced into the oral enactment of the text by the actor. As far as non-verbal, acoustic and visual codes are concerned, this information differential is generally even greater, for even the most detailed description of a dramatic figure, his actions and sphere of action must, of necessity, be subordinate to the physical presence, mimetic skills and