

THEATRICAL ICONOGRAPHY/
ICONOLOGY: THE ICONIC SIGN
AND ITS REFERENT

I

It has become banal to say that the object of the art of theatre, its artifact, is particularly fragile, that a theatrical performance—necessarily limited in time and not reproducible—is an ephemeral phenomenon. And yet it is a fact that the evanescence of the theatre arts explains better than any other circumstance the universality and the importance of iconography in this area. What could be more natural than the forever manifested desire to prolong the length of the theatrical phenomenon, to immortalize it in a certain sense.

The aural components of the show, namely words and music, have, from the most ancient times been preserved by relatively effective means: the graphic signs of writing and musical notation. However, writing can establish only a single level of sonority and of significance of language; it cannot, or at best in a purely summary fashion, render the intonations which constitute an important

Translated by R. Scott Walker

factor in dramatic expression. It is only with modern techniques for the recording and reproduction of sounds (phonograph, radio, magnetic tape) that it has been possible to preserve and to transmit words with all the subtleties of tone.

As for the visual components of the performing arts, man has constantly sought the means to represent them figuratively. The iconographic object is almost as old as the art of theatre, and much more durable. And this is the value of iconography for the theatre historian. But where an historian normally works on this or that specific period, on a certain aspect of theatrical life, a certain institution or author or comedian, the theoretician is obliged to take into consideration all periods and all forms of the art of theatre if his reflections are to be generalized. And when we attempt to encompass all that has been produced as iconographic document throughout the centuries, even if only in the imagination, we are impressed, not to say overwhelmed, by the multitude of objects. What has come down to us from Greco-Roman Antiquity, for example, certainly exceeds the number of dramatic works performed during that same period. In modern times the quantity of iconography objects—both absolutely and in relation to the number of theatrical performances—is constantly increasing. In our day, to each production there correspond dozens if not hundreds of iconographic documents of all types.

Apart from this numerical abundance, there is also a multiplicity of forms, of procedures, of subjects represented. Every technique of the plastic arts is involved: drawing, painting, engraving, sculpture, low relief and high relief, mosaics, stained glass, fresco, tapestry. The most varied materials and media are used: illuminated manuscripts, illustrated books, lithography, posters, postage stamps. And there is likewise a diversity of objects, whether useful or not, which are part of what is termed the decorative arts—vases, plates, dishes, cake forms, lamps, windows, cinerary urns, sarcophagi, etc.—made of marble, stone, wood, terracotta, earthenware, metal or ivory.

Around the middle of the 19th century there was a revolutionary event which shook up theatrical iconography, as it did many other things: photography. This invention gave us first of all pictures of actors in costume, often in more or less studied poses, pictures taken outside of the theatre itself before the time, around the end of the last century, when the photographer entered into the theatre

building, despite hesitations on the part of certain directors (such as Henry Irving). Color photography, since the Thirties, did not bring about any notable changes, and it is in any case still scorned by many professionals.

A second revolution took place toward the end of the 19th century with the invention of the cinema. The imitation of movement, so eagerly sought by many artists in order to make the figurative representation of theatrical scenes more alive and true, was at last made possible by a technical device. Since the beginning of our century, the history of cinema is interwoven in numerous respects with the history of the theatre, especially since the appearance of talking pictures; and cinema has played and continues to play (with the video tape recorder today) an inestimable role in theatrical documentation.¹ However, the cinematographic art is a separate area, governed by specific laws, and the theoretical reflections which follow do not include cinema as an element of theatrical iconography.

Alongside the multiplicity of means and technical processes, the problem which arises in turn is that of point of view and of finality. By whom and for what end was an iconographic object created? By an artist seeking an aesthetic expression, for whom the theatre only served as a source of inspiration or even pure pretext? By a theatre professional wanting to determine as faithfully as possible a certain detail of a performance in order to preserve it from oblivion? By a theatre lover with the same motivation or answering some interior imperative? At the initiative or request of a historical institution, of a comedian, of a director?

And finally, there is the question of content: what is represented? Iconographic objects reproduce all the visual components of the show, everything that can be seen on the stage or in the performing area during the performance or during rehearsals—actor, costumes, props, sets, wigs, masks, etc.—taken individually, partially, entirely or in all sorts of combinations. And there is also the audience, its reactions to the show (for example, Daumier's famous cycle), the theatrical setting—closed, semi-closed, open-air—with or without viewers, the backstage area and the stage equipment, the theatrical

¹ See André Veinstein, *Intérêt documentaire des films sur le théâtre et l'art du mime*, in *Catalogue des films sur le théâtre et l'art du mime*, Paris (printed in Zurich), UNESCO, 1965, pp. 13-20. This catalogue contains notes on 395 films.

architecture which, since performances have been enclosed in buildings, includes both the interior (the auditorium itself and stage) and the exterior. This list, although already long enough, is hardly exhaustive.

One limit should be noted, however: that between the object of theatrical iconography and the theatrical object as such. In specialized museums and exhibits dedicated to theatre persons, to authors of dramas or theatrical institutions, alongside iconographic documents in the strict sense there are also objects which were used in the shows: costumes, wigs, masks, actual stage props or even architectural fragments taken from the theatrical settings. These kinds of artifacts are documents often of an inestimable value, but they do not belong to what we are calling theatrical iconography. Iconography objects are by definition reproductions, signs of authentic things, signs which have as referents persons or objects which exist or which have existed.

Once the terms "sign" and "referent" have been mentioned, let us note two types of equivocal cases with regard to belonging to theatrical iconography. This should, perhaps, help us to define our problematic more carefully.

Let us first consider illustrated editions of dramatic works. Do the pictures drawn by the artist belong to theatrical iconography? When it is an unperformed work (and one that will perhaps never be performed), the direct and principal referent for the illustrator is the literary work, whose relationship to theatrical realities are virtual and uncertain. The situation is different when the text of the play has already been staged. Had the artist seen the theatrical performance(s) of the play in question? Did he take his inspiration from them? It is the enlightening of these circumstances (which is not always easy, as historians well know) which will determine the possible place of this or that illustration in theatrical iconography.

Another ambiguous case is that of figurative projects prepared by the creators of the performance: decorators, painters, directors, technical staff. These projects are used as a preparatory study, either before or during rehearsals, and can take the form of drawings, sketches or various types of diagrams and outlines, as well as scale models of the sets and costumes. They do not reproduce an already existing theatrical reality, since this is in the process of being formed (even if they do have reference to something, some-

times to a previous artistic experience, that is to a pre-existing theatrical reality). They are not signs of the sets, costumes, etc. of the show being prepared, but rather these sets and costumes could be considered as iconic signs of the projects to which they refer and from which they are inspired. Is the principle of priority decisive when determining whether this or that artifact is to be considered an iconographic object?

This is the type of question which will make it possible if not to resolve at least to clarify or to specify the application of the notions borrowed from semiology or semiotics: iconic sign and referent.

II

The general theory of the sign or of signs has its roots in Ancient Greece. It has a not-unimportant history in modern times as well, but there is far from a universal consensus in the field. I would even say that we are farther and farther from such. This is not due to any lack of proposals or theoretical affirmations, and in fact the opposite is true.

Nevertheless, when considering most existing theories throughout the course of our century (without consideration for theories which reject the very notion of sign as inoperant; but such theories are automatically excluded from the science of signs), we find several common elements which merit being pointed out.

It is well-known that the renewal of semiology/semiotics in human sciences is due to two scholars who were working at almost the same time but without knowledge of one another. It is in fact because of this circumstance that the terminological duality, which has been maintained down to our own times, can be explained. Ferdinand de Saussure proposed the name *semiology* for this discipline; Charles Sanders Peirce proposed the term *semiotics*.

The notion of sign, for Peirce, includes three principal elements: the representamen, the interpretant and the object. Or, by using the semiotic triangle of Ogden and Richards, we have respectively the symbol (the signifier), the reference (the signified) and the referent (the thing).

To this triadic schema is often contrasted the dyadic or dichotomous concept from Saussure which distinguishes, within the sign

between the signifier and the signified, that is between the form and the contents. But the Saussurian schema is only apparently of a dichotomous nature. We should recall the essential definitions of the Geneva linguist: “The linguistic sign does not unite a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustical image [Saussure is here talking about the linguistic sign, but this reasoning is applicable to every sign.] (...) We call *sign* the combination of the concept and the acoustical image (...). We propose retaining the word *sign* to designate the whole, and to replace *concept* and *acoustical image* respectively with *signified* and *signifier*”.² If the signifier of a sign, in the Saussurian schema, is the image (acoustical or other), and thus a sensory phenomenon, the signified is defined as concept, as a psychic and abstract phenomenon, as the idea of a thing and not the thing itself. This thing signified exists, but it exists apart from the sign. It is nothing other than the referent in the triadic schema.

It must be said that the referent, which is explicit in the theory of Peirce and his continuers but implicit in Saussure’s reasoning, is one of the principal concerns of contemporary semiologists/semioticians. We do not intend here to envisage the position of the referent with respect to the general theory of signs, a quite vast problem which provokes important controversies: what are the possible characteristics of the referent (object, but also quality, action, real or imaginary event)? Does a sign necessarily have a referent? We will limit ourselves to an examination of the condition of the referent in the area which interests us directly, that of theatrical iconography.

Every iconographic object related to the theatre considered as sign or as ensemble of signs, possesses a form (signifier(s)) which represents a content (signified(s)). And this signified content necessarily refers to an existing reality, to theatrical reality. The iconographic sign thus always has a referent (or referents); it is referential by definition. Moreover, this is not a feature of theatrical iconography alone; this property concerns all iconography, every figurative representation from whatever area of social and cultural activity as well as every natural phenomenon. Be it, for example,

² Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Payot, 1966, pp. 98-99.

the iconography of Napoleon, of the One Hundred Years War, of musical instruments, of butterflies, of plants, of pebbles, of stars, the figured representations of these phenomena, even if they do not totally conform to reality, even if they contain a share of the imaginary, refer to something or to someone which exists or which has existed. Is it possible to expand on this observation by saying that every iconic sign is referential? The question remains an open one, but it involves areas which are more extensive than iconography as such.

Nevertheless, the introduction of the term “iconic sign” into our discussions requires a few explanations. [An] icon as sign, or [an] iconic sign, is another vast and controversial problem in current semiology. There too it is best to return to the sources in order to see things more clearly.

Charles Sanders Peirce uses the word “icon” to name one of three classes of signs; the two others are called “index” and “symbol”. Here are a few of his definitions (in the order in which they appear in *Collected Papers*; the numbers in parentheses refer to this edition).

“An *icon* is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own (...). Anything whatever, be it quality, existent individual, or law, is an icon of anything, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it” (2.247).

“But a sign may be *iconic*, that is, may represent its object mainly by its similarity, no matter what its mode of being. (...) Any material image, as a painting, is largely conventional in its mode of representation; but in itself, without legend or label it may be called a *hypoicon*” (2.276).

“It is a familiar fact that there are such representations as icons. Every picture (however conventional its method) is essentially a representation of that kind” (2.279).

“I call a sign which stands for something merely because it resembles it, an *icon*” (3.362).³

These quotations, somewhat long, seem to me necessary for fully defining Peirce’s icon and for avoiding the misunderstandings which appear in some commentaries and secondary sources. The

³ References are not to pages but to paragraph numbers in *Collected Papers*, vol. 2-3, Harvard University Press, 1932.

first element to be retained from the definitions cited above is the use of the term “object” or “thing” which corresponds to the notion of referent. Secondly, stress is placed on resemblance or similarity between the iconic sign and the thing signified. And finally we should note the mention of a painting (that is, a pictorial work) as the particular example of an iconic sign. In the same paragraph Peirce also mentions photography. The conclusions which we can draw from these observations are (1) that the iconic sign is a referential sign (always? most frequently?) but without the opposite necessarily being true, and (2) that relation which exists between the icon and its referent is a relation of resemblance.

Peirce’s semiotics does not represent a complete and closed system; his writings on signs have several lacunae. They contain contradictions, hesitations, unpolished concepts. His theses, particularly with regard to the referent and the icon, are refuted by certain semioticians (e.g. Umberto Eco) or by certain schools of semiotics (the Greimas School), just as certain of Saussure’s theses are contested by these same and other semioticians. Peirce’s theories were developed in the realm of logic; the propositions of Saussure arose from a linguistic angle. It would not be reasonable to accept them *a priori* as valid for a general theory of signs. On the other hand, nothing prohibits using one or another of Peirce’s or Saussure’s concepts for reflecting on signs, or employing them occasionally and pragmatically in one or another area of applied semiotics/semiology.

We have been examining the notion of referent and that of iconic sign (or icon). As far as the general theory of signs is concerned, the problem of the relevance of these notions is far from being resolved. (Will it ever be one day? We may doubt it.) On the other hand, it seems to me that these notions are applicable to theatrical semiology, which I have attempted to justify elsewhere, with all the reservations which must be applied. And with regard to the realm of theatrical iconography, the concepts of icon and of referent seem perfectly appropriate since, on the one hand, they make it possible to define the iconographic object or artifact and, on the other, they facilitate an analysis of it.

Using the conceptual and terminological data just mentioned, we can propose the following definition of the theatrical iconographic

object: it is a signifying figurative representation, that is, an iconic sign whose referent is a phenomenon belonging to theatrical reality, and which is united to this referent by bonds of resemblance.

What is the practical use of such a definition? We will attempt to show this using several examples taken from theatrical iconography of various periods.

III

The first concern of a theatre historian or of an archivist when faced with an iconographic object is to determine the historical reality which is represented therein. In other words, it is necessary to identify the referent of the given iconic sign as precisely as possible. Another problem is that of the degree of resemblance between the icon and its referent.

The task of identification is relatively simple in the majority of cases when the source of the iconographic document is given to us in a sure manner or when the object represented can be easily deciphered. The captions on the pictures of "*Varlet de La Grange, comédien du Roy—Dom Juan*", "*Mr. Kemble as Lear*" or "*Joh. Phil. Klingmann als Don Carlos*" leave no room for doubt. On the other hand, even without such captions there is no need to be a great specialist to recognize Edmund Kean in the role of Richard III, Sarah Bernhardt as Napoleon II, Louis Jouvet playing Doctor Knock, or to identify the character of Hamlet holding Yorick's skull in one or another traditional staging. But then it is necessary to determine whether the model has taken a static pose or if, to the contrary, he is represented in a stage situation, that is dynamically. With regard to photographs, there is the additional problem of knowing if the picture was taken during the performance, outside the performance but on the set, or even outside the theatre (e.g. in a photographer's studio).

Nevertheless, a large number of iconographic documents are ambiguous and equivocal with regard to their referent and keep secret the source of their inspiration. In such cases we are forced to form hypotheses; we are reduced to suppositions, to relatively subjective judgements, by making a critical survey of every possible

referent in the historical and cultural context of a given (or even supposed) era.

To realize just how rare are indisputable referents in the theatrical iconography of Antiquity, one need only read and carefully study Margarete Bieber's work, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, particularly the second edition which contains 866 illustrations."⁴

The relatively sure attributions are limited to very basic figurative examples primarily concerned with the theatre profession and with the performing area: masks, cothurns, musical instruments, theatre architecture as well as portraits of several dramatic authors. When it is a matter of the representation of scenes played, uncertainty is the rule. Here are a few examples.

Margarete Bieber (pp. 10-11) describes and comments in detail on the vase from Naples known by the name of Pronomos, which she thinks is a representation of a typical satyric drama. "The famous vase in Naples (...) shows how these dramas were performed in the second half of the fifth century. (...) The title of the play may have been *Hesione*". Nevertheless in a footnote (p. 274) she refers to an opinion which is different from her own. "I cannot accept the theory of Buschor that the actors are those of tragedy, while the chorus is that of the satyr play. If this were true, there would be tragic actors surrounded by a satyr chorus and no tragic chorus, and a satyr chorus without their actors. But the leader Papposilenus is conferring with one of the actors; they therefore belong together. One might also expect representatives of comedy if the two other forms of dramatic plays were indicated". The theatrical referent of the vase in question is thus relatively determined in terms of its period, whereas the dramatic genus represented remains controversial and the name of the play is but an hypothesis.

Does such a representation of the Antigone-Creon-Ismene-Haemon group on a vase (their names are written out) refer to the tragedy by Sophocles or the play by Euripides (of which we know but only a few fragments), or to a non-dramatic source? At least three different referents are possible.

A much larger number of virtual (or partially valid) referents for

⁴ Princeton University Press, 1939, Second enlarged edition, 1961.

a single iconographic object is proposed by Margarete Bieber herself in the analysis of a marble bas relief. "The comedy scene on a relief in Naples shows masks and costumes which might have been worn in Menander's comedies, although the subject matter is quite different. (...) The costumes of the old men could be given to Smicrines in the *Arbitrants*, to Demeas and Niceratus in the *Samia*; that of the youth to Chaerestratus and Charisius in the *Arbitrants*, to Moschion in the *Samia*; that of the flute girl to Habrotonon; and that of the slave to Onesimus in the *Arbitrants*, and to Parmenon in the *Samia*" (p. 92).

Another theoretical—and also practical—problem exists in the case when the referent of an iconographic object is but vaguely known, and it is precisely this icon itself which allows us to formulate hypotheses about the nature of the referent, that is of the primary phenomenon relative to the iconic sign in question. In this way, for example, Erich Bethe tried to reconstruct the Euripidean tragedy, *Andromeda* (which we know about especially from parodies by Aristophanes and from several remaining fragments) working from a crater which is in Berlin.⁵ As for the "hilarious tragedies" of Rhinthon of Syracuse (around 300), here is Margarete Bieber's opinion, buttressed by several examples. "We know this farce partly from scanty fragments of the plays, partly—and much better—from a great number of vase paintings. From these pictures we learn to know not only the contents and the plot of numerous plays, but also the costumes and the way in which they were acted".⁶ The French Hellenist Pierre Guillon wrote in reference to this dramatic author, "The painted vases serve here as witnesses for us where texts are missing".⁷

The relationships of icon to referent are here reversed. In the investigation process, the iconic sign becomes a referent of a linguistic (text) or theatrical (performance) reality which must have existed but which we know very little about and are seeking to discover—partially and imperfectly—through the iconographic object which we have available.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁷ *Histoire des littératures*, "Encyclopédie de la Pléiade", Paris, Gallimard, 1955, t. 1, p. 471.

Here is another example of such a procedure. A very rich iconographic document exists regarding the comedies of Terence, namely the Lyon edition by J. Trechsel (1493). The sources of inspiration for the many illustrations in this volume are: 1) the texts of the six comedies (certainly); 2) the commentaries on Terence widespread in that era along with other iconographic sources (probably); 3) performances of one or another comedy (maybe, but this is less probable). In turn the illustrations of the Trechsel edition were to serve as referent, at least partially, for subsequent stage productions of the comedies of Terence, and even for the re-creation (hypothetical, of course) of a performance attempted by a researcher.

Jacek Lipiński, the Polish theatre historian, attempted to reconstitute the movements of the actors in *The Eunuch* by Terence, which was performed in Latin in Wrocław in 1500.⁸ He used the text of the comedy, the famous commentary by Donatus (rediscovered and printed in 1472, widely known throughout humanist Europe, including Poland), and three iconographic documents: the Trechsel edition, the illuminated manuscript *Le Térence des Ducs* (Bibliothèque de L'Arsenal) and the *Codex Parisinus* (Bibliothèque Nationale). The results of his efforts are impressive, although the author does not leave the realm of hypotheses. What is interesting for our theorizing is that the iconographic content of the Trechsel edition, which necessarily had its own referents, became the referent or rather one of the referents for the presumed form of a production which was in fact performed in 1500, but about which is known only the place where it was performed (the Wrocław City Hall) and the director (Laurentius Corvinus, professor at the Academy of Cracow).

A final example, this time drawn from the French classical period, deserves our attention. Odile Biyidi published a study of Antoine Coypel and his son Charles as painters of Racinian themes.⁹ Her analysis of the painting by Antoine Coypel, *Athalie*

⁸ *Sztuka aktorska w Polsce 1500-1633* [*The Actor's Art in Poland 1500-1633*], Warszawa, P.W.N., 1974 (summary in French). Analyses relative to *The Eunuch* make up chapter 1 (pp. 9-73).

⁹ *Racine et les Coypel. Contribution à l'étude de l'esthétique classique*, in *Iconographie et littérature. D'un art à l'autre*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1983, pp. 61-79.

Chased from the Temple (Louvre Museum), painted five years after the publication of *Athalie* by Jean Racine, seems to confirm the fact that the artist was inspired by the denouement of the tragedy. However, since the play was never performed until after the poet's death in 1699 other than in private performances without sets or costumes, it was not the performance which served as referent for Coypel's painting, but the text, almost without stage directions. On the other hand, the 1736 edition contains stage directions which seem to have been inspired to a certain extent from the painter's pictorial vision.¹⁰ And these indications were no doubt taken into account in subsequent stagings.

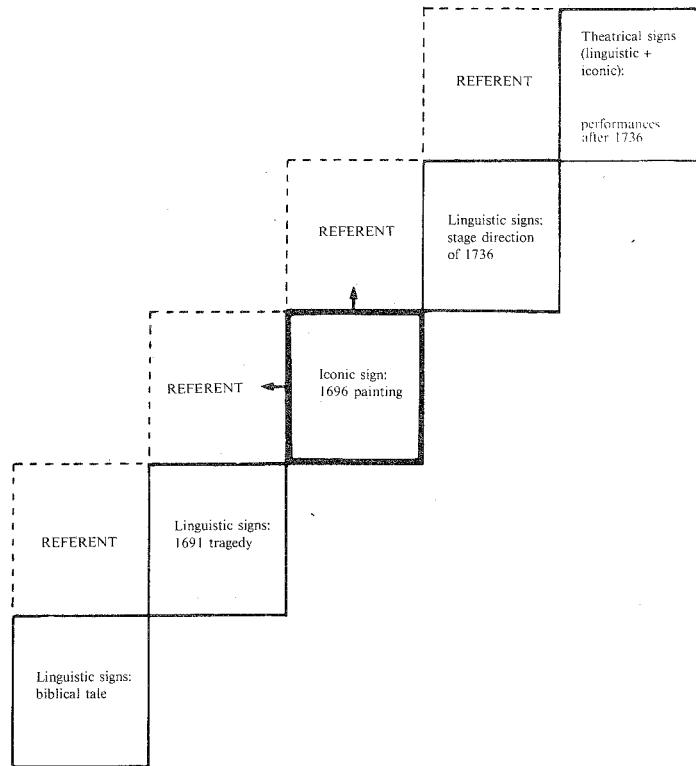
The diachronic chain referent-icon-referent is subject in this case to a certain extension. The iconic sign constituted by the painting *Athalie Chased from the Temple* (1696) refers to the original edition of Racine's text (1691) and at the same time constitutes the referent for the stage direction of the 1736 edition, which edition is the direct referent of one or another performance of *Athalie*. It is evident that the stage direction in question is not the only referent for the final scene of the tragedy in such a performance. This has been nourished by a whole referential chain which should be traced back in time, since Racine's text is itself inspired by a biblical account. What is of interest to us is the fact that the pictorial iconic element occupies a key position here, that it is a creative link, a sort of gear in this mechanism of retroaction: inspired vs inspiring or icon vs referent.¹¹

The following diagram can be used to illustrate this.

(In order not to make it too confusing, we did not indicate in the diagram the distinction between signifier-signified which is proper to each sign.)

¹⁰ Here is the stage direction in question as it is found in the 1736 edition: "Joas is seen on his throne; his nurse is kneeling at his right; Azarias, sword in hand, is standing at his left, and near to him Zachary and Salomith are kneeling on the steps of the throne with several levites holding swords lined up along the sides" (a. V, sc. 5).

¹¹ In the same article, Odile Biyidi analyzes a painting by Charles Coypel, *Athalie et Joas* (1741), inspired by scene 7, act 2 of *Athalie* by Racine. "The ensemble makes us think of one of those instantaneous scenes played by very great actors (...). Charles Coypel, a great lover of theatre, painted in his pictures actors in the process of acting and not, like his father, the imaginary reference to dramatic action" (p. 71).



It would be interesting to study the function of the iconic object as sign and referent at the same time, with regard to a certain number of plays inspired by the plastic arts. We will only cite two examples. First is the Polish poet Stanislaw Wyspiański, whose 1904 drama *Akropolis* (made famous all over the world through Jerzy Grotowski's adaptation) has as *dramatis personae* the statues on the cathedral of Cracow and figures represented in tapestries from the 15th and 16th centuries, plastic works drawn from Polish history, from the Bible and from the Trojan myth. These authentic iconic objects are thus referents of a dramatic work and themselves refer to historical or legendary sources.

Of the many plays Michel de Ghelderode inspired from paintings, we can cite, as the second example, *Les Aveugles (The Blind)* (1933) "a morality play in one act, after Breughel the Elder",

whose famous painting has as referent the Gospel parable.¹²

In the cases cited, we are dealing with a temporal progression in the relationships of sign to referent, with a chronological order, where the referent precedes the iconic sign. Is this order unchangeable? Is an inversion not possible? Thomas A. Sebeok has doubted the intrinsic nature of such an order and uses a highly suggestive image. "Suppose that a renowned contemporary personage, such as the Pope, is known to me (as he is to most Catholics) only through his image—photograph, lithograph, TV picture, or some other pictorial representation—but that, one day, I get to see him in the flesh (...). On that occasion, the living Pope would, for me, become an iconic sign for his long-familiar image, the real chronology of events notwithstanding".¹³

In order to bring this situation more closely in line with the realm of theatrical iconography, let us replace the Pope with a famous actor whom we recognize in the street. This flesh and blood figure, who, up until then had been nothing more for us than the referent of numerous pictorial representations, that is iconic signs, becomes in turn a sign, while his images assume the role of referent. We would then be faced with a dialectic inversion of the functions of the icon and of the referent, an inversion which transgresses time. Another aspect of the problem of temporality appears in the case of a dramatic author who illustrates his own works, such as Alfred Jarry. The relationships between the image and the text often risk being inextricable. Is the "true portrait of Monsieur Ubu" which we can find in the original edition of *Ubu roi* (1896) an iconic sign of the text or, to the contrary, its referent?

Let us note that in his definition of an icon, Thomas A. Sebeok is careful not to introduce the temporal vector. "A sign is iconic when there is a topological analogy between the signifier and its referent".¹⁴ And so, according to the American semiotician, this analogy does not imply an order in time; it is topological and only concerns space.

¹² See Roland Beyen, *Michel de Ghelderode ou la comédie des apparences* (exhibition catalogue), Bruxelles-Paris, 1980, pp. 110-112.

¹³ "Iconicity", *MLN* [*Modern Language Notes*], vol. 91, No. 6, December 1976, p. 1444.

¹⁴ "Six espèces de signes: propositions et critiques", trans. by André Helbo, *Degrés*, No. 6, April 1974, p. b 15.

Analogy, resemblance, similitude, similarity—the notions which reappear in most definitions of the icon—represent another question that the iconic sign raises in its relation to the referent. What is the threshold of resemblance for considering a given iconic object (for example a caricature) as representative of a given referent? What is the common denominator of several iconic objects which allows us to consider them as deriving from the same referent? This is a vast theoretical problem which, in the case of theatrical iconography, has practical consequences of great importance. But further studies are needed requiring additional methodological instruments, in order to answer these questions.

IV

Theatrical iconography extends over considerable regions, both in terms of its diachronical and geographical extension (our examples have been limited to European culture) as well as from the point of view of the materials and techniques used. But a particularly fertile, and also delicate, field is opened as soon as we move to the interpretation of iconographic documents, of their relationships with theatrical, literary, cultural and historical realities. It is a task which, as we have indicated in a few samples, is extremely complex.

In light of this, we can ask if the word “iconography” is capable by itself alone of covering such a variety of functions, whether it would not be useful to have recourse to another term in the same family, that of “iconology”. Why not take advantage of the existence of these two names, etymologically correct, both of which have respectable antecedents, in order to divide the notional area which is theirs? Iconography would be the term for designating 1) an ensemble of documents representing this or that phenomenon, 2) their description and classification. The term iconology would be reserved for an interpretative and comparative study, for research into the relationship between the iconographic object and its historic context, between the icon and its referent. In sum, on the one side would be documentation and descriptive research, and on the other theoretical or theorizing study. A similar distinction is already practiced between ethnography and ethnology (the latter

considered to be the “theoretical study of facts described by ethnography”).

It is evident that the boundary between these two fields of study, between these two activities, would not be a rigid one. In addition, certain sectors of theatrical iconography, by definition limited ones, do not require such a distinction, for example the iconography of a given building, of an actor or playwright. It is no less true that the vast area of figurative representation of theatrical realities is so multiform and raises such diverse questions that its study fully justifies the use of a second term.

Already in use in 1593 in the title of a treatise by Cesare Ripa, the term “iconology” was reintroduced in the 20th century thanks to Erwin Panofsky when he entitled one of his works *Studies in Iconology* (1939). Although he had to admit, in the preface to the French edition, “Today, in 1966, I would perhaps have replaced the key word in the title, *iconology* with *iconography*, more familiar and less subject to discussion”, Erwin Panofsky confirms and justifies the distinction between the two terms. “This is precisely the difference between a purely descriptive activity and one leading to an interpretation which, in my opinion, should have been stressed by setting in opposition the apparently esoteric (although quite old and quite elastic) term *iconology* with the word *iconography*, more widely used although more recent and more restrictive”.¹⁵

And in his work *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955), we find several definitions which merit being recalled. “Iconography is an invaluable help for the establishment of dates, provenance and, occasionally, authenticity; and it furnishes the necessary basis for all further interpretation. (...) I propose to revive the good old word “iconology” wherever iconography is taken out of its isolation and integrated with whichever other method, historical, psychological or critical, we may attempt to use in solving the riddle of the sphinx”.¹⁶

These words of Panofsky bring us back to Peirce, whom we can

¹⁵ *Essais d'icologie. Thèmes humanistes dans l'art de la Renaissance*, tr. by Claude Herbertte and Bernard Teyssède, Paris, Gallimard, 1967, pp. 3, 5.

¹⁶ *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955, pp. 31-32.

quote for one final time. “A great distinguishing property of the icon is that by the direct observation of it other truths concerning its object can be discovered than those which suffice to determine its construction”. (2.279) It is the search for these hidden truths which should be the objective and the ambition of true theatrical iconology.

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