

Vera Kérchy

The Theatrical Challenges of the de Manian Theory of Rhetorics
Ideological Technologies in Theories of Postmodern Self-reflective Theatre and
Performativity
Tracing the possibilities of a Material Model of Theater

PhD-dissertation

SUMMARY

The aim of my dissertation is to provide a comparative analysis of the theoretical terms of *performance*, *performativity*, *event*, *materiality*, *representation*, and *theatricality* through simultaneously interpreting them as vital concepts of postmodern theatre studies and of the de Manian theory of deconstruction. I wish to examine whether these common notions are as identical as we presume them to be, or not, and study the effect of one field onto the other (implemented through the theoretization of these seemingly identical common concepts)

The analysis of these seemingly identical common concepts reveals that, on the one hand, deconstructive ideas can not be easily adapted to/adopted by the empirical field of theatre studies (because of the non-empirical aspects of deconstructive rhetorics), and on the other hand, that the deconstructive notions of theater and performativity are very far from theater as a representational art-form. The gap between the two theoretical fields is due to the different conceptions of language and signification which involve different epistemological implications. Performance theories and theories of self-reflective postmodern theatre are founded in *either* the performative *or* the representative/cognitive dimensions of language, based on the supposition that the two dimensions can be experienced separately). Thus they bear ideologies that can not be harmonized with the concepts of deconstructive rhetorics, since these latter assume that *performativity* and *cognitivity* are inseparable and incompatible at the same time, as mutually exclusive entities, which necessarily result in a permanent insecurity concerning the world's accessibility. I shall call these contemporary theater theories – with reference to the language philosophies implied in them, and with the aim to evoke de Man's notions for inadequate models of reading – performative and tropological models. I shall discuss the ideologies of postmodern self-reflective theatre interpreted in terms of a *tropological model* in Chapter I., and will scrutinize the ideologies of performance-theatre as a *performative model* in Chapter II.)

By analyzing the seemingly identical common notions of theatre theories and deconstruction, besides the realization that maybe there is no common field to seek (this is the topic of my first two chapters), the need for a new theater theory arises, for an innovative theatrical model that works with non-epistemological preconditions (this *material model* is the topic of my third chapter). In the third chapter I analyse (throughout the process of reading a *mise en scène*) how seemingly theatrical notions of deconstruction – the non-empirical notions of the *unsuccessful performative* (Austin), the *rituality of the sign* (Derrida), that is the *unsuccessful theatricality* – shift from the bodily actions and self-reflection to someplace else. I have arrived to the realization that the allegorical figure of Kleist's essay (*Über das Marionettentheater*), the living puppet, the mutilated (zombie) marionette (allegorising the mechanics of deconstructive rhetorics) can become useful as a *reading-allegory* throughout the interpretation of a theater performance, too. The actor – who appeared in the avant-garde performance as the presence of the physical body or in the postmodern theater as a piece of text locked in the prisonhouse of representation – now subverts the spectator's anthropomorphising, metaphorising, humanising gaze as a ghost frustrating the reader with

the suspicion of ‘always-meaning-something else’. The *deconstructive irony* of the stage confronts us with the feeling that perception is always-already diverted by cognition and, on the other hand, rhetoric’s performative event always-already makes cognition ambiguous.

In the first chapter I analyse the two (partly theatrical) reactions of the linguistic turn, namely how the doubt concerning the mimetic power of language and the intentional character of the signifier motivated, on the one hand, the theory of the prisonhouse of representation (which coincides with the theory of the *tropological theatrical model*), and on the other hand, the deconstructive theory of rhetorics characterized by its mutually exclusive performative and cognitive dimensions. The theory of the prisonhouse of representation argues that the precondition of authentic language-use is self-reflectivity, and our only way to speak is to unveil the mocking linguistic power for producing illusion, while deconstruction finds this self-reflective operation ideological because of the two mutually exclusive dimensions (the cognitive and the performative) of language and argues for the rhetorical subversion that always makes every text permanently ironic. I demonstrate the main arguments of postmodern self-reflective theatre theory through Kékesi Kun’s works (*The Insurrection of Reflections. The Rhetoric of Drama and Theater in the end of the Millenary*¹ and *In the Shadow of Thalia. Postmodern – Drama/Theater – Theory*²), whereas to show the defaults of the concept of self-reflection I analyze de Man’s texts concerning the tropological dimensions of language (*Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*³) and the theory of irony (*The Concept of Irony*) together with Derrida’s interpretation of Artaud (*The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation*⁴).

In the second chapter I shall interface and interpret the two reactions of the performative turn. The action, the event *outside* or *inside* the language – depending on which theoretical perspective we apply – by coming to the foreground results on the one hand in the rising of the performance (theatre) theory (the *performative model*) based on the analysis of performances emphasizing the physicality of the (performing) body, and on the other hand in the blooming of the discourse of deconstructive linguistic theories dealing with the performative dimensions of the rhetoric. I base the analysis of the theatrical performative model on Fischer-Lichte’s performance theory (mainly *The Performative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*⁵), the same theoritian whose *Semiotik des Theaters*⁶ I have already discussed in the first chapter.⁷ To illustrate the deconstructive theory of performativity I focus on Derrida’s text on Austin (*Signature, Event, Context*⁸) and on the final chapter of *Allegories of Reading*, entitled *Excuses (Confessions)*⁹, and I shall also

¹ Kékesi Kun Árpád: *Tükörképek lázadása. A dráma és színház retorikája az ezredvégen*, József Attila Kör, Kijárat Kiadó, 1998.

² Kékesi Kun Árpád: *Thália árnyék(á)ban. Posztmodern - Dráma/Színház - Elmélet*, Veszprémi Egyetemi Kiadó, Veszprém, 2000.

³ de Man, Paul: *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1979. (AO)

⁴ Derrida, Jacques: „The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation”, in: J.D.: *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974.

⁵ Fischer-Lichte, Erika: *The Performative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, transl. Saskya Iris Jain, Routledge, London and New York, 2008

⁶ Fischer-Lichte, Erika: *Semiotik de Theaters. Eine Einführung*, Gunter Narr Verlag, Tübingen, 1983.

⁷ The split of Fischer-Lichte’s theoretical works into two parts marks two things: it not only repeats the empirical disruption of the tropological and the performative, but it also ironically metaphorizes the impossibility of this disruption by belonging to the same author.

⁸ Derrida, Jacques: „Signature, Event, Context”, ford. Samuel Weber, Jeffrey Mehlman, in: J.D.: *Limited Inc.*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL., 1977.

⁹ de Man, Paul: „Excuses (*Confessions*)”, in: *OA*: 278-302

necessarily touch upon Austin's *How to do Things with Words*¹⁰. To unfold the ideological features of the theatrical *performative model* I lean on the theatre-theoretical misreadings of the deconstructive discourse of *performativity*.

The theoretical part of the third chapter is no longer contrapuntist, since here I try to outline a new theatre theory which harmonizes the de Manian theory of rhetorics. (Here my critique turns to the analytical comparison of the Schillerian and the Kantian/Kleistian formalization.) In this chapter – for the lack of a suitable theatrical model – I try to adopt Kleist's enigmatic essay (mostly unrecognised as a theatre-theoretical text), *On The Marionette Theatre*¹¹ to the field of theatre-theory and work out a theory of the *material model* of theatre. De Man reads the pseudo-theatrical Kleist-scenes as allegoric models of reading (*Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's Über das Marionettentheater*¹²) and looks at the the Kleistian formalization as a reflection of the non-phenomenological features of rhetorics, ie. the mutually exclusive relationship of the tropological and the performative linguistic functions. This kind of reading is in accordance with the first two chapters and summarizes its deconstructive remarks. Therefore, by the end of the dissertation the de Manian theory of rhetorics joins with a proper theatre theory which can be seen – for being radically different from the theatrical tradition based on a non-epistemological language-theory – as an attempt for a *material model*.

To summarize the concepts of language, sign and rhetorics from the aspect of performativity we can say, that the *tropological model* claims that we can get rid of the performative dimension, while the *performative model* finds that a successful, intentional performativity is possible, and the *formalist model* (that I summarize in the third chapter's introduction containing the Schiller-Kant/Kleist-confrontation) supposes that a non-successful, non-intentional performative can manifest itself in the phenomenal space. (The latter two concepts can be seen as two versions of the *performative model*.) All of these concepts can be set against the de Manian concept of rhetorics; suggesting that – because of the mutually exclusive relationship of performativity and cognitivity all texts are always ambiguous and ironic, therefore – performativity can be experienced only through the ironic functions of the text, as a trace. The aim of my paper was to find a proper *material theatrical model* for this de Manian language-theory (which seemed to be full of theatrical metaphors), that happened to be the uncanny theater of living puppets/zombie actors.

All chapters are accompanied by a part with a close reading analysis of a performance to illustrate the functioning of the examined theories. In the chapter of the *tropological model* by analyzing Erzsébet Gaál's *Danton* (1990) I try to show how the performance haunts the theory of postmodern irony, and theatrical self-reflectivity. First, it orders the postmodern horizon, but just at the same time it crushes it: letting the performative dimension of the *mise en scène* (and of Büchner's text) unfold, as the performance makes the metafictional interpretation (based on the binary of fiction and reality) fall through. In the chapter of the *performative model* I use the concept of deconstructive intermediality to show the ideological nature of the idea concerning the guaranteed presence of the physical bodily being. I do this by analyzing Miklós Erdély's film, *Version* (1981), in order to show the failures of the filmic citation of theatrical presence. In the chapter of the *material model* I try to demonstrate theatre's allegorical functioning, along with the stage inhabited by de-animated actors, living puppets, and ironic marionettes through analyzing Sándor Zsótér's *Pentesilea* (2004). In

¹⁰ Austin, John L.: *How to do Things with Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977.

¹¹ Kleist, Heinrich von: „On the Marionette Theatre”, transl. Idris Parry, <http://www.southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm>

¹² De Man, Paul: „Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's Über das Marionettentheater”, in: de Man: *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984. 263-290

contrast with the first two performances analysed, Zsótér's performance adopts the de Manian theory of rhetorics without any confrontations with other linguistic theories.

In the *Conclusion* I enlarge my study's perspective through examining fields of theatricality outside theatre. After I have tried to reclaim the signifier's theatricality, and deconstructive-allegoric performativity to the field of theater, at the end of the dissertation – with the edifications earned from the previous deconstructive-theatrical comparison – I 'let them go', release them back to the field of other media, as a non-artistic, non-theatrical notion. As in the case of the *Version*-analysis, but now getting much farther from the field of theater I prove the deconstructive-theatre-theoretical symptom of theatre/theatricality by analyzing a film, David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006).

Bibliography:

- AUSTIN, John L.: *How To Do Things With Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977
- DE MAN, Paul: *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1979. (AO)
- DE MAN, Paul: „Excuses (*Confessions*)”, in: OA: 278-302
- DE MAN, Paul: „Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist's Über das Marionettentheater”, in: de Man: *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1984. 263-290
- DERRIDA, Jacques: „The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation”, in: J.D.: *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974.
- DERRIDA, Jacques: „Signature, Event, Context”, ford. Samuel Weber, Jeffrey Mehlman, in: J.D.: *Limited Inc*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston II., 1977.
- FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika: *Semiotik de Theaters. Eine Einführung*, Gunter Narr Verlag, Tübingen, 1983.
- FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika: *The Performative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, transl. Saskya Iris Jain, Routledge, London and New York, 2008
- KÉKESI Kun Árpád: *Tükörképek lázadása. A dráma és színház retorikája az ezredvégen*, József Attila Kör, Kjárát Kiadó, 1998.
- KÉKESI Kun Árpád: *Thália árnyék(á)ban. Posztmodern - Dráma/Színház - Elmélet*, Veszprémi Egyetemi Kiadó, Veszprém, 2000.
- Kleist, Heinrich von: „On the Marionette Theatre”, transl. Idris Parry, <http://www.southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm>