The stage as a multimodal text: a proposal for a new perspective

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The stage as a multimodal text: a proposal for a new perspective.

Introduction.
Recent research on Internet communication and computer generated environments has revealed a new way of considering the role of space in representational communicative acts (Maiorani 2009 (a) and (b) ). Actually, all communicative acts can be considered as ‘representational’ in that all events, occurrences, states, etc. have to be encoded and ‘represented’ in a message in order to be communicated. Multimodality as an analytical method is concerned with the way these representations construe and convey ideology through the use of different semiotic systems.

The specific semiotic condition of Internet communication requires that all communicators assess their presence on line by the very act of construing and representing their identity: this can be made through the creation of a personal web page or of a simple profile to which an e-mail address is attached, or through the creation of more complex representations like avatars in action/interaction based communicative environments and on line worlds like Second Life and Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG).

Interaction on line takes place not only through multimodal representations of meanings, but also within representational structures that actually allow semiotic processes to take place. Representational structures, in multimodal analysis, are those choices that all semiotic modes offer in order to represent the different relations between the items that are part of our world (in terms of systemic functional linguistics, all Participants, including people) and the processes in which they are involved (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 42). These structures are necessarily realised in space and time; however, while the time dimension impacts on the development of communication, the space dimension determines the nature itself of representational structures and plays an essential role in the meaning-making practices of communication, especially after the advent of the Internet and the unfolding of new aspects of space as a semiotic rather than a physical dimension.

The research in progress proposed here uses the functional framework of multimodal analysis derived from Halliday’s Functional Grammar to study space as a semiotic affordance in communicative contexts that involve representation. It is part of a wider research that investigates how the notion of space as a semiotic dimension has developed since the advent of the Internet, and how this has influenced our way to perceive and elaborate messages of all kinds. This paper in
particular will focus on testing the applicability of the functional framework of analysis to the stage as a multimodal text that interacts with the verbal text of a play.

The research, in this respect, is at an early stage and it therefore deals with the theoretical basis on which multimodal systemic functional analysis of stage sets can be developed. The assumption underlying it is that a stage set, as well as a movie set or a game hyper-context, are comparable semiotic affordances that actively contribute to the meanings being made and to the way they are perceived by the public through interaction. The interplay that is created between the stage and the verbal text through which communication is realised can be studied to understand how a play, a movie or a game script, as well as their characters, are functionally re-interpreted in different periods and cultural circumstances. This assumption is based on a parallel between the creation and functionalities of an online game session and hyper-environment and the creation and functionalities of a stage set. In order to illustrate it, the first part of this paper will discuss how the transmediation of meanings from a pre-text to an online game session may be studied in a multimodal systemic functional perspective.

2. Space as a semiotic dimension: the example of hyper-environments.

Like a stage or a movie set, the sets in which Massive Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (hereafter MMORPG) take place are semiotic multimodal contexts designed to enable the activities of the games to take place. Communication through words and action is the basic semiotic activity in which the game players, as well as the characters of a play, are involved and through which that particular world in which the game and the play occur is construed and represented. Each game, like a play, is based on a pre-existent script and locations are designed precisely to allow players’ avatars to enact, like characters, that script and develop their own multimodal narratives. Similarly, a stage play is also based on a pre-existing script but it is the stage arrangement that locates characters in a semiotic dimension where they are enabled to enact the verbal text through a multimodal representation designed by the stage director. Like the script of a MMORPG, the verbal text of a play becomes multimodal when enacted in and environment constructed on stage as a locative Circumstance. In this perspective, it can be argued that it is the different ways of locating characters in relation to specific sets that differentiate the different versions of a play.

Players of a MMORPG construe their digital identities as avatars through a quite structured process. An online game avatar has to be a socially active element within the game and has to communicate with other avatars forming the game online community. In other words, an avatar must be enabled to play a role. From a systemic functional perspective, as multimodal texts, avatars have to serve three basic communicative functions: representing any kind of experience in the
game, establishing interpersonal relationships and being perceptible in a coherent form. These are the same three communicative functions that a character has to serve in order to exist as such both in a play script and on stage. These functions are fulfilled through the realisation of three basic typologies of meanings, which are realised in all sorts of communicative acts: Experiential (those meanings that account for the representation of any kind of world experience), Interpersonal (those meanings that account for the establishment and development of relationships), and Textual (the enabling meanings that make a text cohere and be perceived as a whole). Each typology of meaning is realised by and can be studied through specific grammatical structures, where by grammatical structure multimodal semiotics means all semiotic structures available in the semiotic potential of a culture.

Meanings are constructions: each semiotic system has its own code with its own grammar. In a multimodal message, meaning is made through the interplay of several semiotic codes. Multimodal systemic functional analysis studies the discourses construed by multimodal messages: it applies the basics of Halliday’s Functional Grammar\(^1\) model to all semiotic systems, studying the semiotic interplay between different codes from a functional, unifying perspective.

This study starts by tracing the process through which an avatar, as well as a character, becomes functional and is enabled to realise the three basic kinds of meaning, and by trying to investigate what is the role that space as a semiotic dimension plays in it.

As shown in Table 1, the functional analysis of the process of creation of an avatar highlights a specific textual quality of online role-playing games: the existence of two levels of multimodal textual creation. The table takes as an example The Matrix film trilogy and its transposition into a MMORPG. It shows how meanings are transmediated from the three semiotic variables construing the Context of Situation in which the original text (the films) develops to the Hyper-Context of Potential Situation which is made available for the game players to develop their own game narratives through the use of avatars. Thus, the Context of Situation of the films becomes the Background Context of Situation of the game. The avatar, as a character, is therefore conceivable as a multimodal text in itself that is enabled to function only when inserted into a context and that, at the same time, enables the performance of a text within the game context. Locative Circumstance and avatar/character are mutually enabling multimodal realisations and their interplay creates the game text as well as the game semiotic potential.

\(^1\) Halliday’s Functional Grammar has been developed for more than thirty years; the most updated version of its model is published in the third edition of Introduction to Functional Grammar (2004).
Exactly like a stage script, the Background Context of Situation of a MMORPG provides the guidelines which determine a closed number of combinations of features among which the player will have to choose in order to create a game identity. The physical characteristics of the avatar, as multimodal Textual meanings, will realise it as a text, thus fulfilling the Textual metafunction; the avatar’s skills, determined by the choice of physical features as potential multimodal Experiential meanings will allow it to perform specific ranges of actions (or Processes) in the game environment, thus fulfilling the Experiential metafunction; the ability to form alliances with other avatars as potential multimodal Interpersonal meanings, also determined by the choice of physical features and attributes, will allow (or not allow) the avatar to establish social relationships within the game social community.

3. Stage space and meaning transmediation: the three functional dimensions.

An important difference must however be taken into consideration when discussing this parallel between MMORPG environments and theatre plays: the avatar as represented Participant in an online game and the player as interactive Participant inherently overlap, while characters on stage are independent identities. While in MMORPG players are interactive and represented Participants at the same time, a play, as well as a movie, does not allow this overlapping and maintains a clear
distinction between two different kinds of interactive Participants: the audience and the stage or movie director, who do not overlap semiotically with any of the characters on stage. The way the space on stage is experienced by the audience of a play is therefore different from the way a player experiences the hyper-space of an online game: as both interactive and represented Participants, game players are at the same time within and outside the semiotic space of the game locative Circumstance while the audience of a play, even when addressed directly, is semiotically construed as being external to it. It is the stage director, and not the audience, who mediates the interplay between the characters of a play and the locative Circumstance that will be set on stage.

The director of a play construes a representation of characters that only exist as verbal text until they are inserted in his or her own interpretation of their appropriate set and with what he or she considers to be their appropriate physical appearance. In this perspective, the director has to operate a transmediation of the meanings that construe characters in the script to the multimodal meanings that will construe the characters acting in the semiotic space of the stage set. In order to do so, the director has to provide a functional template for characters played by actors/avatars, characters who may have been originally created by the play’s author but who, in order to leave the written page, need to be transmediated into a semiotic space that enables representation in front of an external audience.

Table 2 shows a schematic representation of the process through which this transmediation is operated: the functional template for characters will be provided by the director with three functional dimensions that will enable the multimodal representation of the script in the form of a stage performance. These three dimensions will develop in space not as a physical but as a semiotic dimension itself. The interplay between the characters and the semiotic space that enables them to exist will realise a specific version of the play. Exactly as it happens with MMORPG, starting from a Background Context of Situation (the play script), the director will provide a functional dimension enabling representation for all three kinds of meanings: a Textual dimension in the form of a set or locative Circumstance that, like a hyper-environment, will be used as an affordance enabling the performance of the verbal text; an Interaction dimension that will enable interaction between characters as represented Participants within a specific locative Circumstance, and between the characters and the audience as interactive Participant who will perceive action as being represented in that specific location; and an Action dimension, allowing the performance of actions in the provided location.
Table 2 Transmediation of meanings operated by the director of a stage play.

One of the major problems when studying stage representations and theatre literature in the past is that we know very little about stage conventions that occurred in some major playwrights’ times. About the Elizabethan theatre, for example, Dessen (1984, 8-9) says in his seminal work on modern attempts at interpretation:

*A particular disturbing feature of any study of staging and stage practice is that, quite simply, we have no way of knowing how much we do not know. [...] when one turns to the stage practice and theatrical conventions of the past, especially in the plays of Shakespeare (which seem to speak to us readily across the wide gap of time), the historian or director or critic or editor can never be sure when we are talking the same language, when we are sharing the same assumptions.*

By analysing stage direction through the grid provided by Table 2 we would be able to consider all kinds of theatre performances from a homogeneous perspective that is semiotically oriented rather than being concerned with historical reconstruction or reception. This kind of study can tell us how a specific play can work as a performance in relation to the typology of stage
available, whose space is considered in its meaning-making value rather than in its physical aspect. The results would help to understand the possible ‘agreement’ that could be established between text performance and the public in terms of semiotic elaboration of the representation.

Interestingly, also Dessen seems to make a parallel between stage and movie sets (1984, 10-11) in terms of space and representation:

To audiences today, cinema may represent the epitome of realism, yet if we can, for a moment, examine our own assumptions, what is ‘real’ about sitting in a darkened auditorium, watching figures larger than life (especially in ‘close-ups’) projected onto a flat screen and seen through camera angles that often do not correspond to our normal viewing range, while listening to voices, not from the lips of the speakers, that boom around us in stereophonic sound accompanied by music from a full orchestra? Yet ‘We accept; we agree; these are the conventions.’ [...] Granted, the camera can provide far more detail for the viewer of cinema or television than could be presented on the Elizabethan stage, but complex events (a long journey, the flight of an arrow) still require selectivity in presentation that enlists our conventional responses, while in any medium exposition of essential information without some form of narrative shorthand proves very cumbersome.

The point this paper wants to make is that through the analytical perspective elaborated for the study of hyper-environments, that is to say through the application of a functional perspective to the study of available stage space, we can understand how stage narrative is, was or will be enabled by studying the text’s interplay with space as a semiotic dimension. It is precisely by agreeing to and interacting with a specific semiotic dimension proposed by the director that the audience of a play experiences the specific representation of a play.

4. An example of analysis.
As a point of departure for the application of this method of analysis, this article proposes the Elizabethan stage in relation to a movie version of it. The choice is due precisely to the many uncertainties and gaps that still exist in the study of the actual practice of theatre staging in this period, and also to the fascination it has always had on contemporary theatre and on movies that try to re-interpret it or to reconstruct it.

Elizabethan theatres were specifically thought to enable a specific kind of theatre in a specific time and for a specific society. The analysis proposed here is at its first stage of development and it is based on the basic permanent structure of stage at that time, which may allow the study of the interplay between performance space as a semiotic dimension and a great number of plays created in that period. The Textual dimension provided for representation by the
Elizabethan stage seems to be based on a functional structure that is strictly related to the verbal text and the extent to which this involves or does not involve the audience as interactive Participant. In this perspective, the stage as a locative Circumstance seems to complement the verbal text in terms of ‘positioning’, construing in interplay with it different degrees of relevance and prominence of characters and actions. As already stated, this kind of study may make up, at least in part, for the lack of precise information about many aspects of the actual stage practice in this period, as underlined by Bradley (1992, 6) in his research on the process of text staging:

*It is curious that the finest players in Europe, performing at court before the most sophisticated and learned audience England has ever known, left no independent body of theory. They looked over their shoulders at the principles of classical decorum and of the unities of time, place, and action, but for the most part they did otherwise. They spoke of Acts, but they wrote in Scenes. From this innocent habit has descended a long line of scholarly misconception of their working principles.*

Interpersonally, the basic structure of the Elizabethan stage appears to be comprised of two well distinguished levels which realise the Interaction dimension: the gallery, or ‘upper stage’, and the proscenium, or main stage. The interesting aspect of the gallery is that, it seems to be able to serve several functions in relation to the verbal text:

- it may have marked, by differentiating characters and dramatic passages in terms of positioning and prominence, different levels of importance of the characters in a play as well as of the action that took place as the play’s plot developed;
- it may have facilitated the development of the rhetorical structure of the play’s verbal text by enabling two levels of performance through which action and interaction could be realised and perceived;
- it may have often marked specific moments in the play where the audience was addressed directly and more directly involved in the characters’ personal reflections and judgements. In other words, it might have been a good spot for the performance of the Elizabethan asides, whose tradition dates back to the classical theatre the Elizabethan playwrights drew upon;
- it seems to divide the stage into two categories of visually textual display theorised by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 186 ff.): the ‘ideal’ area, the upper part of space where, in visual representation, action and interaction related to supernatural dimensions and ideal environments would conventionally take place; and the ‘real’ area, where action and interaction related to the ‘here and now’ of the representation would conventionally take place.
Experientially, the action dimension would be therefore provided with specific portions of stage whose use might have determined, at the same time, the dramatic relevance and typology of each single episode with respect to the whole play.

The proscenium was to be perceived three-dimensionally and very much outstretched towards the public, while the gallery was to be perspective perceived more as a bi-dimensional space, almost a visual link, or a multimodal ‘bridge’, between the multimodal text of the stage performance and the verbal text of the written play script.

Interestingly, this multi-dimensional quality of the semiotic space of the Elizabethan space seems to be very cleverly captured in a filmic transposition of a play based on Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead (1966, 1967) by Tom Stoppard. The film, released in 1990, is also directed by Stoppard and highlights a further aspect of the stage as multimodal text complementing the verbal text.

Analysis in the multimodal systemic functional perspective has been performed on various movie narrative sequences: one in particular seems to be very useful to show how the method of analysis proposed here works. The sequence in question (1:26:54 to 1:28:22) is the one where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern watch as spectators the audience (the King and Queen) of the puppets’ dumb show in Hamlet (where the king and Queen themselves are represented). The play within the play is therefore mirrored once again for the movie audience. In terms of Elizabethan stage, which is what Stoppard seems to be willing to reproduce throughout the movie, the representation is realised as shown in Fig. 1.

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2 The term “narrative sequence” is used here as in Maiorani (forthcoming): “by narrative sequence is meant here a coherent micro-episode of the movie script which is realised multimodally in the movie as a specific, distinguishable and narratively relevant sequence. This choice takes into consideration both the point of view of a playwright who structures the plot according to specific and coherent episodes whose progression determines the texture of the script, and the director’s point of view, who actually construes their version of the script as a macro-narrative sequence composed by a series of textured narrative sequences”.
The analysis of this particular sequence shows that Stoppard provides his movie characters with the same structure and functional dimensions of the Elizabethan stage:

- the puppets perform the ‘play within the play’ in what could be considered a gallery; interpersonally they ‘speak’ both to the King and Queen who are watching them and to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as well as to the movie audience. The puppets enact in the ‘ideal’ area of the semiotic space the truth that Hamlet thinks to know after his encounter with his father’s ghost and that is not yet revealed in the ‘real world’;
- the action performed by the puppets in the gallery has to do with something that in the play, as well as in the movie, can not yet be proved to be real, a supernatural apparition. However, this dumb show, like an aside, provides the audience with an insight into the plot;
- the King and Queen are represented as being on stage on the proscene, in the ‘real world’ of the ongoing play, while the movie protagonists, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are represented as being the audience. From this position, the Queen and King trigger again the main action (that which develops in the ‘here and now’ of the movie plot) when the dumb
show is interrupted. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern look at them as spectators, the King and Queen are represented as wearing masks, as if the two protagonists, being themselves characters, could not escape their nature and their semiotic dimension by getting outside the ongoing play. When they become involved again in the main action triggered by the sovereigns, thus becoming part of the main stage, the King and Queen do not wear masks anymore.

The whole sequence representation holds on to this multi-dimensional structure, which can be reconstructed and studied through a multimodal functional analysis. Interestingly, at the end of this filmic narrative sequence, when the representation turns to the ‘here and now’ of the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern perform one of their *asides* while getting to the *gallery* provided by the movie set. The same thing does Hamlet while emphatically commenting on the outcome of the players’ representation.

5. Conclusions.

In another interesting sequence of the film (0:12:44 to 0:20:23), the two protagonists meet the company of actors and puppeteers on their way to Elsinore; their leader, who looks very much like Shakespeare himself, immediately addresses them as “an audience”, and turns the large carriage where he is travelling with the rest of the company into a rudimental Elizabethan stage that deploys before them. At the beginning of the story, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves on their way Elsinore and with no memory of their past or of why and how they started their journey; when they first meet the comedians, it is as if Stoppard was trying to remind them that they are nothing more than characters created for the semiotic space of a stage and that they cannot be anything else nor function outside that space. When later, in the filmic narrative sequence analysed above, they become spectators of the audience of the puppet show, Stoppard plays on the border between the characters’ dimension in the film and the character’s dimension as elements of a play themselves. In the film as well as in the stage play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trapped in their own essence of stage characters by the very nature of stage as a semiotic dimension that is ‘apart’ from the outside world of the audience. Even as an audience they can not but watch the very play they belong to and which is thought and realised for the specific structure of the Elizabethan stage.

What this analysis also reveals is that Stoppard seems to test his Elizabethan characters against the semiotic dimension of the film set space, and that he seems to realise the fact that the semiotic dimension of stage is of a specific kind and that if a play and its characters are written for a specific stage as a semiotic affordance they will only work in interplay with that, and that alone.
The analysis performed on various narrative sequences of the movie confirms that whenever Rosencrantz and Guildenstern move away from the main stage or the gallery reconstructed in the film locations they are lost and without a clue.

These results also highlight the fact that while a film, as a multimodal text, develops in different functional dimensions, the stage play develops in functional dimensions whose structure always acknowledges the presence of a public and is therefore always realised in a locative Circumstance which can not enclose the action and interaction in its entirety. The semiotic space of the stage is always apart from and aware of the semiotic space of the audience.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, this analysis is just a first basic attempt at applying multimodal discourse analysis to the semiotic dimension of stage using perspectives that have been developed by studying interaction in online hyper-environments. If applied to other typologies of stage structure, this kind of analysis may reveal interesting patterns both in the way a single play has been staged in different historical periods and in the way stage conventions have evolved in time according to the development of theatre literature and technical affordances.

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