

Narrating the past in the present

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Paul Bouissac

The Semiotics of Performances

London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025, 184 pp. (hbk, ISBN 9781350372665, £52.50, pbk ISBN 9781350372658, £16.79, ebk ISBN 9781350372672, £21.59)

1. Intersections of performance, culture, and artistic practice

Paul Bouissac, Professor Emeritus at Victoria College, University of Toronto, has recently published *The Semiotics of Performances*, an engaging and intellectually rigorous contribution to Performance Studies. The book traces the complete trajectory of live performance, from its initial conception through its realization, promotion, and subsequent critical analysis. The subtitle, *An Introduction to the Analysis, Interpretation, and Theory of the Performing Arts*, aptly reflects its scope, guiding readers through a cohesive exploration of performance semiotics and providing a concise yet comprehensive overview.

Across 170 pages, Bouissac offers a synthesis of his extensive scholarship, presenting a lucid, exploratory, and critical account of performance as a semiotic phenomenon. The book demonstrates the refined perspective of a scholar widely recognized as a pioneer in circus studies. Bouissac's previous works – *Circus as Multimodal Discourse*, *The End of the Circus*, *The Meaning of the Circus*, *Saussure: A Guide For The Perplexed* and *The Semiotics of Clowns and Clowning* – have established him as a founding figure in the field. In this latest volume, he distills decades of research into a profound and accessible framework, offering both a theoretical foundation and an analytical toolkit for examining performances across diverse cultural and artistic contexts.

ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: 11

Issue: 01

Summer 2025

ISSN: 2459-2943

DOI: 10.18680/hss.2025.0013

Pages: 251-255

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2. Semiotics of the ephemeral ‘here and now’ of performances as multimodal ‘texts’

In twenty-first-century scholarship on the semiotics of performance, the concept that immediately comes to the fore is mainly the multiplicity of performance forms that rely on the actor’s body and incorporate cutting-edge technological means to produce multimodal results in various indoor and outdoor spaces. These may include artistic events or even pure improvisations that semiotics approaches from its transversal and cross-sectional perspective. Bouissac’s study applies a lens that is at once sharply focused and broadly inclusive, generously integrating interdisciplinary approaches.

More specifically, *The Semiotics of Performances* innovatively supplements foundational 20th-century studies on the subject (Elam, 1980; Fischer-Lichte, 1983; De Marinis, 1993) with examples drawn from our contemporary performative present, focusing on live performances conceived as multimodal ‘texts’. The book provides readers with the conceptual tools necessary for a systematic semiotic interpretation and addresses a wide range of potential audiences – students, practitioners, and researchers in Theatre, Performance, and Cultural Studies – engaged with or interested in analyzing performance. Bouissac’s perspective simultaneously opens the discussion to interdisciplinary approaches, including pragmatics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. This analysis is combined with his guidelines for understanding the communicative processes through which the “here and now” of the ephemeral performative event is captured, opening further possibilities for interpretation. His perspective is articulated within the framework of a semiotic approach that draws on seminal linguistic models, including those of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and Karl Bühler.

3. A valuable twist: From top-down to bottom-up study in Performance Semiotics

In this interpretive framework, as explicitly stated in the Preface, the structure of each chapter is based on a precise perspective that overturns the established “top-down approach” long regarded as the dominant method in semiotics. Instead, the author proposes a “bottom-up approach,” which structures the chapters by beginning with concrete examples of live performances in recorded form and then proceeding to their analysis through appropriate theoretical models (e.g., Jakobson’s, Shannon and Weaver’s, Greimas’s narrative schema, etc.). More precisely, chapters have an internal division into four parts: “the basics”, an “advanced discussion” that interconnects praxis and theory, a short “bibliography”, and supplementary texts for additional reading, suitable for both individual engagement and collaborative discussion within pedagogical settings.

The “bottom-up approach” represents a valuable innovation for the reader. It is inspired by Bouissac’s *teaching* praxis, specifically his syllabus for the course *Understanding the Performing Arts: Interpretation and Expression*, taught at Victoria College, University of Toronto, in 2020. Yet this reverse tactic proves valuable for readers from any disciplinary background, not only because it operates synthetically, moving from the specific to the theoretical, but also because it begins with paradigms familiar to the reader (examples of performances selected and made available online by the author) and proceeds toward the presentation of a holistic conceptual framework of analysis, focusing on the microstructures that shape any kind of live performance.

In this respect, the companion website accompanying the book provides an additional resource and links to supporting audiovisual material and exercises suggested for each chapter.

In this sense of expansion, applied to the performances under study, Bouissac employs diagrams and schematic guidelines that engage with the practice itself: the human being as actant. Extending his reflection further, every bipolar approach in the performing arts –such as the much-discussed diptych “performer–audience”– is analyzed into its components based on the different factors that define the relationship between addresser and the addressee (communication process and feedback, emotions, cultural devices, etc.) within the shared cultural rules (code) in a concrete context (e.g., space and time as determining factors).

4. Narrating the Past in the Present

The ten chapters of the book begin with an examination of performances as communication (Chapter 1) and as creative process (Chapter 2), introducing both expert and non-expert readers to the two-way relationship between performer and audience, while also emphasizing the dual nature of the performer (person and persona) and the construction of performing identities (Chapter 3). The first example offered is the clown, as an homage and a recognition of his value by a scholar who has dedicated more than half a century to studying circus performances, investigating human internal and emotional labor, melancholy, and loneliness in their deepest forms. Bouissac highlights the profound but semiotically formulated tension in the clown’s face: the need to break the bonds of the laughing mask. This façade conceals another self even as it seeks to amuse audiences of all ages.

From this starting point, the book explores the dimensions of performances as social processes (Chapter 4) and as affective (Chapter 5) and cognitive experiences, discussing the narrative structures and relevance (Chapter 6). Through this theoretical lens, performances are regarded as holistic texts and are examined in terms of metaphor and through the roles enacted in everyday life. Chapter 7 presents models for the

analysis and interpretation of live performances, taking as its point of departure the performance conceived as a multimodal and multisensorial “text” situated within its context. The chapter includes a subsection entitled “How to make a verbal copy of a performance,” which provides a clear and concise descriptive guide to this process.

At this stage, the author broadens his reflection into fields such as social impact, reflexivity, and transformative experience. The range of semiotic objects widens further, encompassing contemporary forms such as drama, opera, circus (clowns and acrobats), ballet, concerts, stand-up comedy, fashion shows, and the Street Play Movement, among others. These forms are analyzed through their political, social, moral, and cross-cultural dimensions. For instance, in addressing the transformative power of performance and drawing on the work of Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), Bouissac approaches the phenomenon of emblematic “extreme performances” taking Marina Abramović as a key example (Chapter 9, pp. 150-152). Special attention should be given to one of the book’s most notable strengths: the supplementary readings, among which stand out the author’s field experience in Mumbai (91-92), «A Clown Performance» (pp. 119-126), and, perhaps most significantly, «Performance Poetry: Practice» (pp. 75-78) –a personal communication with Chris Arning. The latter lends itself to being read as a theatrical autobiographical monologue, or a statement of a poet’s analytical reflections on the performer’s own struggles. Unlike the performer, whose role is directly tied to enactment, the poet’s direct exposition to the audience may appear unfamiliar. In this narration, body (performer) and soul (poet) converge into a single entity: the exhibited presence of the poet-performer-creator (from the ancient Greek verb *poieō*, “to create”).

But how is it possible to narrate the past in the present? What makes a performance successful or disappointing? And, at a deeper scientific level, what accounts for the difference between a positive and a negative audience experience? (Chapter 10, p. 157). The final chapter, entitled «The Roles of Performance: The Felicity Conditions», provides a “conceptual toolkit” and “practical guidelines” for performers, critics, and spectators, along with their “insightful diagnostic” (p. 158). The book concludes with an examination of the rules of performance (the Felicity Conditions) presented as practical guidelines for effective performance: be accountable, communicate effectively, be relevant, and be proper.

Overall, *The Semiotics of Performances* examines contemporary live performances with a forward-looking perspective, presenting a holistic account of the enacted experience that foregrounds the dynamics of the body-sign. In this respect, Paul Bouissac offers a thought-provoking textbook that equips readers with extensive theoretical tools and analytical models to foster critical thinking.

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