

Semiotics around the World: Synthesis in Diversity

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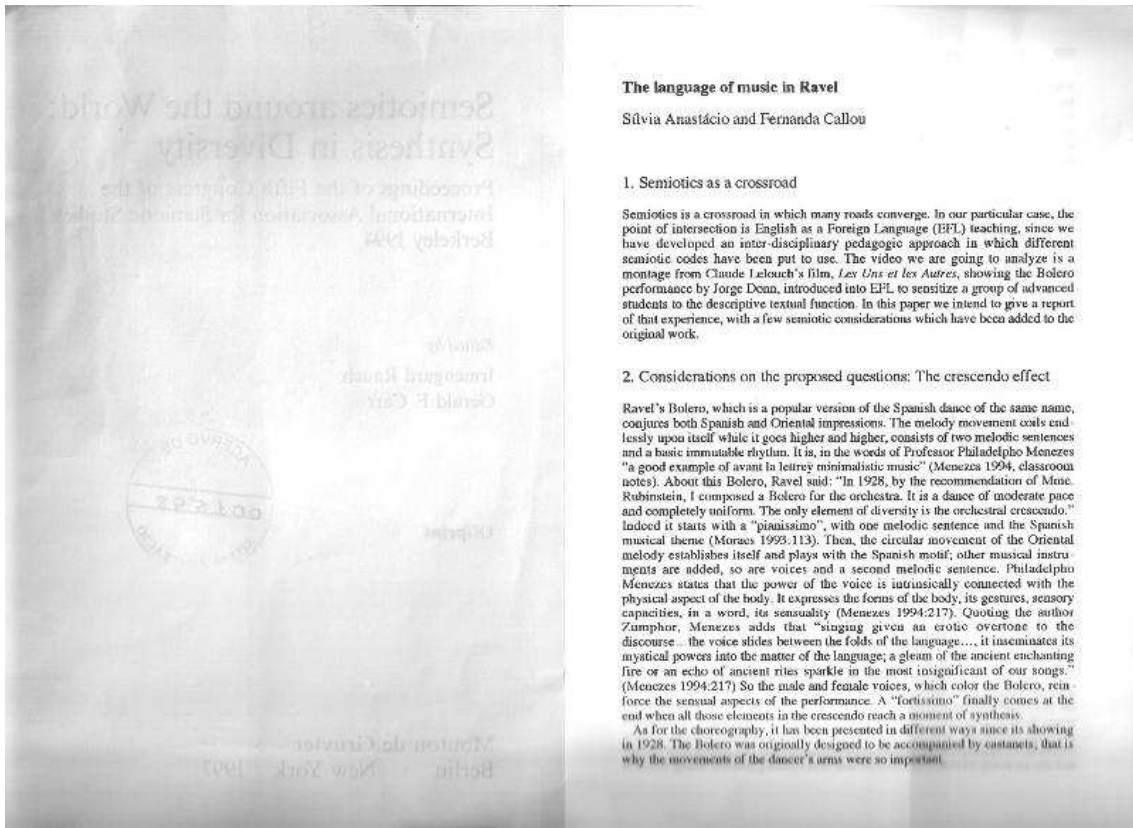
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The language of music in Ravel

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1. Semiotics as a crossroad

Semiotics is a crossroad in which many roads converge. In our particular case, the point of intersection is English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, since we have developed an inter-disciplinary pedagogic approach in which different semiotic codes have been put to use. The video we are going to analyze is a montage from Claude Lelouch's film, *Les Uns et les Autres*, showing the Bolero performance by Jorge Donn, introduced into EFL to sensitize a group of advanced students to the descriptive textual function. In this paper we intend to give a report of that experience, with a few semiotic considerations which have been added to the original work.

2. Considerations on the proposed questions: The crescendo effect

Ravel's Bolero, which is a popular version of the Spanish dance of the same name, conjures both Spanish and Oriental impressions. The melody movement coils endlessly upon itself while it goes higher and higher, consists of two melodic sentences and a basic immutable rhythm. It is, in the words of Professor Philadelpho Menezes "a good example of avant la lettre minimalist music" (Menezes 1994, classroom notes). About this Bolero, Ravel said: "In 1928, by the recommendation of Mme. Rubinstein, I composed a Bolero for the orchestra. It is a dance of moderate pace and completely uniform. The only element of diversity is the orchestral crescendo." Indeed it starts with a "pianissimo", with one melodic sentence and the Spanish mystical theme (Moras 1993:113). Then, the circular movement of the Oriental melody establishes itself and plays with the Spanish motif; other musical instruments are added, so are voices and a second melodic sentence. Philadelpho Menezes states that the power of the voice is intrinsically connected with the physical aspect of the body. It expresses the forms of the body, its gestures, sensory capacities, in a word, its sensuality (Menezes 1994:217). Quoting the author Zampfor, Menezes adds that "singing gives an erotic overtone to the discourse... the voice slides between the folds of the language... it insinuates its mystical powers into the matter of the language; a gleam of the ancient enchanting fire or an echo of ancient rites sparkle in the most insignificant of our songs." (Menezes 1994:217) So the male and female voices, which color the Bolero, reinforce the sensual aspects of the performance. A "fortissimo" finally comes at the end when all those elements in the crescendo reach a moment of synthesis.

As for the choreography, it has been presented in different ways since its showing in 1928. The Bolero was originally designed to be accompanied by castanets, that is why the movements of the dancer's arms were so important.

When the original choreography opens, a curtain rises on a smoky tavern in Barcelona. A woman enters dressed as a Gypsy, with a Spanish comb, a scarlet and black shawl. Atop a table, she stamps out the rhythm. Instantly the room fills with men. The music grows in passion and the woman is joined in the dance, first by one, then by more than a dozen men. Knives are drawn and an atmosphere of fight is created. The Gypsy woman is tossed from arm to arm. Suddenly all comes to a stop as the music reaches its climax and the curtain falls. That Gypsy is the icon of the fatal, mystical woman, who allures the collective imagination. That basic structure of a woman encircled by a ring of men is covered by the choreographer Maurice Bejart in the film. First it is only the male human body of the main dancer, a living sign in ecstasy, a monad with a group of dancers sitting around. Then, that sense of vertigo is amplified and a kind of conflict is established when, two by two, men stand up and join him, marking the rhythm. Jorge Donn has a wider variety of movements than the other dancers, each time incorporating new gestures to the choreography. There is an upwards force that enlivens him as if Donn wanted to transcend himself; first through the movement of his arms projecting themselves upwards; then through the leaps and twistings of his body. The expression of his face which gets more and more energetic, as well as his disheveled hair, both help to contribute to that effect of crescendo primarily conveyed through Ravel's music as all instruments of the orchestra kept joining in, summoned by the energetic conductor. There is also a downward force that often makes Donn contract his body as if he were retreating to his roots, engaged in a mystical ritual, frenetically tapping on the ground. And the seductive motif, suggested at the very beginning through the main dancer's movements of the hips is gradually built up till it gets to a moment of orgasmic climax when all dancers project themselves upwards. At the very end, after the climatic moment, there is a second of relieved exhaustion when all bodies incline themselves to the floor, forming a big circle, in perfect unison. The end is a reiteration of the initial form: the Bolero starts with a big red circle and ends with a circle of men, which crystallizes a circuit of human energy. It is a moment of synthesis represented through a conventional sign, the circle.

As Bejart states, the Bolero belongs to the dancer that interprets it (Bejart 1979:128). Indeed, his choreography seems to fill in the space between the melody and the dance in an extraordinary way and Donn is quite "mystical" in the sense that Bejart uses the term when he talks about the special ballet dancer who manages to "assimilate music" in such a way that "his body becomes alive with music" by translating the invisible melody into something visible, palpable: "it's an alchemy," he concludes (Bejart 1979:129).

It is interesting to observe that the crescendo also reflects on the audience. The extraordinary director Claude Lelouch has managed to explore that effect in the close-ups and travelings of his camera. So, those people who were bored at the beginning, got more and more bored, even fell asleep at the end of the show. Those who were enjoying it, seemed more and more pleased as the performance moved on. We could also refer to certain people at home: the most solitary person who seems to be the most emotional of all, is listening to his radio in a state of "épouche". A couple in bed, get more intimate under the influence of the Bolero and so is a couple in the audience, especially when the young man puts his arms around the girl and she responds to that. There is also that man wearing glasses, sitting beside a

grey-haired woman. Throughout the whole performance he insistently tries to catch her eyes. In the film they are married but she has lost her memory and cannot recognize him. As the Bolero played an important part in their past, he probably dreams about a flash of light in her memory. So, he keeps looking at her, in an attempt to understand what is going on in her mind. Claude Lelouch is an extraordinary director who manages to project the spectator into the mind of the character. He often creates a kind of empathy between the spectator and the character, and he manages that by paying minute attention to the eyes of the characters. In his close-ups, Lelouch frames not only deep and meaningful looks, but quite often he justly waits until the mouth can enrich the smile that begun in the eyes. His camera keeps attentive close-ups of multiple expressive angles suggested by Jorge Donn, in an attempt to capture his muscles, gestures, looks, even the movement of his hair. The force of that visual image, that iconic element is Lelouch's point of departure. But he is a "voyeur" of the World, he does dynamic cuts and moves his camera in incessant traveling which alternates takes of the performance with views of spectators "in loco" or at home, besides showing scenes of Paris, with its colored lights on at night. Lelouch's camera sweeps every detail and, as a final touch to that sense of grandeur, there comes the monumental Eiffel Tower into the background, bathed in the bluish light of the reflectors.

3. The performance location as part of a meaningful whole

The location where the performance occurs is emblematic of a new age, a new man reborn. The Eiffel Tower, built for the French exhibition in 1889, stood for the "triumph of iron" (Rouanet 1992:60). It is "a lyrical expression of the new industrial era" (Berman 1993:225), a living poem, that hand in hand with Ravel's Bolero, celebrates Paris liberated from the scenes of humiliation of World War II, extraordinarily shown by Lelouch in the film. It celebrates the present age. According to Baudillard, the cult of the body is also the evidence of a new age and the body as a sign, liberated through eroticism, translates the modern ideology (Baudillard 1991:144-145). As Santaelia suggests, architecture can be seen as a "cutting of reality, as the product of praxis: it presents several layers of significance superimposed on each other, whose articulation it is possible to perceive and interpret" (Santaelia 1989:133); "reality can talk many languages" (Santaelia 1989:143).

The Eiffel Tower may be interpreted in its primary form as an icon, the quality of the material that has been used—iron—is here stressed, suggesting with its architectonic forms, a project behind it. But, if we set that architectonic element in a specific time and space (in the heart of Paris, 1889, or even today, since it is still there), it can be an index, a focus pointing in several directions. Its form indicates a certain function (it was built as a tower of communications); it also points to its support system, since it sums up the technical characteristics of the society by which it was designed. Finally, the manner that syntagma articulates itself and is articulated in the urban space reflects the power of a specific society. So the Eiffel Tower, with all those intricate arches and beams made of iron, planted in the center of Paris, makes it a living historical document of the Industrial Age, of the Age of

Democracy. "The index is the only sign that has History and memory." Finally, that monument can be a symbol. It represents a certain style, determined by systematic social rules or canons. "Architecture becomes a type of language, which conveys an articulated message" (Santucci 1980:141). According to Piaget, "the perceptive individual or in the collective memory... it equally projects itself into the future environment development... It is diachronic reading" (Santucci 1980:175) which allows multiple views of reality.

4. Final comments: the role of perceptive schemes

As an illustration of different kinds of perception inspired by the same sort of stimuli, it would be interesting to make comments on different paintings done by the students from the EFL group previously mentioned in this paper. Under the effect of Ravel's stimuli, each student produced his own "work of art". But in spite of the fact that those intersensory translations proved to be quite singular, they all shared some common characteristics: all of them indicated a crescendo in color or in form, and they all reproduced curving lines or circles, thus mimicking the melodic movement. Students used hot tones (red, orange, and yellow) and cold tones (blue and bluish green), the colors that dominate the ballet scenes. As for the intersensory experience reported here, it is in tune with the Suggestopedic technique: the idea of integrating music into the classroom environment is an attempt to make the language acquisition process more effective.

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