

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL (PH.D.) DISSERTATION

**SIGNIFYING IN BLACKFACE: THE PURSUIT OF
MINSTREL SIGNS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

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I. OBJECTIVES AND STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation, submitted in English, takes its subject from the area of American Studies and presents the results of a cultural-semiotic investigation. It primarily examines how the elements of a 19th-century popular theatrical tradition, commonly known as the *blackface minstrel show*, dispersed in the larger American (USA) culture; and how these culture-specific semiotic units or, *minstrel signs*, evolved ultimately as constitutive elements in literary texts. The minstrel sign is defined in the dissertation as a culture-bearing semiotic unit which in itself is capable of metonymically evoking the institution and historical context of the 19th-century American minstrel theater and tradition, while merging into itself minstrelsy's complex political, social and ideological aspects. The research has been governed by three major objectives: (1) To identify and provide a typological classification of the minstrel signs of the minstrel theater. (2) Exploring the economic and ideological aspects of the relevant minstrel signs, which enabled as well as necessitated the extensive cultural dissemination of minstrel signs. (3) To analyze the specific cultural impact of this fundamentally theatrical-semiotic system of signs; with a special emphasis on the complex formative influence of minstrel signs upon the structure and meaning of American literature.

The examination is premised on two obvious and universal propositions: (1) literary texts tend to encode a large bulk of culture-specific information which remains hidden from the uninitiated reader who lacks sufficient cultural knowledge to decode these messages; (2) the elaboration of the semiotic network of specific cultural traditions might contribute to a more refined understanding of cultural messages encoded in literary texts. The present work aims to substantiate the premises of cultural continuity and cultural literacy underlying the above statements by a concrete example, the identification of the semiotic system of minstrel signs.

The introduction of the term "minstrel sign" was prompted by various cultural inputs apart from the recognition of the minstrel sign's apparent potential as a constitutive element in literature: (1) The heritage of the classic minstrel show (1843-1880) is still viable. Its influence has penetrated American cultural life, especially the entertainment industry, from the popular stage (vaudeville, revue) through film, popular and high literature, radio and television to consumer goods (see minstrel relics and the advertising industry). That the minstrel phenomenon as such grew beyond the confines of the cultural institution (the minstrel theater) which brought it to life, and that its life-span expanded well over that of the institution which supplied its immediate cultural context can be explained but one way.

Namely, that the minstrel phenomenon, which arose from the institutional framework of the minstrel theater, incorporated from the outset such building blocks—in my conceptual framework: minstrel signs—which were not only meaningful in themselves, but could easily be transferred over and become part of any cultural text foreign to its institutional origins. (2) The definition of minstrel signs on the other hand was triggered by another, more general cultural necessity. It is a commonplace fact that various cultural mediums bombard us with billions of signs every single day and only few of these cultural signs become meaningful to us even when consciously recognized. To enable the cultural recipient to filter out and pay special attention to the historically meaningful fragments, something else is required to enhance interest in these signs. With the identification of the term minstrel signs, with the definition of their meaning, the description of their semiotic classes, the diagnosis of their ideological and other cultural contexts and with the illumination of their significance as constitutive elements in literary texts I hoped to respond to a wider cultural demand. The need to restore the meaning of certain forgotten yet still actively signaling segments of the American cultural past by making this special class of signifiers easily recognizable and unique among the other signs.

The dissertation follows the structural division outlined in its title, namely, it can be divided into two main parts. The first half of the study elaborates the notion of "blackface signification," while the second half substantiates the literary influence of minstrelsy's signifying arsenal.

Chapter I reviews those theoretical schools which have served as sources and backgrounds for the research project. Out of this large conglomerate a Cultural Studies discipline (*Minstrelsy Criticism*) and a highly relevant school of literary criticism (*theater and drama semiotics*) determine the thematic, structural scope and—not less importantly—the language of this dissertation. The different waves of Minstrelsy Criticism have been given privileged role in this dissertation. This project is especially indebted to the third wave of Minstrelsy Criticism, which, while shifting critical attention away from issues of race—previously argued to be central to minstrelsy's undertaking—emphasizes the significance of other alternative discourses for minstrelsy. The second significant theoretical source is supplied by the critical discourses of theater and drama semiotics, which has profoundly shaped the semiotic analysis of the minstrel theater. Utilizing the lessons drawn from general theories of theater and drama semiotics, I introduce the concept of "minstrel sign," outline its fundamental characteristics and define its signifying function. Based on the core theatrical unit of the minstrel sign, thematic levels of theatrical communication within the minstrel show

are set up, isolating (1) the structural, (2) the literary/generic, (3) the aesthetic, (4) the linguistic and (5) physical (or bodily) semiotic levels therein. In the system thus devised these thematic levels besides connoting the vertical semiotic levels of theatrical communication also signify the thematic classes of minstrel signs. Accordingly, this part of the project identifies *structural* minstrel signs of: the minstrel parade, the semicircular stage arrangement, the tripartite format; *literary/generic* minstrel signs: minstrel songs, the stump speech, conundrums, puns, and the minstrel dance; *aesthetic* minstrel signs: the minstrel mimicry, the minstrel grotesque and minstrel stereotypes; *linguistic* minstrel signs: the minstrel dialect, malapropism, homonyms and homophones; and *physical* (or bodily) minstrel signs: the minstrel mask, the minstrel attire, physical features, and minstrel cross-dressing, as distinctive signs within the individual thematic classes.

Chapter II details the historical and cultural origins of the above thematically classified and vertically arranged minstrel signs, also noting their specific application and functioning within the signifying arsenal of the minstrel theater. When it seems necessary, I also comment on the wider cultural relevance and implication of these special signs, while identifying their interconnections with other universal cultural phenomena or aesthetic qualities, also stressing their subsequent cultural relevance and after-life. With the identification of the complete semiotic repertoire of the minstrel theater, the chapter furnishes the reader with a novel methodological tool, which might enable the easy recognition of minstrel signs in literature, and could further facilitate their identification as relevant culturally meaningful units in whatever “foreign” cultural context they might resurface.

Chapter III is an intermediary division in more senses than one. On the one hand it indicates those general economic and ideological processes which triggered the rise of the previously enumerated minstrel signs, as well as places them in the larger American social and cultural context while highlighting the motivations of their emergence. On the other hand this chapter paves the way for the literary analyses in Chapters IV and V, as it points to those economic, cultural and ideological processes which fuelled the cultural popularity and dissemination of the same signs. Without this explanation neither the significance of the previously set-up semiotic system nor the unique life-span of the minstrel signs, detectable also through their literary survival, would be intelligible.

While the first three chapters highlight the concept of “blackface signification” identified in the first part of the dissertation’s title from the semiotization of the minstrel show through the classification of its signs, to the elaboration of their ideological contents, the second half of the work from Chapter IV onwards, as indicated in the dissertation’s subtitle,

details the relevance of blackface signification for American literary expressiveness. Chapters IV and V illustrate the formative influence of the minstrel sign upon authorial discourses while constantly acknowledging the ways in which this novel methodological tool might enrich the scope of literary interpretation. Although in the past several critical studies commented on the significance of the minstrel phenomenon in shaping contemporaneous culture and society, thus far nobody has undertaken a systematic analysis of the canonized literary corpus from the aspect of minstrel signification.

The analysis of the 19th-century literary corpus will concentrate the exploration of the literary survival of the minstrel sign around four major works: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" (1855) and *The Confidence-Man; His Masquerade* (1857), and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). The impact of the minstrel sign in the 20th century is extended to the realm of poetry and drama as well. The first section of these analyses will focus on works where minstrel signs emerge as substantive compositional features. Here I will include Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs* (1964), and black dramatist Ntozake Shange's *spell #7* as my main illustrative examples. The sporadic literary minstrel references will be explored through the brief re-reading of Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" (1955), John Barth's *The Floating Opera* (1956), and Thomas Berger's novel *Little Big Man* (1964). The final objective of these analyses is to stress that there are numerous literary texts from the past two centuries in the reading and comprehension of which the minstrel sign is not merely a possible but also a necessary critical tool.

The final chapter, Chapter VI, highlights the meeting points between this research and translation theory. In the scope of a brief comparative study once again it emphasizes the overall objective of the work, namely to make culture and literature more intelligible through the incorporation of the insights offered by novel interpretative techniques; thus also enriching the horizon of American Studies.

II. THE THEORETICAL SOURCES, CRITICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY OF THE DISSERTATION

The completed project combines as well as extends the achievements of two theoretical discourses by applying their methodologies, language and critical tools to the subject matter at hand. On the one hand it introduces and also develops further the scholarly objectives and results of the field identified in the dissertation as *Minstrelsy Studies*; on the other hand, it combines the critical discourses of Minstrelsy Studies with the field of literary criticism known as theater and drama semiotics.

Minstrelsy Studies focuses on the phenomenon of the 19th-century blackface minstrel show, under the auspices of which white middle-class entertainers imitated blacks within the legitimate theater. The third major wave of Minstrelsy Criticism, i.e., contemporary minstrel theory, is centered around the initiative of re-contextualizing the minstrel phenomenon by casting it outside of the racist context. This recent critical wave, which has gradually gained prominence from the 1970s onward, does not only stress the complexities ingrained with the discourses of the minstrel show and emphasize the significance of identifying within minstrelsy thematic layers other than the racialized subtexts, but it also reveals the importance of drawing into the scope of research those forgotten documents and sources which might lead to a more refined understanding of minstrelsy. The new approaches in Minstrelsy Studies include the exploration of the **gender and class politics** of minstrelsy (Eric Lott); the **forgotten genres** of the minstrel stage (William J. Mahar); the connections between universal **popular theatricals and festivals** and the minstrel theater (Dale Cockrell); the minstrel dance as a compositional element in **cultural lore cycles** (W. T. Lhamon, Jr.). Through the introduction of the individual categories of minstrel signs the dissertation incorporates the findings of these novel theoretical approaches, yet it also points beyond, to a possible—and even further expandable—critical path in highlighting the semiotic dimension of the minstrel theater.

The second theoretical and methodological source is taken from the area of literary criticism. In order to develop the semiotic system of the minstrel theater it was necessary to review and also adjust to the subject matter at hand the problem areas, terminological repertoire and typologies of the field called the semiotics of theater and drama. Relying on the theoretical achievements of theater semiotics—emphasizing the contributions of the representative figures of the Prague School, especially Jan Mukařovský, Petr Bogatyrev, Karl

Brušak, the works of the Polish and French structuralists, Tadeusz Kowzan, Roland Barthes and Patrice Pavis, and incorporating the theoretical groundwork of contemporary theater and drama semioticians such as Keir Elam, Elaine Aston és George Savona, as well as Ferdinand de Toro—I have developed a semiotics of the theatrical communication within minstrelsy. The dissertation highlights two areas from the former theoretical investigations: (1) the problem and concept of the theatrical core unit, and (2) the taxonomies developed to classify and systematize this semiotic core. Most theoretical hypotheses devoted to the isolation of the theatrical core unit conclude that the concept of “the sign” approximates this notion most closely (while adding that this label is not definitive either—given the complex problem of the varying orders of magnitude among theatrical signs—nor exclusively the property of theatrical discourse). Summarizing the conclusions drawn from the semiotics of theater, I propose the concept of “the minstrel sign,” and the dissertation takes this complex core semiotic, theatrical and cultural unit as its basis. In accordance with the theoretical foundations supplied by the semiotics of theater and drama I isolate the various formal and thematic varieties of the minstrel sign, which in themselves also connote the complex vertical stratification of the discourses of the minstrel theater. Although as compared with the general taxonomies offered by theatrical semioticians the semiotic systematization of minstrelsy’s discourses is necessarily simplified, the vertical semiotic layers identified might suggest novel approaches to rethinking theatrical communication in general.

The cultural-semiotic unit of the minstrel sign does not serve as an exclusive basis for the semiotics of minstrelsy. The cultural and ideological processes outlined, as well as the analysis of literary texts also incorporate this core unit, its semiotic, cultural, ideological and social dimensions as their point of origin.

Beyond the above detailed theoretical influences, the dissertation also builds upon the resources of original minstrel documents and source materials. Two extended scholarships in the United States greatly assisted me in the incorporation of primary minstrel materials into this work. Accordingly, the dissertation emphasizes the significance as well as the indispensability of these sources in the recovery of the original thematic layers and for a more faithful reconstruction of the one-time context of the minstrel show.

III. PROFESSIONAL AND SCHOLARLY RESULTS

[1] The main accomplishment of the dissertation is that, by bringing together formerly isolated discourses of literary and cultural theory, it is capable of highlighting for the reader heretofore dormant semiotic layers within familiar cultural and canonized literary texts. By wedding previously distinct cultural discourses, I do not only aim to underline the mutually enriching influence of these discourses upon one another, but I also wish to point to the basic cultural worth and practical value of novel interpretations that thus emerge.

[2] With the development of the semiotic system of the blackface minstrel theater I offer a new critical tool for the reading and analysis of literary texts. The semiotics of minstrelsy also serves as model for a new critical methodology, which might foreground the development of further similar cultural-semiotic systems in the future. The application of these systems as critical tools in the reading of literature might invigorate the understanding of those cultural references that literary texts encode.

[3] The general thematic stratification of blackface minstrelsy's semiotic system might be used as a point of reference in rethinking general rules and specific instances of theatrical communication.

[4] The dissertation emphasizes that minstrel signs, quite similarly to other theatrical sign systems, are not only functional units which are responsible exclusively for the smooth but mechanical operation of particular levels of theatrical communication. Almost all theatrical signs are ideologically attuned, and the identification of these ideologies is indispensable for the proper acknowledgement of the complex social, historical, political contexts of popular as well as art theaters.

[5] The analysis of 19th and 20th-century American literary texts illustrates the formative influence of the previously identified theatrical- and cultural-semiotic system of signs in practice. Instead of the mechanical enumeration of minstrel signs, these literary analyses attempt to classify those authorial strategies and ideological leanings which the texts in question display.

[6] The outlines of the semiotics of the specific theatrical system may obviously promote a more subtle understanding of literary texts, since it helps unearthing those dormant cultural references which are encoded in them. The completed research project thus advances a better comprehension of American literature in particular and the larger American culture in general. The typological system developed will hopefully facilitate the wider cultural recognition of minstrel culture. In its modest way the dissertation also wishes to contribute to the great mission of cultural translation.

IV. PUBLICATIONS IN THE THEMATIC RANGE OF THE DISSERTATION

Monography:

1. Virágos, Zsolt—Varró Gabriella. *Jim Crow örökösei: Mítosz és sztereotípiá az amerikai társadalmi tudatban és kultúrában*. [The Heritage of Jim Crow: Myth and Stereotype in American Cultural Consciousness and Culture] Budapest: Eötvös, 2002. 370 pp

Articles:

1. “Blackface Minstrelsy: An Alternative Discourse on Dominance.” *HJEAS* [Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies] 2. 1 (1996): 57-71.
2. “The Theme of Comic Love in Blackface Minstrelsy: The Anatomy of the Grotesque.” *EJAS* [Eger Journal of American Studies] 3 (1996): 87-114.
3. “Deconstructing the Myth of the Other: Blackface Minstrelsy as a Postmodern Discourse on Race.” *British and American Studies* 4 (1999): 113-120.
4. “The Minstrel Sign Revisited: A Reading of Herman Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno.’” *British and American Studies* 7 (2001): 181-191.
5. “The Changing Landscape of Minstrelsy Criticism.” *British and American Studies* 8 (2002): 165-170.
6. “The Adventures of the Minstrel Sign in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*.” *EJAS* [Eger Journal of American Studies] 8 (2002): 261-275.