

SIGNERY

The term is heavy, I admit, but I am adopting it provisionally on the grounds of a double affiliation.* On the one hand it refers to the *sign-board* (*enseigne*), a panel bearing an inscription traditionally announcing an artisan's trade; on the other hand, I relate it to the recently gallicized term "enginry" (*ingénierie*), which evokes, beyond the activity of the engineer, the ensemble of appliances and mechanisms made use of by industrial society, and at the origins of which one discovers the term *engine* (*engin*) in its double etymological acceptance as tool, instrument, and also as ruse or wile. By signery, a term which I put forward provisionally, I thus designate the ensemble of signs, signals, inscriptions, and visual stimuli manifested in our modern cities.

How should I define what I have just designated by this term? The first temptation is, in the customary manner, to establish a classification. Granting this, we may distinguish two major divisions or groups:

1. The first group comprises the *display-signs* (*enseignes*), in which stand out the sub-groups of shop-signs and advertising posters, and a third further sub-group encompassing the inscriptions on buildings and public institutions;
2. The group of *signals* (*signaux*) in which one can equally

Translated by Paul Rowland.

* This chapter is an extract from a forthcoming book entitled *Urbanoculture, urbanicoles*. (Translator's note: the title *Enseignerie* is a neologism, and I have

Signery

well distinguish several sub-groups: that of the signposting (*signalisation*) of roads and services (hotels and information, signposting inside stations and airports, etc. . . .)

This approach, quite legitimate though it may be, amounts to dividing the whole into as many parts as it is possible to distinguish, the whole being made up of the sum of its parts. The result is all the more convincing the further the analysis itself is pushed. But if I spoke of temptation, it is precisely because such an approach aims at encompassing what I have termed "signery" as an object of knowledge, *without bearing in mind the relations that we establish with it in urban life*. Now it is really this *relation* that constitutes the methodological principle of our study.

Without rejecting the assistance of classification, on the condition that we take it as a point of departure, can we give an account of the urbanicoles* situation? This I characterize with a statement and a question. This first is: "I walk down the street"; the second is: "What do I see?" In doing this, I find it easy to reply to myself: "Here is the IBM sign (*enseigne*), the Samaritaine, the Galeries Lafayette, the No-Waiting signs (*panneaux*) . . ." In so doing I do not, however, escape a second temptation, which is that of putting myself in the *position of an observer*, i.e., my attention is concentrated upon one phenomenon which it is a question of circumscribing and defining. While declaring that I am walking down the street, I am surreptitiously placing myself in the privileged position of someone who, in default of being immobile, immobilizes his attention upon an object. All "observation" implies a position, a posture, in short a two-fold attitude which on one hand involves grasping the phenomenon, and on the other hand preserving the posture—generally seated, or standing—necessary for the observation. This is the arrangement adopted by science for centuries, and which has yielded it its recognized successes. It has

rendered it into English with a neologism. Throughout this article the author makes use of conceptual and verbal associations that do not translate into English. I have accordingly included the original French term on all relevant occasions).

* The name "arboricoles" has been given to those our ancestors who lived in the trees. I propose the name "urbanicoles" for us who live in cities.

shown itself to be so effective that we do not even doubt its validity; it “spontaneously” foists itself upon us as though it were natural. Were we dealing with biology, physics, or astronomy, our attention would “naturally” rest upon the results obtained by the research and not at all upon the researchers themselves in the process of making their observations. In just the same way, the researcher himself concerns himself with the object of his study, and far less, if at all, with his own behavior. The position of the observer is not therefore uncompromising: it induces him to analyse an object with a view to knowing it as an object. Now, just as the content of an observation varies with the instrument being used, so does the posture taken to study a phenomenon determine its configuration to a great extent.¹

Even the word *situation*, which I have used, is in its turn shown to be defective. Although it does not expressly refer to the position of the observer, it does by definition denote a static behavior, while urban life is a permanent and dynamic interaction. Can we try some new approach?

I enter the street. What signs (*signes*) come into view? How? With what kind of behavior?

Now, and this is an entirely new phenomenon in relation to “signery,” it is no longer possible to speak of one sole kind of behavior. The pronoun “I” itself becomes suspect: an abstraction made up of differences of age, class, and sex. Two radically distinct patterns of behavior are forced upon the urbanicoles:

1. The pedestrian-behavior-I
2. The motorized-behavior-I

¹ The fundamental attitude of Western thought and science has been, and still is, the establishment of a clear distinction between subject and object, between the observer and the observed. It was this that led to advances particularly in physics. The social and human sciences have been inspired by this with no less success. However, ethnography and ethnology reveal limitations that were not formerly apparent. The scholar who studies the habits of a society tends, whether he wishes or not, to confine himself to externals. The analysis of habits upon which he is engaged complies with his own perspectives and imperatives. It is one thing to analyse behavior from the exterior, and quite another to experience it from within. Furthermore, the new ethnologies of the Chicago School (Active Anthropology) are attempting to reform their discipline in order to remedy this rift, whose resultant prejudices became apparent only over a long period.

Signery

The first is multimillennial, the second dates from barely a century ago.

At the steering-wheel I only take notice of certain signs, in particular the road signs that direct the driving-I that I or we become. It is not that the other notices (*inscriptions*) and signs (*enseignes*) escape me altogether, but that I only give them marginal attention: scars on a scarred city. On the other hand, when I leave my car, I change both my skin and eye. How commonplace a phenomenon this is, and yet from one instant to the next the visual signs that made prior, if not exclusive, claim upon me cease, or nearly cease to act: with the exception of those for pedestrians. From one instant to the next what were no more than scars along the street become changed into a simultaneous emblematic articulation of buildings and the pedestrian's path. To the urbanicoles signery therefore never presents itself as a whole. It comprises two systems, two codes whose paradoxical originality is on one hand to co-exist closely within the body of the city, and on the other hand to manifest themselves separately according to the behavior-I one adopts: the pedestrian-behavior-I or the motorised-behavior-I. The change in locomotion is not therefore simply one of modality. It determines new behavior, and modifies not only the face of the city, but its structure also. To pass from the condition of the pedestrian to that of the motorist, or the reverse, does therefore amount, according to the analogy previously cited, to a *change of skin*. But whereas in the changing of an animal's skin the stages are always and necessarily successive—physiology and environment closely overlapping in each case—in the human-technical kingdom such as our own these stages are, without being simultaneous, recurrent. The result of this is that if our behavior becomes differentiated according to the mode of locomotion adopted, it shows up in a duplicated perception and is registered by a hybrid memory.²

The two kinds of behavior that I have distinguished deserve an additional clarification. If the "I" is linked in one case to

² Whence the errors of which we take insufficient notice: the driver insulting the pedestrian, knowing full well that the latter cannot hear him; or the pedestrian, no doubt absent mindedly, stopping at the stop-sign (this happens).

pedestrian behavior and in another to motorist behavior, it is still necessary to point out that in the modern city the "I" is not related to an individual, an isolated being. It is taken from a context which reduces, if not annihilates, its existence as a subject. Pedestrians and motorists move around in *packs*. By this term I mean units which, as opposed to groups, are composed of unintegrated elements. Integration, as defined by Lalande, is the "establishment of a closer interdependence between the parts of a being or the members of a society; in the traditional definition of interdependence there is the underlying idea that integration has an organic character." In the classical sense, interdependence is therefore indissociable from values which, however different they may be, are shared by the members of a group or a society. Now the *pack-unit* of which I am speaking is, for the pedestrian/motorist-urbanicole, less a matter of interdependence than of inter-coercion. The passage from "I" to "we" is the result less of an adherence than a submission to common conditions. The urbanicole packs are governed by similar, even identical, behavioral patterns. The group is characterized by the communication that goes on between its members; the pack does without communication, its elements coalescing simply through necessity. This results in types of behavior that a closer study of signery will permit us to distinguish.

ROAD SIGNS

These are found along the roadside everywhere, but it is in the urban environment that they proliferate. There is no town that is not submerged in them. This is a commonplace observation, and yet one has only to go back a few decades to measure the importance of this phenomenon. Even the so-called pedestrian precincts are ringed with notices prohibiting traffic!

We are therefore, for the first time in history, in the presence of a *population* (I use the term intentionally) that has never existed before and which serves as evidence of, if the evidence can be perceived, the transformation of traditional space into motorized space. The difficulty in becoming conscious of this is all the greater since in his usual behavior the city-dweller continues to act and think as a pedestrian. He also "naturally"

Signery

tends to place this new population in parentheses, pushing the signs aside, and even when he drives about in his own city he cannot prevent himself from thinking of them as circumstantial auxiliaries which do not fundamentally change the space to which he is accustomed.

Let us stress this: even when he sits at the wheel and is forced to take notice of signs which in his pedestrian state he overlooks or pushes aside, it is difficult for him to perceive, even with the prompting of technology and speed, that *traffic* constitutes a new environment with its own laws; one which turns him, unawares even, into a mutant, as though traffic were only reducible to an *idealized outline* (*signalétique idéale*), with purely technical origins. The signs appear "objective" and "neutral": signs without memory of the accidents that may have taken place and of which they preserve no trace, confining themselves to regulating traffic that is itself thought of as ideal.

Everything conspires to ensure their *idealized status*. The signs are in fact standardized and functionalized. When triangular they warn of danger; when circular with a red border they denote prohibitions; when square and rectangular they show rules and give information.

The standardization is evident on several levels. The *shape* of the signs: triangle, disc, square; the *dimensions* are strictly specified just as the colors are: white, red, blue, and yellow. This standardization is not without analogies in military organization, both being designed in accordance with a strategic perspective.

A new kind of standardization is created upon another level, which I shall call "linguistic." The sign is an abstract, conventional, and unequivocal symbol. As opposed to language, it constitutes a code which is all the stricter in that it is stationary and can only be unilateral and unidirectional. There is no dialogue with road signs: they give orders and allow no reply; their imperialism is without appeal.

All this involves what, on a third level, I shall call *mental standardization*. Pedestrians must accommodate themselves to the three principal categories of information, commands, and prohibitions. This standardization therefore always has a re-

pressive character, since every error, every transgression, is subject to penalties.

The hegemony of the automobile kingdom is further established on the quantitative level: only three out of thirty-six danger signs are directed at pedestrians.

The motorized-I occupies a privileged position which is authenticated and legalized by signs, and which turns traffic into "the priority occupier." The city ceases to exist in its time-honored form, as a homogeneous residential unit, a place of permanent interaction between citizens, and becomes a network of trajectories. The stationary city is substituted by the transit-city, and traffic-space takes the place of building-space.

But are we entitled to say that the mental change accompanying such a mutation affects even those who take part in it and are its agents?

The behavior of the pedestrian-I is ambiguous. When I walk through the city all the signs directed at motorists tend to melt away. In reality, as we have seen, it is not so much that they disappear as that they are pushed aside: witness the slips and botched maneuvers that result in accidents. The behavior of the pedestrian-I is never confusable with a self-conscious individual, still less with a clear conscience: it has a non-conscious or unconscious double within which the road signs are always ready to return, or rear up. The pedestrian-I and the motorized-I are distinct patterns of behavior neither separated nor separable; they are embodied within each other, proliferating indirect exchanges which often cause short circuits.

The physiognomy of the city becomes transformed; but since we sometimes adopt the behavior of the pedestrian-I and sometimes that of the motorized-I, which as we have just seen are always mingled within us, we almost have to do violence to ourselves to realize it, or make an appeal to our ever-dutiful Martian, a convenience to which we have previously had recourse. He would doubtless be astonished to ascertain that the environmental habitat of the two species he had distinguished—pedestrians and cars—was comprised of innumerable signs, triangular, rectangular, circular, white, yellow, red, and blue, and which would make him wonder if they might equally well be the flags celebrating a victory. What victory?

Signery

Whose? Over whom? His confusion will continue to grow as he observes that all the cities of the world, and not only all the cities but all the streets, are celebrating it with the same enthusiasm. All the more so in that where the signs are planted, on the ground of all cities and all streets, there are corresponding markings which are no less imperious. Everywhere, there are nothing but white and yellow lines, stripes, arrows, and studs; these our Martian, possessing a few rudiments of ethnography, would be tempted to take for a tattoo that, without exercising too great a degree of subtlety, he would attribute to the relationship existing between the two species already distinguished.

Perhaps he would conclude, not erroneously, that this was a relationship based on force, in which (and after how long?) the advantage had come to rest with the automobile. Thus in his eyes, the meaning of the flags would become clear, and their multiplicity; likewise the initially enigmatic fact that cities have adopted the tattoo attesting their allegiance to the victorious species.

The aberration of such remarks would not fail to strike the police, magistrates, and road-users all equally well. Flags? Tattoos? When they are simply functional signals and signs! Reason brings us to order again; but is this something that is reducible to the rational level? These signals (*panneaux*) are also shapes; they carry colors; they are invested with powers; they ceaselessly intrude to dictate our behavior. Even if their powers are not exerted like those of masks and fetishes, exclusively on the occasion of certain ceremonies, we cannot deny them a "magical" influence: even to the point at which one might wonder, lending an ear to our Martian, if the ritual that we practice escapes us in that it merges in with our daily habits.

As universally accepted symbols, signs and signals are, in their own way, symbols which are useful for recognition but which, as opposed to religious symbols, are bereft of any transcendence. They indicate directions, but in themselves do not constitute a path. They pronounce edicts, based not upon an ethic but upon a code. The order to which they belong is immanent, and proscribes value-judgement. As opposed to the monuments that symbolize the collective memory so as to in-

tegrate the members of a society, they confine themselves to serving the established order. Soldiers, guards, sentinels: to them the uniform takes the place of life and *raison d'être*. The flux in whose service they enlist possesses none of the hue of an entity, any more than the adornments of metaphor. It is a flux of force whose sovereignty is backed by its power to coerce and threaten us. Thus stripped of all transcendence, *the mutilated symbols becomes signals*. For want of sending us into a dimension that gives us meaning—gods or ideas—they order our behavior according to three imperatives: command—danger—prohibition. The prodigious effort of civilization, which has consisted precisely in elevating the sign (*signal*) by language, art, and science, to the level of the symbol, thanks to which societies have been able to constitute themselves and unfold in time and space, and sometimes even shine there, finds itself brusquely cut short. Even if symbolic communication entails a code, it is never, as opposed to the signal, reduced to one. The flux of traffic involves beings without the need to identify or depict them (except in case of accident). The absence of communication consummates separation: the other remains other unto death, which is never anything more than “accidental,” and which always transpires *elsewhere*. Signalling (*signalétique*) consecrates the heterogeneity of men, space, and time, all the more dangerously in that it clothes its signs with the attractions of ideality. A secularly civilized space is succeeded by a deathly and irredeemably alien space.

DISPLAY-SIGNS (ENSEIGNES)

The second group encompasses all the notices (*inscriptions*) found in the city—hotel, cinema, theatre, shop, and boutique signs etc.—to which may be added the so-called advertising posters and signs. A number of initial considerations relate to two sub-groups that I can distinguish. I shall come back to the “advertising” sub-group subsequently.

The characteristic of this group—display-signs and bill-boards—is that it distinguishes itself from the group previously defined: that of the road-signs.

The “signery” that I am now dealing with is not aimed ex-

Signery

clusively at traffic, but primarily at the pedestrian urbanicoles, those who go around on foot. For them, it constitutes the “signscape” of urban space.

As with road-signs, these are found in abundance in the city, but their location is different. The road-sign population is distributed along traffic-routes (as would seem self-evident); the population of display-signs is located by preference in areas of high-density, where the “social-packs” are themselves the most dense and have the most frequent turnover (Broadway, 5th Avenue, and Champs-Élysées; all cities have their equivalents). Let it be said, in passing, that in spite of their differences, the two systems maintain a hidden complementarity, to which I shall return. To take display-signs, however, I note initially how, as we have just seen, their concentration is effected in certain areas, while residential areas and workplaces are generally deprived. This distribution, beyond the fact that it shows the function of display-signs, tells us about the expected, induced, or conditioned behavior of the urbanicoles. Attracting attention, holding it, and to the greatest possible extent seducing it, the display-sign is always, or nearly always, addressed to the potential consumer. With respect to this, it is no less important to note that, as I have just alluded, the areas that are highly populated with display-signs (“*en-seignés*”), areas noted for consumption, are generally found outside residential and working quarters. Hence the triple division of the city into residential areas, work areas, and consumption areas, specifically designated as such.

Beyond the fact that it severs the inhabitants from their neighborhood in which the baker and the grocer traditionally catered to their needs, this division produces a new phenomenon. The commercial centers of the majority of cities, which the crowd invades by day, become suddenly deserted at nightfall. Diurnal reality is succeeded by nocturnal unreality. Everything happens as though the modern city created specific areas, designated specifically by display-signs, inhabited by display-signs, and animated by display signs, (I use the repetition intentionally), while areas of work and residence dissolve into anonymity and *grisaille*. Is it no less singular, if not paradoxical, that “pedestrian” precincts, which are closed-off from car traffic to be restored ex-

clusively to the use of pedestrians (that is the official reason), are generally situated close to the greatest density of signery, with access to cars in underground car-parks? The same can be said even of the internal arrangement of these precincts which, by way of brightening things up, proliferates snack-bars, shops, restaurants, and stores.

In the same way that the urbanicole adopts the behavior of traffic, he adopts the behavior of consumption. To each of these kinds of behavior there is a corresponding system of different signals. But these differences, so obvious that there seems to be no relationship between them, disguise not only the complementarity to which I have already alluded, but a fundamental similarity. First the difference. Conventional and standardized, road-signs assert their authority on an ideal plane, ruling over traffic that is itself considered "ideal." But these signs are always experienced by the urbanicole on an existential level, dependent upon the particular situation in which he finds himself, and are permanently accompanied by a vague feeling of insecurity. We thus arrive at this strange equation: road-signs/ideal status = putting the body on the alert/danger. These two terms constitute the strangest of symbioses. While this corresponds to our daily situation it consummates the separation between two strictly incompatible levels of reality.

On the other hand display signs (*enseignes*) and billboards are characterized by their non-ideality. They have about them an air of being utterly hybrid and whimsical, at all events of eluding both standardization and convention. They are therefore characterized by a generalized existentiality which the urbanicole experiences above all on the level of pleasure, well-being, comfort, enjoyment, and satisfaction. Schematizing, we end up with the following equation: display-sign = pleasure, within which is hidden the illusion (should one say: the trick?) which consists of making us take the apparent non-standardization of display-signs as the equivalent of liberty. Liberty in appearance only: these display-signs, in their infinite diversity, in fact pursue the same objective, which is less to inform than to incite, in the widest sense, the consumption of goods and services. In the appeal to a make-believe society, or more exactly beneath

Signery

the appeal to a make-believe society, we find ideality once again—since display signs hark back to a world of essences—no less coercive than that of road-signs.

How is it practiced, this “liberty” that has such an existential air? On the first level, which I shall call the physical, display-signs are characterized by their diversity. In dimension they go from large format down to the smallest, appearing in a frame or, more often, breaking away from space altogether. Their graphics demonstrate an inexhaustible inventiveness: letters, colors, and images let themselves go to their heart’s content. Next to the standardized population of road-signs, which have the air of living under a military regime, with their shapes, dimensions, colors, and spacings all matched in conformity with regulations, the population of display-signs lives under a regime of caprice, as though it were its task to temper the imperatives of traffic by free divagation: discipline replaced by truancy.

On a second level, the linguistic, the difference is no less evident. By definition, the road-sign is *univocal*; it conveys only one possible meaning. All ambiguity is rigorously excluded. Display-signs and posters, on the contrary, give the feeling of being *multivocal*. Here, all sorts of voices make themselves heard, for the article, and for the service offered. The intonation varies from one to the other; ellipses, puns, and wit are happily married together here. But it is quite possible for them all to sing in unison: which is one manner of rediscovering univocality . . .

Provisionally setting aside billboards, which, above all in the form of the poster, mingle images and text, and to the examination of which I shall return, let us take a look at those display-signs which confine themselves to text: those that indicate hotels, restaurants, shops, and emblems of various brands (Coca-Cola, IBM, Marlboro), and which I shall designate by means of the term “written display-signs” (*enseignes-inscriptions*).

The comparison with the signposts (*panneaux de signalisation*) that carry wording, indicating a city or a motorway exit, is no less striking. The written-display-signs surmounting shops, cinemas, and stores, are forced into rivalry by their anti-standardization. In opposition to written road-signs, whose format, dimensions, and lettering are strictly prescribed, they take the

semantic content as an opportunity for free play, in which are involved such diverse factors as dimension, the arrangement of letters, their design, layout, the choice of color, the variety of material and basic medium (paper, ceramic, neon, lights). Again, in opposition to road-signs (concerning which it has not been sufficiently remarked that with the exception of traffic-lights these go out at night, save when passingly illuminated by car headlamps), written-display-signs for the most part benefit by operating both day and night. The latter is made even more effective by multicolored neon and the movement which very often animates letters that light up and out one after another in continual succession.

On a third level, the aesthetic, written-display-signs are distinguished by their "personalization," which is all the easier to understand since written road-signs on the contrary aim at the greatest impersonality. The "personalization" to which I am referring may be either individual—the shopfront (*enseigne*) of some jeweller or perfumer—or collective: a department-store, hotel, restaurant, or cinema, or even the display of a brandname: ESSO, or SHELL.

Amid this variety, apparently related to nothing more than whim, there stand out three instances from which it seems possible to extract underlying rules:

1. That of "cold," or relatively cold, written display-signs. These are found on establishments such as restaurants, hotels, and pharmacies, which are directed at recurrent and specific needs: lodging, eating, taking care of oneself. The nature of the service offered and the recurrence of the need imply conditions that might be schematized by the following observations: the more the nature of the "service" tends towards the idea, feeling, or notion of a public service, the more the display-sign tends to be readable and to contain fewer variations. This means that in the case of the pharmacy, for example, one is dealing with an almost standardized sign, the same being true of banks or public services: town-hall, police-station, or administrative offices.

2. The instance of "warm" written display-signs is characterized by the desire to arrest and surprise. These are generally related to the entertainment or luxury industries which seek, via graphics, colors, and size, to show the "extraordinary" nature

Signery

of their products; alcohol, cigarettes, and gadgets. Thus the more the nature of the product or service diverges from the idea, feeling, or notion of public service, the greater and more varied becomes the whimsicality. This is the corollary of the observation made under No. 1 above.

3. This is the most curious, as well as the most subtle, instance. It is the case of written-displays of brand-names which have the paradoxical quality of being both "warm" and "cold" simultaneously: COCA-COLA, ESSO, SHELL, and LEVI'S, as well as lettering which on first sight is confined to individual "personalization". This is not to say that they refer, like the jeweller's shopfront, to the owner of the shop, but that they indicate well-defined products: drinks, gasoline, or jeans. There is almost a contradiction between the idea of personalization and that of being widespread. Whatever the case, it is the contrary that is produced. The repetitive display of brand-names ends by setting its seal on the environment to the extent that legibility is no longer a matter of usual reading conditions, but of the power of impregnation, of the saturation achieved by large firms whose products thus come to seem almost like products of nature. In the same way, the activities of these firms finally create the feeling of a public service covering the whole planet. While in the first and second instances written display-signs are judged as "cold" or "warm" according to so-called normal conditions of legibility, displays of brand-names create their own conditions, not only of legibility, but of credibility! Next to this the Kantian imperative is lightweight!

The power of such signs (*enseignes*) lies in combining the two antithetical notions of personalization and standardization, not only within the same category, but within the same exhortation addressed to the consumer. The *mental standardization* that is the result produces a standardization of behavior.

With the "motorized-self,"³ signery (*enseignerie*), as opposed to road-signs, undergoes a sort of repression. It is thus all the more manifest at the margins of attention, the latter being

³ The passage from the "motorized-I" to the "motorized-self" stems from the distinction I have established between the "integrated" group and the "pack" group. This also goes for the passage from the "pedestrian-I" to the "pedestrian-self".

entirely taken up with the configuration of objects, space, and signs according to which traffic proceeds. It nevertheless becomes active again at stopping-places and traffic-lights, wherever the driver even for an instant becomes a pseudo-pedestrian once more. Even though there is a screening, this is never total. As the driver travels or halts the display-signs unroll in multicolored ribbons or shape themselves into definite messages.

With the "pedestrian-self," signery constitutes, against the background of anxiety stemming from traffic, a cocoon that gives both security and satisfaction (in the sense that the objects and services it offers answer to the pleasure principle defined by Freud). This mechanism is all the more effective in that if the standardization of road-signs is experienced on a conscious level, the standardization of display-signs, which exists no less than in the former case ("Drink Coca-Coca" excludes the possibility of drinking anything else), is experienced on the level of the unconscious. The one warns us, summons, or threatens us; the other gratifies us. The two systems complete one another, with the same goal, the same ideality, and according to the same methods: all the more effectively still, since, as we have remarked, the "pedestrian-self" and the "motorized-self" do not constitute distinct species but rather species which are combined together in the personality of the "pedestrian-driver." It is in this ambiguous area that the complementarity and functioning of the two systems are based.

The *vehicular symbolism* therefore becomes paired with an *advertising symbolism* (advertising being taken here in the broad sense of that which indicates, such as the restaurant sign and the poster aimed at promoting a product). But as we have previously seen, with reference to traffic, symbolism becomes degraded into *signalling*. Display-signs, no more than road-signs, have no meaning beyond themselves. Signals and signs are their proper referents, and they operate according to the service or product. The former regulate traffic, the latter consumption; it is thus only upon the immanent plane that they exist and act.

It would, however, be wrong to conclude that signalling (*signalétique*), both vehicular and advertising, can equally be reduced to a set of functional signals and signs. In default of transcendence, *symbolic powers* are revealed behind them. Road-

Signery

signs are indissociable from the force-flux of cars; and in the same way signery is indissociable from the force-flux of the circulation of goods. The symbolic dimension appears in the shaping of the representations and the behavior that it imposes. Just as the city is converted into a traffic route, so it is converted into a consumption route. The urbanicole has no choice; the two voices are equally imperious, and the two routes aspire equally to the status of the ideal. No longer is there even any question of options; the power of the symbolic immanence is the result of the effective alteration of the urban space and the effective application of two codes which, under very different guises, are equally rigorous. The “vehicular symbolic-signalling” rules over traffic without ever considering the necessary conditions of participation in it. The “advertising symbolic-signalling” raises up consumption to the position of sovereign without ever considering the necessary conditions of participation in consumption. The ideality of these signals and signs is precisely designed to push aside the questions that might throw doubt upon its status.

BILLBOARDS

The above reflections for the most part cover both display-signs and advertising posters to the extent of their common features. What follows refers principally to the sub-group of billboards, on the one hand to clarify what it is that distinguishes them, and on the other hand to relate them to signery in general, as it functions in the city. This preamble is a methodological precaution. I do not, in fact, intend in any way to discuss the phenomenon of the poster, nor even to carry out either an analysis of its content or a sociological or semiological examination.⁴

⁴ François Enel, *L'affiche*, Paris, Mame, 1971; Abraham Moles, *L'affiche dans la société urbaine*, Paris, Dunod, 1970; Lo Duca, *L'affiche*, Paris, PUF, 1945; Davis Hillier, *Histoire de l'affiche*, Paris, Fayard, 1970. From the historical point of view, it is relevant to note that the modern poster dates back only as far as the end of the XIXth century, with the invention of color lithography, and that it has only become the way we know it since the development of the typography and the mass distribution employed in advertising campaigns. In our times, it may be considered as part of the mass-media, like the press, radio, and television.

Men have been living with men for a long time, with animals for a long time, and with tools for a long time. It is only very recently that they have started to live with the *artificial populations* produced by the *mass media*, among which figures the billboard population. How do the urbanicoles behave in the presence of the latter: that is the question.

A cross-section of the city shows the distribution to fall into three levels. First there is the street-level view; then there is the view from facade-, roof-, and sky-level; and finally there are the underground places, the subway and its passages, and the shops, markets and supermarkets that megalopolises bury around underground stations. The modern city culminates in advertising and is rooted in it (on condition that, so as not to become entangled in metaphors, we specify that the "sap" is artificial).

The *horizontal location* calls forth two preliminary remarks. On one hand, billboards are concentrated in places which are reserved for them on a long-term basis. On the other hand, they spread into temporary sites, for example to the fencing that guards buildings in process of demolition or construction. Fixed sites, and transient sites: nor is the latter the least significant category in the modern city, which is permanently occupied with construction.

In opposition to road-signs, which are confined to fixed locations, the advertising population always overflows the hoardings assigned to it. Of the two populations it is the most "cosmophage"; the slightest available surface whets its appetite.

The customs of the two populations differ on other counts moreover. If not immutable, signals and display signs are at least fixed in their nature and function. Road-signs remain unchanged; likewise display-signs, even if they sometimes change, have a relatively long lifespan. The advertising population, on the contrary, is subject to periodic exuviation. Every two or three months, more or less, it renews itself either as a whole or partially. Streets, subway passages, buses: the whole urban landscape undergoes a periodical metamorphosis at the pleasure of advertising campaigns.

Because of these conditions, it is difficult, as people normally do, to speak of advertising, or even of what is fittingly called "advertising language," as an isolated phenomenon. Neither can

Signery

it be reduced to communication, even if the captains of industry, advertisers, and graphic designers turn it primarily and above all into communication, and even if the sociologists and semi-ologists view it mainly within the perspectives of communication.

Strange as it may seem, it is not true that, *in urban life*, posters are messages issued by addressors and directed at addressees. At least, this is not the prime rôle that they play, except for when I stop expressly to look at one or when, shutting myself off in my study, I concentrate all my attention on one to analyse it. The poster only becomes a language and fits into the traditional schema of communication—emitter, message, receiver—when it is taken as the object of deliberate perusal. This attentive stance, frontal and focussed, is never the one taken up by urbanicoles.

Rather than being a message issuing from an addressor and directed at an addressee, advertising posters are, on the level of urban life I repeat, experienced as a *sort of emanation*, as a flux of emanations which accompany us almost continuously. We should really speak of a force of emanation rather than of broadcasting. Everything happens as though the whole city were the seat of a certain “mana” that completely enclosed us. It also seems to me to be erroneous to speak of a “message,” still more so of a “language.” No passer-by feels himself to be personally addressed, even if he belongs to the “target group” specifically aimed at by the advertiser. The poster does not so much communicate as reveal. The contact space with posters is produced as pedestrians walk around: it is this walking up and down of the pedestrian that activates the catalysis of advertising emanations. This is why the poster, contrary to the book or newspaper, cannot be stored away in a library or newspaper kiosk: it must occupy the space that it transforms into a suitable setting for catalysis. The pedestrian is less an addressee, in the linguistic sense of the term, or a receiver, in the sense that the word is used in communications theory; he is much more an agent in a catalysis, a catalyst. As opposed to language which proceeds via juxtaposed units which form a meaning, *emanation-catalysis*, if I may be permitted to use the term, in some way annihilates the distance ordinarily existing between expressions

and whoever reads them. It works by creating an ambience filled with fluid elements, and is a matter of magic rather than communication. Thus it is that irrespective of their verbal or iconographic content posters act by their mere presence, which reawakens ancient habits within us. The modern city brings about a return to an animism that functions without our knowledge, with *the beneficent* on one side, and *the maleficent* on the other. The first is represented by the pavement, the area of security peopled by the genial spirits of advertising. The second is represented by the road, which, even if not maleficent in the strict sense, is always resented as a dangerous area. To the soothing and reassuring host of posters comes the response of the frenzied stream of cars, each one of which is dangerous and powerful.

In traditional civilization, the good and bad were identifiable, if not directly then at least through intermediary oracles, sorcerers, and priests. Exorcism was then a standard practice. Our modern society has abolished the evil-eye, charms, and exorcisms; we believe that we live in the kingdom of reason alone. However, our basic habits have hardly changed. Without our knowing, the fetishes have taken the shape of signs, signals, display-signs, and posters which, above and beyond their texts and images, beyond uses, customs, and institutions, witness to the power of the great "mana" who today is *Advertising*. In fact, its power is such that it no longer has any need to hide its identity, neither to claim any right, nor even creator. It impregnates us, body and soul. Again, as opposed to God, it is not appointed to live in churches or in equally dispersed consciousnesses: it becomes part and parcel of the urban space which is itself an extension of our own bodies. It blankets our retinas, and takes over our brains (who can hear the first two syllables of the magic formula Dubo . . . Dubon . . . without mentally completing: "Dubonet"?).

Our ecosystem, traditionally defined as the set of interdependent relationships between living things—men, animals, and plants—has profoundly changed. It is increasingly composed of artificial populations. A new kind of interdependence is modifying the ecosystem down to its very roots. Men, animals, and plants occupy a *threedimensional space*; one can touch them,

Signery

handle them, and push them away. Posters, on the contrary, are confined to mere *surface* dimensions. No matter what the objects beings represented, their volume, color, even the landscape by which they are sometimes surrounded, their two-dimensionality denotes a spatial status which, far from being original, is the result of a long evolution. The *preponderance of the visual*, which can, in a simplified manner, be dated back to the Renaissance, in fact stresses vision to the detriment of the other senses. The urban ecosystem neglects touch, smell, and the audible (with the sole exception of noises that border on the intolerable). The perception offered to us by posters is thus an alienated one. Even in the most strongly “sensory” posters, such as those devoted to food products, beauty products, or in the numerous ones that make use of female nudes, it is by sight and sight alone that the other senses are, if not reached, at least mediatized.

This generalized “iconification” sunders us increasingly from experience in such a way as to reduce us to the role of spectators, if not voyeurs. The eye has almost become the urbanicole’s sole remaining organ. This hypertrophy is all the more fearsome since, and by how specious an inversion, the signs themselves finally come to be seen as things. Thus we can understand how it is that they multiply infinitely and surround us ever more closely.

In fact, posters are rarely isolated save when they are of very large format, as happens in megalopolis. They are generally grouped into series, some *homogeneous*, as when the same poster is repeated three, four, ten, or twenty times, and some into *heterogeneous* series, as when different advertisements are displayed on the same boarding. The linked series occur in *urban sequences*, shaping space as they punctuate the pedestrian’s progress. It is impossible to escape them. Above and beyond its economic function, the reinforcing effect is such that Advertising becomes an ecumenical force, working upon the urbanicoles as a primary integrating factor.

It is from this point of view that the *dimensions* and the *composition* of posters deserve to be looked at more closely. The giant formats that are to be found above all in the great capitals do not only form part of the scene, but comprise it. In

the manner of Baroque architecture, the gigantic announcements are an Advertising stage-set, which, over and above their visual aspect, produce the effect of a dramatization. People, objects, landscapes appear as visions animated by the whirlwind motion of the traffic.

On a lower level are found the medium-sized posters that appear on billboards: icons aimed at gathering up and synthesizing what the large formats amplify and dramatize.

The internal composition of posters is no less revealing. Numerous works of an economic, sociological, and semiological nature have been devoted to this; but it is from another direction, that of urban life, that I would like to tackle it for my own part. There is a common point of departure. All are agreed in allowing that the poster presents an image, shapes, a text, and colors. Starting from these distinctions, analyses can vary according to whether one takes account of the costs, the effects, and the economy of signs. But, whatever their subtlety, these analyses presuppose that one takes up a specifically "analytic posture," which implies keeping a distance from the object one is studying. Without impugning the validity of such analyses, or their purpose, it seems to me that the *advertising emanation* should be given some initial consideration. Via this approach, which is that of every man who walks through the city, I suggest that it is the inclusiveness of the poster that makes it work. What we call iconic content never appears as such; text and image are indissociable from their combination, which we analytically designate by the name of graphics. Reduced to typescript, "Peter Stuyvesant", "Chesterfield", and "Lee Cooper" would suddenly lose their effectiveness. In the same way, the shapes and colors are not elements: they constitute the intrinsic power of the advertising image. No doubt, connotation and denotation are useful distinctions, but it is this inclusiveness of the "emanation," of what is usually called its impact, that is important.

"Language, above all else, seeks to influence, and attempts to direct our behavior rather than give clear information. The word is surely something other than a sign used to represent a concept; it does not correspond to a notion, the degree of whose abstraction one tries to fix with the greatest possible precision.

Signery

It evokes by summoning up the most lively of an infinite complex of particular images. The sign is not the equivalent of a concept, but provokes the appearance of a succession of images, as does the word; if it does not correspond to a concept, this does not mean that it is simply no longer a sign.”⁵

These lines, written by Granet about Chinese ideographs, apply perfectly to posters. Even if analysis understands the workings of an advertisement, it does not understand, at least not sufficiently, the kind of relationship which is set up between advertising and the public. Just as the Chinese language aims above all at influencing, advertising language aims at influencing and at making us act. “Marlboro, the taste of adventure,” is not created by the addition of a cowboy smoking and a horse, plus a view of the Far-West; it is the union of the poster, motif, shape, color, and graphics integrated together, which make an all-round appeal to the desires and the imagination in order to direct them towards Marlboro cigarettes.

If I insist upon the limitations of the analytic stance, it is also because in urban life billboards are never apprehended either in isolation or frontally, as they are when they become the object of study. The “pedestrian-I” only has lateral, oblique, and always temporary contact with them. Furthermore, he has no choice in the matter: the surrounding advertising flows over him of its own accord.

If they are neither selected, nor read (in the strict sense of the word), nor even perceived as to their role or function, one might doubt their existence. Now since the contrary is the case, it is clear that posters and urbanicoles today coexist in a state of symbiosis.

Certainly, advertising remains a language. but this statement seems, from some of the analyses it has inspired, to fall far short of the reality. Language and languages are borne by the medium of the air in the case of speech, by paper in the case of writing, and by the electric cable in the case of the telephone; whereas Advertising turns our very environment into a sign-area around which is shaped the behavior of the urbanicoles. As a spatialized and dynamicized language, Advertising retains the

⁵ Marcel Granet, *La Pensée Chinoise*, Albin Michel, 1968.

means of communication to immerse us physically in its flux of images, colors, brand-names, and slogans. The indicative and the imperative of which it makes such abundant use, are not so much expressions of the tense of the verb as the instruments of the tautology which with the help of the image, far from causing lassitude, establish an ontological reality. ESSO is ESSO, just as COCA-COLA is COCA-COLA. Advertising thus has a Being, and far surpasses the, albeit secret, beliefs we entertain about it, making the venerable ontology of the philosophers pale in comparison. Instead of being based upon concepts, language, and learning, in brief upon knowledge, which always depends, in the Freudian sense, on the reality principle, it is perched upon the single satisfaction stemming from the original pleasure principle. This is why advertising is not itself a myth; it is also why, contrary to what people say, it produces no myth. In effect, myth always involves some measure of a certain mental organization, even on the level of belief and emotion. Now, it is the strength of advertising that it goes beyond myths (while still offering those who wish at all costs to reject it the temptation to find them) in order to restore us to the single state of joy of which it is, in the strict sense and the psychoanalytic sense, *the word*.⁶

For thousands of years, societies have been organized according to the fundamental relationships they have established between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Cosmogony, myth, and religion: there is no civilization which has not found its *raison d'être* here. The analogous relationships which the Egyptians established with the cosmos and the Greeks with the gods were the guarantees of the authenticity of the macrocosm-microcosm relationship, thanks to which the members of the community felt themselves linked both with one another and with the universe. Cosmogony, myth, and religion were not simply matters of belief; beyond the ceremonies and rites to which they gave rise, they suffused equally the life of the individual (if this term can be said to have any meaning in traditional civilizations) and that of the whole society.

The relationship of the macrocosm to the microcosm is

⁶ Serge Leclair, *Psychoanalyser*, Ed. du Seuil, 1974.

Signery

therefore never reducible to two terms. It is tri-polar: meaning that the relationship itself constitutes a basic pole, and it is to this that I propose to give the name "*mesocosm*." By "*mesocosm*" I refer not only to the set of beliefs, myths, ceremonies, rites, and institutions, but also to the set of individual and social activities—political, economic, and cultural—which are the expression and manifestation of it: all those things which, in traditional civilizations, were regulated from birth to death. It was this behavior, not the unusual but, on the contrary, the everyday, which made up the features of the mesocosm: ways of speaking, living, eating, marrying, moving, working, cultivating, exchanging, and looking after oneself, in short the complex facts and gestures whereby the members of the community simultaneously matched act and belief.

Now, industrial production and the technology spawned forth by science have not only shattered tradition to pieces, but have also for the first time put us in the presence of an *entirely manufactured mesocosm*. Instead of acting, as was the case for thousands of years, as the mediator between the macrocosm and the microcosm, *the modern mesocosm tends to become an end in itself*. From a one-time mediator, it turns into a producer. Macrocosm and microcosm are reduced to its mere products, which in turn become its mere referents. The industrial mesocosm reduces the universe and man to its own level. The relationship becomes a subjugation, as is witnessed by the transformation of our cities, and as is witnessed equally well by *signery*: on one hand there are the road-signs, the father-principle, and the expression of law, while on the other are the display-signs and posters, the maternal-principle, the instruments of satisfaction. Thus, at the heart of the mutation we find the two original forces, all the more powerful as their sublimation is repressed.