

THE SIGN IN THE THEATER

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEMIOLOGY OF THE ART OF THE SPECTACLE

The idea of sign, *σημα* (*sema*), has been popular in philosophy and the history of the sciences. Hippocrates and the Stoics, Plato and Aristotle, Saint Augustine and Descartes, Leibniz and Locke, Hegel and Humboldt figure among those who have dealt penetratingly with it. It has engendered a wide variety of sciences and disciplines: semiology, semiotics, semasiology, semantics, sematology which changed their name and content with the influence of time and sometimes of fashion, becoming forgotten to reappear with the impetus of a great thinker. The history of the sciences of the sign deserves systematic study. We shall content ourselves to point out that, of the terms quoted above, semiotics and semiology (or semeiology) have had a longer and richer career than the others. Since Greek antiquity they were applied to two appar-

Translated by Simon Pleasance.

ently distant fields: military art (the science of manoeuvring troops with the help of signals) and medicine, in which they showed a greater perseverance. In many countries, throughout the 19th century and even today, medical study of the symptoms of illnesses is called semiology.

The term “semiology” made its appearance in the human sciences thanks to Ferdinand de Saussure or rather to his *Cours de linguistique générale*, compiled posthumously and published in 1916. Let us record the passages which, though too well-known, should serve as a point of reference in any attempt to expand the field of semiological research into the social sciences.

“Language is a system of signs expressing ideas and as such is comparable to writing, the deaf and dumb alphabet, symbolic rites, forms of courtesy, military signals etc... But it is the most important of these systems. One can therefore conceive of a science which studies the life of signs in the core of social life. It would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology: we shall call it *semiology* (from the Greek *sēmeion*, “sign”). It will tell us what signs consist in, and by what laws they are ruled. (...) Linguistics is only a part of this general science, the laws that semiology will discover, will be applicable to linguistics (...). If one wants to discover the true nature of language, one must first of all take into account what it has in common with all the other systems of the same order; (...) we are of the opinion that, considering rites, customs etc... as signs, these facts will appear in another light, and one will feel the need to group them in semiology and explain them by the laws of this science.”¹

For half a century semiology, as postulated by the Geneva linguist (and before him by Ch. S. Peirce, under the name of semiotic) has not succeeded in establishing itself through the different disciplines but semiological research has made great strides in recent decades, above all in linguistics and social psychology. The attempt has been made to introduce methods of semiological analysis into some fields constituting repertoires of social signs: the highway code, fashion, food, gestures, sign-boards. On the contrary, very little attention has been given to the semiology of art, with the exception of literature, the nearest to linguistics.

¹ *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, 1966, pp. 33-35.

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One of the first attempts to examine art as a semiological fact was the communication of Jan Mukařovský at the 8th international congress of philosophy at Prague, in 1934. Mukařovský starts from the principle that “any psychic content surpassing the limits of individual consciousness acquires the character of sign by the very fact of its communicability,” he affirms that “the work of art is simultaneously sign, structure, and value,” and concludes lucidly: “(...) as long as the semiological character of art is not sufficiently clarified, the study of the structure of the work of art will necessarily remain incomplete. Without a semiological orientation, the art theoreticians will always be inclined to regard the work of art as a purely formal construction or even as the direct reflection either of the psychic or even physiological dispositions of the author or of the distinct reality expressed by the work, or of the situation, be it ideological, economical, social or cultural, of the given environment. (...) The semiological viewpoint alone will allow theoreticians to recognize the autonomous existence and the essential dynamism of artistic structure and to understand its evolution as an immanent movement, though in constant dialectic relation to the evolution of other fields of culture.”² Nevertheless, Mukařovský’s developments have a very general character. He distinguishes two semiological functions: the communicative function and the autonomous function, but he proposes no method of semiological analysis in the field of art. Far from treating a work of art as a collection or a sequence of signs, he appears to consider it as one sign (“every work of art is a sign,” “the work of art has a sign character,” etc.).

The same tendency to consider a work of art as a semiological unit appears in Eric Buysens. In his book published in 1943 which represents one of the basic works in the early days of the history of semiological science, he gives very little space to the phenomena of art. Contrary to Mukařovský, Buysens expresses the opinion that “art is hardly semical.” “Its economy, he continues, is purely artistic: it is the means of giving prominence to the elements that should produce emotion. (...) The artistic work does not fulfil the utilitarian part of the semical act calling for

² “L’art comme fait sémiologique,” in *Actes du Huitième Congrès International de Philosophie à Prague*, 2-7 september 1934, Prague, 1936, pp. 1065-1070.

collaboration; it is rather the testimony of a psychological event.”³ In relation to Mukařovský’s theses, this last statement is a step backwards. Let us keep in mind that the Belgian linguist distinguishes two categories of semies: the systematic and asystematic semies. Among the former he enumerates speech, road and maritime signals, mathematical, physical and chemical formulae, commercial, musical, prosodic symbols. By asystematic semies he means: art, publicity, politeness, gestures, shop-signs etc. Nowadays this distinction only has a historical value, as less arbitrary criteria of classification have been elaborated since then; by recording it here, one is emphasizing that though judging art “hardly semical,” BuysSENS reserves for it the role of a distinct semie.

After the war, the idea of treating art as a semiological fact gains ground among linguists and semiologists. Literature, the art of the word, is the favorite field of semiological research principally followed in France, the United States and the U.S.S.R. As for the fields of artistic activity other than literature, the “intrusions” are shy, rare and not very systematic. It is as well to note that Roman Jakobson is ready to acknowledge painting and cinema as “non-linguistic languages,” that Roland Barthes’ openings into different fields of art enrich his semiological analyses, that “Art as a semiological system” was one of the main themes of the symposium on the sign organized in the U.S.S.R. in 1961.

The theory of sign, however, has not up to now been applied systematically to any field of art. What are the causes of this state of affairs? How can one explain this fear of approaching the fields of art? Modern semiology begins with Saussurian linguistics. But, while “linguistics is only a part of this general science” (semiology) for the Geneva master there now appears a counter-tendency to consider semiology as a part or an aspect of linguistics. This tendency to reduce all the problems of sign to language is perhaps the principal reason why semiology deals so little with the arts, preferring fields of signification (highway and mathematical signs, furniture, cartography, tourist guides, telephone directories, cars) where linguistic equivalents are easily found. What is more striking is that the spectacular arts although

³ *Les langages et le discours. Essai de linguistique fonctionnelle dans le cadre de la sémiologie*, Bruxelles, 1943, p. 37.

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having a common ground with the linguistic facts, have almost been kept apart from semiological analysis. In BuysSENS one finds the statement that "the richest combination of semical facts certainly seems to be that which happens during the presentation of an opera." But to the means of scenic expression (words, song, music, mime, dance, costumes, scenery, lighting) he adds audience reactions, manifestations of society life, without overlooking the participation of the theater staff, firemen and policemen. BuysSENS is therefore thinking of spectacle as a sociological phenomenon when he concludes: "In short, it is a whole world that comes together and communicates for a few hours."⁴ The only kind of spectacle that, to our knowledge, has been scientifically considered from the semiological viewpoint is the art of cinema.⁵ But any analysis of this art, one of the most recent and a slave to special techniques, is determined by this very technique and would gain a lot from the possibility of relying on a semiology of the theatrical art. It should be noted that several theatrical theoreticians as well as people in the trade, use the term "sign" when they speak of artistic elements or means of theatrical expression, which proves that semiological consciousness or subconsciousness is something real among those who deal with the spectacle. This confirms at the same time the need of a semiological opening in the theatrical art, the necessity to consider spectacle from the viewpoint of semiology. This is the principal aim of the thoughts proposed here.

Of all the arts and perhaps of all the fields of human activity, spectacle is the one in which the sign shows itself in the richest and most dense and varied way. The word pronounced by the actor first has its linguistic meaning i.e. it is the sign of the objects, the persons, the feelings, the ideas or their interrelations that the author of the text meant to evoke. But already the intonation of the actor's voice and the way of pronouncing that word are likely to change its value. How many ways of pronouncing the words "I love you" can mean passion as well as indifference, irony as well as pity. Facial mime and gestures of the hand can underline the meaning of words, belie it or give it a particular shade. That is not all. A lot depends on the attitude

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁵ Cf. the articles by Christian Metz, especially "Le cinéma: langue ou langage?" *Communications*, No. 4 (1964), pp. 52-90.

of the actor's body and his position in relation to his partners. The words "I love you" have a different emotional and significative value inasfar as they are said by a person sitting negligently in his armchair, a cigarette in his mouth (the supplementary significative role of the accessory), by a man holding a woman in his arms or with his back to the person he is addressing these words to.

Everything is sign in a theatrical presentation. A cardboard column means that the scene takes place in front of a palace. The beam of the spotlight picks out a throne and here we are inside the palace. The crown on the actor's head is the sign of royalty whereas the wrinkles and whiteness of his face, obtained with the help of make-up, and his hesitant gait are all signs of old age. And lastly, the sound of galloping horses growing louder in the wings is the sign that a traveller is approaching.

Spectacle uses the word as well as non linguistic systems of signification. It has recourse to auditive as well as visual signs. It puts to good use the systems of signs made for communication between men, and those created by the needs of artistic activity. The signs it uses are drawn from anywhere: from nature, social life, different crafts, all the fields of art. If one examines out of curiosity the list of "major" and "minor" arts, a hundred in number, established by Thomas Munro,⁶ one can easily state that each of them can find its place in a theatrical presentation, playing a semantic part, and that some thirty of them belong directly to the spectacle. In practice, there is no system of signification, there is no sign that cannot be used in the spectacle. The semiological richness of the art of the spectacle explains at the same time why this field has preferably been avoided by the theoreticians of sign. It is because richness and variety in this case mean complexity. In the theater the signs seldom appear in their pure state. The simple example of the words "I love you" has just shown us that the linguistic sign is most of the time accompanied by the sign of the intonation, of the mime, of the movement and that all the other means of scenic expression—decor, costumes, make-up, sound effects— act simultaneously on the spectator as combinations of signs which are complementary, derive strength and precision from each other, or are in contradiction. The analysis of a spectacle from the semiological viewpoint

⁶ *The Arts and Their Interrelations*, New York, 1949.

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presents serious difficulties. Should we proceed along the vertical or horizontal section? Should we first of all detach the superimposed signs of different systems or divide the spectacle into units in its linear development? But the spectacle and most combinations of signs are situated in time as well as in space which makes analysis and systematization all the more complicated.

The vast field of the art of the spectacle as a field of semiological exploitation could be approached in several ways. What method is to be chosen? The task would be made considerably easier if one could rely upon the sufficiently developed theoretical analysis of each system of signs which the spectacle uses or can use. But this is not possible in the present state of semiological studies. Certain fields of artistic expression such as the plastic arts or music, are still practically unexplored by semiology. Others, specifically scenic, such as movements of the body (mime, gestures, attitudes), make-up, lighting are in a hardly better position. Their semantic value is perfectly appreciated and exploited by the people in the trade but the theoretical foundations are missing; the existing treatises are only indexes of a purely practical character. For want of semiological bases strong enough to be able to draw conclusions on the role of different systems of signs in the complex phenomenon of the spectacle, we have decided to approach the question by its result, that is to say the spectacle as an existing reality, trying to clear up this disorder or rather the appearance of disorder due to the richness of all that takes place in space and time during a theatrical presentation. We shall be content to consider only the theatrical art, but in its broadest meaning (drama, opera, ballet, pantomime, puppets) leaving aside the other forms of spectacle, notably cinema, television, the circus and the music-hall.

First of all the idea of sign must be considered. The general theory of signs is a prosperous science which is developing essentially in logic, psychology and linguistics. For semiology it is an indispensable start, which is no proof that the idea of sign is clear. On the contrary, the existing definitions vary noticeably, the very term sign is contested or rather competes with many analogous terms: index, signal, symbol, icon, information, message, symptom, badge, which do not replace it but differentiate the idea of sign, according to the numerous functions that have evolved

from it. We shall not try to create new nomenclatures and definitions so as not to further embroil the theoretical situation of the sign. We shall endeavor to choose those that seem most sensible and at the same time most appropriate to our subject i.e. the semiology of the spectacle.

1. We accept the term *sign* without having recourse to the other terms from the same ideological field.

2. We adopt the Saussurian schema *signifié* and *signifiant*, two components of the sign (the *signifié* corresponds to the content, the *signifiant* to the expression).

3. As for the classification of signs, we accept that which divides them into *natural* and *artificial signs*.

This last point needs comment. The distinction quoted is to be seen in the *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* by André Lalande (1st. ed., 1917). Here is the essence of his definitions: “*Natural signs*, those whose relation with the thing signified results from the laws of nature alone: e.g. smoke, the sign of fire.” “*Artificial signs*, those whose relation with the thing signified relies on a voluntary and more often collective decision.”⁷ This fundamental distinction between natural and artificial signs which has been adopted by several authors is based on a fairly clear principle. Everything is the sign of something in ourselves and the surrounding world, in nature and the activity of men and animals. Natural signs are those which spring forth and exist without the participation of the will; they have the character of sign for whoever perceives and interprets them, but they are emitted involuntarily. This category includes principally the phenomena of nature (a flash of lightning—the sign of storm, fever—the sign of disease, the color of the skin—the sign of race) and the actions of men and animals not meant to signify (reflexes). Artificial signs are created voluntarily by man or animals to signal something, to communicate with someone. By slightly modifying the definitions of Lalande, one can affirm that the essential difference between natural and artificial signs is situated at the level of emission and not of perception and that it is determined by the absence or existence of the will to emit the sign.

⁷ F. de Saussure distinguishes the *natural* sign from the *arbitrary* sign. Charles Bally opposes *index* to *sign*. The term *conventional* sign is also used in opposition to *natural* sign.

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Though fairly clear, this distinction does not solve all the practical problems, it does not answer some borderline cases. Let us take an example of a linguistic sign. The exclamation "ow" of the smoker who has burnt his hand with his cigarette is a natural sign. But is the swear-word uttered on the same occasion a natural or an artificial sign? This depends on certain circumstances, such as the linguistic habits of the person who pronounces it, the presence or the absence of witnesses. Let us take a sign relevant to mime. To what extent is a grimace of disgust a natural sign (involuntary reflex) or an artificial sign (voluntary act to communicate disgust)?

The signs used by the theatrical art all belong to the artificial category. They are artificial signs *par excellence*. They are the result of a voluntary process and most often created with premeditation; they tend to communicate on the spot. Nothing surprising in an art that cannot exist without an audience. Uttered voluntarily and in full consciousness of communicating, theatrical signs are perfectly functional. The theatrical art uses signs drawn from all the manifestations of nature and all human activities. But once used in the theater each of these signs acquires a significative value much more pronounced than in its original use. The spectacle transforms natural signs into artificial ones (a flash of lightning), so it can "artificialize" signs. Even if they are only reflexes in life, they become voluntary signs in the theater. Even if they have no communicative function in life, they necessarily acquire it on stage. The soliloquy of a scientist, for instance, who is trying to formulate his thoughts or that of a person in a state of nervous over-excitement is composed of linguistic signs i.e. of artificial signs but without any intention of communicating. Recited on stage, the same words recover their communicative role, the only reason for the monologue of the scientist or the angry character is to communicate his thoughts or his emotional state to the audience.

We have just said that all the signs utilised by the theatrical art are artificial. This does not exclude the existence of natural signs in theatrical presentation. The means and techniques of the theater are too deeply rooted in life to let the natural signs be completely eliminated. In an actor's diction and mime the strictly personal habits go with the voluntarily created shades of meaning, the conscious gestures are intermingled with reflexes. In these

cases, natural signs are mixed with artificial signs. But the complications go even further for the theoretician. The trembling voice of a young actor playing the part of an old man is an artificial sign. On the contrary, as the trembling voice of an octogenarian actor is not created voluntarily, it is a natural sign in life as well as on stage. But it is at the same time a sign voluntarily and consciously used when this actor plays a very old character. He does not will his voice to be as it is: he cannot speak differently; his voice becomes an artificial sign by the will of the stage or theater director who has chosen him for that part. And so we see that the choice of an actor for a part or the choice of the play for an actor, a choice made according to his physique (expression of the face, voice, age, size, constitution, temperament), is already a semantic act tending to obtain the most adequate values for the dramatist's or director's intentions. Here we are near the problem of the subjects of volition in the theatrical sign, a problem which we shall have to reconsider in the course of this article.

After these general remarks concerning the idea of sign and the specificity of sign used in the theater, let us try to define the principal systems of signs used in a theatrical presentation. The classification as proposed below is arbitrary like all classification. We have distinguished thirteen systems of signs. Clearer sections could be made by reducing the number of systems to four or five; a much more detailed classification could also be made. The one we propose is intended to reconcile, to a certain degree, the theoretical and practical aims, in order to help towards a more profound semiological research and at the same time to provide a temporary tool for scientific analysis of the theatrical spectacle.

1. THE WORD

The word is present in most theatrical forms (except the pantomime and the ballet). Its role in relation to the signs of the other systems varies according to the dramatic genres, the literary or theatrical fashions, the styles of the stage setting (cf. a verbal recital and a grand spectacle). We consider the signs of the word in their linguistic acceptance. They are consequently the words pronounced by the actors during the presentation. Because the

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linguistic semiology is much more developed than the theory of any other system of signs, one must refer to the very numerous works of the specialists (who, moreover, do not agree on many essential problems) to elaborate the bases of a semiology of the word in the spectacle. We shall only point out that semiological analysis of the word can be situated at different levels: not only at the semantic level (which deals with words as well as sentences and more complex units), but also at the phonological, syntactic, prosodic etc... levels. In a cue the superabundance of hissing and hushing consonants (*s, z, sh, j,*) can in some languages express anger and irritation in the character speaking.⁸ The archaic order of the words is the sign of a remote historical time or of an anachronical character living on the edge of the linguistic habits of his contemporaries. Rhythmic prosodic or metric alternations can mean the changes of feelings or mood. In all these cases it is a question of supersigns (compound signs at the 2nd or 3rd degree) in which the words, beside their purely semantic function, have a supplementary semiological function at the phonological, syntactic or prosodic level.

As an example, there is a specifically theatrical problem of the relationships between the subject speaking and the physical source of the word. Contrary to what happens in life, they do not always make one in the theater, and what is more important, this inadequacy has semiological consequences. In a puppet-show, the characters are represented from the visual viewpoint by dolls, while the words are pronounced by invisible artists. The consecutive movements of a puppet in the course of the dialogue mean that it is the puppet who "is speaking" at that moment, they point out the sham subject of a ripost, they link the source of the word with the character "speaking." It can happen that the procedure of the puppet-show is imitated in a dramatic presentation with living actors, but the semiological role of that game is then quite different, even an opposite one. Let us take a character who makes stiff gestures and only opens his mouth while his words are mechanically transmitted by the means of the amplifier. The intentional rupture between the natural source of the voice and the subject "speaking" is the sign of the dancing-jack, of the

⁸ The famous line from Racine: "Pour qui sont ces serpents qui sifflent sur vos têtes" (*Phèdre*).

puppet. The separation of the word from the subject speaking, an expedient fairly widely spread in contemporary theater, thanks to modern techniques, can assume different forms and play several semiological parts: such as a sign of the hero's inner monologue or a sign of a visible or invisible narrator or a collective character, or a ghost (Hamlet's father in some stage settings), etc...

2. THE TONE

The word is not only a linguistic sign. The way it is pronounced gives it a supplementary semiological value. "The tone makes the song." Even if a word is apparently neuter and indifferent, the actor's diction can give it the most subtly shaded and unexpected effects. A comedian of the Stanislavski troupe drew attention to himself by his forty ways of saying the words "tonight" with his audience capable of guessing their semantic context in most cases. What we here call tone (the actor's diction is the vehicle of it) includes such elements as intonation, rhythm, speed and intensity. The intonation in particular throws into relief the height of the sounds and their pitch and creates the most varied signs with all sorts of modulations. In this system of signs one must also include what is called the accent (country, aristocratic, provincial, foreign accents) although the signs of the accents are divided between the tone and word itself (at the phonological and syntactic levels).

Every linguistic sign therefore has a normalized form (the word as such) as well as variations (the tone) constituting a "ground of freedom" (A. Moles) which every speaking individual and especially the actor exploits in a more or less original way. These variations can have a purely aesthetic value; they can also constitute signs.

3. THE FACIAL MIME

Let us now consider the expression of the actor's body, the spatio-temporal signs created by the human body's techniques, signs that could be called kinesthetic, kinesic or kinetic.

We begin with the facial mime because it is the system of kinesthetic sign nearest to verbal expression. There are many mime

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signs needed by articulation; at this level, it is very difficult to define the border between spontaneous and voluntary mime, between natural and artificial signs. A striking example of this is the execution of an opera in which highly developed facial mime is almost entirely a function of vocal emission and of articulation. On the contrary, the mime signs relative to the text recited by the actor i.e. the words at the semantic level, are in most cases artificial signs. By accompanying the word they make it more expressive, more significant but it also happens that they attenuate the signs of the word or contradict them. The muscular signs of the face have such an expressive value that they often successfully replace the word. There are all sorts of mime signs linked to forms of non-linguistic communication, to the emotions (surprise, anger, fear, pleasure), to pleasant or unpleasant physical feelings, to muscular feelings (for instance, effort), etc.

4. THE GESTURE

After the word and its written form, the gesture constitutes the richest and the most supple means of expressing thoughts i.e. the best developed system of signs. Theoreticians of the gesture claim that it is possible to make up to 700,000 signs (R. Paget) with the hand and arm. As for the art of the spectacle, it is worth noticing that the 800 signs executed with both hands by the actors of the Indian "danced drama," Kathakali, correspond, from a quantitative viewpoint, to the vocabulary of Basic English or of fundamental French and allow the characters to carry on long dialogues. By differentiating the gesture from the other systems of kinesthetic signs, we consider it as a movement or attitude of the hand, the arm, the leg, the head, the whole body in order to create and communicate signs. Signs of gesture include several categories. There are some that go with the word or are substitutes for it, that replace an element of the setting (gesture of the arm to open an imaginary door), an element of the costume (imaginary hat), of several accessories (play of the fisherman without a rod, worms, fish or pail), gestures that signify a feeling, an emotion etc... All the gestures being more or less conventional (cf. the signs of politeness or physical comfort throughout the different areas of civilization) it is as well to underline that in the arts of

the spectacle of some countries, such as the Asian, gestures are supraconventional signs: carefully codified and transmitted from generation to generation, they are accessible only to an initiated audience.

5. THE ACTOR'S MOVEMENT ON THE STAGE

The third system of kinesthetic signs includes the actor's movements and his positions in the scenic space. It deals principally with:

1. successive positions in relation to the other actors, the accessories, the settings, the audience;
2. different ways of moving about (slow, hurried, hesitant, majestic gaits, moving on foot, in a chariot, by car, on a stretcher);
3. entries and exits;
4. collective movements.

Considered from a semiological viewpoint, these principal categories of the actor's movement on the stage are capable of providing us with the most varied signs. A character comes out of a restaurant (sign of his connection with the restaurant: he is himself the restaurant owner or a waiter, he is a customer or he had entered it to see someone). When he sees another character in the middle of the stage, he comes to a sudden halt (the desire of not communicating with that character) or else he goes to him (the desire of communication). A third character appears, the two interlocutors part in a hurry (the sign of their complicity).

A hesitant gait is the sign of drunkenness or exhaustion. Stepping backwards can be the sign of the reverence demanded by protocol, of shyness, of defiance towards who is left, or of affection (the real value of this sign depends on the semiological context). The actor's entry (as well as his exit) from the right or the left, through the door or the window, from under the stage or across the footlights are all signs used by the dramatist or the director. And lastly, the movements of groups and crowds can create specific signs other than the sum of the signs provided by the individual movements. For instance, a slow apathetic gait becomes the sign of a threatening power as soon as it is executed by some twenty or thirty walk-on-parts, in a group or coming from

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all directions (the same sign multiplied by a certain number of individual cases changes the *signifié*; it is given a new value).

6. THE MAKE-UP

Theatrical make-up is designed to show-up the actor's face as it appears on stage in certain conditions of lighting. With the mime, it contributes to the character's physiognomy. While the mime, thanks to the movements of the facial muscles, creates essentially mobile signs, make-up forms signs of a more durable character. Sometimes it is applied on the other uncovered areas of the body, such as the hands or the shoulders. Using various techniques and materials (make-up, pencils, powders, mastics, varnishes, postiches) make-up can create signs relative to the race, age, health and temperament. They are generally based on natural signs (color of the skin, whiteness or redness of the face, line of the lips and eye-brows). By means of make-up, one can set up a collection of signs that constitutes a type, e.g. a vamp, a witch, a drunkard. The signs of the make-up (often combined with these of hair-style and costume) also allow a representation of a historic or contemporary personality. Make-up as a system of signs is directly interdependent with facial mime. The signs of the two systems are mutually strengthened or complementary but it is also possible that make-up hinders the actor's mimical expression. People in the trade well know the make-up called "mask-make-up" which partially immobilizes the face; the technique of make-up also uses rubber-masks. This leads us to point out the role of the mask itself in the semiological frame. In our opinion, the mask belongs to the system of signs of make-up though, from the material viewpoint, it could be part of the costume, and from the functional viewpoint, part of the mime.

7. THE HAIR-STYLE

From the artisan viewpoint, the theatrical hair-style is most often classified with make-up. As an artistic phenomenon, it belongs to the field of the costume designer. From the semiological viewpoint, however, the hair-style often plays a part independent of make-up and costume, a part which appears decisive in some cases. This

is why we have decided to consider it as an autonomous system of signs. For instance, in *The Physicians* by Dürrenmatt, the spectator being warned that there is a pseudo-Newton among the characters recognizes him at first sight thanks to the typical wig of the English 17th century; in this case, the make-up plays an entirely secondary part. The hair-style can be the sign of belonging to a geographical or cultural area, to an epoch, to a social stratum, to a generation that is in opposition to its fathers' habits. The semiological power of the hair-style lies not only in its style, its various historic and social aspects, but also in the more or less elaborate state which it is in. While discussing the hair-style, one must not forget the semiological role that the beard and the moustache can play as indispensable complements of the hair-style or as autonomous elements.

8. THE COSTUME

In the theater, "the apparel makes the man." The costume transforms Mr Smith-actor or Mr Brown-walk-on-part into an Indian maharajah or a Parisian tramp, into a patrician of Ancient Rome or a ship's captain, into a vicar or a cook. The costume brings artificial signs of great variety into life itself. In the theater it is the most external and conventional means of defining the human individual. The costume signifies the sex, the age, the belonging to a social stratum, the profession, a particular social and hierarchical position (king, pope), the nationality, the religion; it sometimes defines a historical or contemporary personality. Within the limits of each of these categories (and also outside them) the costume can have all sorts of shades of meaning such as the material position of the character, his tastes, traits of his character. The semiological power of the costume does not only define who is wearing it. The costume is also a sign of the climate (colonial helmet) or the historical epoch, of the season (panama) or the weather (raincoat), the place (bathing-costume, mountaineer's costume) or the time of day. A costume, of course, usually corresponds to several circumstances at once and it is generally associated with signs which belong to other systems. In some theatrical traditions (Far East, India, *Commedia dell'Arte*) the costume, fossilized by rigorous conventions, becomes

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(like the mask) the sign of immutable types that are repeated from one play to another and one generation to another. It is as well to underline the fact that the signs of costume, as well as those of mime, make-up and hair-style can work both ways: it is possible that the costume is used to hide the character's real sex, his true social position, his true profession, etc. Here lies the whole problem of travesty.

9. THE ACCESSORY

For several reasons the accessories constitute an autonomous system of signs. In our classification they are best situated between the costume and the decor because many borderline cases bring them near to one or the other. Any element of the costume can become an accessory as soon as it plays a particular role independent of the semiological functions of clothing. For instance a cane is an indispensable element of the dandy's costume in one of de Musset's comedies. But when left behind in the boudoir of the courted lady, it becomes an accessory loaded with consequences. On the other hand, the frontier between the accessory and the decor is sometimes hard to define. A car is more of an accessory in the 3rd scene of *Master Puntila and his valet Matti*, it is an element of the decor in the 1st act of *Knock*. And which is Mother Courage's cart in the play by Brecht?

A practically unlimited number of objects that exist in nature and in social life can become theatrical accessories. If they only represent objects encountered in life, these accessories are artificial signs of those objects, signs at the first degree. But, as well as this elementary function, they can indicate the place, the moment or any circumstance connected with the characters who use them (profession, tastes, intention) and this is their significance at the second degree. The lantern burning in the valet's hands means that it is night, the saw and the axe are the signs of the woodcutter. There are cases when the accessory can obtain a semiological value at a higher degree. The stuffed sea-gull, an accessory in Chekhov's play, is the sign, at the first degree, of a recently killed sea-gull; this is the sign, at the second degree (or symbol in current language) of an abstract idea (failed aspiration to freedom) which is in turn the sign of the hero's mood in the play. To be

more precise, we can say that the *signifié* of the sign at the first degree, is linked to the *signifiant* of the sign at the second degree; the *signifié* of the latter is linked to the *signifiant* of the sign at the third degree and so on (the phenomenon of connotation).

10. THE DECOR

The primordial job of the decor, a system of signs that can also be called scenic apparatus, decoration or scenography, is to represent the geographical place (landscape with pagodas, the sea, mountains), the social place (a public square, laboratory, kitchen, café) or both at once (a street towered over by skyscrapers, a sitting-room looking out on the Eiffel Tower). The decor or one of its elements can also indicate time: a historical epoch (Greek temple), a season (roofs covered with snow), a time of day (sunset, moon). Beside its semiological function of determining the action in space and time, the decor can include signs related to the most different circumstances. Suffice it to say that the semiological field of theatrical sets is practically as vast as that of all the plastic arts: painting, sculpture, architecture, decorative art. The means used by the stage-designer are greatly varied. Their choice depends on theatrical tradition, the epoch, the artistic currents, personal tastes, material conditions of the spectacle. The decor can be richly detailed or reduced to a few essential elements, even to one single element. In an overloaded bourgeois interior, every piece of furniture and every object (solid, painted or cardboard) is the sign at the first degree of a piece of furniture or a real object, but most of them have no individual signification at the second degree; they are the combinations of several signs at the first degree, and sometimes their totality, constituting the sign at the second degree, is the sign of a bourgeois interior. When the theatrical decor is limited to one element, to one single sign, this automatically becomes the sign at the second (and even at the third) degree. The semiological value of a decor does not therefore depend directly on the quantity of signs at the first degree. An isolated sign can have a semantic content that is richer and denser than a whole collection of signs.

The semiological function of the decor is not only the signs implied in its elements. The movement of the settings, the way

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of placing them or changing them, can introduce complementary or autonomous values. A spectacle can do entirely without a decor. Its semiological role in this case is played by gesture and movement (an expedient to which pantomime readily has recourse), by the word, sound effects, costumes, accessories and also by the lighting.

11. THE LIGHTING

Theatrical lighting is a relatively recent device (in France it was not introduced until the 17th century). Exploited principally to make the other means of expression stand out, it can however have an autonomous semiological role. Progressing rapidly from the use of electricity i.e. over a century ago, theatrical lighting, with its perfected mechanisms of distribution and command, has an increasingly wide and rich use from the semiological viewpoint, on the indoor stage as well as in open-air spectacles.

Firstly, the lighting is capable of defining the theatrical place: the spotlights concentrated on a part of the floor point out the momentary place of action. The spotlight can also isolate an actor or an accessory, not only to outline the material place, but also to show up the actor or the object in relation to his surrounding; it becomes the sign of the momentary or absolute importance of the character or the object picked out. An important function of the lighting consists in being able to enhance or modify the value of the gesture, the movement or the decor, and even give them a new semiological value; the face, the actor's body or a part of the decor are sometimes "modelled" by the light. The color cast by the lighting can also play a semiological role.

A special place must be reserved for projections. In their functioning, they belong to the system of lighting but their semiological role goes considerably beyond this system. One must first distinguish the still from the moving projection. The former can complete or replace the decor (projected image or photography), the latter can give added dynamic effects (the movement of clouds or waves; the imitation of rain or snow). The use of projection in contemporary theater takes on greatly varied forms: it has become the technical means of communicating signs belonging to different systems and even situated outside them. For instance, a cinematographic projection during a theatrical spectacle

must first be analysed in the frame of the semiology of the cinema; the fact that this projection takes place, is for us a sign at a compound degree: this happens simultaneously in another place, or it is the character's dreams.

12. THE MUSIC

Music, one of the great fields of art, requires specialized studies in order to outline its semantic or semiological aspect. The significative value of "program-music," of "imitative" music has always been evident. But a method of valid analysis is only possible if we start with semiological research at the level of the fundamental structures of music—rhythm, melody, harmony—based on the connection between the intensity, duration and pitch of the sounds. This research has not yet gone beyond the preliminary stage. As for music applied to the spectacle, its semiological function is nearly always indubitable. Specific and rather difficult problems arise when it is the point of departure of a spectacle (opera, ballet). In the case when it is added to the spectacle, its role is to underline, amplify, develop, sometimes belie or replace the signs of the other systems. The rhythmical or melodic associations linked to some genres of music (menuet, military march) can evoke the atmosphere, the place or the epoch of the action. The choice of instrument has also a semiological value capable of suggesting the place the social environment, the atmosphere. Among the numerous uses that stage-directors make of music, let us take the example of the musical theme that accompanies the entry of every character and becomes a sign (at the second degree) of each of them, or that of the musical motif that, when added to the retrospective scenes, signifies the present-past contrast. A special place must be reserved for vocal music, the signs of which are closely linked with those of the word and diction (just as word and tone are linked in spoken language). But music sometimes means something other than the text (e.g. soft music and crude text). In opera, the semiologist's job is all the more complicated because the signs of music appear simultaneously on two levels: the instrumental and the vocal. This is also, to a certain extent, the case of musical comedy and song.

13. THE SOUND EFFECTS

We come to the category of sounds which belong neither to the word nor to the music: sound effects. There is first a whole field of natural signs (footsteps, creaking of doors, rustle of accessories and costumes) which remain natural in the spectacle. They are the involuntary and secondary result of the communication obtained by other signs, a result that cannot or is not meant to be avoided. The only sounds that interest us are those which, being natural or artificial signs in life, are artificially reproduced for the aims of the spectacle; they make up the field of sound effects. The semiological ground of sound effects is as vast as, and perhaps even vaster, than the world of sounds in life. Sounds produced in the theater can indicate the time (the chime of a clock), the weather (rain), the place (noises of a big city, bird-cries, noises of pet-animals), the movement (sound of a car approaching or drawing away), a solemn or worried atmosphere (heavy bell, sirens), they can be the sign of the most varied phenomena and circumstances. The means used to obtain sound effects are very varied: from the actor's voice imitating the cock's crow in the wings, through all sorts of mechanical devices, to the tape which has produced a real revolution in this field. On the one hand, it enables one to record and reconstitute the rarest natural sounds and, on the other hand, it makes possible really creative work and the most audacious experiments with a view to making signs which are often on the limit of music and the word. Is not a spoken text, recorded and played back, a sort of stammering like a sound effect?

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When one embraces at one glance the thirteen systems of signs that we have passed quickly over, observations emerge that lead to a more synthesizing classification. Systems 1 and 2 relate to the spoken text; 3, 4 and 5 to the expression of the body; 6, 7 and 8 to the actor's external appearance; 9, 10 and 11 to the aspect of the scenic place; 12 and 13 to the inarticulate sounds. This makes five large groups of signs. Let us note that the first eight systems (three large groups) directly concern the actor.

Another classification allows a distinction between auditory and visual signs. The first two and the last two systems of our classification—word, tone, music, sound effects—include auditory (or sonorous, or acoustic) signs while all the other groups together, visual (or optical) signs. With this last classification, which deals with the perception of signs, is connected that which situates them in relation to time and space. The auditory signs are communicated in time. The case of visual signs is more complicated: some (make-up, hair-style, costume, accessory, decor) are, in principle, spatial, others (mime, gesture, movement, lighting) function generally in space and time.

By applying the distinction concerning the sensory perception of signs (auditory—visual) to that which divides them according to their mouth-piece, we obtain four large categories: auditory signs emitted by the actor (systems 1 and 2), visual signs localized in

1 Word	Spoken text	Actor	Auditory signs	Time	Auditory signs (actor)	
2 Tone				Space and time		Visual signs (actor)
3 Mime	Expression of the body		Visual signs	Space	Visual signs (outside the actor)	
4 Gesture				Actor's external appearance		Space and time
5 Movement						
6 Make-up	Outside the actor			Auditory signs		
7 Hair-style					Inarticulate sounds	
8 Costume			12 Music			
9 Accessory	13 Sound effects					
10 Decor						
11 Lighting						

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the actor (3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8), visual signs going beyond the actor (9, 10 and 11), auditive signs outside the actor (12 and 13).

The figure will help to follow the suggested classifications.

The signs and their systems can also be classified according to the subjects of volition i.e. the characters who create them by their will (since every artificial sign implies a voluntary creation). First we have the dramatist; he is principally the creator of the signs of the word but by the text itself or by taking part in the rehearsals he can inspire signs belonging to all the other systems. The director is, nowadays, the almighty master of the spectacle, capable of creating or suppressing the signs of any system (including those of the word, by cutting or adding to the text). The actor in a more or less independent way determines the signs of tone, mime and gesture, partly those of his scenic movements, sometimes these of make-up, hair-style or costume. The stage-designer's role (also called the person in charge of the scenic apparatus or the scenographer), consists in creating the signs of the decor, the accessories, sometimes the lighting; he or his specialised collaborators create the signs of the costume, hair-style and make-up. By a certain disposition of the stage-space, the stage-designer can suggest the signs of movement. And lastly, to mention only the principal co-authors of the theatrical spectacle, the composer creates the signs of music and, eventually, of the sound effects; in the case of ballet or pantomime-music, the composer inspires the signs of the actor's movement (as the dramatist does in relation to the different systems of signs). In ballet and danced interludes the choreographer is the principal creator of the signs of gesture and movement.

After these attempts to systematize the semiological phenomena of the theatrical spectacle, it is as well to insist on the fact of the interchangeability of signs between different systems. This problem has already arisen during the presentation of the various systems. The word, first of all, has the power of replacing most of the signs of the other systems. The gesture comes second to it. But it can happen that the most material signs, these of the decor or the costume, are substitutes for one another. "Some man or other must present wall: and let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him, to signify wall; and let him hold his fingers thus, and through that cranny shall Pyramus and Thisby

whisper," Bottom says in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (act III, sc. I), and, in fact, Snout's costume is an element of the decor: "This loam, this rough-cast, and this stone, doth show that I am that same wall; the truth is so," he affirms (act V, sc. I). In another representation, the actors come and recite couplets putting their faces in the holes of a partition on which their silhouettes are cleverly outlined. Here an element of decor takes the place of costume.

Let us note, in passing, that there are equivocal signs in the theater with a double meaning, consciously entangled or hermetic at the level of the word as well as the other systems, signs capable of being interpreted in different ways. A decor can indicate a cathedral vault and a forest at the same time (out of an artistic taste for simplification, for practical reasons, to create a meaning at the compound degree). A costume can contain mixed elements of both sexes or different epochs. A sound effect can signify at once a character's heartbeat and the drums of an army, it can pass from one meaning to the other.

The problem of the perception and interpretation of the signs is worth being analysed with the methods of the theory of information. Where there is a system of signs, there must be a code. The codes of the signs used in the theater are provided for us by social or individual experience, by education, by literary and artistic culture. There are types of spectacle for which the knowledge of a special code or codes is needed. To reach the heart of the problem, let us take the radical example of a deaf or blind man attending a dramatic performance: the latter will only perceive the auditive, the former, the visual signs. The example of a spectacle in a foreign language is much more subtle (the degree of the knowledge of that language, and of the play in question). In all cases, the number and value of the signs perceived, in relation to the number and value of the signs emitted, varies according to the general culture of the spectator, his knowledge of the environment and customs presented, the degree of his tiredness, how much he takes part in what happens on stage, his capacity of concentration, the quantity of signs simultaneously emitted (the problem of the economy of signs to which we shall return), the conditions of transmission of the signs (e.g. bad diction of an actor or insufficient lighting), and, lastly, the position occupied by

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the spectators from the front rows in the pit to the gods, which makes a difference for the possibility of seeing and hearing, already differentiated *a priori* by their individual auditive and visual capacities. But these considerations run the risk of taking us too far from the main object of our research since they belong to the theory of information as well as the spectator's psychology and physiology.

What is essential from the viewpoint of theatrical semiology is the problem of the economy of the signs communicated during the spectacle. Semiological prodigality and parsimony are the two poles.

Before the performance starts, the spectator looks at the painted curtain that tells him unequivocally about the place and the epoch of the play. A piece of music confirms that we are transported into the time of Offenbach. Once the curtain is up, a huge calendar on the wall gives us the precise date and one of the character's first replies contain the precious information: "We are in 18...". In another presentation, while the actors speak and move about, a luminous newspaper runs above their heads and at the same time pictures are projected on a screen so that it is practically impossible to follow the three levels simultaneously. In such an excellent spectacle, the director is not content with just representing the place and the atmosphere of the dramatic action (a lunatic asylum) by making a few patients walk about; he puts scores of them in every corner of the decor, which is built on several levels, and makes them issue the most elaborate sounds and gestures all through the performance. The prodigality of signs is huge but here it serves an indubitable artistic aim. Semiological wastage can show itself in several aspects: duplication or multiplication of the same sign, juxtaposition of signs whose *signifié* are identical or very close, repetitions of the same signs, simultaneous emission of a large number of similar or unsimilar signs, only one part of which can be perceived by the spectator. It is easy to say that the notion of redundancy borrowed from the theory of information, does not explain all the problems relative to what we call the prodigality of the signs of the spectacle.

A practically empty stage, black curtains and a rostrum. The troop enters like a homogeneous gang in working denims. An actor emerges, takes a hat, a cane and speaks; the character is

formed. The spotlight picks out another actor who comes forward and replies. Little by little with some accessories and a few elements of costume, with words and movement, a whole small world begins to live, fight, suffer and rejoice. This is the “bare” setting in which semiological parsimony shows up every sign and charges it with a task that is usually distributed between several signs of several systems.

Situated between both these extremes, prodigality and parsimony, is the problem of the economy of the signs. This demands not only that they are not multiplied and repeated without any semantic or artistic necessity but also that among a large quantity of simultaneously communicated signs (demanded by the dramatic work or by the style of the setting) the spectator can easily disengage the most important, those indispensable for an understanding of the work.

Enriched by some analyses and several examples drawn from different systems of signs, we must reconsider the problem of the theatrical sign in general and especially the relations between *signifié* and *signifiant*. To begin with, we accepted the Saussurian schema: *signifié-signifiant*, two components of the sign. How does this schema, elaborated for the needs of linguistics, stand up to the test of the theatrical sign, a sign that extends into extremely vast semiological fields?

A certain sound effect is the sign of rain. The sound emitted by the sheet-iron is in this case *signifiant*, the idea that it is raining is *signifié*. But rain can be represented (signified) in the theater in several ways, by different systems of signs: by the lighting (projection), the costume (raincoat and hood), the accessory (umbrella), the gesture (actor who shakes himself when entering), the hair-style (wet hair), the music and, above all, the word. And so there are different signs (simultaneous, successive or virtual), different *signifiant* but the *signifié* is always the same: “it is raining.” (Not forgetting that each of these signs can have a supplementary semiological value e.g. a particular tone to pronounce the words “it is raining,” a gesture that reveals a rustic or a gentleman.) Let us take another example. The concept of the uneducated man is represented in a theatrical character by several signs: the word, tone, mime, gesture, movement, hair-style, costume, accessory. Their *signifié* is: “the uneducated man.” In

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Act V of *Pygmalion* by G. B. Shaw, Mr Doolittle arrives at Mrs Higgins. This time, the dustman is in the costume of a rich bourgeois: frock-coat, white waistcoat, top hat. The actor playing that part settles himself in an armchair, puts his top hat down on the floor beside him and lights a cigar. During the dialogue, he wants to tap the ash of his cigar off; he hesitates for a while, and then he uses his top hat for want of an ash-tray. His gesture means: 1. that he gets rid of the ash of his cigar, 2. that he has no manners, 3. that he wants to be considered as a gentleman. Here we have one sign, one *signifiant*, and three superimposed *signifié*, or, as we have often said for the sake of simplification, the sign at the first, second and third degrees.

We have just cited the case when several signs have the same *signifié* and the case when a single sign has several superimposed *signifié*. It is important to add a more complicated case when the spectator is obliged to associate two or more signs belonging to different systems, to discover the compound *signifié* (or in another nomenclature, the sign at the compound degree). A gang of protesters crosses the stage, empty-handed; while slogans are projected on to the screen. And so there are several signs of two systems (movement and projected decor), different *signifiant* and different *signifié*; by associating these signs at the level of their *signifié*, one grasps their compound *signifié* (the sign at the x degree): people protest with posters, they claim the realization of their postulations. And here is another combination. The actor stays motionless on stage while his words are diffused by loud speakers and the mime of his face is projected like a film. Beside the signs emitted within each system, the sign at the x degree or the compound *signifié*, the result of the association of these three elements is, "it is an inner monologue." The examples quoted are enough to prove the complexity of the theatrical sign. The idea of connotation (Hjelmslev, Barthes) can help to solve certain problems but is inefficient in more complicated cases.

The theoretical aspect of the sign of the spectacle will become clearer and more precise with the advance of the research about the particular systems of signs and the different types of spectacle. A synthesis, i.e. the semiology of the art of the spectacle, will not be achieved in the very near future. If we have dared to sketch this general view (though limited to certain types of spec-

tacle) it is with the hope that it could encourage and facilitate practical research without which a valid synthesis cannot be achieved. The remarks proposed here may be useful for a scientific analysis of theatrical presentation. A really scientific and comparative analysis is compulsory today. The Colloquium of Royaumont on the contemporary theater, organised and directed by Jean Jacquot in november 1966, was one of the first attempts in this direction. In the course of the discussion, it was apparent how much people seriously interested in that problem—researchers, academics, directors, critics—need a method that would allow a collective and efficient effort. It seems that the semiological method would be perfectly adequate as a starting point for this kind of research, all the more because the existing techniques, the cinema and the tape-recorder, provide a means of examining and re-examining at will each fragment of a presentation that has been chosen to that effect at the level of the visual and auditive signs.

The application of the semiological method to the analysis of the spectacle demands the elaboration of some methodological principles: first of all the determination of the significative (or semiological) unit of the spectacle. If one takes into account that linguists do not agree on the semantic unit of language (morpheme word, sentence, wording), one realises the difficulty presented by this task. The significative unit for every system of signs must be determined and then the common denominator of all the signs, emitted together, must be found. The following definition could be postulated *a priori* starting from the idea of time: the semiological unit of the spectacle is a slice containing all the signs emitted simultaneously, a slice the duration of which is equal to the sign that lasts least. In practice, this could lead to an excessive atomisation of the units of the spectacle and might demand the introduction of a distinction between the small and large units (especially at the level of the word and kinesthetic signs).

Beside its utilitarian functions and the help it is able to give to theatrical studies, semiological research in the field of the spectacle opens up large horizons from the theoretical viewpoint. The confrontation of the most heterogeneous signs within an artistic entity, in relatively restricted time and space, of signs whose interdependence is considerable and varied, obliges one to

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look for theoretical solutions and to draw conclusions that would be valid for the sign in the widest possible acceptance. The semiological study of the spectacle can become the favorite battleground for the elaboration of a general semiology. Thanks to the necessity of confronting very varied systems of signs, the semiology of the art of the spectacle can reveal itself as the touchstone of a general science of signs.