

Keir  
**Elam**

The Semiotics of Theatre  
and Drama

2nd Edition

 **Routledge**  
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LONDON AND NEW YORK

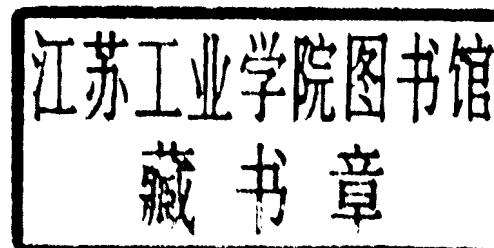
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'The *New Accents* titles are of the highest interest for literary theory and General Editor Terence Hawkes represents a guarantee. I have particularly appreciated the work of Keir Elam.'

*Umberto Eco*

The late twentieth century saw an explosion of interest in semiotics, the science of the signs and processes by which we communicate. In this study, the first of its kind in English, Keir Elam shows how this new 'science' can provide a radical shift in our understanding of theatrical performance, one of our richest and most complex forms of communication.

Elam traces the history of semiotic approaches to performance, from 1930s Prague onwards, and presents a model of theatrical communication. In the course of his study, he touches upon the 'logic' of the drama and the analysis of dramatic discourse. This edition also includes a new post-script by the author, looking at the fate of theatre semiotics since the publication of this book, and a fully updated bibliography. Much praised for its accessibility, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* remains a 'must-read' text for all those interested in the analysis of theatrical performance.

**Keir Elam** is Professor of English Drama at the University of Florence.

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In memory of my mother

## GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

No doubt a third General Editor's Preface to *New Accents* seems hard to justify. What is there left to say? Twenty-five years ago, the series began with a very clear purpose. Its major concern was the newly perplexed world of academic literary studies, where hectic monsters called 'Theory', 'Linguistics' and 'Politics' ranged. In particular, it aimed itself at those undergraduates or beginning postgraduate students who were either learning to come to terms with the new developments or were being sternly warned against them.

*New Accents* deliberately took sides. Thus the first Preface spoke darkly, in 1977, of 'a time of rapid and radical social change', of the 'erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions' central to the study of literature. 'Modes and categories inherited from the past' it announced, 'no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation'. The aim of each volume would be to 'encourage rather than resist the process of change' by combining nuts-and-bolts exposition of new ideas with clear and detailed explanation of related conceptual developments. If mystification (or downright demonisation) was the enemy, lucidity (with a nod to the compromises inevitably at stake there) became a friend. If a 'distinctive discourse of the future' beckoned, we wanted at least to be able to understand it.

With the apocalypse duly noted, the second Preface proceeded

piously to fret over the nature of whatever rough beast might stagger portentously from the rubble. 'How can we recognise or deal with the new?', it complained, reporting nevertheless the dismaying advance of 'a host of barely respectable activities for which we have no reassuring names' and promising a programme of wary surveillance at 'the boundaries of the precedented and at the limit of the thinkable'. Its conclusion, 'the unthinkable, after all, is that which covertly shapes our thoughts' may rank as a truism. But in so far as it offered some sort of useable purchase on a world of crumbling certainties, it is not to be blushed for.

In the circumstances, any subsequent, and surely final, effort can only modestly look back, marvelling that the series is still here, and not unreasonably congratulating itself on having provided an initial outlet for what turned, over the years, into some of the distinctive voices and topics in literary studies. But the volumes now re-presented have more than a mere historical interest. As their authors indicated, the issues they raised are still potent, the arguments with which they engaged are still disturbing. In short, we weren't wrong. Academic study did change rapidly and radically to match, even to help to generate, wide reaching social changes. A new set of discourses was developed to negotiate those upheavals. Nor has the process ceased. In our deliquescent world, what was unthinkable inside and outside the academy all those years ago now seems regularly to come to pass.

Whether the *New Accents* volumes provided adequate warning of, maps for, guides to, or nudges in the direction of this new terrain is scarcely for me to say. Perhaps our best achievement lay in cultivating the sense that it was there. The only justification for a reluctant third attempt at a Preface is the belief that it still is.

TERENCE HAWKES

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been read in typescript by a number of friends and colleagues, to whom I wish to express my sincere gratitude. Marcello Pagnini, Alessandro Serpieri, Paola Gulli Pugliatti and Patrice Pavis all offered me illuminating criticism and stimulating suggestions, which I have taken into account in putting the book into its final form. I should particularly like to thank Terence Hawkes, the general editor, for his warm encouragement and shrewd advice at every stage of the writing of this work.

Various sections of Chapter 5 reflect my experience, from 1977 to 1978, as a member of a research group, directed by Alessandro Serpieri and sponsored by the Rizzoli Foundation of Milan. I happily acknowledge my debt to my colleagues in the group.

KEIR ELAM 1979

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# 1

## PRELIMINARIES: SEMIOTICS AND POETICS

### THE SEMIOTIC ENTERPRISE

Of all recent developments in what used to be confidently called the humanities, no event has registered a more radical and widespread impact than the growth of semiotics. There scarcely remains a discipline which has not been opened during the past fifteen years to approaches adopted or adapted from linguistics and the general theory of signs.

Semiotics can best be defined as a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society. As such it is equally concerned with processes of *signification* and with those of *communication*, i.e. the means whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged. Its objects are thus at once the different sign-systems and codes at work in society and the actual messages and texts produced thereby. The breadth of the enterprise is such that it cannot be considered simply as a 'discipline', while it is too multifaceted and heterogeneous to be reduced to a 'method'. It is – ideally, at least – a multidisciplinary science whose precise methodological characteristics will necessarily vary from field to field but which is united by a common global concern, the better understanding of our own meaning-bearing behaviour.



Proposed as a comprehensive science of signs almost contemporarily by two great modern thinkers at the beginning of this century, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, semiotics has since had a very uneven career. This has been marked in particular by two periods of intense and wide-based activity: the thirties and forties (with the work of the Czech formalists) and the past two decades (especially in France, Italy, Germany, the Soviet Union and the United States). The fortunes of the semiotic enterprise in recent years have been especially high in the field of literary studies, above all with regard to poetry and the narrative, (see Hawkes 1977a). Theatre and drama, meanwhile, have received considerably less attention, despite the peculiar richness of theatrical communication as a potential area of semiotic investigation. The main purpose of this book is to examine such work as has been produced and to suggest possible directions for future research in so vital a cultural territory.

### HOW MANY SEMIOTICS?

'Theatre' and 'drama': this familiar but invariably troublesome distinction requires a word of explanation in this context, since it has important consequences with regard to the objects and issues at stake. 'Theatre' is taken to refer here to the complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction: that is, with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and with the systems underlying it. By 'drama', on the other hand, is meant that mode of fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular ('dramatic') conventions. The epithet 'theatrical', then, is limited to what takes place between and among performers and spectators, while the epithet 'dramatic' indicates the network of factors relating to the represented fiction. This is not, of course, an absolute differentiation between two mutually alien bodies, since the performance, at least traditionally, is devoted to the representation of the dramatic fiction. It demarcates, rather, different levels of a unified cultural phenomenon for purposes of analysis.

A related distinction arises concerning the actual object of the semiotician's labours in this area; that is to say, the kinds of text which he is

to take as his analytic corpus. Unlike the literary semiotician or the analyst of myth or the plastic arts, the researcher in theatre and drama is faced with two quite dissimilar – although intimately correlated – types of textual material: that produced in the theatre and that composed for the theatre. These two potential focuses of semiotic attention will be indicated as the *theatrical* or *performance* text and the *written* or *dramatic* text respectively.

It is a matter of some controversy as to whether these two kinds of textual structure belong to the same field of investigation: certain writers (Bettetini and de Marinis 1977; Ruffini 1978; de Marinis 1978) virtually rule out the dramatic text altogether as a legitimate concern of theatrical semiotics proper. The question that arises, then, is whether a semiotics of theatre and drama is conceivable as a bi- or multilateral but nevertheless integrated enterprise, or whether instead there are necessarily two (or more) quite separate disciplines in play. To put the question differently: is it possible to refund in semiotic terms a full-bodied poetics of the Aristotelian kind, concerned with all the communicational, representational, logical, fictional, linguistic and structural principles of theatre and drama? This is one of the central motivating questions behind this book.

### THE MATERIAL

Given the unsettled and still largely undefined nature of the territory in view here, the examination that follows is inevitably extremely eclectic, taking into account sources ranging from classical formalism and information theory to recent linguistic, philosophical, logical and sociological research. The result is undoubtedly uneven, but this is perhaps symptomatic of the present state of semiotics at large. By the same token, the differences in terminology and methodological concerns from chapter to chapter reflect some of the changes that have registered in the semiotics of theatre and drama in the course of its development.

As for the illustrative examples chosen, especially dramatic, the chief criterion has been that of familiarity, a fact which accounts for the perhaps disproportionate number of references to Shakespeare. Exemplifications of modes of discourse (Chapter 5) are taken largely from English language texts in order to avoid the problems presented by translation.

## 2

# FOUNDATIONS: SIGNS IN THE THEATRE

## PRAGUE STRUCTURALISM AND THE THEATRICAL SIGN

### The Prague School

The year 1931 is an important date in the history of theatre studies. Until that time dramatic poetics – the descriptive science of the drama and theatrical performance – had made little substantial progress since its Aristotelian origins. The drama had become (and largely remains) an annexe of the property of literary critics, while the stage spectacle, considered too ephemeral a phenomenon for systematic study, had been effectively staked off as the happy hunting ground of reviewers, reminiscing actors, historians and prescriptive theorists. That year, however, saw the publication of two studies in Czechoslovakia which radically changed the prospects for the scientific analysis of theatre and drama: Otakar Zich's *Aesthetics of the Art of Drama* and Jan Mukařovský's 'An Attempted Structural Analysis of the Phenomenon of the Actor'.

The two pioneering works laid the foundations for what is probably the richest corpus of theatrical and dramatic theory produced in modern times, namely the body of books and articles produced in the

1930s and 1940s by the Prague School structuralists. Zich's *Aesthetics* is not explicitly structuralist but exercised a considerable influence on later semioticians, particularly in its emphasis on the necessary inter-relationship in the theatre between heterogeneous but interdependent systems (see Deák 1976; Matejka and Titunik 1976; Slawinska 1978). Zich does not allow special prominence to any one of the components involved: he refuses, particularly, to grant automatic dominance to the written text, which takes its place in the system of systems making up the total dramatic representation. Mukařovský's 'structural analysis', meanwhile, represents the first step towards a semiotics of the performance proper, classifying the repertory of gestural signs and their functions in Charlie Chaplin's mimes.

During the two decades that followed these opening moves, theatrical semiotics attained a breadth and a rigour that remain unequalled. In the context of the Prague School's investigations into every kind of artistic and semiotic activity – from ordinary language to poetry, art, cinema and folk culture – attention was paid to all forms of theatre, including the ancient, the avant-garde and the Oriental, in a collective attempt to establish the principles of theatrical signification. It is inevitably with these frontier-opening explorations that any overview of this field must begin.

### The sign

Prague structuralism developed under the twin influences of Russian formalist poetics and Saussurian structural linguistics. From Saussure it inherited not only the project for analysing all of man's signifying and communicative behaviour within the framework of a general semiotics but also, and more specifically, a working definition of the sign as a two-faced entity linking a material vehicle or signifier with a mental concept or signified. It is not surprising, given this patrimony, that much of the Prague semioticians' early work with regard to the theatre was concerned with the very problem of identifying and describing theatrical signs and sign-functions.

Mukařovský's initial application of the Saussurian definition of the sign consisted in identifying the work of art as such (e.g. the theatrical performance in its entirety) as the semiotic unit, whose signifier or sign

vehicle<sup>1</sup> is the work itself as 'thing', or ensemble of material elements, and whose signified is the 'aesthetic object' residing in the collective consciousness of the public (1934, p. 5). The performance text becomes, in this view, a macro-sign, its meaning constituted by its total effect. This approach has the advantages of emphasizing the subordination of all contributory elements to a unified textual whole and of giving due weight to the audience as the ultimate maker of its own meanings. It is clear, on the other hand, that this macrosign has to be broken down into smaller units before anything resembling analysis can begin: thus the strategy adopted later by Mukařovský's colleagues is to view the performance not as a single sign but as a network of semiotic units belonging to different cooperative systems.

### Semiotization

It was above all the folklorist Petr Bogatyrev, formerly a member of the Russian formalist circle, who undertook to chart the elementary principles of theatrical semiosis. In his very influential essay on folk theatre (1938b), he advances the thesis that the stage radically transforms all objects and bodies defined within it, bestowing upon them an overriding signifying power which they lack – or which at least is less evident – in their normal social function: 'on the stage things that play the part of theatrical signs . . . acquire special features, qualities and attributes that they do not have in real life' (pp. 35–6). This was to become virtually a manifesto for the Prague circle; the necessary primacy of the signifying function of all performance elements is affirmed repeatedly, most succinctly by Jiří Veltruský: 'All that is on the stage is a sign' (1940, p. 84).

This first principle of the Prague School theatrical theory can best be termed that of the *semiotization of the object*. The very fact of their appearance on stage suppresses the practical function of phenomena in favour of a symbolic or signifying role, allowing them to participate in dramatic representation: 'while in real life the utilitarian function of an

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I shall in general use the term *sign-vehicle* rather than *signifier*, as it seems more appropriate to the nature of the material involved. But there is no essential difference of meaning between the two terms.

object is usually more important than its signification, on a theatrical set the signification is all important' (Brušák 1938, p. 62).

The process of semiotization is clearest, perhaps, in the case of the elements of the set. A table employed in dramatic representation will not usually differ in any material or structural fashion from the item of furniture that the members of the audience eat at, and yet it is in some sense transformed: it acquires, as it were, a set of quotation marks. It is tempting to see the stage table as bearing a direct relationship to its dramatic equivalent – the fictional object that it represents – but this is not strictly the case; the material stage object becomes, rather, a semi-otic unit standing not directly for another (imaginary) table but for the intermediary signified 'table', i.e. for the class of objects of which it is a member. The metaphorical quotation marks placed around the stage object mark its primary condition as representative of its class, so that the audience is able to infer from it the presence of another member of the same class of objects in the represented dramatic world (a table which may or may not be structurally identical with the stage object).

It is important to emphasize that the semiotization of phenomena in the theatre relates them to their signified classes rather than immediately to the dramatic world, since it is this which allows non-literal signifiers or sign-vehicles to perform the same semiotic function as literal ones (the dramatic referent, the imaginary table, might be represented by a painted sign, a linguistic sign, an actor on all fours, etc.). The only indispensable requirement that is made of the stage sign-vehicle is that it successfully stands for its intended signified; as Karel Brušák observes in his article on the Chinese theatre, 'A real object may be substituted on the set by a symbol if this symbol is able to transfer the object's own signs to itself' (1938, p. 62).

Stage semiotization is of particular interest and importance with respect to the actor and his physical attributes, since he is, in Veltruský's phrase, 'the dynamic unity of an entire set of signs' (1940, p. 84). In traditional dramatic performance the actor's body acquires its mimetic and representational powers by becoming something other than itself, more and less than individual. This applies equally to his speech (which assumes the general signified 'discourse') and to every aspect of his performance, to the extent that even purely contingent factors, such as physiologically determined reflexes, are

accepted as signifying units. ('The spectator understands even these non-purposive components of the actor's performance as signs' (Veltruský 1940, p. 85).) Groucho Marx illustrates the point in his amazement at the scratches on Julie Harris's legs in a performance of *I am a Camera*: 'At first we thought this had something to do with the plot and we waited for these scratches to come to life. But . . . it was never mentioned in the play and we finally came to the conclusion that either she had been shaving too close or she'd been kicked around in the dressing room by her boyfriend' (quoted by Burns 1972, p. 36). The audience starts with the assumption that every detail is an intentional sign and whatever cannot be related to the representation as such is converted into a sign of the actor's very reality – it is not, in any case, excluded from semiosis.

Brechtian epic theatre made great play with the duality of the actor's role as stage sign-vehicle *par excellence*, bound in a symbolic relationship which renders him 'transparent', at the same time that it stresses his physical and social presence. By driving a dramaturgical wedge between the two functions, Brecht endeavoured to expose the very quotation marks that the actor assumes in representation, thus allowing him to become 'opaque' as a vehicle. The gesture of putting on show the very process of semiotization involved in the performance has been repeated and varied by many directors and dramatists since. The Austrian playwright Peter Handke, for instance, has the professed object in writing his plays of drawing the audience's attention to the sign-vehicle and its theatricality rather than to the signified and its dramatic equivalent, that is 'Making people aware of the world of the theatre . . . There is a theatrical reality going on at each moment. A chair on the stage is a theatre chair' (1970, p. 57).

### Connotation

Even in the most determinedly realistic of dramatic representations, the role of the sign-vehicle in standing for a class of objects by no means exhausts its semiotic range. Beyond this basic denotation, the theatrical sign inevitably acquires secondary meanings for the audience, relating it to the social, moral and ideological values operative in the community of which performers and spectators are part. Bogatyrev notes

this capacity of theatrical sign-vehicles for pointing beyond the denotation to some ulterior cultural signification:

What exactly is a theatrical costume or a set that represents a house on stage? When used in a play, both the theatrical costume and the house set are often signs that point to one of the signs characterizing the costume or the house in the play. In fact, each is a sign of a sign and not the sign of a material thing. (1938b, p. 33)

It may be, for example, that in addition to the denoted class 'armour' a martial costume comes to signify for a particular audience 'valour' or 'manliness', or a bourgeois domestic interior 'wealth', 'ostentation', 'bad taste', etc. As often as not, these second-order and culturally determined units of meaning come to outweigh their denotative basis.

Bogatyrev's 'signs of signs' are what are generally designated connotations. The mechanism of connotation in language and other sign-systems has been much discussed, but the most satisfactory formulation remains that provided by the Danish linguist Hjelmslev, who defines a 'connotative semiotic' as one 'whose expression plane is a semiotic' (1943, p. 77). Connotation is a parasitic semantic function, therefore, whereby the sign-vehicle of one sign-relationship provides the basis for a second-order sign-relationship (the sign-vehicle of the stage sign 'crown' acquires the secondary meanings 'majesty', 'usurpation', etc.).

Every aspect of the performance is governed by the denotation-connotation dialectic: the set, the actor's body, his movements and speech determine and are determined by a constantly shifting network of primary and secondary meanings. It is an essential feature of the semiotic economy of the theatrical performance that it employs a limited repertory of sign-vehicles in order to generate a potentially unlimited range of cultural units, and this extremely powerful generative capacity on the part of the theatrical sign-vehicle is due in part to its connotative breadth. This accounts, furthermore, for the polysemic character of the theatrical sign: a given vehicle may bear not one but a second-order meanings at any point in the performance continuum (a costume, for example, may suggest socio-economic, psychological and even moral characteristics). The resulting semantic ambiguity is vital to

all but the most doggedly didactic forms of theatre, and especially so to any mode of 'poetic' theatre which goes beyond 'narrative' representation, from the medieval mystery play to the visual images of the Bread and Puppet Theater.

How strictly the connotative markers are determined depends upon the strength of the semantic conventions at work. In the classical Chinese and Japanese Noh theatres, the semantic units are so strictly predetermined that the denotation-connotation distinction virtually disappears: all meanings are primary and more or less explicit. In the West, the second-order significations of any particular element are less tightly constrained, and will even vary from spectator to spectator, although always within definite cultural limits (the crown in *Richard II* is unlikely to bear the connotation 'divine providence' for any member of a contemporary audience).

Connotation is not, of course, unique to theatrical semiosis: on the contrary, the spectator's very ability to apprehend important second-order meanings in his decoding of the performance depends upon the extra-theatrical and general cultural values which certain objects, modes of discourse or forms of behaviour bear. But Bogatyrev and his colleagues draw attention to the fact that, while in practical social affairs the participants may not be aware of the meanings they attach to phenomena, theatrical communication allows these meanings sway over practical functions: things serve only to the extent that they mean. In drawing upon these socially codified values, what is more, theatrical semiosis invariably, and above all, connotes itself. That is, the general connotative marker 'theatricality' attaches to the entire performance (Mukařovský's macro-sign) and to its every element – as Brecht, Handke and many others have been anxious to underline – permitting the audience to 'bracket off' what is presented to them from normal social praxis and so perceive the performance as a *network of meanings*, i.e. as a text.

### The transformability of the sign

What has been termed the 'generative capacity' of the theatrical sign – the extraordinary economy of communicational means whereby in certain forms of dramatic presentation, from the ancient Greek to

Grotowski's 'poor' theatre, a rich semantic structure is produced by a small and predictable stock of vehicles – is enhanced by a quality variously characterized by the Prague structuralists as its *mobility*, *dynamism* or *transformability*. The sign-vehicle may be semantically versatile (or 'over-determined') not only at the connotative level but also, on occasion, at the denotative – the same stage item stands for different signifieds depending on the context in which it appears: 'each object sees its signs transformed in the most rapid and varied fashion' (Bogatyrev 1938a, p. 519). What appears in one scene as the handle of a sword may be converted, in the next, into a cross by a simple change of position, just as the set which stands in one context for a palisade is immediately transformed, without structural modification, into a wall or garden fence. This denotational flexibility is complemented, often enough, by the mobility of dramatic functions that a single physical item fulfils: 'Mephistopheles signifies through his cape his submission to Faust, and with the help of the same cape, during Valpurgis night, he expresses the unlimited power which he exercises over diabolical forces' (Bogatyrev 1938a, p. 519).

Jindřich Honzl, a noted director as well as analyst of the theatre, develops this notion in a paper dedicated to what he terms the 'dynamism' of the sign. Honzl's thesis is that any stage vehicle can stand, in principle, for any signified class of phenomena: there are no absolutely fixed representational relations. The dramatic scene, for instance, is not always figured analogically through spatial, architectural or pictorial means, but may be indicated gesturally (as in mime), through verbal indications or other acoustic means (the 'acoustic scenery' of which Honzl writes (1940, p. 75) is clearly essential to radio drama). By the same token, there is no fixed law governing the customary representation of the dramatis persona by the human actor: 'If what matters is that something real is able to assume this function, the actor is not necessarily a man; it can be a puppet, or a machine (for example in the mechanical theatres of Lissitzky, of Schlemmer, of Kiesler), or even an object' (1940, p. 7).

Realistic or illusionistic dramatic representation severely limits the mobility of the sign-relationship: in the Western theatre we generally expect the signified class to be represented by a vehicle in some way recognizable as a member of it. This is not the case, however, in the

Oriental theatre, where far more semantic scope is permitted to each stage item, on the basis of explicit conventions. Karel Brušák, in his pioneering semiotic study of the Chinese theatre, describes the 'scenic' functions performed by the actor's strictly codified gestures:

A great proportion of the actor's routine is devoted to producing signs whose chief function is to stand for components of the scene. An actor's routine must convey all those actions for which the scene provides no appropriate material setup. Using the applicable sequence of conventional moves, the actor performs the surmounting of imaginary obstacles, climbing imaginary stairs, crossing a high threshold, opening a door. The motion signs performed inform the onlooker of the nature of these imaginary objects, tell whether the nonexistent ditch is empty or filled with water, whether the nonexistent door is a main or ordinary double door, single door, and so forth. (1938, p. 68)

The mobility of the sign may be a structuralist principle, but it is by no means a recent discovery. In a metadramatic exposition in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the clown Launce confronts the problem of the semiotic economy of the performance, having to decide which signified dramatis personae he must assign to his paltry set of sign-vehicles (of whom only two are animate and only one human):

Nay, I'll show you the manner of it. This shoe is my father; no, this left shoe is my father: no, no, this left shoe is my mother; nay, that cannot be so neither: – yes, it is so; it is so; it hath the worsor sole. This shoe, with the hole in, is my mother, and this my father. A vengeance on't! there 'tis: now, sir, this staff is my sister; for, look you, she is as white as a lily and as small as a wand: this hat is Nan, our maid: I am the dog; no, the dog is himself, and I am the dog, – O! the dog is me and I am myself; ay, so, so. (II. iii. 15 ff.)

(Line reference here and throughout the book are to the *Complete Works*, ed. W. J. Craig, London, OUP, 1905.)

Even though Launce tries to apply the principle of appropriateness or

analagousness between representation and *representatum*, he inevitably discovers that the sign-vehicles are perfectly interchangeable.

The mobility factor – as it were, the 'transformation rule' of stage representation – is dependent not only on the interchangeability of stage elements but still more on the reciprocal substitution of sign-systems or codes (see Chapter 3). The replacement, for example, of scenic indicators by gesture or verbal reference involves the process of *transcodification*: a given semantic unit (say, a 'door') is signified by the linguistic or gestural system rather than by the architectural or pictorial, as often occurs in mime.

Of particular interest in this code- and function-switching semiotic flux is the question – one of Launce's directorial problems – of the dialectic between the animate and the inanimate, or, better, between the subjective and the objective on stage. It is almost unavoidable, when thinking about dramatic representation, to draw a firm and automatic distinction between the active subject, embodied by the actor, and the objects to which he relates and which participate in the action through his agency. This opposition is broken down by Jiří Veltruský, however, and replaced by the more analytic notion of a subjective-objective continuum along which all stage sign-vehicles, human and inanimate, move in the course of the representation. While the customary, or automatized, epitome of the dynamic subject is the 'lead' actor, whose 'action force' sets semiosis in motion, and the prime paradigm of the passive object is the prop or element of the set, the relation between these apparent poles may be modified or even reversed.

It is possible for instance, for the action force that the actor bears to fall to a zero level, whereby he assumes a role analogous to that of the prop (in the case, for example, of the stereotyped figure automatically associated with certain functions, like the butler in a typical 1940s drawing-room comedy or, to take Veltruský's example, 'soldiers flanking the entrance to a house. They serve to point out that the house is a barrack' (1940, p. 86. Here the actor functions, effectively, as part of the set.) At the same time, the inanimate stage item is capable of promotion up the objectivity-subjectivity continuum, so acquiring a certain action force in its own right. Veltruský provides the emblematic example of the stage dagger which may move from its purely contiguous role as part of the costume, indicating the wearer's status, through



participation in the action as an instrument (as in the murder of Julius Caesar), to an independent association with some act, as when, covered with blood, it comes to connote 'murder' (see Veltruský 1940, p. 87).

At an extreme, of course, it is possible to dispense altogether with the human agent and entrust the semiotic initiative to set and props, which are then perceived as 'spontaneous subjects equivalent to the figure of the actor' (Veltruský 1940, p. 88). It is notable that many of the so-called avant-garde experiments in the twentieth-century theatre have been founded on the promotion of the set to the position of 'subject' of semiosis, with a corresponding surrender of 'action force' by the actor: Edward Gordon Craig's ideal, for example, was a mode of representation dominated by a highly connotative set and in which the actor had the purely determined function of *Übermarionette*. Samuel Beckett's two mimes, *Act Without Words* I and II, play with the reversal of subjective-objective roles between actor and prop – the human figure is determined by, and victim of, the stage sign-vehicles around him ('tree', 'rope', 'box', etc.) – while his thirty-second *Breath* has the set as its sole protagonist.

### Foregrounding and the performance hierarchy

From the first, the Prague theorists – following Otakar Zich – conceived of the performance structure as a dynamic hierarchy of elements. Mukařovský's early essay on Chaplin begins by characterizing the object in view as 'a structure, that is, as a system of elements aesthetically realized and grouped in a complex hierarchy, where one of the elements predominates over the others' (1931, p. 342). He proceeds to examine the means whereby Chaplin remains at the apex of this structure, ordering subordinate components of the performance about him. All of the structuralist writers on the theatre emphasize the fluidity of the hierarchy, whose order is not absolutely determinable *a priori*: 'the transformability of the hierarchical order of the elements which constitute the art of theatre corresponds to the transformability of the theatrical sign' (Honzl 1940, p. 20).

What is of interest in the shifting structure of the performance is, in Veltruský's words, 'The figure at the peak of this hierarchy' which 'attracts to itself the major attention of the audience' (1940, p. 85).

Here a concept first developed in the study of poetic language is applied, *aktualisace* (usually translated as 'foregrounding'). Linguistic foregrounding in language occurs when an unexpected usage suddenly forces the listener or reader to take note of the utterance itself, rather than continue his automatic concern with its 'content': 'the use of the devices of the language in such a way that this use itself attracts attention and is perceived as uncommon, as deprived of automatization, as deautomatized, such as a live poetic metaphor' (Havránek 1942, p. 10).

In terms of the performance structure, the automatized state of affairs, in the Western theatrical tradition, occurs when the apex of the hierarchy is occupied by the actor, and in particular the 'lead' actor, who attracts the major part of the spectator's attention to his own person. The bringing of other elements to the foreground occurs when these are raised from their 'transparent' functional roles to a position of unexpected prominence, i.e. when they acquire the semiotic subjectivity of which Veltruský writes: attention is brought to bear momentarily or for the duration of the performance on a conspicuous and autonomous setting (such as those of Piscator and Craig), or on lighting effects (as in the experiments of Appia), or on a particular and usually instrumental aspect of the actor's performance, for example his gestures (the experiments of Meyerhold or Grotowski).

*Aktualisace* derives from, and bears a strong family resemblance to, the Russian formalist notion of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization or 'making strange') (see Bennett 1979, pp. 53 ff.). It is not only the granting of unusual prominence or autonomy to aspects of the performance which serves to foreground them, but the distancing of those aspects from their codified functions. When theatrical semiosis is alienated, made 'strange' rather than automatic, the spectator is encouraged to take note of the semiotic means, to become aware of the sign-vehicle and its operations. This was, as has been suggested, one of the aims of Brechtian epic theatre; Brecht's noted concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, the alienation effect, is, indeed, an adaptation of the Russian formalist principle (see Brecht 1964, p. 99), and Brecht's own definition of the effect as a 'way of drawing one's own or someone else's attention to a thing' which 'consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something

ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible into something peculiar, striking and unexpected' (Brecht 1964, p. 143) indicates its affinity with the formalist and structuralist principles.

Theatrical foregrounding may involve the 'framing' of a bit of the performance in such a way as, in Brecht's words, 'to mark it off from the rest of the text' (p. 203). This can amount to an explicit pointing to the representation as an event in progress – Brecht's 'gestus of showing' – as when the actor stands aside in order to comment upon what is happening, or a rendering opaque of representational means through a range of devices such as freezes, slow-motion effects, unexpected changes in lighting, etc. Much experimental theatre of the 1960s and 1970s was devoted to the development of techniques for framing and estranging the signifying process. A particularly successful exponent has been the American director-playwright Richard Foreman, whose 'use of visual and aural "framing devices" constitutes a recognizable stylistic feature' of his productions – that is, his inclusion of 'anything that punctuates, frames, emphasizes, or brings into the foreground a particular word, object, action or position' (e.g. his literal framing of an actor's foot in *Vertical Mobility*) (Davy 1976, pp. xiv–xv; see also Kirby 1973).

Despite its origins as a linguistic concept, foregrounding is essentially a spatial metaphor and thus well adapted to the theatrical text. It is, of course, possible for those devices which serve to defamiliarize the linguistic utterance in other contexts also to operate in the drama. This would allow the linguistic sign to be foregrounded in the performance, although never so fully as in literary discourse where no non-linguistic semiotic systems compete for the audience's attention (see Elam 1977). Conspicuous rhetorical figures, highly patterned syntax, phonetic repetitions and parallelisms augment the material presence of the linguistic sign on stage; Havránek (1942, p. 11) suggests that 'we find maximum foregrounding, used for its own sake, in poetic language', although it must be added that in certain periods, such as the Elizabethan, elaborately worked language in the drama has been the automatized norm, so that a multiplicity of rhetorical or poetic devices is not in itself a guarantee of successful linguistic foregrounding. The explicit framing of language, through metalanguage and other forms of commentary (see pp. 140–2 below), has been a very longstanding feature of

dramatic dialogue. But what serves most radically to alienate the signifier from its meaning-function and to increase its opacity is actual nonsense, of the kind so richly employed, for example, by Alfred Jarry or, occasionally, by Shakespeare:

FIRST LORD. Throca mouvousus, cargo cargo, cargo.  
ALL. Cargo, cargo, villianda par corbo, cargo.  
(*All's Well that Ends Well*, iv. i. 70 ff.)

## TYPOLOGIES OF THE SIGN

### Natural and artificial signs

After the promising charting of the territory by the Prague School structuralists in the 1930s and early 1940s, little work of note dedicated to the problems of theatrical semiosis was produced for two decades. Roland Barthes suggested provocatively in 1964 that the theatre, marked by 'a real informational polyphony' and 'a density of signs', constituted a privileged field of semiotic investigation: 'the nature of the theatrical sign, whether analogical, symbolic or conventional, the denotation and connotation of the message – all these fundamental problems of semiology are present in the theatre' (1964, p. 262). Barthes failed, however, to follow up his own provocation.

It was, instead, the Polish semiotician Tadeusz Kowzan who, in 1968, took up the structuralist heritage. In his essay 'The Sign in the Theatre', Kowzan reasserts the basic Prague School principles, above all that of the semiotization of the object: 'Everything is a sign in a theatrical presentation' (1968, p. 57). He similarly reaffirms the structuralist notions of the transformability and connotative range of the stage sign: in addition, however, he endeavours to found an initial typology of the theatrical sign and sign-systems, i.e. to classify as well as describe the phenomena (on Kowzan's table of sign-systems, see pp. 45 ff. below).

The distinction that Kowzan draws upon in the first instance is the often-made one between 'natural' and 'artificial' signs, whose distinction lies in the presence or absence of 'motivation': natural signs are determined by strictly physical laws whereby signifier and signified are bound in a direct cause-and-effect relationship (as in the case of

symptoms indicating a disease or smoke signifying fire). 'Artificial' signs depend upon the intervention of human volition (in the various languages man creates for signalling purposes). The opposition is by no means absolute, since even so-called natural signs require the observer's 'motivated' act of inference in making the link between sign-vehicle and signified. It serves Kowzan, however, in the formulation of a further principle, namely the 'artificialization' of the apparently natural sign on stage:

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 theatre. Even if they have no communicative function in life, they necessarily acquire it on stage. (p. 60)

This is, in effect, a refinement on the semiotization law: phenomena assume a signifying function on stage to the extent that their relation to what they signify is perceived as being deliberately intended.

### Icon, index and symbol

More promising, at least intuitively, than the simple natural/artificial opposition is the well-known trichotomy of sign-functions suggested by the American logician and founding father of modern semiotic theory, C. S. Peirce. Peirce's highly suggestive tripartite typology of signs – icon, index and symbol – corresponds so effectively to our commonsense perception of different signifying modes that it has received widespread and sometimes uncritical application in many fields, not least theatre study (see, for example, Kott 1969; Pavis 1976; Helbo 1975c; Ubersfeld 1977), although the conceptual basis of Peirce's distinctions is very problematic and has been repeatedly questioned in recent years (see Eco 1976).

Peirce's definitions of the three sign-functions are subject to variation, depending on the context in which they occur, but the differences can be summarized as follows.

The icon. The governing principle in iconic signs is similitude; the icon represents its object 'mainly by similarity' between the

sign-vehicle and its signified. This is, clearly, a very general law, so that virtually any form of similitude between sign and object suffices, in principle, to establish an iconic relationship:

An icon is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses. . . . Anything whatever, be it quality, existent individual, or law, is an Icon of anything, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it. (Peirce 1931–58, Vol. 2, § 247)

Examples of iconic signs given by Peirce himself include the figurative painting (an icon to the extent that 'we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing' (Vol. 2, p. 363)) and the photograph; he further distinguishes three classes of icon: the image, the diagram and the metaphor.

The index. Indexical signs are causally connected with their objects, often physically or through contiguity: 'An Index is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that object' (Vol. 2, § 248). The 'natural' cause-and-effect signs considered in the previous section are thus indices, according to Peircean doctrine, but Peirce also includes in this category the pointing ('index') finger – which relates to the pointed-to object through physical contiguity – the rolling gait of the sailor, indicating his profession, a knock on the door which points to the presence of someone outside it, and verbal deixis (personal and demonstrative pronouns such as 'I', 'you', 'this', 'that', and adverbs such as 'here' and 'now', etc.).

The symbol. Here the relationship between sign-vehicle and signified is conventional and unmotivated; no similitude or physical connection exists between the two: 'A symbol is a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas' (Vol. 2, § 249). The most obvious example of a symbol is the linguistic sign.

Despite the qualifications which Peirce himself added to his definitions, indicating that there can never be such a thing as a 'pure' icon or index or symbol, it is only too tempting to fall into a naïve absolutism in applying the categories. The theatre appears, for example, to be the perfect domain of the icon: where better to look for direct