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The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama

2nd Edition
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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 interrelationship 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 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 ance 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 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

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1 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.
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 semiotic 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 11 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 worser 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 

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, aktuolisace (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 ostronenie (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.
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 similitude between sign-vehicle and signified than in the actor-character relationship? The first writer to apply the Peircean concept to the theatre, Jan Kott, accepts the apparent iconicity of the stage sign and identifies the chief element of similarity: ‘In the theatre the basic icon is the body and voice of the actor’ (1969, p. 19).

There is, in fact, a good case to be made out for the importance of icons to theatrical semiosis. It is clear that a degree of analogousness often arises between, say, representational and represented human bodies, or between the stage sword and its dramatic equivalent (the ‘similitude’ involved is, in these cases, definitely stronger than in Peirce’s example of the portrait). The theatre is perhaps the only art form able to exploit what might be termed iconic identity: the sign-vehicle denoting a rich silk costume may well be a rich silk costume, rather than the illusion thereof created by pigment on canvas, an image conserved on celluloid or a description. An extreme assertion of literal iconic identity was the basis for one of the gestures made by the Living Theater in the 1960s: Julian Beck and Judith Malina claimed to be representing on stage precisely themselves, so that the similarity between sign and object became—supposedly—absolute.

Iconism is usually associated by commentators with visual signs, where the similitude involved is most readily apparent. The illusionistic visual resources of the theatre are unrivalled: literal
signs apart, the performance can draw upon an unlimited range of simulacra, from elaborate mock-ups to back projection and film. But it would be mistaken to limit the notion to the visual image alone; if theatre depends upon similitude, this must characterize acoustic sign-systems equally and, indeed, the representation at large. Patrice Pavis has suggested that ‘the language of the actor is iconized in being spoken by the actor’, i.e. what the actor utters becomes the representation of something supposedly equivalent to it, ‘discourse’ (Pavis 1976, p. 13). In naturalistic performances especially, the audience is encouraged to take both the linguistic signs and all other representational elements as being directly analogous to the denoted objects.

Yet the principle of similarity is less well defined in the theatre than it might appear. The degree of genuine homology operating between the performance and what it is supposed to denote is extremely variable. If one takes the case of Kott’s icon par excellence, the actor and his physical features, the similitude between the sign and what it stands for begins to break down as soon as one considers, for example, Elizabethan boy actors representing women, the portrayal of gods by Greek actors, or the numerous cases of ageing theatrical stars who continue to adopt the roles of romantic heroes or heroines (not to mention Sarah Bernhardt’s impersonation, in old age and complete with wooden leg, of Hamlet). Here the wholly conventional basis of iconism on stage emerges clearly.

Much of the richness of the stage spectacle derives from the interplay of varying degrees of semiotic literalness: young actors portraying, with a degree of verisimilitude, the lovers in a Forest of Arden represented by cardboard cut-out trees. An extreme example of such mixing of the literally iconic with the blatantly schematic in the contemporary theatre might be Robert Wilson’s Ka Mountain (1972), an epic 168-hour performance given near Shiraz in Iran, where the setting was represented by real mountains, inhabited, for the occasion, in part by actual bodies (human and animal) in various roles and in part by cut-out stereotypes of old men, dinosaurs, Noah’s Ark, a notional American suburb and biblical emblems.

Peirce, it will be recalled, subdivided the icon into the three classes of image, diagram and metaphor. If certain forms of theatre—broadly, ‘illusionistic’ representation—encourage the spectator to perceive the performance as a direct image of the dramatic
world, others content themselves with diagrammatic or metaphorical portrayal where only a very general structural similitude exists between sign and object. Thus the actor, in pantomime or surrealist theatre, may impersonate the shape of a table (diagram). Alternatively, similarity may be simply asserted rather than apparent, as in the case of an empty stage which becomes, for the audience, a battlefield, palace or prison cell (metaphor).

Iconism is further conditioned by the law of the transformability of the sign. If one sign-system can do the work usually fulfilled by another, it is clear that direct similarity is quite dispensable. Honzl’s ‘acoustic scenery’ is a notable case in point. In the Elizabethan theatre, language, apart from denoting speech at large, often played a pseudoiconic descriptive role in figuring the dramatic scene, as in Measure for Measure where Isabella describes in detail the location of her rendezvous with Angelo:

He hath a garden circummur’d with brick,  
Whose western side is with a vineyard back’d;  
And to that vineyard in a planched gate,  
That makes his opening with this bigger key...  

(IV. iv. 30 ff.)

This device, which the classical rhetoricians termed topographia, functions according to a purely metaphorical similarity between the verbal representation and the scene described.

The notion of iconism is useful, therefore, provided that two main qualifications are kept in mind. First, the principle of similitude is highly flexible and strictly founded on convention (‘to say that a certain image is similar to something else does not eliminate the fact that similarity is also a matter of cultural convention’ (Eco 1976, p. 204), allowing the spectator to make the necessary analogy between the standing-for and the stood-for objects, whatever the actual material or structural equivalence between them. Second, even in the most literal iconic sign-functions (mountains representing mountains or Judith Malina herself) the similarity puts into play not a simple one-to-one relationship between analogous objects but a relationship necessarily mediated by the signified class or concept. In Peircean terms, semiosis involves ‘a co-operation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object and its interpretant’ (1931–58, Vol. 5, § 484) (the
‘interpretant’ being, roughly, the idea which the sign produces), so that anything which permits the spectator to form an image or likeness of the represented object can be said to have fulfilled an iconic function:

Not only is the outward significant word or mark a sign, but the image which it is expected to excite in the mind of the receiver will likewise be a sign—a sign by resemblance, or, as we say, an icon—of the similar image in the mind of the deliverer. (1931–58, Vol. 3, § 433)

As with icons, indices are not so much distinct entities as functions. Costume, for example, may denote iconically the mode of dress worn by the dramatic figure but, at the same time, stand indexically for his social position or profession, just as the actor’s movement across the stage will simultaneously represent some act in the dramatic world and indicate the dramatis persona’s frame of mind or standing (the cow-boy’s swagger or, to repeat Peirce’s example, the sailor’s gait). The category of index is so broad that every aspect of the performance can be considered as in some sense indexical. The dramatic setting, for instance, is often represented not by means of a direct ‘image’ but through cause-and-effect association or contiguity. (Consider the first scene of The Tempest, where the storm may, according to illusionistic principles, be suggested by wind machines, stage rain and other technological paraphernalia, or simply by the actors’ movements, depicting the tempest’s immediate consequences.)

In these cases, the indexical function appears secondary to the iconic, but there are instances where what predominates on stage is a ‘pointing to’ rather than an imagistic mode of signifying. Gesture often has the effect of indicating the objects (directly represented or not) to which the speaker is referring and thus of placing him in apparent contact with his physical environment, with his interlocutors or with the action reported, commanded, etc. (see pp. 74/75 ff. below). Similarly, lighting changes may serve to indicate or define the object of discourse in an indexical manner: in Samuel Beckett’s Play, for instance, the spotlight (the most direct form of technological ‘pointing’ that the theatre possesses) serves not only to indicate the subject of each monologue, in a manner similar to that of indexical gesture, but to motivate each speaker, provoke him into speech. Here stage
indices have the general function of what Peirce terms ‘focusing the attention’, and are thus closely related to explicit foregrounding devices (which, in this sense, point to the object offered to the audience’s attention). The importance of the indexical sign-function in pointing out where the spectator should direct his notice is emphasized by Patrice Pavis: ‘The theatre, which must constantly attract the receiver’s attention, will thus have recourse to the index’ (1976, p. 16).

Verbal deictics are exemplary but problematic forms of indexical signs. Peirce classes them as subindices or indexical symbols, since any linguistic sign is in the first instance conventional and its semantic or meaning-carrying role is prior to its indicating role. Deixis is immensely important to the drama, however, being the primary means whereby language gears itself to the speaker and receiver (through the personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’) and to the time and place of the action (through the adverbs ‘here’ and ‘now’, etc.), as well as to the supposed physical environment at large and the objects that fill it (through the demonstratives ‘this’, ‘that’, etc.). It has been suggested, indeed, that deixis is the most significant linguistic feature—both statistically and functionally—in the drama (see pp. 126 ff. below).

Peirce’s exemplary ‘symbol’, as has been said, is the linguistic sign. It must be emphasized, however, that theatrical performance as a whole is symbolic, since it is only through convention that the spectator takes stage events as standing for something other than themselves. In certain modes of theatre—mime or the Noh theatre—no other sign-systems, especially the gestural or ‘kinesic’, are quite as strictly governed by semantic conventions as the linguistic. It can be said, therefore, that on stage the symbolic, iconic and indexical sign-functions are co-present: all icons and indices in the theatre necessarily have a conventional basis.

Metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche

As we have seen, in classifying the kind of iconic similarity which is asserted rather than apparent, Peirce employs the rhetorical category of metaphor. In a sentence such as ‘she’s a real wallflower’, the supposed similarity between the signifier ‘wallflower’ and the signified ‘girl who does not dance at parties’ is arbitrary and fanciful—at most the two have in common the semantic feature ‘clinging to walls’. In theatrical performance the
assertion of equivalence between, say, a green back-cloth and the
signified ‘woodland setting’ might be similarly considered a
metaphoric substitution on the basis of a single common feature
(‘greenness’).

The linguist Roman Jakobson—a collaborator with both the
Russian formalists and the Prague structuralists—advances a
highly influential theory according to which metaphoric
substitution forms one of the fundamental poles not only of
language use but of semiotic and artistic activity in general. The
other pole is likewise categorized by means of a rhetorical figure:
metonymy, the substitution of cause for effect or of one item for
something contiguous to it (for example, the White House comes
to stand for the President of the United States, and the umbrella,
bowler hat and folded newspaper for the English city gent).
Jakobson argues that this distinction is useful in classifying
different modes of artistic representation: ‘realism’, for instance, is
largely metonymic in mode while ‘symbolism’ is primarily
metaphoric (Jakobson and Halle 1956; see also Hawkes 1977a, pp.
77 ff.; Lodge 1977).

It is clear that if metaphoric substitution is allied to the iconic
sign-function (both are based on the principle of supposed
similarity), then metonymic substitution is closely related to the
index (each being founded on physical contiguity). Veltruský
observes that on stage a given prop, for example, may come to
stand for its user or for the action in which it is employed: ‘It is so
closely linked to the action that its use for another purpose is
perceived as a scenic metonymy’ (1940, p. 88). In this sense the
use, say, of a stage sword in order to shave a beard is a metonymic
‘deviation’. Certain stereotyped roles may be so strongly associated
with a particular property that the two become synonymous, as in
the case of the so-called ‘spear-carrier’ where the prop indicates the
actor’s function rather than vice versa.

Jindřich Honzl notes another form of what he regards as
metonymic substitution on stage, namely such ‘scenic metonyms’
as the representation of a battlefield by a single tent or of a church
by a gothic spire (1940, p. 77). The structuralists, including
Jakobson, consider the kind of substitution at work here, i.e. of a
part for the whole, as a species of metonymy, whereas the classical
rhetoricians termed it synecdoche. It is worth insisting on the
difference, since in practice synecdochic replacement of part for
whole is essential to every level of dramatic representation.
Taking Honzl’s example of scenic synecdoches, it is evident that even in the most detailed of naturalistic sets what is actually presented to the audience’s view stands for only part of the dramatic world in which the action takes place. Extensive settings are usually represented by pertinent and recognizable aspects thereof: a castle, for example, by a turreted wall, a prison cell by a barred window and a wood by a given number of stage trees, whether painted or free-standing. The same principle applies to the actors, who represent members of a presumably more extensive society, just as their discourse and actions are taken to occur in a wider context than the immediately apparent situation (the wider context often being named: Rome, Orleans, etc). When the stage representation of actions is more than purely symbolic or metaphorical—when, for instance, a ‘murder’ is apparently enacted rather than being reported or suggested by means of conventional symbols—there is always, none the less, an assumption that the audience will agree to take the motions that the actors go through, which do not in themselves add up to anything, as the impersonation of the complete act (the wielding of a stage knife as an assassination). (See pp. 113–14 below.) Finally, as has been emphasized, since objects on stage function semiotically only to the extent that they are, in Umberto Eco’s words, ‘based on a synecdoche of the kind “member for its class”’ (1976, p. 226), it can be argued that the theatrical sign is by nature synecdochic.

Ostension

One final observation may be made about theatrical semiosis which further distinguishes it from the signifying modes of most other arts, particularly literature. Theatre is able to draw upon the most ‘primitive’ form of signification, known in philosophy as ostension. In order to refer to, indicate or define a given object, one simply picks it up and shows it to the receiver of the message in question. Thus, in response to a child’s question ‘What’s a pebble?’, instead of replying with a gloss (‘It’s a small stone worn into shape by water’) one seizes the nearest example on the beach or ground and demonstrates it to the child; or, similarly, in order to indicate which drink one desires, one holds up a glass of beer to whoever is doing the ordering. What happens in these cases is not that one shows the actual referent (the ‘pebble’ or ‘beer’ being referred to) but that one uses the concrete object ‘as the expression
of the class of which it is a member’ (Eco 1976, p. 225): the thing is ‘de-realized’ so as to become a sign.

Eco has argued that this elementary form of signifying is ‘the most basic instance of performance’ (1977, p. 110). Semiotization involves the showing of objects and events (and the performance at large) to the audience, rather than describing, explaining or defining them. This ostensive aspect of the stage ‘show’ distinguishes it, for example, from narrative, where persons, objects and events are necessarily described and recounted. It is not, again, the dramatic referent—the object in the represented world—that is shown, but something that expresses its class. The showing is emphasized and made explicit through indices, verbal references and other direct foregrounding devices, all geared towards presenting the stage spectacle for what it basically is, a ‘display’.

Beyond the sign

The discussion of theatrical signs in this chapter has been concerned not with entities but with functions, some of which (e.g. ‘foregrounding’, ‘indices’ and ‘ostension’) to a considerable extent overlap (they are different ways, as it were, of looking at the same phenomena). The various sign-functions mentioned here are to be considered complementary rather than mutually exclusive, and they certainly do not exhaust the range of signifying modes of which the theatre is capable. All that these semiotic categories indicate is certain ways in which the formidable task of describing and classifying a matter as the production of meaning on stage has been initiated.

One cannot proceed very far in examining theatrical meaning, however, without moving beyond the concept of the sign towards a discussion of the theatrical ‘message’ or ‘text’ and the systems of signs, or codes, which produce the performance. The semiotics of theatre, in recent years, has been less concerned with signs and sign-functions than with theatrical communication and the rules underlying it, and it is to these broader issues that we now turn.