

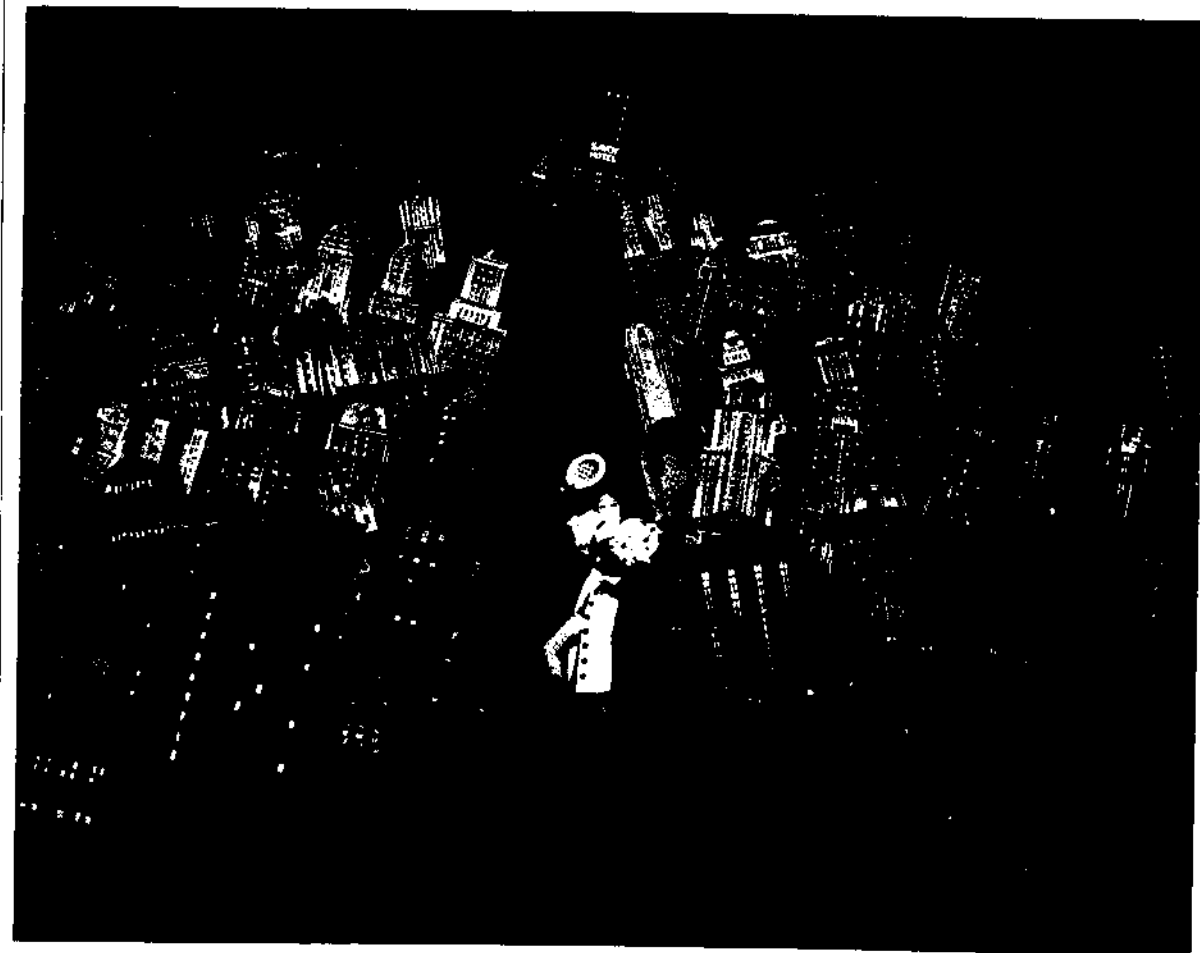
DOSSIER 1: SPECTACLE THEORY

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143. Ruby Keeler in *42nd Street* (1933, Lloyd Bacon). Art Director: Jack Okey.

UNIVERSE OF THE MIND

A Semiotic Theory of Culture

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Introduction by
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Semiotic space

Up to this point our argument has followed a generally accepted pattern: we have started by taking the single act of communication by itself, and we have examined the relationships which arise between addresser and addressee. This approach presupposes that the study of this one fact will throw light on all the chief features of semiosis and that these features can then be extrapolated on to the larger semiotic processes. This approach accords with Descartes' third rule in *Discourse on Method*. Descartes wrote:

The third [rule] was to carry on my reflections in due order, commencing with objects that were the most simple and easy to understand, in order to rise little by little, or by degrees, to knowledge of the most complex.¹

This approach also accords with the scientific practice which dates from the time of the Enlightenment, namely to work on the 'Robinson Crusoe' principle of isolating an object and then making it into a general model.

However, for this procedure to be a correct one, the isolated fact must be able to model all the qualities of the phenomenon on to which the conclusions are being extrapolated. This is not so in our case. A schema consisting of addresser, addressee and the channel linking them together is not yet a working system. For it to work it has to be 'immersed' in semiotic space. All participants in the communicative act must have some experience of communication, be familiar with semiosis. So, paradoxically, semiotic experience precedes the semiotic act. By analogy with the biosphere (Vernadsky's concept) we could talk of a semiosphere, which we shall define as the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages, not the sum total of different languages; in a sense the semiosphere has a prior existence and is in constant interaction with languages. In this respect a language is a function, a cluster of

semiotic spaces and their boundaries, which, however clearly defined these are in the language's grammatical self-description, in the reality of semiosis are eroded and full of transitional forms. Outside the semiosphere there can be neither communication, nor language. Of course, the single-channel structure is a reality. A self-contained, single-channel system is a mechanism for transmitting extremely simple signals and for the realization of a single function, but for the task of generating information it certainly will not do. This is why we can imagine that a system like this is an artificially-made construction, but in natural circumstances systems of quite another type are at work. Just the fact that it is a universal of human culture, that there exist both conventional and pictorial signs (or rather that all signs are to some degree both conventional and representational), is enough to show that semiotic dualism is the minimal form of organization of a working semiotic system.

Binarism and *asymmetry* are the laws binding on any real semiotic system. Binarism, however, must be understood as a principle which is realized in plurality since every newly-formed language is in its turn subdivided on a binary principle. Every living culture has a 'built-in' mechanism for multiplying its languages (as we shall see below, the parallel and opposite mechanism for unifying languages is also at work). For instance, we are constantly witnessing a quantitative increase in the languages of art. This is especially so in twentieth-century culture and in other past cultures typologically resembling it. At periods when most creative activity comes from the readership, the slogan that 'art is everything we perceive as art' rings true. In the early years of this century cinema ceased being a fairground amusement and became a serious art-form. It made its appearance not alone but along with a whole procession of traditional and newly invented peep-shows. Back in the nineteenth century no one would have seriously regarded the circus, fairground peep-shows, traditional toys, advertisements or the cries of street traders as art-forms. Once it became an art, cinematography at once split into documentary films and entertainment films, camera films and cartoon ones, each with its own poetics. And nowadays there is another opposition to be added, that between cinema and television. True, art becomes more narrow at the same time as the assortment of art-languages increases: some arts in practice drop out of the picture. So we should not be surprised if, when we look closer, the diversity of semiotic systems within a particular culture is relatively constant. But something else is important: the set of languages in an active cultural field is constantly changing, and the axiological value and hierarchical position of the elements in it are subject to even greater changes.

At the same time, throughout the whole space of semiosis, from social jargon and age-group slang to fashion, there is also a constant renewal of codes. So any one language turns out to be immersed in a semiotic space

and it can only function by interaction with that space. The unit of semiosis, the smallest functioning mechanism, is not the separate language but the whole semiotic space of the culture in question. This is the space we term the *semiosphere*. The semiosphere is the result and the condition for the development of culture; we justify our term by analogy with the biosphere, as Vernadsky defined it, namely the totality and the organic whole of living matter and also the condition for the continuation of life.

Vernadsky wrote that

all life-clusters are intimately bound to each other. One cannot exist without the other. This connection between different living films and clusters, and their invariability, is an age-old feature of the mechanism of the earth's crust, which has existed all through geological time.²

The same idea is expressed more clearly again:

The biosphere has a quite definite structure which determines everything without exception that happens in it. . . . A human being observed in nature and all living organisms and every living being is a function of the biosphere in its particular space-time.³

In his notes dating from 1892 Vernadsky pointed to human intellectual activity as a continuation of the cosmic conflict between life and inert matter:

the seeming laws of mental activity in people's lives has led many to deny the influence of the personality on history, although, throughout history, we can in fact see a constant struggle of conscious (i.e. not natural) life-formations with the unconscious order of the dead laws of nature, and in this effort of consciousness lies all the beauty of historical manifestations, the originality of their position among the other natural processes. A historical epoch can be judged by this effort of consciousness.⁴

The semiosphere is marked by its *heterogeneity*. The languages which fill up the semiotic space are various, and they relate to each other along the spectrum which runs from complete mutual translatability to just as complete mutual untranslatability. Heterogeneity is defined both by the diversity of elements and by their different functions. So if we make the mental experiment of imagining a model of a semiotic space where all the languages came into being at one and the same moment and under the influence of the same impulses, we still would not have a single coding structure but a set of connected but different systems. For instance, we construct a model of the semiotic structure of European Romanticism and

mark out its chronological framework. Even within such a completely artificial space there would be no homogeneity since inevitably where there are different degrees of iconism there can be no mutually complete semantic translatability, but only conventional correspondence. Of course the poet and partisan hero of 1812, Denis Davydov, did compare the tactics of partisan warfare with Romantic poetry, declaring that the leader of a partisan band should not be a 'theorist' with 'a calculating mind and a cold heart': 'This poetic profession needs a romantic imagination, a passion for adventure and it is never content with dry prosaic displays of valour. It is a verse of Byron's!'¹⁵ But we have only to look at his study of tactics, *Attempi at a Theory of Partisan Warfare*, with its plans and maps to realize that this fine metaphor was just a pretext for the contrast-loving mind of a Romantic to juxtapose the incompatible. The fact that the unification of two different languages is achieved by a metaphor is proof of the essential differences between them.

But then we have also to take account of the fact that different languages circulate for different periods: fashion in clothes changes at a speed which cannot be compared with the rate of change of the literary language, and Romanticism in dance is not synchronized with Romanticism in architecture. So, while some parts of the semiosphere are still enjoying the poetics of Romanticism, others may have moved far on into post-Romanticism. So even our artificial model will not give us a homologous picture across a strictly synchronic section. This is why when we try to give a synthetic picture of Romanticism to include all forms of art (and perhaps also other areas of culture), chronology has to be sacrificed. What we have said is true also of the Baroque, of Classicism, and of many other 'isms'

Yet if we talk not of artificial models but of modelling the actual literary process (or more broadly, the cultural process) then we must admit that – to continue with our example – Romanticism occupies only a part of the semiosphere in which all sorts of other traditional structures continue to exist, some of them going way back into antiquity. Besides, at all stages of development there are contacts with texts coming in from cultures which formerly lay beyond the boundaries of the given semiosphere. These invasions, sometimes by separate texts, and sometimes by whole cultural layers, variously effect the internal structure of the 'world picture' of the culture we are talking about. So across any synchronic section of the semiosphere different languages at different stages of development are in conflict, and some texts are immersed in languages not their own, while the codes to decipher them with may be entirely absent. As an example of a single world looked at synchronically, imagine a museum hall where exhibits from different periods are on display, along with inscriptions in known and unknown languages, and instructions for decoding them; besides there are the explanations

composed by the museum staff, plans for tours and rules for the behaviour of the visitors. Imagine also in this hall tour-leaders and the visitors and imagine all this as a single mechanism (which *in a certain sense* it is). This is an image of the semiosphere. Then we have to remember that all elements of the semiosphere are in dynamic, not static, correlations whose terms are constantly changing. We notice this especially at traditional moments which have come down to us from the past. The evolution of culture is quite different from biological evolution, the word 'evolution' can be quite misleading.

Biological evolution involves species dying out and natural selection. The researcher finds only living creatures contemporary with him. Something similar happens in the history of technology: when an instrument is made obsolete by technical progress it finds a resting place in a museum, as a dead exhibit. In the history of art, however, works which come down to us from remote cultural periods continue to play a part in cultural development as living factors. A work of art may 'die' and come alive again; once thought to be out of date, it may become modern and even prophetic for what it tells of the future. What 'works' is not the most recent temporal section, but the whole packed history of cultural texts. The standard evolutionary point of view in literary history comes from the influence of evolutionary ideas in the natural sciences. With this approach the state of literature at any one time is judged by the list of works *written* in that year, instead of by the works *being read* in that year – which would produce a very different picture. And it is hard to say which of the lists is more typical for the state of culture at any one time. Pushkin, for instance, in 1824–5, took Shakespeare as his most topical writer. Bulgakov read Gogol and Cervantes as contemporaries. Dostoevsky is just as relevant at the end of the twentieth century as he was at the end of the nineteenth. In fact, everything contained in the actual memory of culture is directly or indirectly part of that culture's synchrony.

The structure of the semiosphere is asymmetrical. Asymmetry finds expression in the currents of internal translations with which the whole density of the semiosphere is permeated. Translation is a primary mechanism of consciousness. To express something in another language is a way of understanding it. And since in the majority of cases the different languages of the semiosphere are semiotically asymmetrical, i.e. they do not have mutual semantic correspondences, then the whole semiosphere can be regarded as a generator of information.

Asymmetry is apparent in the relationship between the centre of the semiosphere and its periphery. At the centre of the semiosphere are formed the most developed and structurally organized languages, and in first place the natural language of that culture. If no language (including natural language) can function unless it is immersed in the semiosphere,

then no semiosphere, as Emile Benveniste pointed out, can exist without natural language as its organizing core. The fact is that the semiosphere, besides the structurally organized language, is crowded with partial languages, languages which can serve only certain cultural functions, as well as language-like, half-formed systems which can be bearers of semiosis if they are included in the semiotic context. Compare the latter with a stone or a strangely twisted tree-stump which can function as work of art if it is treated as one. An object will take on the function ascribed to it.

In order that all this mass of constructions are perceived as bearers of semiotic meaning we must make a 'presumption of semioticity': the semiotic intuition of the collective and its consciousness have to accept the possibility that structures may be significant. These qualities are learnt through natural language. For instance, the structure of the 'families of the gods' and of other basic elements of the world-picture are often clearly dependent on the grammatical structure of the language.

The highest form and final act of a semiotic system's structural organization is when it describes itself. This is the stage when grammars are written, customs and laws codified. When this happens, however, the system gains the advantage of greater structural organization, but loses its inner reserves of indeterminacy which provide it with flexibility, heightened capacity for information and the potential for dynamic development.

The stage of self-description is a necessary response to the threat of too much diversity within the semiosphere: the system might lose its unity and definition, and disintegrate. Whether we have in mind language, politics or culture, the mechanism is the same: one part of the semiosphere (as a rule one which is part of its nuclear structure) in the process of self-description creates its own grammar; this self-description may be real or ideal depending on whether its inner orientation is towards the present or towards the future. Then it strives to extend these norms over the whole semiosphere. A partial grammar of one cultural dialect becomes the metalanguage of description for culture as such. The dialect of Florence, for instance, became during the Renaissance the literary language of Italy, the legal norms of Rome became the laws of the whole Roman Empire, and the etiquette of the Parisian court of Louis XIV became the etiquette of all the courts of Europe. A literature of norms and prescriptions comes into being in which the later historian will tend to see an actual picture of real life of that epoch, its semiotic practice. This illusion is supported by the evidence of contemporaries who are in fact convinced that they indeed do live and behave in the prescribed way. A contemporary will reason something like this: 'I am a person of culture (i.e. a Hellene, a Roman, a Christian, a knight, an *esprit fort*, a philosopher of the age of the Enlightenment, or a genius of the age of

Romanticism). As a person of culture I embody the behaviour prescribed by certain norms. Only what in my behaviour corresponds to these norms is counted as a *deed*. If, through weakness, sickness, inconsistency, etc., I deviate from these norms, then such behaviour has no meaning, is not relevant, simply *does not exist*.' A list of what 'does not exist', according to that cultural system, although such things in fact occur, is always essential for making a typological description of that system. For instance, Andreas Capellanus, author of *De Amore* (c.1184-5), a well-known treatise on the norms of courtly love, carefully codified courtly love and set the standards of faithfulness, silence, devoted service, chastity, courtesy, and so on for the lover; yet he had no compunction in violating a village-girl since according to his world-picture she 'as it were did not exist', and actions involving her as it were did not exist either, since they lay outside the domain of semiotics.

The world-picture created in this way will be perceived by its contemporaries as reality. Indeed, it will be *their* reality to the extent that they have accepted the laws of that semiotics. And later generations (including scholars), who reconstruct life in those days from texts, will imbibe the idea that everyday reality was indeed like that. But the relationship of this metalevel of the semiosphere to the real picture of its semiotic 'map' on the one hand, and to the everyday reality of life on the other, will be complex. First of all, if in that nuclear structure where the self-description originated, the self-description in fact represents an idealization of a real language, then on the periphery of the semiosphere, this ideal norm will be a contradiction of the semiotic reality lying 'underneath', and not a derivation from it. If in the centre of the semiosphere the description of texts generates the norms, then on the periphery the norms, actively invading 'incorrect' practice, will generate 'correct' texts in accord with them. Secondly, whole layers of cultural phenomena, which from the point of view of the given metalanguage are marginal, will have no relation to the idealized portrait of that culture. They will be declared to be 'non-existent'. From the time of the cultural history school, the favourite genre of many scholars has been articles of the type, 'An Unknown Poet of the Twelfth Century', 'Further Remarks about a Forgotten Writer of the Enlightenment Period', and so on. Where does this inexhaustible supply of 'unknown' and 'forgotten' figures come from? They are the writers who in their time were classed as 'non-existent' and who were ignored by scholarship as long as its point of view coincided with a normative view of the period. But points of view change and 'unknowns' suddenly occur. Then people remember that in the year Voltaire died, the 'unknown philosopher', Louis-Claude Saint Martin was already thirty-five, that Restif de la Bretonne had already written over 200 novels which historians of literature still cannot properly place, calling him either 'little Rousseau' or an 'eighteenth-century Balzac'; and