

I Meaning

The study of the generation and circulation of meaning in societies, including, here, theatre, is called semiotics (or semiology). Initially a branch of linguistics, semiotics in its modern form was founded independently around the turn of the 20th century by the American Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and the Swiss Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), though both were building upon a tradition that goes back to antiquity (see Jakobson). The work of Saussure, in particular, became the basis for a major paradigm shift in the humanities and social sciences known as Structuralism. Structuralism involves considering the world as made up, not of independently existing or pre-existing objects that are perceived and identified clearly and separately, but of relationships that are established within an overarching structure. For the structuralist, the nature of every object or element in the world derives from and can only be perceived in relation to the larger system, or structure, in which it participates. The nature of things rests not in the things themselves or any sort of clearly delimited essence peculiar to them, but in their perceived relationships to (and difference from) other things – in broad strokes, sweet versus sour, black versus white, tragedy versus comedy, but in more nuanced examples the fine divisions along the *continuum* of taste, along the colour spectrum or along a spectrum that includes tragicomedy, or satire. Blue is only blue insofar as it is not green (or cyan, or turquoise, or any number of hues in between that may only be given a name and considered significant in the context of lighting gels or paint chip samples), or on the other hand insofar as it is not violet, purple, or red. Structures are at any given moment complete and coherent within themselves, they refer to nothing outside

of themselves, and they are governed by principles intrinsic to them and to which they and all of their constituent parts conform. Crucially, they are held in place by convention – a kind of social agreement, negotiated or coerced. Structuralists study the abstract but totalizing structures that give shape and meaning to the world.

Saussure and his legacy

One such structure is spoken language, the object of Saussure's study and the model for structuralists such as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–81) and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), who argued, respectively, that human psyches and human cultures are structured like languages. For Saussure and those who came after him, language may best be understood as a tool through which humans perceive things; that is, it is not a tool used to describe a world that pre-exists that description, but a tool through which to *constitute* that world. For Saussure, then, a word is not a label for something that exists independently of how it is named; rather our understanding of what exists in the world is a product of mental concepts that are themselves the products of the languages we speak. Some cognitive studies scholars and others dispute the semiotic claim for the precedence of language (McConachie, *Engaging*; McConachie and Hart, *Performance*), but for Saussure, unarticulated thought is “simply a vague, shapeless mass” (Saussure 110), while sound, too, is “an equally featureless plane” (110), an undifferentiated continuum of noise. Think of a baby, whose gaze does not fix on anything or distinguish one thing from another, and who makes sounds that seem otherworldly, ranging freely over the sound spectrum in ways adults are not capable of and society does not reward with understanding. Or think, again, of the colour spectrum, a certain range along which society has determined to label “blue.”

What language performs, according to Saussure, is a set of differentiations, or “articulations,” as Saussure calls them in his posthumously published lectures, *Course in General Linguistics* (111). Language divides each of the two continuums, concepts and sounds, and matches them with or articulates them against one another in ways that allow thought to be made precise. “Articulation,” he argues, “may refer to the division of the chain of speech into syllables, or to the division of the chain of meanings into meaningful units” (10). Language – “a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas” (10) – acts “as an intermediary between thought and sound, in such a way that the combination of both necessarily produces a mutually complementary delimitation of units” (110).

The location at which idea and sound come together – the basic unit of communication – is the sign. The linguistic sign consists of two inseparable but theoretically distinguishable parts (like the two sides of a sheet of paper), and Saussure calls these co-dependent parts the *signifier* and *signified*. The *signifier* has material existence in the world; the *signified* is purely conceptual. In the case of spoken language, Saussure's primary concern, the signifier is sound, the signified the idea or concept that is conjured in the mind by that sound or combination of sounds. When we speak the signifier “cat” the idea of a cat (the signified) is conjured in the mind. But the sign has no absolute or independent value, and the relationship between the sign and signifier (the sound “cat” and the mental image of a cat) is arbitrary.

The sign has meaning only in relation to the *sign system* (in Saussure's case, the spoken language) of which it is part, and that system is one of differences. As Saussure argues, “a linguistic entity is not defined until it is *delimited*, i.e. separated from whatever there may be on either side of it in a sequence of sounds” (102, emphasis in original). The signifier “cat” is only significant, for example, insofar as it is not, and is distinguishable (by one consonant or one vowel) from, “cap,” “bat,” “cut,” or “rat.” Meanwhile, the signified, the mental

has arbitrarily decided are significant, a determination that shifts over time but has major material consequences for the lived reality of people in the world. An example of this is racial designation: A person is only Caucasian in the contemporary world, for example, insofar as she is not Asian or African; another is only Japanese insofar as she is not Chinese, or is Chinese insofar as she is not from Hong Kong, Taiwan – or perhaps even Tibet. A century ago in the United States Irish and Jewish immigrants were considered to be people of colour; now they are “white.” And today many people who are considered to be “white” in their homelands in the Middle East become “people of colour” when they emigrate to Europe or North America.

This issue of *significant* differences is crucial to theatre, where “linguistic” conventions can be established over the course of a single performance, in which audiences can come to understand when, why, and how differences – and connections – actually *make* any difference. In Robert Lepage’s international hit *The Far Side of the Moon*, a panel with a circular window, depending on the context by which it is framed, shifts between representing a womb, the window in a laundromat washing machine, and the portal in a spacecraft. A rope emanating from it shifts between representing an umbilical cord and the life support line for an astronaut’s spacewalk (Figure 1.1).

Audiences seem to have no difficulty “reading” these signs, and indeed take considerable delight in perceiving the unlikely connections when one signifier evokes unexpectedly different signifieds, functioning as visual puns. Audiences know that the onstage cord – the signifier – “is” neither umbilical nor life support, but the idea of each is alternatively conjured in the mind. In Canadian playwright James Reaney’s signature play, *Sticks and Stones*, a pair of sticks serves variously to represent barriers or links between people – fences or stiles. The sticks represent weapons when raised and pointed, a fiddle when crossed horizontally and bowed, a crucifix when crossed vertically. In

image of a cat, is significant only insofar as it is not, but is distinguishable from, that of a dog, horse, rat, or any other thing. “*In the language itself*,” Saussure argues, “*there are only differences*. [...] The language includes neither ideas nor sounds existing prior to the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonetic differences arising out of that system” (118, emphasis in original).

Saussure makes an issue of the distinction between differences that a language or society deems to be significant and those that are disregarded, as when, in French, the different pronunciations of the letter “r” – uvular consonant (a guttural sound made at the back of the throat), apical trill (made by the tip of the tongue against the roof of the mouth), or even Germanic “*ch*” – are disregarded in everyday speech as insignificant, while in German the difference between “r” and “*ch*” is crucially important (117). And it is clear beyond Saussure’s examples that different accents, different pronunciations, are only deemed to be significant when the important differences that a specific linguistic community recognizes are obscured. Different speakers of English may pronounce the “*th*” in “the,” “with,” or “through” in different ways, but it is only when and if “through” becomes confused with “true,” for example, that this difficulty inhibits communication. (These differences might, however, also function as a signifier of class or cultural difference, an issue having to do with the policing, in the theatre and the world, of “proper” accents and “correct” pronunciations. “This” and “dis” might have the same meaning, but might signify different social and cultural positionings in their speakers.) In most western languages, differences in pitch usually have no significance at all, except for emphasis, while in most Asian languages, while the pitches themselves have no absolute value, the relationships among pitches employed in a single utterance have determining importance.

On the side of the signified, the world is also divided by languages into differences that a specific linguistic community

each case, the semiosis is established and agreed upon economically, provisionally, and clearly through the simple expedient of evoking a comprehensible set of differential relationships.

This is a theatrical microcosm of how Saussure claims that all linguistic systems function. In shows deriving from cultures other than that of a dominant audience, or in shows before audiences from many cultures, however, more work may have to be done establishing conventions through which understanding is achieved. In African American playwright Susan Lori Parks's *America Play*, or *Top Dog, Underdog*, most American audiences and many others understand that a tall top hat and beard signify Abraham Lincoln, even when they are worn by a Black man, which nevertheless registers a disruption of the seamlessness of the semiosis and the "naturalness" of the representation (Figure 1.2). In *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, however, the four central women from Guna cosmology who shape the action have to introduce themselves and their significance to any but a Guna audience.

What gives the individual sign its value is its participation in the larger structure – the language, the *sign system* – within which it derives its meaning. Crucially, Saussure insists that the *meaning* and the *value* of a sign are distinct things. Meaning, he argues, is simply the mental counterpart of a pattern or sequence of sounds, assigned arbitrarily to those sounds by convention: "cat" *means* the concept of a particular kind of four-legged furry mammal. Value, on the other hand, always involves the invocation of something dissimilar for which the sign can be exchanged, and of something similar to which it can be compared. The value of a unit of currency, for example, is determined at once by a dissimilar item for which it can be exchanged (a ten dollar bill can be exchanged for a bottle of wine), *and* by a similar item, a unit of currency of a different denomination, to which it can be compared (a ten dollar bill is worth two fives). Within a simple sign system, a flashing light on the back of a car can be exchanged for something dissimilar – the idea of turning left – and compared to

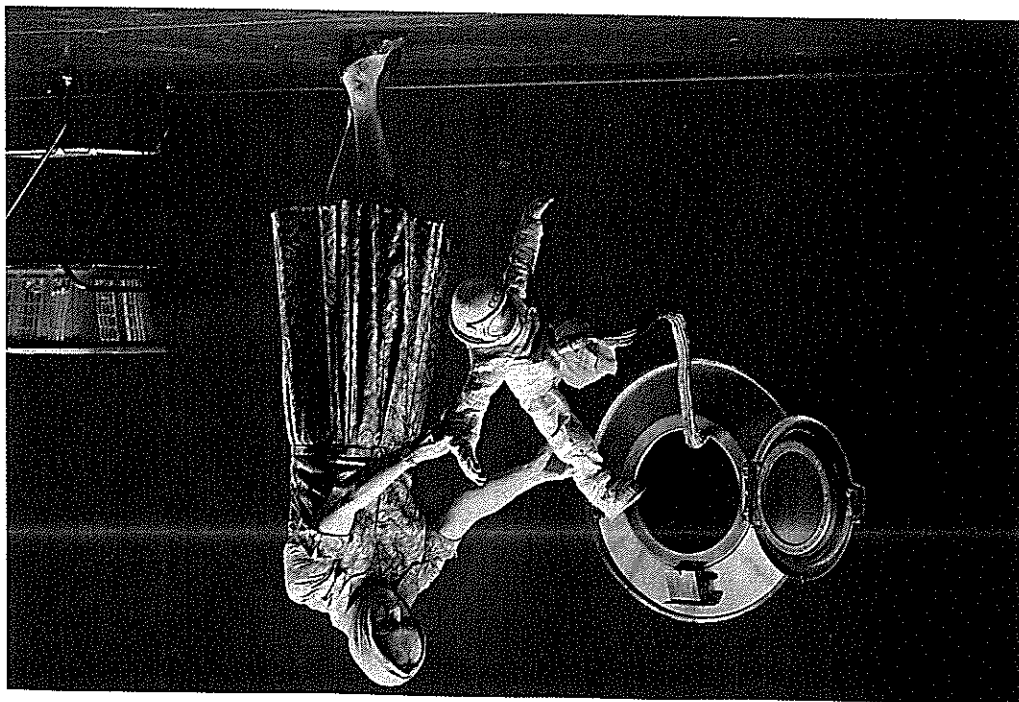


Figure 1.1 Yves Jaques in Ex Machina's 2012 production of Robert Lepage's *The Far Side of the Moon*
Source: Photo by Despina Spyrou/Despina Spyrou/Onassis Cultural Centre-Athens.



Figure 1.2 Gary Yates in the 2001 Actor's Express, Atlanta production of Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play*, dir. Weir Harman

Source: Photo by Michelle Hollberg, courtesy Freddie Ashley.

something similar – the light on the right-hand side of the same car that is not flashing. Similarly, in a more complex sign system such as a language, a word can be substituted (or *exchanged*) for something entirely dissimilar – “cat” for the mental image of a particular type of four-legged furry mammal – and *compared* to something similar – another word that is to a greater or lesser degree similar, such as “cap” or “bat” – and these two relationships are how we determine its value in the linguistic marketplace.

In the theatre, an actor is most often “exchanged” for a character within the dramatic fiction and “compared” to another actor playing a different character. Understanding this signifying relationship is generally taken for granted – actors play roles – but it can become particularly crucial in productions (of such plays as Plautus's *Menaechmi* or Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* or *Twelfth Night*) that deal with mistaken identities or twins, or even in those, common in contemporary theatre, that employ doubling (in which a single actor plays multiple roles). Each of the performers in *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky* plays (is exchanged for) four roles, but unlike the doubling in naturalistic theatre, this *comparison* between these roles is based on similarity rather than difference: the audience comes to see the different roles as aspects of parallel, mutually informing stories.

A sign system, however, can only function *synchronically*; it is complete and stable only at one fixed moment in time. Just as the exchange or purchasing value of a dollar changes over time (diachronically), so too does the value of a sign, though in neither case is any individual user of the system able to implement such changes. Not only is the value of a sign stable only in a synchronic present, it is stable only insofar as its community assents to, enacts, and evokes the system through each utterance that participates in that system. “The language is never complete in any single individual,” Saussure argues, “but exists perfectly only in the collectivity”; in fact, he argues, it consists of a “social bond” among its speakers

(13) – an issue that is of vital importance to marginalized or threatened cultures.

It is also important to note that a sign system, as such, has no material existence in the “real” world. It never comes into existence anywhere in its entirety but is implicit in, and evoked by, each individual utterance (which, only a fragment in itself, nevertheless does have material reality as sound). Saussure privileges the sign system as a whole and calls it the *langue*; the individual utterance he refers to as *parole*, comparing *langue* to a musical work, *parole* to different performances of that work in a way that has obvious application to theatre (Saussure 18). In theatre, if an individual “utterance,” or “*parole*” is understood to be a complete onstage moment, or indeed a whole theatrical production, it can invoke a range or complex inter-section of languages (“*langues*”) – what French philosopher Roland Barthes (1915–80) calls “*a density of signs*” (“Literature” 262, emphasis in original), each of which – spoken language, gesture, costume, lighting, and so on – invokes a different sign system (*langue*), and all of which *taken together* constitute the language of the stage.

But it is one of Saussure’s most important and most enabling (if controversial) contributions to observe, as already noted, that “the process which selects one particular sound-sequence to correspond to one particular idea is entirely arbitrary” (111), and therefore “*the linguistic sign is arbitrary*” (67, emphasis in original). What holds the sign in place, Saussure asserts, is no absolute or logical connection among its parts; in fact, “it exists only in virtue of a kind of contract agreed between the members of a community” (14). The English-speaking community somehow agrees that “cat,” rather than “chat,” or “grimf,” will conjure in the mind the idea of a particular type of furry mammal, or more ominously that “Asian” or “Indian” will conjure in the mind certain racialized characteristics and behaviours.

Saussure doesn’t fully tease out the implications of this meaning-through-consensus, though he does observe that,

“from the point of view of the linguistic community, the [sign] is imposed rather than freely chosen” (71), and his brief discussion of the ways in which “colonization [...] transports a language into new environments” (21) hints at the power dynamics that come into play around the control of meaning, particularly across economically or militarily unequal cultures. For if signification is fundamentally arbitrary and there is no “natural” connection between signifier and signified, sign and referent, then it is subject to manipulation. This raises key questions about *who controls the semiosis*, and in what or whose interests meanings are established, stabilized, and maintained. Indeed, each time a single utterance, or *parole*, evokes a larger *langue*, it is bringing into play what Roland Barthes calls “myth,” or what his compatriot and contemporary philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–84) calls “discourse.” And, crucially, languages, myths, and discourses are inevitably ideologically coded; that is, they carry with them specific ways of thinking about the world that they naturalize, or take for granted, and they enforce certain possible meanings or modes of understanding to the exclusion of others.

In his early structuralist work, and in particular his 1957 book, *Mythologies*, Barthes began with “a feeling of impatience at the sight of the ‘naturalness’ with which newspapers, art, and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history [...]. I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which [...] is hidden there” (11, emphasis in original). Barthes built directly upon Saussurian semiotics to investigate “myth” – by which he means any “system of communication,” including “photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity,” and presumably theatre (109, 110) – as “*a second order semiological system*” (114, emphasis in original). Myth constitutes a second order system because it “is made of material that has already been worked on” (that is, already has sign value), and because it encodes not-so-innocent “messages” with its

(apparently transparent) meanings through the building of a "semiological chain" (110, 114). Each link in such a chain consists of a signifier and a signified constituting a sign, the totality of which becomes the signifier in the chain's next link. Each part of a mythical signifying system evokes what Barthes calls "a global sign, the final term of a first semiological chain" (114). In a famous example he demonstrates this (implied) final term as ideological. Barthes describes the cover photograph of a magazine in which a young Black man in a French army uniform is pictured, eyes uplifted, saluting the French tricolour:

All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But [...] I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this young Negro [sic] in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (*a black soldier is giving the French salute*); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier. (116, emphasis in original)

To provide an example from the theatre, in a production of a Shakespearean history play a simple piece of stage furniture such as an ordinary desk chair can function as the first item in a semiological chain that moves from signifier (the chair) to signified (a chair within the stage fiction) through to the idea of a throne, then to that of royalty, then to that of the divine right of kings, and "finally" (the global sign) to an entire myth, or "message" that naturalizes social stratification and hierarchy.

Foucault's "discourse" echoes Barthes' "myth" insofar as it refers to a communications system, or system of signs, but

Foucault's term is used to refer more specifically to a set of *enoncés* (statements, units of knowledge) strung together that regulate or delimit what it is possible to say about a certain subject. In *The Order of Things* (1966) and its successor, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault treats certain patterns of *enoncés* as networks of underdetermined, or not verifiably appropriate choices that are made, not necessarily consciously, to exclude, control, gain status, or reinforce particular social institutions, and thereby to serve particular interests through the circulation of "power/knowledge" in society (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975). Examples of discourses, or "discursive formations," might include legal or medical discourses, or the discourses of cultural theory, which can feel closed to non-specialists, which uphold the privileges of specific institutions, govern what can be uttered when and where, and serve as sites in which power and knowledge (or more accurately "power/knowledge") circulate. A familiar theatrical example might be the often arcane discourse of theatrical lighting, with its leikos and fresnels, gobbos and gels, which can often feel to outsiders like an exclusive preserve, one peppered with industry brand names that directly serve the interests of specific dominant manufacturers – and, at a later stage in the semiological chain, the capitalist system. This specialized discourse also serves to obscure the ideological underpinnings of the sign systems through which stage lighting communicates, allowing its effects to be produced as if by magic.

The implications of Saussure's semiotics in conjunction with its extension into Barthes' myth and Foucault's discourse are enormous. In his essay on "The Mirror Stage," for example, structuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, building on Saussure, argues that human subjectivity (identity) is shaped by entry into language (or the symbolic order, which he also calls "the law of the father") to which the individual is henceforth "subjected." This happens at the moment of recognition of the other (the mother and the self as other) that he calls the "mirror stage." When the infant encounters the self as other

at the mirror stage of psychological development, according to Lacan, he [sic] encounters "identity" or selfness alienated through language (what does it mean to look in a mirror and say, "that (out there) 'is' me"? What does it mean to say "I" (to represent the self in language)? What does it mean to say "I am a boy"? "I am Indian"? "I am an Afro-German woman with a disability"? What does it mean to enter into language as a site of difference and differentiation? And this moment, in which the child is able, as in Saussure, to *articulate* the self, the mother, and the other as distinct from the pre-Oedipal abstract mass of sheer *being*, recurs and is reinforced throughout life as a kind of biblical fall from the innocence of unity with undifferentiated being, that is nevertheless also an entry into knowledge and power. Insofar as the theatre functions as a site at which human subjectivity is constituted and explored, and as a place where desire is played out through actors/others, the stage can often function as a Lacanian mirror. Through processes such as empathy, the audience can witness the self played out in discourse as other and can both experience and come to an understanding of the pleasures, powers, and alienations effected by their existence as human subjects.

Not surprisingly, Lacan's semiotic approach to the human psyche has opened up the opportunity for a great deal of productive psychoanalytical criticism of theatrical meaning-making, and much of this work has been feminist. A 2002 article published by Anne Marie Rekdal in *Scandinavian Studies* serves as an example. Rekdal examines Ibsen's *A Doll House* through a Lacanian lens, arguing that its heroine, Nora, is torn between the *jouissance* of transgressing the law of the father and her entrapment within that law. Rekdal argues that what Nora undergoes in the play is a "subjective-existential crisis" (152) that leads to a rebellion against that law, and that represents Ibsen's positing, in her departure from the family home and abandonment of her husband and children, of "an alternative ethical system to the Oedipal and patriarchal" (178). Significantly, this rebellion is achieved, not by way of

language or the symbolic order – represented in the play by the threatening letter that is visibly and ominously in the mailbox – but through Nora's dancing of the famous wordless and wild *tarantella* at the heart of the play.

The limitations of a Lacanian approach are perhaps most apparent in work that derives from non-patriarchal cultures, where entry into language is less about entry into "the law of the father," or into "power/knowledge," and less about alienation from a pre-linguistic fullness of being, than it is about entrance into a cosmology dominated, as most of the world's Indigenous cultures are, by *relations* with the world and by an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things. When Dule Girl returns to Guna Yala at the end of *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, at which time her face is painted with the signs of Guna womanhood, she enters a sense of oneness with creation and culture. Hers is a coming of age that is characterized by fullness rather than alienation.

In his major work, *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Lévi-Strauss contends that cultures too, like the psyche for Lacan, are structured like languages. The early chapters of the first volume of *Structural Anthropology* wrestle with the relationship between linguistics and anthropology in the constitution of a systematic and totalizing structuralist "human sciences." There Lévi-Strauss focuses on the revolutionary role that structural linguistics has played for the social sciences and offers it as a model for anthropology to follow. He argues that kinship, food, political ideology, ritual, cooking, and other practices are partial expressions of a larger cultural structure, language, or myth that is never made explicit or conscious and has no concrete existence as a whole, but is evoked by these practices that derive their meaning only in relation to it. And it is these unconscious foundations, he argues, rather than empirical observation of specific practices, that are the proper object of study for anthropologists.

Lévi-Strauss's closest engagement with Saussure comes in a later chapter in the same volume, "The Structural Study

of Myth." The chapter begins with Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, which Lévi-Strauss extends, like Barthes, to a third term, "myth," but unlike Barthes' myth, that of Lévi-Strauss is understood as "mythical stories," stories that Lévi-Strauss says are at once the unique, surprising, and unexpected (in their detail) foundational stories of specific cultures and yet similar (in their structures) across cultures around the world (208). He explains that similarity by considering myth to be language (*langue*) – "functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at taking off' from the linguistic ground [*parole*] on which it keeps on rolling" (210). He offers as an example a structuralist analysis of the story of Oedipus, which he claims with notable western ethnocentrism "is well known to everyone" (213), which is of course foundational for the psychoanalytic theories of both Freud and Lacan, and which, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, served as the model for Aristotle's *Poetics*, the foundational text for the western study of dramatic literature. Lévi-Strauss's choice of case study was far from random, then, or innocent.

Both Lacan and Lévi-Strauss have rightly come under attack from various quarters for their universalizing and masculinist tendencies, but if their arguments have any validity – and their significant influence suggests that they do, even if it is not a totalizing one – then the languages, myths, and discourses that are entered into by western subjects at the Lacanian "mirror stage" contribute significantly and determinately to the constitution of who "we" are, both as individuals and as societies. When we study meaning production through language, then, we are studying, at a fundamental and formative level, "who 'we' are."

Later the structuralist certainties and totalities assumed by Saussure, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, the early Barthes, and to a lesser extent Foucault (though he denied that he was a structuralist) would be "deconstructed" by the poststructuralists, including Barthes himself at a later stage, but especially by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), who focused on

the always deferred nature of signification, when each sign in what Barthes had called a semiological chain becomes the next signifier, and so on *ad infinitum*. Derrida coined the term "différance" (or in French, *différence*), the replacement of "e" by "a" playing on the fact that the French verb "*différer*" can mean both "to defer" and "to differ." "Différance" thereby captures at once the inevitable *déferal* of meanings that are carved out through *différence* ("différance defers-differs" [Of *Grammatology* 66]), while also playing with the fact that, spoken, the spelling change from "e" to "a" makes no *différence*: it can't be heard (Derrida, "Différance"). Derrida argued that there is, in fact, no global or "transcendental" signifier or signified that begins or completes the chain of signification, originates or confirms (or controls) final meaning: "in language," he argues, echoing Saussure, "there are only differences" ("Différance" 11). But this enabling deconstruction of global certainties was already implicit, as Derrida himself argues in his critique of Saussure in *Of Grammatology* (27–73), in Saussure's assertion of the fundamentally arbitrary (or as Derrida says "unmotivated") nature of the signifier/signified relationship and the reliance of signification on linguistic and conceptual differentiations.

In the theatre, an early, pre-Derridean application of this argument might be understood to emerge from the theory and practice of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), whose socialist politics led him to develop an aesthetic that resisted the representation of historical inevitability (such as "fate") and encoded the possibility of social change. Brecht's concept of the "not...but" was developed as part of an acting method for his "epic theatre." It involved staging, not historical inevitability, but historicized (that is, historically and culturally contextualized) choice:

When [an actor] appears on stage, besides what he actually is doing he will in all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is to say he will act in such

a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible [...]. Whatever he doesn't do must be contained and conserved in what he does. In this way every sentence and every gesture signifies a decision; the character remains under observation and is tested. The technical term for this procedure is "fixing the 'not...but'." (Brecht 137)

In epic theatre the audience is always made aware, through an actor's *demonstrating* rather than *inhabiting* a role, of the character's options: every onstage action is shadowed by what Derrida would call the "traces" of the choices not taken, and the significations not pursued. Brecht's theatre is a rich testing ground for semiotic analysis, since his so-called "defamiliarization" techniques crucially involve denaturalizing the signifier-signified relationship. If each signifier bears the traces of another signifier, as Elin Diamond has pointed out, this "wreaks havoc on identity [...] if an identity is always different from itself it can no longer *be* an identity" (48). What Brecht's staging of the "not...but" performs is a potentially radical critique of representations of identity grounded in such apparently stable things as gender, sexuality, nation, culture, and race. Indeed, it potentially undermines any understanding of human subjectivity (selfhood that is formed, at least in part, by those things to which one is "subject") as unified, self-contained, or autonomous (independent, able to make choices freely). If the self is understood to be a subject rather than an identity (with its implications of oneness), it is possible to afford it agency (as when the "I" is the grammatical subject of a sentence), while also recognizing that it is constituted socially by a heterogeneous mix of influences – prominent among which are the historically and culturally specific myths and discourses in which the self participates and to which it has been "subjected" and is now "subject."

It is this potential to destabilize unified representations of identity that has made a semiotic approach central to feminists, postcolonialists, and cultural materialists who are

centrally concerned with uncovering the ideological encoding of gender, race, and class, respectively, within dominant systems of representation, including those of the stage. When a theatre audience gives consent to a representation – when we accept that the figure onstage with long hair, wearing a skirt and makeup, and behaving coyly "is" a woman – it is what the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918–90) calls "hailed," or "interpellated" into an ideological system ("Ideology" 170–7), in this case what cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1949–) calls "the sex/gender system" that identifies certain prescribed behaviours as inherently or naturally feminine (34–41). Theatrical representations of race in figures such as the stage Irishman, the "noble savage," "squaw" or "Indian Princess," or in the grotesqueries of blackface minstrelsy, have been particularly egregious in their interpellation of audiences into racist regimes, as audiences learn to "recognize" characteristics and behaviours represented as "natural" to certain peoples. Politically alternative theatre has needed consistently to develop and deploy techniques such as Brechtian defamiliarization (*verfremdung*) in order to destabilize rather than reify such representations, and to find ways of staging identities as multiple, fluid, and subject to a multiplicity of divergent myths and discourses. Helen Gilbert has discussed, for example, the ways in which Indigenous playwrights Daniel David Moses (Delaware, from Canada) and Wesley Enoch (Murri, from Australia) have used "whiteface" Indigenous minstrelsy in their plays to destabilize the fixity of race while affirming the complex and positive identities of Aboriginal peoples (Gilbert).

The enabling heterogeneity of the mix of discourses that constitute human subjectivity has been labelled "dialogism" by the Russian linguist and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), whose engagement with Saussure's linguistics in the 1920 book *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (a work of disputed authorship often attributed to his Soviet colleague and collaborator V.N. Volosinov, 1895–1936), launched a

But Bakhtin was citing the drama of a very particular moment and kind, and many others have found the concept of dialogism useful in the semiotic analysis of theatre, particularly of contemporary theatre that eschews naturalistic closures, employs doubling, direct address, or "dialogic monologue" (Knowles and Harvie) or eschews "footlights," which Bakhtin interprets as anything which "separates the aesthetic event from lived life" (Art 217). Helene Keyssar, for example, critiquing Bakhtin's exclusion of drama from the realm of true polyphony, assembles a list of dialogic plays that range from *Woyzeck* through *Ubu Roi*, Beckett, and Brecht, to contemporary African American and feminist plays (95). She puts the concept of dialogism to productive feminist use in her analysis of Wendy Wasserstein's 1988 play *The Heidi Chronicles* and Maria Irene Fornés's 1977 *Pefu and Her Friends* (95-104). In 2010, Kwok-kan Tam applied Bakhtinian dialogism productively to explicate even so traditionally monologic a play as Ibsen's *A Doll House*, shifting the grounds of dialogism from a strictly linguistic to a psychological orientation, and reading the central character Nora's transformation as a transition over the course of the play "from a monologic self to a dialogic self" (83).

But perhaps the most productive and influential application of Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and the carnivalesque has come about through their reworking in the hands of the poststructuralist Bulgarian-French philosopher, psychoanalyst, literary critic, novelist, and feminist Julia Kristeva (1941-). In a 1966 essay, "Word, Dialogue and the Novel" Kristeva coined the concept of "intertextuality" out of an attempt to merge Saussure's semiotics with Bakhtin's dialogism, defining it elsewhere as the "transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another" (*Revolution* 59-60). For Kristeva, citing Socratic dialogue, meaning itself "is a product of a dialogical relationship among speakers" ("Word" 81), and "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations" ("Word" 66). It is this intertextuality, Kristeva argues, that is the politically productive

lifelong study of "utterances" (roughly, Saussure's *paroles*). Bakhtin shifted Saussure's focus from the "universalist" structure - the *langue* - to the unique phenomenon, the utterance (*parole*), which is *made* unique by its social and historical context. Utterances, then, are not simply linguistic but also social phenomena "constructed between two socially organized persons" at the moment in which they are heard or read (Volosinov 85). According to Bakhtin's "sociolinguistics," all utterances, which can range from a single sound or gesture to a full-length novel, are made up of a polyphony of languages - what Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia." These languages are drawn from a variety of "speech genres" - social, professional, and cultural communication systems (see Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*).

Bakhtin's speech genres are like Foucault's discourses, but for Bakhtin they coexist within a single utterance, potentially denaturalizing one another and disrupting claims to monologic authority or totalizing expression. Some utterances, of course, are more dialogic than others: the epic, for example, is monologic for Bakhtin, aspiring to be the final (theological) Word (Derrida's transcendental signified); but the novel, and in particular the "polyphonic novel" of Dostoevsky and the "carnavalesque" of Rabelais, exemplifies the dialogic text, which consists of "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (*Rabelais; Problems* 6). Ironically, given its basis in dialogue, Bakhtin did not find the fundamentally naturalistic drama of his day particularly dialogic (though he celebrated the dialogism of the carnivalesque medieval theatre), because he felt that it was "almost always constructed out of represented, objectified discourses" (*Problems* 188). He saw in drama an attempt to bring together in dialogue, but *not* to merge, voices that were in themselves monologic, and were therefore "alien to genuine polyphony" (*Problems* 34): "Dramatic dialogue is determined by a collision between individuals who exist within the limits of a single unitary language" (*Dialogic* 405).

component of discourse. It is the dialogic elements of language that "destroy man's epic and tragic unity [Kristeva is *not* using the universal masculine here] as well as his belief in identity and causality; they indicate that he has lost his totality and no longer coincides with himself" ("Word" 83). "The carnival challenges God, authority, and social law;" indeed, "insofar as it is dialogical," Kristeva argues, "it is rebellious" ("Word" 79).

Although, like Bakhtin, Kristeva focuses her analysis on Menippean (carnavalesque) discourse and the polyphonic novel, she also cites Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty, and refers to dialogic intertextuality as "spectacle, but without a stage" ("Word" 78), as "dramatization" ("Word" 79). "All poetic [that is, intertextual] discourse is dramatization," she argues, where different voices contend as conflicting, unmerged dramatic postulates – as theatre – and thereby "relativize each other" ("Word" 78). Kristeva later abandoned the term "intertextuality" because she felt it had too often been understood in the "banal sense of 'study of sources,'" replacing it with "transposition" (*Revolution* 60), but the term has proven to be extraordinarily productive. Scholars have explored scenic intertextuality between *commedia dell'arte* and Theatre of the Oppressed (Heritage), intertextuality in contemporary Lithuanian theatre (Staniškytė), in musical theatre, in Latin American theatre, in early modern theatre, in vaudeville, in multi-ethnic and Indigenous theatre (Maufort and Figuera) – the list is endless. But theatre might best be seen as *fundamentally* intertextual, a site at which the various discourses that constitute its "cybernetic machine" (Barthes, "Literature" 261) come together and productively "relativize" each other.

Charles Peirce: sign, object, and interpretant; icon, index, and symbol

While Saussure's work grew out of the discipline of linguistics and is contained in the slim volume, *Course in General*

Linguistics, consisting of edited lecture notes taken by his students and published after his death, Charles Sanders Peirce produced a daunting body of work, much of it published only posthumously, and only a portion of it assembled by Harvard University Press in the eight-volume maze that is the *Collected Papers*, by Indiana University Press in the chronologically-arranged two-volume *The Essential Peirce*, and also by IUP in the so-far eight-volume (of a projected thirty) *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Peirce's discussion of "semeiotic" is not developed in isolation, but accrues alongside, and is fundamental to, his theories of logic, mathematics, and philosophical pragmatics. His writings on semiotics, some of them gathered together in the 1991 University of North Carolina Press volume, *Peirce on Signs*, evolved over the course of his life, and in this work he provided literally dozens of different definitions of the sign.

But what is central and consistent is that, while for Saussure the sign was a dyad (made up of two parts, the signifier and signified), for Peirce, the sign was a relation – a "sign relation" – that is triadic, consisting of three essential parts: the sign, the object, and the interpretant. What Peirce calls the "sign," or *representamen*, is defined not by its essence but by its function: to represent, or *stand for* something – to be interpreted. The "object" is what is represented in the sign, what the sign stands for, or the subject matter of the sign relation (having to do with all three parts), and this is what is "value added" to Saussure's dyad. The object can be anything that is thinkable. The interpretant, finally, is the meaning of the sign – similar to Saussure's "signified": an idea or effect as it is interpreted, usefully insisting, as Saussure does not, on the *act* of interpretation. To summarize and simplify, the sign stands *for* the object to the interpretant; or, in perhaps Peirce's simplest articulation, "a sign is an object which stands for another to some mind" ("On the Nature of Signs" 141).

One of the significances of Peirce's tripartite sign relation is the emphasis it places on the act of interpretation (which for

him consisted, and was constitutive, of thought). For Peirce a sign exists in order to be interpreted; if it is not interpreted, it is not a sign. But the *interpretant* is not the same as the *interpreter*. As Roman Jakobson points out, the interpreter is "the receiver and decoder of a message"; the interpretant is *part* of the sign, "the key which the receiver uses to understand the message," (442), or in Peirce's words, "all that is explicit in the sign itself, apart from its context and circumstances of utterance" (*Collected Papers*, 5 325).

The implications of this distinction are important, in part because it suggests that all signification involves an act of translation of signs into other signs and so on (like Barthes's semiological chain), and in part because it foregrounds the "context and circumstances of utterance" in the real, material world. And for Peirce, unlike Saussure, the "real world" – what Peirce calls "some external permanency [...] something upon which our thinking has no effect" ("Fixation" 120) – exists independently of semiosis. Indeed, even if its characteristics depend upon systems of signs and representations, for Peirce the external world – the referent, or that to which the sign relates in its totality ultimately (or eventually) refers – is determinate of the truth value of the representation, the "final [vs. 'dynamic'] interpretant" (*Semiotic and Significs* 111) against which it can be measured or tested by a community (see Fischer 120–34). Finally, the "circumstances of utterance" for Peirce include prior (or "collateral") knowledge of the sign relation's object (its subject matter), without which the sign could not be interpreted ("Pragmatism" 409). This focus on reception of the sign is one element in Peirce's thinking that makes his work significant for the study and practice of theatre, where "real-world" testing and the prior experience of audiences are crucial to communication. It is particularly crucial in the case of intercultural performance where "the density of signs" Barthes refers to occurs not only across the languages of the stage but also across cultural differences that play themselves out experientially in real, material ways.

Peirce's understanding of what might serve as a sign extends far beyond spoken or written language. Indeed, as Jakobson says, his "semiotic edifice encloses the whole multiplicity of significative phenomena, whether a knock on the door, a footprint, a spontaneous cry, a painting, a musical score, a conversation, a silent meditation, a piece of writing, a syllogism, an algebraic equation, a geometric diagram, a weather vane, or a simple bookmark" (442). And he discusses each of these things and more, at length. He does not discuss theatre, but the expansiveness of his semiotic lends itself to the analysis of a form that includes so many elements, so many different ways of signifying, such semiotic richness. His classification of signs, in fact, contains elements that are almost uniquely valuable to theatre studies.

Peirce assembled a staggeringly complex classificatory system consisting of "ten main trichotomies" ("Excerpts" 483–91), what one of his editors calls "the most advanced theory of signs ever fashioned" (Houser xxx), but for theatre practitioners and scholars his identification of three *types* of sign is particularly useful:

There are three kinds of signs. Firstly, there are *likenesses*, or icons; which serve to convey ideas of the things they represent simply by imitating them. Secondly, there are *indications*, or indices, which show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them. Such is a guidepost, which points down the road to be taken, or a relative pronoun which is placed just after the name of the thing intended to be denoted, or a vocative exclamation, as "Hi! There," which acts upon the nerves of the person addressed and focuses his [sic] attention. Thirdly, there are *symbols*, or general signs, which have become associated with their meanings by usage. Such are most words, and phrases, and speeches, and books, and libraries. ("What is a Sign" 5, emphasis in original; see also "One, Two, Three" and "Sign")

It will be clear that only one of these, the symbol, fits with Saussure's statement that all signs are arbitrary, the result of convention. Insofar as Saussure was concerned primarily with spoken language (and even there qualified his assertion somewhat late in the *Course*), the linguist and the logician are in agreement about this.

Peirce's classification of one type of signification as *iconic* has frequently been considered especially useful for the analysis of theatre, where the likenesses between the actor and the character she plays, between the furniture on stage and the furniture it represents within the fiction of the play, and so on, make the theatrical medium uniquely iconic. And indeed the stage, particularly the naturalistic stage, has frequently taken this iconicity to extremes, when real rabbits frolicked in the forest of Arden in 19th-century productions of *As You Like It*, or when Christine in Strindberg's *Miss Julie* cooks real food on a real stove in real time. And there is no doubt that particularly powerful effects can be achieved when an onstage sign and its real-life referent approach identity, though it is also a truism that the use of the "real" onstage – as in the case of children, dogs, working clocks, or fire – can serve to fracture rather than reinforce the illusion, particularly in naturalistic work.

But not all theatrical representation is iconic, a mode that is most suited to naturalism or realism, where verisimilitude is key, and where what is re-presented has already happened: Peirce argues that the icon "has such being as belongs to past experience" (qtd in Jakobson 427). Indeed, Bertolt Brecht developed a method of acting for his epic theatre that is fundamentally *indexical*, in which the actor was encouraged to "show" or demonstrate rather than strive to "become" the character she is playing, in effect pointing indexically to key characteristics without aspiring to iconic similarity (Brecht 136–40). Because, as Peirce argues, the index "has the being of present experience" (Jakobson 427), it is particularly conducive to political theatre and to situations in which the "action"

takes place in the minds and bodily receptors of the audience. Other experimental forms such as expressionist, symbolist, absurd, poststructuralist, postmodernist, or what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls "postdramatic theatre" (theatre that attempts to rely neither on representation of the external world nor on the developmental structuring of time) are likely to draw upon the *symbolic*, where the arbitrariness of sign-referent relationships can be productively exploited and the taken-for-grantedness of too easy recognitions undermined. For this type of experimentation, the symbolic mode is essential, for as Peirce argues, "the value of a symbol is that it serves to make thought and conduct rational and enables us to predict the future" (Jakobson 427) – or at the very least, to make audiences sit less comfortably in their seats and certainties.

Peirce was clear that any sign could, and almost always does, have characteristics of more than one of his three types (the iconic, the indexical, and the symbolic). This is certainly true in the theatre, where a degree of iconicity seems to be required in order for there to be recognition and for communication to take place, but where signs also frequently point indexically to extra-diegetic space and time (outside of the represented action), and where spoken or other symbolic language is generally used. Peirce himself points to the importance of icons, and to a lesser extent indices, for intercultural communication (what he calls "intercommunication"), where the shared conventions that are necessary for symbolic signs, such as most spoken or written language, may not exist ("What" 6). (This may be why theatrical productions designed for international touring tend not to rely heavily on spoken text.) But it is clear that directors, designers, and actors in the contemporary theatre need to develop some consciousness of the types of sign that are used in their productions. If a work is to be political, an overreliance on iconicity may tend to reify rather than disrupt dominant representational regimes, whereas the use of indexical signs might help to promote political awareness and historical consciousness by alienating ideological

taken-for-granted. An existentialist worldview, however, one invested in deep psychological drives, or one dominated by postmodern uncertainties, might be best communicated through the use of the symbolic, where meaning is already inherently arbitrary.

This chapter has focused on the foundations, implications, and legacy of the modern study of meaning production, with suggestions for its application to the study and practice of theatre. In the next chapter the focus will be on the history and practice of semiotics as it has developed in specific application to drama and theatre.

2 Theatre

Prague school contributions

Theatre's "density of signs" makes it an ideal subject for semiotic analysis (Barthes, "Literature" 262, emphasis in original). But semiotic theory and analysis as applied specifically to drama and theatre only began to develop in Europe fifteen years after the posthumous publication of Saussure's *Course*, with the appearance in 1931 of Otakar Zich's *Estetika dramatického umění: teoretická dramaturgie (Aesthetics of the Art of Drama)* and Jan Mukařovský's "Tentativo di analisi del fenomeno dell'attore" ("An Attempted Structural Analysis of the Phenomenon of the Actor"). These publications were foundational for the work on drama and theatre of the Prague School Structuralists throughout the 1930s and 40s, which was continuous with the literary poetics of the earlier so-called Russian Formalists, with whom they shared membership. The Prague School introduced to theatre and performance studies and into theatrical practice a number of key concepts that have continuing importance, including such basic devices as foregrounding (*aktualisace*) and showing (*ostension*), extending into many of the central concerns of theatrical practice.

Two of the key contributions of the Prague School derived directly from Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky's 1925 concept of "*ostranenie*," variously translated as "making strange," "estrangement," or "defamiliarization," – a concept that is directly relevant to Brecht's later *verfremdungseffekt*, or "defamiliarization" effect (see Chapter 1). For Shklovsky, one of the key functions of art was to make ordinary, taken-for-granted elements of life visible again by making them "strange," "seeing things out of their usual context" (9) or