

the signification. One could imagine a kind of law: the more direct the trauma, the more difficult is connotation; or again, the "mythological" effect of a photograph is inversely proportional to its traumatic effect.

Why? Doubtless because photographic connotation, like every well-structured signification, is an institutional activity; in relation to society overall, its function is to integrate man, to reassure him. Every code is at once arbitrary and rational; recourse to a code is thus always an opportunity for man to prove himself, to test himself through a reason and a liberty. In this sense, the analysis of codes perhaps allows an easier and surer historical definition of a society than the analysis of its signifieds, for the latter can often appear as trans-historical, belonging more to an anthropological base than to a proper history. Hegel gave a better definition of the ancient Greeks by outlining the manner in which they made nature signify than by describing the totality of their "feelings and beliefs" on the subject. Similarly, we can perhaps do better than to take stock directly of the ideological contents of our age; by trying to reconstitute in its specific structure the code of connotation of a mode of communication as important as the press photograph we may hope to find, in their very subtlety, the forms our society uses to ensure its peace of mind and to grasp thereby the magnitude, the detours, and the underlying function of that activity. The prospect is the more appealing in that, as was said at the beginning, it develops with regard to the photograph in the form of a paradox—that which makes of an inert object a language and which transforms the unculture of a "mechanical" art into the most social of institutions.

1961

The Imagination of the Sign

EVERY sign includes or implies three relations. To start with, an interior relation which unites its signifier to its signified; then two exterior relations: a virtual one that unites the sign to a specific reservoir of other signs it may be drawn from in order to be inserted in discourse; and an actual one that unites the sign to other signs in the discourse preceding or succeeding it. The first type of relation appears clearly in what is commonly called a *symbol*; for instance, the Cross "symbolizes" Christianity, red "symbolizes" a prohibition to advance; we shall call this first relation, then, a *symbolic* relation, though we encounter it not only in symbols but also in signs (which are, roughly speaking, purely conventional symbols). The second type of relation implies the existence, for each sign, of a reservoir or organized "memory" of forms from which it is distinguished by the smallest difference necessary and sufficient to effect a change of meaning; in *lupum*, the element *-um* (which is a sign, and more precisely a morpheme) affords its meaning of "accusative case" only insofar as it is opposed to the (virtual) remainder of the declension (*-us, -i, -o, etc.*); red signifies prohibition only insofar as it is *systematically* opposed

From *Critical Essays*.

to green and yellow (of course, if there were no other color but red, red would still be opposed to the absence of color); this second type of relation is therefore that of the system, sometimes called paradigm; we shall therefore call it a *paradigmatic* relation. According to the third type of relation, the sign is no longer situated with regard to its (virtual) "brothers," but with regard to its (actual) "neighbors"; in *homo homini lupus, lupus* maintains certain connections with *homo* and with *homini*; in garment systems, the elements of an outfit are associated according to certain rules: to wear a sweater and a leather jacket is to create, between these two garments, a temporary but signifying association, analogous to the one uniting the words of a sentence; this level of association is the level of the syntagm, and we shall call the third relation the *syntagmatic relation*.

Now it seems that when we consider the signifying phenomenon (and this interest may proceed from very different horizons), we are obliged to focus on one of these three relations more than on the other two; sometimes we "see" the sign in its symbolic aspect, sometimes in its systematic aspect, sometimes in its syntagmatic aspect; this is occasionally the result of mere ignorance of the other relations: symbolism has long been blind to the formal relations of the sign; but even when the three relations have been defined (for example, in linguistics), each school tends to base its analysis on one of the sign's dimensions: one vision overflows the whole of the signifying phenomenon, so that we may speak, apparently, of different semiological consciousnesses (I refer, of course, to the consciousness of the analyst, not of the user, of the sign). Now, on the one hand, the choice of a dominant relation implies a certain ideology; and, on the other hand, one might say that each consciousness of the sign (symbolic, paradigmatic, and syntagmatic) corresponds to a certain moment of reflection, either individual or collective: structuralism, in particular, can

be defined historically as the passage from symbolic consciousness to paradigmatic consciousness: there is a history of the sign, which is the history of its "consciousnesses."

The symbolic consciousness sees the sign in its profound, one might almost say its geological, dimension, since for the symbolic consciousness it is the tiered arrangement of signifier and signified which constitutes the symbol; there is a consciousness of a kind of vertical relation between the Cross and Christianity: Christianity is *under* the Cross, as a profound mass of beliefs, values, practices, more or less disciplined on the level of its form. The verticality of the relation involves two consequences: on the one hand, the vertical relation tends to seem solitary: the symbol seems to stand by itself in the world, and even when we assert that it is abundant, it is abundant in the fashion of a "forest"—i.e., by an anarchic juxtaposition of profound relations which communicate, so to speak, only by their roots (by what is signified); and on the other hand, this vertical relation necessarily appears to be an analogical relation: to some degree the form resembles the content, as if it were actually produced by it, so that the symbolic consciousness may sometimes mask an unacknowledged determinism: thus there is a massive privilege of resemblance (even when we emphasize the inadequate character of the sign). The symbolic consciousness has dominated the sociology of symbols and of course a share of psychoanalysis in its early stages, though Freud himself acknowledged the inexplicable (nonanalogical) character of certain symbols; this moreover was the period when the very word *symbol* prevailed; during all this time, the symbol possessed a mythic prestige, the glamor of "richness": the symbol was rich, hence it could not be reduced to a "simple sign" (today we may doubt the sign's "simplicity"): its form was constantly exceeded by the power and the movement of its content; indeed, for the sym-

bolic consciousness, the symbol is much less a (codified) form of communication than an (affective) instrument of participation. The word *symbol* has now gone a little stale; we readily replace it by *sign* or *signification*. This terminological shift expresses a certain crumbling of the symbolic consciousness, notably with regard to the analogical character of signifier and signified; nonetheless the symbolic consciousness remains typical, insofar as its analytical consideration is not interested in the formal relations of signs, for the symbolic consciousness is essentially the rejection of form; what interests it in the sign is the signified: the signifier is always a determined element.

Once the forms of two signs are compared, or at least perceived in a somewhat comparative manner, a certain paradigmatic consciousness appears; even on the level of the classical symbol, the least subtle of signs, if there is some occasion to perceive the variation of two symbolic forms, the other dimensions of the sign are immediately discovered; as in the case, for instance, of the opposition between *Red Cross* and *Red Crescent*: on the one hand, *Cross* and *Crescent* cease to entertain a "solitary" relation with what they respectively signify (Christianity and Islam), they are included in a stereotyped syntagm; and, on the other hand, they form between themselves an interplay of distinctive terms, each of which corresponds to a different signified: the paradigm is born. The paradigmatic consciousness therefore defines meaning not as the simple encounter of signifier and signified, but, according to Merleau-Ponty's splendid expression, as a veritable "modulation of co-existence"; it substitutes for the bilateral relation of the symbolic consciousness a quadrilateral or more precisely a homological relation. It is the paradigmatic consciousness which permitted Lévi-Strauss to reconceive the problem of totemism: whereas the symbolic consciousness vainly seeks the "dimensional," more or less analogical characters which unite a signifier (the totem) to a signified (the clan), the paradig-

matic consciousness establishes a homology (as Lévi-Strauss calls it) between the relation of two totems and that of two clans. Naturally, by retaining in the signified only its demonstrative role (it designates the signifier and makes it possible to locate the terms of the opposition), the paradigmatic consciousness tends to empty it: but it does not thereby empty the signification. It is obviously the paradigmatic consciousness which has permitted (or expressed) the extraordinary development of phonology, a science of exemplary paradigms (*marked/nonmarked*): it is the paradigmatic consciousness which, through the work of Lévi-Strauss, defines the structuralist threshold.

The syntagmatic consciousness is a consciousness of the relations which unite signs on the level of discourse itself, i.e., essentially a consciousness of the constraints, tolerances, and liberties of the sign's associations. This consciousness has marked the linguistic endeavors of the Yale school and, outside linguistics, the investigations of the Russian formalist school, notably those of Propp in the domain of the Slavic folk tale (hence we may expect that it will eventually illuminate analysis of the major contemporary "narratives," from the *fait-divers* to the popular novel). But this is not the only orientation of the syntagmatic consciousness; of the three, it is certainly the syntagmatic consciousness which most readily renounces the signified: it is more a structural consciousness than a semantic one, which is why it comes closest to practice: it is the syntagmatic consciousness which best permits us to imagine operational groups, "dispatchings," complex classifications: the paradigmatic consciousness permits the fruitful return from decimalism to binarism; but it is the syntagmatic consciousness which actually permits us to conceive cybernetic "programs," just as it has permitted Propp and Lévi-Strauss to reconstruct the myth "series."

Perhaps we shall someday be able to return to the description of these semantic consciousnesses, attempt to link them to a history; perhaps we shall someday be able to create a semiology of the semiologists, a structural analysis of the structuralists. All we are endeavoring to say here is that there is probably a genuine imagination of the sign; the sign is not only the object of a particular knowledge, but also the object of a vision, analogous to the vision of the celestial spheres in Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* or related to the molecular representations used by chemists; the semiologist *sees* the sign moving in the field of signification, he enumerates its valences, traces their configuration: the sign is, for him, a sensuous idea. Of the three (still fairly technical) consciousnesses discussed here, we must presume an extension toward much wider types of imagination, which we may find mobilized in many other objects than the sign.

The symbolic consciousness implies an imagination of depth; it experiences the world as the relation of a superficial form and a many-sided, massive, powerful *Abgrund*, and the image is reinforced by a very intense dynamics: the relation of form and content is ceaselessly renewed by time (history), the superstructure overwhelmed by the infrastructure, without our ever being able to grasp the structure itself. The paradigmatic consciousness, on the contrary, is a formal imagination; it *sees* the signifier linked, as if in profile, to several virtual signifiers which it is at once close to and distinct from: it no longer sees the sign in its depth, it sees it in its perspective; thus the dynamics attached to this vision is that of a summons: the sign is chosen from a finite organized reservoir, and this summons is the sovereign act of signification: imagination of the surveyor, the geometrician, the owner of the world who finds himself at his ease on his property, since man, in order to signify, has merely to choose from what is presented to him

already prestructured either by his brain (in the binarist hypothesis), or by the material finitude of forms. The syntagmatic imagination no longer sees the sign in its perspective, it *foresees* it in its extension: its antecedent or consequent links, the bridges it extends to other signs; this is a "stemmatous" imagination of the chain or the network; hence the dynamics of the image here is that of an arrangement of mobile, substitutive parts, whose combination produces meaning, or more generally a new object; it is, then, a strictly fabricative or even *functional* imagination (the word is conveniently ambiguous, since it refers both to the notion of a variable relation and to that of a usage).

Such are (perhaps) the three imaginations of the sign. We may doubtless attach to each of them a certain number of different creations, in the most diverse realms, for nothing constructed in the world today escapes meaning. To remain in the realm of recent intellectual creation, among the works of the profound (symbolic) imagination, we may cite biographical or historical criticism, the sociology of "visions," the realist or introspective novel, and in a general way, the "expressive" arts or languages, postulating the signified as sovereign, extracted either from an interiority or from a history. The formal (or paradigmatic) imagination implies an acute attention to the *variation* of several recurrent elements; thus this type of imagination accommodates the dream and oneiric narratives, powerfully thematic works and those whose aesthetic implies the interplay of certain commutations (Robbe-Grillet's novels, for example). The functional (or syntagmatic) imagination nourishes, lastly, all those works whose fabrication, by arrangement of discontinuous and mobile elements, constitutes the spectacle itself: poetry, epic theater, serial music, and structural compositions, from Mondrian to Butor.