Toward a Semiotic Theory of the Comic

and a New Aesthetic of Comedy:

Explanation and Interpretation of
Eighteenth-Century French Comedy

by

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HAMLET. Denmark’s a prison.

ROSENCRANTZ. Then is the world one.

HAMLET. A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o’ the worst.

ROSENCRANTZ. We think not so, my lord.

HAMLET. Why, then, ’tis none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so: to me it is a prison.

ROSENCRANTZ. Why then, your ambition makes it one; ’tis too narrow for your mind.

HAMLET. O God, I could be bounded in a nut shell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

GUILDENSTERN. Which dreams indeed are ambition, for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.

HAMLET. A dream itself is but a shadow. [...] I have of late — but wherefore I know not — lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me: no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.
FOREWORD

Current semiotics continues to show weaknesses which limit its applicability to literary research, which itself seems inadequate when faced with comedy; the question is whether this is because semiotics and similar approaches lack the appropriate relationship with such texts, or if it is simply inadequate when faced with the problems of the genre. In my view, the answer to this is clear: the comic literature is surely, as a form of communication, a part of that which semiotics studies, or is intended to explain – therefore laughter constitutes evidence of the “incompleteness” of semiotics in the same way the Michelson-Morley experiment showed that classical physics was not able to explain the dynamics of motion in cases of extremely high velocities such as that of light.¹

Semiotics is indeed wanting then, for our purpose – that of attempting to explain the functioning of the comic and, with this, to understand the structure of comedy. What is needed is a re-examination of the origins of the inadequacy, with the obvious aim of overcoming it. In other words, it will be crucial to take a deeper look at the philosophical foundation of semiotics – indeed I believe that the latter does not

¹ Michelson and Morley (1887). Their well-known experiment in which the velocity of light was measured while refracted into the shape of a cross is one of the most influential of the last two centuries – it revealed that light always travels in a vacuum at the same speed, regardless of the Galilean frame of reference; this is what spurred Einstein (1909) to develop a new mathematical approach and a new physics: relativity.
Here I have adopted the categories first described by German philosopher Droysen in his *Grundriß der Historik* (1851), according to which there are three kinds of scientific method: the speculative method, which asks simply *what kind of thing is this?* Second, the explicative method, whose aim is to identify the laws governing causes and effects, or the dynamics, of the interactions between the things identified. Finally, the interpretative method, which aims at an understanding of the internal unity, the grammar of the whole in relation to the parts, including the biases of subjectivity, that can be observed in the diversity of manifestations of a structural system.

actually lack the capabilities necessary for the study of such matters – it’s just that semiotics has been constructed in such a way that it is *ontologically incompatible* with the very stuff that constitutes the ridiculous as it is found in comic texts. With certain re-formulations and adjustments, semiotics will provide, in my opinion, the very methodology our subject here shall require.

For Greimas, (1970: 11) though semiotics was initially just a “scientific project,” he would later be persuaded it constituted a “science” that “has functioned very satisfactorily [...] for the last twenty years.” However, as was the case for alchemy in Isaac Newton’s day, – a discipline that was without doubt seen as a firm component of the natural sciences history would ultimately recognize – semiotics has unfortunately been hard pressed to provide any real *explanation* of observable communication (particularly in respect to comedy), and is still unable to contribute very much to an *understanding* of the underlying dynamics of the comic or laughter.²

Indeed it seems that semiotics today, like many areas of the human sciences dealing with cognition, is at a stage of development similar to that of Renaissance alchemy – in the sense that it offers the researcher a number of analytical tools, but still lacks the coherence of a rigorous and well-established discipline. A modest semiotician, for instance, is not able to repeat and “independently verify” the research of his more brilliant colleagues, as their methods often rely in part upon a sort of

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“extra-scientific intuition” that guides the most capable scholars in applying such-and-such a method according to the specificity or the syntax of the communicative text at hand. Moreover, a certain “refusal” to examine speculatively the fundamental philosophy underlying the discipline has resulted not only in a lack of criteria for objectivity but also for neutrality. In other words, no sound ontology yet orients the researcher – you just have to “know when” to change methodological posture, when there is a syntactic change in the text under examination.

Therefore a first fundamental problem, which is manifested in a sense as the Achilles heel of semiotics, one that renders it blind to the very nature of comedy, is the fact that it has not sufficiently explored the philosophical basis upon which it is founded. Polish philosopher Georges Kalinowski (1985: 262), who examines this very issue in great detail in an attempt at a description of an adequate semiotics, brings to light a number of problems generally ignored by today’s scholars in the area. In fact he even goes so far as to say that semiotics (as it existed before the name was first used) was actually more advanced during the Middle Ages:

This is why, in order for semiotics to reclaim the forgotten virtues it once possessed, we have engaged in a philosophical reflection taking language as its object, as a starting point, and progressing on the one hand toward a realist existential ontology, and on the other toward a very precise anthropology which is no more than the natural extension of that ontology, as it recognizes in man a mixed being, at once both material and mental, by virtue of being capable of conceptual thought and language. [My translation]

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3 We are aiming here at the criteria for “scientificity” developed by German historian Max Weber (1992 [1913]), particularly his concept of the “neutrality” of the researcher in terms of the difficulty of defining objectivity in the context of social science methods. Weber shared with Dilthey and numerous contemporaries the opinion that the “sciences of the mind” differ ontologically from the natural sciences.
Kalinowski is quite right: in order to develop a structuralist approach to communication, semioticians must understand both the positivist line of reasoning, which rigorously examines a sign extensions, as well as idealist approaches, like that of Husserl. Paradoxically, it is by recognizing that both of these opposed schools actually neglect important questions treated by the other, such that each constitutes an unjustifiable rejection, that Kalinowski (1985: 130-31) convincingly argues that both extremes must be at once understood and corrected because each leads to a fundamental insufficiency:

[...] an adequate semiotics is based upon a philosophy which takes as rationally justified the two theses respectively opposed to those of Husserl and Carnap. The latter recognizes the existence of an external world containing an incalculably large number of entities belonging to various categories, and according to which the very notion of being is in fact analogical and not equivocal [...] so any term that signifies such entities can neither be predicated on an unequivocal basis nor an equivocal one, but in only a decidedly intermediate manner: such a term can be predicated upon any being, whatever its ontological category, but differently for different categories, as a function of the ontic structure that belongs to each and which differs from category to category. [...] Husserl, in contrast, recognizes the existence in man of something truly immaterial [...] shown in particular by his concepts of logical judgments which are, in his view, clothed in psychological concepts or judgments. [My translation]

Here Kalinowski cogently affirms that semiotics must first perform a speculative investigation of its object of study, and that only in so doing will it be able to supplement its rigorous but limited methods with a form of intensional analysis that benefits from a sufficiently supple ontological sensibility. In essence, semiotics must take in to account both sides of the metaphysical debate seen in Plato Cratylus, namely the dialectic of nature and culture in which the latter seems to defy definition, deviating from the former in a way represented in the Platonic image of the drunken legislator. For the same reason, semiotics can no longer ignore the analysis Dilthey
undertook (1910/1988), which takes the explicative and interpretative methods conceived by Droysen (1857), and develops an ontology of science that clearly distinguishes social and natural sciences, which results in the seminal observation that human sciences can and must consider the additional dimension constituted by the interpretative method, whose purpose is comprehension, precisely because the human sciences are concerned with the very effects man mental characteristics have upon his understanding of reality. Dilthey’s ontological approach thus recognizes that while the brain as an organ is obviously governed by the laws of physics, the mind, as one of the brain functions, is not particularly when it liberally departs from concrete sorts of logic that do not enter into the context of the social imagination.

Current semiotics, jealous perhaps of its elder sisters, the quantitative sciences, tends to imitate them at the expense of its inherent virtues, limiting itself to a serious (materially) logical method that examines meaning only in the concrete terms of a sort of mechanics: space, time, the brain, the body, the realm of the syntagm as though it were somehow taken for granted that logic itself was a key to universal truth, that logic might be in some way more than just a method inherently constrained to particular areas of pertinence. Petitot (1986: 994), though discussing semiotics in general, and therefore without addressing our subject of interest in particular, nevertheless explains, in Kantian terms, the precise nature of this metaphysical obstacle, a fundamental limitation:

The epistemological obstacle brilliantly circumscribed in the Critique of Teleological Judgment (that is to say the impossibility of physically explaining morphogenesis, (self) organization and regulation) is still far from being resolved. [...] The difficulty is not so much experimental as theoretical. The facts are not lacking but the concepts are. It is only recently that in elementary (non-biological) cases, it has become possible to begin to explain how a physico-chemical
substratum can spontaneously self-organize, either temporally (oscillating chemical reactions), or spatio-temporally. [My emphasis]

Yet the origin of the phenomenon of the comic, as I will attempt to show, is in a meta position with respect to logic itself: whereas a comic event results from an incongruity, as numerous philosophers have observed, this incongruity is in fact not logical in nature, but rather, constitutes an incongruity between logic and a culture that has very little to do with logic at all. Semiotics is in this sense too serious, as it were, to be capable of an approach to comic literature. Kalinowski (1985: 156-57) explains this ontologically-based inadequacy:

Human beings think. [...] these cognitive powers are among other things capable of creating images, concepts and so forth. [...] This is so because human intellectual thought is immaterial, [...] and the immaterial, by its nature, is capable of repeatedly reproducing an identical structure. [...] we are in the presence of intensional objects [...] toward which the attention turns, or tends to turn, within the mind of any man. Certain of these objects [...] are purely intensional, the contents of a thought that has not been abstracted from any material fact, but constructed [...] in such a way that it is impossible to find the artefacts to which their essence corresponds. [...] Yet in order to develop an adequate semiotics, a semiotician must, on one hand, accept the existence of the external world and, on the other hand, successfully avoid confusing the real [material] object [...] with the intensional object.[...] Numerous indeed are those semioticians, alas! who do not make this distinction [...] in a sufficiently explicit and consistent manner. Even the greatest among them [...] leave themselves open to more or less serious criticism in this regard. [My translation]

Indeed, to lose on the one hand a sense of the real necessarily implies a loss of any appreciation of the immaterial, as Kalinowski points out throughout the study cited (1985). Semiotics, by throwing together in one single methodological grouping both the intensional and extensional functions of language, ignores the distinctions that must be made between the operations that can be observed in concrete systems and those that exist in the imagination, which, according to Dilthey (1910/1988) are structured solely by the free will. Taken in the narrowly limiting perspective
Kalinowski criticizes, the discursive imagination is somehow supposed to obey the objective logic that governs physical reality. Yet for our purposes, semiotics must be able to ask the question of the semantics of structuralism, [...] whose relationship with the anthropological unconscious must first be identified. (Benoist, 1975: 127).

Indeed, in light of Kalinowski analysis, the consequence of this loss of sight of both the real and the immaterial explains why semiotics fails to recognize the fundamental distinction between signification and denotation, the former meaning the function by which a sign stands for a thought, the latter that by which a sign stands for an actual object. This explains in part the regrettable practice according to which the “semiotic square” is considered as a representation of the fundamental structure of signification, whereas more precisely it only represents a possible fundamental syntax of designation, because it explains the way in which perception differentiates between signs for real objects having either a material or accidental existence, the latter being those having immaterial properties that can be abstracted from the physical properties of real objects. In fact, the semiotic square is often of little or no relevance to signification itself, as differentiation between percepts arises from entirely concrete matters; one need only consider, as did Greimas, the phoneme, the distinct sound or set of sounds required to differentiate meaning in spoken utterances. Its logic is a

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4 A definition explained by Kalinowski (1985: 25), but which he points out indirectly should be attributed to Thomas Aquinas (see the *Summa theologiae* in particular).

5 We will see later on that the mental abstraction of a material property does not confer onto it the ontological status of a signification when the abstraction in question is constrained by concrete facts.

6 *Sémantique structurale*, beginning, Greimas makes a leap of faith from the way phoneme pairs mutually and relatively define one another, to a theory of the “interdefinition” of everything that can be known.
direct consequence of the physical nature of language, and whose perceptibility depends on the anatomy of the ear and mouth, and on the physical characteristics of sound – while at the immaterial level of the concept, on the contrary, differentiation becomes a subjective issue, perhaps even devoid of meaning, as the distinctions that can be made between concepts are simply those seen as pertinent, not as necessary.

An example might prove helpful here – for this immaterial fluidity can be manifested in two ways: the representation of a single state of affairs by multiple concepts, and that of multiple states of affairs by a single concept. Is there a material difference between an illegal coup d’état and a revolution? The same phenomenon is perceived according to one concept or another depending on the judgment one finds it pertinent to associate with the event, whether “treachery” or “liberation.”

The concept of jealousy, on the other hand, represents two quite distinct phenomena: that examined by Greimas and Fontanille (1991) in their *Sémiotique des passions* is defined as a dysphoric rivalry over an object desired by two subjects; yet in another very different sense, I observe a form of jealousy whose origins are actually “euphoric” and which belongs to the class of vicarious pleasures: the situation in which a subject feels, by virtue of an empathy provoked by the observation of another’s positive emotion, a pleasure that is sufficiently palpable that its very vicariousness becomes undesirable, rendering it bittersweet. The linguistic and conceptual representation of these two distinct phenomena is nevertheless one and the same, for pragmatic reasons: because the former cannot arise unless a “rival” first experiences the latter despite their mutual opposition. Yet the reverse is not true. So, to speak of some kind of sensory or otherwise given differentiation between concepts
is, as Kalinowski might describe it, to confuse the meaning of the material and the immaterial, as thought is entirely fluid.

If the semiotic square therefore applies to the way in which we distinguish between types of denotation, what can be said about the elementary structure of signification? Here it will be helpful to distinguish between two meanings of this term: signification as the conceptual sense of a sign is distinct from the act or process by which the former is communicated. As to the first of the two meanings, I would say that there exists no elementary structure – or more exactly, that all significations are elementary because each represents a single and whole paradigm. This position appears reasonable to me, since the signification of a proposition is perceived as a Gestalt, in such a way that wherever the mind perceives the possibility of reducing a paradigmatic abstraction into analytical components, it can now be represented by a grouping of two or more significations that are \textit{a priori} irreducible.

Regarding the second meaning of the term “signification,” the process by which a signification of the first kind is communicated, one cannot consider the process, in my opinion, without taking into account an intersubjective operation: since the act of signifying is to “point out” a concept (or more generally a “representation” in good philosophic usage) one cannot neglect to consider this act in terms of two minds – despite the fact that one or the other can sometimes appear as a virtual participant, in other words an apostrophe destined for a sentient being who is not present or not represented. Perron and Danesi (1996: 14) develop a model that explains, in terms of Greimassian thought, a part of this process. One must note that
these researchers are merely describing a semiotic account of the generative process of communication as seen by Greimas:

[We can discern in Greimas...] a model of cognition having three fundamental levels: (1) a deep structure where figurative models [abstracted] from experience are forged into elemental units of meaning (the hypothesis of figurativity); at this level the events perceived are grouped into actants; (2) the next level of the generative process transforms these elemental units or "sema" into narrative units and situates them into a narrative grammar corresponding to contextual stimuli (the hypothesis of contextuality); the actantial roles are formed here at specific moments in the process and the form of cognition at work here is narrative; (3) a surface structure where actantial roles are converted into discursive units and structures and where these surface elements are actualized or narrated. One will notice that this model has been constructed on the basis of Greimas’ writings and does not explicitly appear in his writings, but attempts to grasp the dynamics of the relationship between experience and cognition. [My translation]

This model contributes significantly to our analysis, even if, because it constitutes part of a study of Greimas, certain problems arising from Greimas’ non-ontological and non-philosophical perspective remain intact: the lack of discussion of the nature and meaning of the socio-cultural structures that generate the elemental units of meaning, the lack of distinction between constructed and abstracted notions, and the failure to deal with the consequences of the immateriality of thought, on the one hand, and the material nature of the surface structures of communication, on the other.

The preceding hypothesis nevertheless identifies a relevant hierarchy, and furnishes the core of a paradigm which, with the help of Kalinowski’s thought, seems capable of describing signification as an act. In order to develop such a protocol, we will need, in the first place, to separate the processes of production and interpretation, and next, to recognize the necessary precondition that is the sharing of a minimal common cultural heritage by the two intelligent communicating beings. Culture, after all, as I have said after the fashion of Jean-Marie Benoist and Claude
Lévi-Strauss, is the very stuff that constitutes the deep structures we signify in communicating, and what determines their structural semantics, and in so doing shapes all anthropomorphic context. I would therefore propose the following as a hypothetical model of the process of signification.

(A) the Generative Process: (1) the perception or imagination of a material state of affairs; (2) the projection, onto the given state of affairs, of figurative and intensional archetypes (this step invests the “anthropomorphic unconscious” into the imagined situation by constructing a narrative semantic structure and syntax on the basis of an acculturated narrativity whose constitutive elements are indirectly the very subject of this book); (3) the fusion of this material and now socio-cultural, mixed state of affairs into a *Gestalt* by means of an operation of synthesis engaging both the conscious and unconscious; (4) the generation of a discursive representation of this mixed Gestalt (a semiotized state of affairs), by means of a denotative strategy, but which nevertheless includes the lexical figurativisation of intensions or concepts; this occurs through the desynchronization of semantic units into a series of syntactically and temporally linked surface structures, followed by (5) the concretisation (the oral or written enunciation) of this temporalized proposition, into phonetic or written semantic units.

(B) The Interpretative Process: (1) the reception and decoding of the proposition communicated in (A) through a linguistic code involving syntactic and semantic conventions, but based upon strategies of denotation; (2) the synchronization of the communicated structures by both syntactical and semantic
This procedure, normally present only in the receptive process, can nevertheless be present in the generative process when the latter takes on a literary character: when one denotes a state of affairs whose semiotization is merely a reflection of what one is thinking about, one generates a deliberately metaphorical language – a procedure which must not be confused with that in the receptive process, which is always multiple.
of a number of these analogically constructed interpretations by means of a faculty of judgment that is both unconscious and conceptual; (9) the selection of one or more “favoured” interpretations that the listener believes to be what the speaker is thinking about and wanted to evoke.

This analytical protocol seems to account appropriately for the ambiguity or hermeneutic multiplicity of communication, for the metaphor, for the “analytically true” lie, and of all anthropological dimensions involved in signification. I am satisfied it corresponds even more closely to the culturally inclined explanation Perron and Danesi (1996: 13) offer in illustration of their Greimassian model:

For Greimassian semiotics [...] generalized narrativity is considered the organizing principle of all discourse, and the narrative structures are what constitutes the deep structure of the semantic process. Indeed Petitot (1985) convincingly maintains that the narrative structures are experienced existentially through passions, ideologies [...] and dreams, and that such semio-narrative structures, to borrow a phrase from Gilbert Durand (1963), can be considered “the anthropological structures of the imagination.” [My translation]

This mention of anthropological narrativity by so many researchers suggests that even neo-Greimassian approaches to the cognition of communication share with Kalinowski some form of recognition of the very ontological inadequacies he criticized, insofar as there is now widespread recognition that the improvement and completion of semiotics will require the addition of a veritably anthropological dimension.

Perron and Debbèche (1996) direct our attention very pertinently toward what might be considered a possible philosophical vision of the analytical protocol of signification I have described above. this is Jean-Paul Sartre’s La nausée (1958). Here I am suggesting that it is possible to take the following passage figuratively; and in this
way, I see in it a metaphorical description of my interpretation of the process of signification: “According to Roquentin, the existential subject ‘[...] is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his stories and those of others, he sees what happens to him through them; and he seeks to live his life as if he were narrating it.” Here I recognize not only a description of spatio-temporal discursive processes, but also a metonymic portrait, as it were, of the step of “donation of sense” (steps A2 and B3) which “tells stories” and in so doing adds, by projection, an archetypical and intensional dimension, in order to create a conceptual intension that is valorized, semiotised and nearly impressionistic – with the whole process incorporated into imagined Gestalten.

The analytical protocol for signification as a process that I have just described, in which a more or less unequivocal generative procedure differs from the inherently plural receptive processes – in fact recalls George Steiner’s interpretation of the same communicative event. In particular, Steiner (1975: 172-3) mentions a phenomenon I attempted to describe as the unity, within a single deep semantics, of the intensional structures used to signify and the structures of culture, which, as anthropology itself suggests, generates the meanings associated with kinship and identity: “We normally use a shorthand [during the communicative process] beneath which there lies a wealth of subconscious, deliberately concealed or declared associations so extensive and intricate that they probably equal the sum and uniqueness of our status as an individual person.” In other words this “wealth of associations” must constitute, because it is what permits the construction of meaning and individual identity, constitute both the narrative and the anthropomorphic structures of the imagination. These in turn are none other than the set of archetypical intensions evoked in
simplified form by Jung, and in a slightly different context by Kalinowski (1985) and Martin (1963).

According to Jung, (1917: § 276) the subconscious archetypes participate in the manner I have described in the interpretation of meaning, and correspond to what semiotics describes as the anthropomorphic function of narrative structures: “Archetypes [...] are the necessary a priori determinants for all psychic processes. [...] Just as conscious apprehension gives our actions form and direction, so unconscious apprehension through the archetype determines the form and direction of instinct.” What strikes me as quite relevant here is that the archetypes Jung identifies, although they are instinctive, are a collage of what Kalinowski calls “constructed” and “abstracted” concepts and therefore constitute, because of the manner in which they can be projected onto imagined states of affairs, intensional objects. Remarkably, what Jung is saying is that man responds instinctively to symbolic images.

As Speze-Voigt (1987) observes, this vision of semiotics would seem to confirm the importance of the relationship between culture and identity: “Signs are themselves a form of social knowledge that has been generalized to the highest degree. Arms and insignia for example are emblemsatically related to the entire structure of society.” Thus signs, while they ordinarily denote concrete objects and physical persons, signify immaterial structures at the same time. These immaterial or conceptual structures, by their very nature, are inseparable both from the socio-cultural structures that define them, and from a mechanics of valences that constitute the deep syntax of these nuclear semantic elements. This will lead us shortly to
examine the intensional semantics, a subjective and therefore cultural metalogic, developed by Martin.

Here the significance of this unification of culture, archetype and signification shows its first methodological consequence: we must now recognize the ontological dimensions, the inherent dualism, of the famed semiotic “square of veridiction” which opposes, in relations I would term partly logical, partly topological, the modalities of “being” and “seeming.” The significance of this tool, in my opinion, arises from the interoceptive character of “seeming,” which, far from constituting properties of a being, are in fact nothing more than a class of intensional objects projected onto beings within, and by, the imagination.

Once again, this difference of interpretation can be attributed to a successful and appropriate evolution from a monochrome “semiotics of designation” to a mixed

![Semiotic square of veridiction](image)

**Figure 0.1:** Semiotic square of veridiction, in which a proposition $P$ is analyzed as a function of the designation $\rho$ and the signification $\pi$. 
“semiotics of signification and denotation.” The result of this development is that the most generalized form of our semiotic square would no longer oppose being and seeming, but *material being* and *intensional being*. Its utility would therefore be to compare a concrete state of affairs usefully with an immaterial one that is not only represented (imagined) but semiotized (conceptualized and judged). The semiotic square of veridiction would thus be a particular case whose function is to represent a *proposition* (in the logical sense) according to the relationship between those concrete things *denoted* by it and those cultural things it *signifies*.

As we can see in Figure 0.1, this perspective of veridiction proves less ambiguous than that of Greimas, who sees the lie defined according to the indices not being and seeming. The problem with this view is the confusion of the sign and its referent: can a state of affairs *per se* be false, secret or lying? My modified interpretation of his semiotic square, which is ontologically two-dimensional, appears to represent the relevant concepts in a clearer manner and permits a more rigorous analysis. Pyrite, for example, even if it resembles gold, does not constitute in itself a lie. To claim that it is gold, however, is indeed to lie: any proposition $P$ that designates a mass of pyrite ($\neg p$) by the name of gold ($p$), signifying that it possesses the enormous subjective value of an object of gold, is false:

$$ (1.1) \quad \vdash P \vDash (\neg p \land \pi) \supset L $$

where $L = « lie ». In sum, if the Greimassian square of veridiction takes as its object a perceptible (existing) object, my adaptation of this tool focusses on a *linguistic enunciation* and takes into account its relationship with each of the possible veridictory realities and which arises, through a realistic and existential ontology, from the
simultaneity of the functions of denotation and signification.\textsuperscript{8} Language would therefore be the only existing object whose analysis by a semiotic square co-exists in the material and imaginary realms and in so doing addresses both denotation and signification – this is the peculiar status of language, and the origin of Kalinowski’s observation (1985:76) that a “balanced” point of view (accepting both the denoted and signified) is crucial for research to apprehend all of language’s functions.

This interpretation of the semiotic square implies that surface structures are material, whereas deep structures are intensional and thus conceptual. One will note that this differs from Greimas’ understanding, in that he situated the deep structures “the immanent” according to a spatio-temporal logic, that of anteriority (\textit{propter hoc, ergo post hoc}).

Such a change in semiotic perspective as I propose is necessarily accompanied by a modified interpretation of the actantial schema. Indeed, one could say that the Greimassian methodology is a generative process that entirely eschews any semantic dimension, in such a way that its models attempt only an account of syntax according to an objective logic: “The consideration of an actant disrobed of its psychological cloak and defined purely by its deeds is the \textit{sine qua non} condition of the development of a semiotics of action.”\textsuperscript{9} Nevertheless the analytical separation of semantics and syntax is relevant only in the realm of the concrete. Yet the deep structures of communication, because they are acculturated cultural concepts (though perhaps built

\textsuperscript{8} Here we assume that any proposition, in the logical sense, claims to be a true affirmation of a designated state of affairs \textit{and} of the socio-cultural values it signifies; negation would be the case in which both are false with respect to the affirmation.

\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Sémiotique des passions}, p.8. [My translation].
upon in-born Jungian archetypes in many cases), can only be apprehended when one considers the elemental units of communication in light of the question of a “semantics of structurality,” to borrow a phrase from Benoist once again. In fact this idea was suggested by Dilthey (1988: 12), who was the first to analyse thoroughly and explain meaningfully the scientific consequences of the Platonic ontological distinction between $\phi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$ and $\tau\epsilon\chi\upnu\epsilon$:

In the natural sciences, the laws of transformations reign supreme, yet in the sciences of the mind, what dominates is the apprehension of individuality, rising from the single person to the individual “humanity,” and the comparative methodology, which aims to bring conceptual order to this individual diversity. [My translation]

This reflection, which heralds the structuralist approach that would later be championed by Lévi-Strauss, suggests to me the anthropological dimensions of our subject, viz. the problem of the comic and its relation to the structure of comedy, requires a method that does not eschew all consideration of the mind in the way Greimas does; for our purposes we must focus directly upon the socio-cultural imagination in order to have any possibility of apprehending what is happening in the comical social situations our theatre corpus provides in a seemingly endless repeating repertoire of archetypes based on individual identity and its very apprehension by spectator and character alike. As a consequence of this different focus, I will attempt to develop actantial models that differ considerably from those of Greimas. For me, axiomatisation, although a necessary process in the generalization of empirical scientific observations, should not lead to a refusal to consider the mind.

As Gilles Thérien explains (1995: 161) such a restricted point of view would limit us to a single dimension of language, and would not permit us to apprehend the
structures of signification, because it would content itself with seeking them in surface structures, under the reckless assumption they are homologous to the deep structures:

When reason is directed toward the comprehension of mechanisms, and the will turned toward the action it holds or expresses, the imagination fills the rest of existence either by providing a “reduced” paradigm, which alienates, or by creating the freedom necessary for the expression of the subject and his subjectivity. The unconscious is not structured like a language [...] It is in the fecund crossing of memory and imagination that the images we make language from are produced.

I feel I need not hesitate to abandon those dated, rigidly mechanistic approaches to language cognition that focus on the syntax of surface structures, and allow myself the liberty of including within the actantial schema (whose function in my opinion is to explain the dynamics of the mixed, natural and cultural, state of affairs that generate the dynamics of the comedic plot) each and every intensional object I observe in the identities of the actants through characters.

To justify my acknowledgement of this “soul,” this “ghost in the machine,” it will suffice to recall the Dilthey’s rigorous analysis of the human cognitive operations, which progress from simple logical operations to subjective discursive ones. This analysis explains how Thérien’s statement is true – the way in which the mind, even while wilfully constraining itself to “logical” thinking, ends up considering, through memory and imagination, subjective, culture-dependent and imaginary values. First let us look at Dilthey’s rational operations (1910/1988: 77) while recalling that he considered them not to constitute discursive thought, since they are contingent on properties of material being, the “given”:

I begin with the operation of comparison. I identify, I differentiate, I establish degrees of difference. In front of me are two little pieces of paper of differing shades of grey. One can perceive a difference and a degree of difference in their
colour, not through reflection about the given, but as a simple fact. This operation [...] which arises from pure logic, is simple.

Dilthey also recognizes (ibid, p. 78) a mental participation in the next operation, *differentiation*, even if this second one is equally contingent on physical reality:

Identity and difference are not properties of things, like size or colour. They arise when the mind carries into its consciousness those relations that are contained in the given. In the sense that the act of comparison and that of differentiating are found only to apply to that which is given, such as the physical properties of size or colour, they are an *analogon* of the very act of perception: but as they create logical concepts and relations, such as identity, difference and degree, which are certainly contained in perception, but not given in them, they belong to thought.

And then *separation*, again being determined by physically given states of affairs, but belonging to the mind:

On the basis of the intellectual operation of comparison, there arises a new operation. For when I *separate* two states of affairs, what goes on, from a logical point of view (these are not at all psychological processes yet) is distinct from differentiation. In the given, two states of affairs are external to each other; I seize their exteriority [...] In another kind of separation, it is a second relation that is apprehended. On a green leaf, I can distinguish colour and shape from each other, and in so doing things which belong jointly to the object and cannot physically be separated are revealed nevertheless to be mentally separable. [Yet] even while the necessary conditions for the cognition of this operation of separation are complex, the operation itself is simple. And, like comparison, it is determined by the content of the thing it allows us to apprehend.

I remark that even here in the pre-discursive purely logical operations, the mind has already begun to surpass physical reality, and in so doing, displays the freedom and fluidity of thought, which is *not constrained* by physical laws but by the will. The fourth operation, *abstraction*, is equally a mental function of the “logical mind” and remains for this reason subjugated to the nature of the given, even if it can be motivated or influenced by the “cultural mind” or the imagination (ibid., p.78):

[...] here we conceive of the process of abstraction, along with its importance for the edification of logic. The separation of the members of a body touches on the concrete reality of that body; this concrete reality remains present in each of its parts; but if size and colour are separated from one another and if thought turns
solely toward colour, then there arises, from this separation, the intellectual operation of abstraction: through what is thus deconstructed, one aspect is focussed upon on its own.

Finally Dilthey introduces the last of the cognitive operations that deals with the contents of physical reality; we cannot fail to notice however that this operation, synthesis, can also be effected on objects created by the imagination, even if it finds its origins in objective reason:

The synthesis of the plurality [of properties] thus separated can only be achieved on the basis of a relation between these various isolated elements. We perceive the spatial orientation of separate realities, or the intervals separating processes as they succeed each other in time. Even this sort of placement into relations brings to the consciousness nothing more than the realities that in fact take place. But this is done by means of cognitive operations based on relations like those that arise in space and time, whether acting or being acted upon. [...] The act of grouping elements together produces the logical relation of the whole with its parts. On the basis of the relations between things thus separated, and on the gradation of differences between the relations contained in the musical tonal system, there arises, from the synthesis of sounds, something which is thus conditioned, but which is nevertheless produced only in that synthesis – harmony or melody. We see here [...] the workings of synthesis, which deals with that which is contained in life experience through perception and memory, and how in spite of this there arises something that would not exist without such syntheses. Here we meet the threshold beyond which begins the domain of free imagination.

This is an excellent analysis of the elements of rational cognition, ending with an explanation of the occurrence of the abstract concept. I would like to point out how much this account, which covers only the first of the two classes of operation Dilthey identified, already surpasses the Greimassian semiotic square (a comparison of two abstractions) as a model of the “knowability” (Greimas, 1990) of signs and what they denote; Dilthey’s system is not limited to just one structure and allows an infinity of combinations of operations participating in knowledge to be considered.
Nevertheless, for argument’s sake, let us briefly examine the way in which these operations, which are contingent only on the nature of the material given, suffice, because they attain the frontier between reason and the imagination, to explain the beginnings of a *metalogical* functioning of the mind. First, since memory is shown to be capable of operating syntheses that are ranked according to emotional impact and according to criteria that are external to the intellectual operations by which they are apprehended, there arises the possibility of “subjective” memories whose recall would thus be divorced from objective reason; second, because the brain is capable of operating a synthesis of a *selection* of properties capable of excluding certain others for reasons that have nothing to do with the nature of the states of affairs perceived, such that we arrive at the possibility of the advent of a *subjective synthesis of given attributes*.

It is thus not very difficult to imagine how cultural institutions, as objects of the imagination, might be liberated from the constraints of purely rational laws, and could be fashioned, consequently, by the synthesis of both positional (logical) and relational (topological) structures – a fact which already justifies the application of a structuralist approach, or even post-structuralist and phenomenological ones, or in other words, a transcendental empiricism.10

Dilthey, however (1910: 79), as the complexity of the subject would suggest, considers these elementary intellectual operations to constitute only a part of discursive thought, which surpasses them: These examples there is no need here to add any more demonstrates the following: these elementary intellectual operations elucidate the given. A prelude to discursive cognition, they nevertheless include the

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10 See Apel (1984) and his *trzendentl-pragmaticcher Sicht*, which, as Wismann points out (1986) seems to have been inspired at least in part by the ontological investigations concluded by Dilthey.
rudiments of discourse [...]. Thus an internal link of foundation conducts elementary intellectual operations that attain the level of discursive thought, from the apprehension of what is present in objects to the judgments one makes upon them. In my view it is significant that Dilthey attributes an imaginary origin to discursive thought, in which the free mobility of representations is limited only by the intention of corresponding to reality. In discursive thought, already, time and memory liberate apprehension from any dependence with respect to the given and effect a selection of what is important for apprehension.\textsuperscript{11} Later, in his \textit{geistige Welt} or mental world, Dilthey advances the concept of the interactive ensemble, perceiving in a new way the way in which structured social institutions constitute culture itself, by means of a mental dialogue for we are now no longer dealing merely with the correspondence between thought and reality, but between the thoughts of one person and those of another, and by extension, between an individual thoughts and those of society in short, we see the establishment of criteria for another reality that supplements the physical universe by giving it an anthropomorphic order. Dilthey ultimately explains (1988: 106-9), for the first time, the origins of the intensional object, and in so doing, a community-wide culture composed entirely of these intensions and their objectifications; and very interestingly to me, he even evokes, while illustrating the nature of signification, the way this process occurs in comedy:

This interactive ensemble can be distinguished from causal relationships by producing \textit{values}, on the basis of the structures of mental life, and by creating \textit{goals}. And this is not an accidental determination [...] but [determined] precisely [by] the structure of the mind in its interactive ensemble to produce [...] and that which it produces is determined by [...] mental states expressing themselves [...] Within the

\textsuperscript{11} Cf. the reference Thérien makes to “memory and imagination” cited above.
structural whole there arises, among other things, the way in which each mental entity is centered on itself. Here, the apprehension of reality and the production of values form a whole. [...] If we read one a comedy by Shakespeare, the elements constituting an event [...] are raised [...] to a unity that [...] makes them depart from the course of the action and relates the parts into a whole.

Even if his terminology might be perceived as archaic by today’s standards, Dilthey quite rightly recognizes that culture is constituted by a grouping of general intensional objects.

A modern logician comes to the support of this conclusion: in his Intension and Decision, Richard Martin (1963: 3) stresses the need for logic that is both intensional and extensional, in terms that seem to foresee the way in which Kalinowski would later identify the inadequacies of any non-philosophical semiotics:

Mathematicians who have concerned themselves with semantical matters have not, on the whole, it would seem, been interested in matters of ontology. Fundamental questions concerning what objects there actually are or are not somehow fail to attract them. The [...] mathematician focusses primarily upon mathematical structure, and [...] he] is satisfied so long as he has some entities or objects [...] to work with, and he does not inquire into their inner character or ontological status.

The philosophical logician, on the other hand, is more sensitive to matters of ontology and will be especially interested in the kind or kinds of entities there are actually. Likewise he will be concerned with the kind or kinds of entities needed for some given, scientific, methodological, or philosophical purpose. He will not be satisfied with being told merely that such and such entities exhibit such and such a mathematical structure. He will wish to inquire more deeply into [...] how they are known [...] in experience, what role they play with knowledge generally, and so on.

I see in this particularly well-thought out passage a description of the limits of current semiotics, which, as I have already suggested, leans almost entirely toward the syntax of designation. As Kalinowski points out, language always refers to designata and significata, of which the latter are intensional. What is needed here is not only an analysis of the epistemological differences between these two types of referent but
especially, a study of the ontological status of the many different sorts of intension.

Martin underlines the importance of this (1963: vii):

We now know a good deal about denotational semantics, thanks to the works of Carnap, Kotarbinski, Tarski, and others. In a sense, denotational semantics may now be regarded as a completed body of theory. The study of intensions, however, is in its infancy, and although valuable progress has been made, no fully satisfactory semantical theory of intensions seems yet to have been formulated.

In traditional logic and in most modern theories, a term is regarded as having one and only one intension just as it is regarded as having one and only one extension or designatum. This traditional point of view obscures the fact that there are many different kinds of intensions to be discriminated carefully from one another. Traditional theories have failed to make such discrimination in part because they provide no clear condition under which two intensions differ or are the same.

The aim of his theoretical mathematical work is in fact to develop a methodology for the treatment of the ontological distinctions between the various sorts of intension, of which each class is governed by its own metalogic by virtue of being ontologically distinct from the others. In other words, Martin (1963: 6) has developed a many-sorted language of intensions:

Many-sorted languages are especially convenient if one wishes to be as clear and economical as possible concerning the underlying ontology. The many sorts of objects dealt with are explicitly enumerated as the ranges of different variables. One is not then tempted to include in the enumeration more sorts than are actually needed. On the other hand, if one collects all of one's entities together indiscriminately, one is less tempted to keep the different sorts separate, is more liable to gloss over important differences, and perhaps to admit more of them than are needed or actually exist. The logical analyst, with a robust sense of what actually is, will welcome the restraints which the use of many-sorted languages naturally imposes upon him.

It is particularly clear that a semiotic science must avoid both the pitfalls of a neo-positivist bias and those of an overly idealistic ontological approach. There is no need to examine here in great detail the examples that Dilthey cites in illustration of
the interactions between the different types of cognition in the evolution of culture: while these examples arise from a reflection on the science of history, for our purposes it will be sufficient to imitate him in a philosophical approach that excludes, to borrow once again from Kalinowski terminology, neither the material nor the immaterial, and which aims at a balanced treatment of the two classes of referent invoked by the texts we will examine: denotations and significations. These
constitute, from an anthropological standpoint, the two poles of the spectrum between cultural objects and their objectifications, on the one hand, and between the given and its perception, on the other in short, an awareness of nature and culture.

It is in this pragmatic-transcendental epistemological perspective that we will examine the way in which the actantial is apprehended, not only in terms of Greimas methods, but in such a light that recognizes in any human topos the objectification of a cultural concept, or a figurativized intensional object whose functionality will not be reduced to the dimensions of its resemblance to physical reality but which shall be considered according to its native metalogic, which arises from an evolutionary process in which many intellectual operations have occurred, as Dilthey explained abstractions, judgments, syntheses and which result in a range of objects whose ontological functioning is different from that of the others, going from “the natural” to the entirely cultural.

It will prove useful to stop and examine, at this point, the example of the actant Dorante from the comedy Les Fausses confidences by Marivaux. An analysis according to which the youthful hero is simply a subject because his semiotic doing is motivated by his attraction toward the heroine Araminte is too epistemological to be of any use to me here, because in its formation there was too little communication between an unknowingly positivist ontology and the mixed being that is humankind.

I interpret the actantial status of the character (while recalling the Kantian sense of the transcendental subject that generates the model) as the apprehension of a conscious intentionality (which is transcendental because it transcends the structures it apprehends) onto which an entire gamut of intensional objects is projected, and in
which the ontological status of each depends on its position in the Nature-Culture axis. These intensional objects, once associated with the idea of a conscious intentionality by means of a synthesis, constitutes the identity of the actant. Figure 0.2 illustrates four interdependent but ontologically distinct levels in the identity of the comedic hero Dorante: taking DaVinci’s ideal Man at the centre to stand for the idea of the physical, material given that is a man, one can view him as being clothed in a number of cultural identities - all cognitive syntheses, as these identities are intensions which nevertheless have the epistemological status of the ontologically distinct entities that generated them (cf. Martin, above). *Orphelin* (orphan): a synthesis of abstractions of a material state of affairs (Dorante’s biological parents are dead, leaving him without paternal support, and little money) which nevertheless has certain cultural consequences (he needs a senior member of the family to take charge of his affairs).12 *Célibataire* (bachelor: a synthesis of cultural status traits – legally recognized as having no spouse – and natural traits (no sexual/emotional/conjugal partner is present in his home). *Bourgeois*: member of a social class (a synthesis of entirely imagined socio-cultural constructions which are nevertheless concretely expressed language, clothing, possessions etc).

Clearly these identities are present in the text insofar as they constitute the signifieds of utterances which, among others, have the more obvious function of denoting the person of the character himself. The important thing is to grasp the metalogic governing the relationship of the actant (a functional character) to other

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12 *Cf.* The “avuncular relation” described in Levi-Strauss, whose definition, according to the celebrated anthropologist, is purely topological; I accept that, but note in passing that this relationship, a synthesis, probably had natural and therefore positional dimensions originally, which L.-S. doesn’t see as relevant.
characters, according to that facet of his identity that is relevant to the relationship and to the situation. Indeed, it would be an error of an epistemological type to interact with one of these identity characteristics through the code, the structures, that belong to a different aspect of the character identity. In fact, according to my hypothesis, this would constitute the very type of error that provokes laughter provided that other socio-cultural conditions prevail simultaneously, as we shall see later, throughout this book.

An obvious example suggests itself here: Dorante uncle, Monsieur Remy, a lawyer, has the strange habit of viewing everything in terms of court proceedings indeed he sees all social interactions according to the institutions of his own career. What is in effect seen here is the Socratic paradigm of the ridiculous:

ε στιν δή πονηρία μέν τις τό κεφάλαιον, εξεώς τινος ἐπίκλην λεγομένης τῆς δ' αὖ πάσης πονηρίας ἐστὶ τούναντίον πα'θος ε χον ἕ το λεγόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν ἐν Δελφοῖς γραμμάτων. ἔγγυε τούναντίον μὴν ἐκείνῳ δήλον ὅτι τὸ μηδαμή γιγνώσκειν αὐτὸν λεγόμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ γράμματος ἀν εἰή

The ontologically-sensitive model I am attempting to develop appears to explain the nature and the syntax of this error, and suggests that Socrates’ very general statement might be honed and improved in accuracy if one were to increase its extension: when Mr Remy fails to attribute the appropriate valencies or functionalities to each of his own social roles according to their ontological and social status, it is because he is confusing his various metaphysical members with each other, resulting in the transmission of the error through the web of cultural structures he and the other characters inhabit. While reasoning with his nephew, an orphan and a bachelor, he reduces these social traits to a pure objective logic, which
forces the youth, for the sake of good manners, to recognize an epistemologically
poor vision of his own socio-cultural being: the Socratic error has further become a
form of ignorance of the other.

MR REMY. Good morning, my nephew; I am pleased to see that you are
punctual. Miss Marton has been sent for, and she is coming. Do you know her?
DORANTE. No, sir. Should I?
MR REMY. Well, on my way here, I was thinking... She is beautiful, isn’t she?
DORANTE. I heard she was.
MR REMY. And comes from a very fine family as well. It is I who took over her
late father’s practice; he was a very good friend of your father. A rather troubled
man; his daughter is left without income. The lady of this house wanted her here;
she likes her very much indeed, and treats her more like a friend than a member
of the household staff; she has been very kind to Miss Marton, and has even
offered a dowry to marry her. Marton also has an old asthmatic relative whose
estate she will inherit, and who is well off. You will be together in the same
house, and I am of the opinion that you should marry her. What do you think?
DORANTE, aside, smiling. Well, it wasn’t her I was thinking of...

[ as Marton enters.]
MR REMY. [...] Come forward, my nephew. Miss, your father and his liked each
other very much; why would the children not follow suit? Here is fine young lady;
a dear heart, so lovely in appearance.
DORANTE, embarrassed. I find no difficulty in believing it.
MR REMY. Look how he admires you! You would indeed not be such a bad
catch. [...] Well! Well! it must be! I shall not leave without having seen that it has
been agreed.
MARTON, laughing. I would be afraid we were being hasty.
DORANTE. You are embarrassing the young Miss, Sir.
MARTON, laughing. Yet I don’t seem disenchanted, do I?
MR REMY, delighted. Oh! I pleased, you are both in agreement. Well, my
children (he takes them both by the hand), I engage you to be married, until otherwise
informed. I must leave you; I I return shortly. I leave you with the duty to present
your future husband to your mistress. Goodbye, my niece. (Exit) [I,v: 38, my own
translations]

Thus the humour of a situation made awkward by the metaphysical
indiscretion of Mr Remy. He sees the socio-cultural identity of other persons
according to one and the same objective logic: like a case that calls for juridical
consideration of all its pragmatic modalities. This paradigm is repeated frequently.

So the reader can now begin to see the way in which this study aims at an
explanation of comedy in general through eighteenth-century French comedy, which
is examined in light of a theory of the comic situated within a semiotics adapted according to Kalinowski criteria. In particular, we shall be supplementing the linguistic structures considered to be at the basis of semiotics with more nuanced ones derived from an anthropological structuralism and guided by an existential philosophy. In other words, I will formally recognize the paradoxical status of language, a functionally complete semiotic system situated within, and beneath, a larger structural system. To borrow once again from Benoist, this means recognizing culture not only as a communicative realm, but in fact, as the arena of all communication.

Consequently, I will attempt to surpass the Greimassian perspective, which I view as non-ontological (in the sense that it makes no attempt to address the question of the existence of the referent) by recognizing, according to a realist and existential ontology, not only the existence of the referent, but of the general object, and, in distinguishing between denotation and signification, I will recognize the phenomenon of the intensional object, and further, despite any apparent logical contradiction, of the general intensional object whose justification lies in the existence of culture. So, just as classical semiotics examines denotation (regardless of its stated aims), we will attempt an semiotic analysis that also includes proper consideration of signification, and will acknowledge, in the sense that Levi-Strauss structural approach to kinship suggests, that the elements constituting the collective grammar and deep semantics can be grasped by means of the structural atoms I will term social identity, a term adopted after an empirical and speculative consideration of the entities at hand. For identity, which combines the unique and the universal, the ephemeral and the permanent, is nothing less than the sum of all modalities of intensional being. And as
we shall see, I hope, this class of noumena (that we nevertheless project onto the phenomenological event), because they are immaterial, skirt around concrete logic, generating instead their own transcendental grammar based upon both material logic and an entire gamut of socio-cultural metalogical conventions. I believe, in a sense running counter to certain aspects of contemporary semiotics, that this transcendental grammar or meta-logic is that which governs communication. Furthermore, in accordance with Chomsky’s intuitions (1987), which suggest that it is through errors that the key to a grammar can be unveiled, and in keeping with Socrates observation (Plato, 1929) according to which we can only understand that which is serious by knowing the ridiculous, I hope to unearth through the study of the comic, which results from a malfunctioning of this socio-cultural grammar, a certain number or new observations regarding its functioning, which, in my opinion, will ultimately prove crucial to the development of an adequate semiotics according to Kalinowski’s criteria.


13 Plato (Symposium, 223d) reports more precisely: [...] προσαναγκάζειν τὸν Σωκράτη ὁμολογεῖν αὐτοῦ τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀνήρ ἐίναι κωμῳδίαν καὶ τραγῳδίαν ἑπίστασθαι ποιεῖν, καὶ τὸν τέκνη τραγῳδοσιῶν ὑντα καὶ κωμῳδοσιὸν εἶναι. Here we paraphrase Sorrell’s free translation (1922: 3).
INTRODUCTION

The present work has the aim of explaining the comic in a corpus of French comedies, while seeking to understand the fundamental structure of this theatrical genre in terms of the analysis. My investigation is therefore empirical only in the following sense: the texts I have selected will furnish, in my view, a sufficient array of observations to permit a speculative method to be undertaken (and whose aim would thus be that of answering questions such as what is the nature of the comic entities or events observed) and consequently, to permit an explicative method to be built upon paradigms that suggest themselves in the speculative study. This explicative method would, I hope, lead to the identification and the interpretation of the anthropomorphic origins of such comic paradigms.

Indeed, such an endeavour would mean an investigation not only of the comedies chosen, but also an attempt at developing a working theory of comedy, and a theory of the comic, all the while adapting semiotics to these ends. It is this unholy trinity of inseparable principal objectives that explains why this book has taken its current form: the first part approaches the texts of the comedies I have chosen in light of my intuition of socio-cultural comic paradigms and attempts in so doing to identify their profound dynamics; the second part completes these observations and

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14 A corpus of which certain plays belonging to the “canon” of eighteenth century France has been chosen for a particular reason, although I myself became certain of it only later: these comedies represent in many senses the high-point of classical French comedy, an epoch during which the playwright finally possesses a more or less complete mastery of his structures – which facilitates our interpretative analysis while explaining how and why this theatrical genre, in its classical form, brought about its own demise through its success – for it is starting at this time that French comedy was obliged to surpass and break with its traditions, notably through theatricality, and other means of subverting the grammar of theatre culture.
axiomatizes them into a general theory of the dynamics of the comic event in general, through the theatrical comic event, using a form of intensional logic derived from Richard Martin philosophy; the third part will aim to draw general conclusions on the theory of the comic and on laughter, and subsequently on the poetics of the genre, and the implications of all our findings on anthropology and the human sciences.

In the first part, I attempt to explore the paradigmatic origins of the comic, which are described in rather intuitive (non-technical) terms such as quixotic and Blind Witness in order to facilitate comprehension among experts of other fields, as well as among undergraduate students of philosophy and literature. Nevertheless, as the work progresses and moves toward its second part, I will introduce a more scientific terminology intended not only to replace the more poetic nomenclature but to complement and complete it rigorously, such that the theoretical underpinnings of my approach will be essentially clear by the time I attempt to axiomatize and generalize in part two. If this practice lessens the formal logical perfection of the work as a whole, I find that it facilitates my rhetorical dispositio to such a degree that even the most difficult new concepts are, thanks to their gradual development, comprehensible to readers that have previously not been interested in the areas related to this study. I also hope that this organic development, however illogical it may seem, might even assist the most sceptical researchers to give the study the benefit of the doubt until such time as they are gently led, I hope, either to the frontiers of tolerance and acceptance, or even as far as acceptance and appreciation.

The first part of this work is therefore devoted to the study of the corpus. We begin with a comparison of the global structures of the Barber of Seville and Jean Bete a
la foire, both comedies by Beaumarchais. Following this we will investigate the fundamental structure of the Barber in such a way that it should reveal, despite being written in the 1760, with a number of relatively innovative nuances, a variation on the theme of the archetypical comedy that will allow us to discern many important general characteristics of the genre, from classical times to the present in fact. For the Barbier de Séville represents not only a near-perfect structural simplicity, as Jacques Scherer writes (1982); but further, it also demonstrates a fractal-like purity of self-reference in that there is no scene, no spoken line, whose comic effect is not a direct reflection of the global actantial structure of the play. This structure, elegantly, even minimalistically constructed, has an overall structure that lends itself without adaptation of any kind to the microscopic structures of the comic scenes or lazzi, the baroque imbroglio of games, tricks, errors and situation fortes whose apparent complexity, and inherent simplicity, recall a Beaumarchais whose watchmaker patience permits such a fine level of work. For this playwright, just as it is for Figaro, the difficulty of succeeding only increases the necessity of trying.  

Following this we will examine in detail the more vulgar Jean B e, which was also written, according to Scherer (1982), in the 1760. This parade, a light-hearted form of mini-comedy conceived especially for fairs, constitutes a sort of precursor to the Barber, in that it respects the exact actantial structures of the latter, but in spite of this, is in a sense also a form of variation on a theme of the more serious and archetypical four-act comedy: only half-respecting its own structural rules, it is revealed in semiotic analysis to parody the very structures that give rise to its form.

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15 Figaro, Act I, scene iv: to encourage the Count, as an “icon” of the author. I am grateful to the late Dr Pierre Bouillaguet (University of Toronto) for this observation.
and thus mocks itself. We will return to this observation later on. The principal interest of the fairground farce, at this point, is that it takes leave of the bienséances or etiquette of decency that govern and censor the legitimate theatre seen at the *Comédie-Française* a liberty that reveals the sexual character of the theatrical comic of this sub-genre at the time of the eighteenth century. As we will attempt to explain, the origins of laughter are, in part, very closely related to cultural taboos.

Next we will move along to the theatre of Marivaux. The third comedy we study will be *Les Fausses confidences*. I see this piece as one of the first legitimate comedies to move away from the traditional models of plot seen over the previous centuries – although it does so only after carefully preserving certain fundamental structural characteristics. For if I may respectfully disagree with Derrida (1967: 149-202) in stating my opinion that the incest taboo does not in fact constitute a seam where culture and nature find themselves stitched together, I believe we can observe such a material-immaterial junction in the case of love, a phenomenon whose natural-cultural ambiguity seems to have been seized upon by all good comic playwrights, at least in a subliminal fashion. How many comedies do we see in which love is not the materially gratuitous but culturally essential key to the plot genesis? If modern comedy, of which those of Marivaux constitute in a sense one of the first models, rejects the ordinary actantial structure crystallized around a nearly omnipotent obstacle-character (or barbon) and whose inflexibility is the very thing that necessitates the hero recourse to ruse, by basing its plot on other more subtle sufficient reasons justifying a pretext for the disguise that is so necessary to the comical esprit of this theatrical genre. We complete the first part with an enumeration of "empirical"
observations (in Kalinowski's sense) on the manner in which intentions participate in the comic event throughout our literary corpus.

In Part Two I make use of the quantitative pragmatics Richard Martin developed (1963); the aim of this American philosopher's seminal work *Intension and Decision* is to determine the theoretical foundations needed for the development of an *intensional logic*. Martin observed that modern logicians such as Carnap, Tarski and Kotarbinski devoted themselves entirely to the completion of designative or extensional logic, whereas the symbolic language Martin elaborates is intended, in contrast, to establish a language capable of expressing notions of intensional logic, and therefore responds neatly to our needs in this study.

We start the second part, however, with an examination of Aristotle's postulates for a demonstrative methodology, and with a serious look at the criteria that must be established, according to Martin (1963: 139) in the particular case of an intensional logic, in order to be able to apply his mathematical language to the results we harvest from our speculative inquiry. Thus we arrive at a way of succinctly expressing, in the extremely precise terms of Martin's concepts of acceptance and equating, the intensional disjunctions we observe in Part One. This procedure enables us to 'axiomatize' the comic disjunction in terms of a general expression, and to elaborate an explicative method for treating the comic one which takes into account the pragmatic, syntactical and semantic dimensions of this socio-cultural phenomenon. In this way I attempt to develop an explanation of the functioning of *disintension*, the epistemological consequence of the perception of the comic, which in essence consists in the disappearance of the former *acceptance* that legitimizes an intension. Then I develop what I hope constitutes a "periodic table of comic
disjunctions" that arranges all our observed comic paradigms from the various comedies according to their pragmatic modalities. We close the second part with a study of the semantic variables influencing an observer's reception of the comic disjunction.
I. FROM A SPECULATIVE STUDY TO AN EXPLICATIVE METHOD

*The Barber and Jean Bete: Global Structures*

In his excellent preface to a recent edition of the *Barber of Seville*, published together in one volume with the farcical "parade" *Jean Bête à la foire*, Jacques Scherer (1982: 10-17) points out numerous similarities between these very different comical plays, writing not only that the "long and complex genesis of the Barber passes through the genre of the parade" but also that "in different contexts, Jean Bete's problems are those of Almaviva." But how much can a classically structured comedy in four acts, one that enjoyed considerable success at the *Comédie-Française*, actually resemble a bawdy farce which "must, in view of its nature, remain confidential" and which hesitates "neither before the scatological nor before obscene allusions nor even before all manner of vulgarities?"

To answer this question we will attempt to apply, as a speculative method, an initial version of a transcendental semiotics, inspired by Kalinowski and Dilthey, as mentioned above. This of course will imply a methodology that investigates the meaning of action (the concrete doing and being) and at the same time an analysis of the intensional dimensions of the characters – which clothe them with social being, which in my view lies at the crux of semiotics. Indeed, the sum total of all comedies constitutes, in a sense, the various parts of an enormous “open text” whose function is to play with the socio-cultural institutions of the contemporary world, an art in which Beaumarchais clearly enjoyed a high level of mastery.
Without doubt, he possessed a very fine understanding, however subconscious, of the structure and functioning of comedy: an analysis of his comedies will show, I believe, that he knew how to exploit mechanisms which draw the spectator’s attention to the fragile intensional nature of the “social institutions” (in the anthropological sense) of identity, both that of the individual as well as those aspects of collective identity which binds the actants into multilateral units and which, by extension, constitute the general institutions of society such as the bourgeoisie and the medical profession.

We know incidentally that in this latter scientific community, an understanding of anatomy necessarily preceded that of physiology; in the same manner, it will be useful in this study of the way comedy functions to begin with a study of the form of the genre. Indeed, while Northrop Frye did not aim to make a contribution to the theory of comedy per se, his “anatomical” observations constitute in a sense for our subject matter what the lifelong project of Tycho Brahe brought to modern astronomy: the descriptive beginnings of a speculative method. In this way the Canadian literary scholar observes quite astutely in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) that the quintessential agon of comedy consists in a “struggle between the will of a son and that of his father.” This is the origin of the classification often attributed to Frye that the *dramatis personae* of a comedy comprise two societies, one of youth and another of the old.

For what reason, however, does the mere opposition of a young hero and an old man lend itself so well to the genesis of the comedic plot? The tragedy *Antigone* by Jean Anouilh, which is by no means comical, shows precisely the same struggle at the
origin of all action: a conflict between a young, idealistic heroine and her uncle King Creon, conservative defender of cultural norms.

It was Jacques Scherer (1982: 11) who wrote this superbly succinct description of the basic actantial structure of both of the plays by Beaumarchais we will examine:

Jean-Bête is summarized as follows: by means of various strategies, the hero, in love with Isabelle, succeeds in marrying her, despite her father’s opposition. The schema of The Barber is identical: Almaviva steals Rosine from her guardian, Bartholo.

We could nevertheless add that both these heros’ “strategies” find their origins in three peculiar circumstances that merit being pointed out: first, the obstacle-character’s hierarchical superiority means his struggle against the hero is necessarily unequal, a corollary of which is the impossibility, from the hero’s point of view, of waging an open, direct battle against his opponent; second, the opposing character not only possesses the advantage of superior status, but he also holds a second concrete advantage over the hero – because the actantial object, whether Rosine or Isabelle, starts out the plot within a space owned by the opponent, where she is more or less imprisoned; third, a point we shall return to, the “society of youth” has no choice other than to resort to a strategy of ruse. In fact the young characters enjoy two sources of cunning innovation: in a secondary sense, the lovers invent a number of feints (for instance Rosine pretends to drop her sheet music through the grille of her window – a jalousie or ‘jealousy’ – in order to get the old Doctor to leave her room); and, in a more significant manner, the hero’s adjutant becomes meneur de jeu or play-maker,

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1 A general observation on the grammar of the comedic genre: socio-cultural hierarchy is frequently seen to be subverted by the relative intellectual competence of roles, which reverses the former. The feminist critic will nevertheless note that this paradigm almost never, until Marivaux, includes female characters – except where comedy parodies the “war of the sexes” (cf. Aristophanes’ Lysistrata).
which itself is a source of humour, by authoring every sort of plan, principally disguises, that aim to disarm the superior power of the opponent.

Nevertheless it would be beneficial to the investigation to allow a parenthetical aside on the subject of the character of Almaviva. A Count, who possesses by virtue of his aristocratic rank and family fortune a clear form of superiority over the petit bourgeois Doctor Bartholo, this young hero in love need not fear his rival. Yet... why does Beaumarchais go out of his way to create a pretext, in the very first scene, to emasculate Almaviva’s power, if it is not to make possible, or even necessary, a decision to resort to the artifice of disguise?

THE COUNT, alone, in a heavy brown coat, his wide-brimmed hat casting a shadow over his face. [...] What for... why follow a woman to Seville, when Madrid and the Court offer such easy pleasures at every turn? – Well that’s exactly what I’m trying to escape. I’m tired of the easy conquests constantly brought to my doorstep by money, ambition and vanity. It is such a sweet thing to be loved for your true self; so, if this disguise serves the purpose I’m hoping it will... [I, i: 49]

This explains why Almaviva adopts the identity of Lindor, a modest young bachelor, and why he must, if he is to keep his wealth secret, stay within the confines of his new role, even when dealing with Bartholo – and thus the latter will enjoy all the advantages of the superiority his age and profession can confer. In the other play, the farcical Jean Bête à la Foire, such a modulation of the hero’s identity is not needed – Jean-Bete already possesses all the necessary disadvantages, such that the heros find themselves in precisely the same situation, as Scherer pointed out.

This actantial and structural similarity becomes more obvious upon examination of the “generative scenes” of each comedy. Especially noteworthy is the manner in which it is the “adjutant” valet, rather than the hero himself, who invents
and plans all of the cunning strategies his master, the actant subject, carries out. Let
us first look at the case of the Barber, specifically the scene in which Figaro begins to
hatch plans and act as “play-maker.” He has just informed Almaviva, his former
master whom he has run into by chance on the streets of Seville, that he is not only
Bartholo’s boarder, but also his barber and apothecary:

THE COUNT. Happy Figaro! You’re going to see my Rosine! Do you realize
how lucky you are?
FIGARO. Those are truly the words of a lover! Do I adore her, too? If only
you could take my place!
THE COUNT. Ah, if only we could get around all the household staff...
FIGARO. That’s what I was just thinking. [...] By busying people with their
own interests, you can prevent them from interfering with those of others.
THE COUNT. True. And so?
FIGARO. Well I’m just considering in my head whether my medicine cabinet
might offer a few innocent little ways... [...] They all use my services. I would
only have to treat them all at the same time.
THE COUNT. But the old doctor might get suspicious.
FIGARO. We’ll have to operate so fast that suspicion has no time to pop into
his mind. I’ve got an idea. The Royal Cavalry Regiment just arrived in this city.
THE COUNT. The Colonel is a friend of mine.
FIGARO. Good. Introduce yourself at the Doctor’s house dressed as a
horseman, with a billeting notice; he will have to house you; and me, I’ll take
care of the rest.
THE COUNT. Excellent!
FIGARO. It would be a good idea for you to act like you’ve had a few drinks.
[...] and act a bit wacky, in this inebriated appearance.
THE COUNT. What for?
FIGARO. Just so he drops his guard, and assumes you’ll soon be in a hurry to
sleep, rather than scheming around his house. [I, iv: 65-6]

So we see, again, that it is Figaro who has recognized what must be done; he
understands that the precarious situation engendered by Bartholo’s “advantages”
create a need to turn his cunning mind to the invention of a ruse. We see the same
genesis of “strategies” in the farce Jean-Bete:

JEAN Bete, furious. No, better we would be to massacre the father, the
daughter, and Gilles, and all my every rivals, and further that I poison me
following this by virtue of a grand sword stroke up the backside of my soul!
ARLEQUIN. Ah! master, this vengeance there is merely vile and puerile. Death only too soon perhaps will come and sweep us away under six feet of dirt; let us not seek trouble, believe me. Disguise yourself, rather, as an Englishman, one who sells orvietan snake-oil antidote. I have a Turk disguise that will do just perfectly for that, and here we are in the time of the Fair, therefore we shall be able to find means to avenge us of this no-good Gilles, and it will be all the more easy since the mademoiselle Zirzabelle is here present, with the good gentleman her father our enemy. [ i: 181]

Here we may notice that not only is the valet the source of novel ideas, but it is he who, among other signs of leadership, possesses the concrete means, the essential equipment, that will be needed to carry out the plan to trick the obstacle character.

As we have now identified the essential features of the actantial stakes in both *The Barber of Seville* and *Jean Bete a la foire*, it might be of some utility to attempt to reconcile the basic structure found with the famous *actantial schema* developed by Greimas. One might do well to recall, however, while examining Figure 1.1, which represents a common variant of this semiotic tool, that Greimas (1986: 180) terms it a “mythical actantial schema,” meaning general. Which implies that there was likely no intention of applying this specific model to comedy. We see it very often, however, in Continental literary criticism, in various forms (Greimas first sketched it with the subject and object positions inverted with respect to the present table, and the arrows are often going in other directions – what do the arrows mean, in any case?)

The question is whether the unmindful application of this schema to comedy, offers anything at all useful to literary analysis. It is not difficult to find Proppian roles
for certain actants among those we are considering: in *The Barber*, Almaviva-Lindor is without doubt the subject actant, and Rosine is certainly the object of this love, while Bartholo can only be the opponent. Figaro would therefore be the adjutant (see Figure 1.2). But who is the sender? and where is the receiver? Is it Eros, who not only makes no appearance in either comedy, but furthermore is never mentioned, who “sends” Almaviva to Seville in pursuit of Rosine? Is the theatrical audience, who might be said to receive the benefits of the plot’s spectacle, the receiver?

Though the customary response to these questions is affirmative, one must recall nevertheless that such a convention amalgamates the mythical, comical and non-fictional dimensions into a single schema whose generality deprives analysis of the very rigour and clarity it purports to deliver.² Furthermore, the rigidity engendered by applying this "mythical schema" allows no place for the "adjutant to the opponent character" embodied by Gilles in the parody and by Bazile, L'Eveillé and La Jeunesse in the *Barber*. Lastly, this schema fails to show the spatial semantics that give the "barbon" a pragmatic advantage which, because of its intensional origins, shapes the entire profound structure of the plot: specifically, it omits consideration of Rosine’s confinement, which, like that of Isabelle in *Jean Bete*, constitutes a socio-cultural prohibition, and subjugates the heroine in each case, such that she must recognize and submit to the authority of the

² This is the very same ontological inadequacy I mentioned above – that which Kalinowski terms a "loss of the meaning of the real" and consequently, "of the meaning of the immaterial," which Martin, indirectly, describes as a difficulty that "obscures the fact that there are many different kinds of intension to be discriminated carefully from one another." (cit. supra)
male figure controlling the space she inhabits, as this figure is the legal owner and charge of the female person and her home.

One could even critique, in the traditional Continental European literary treatment we are considering, the lack of meaning of the schema's arrows which, ostensibly, should represent a vector function, signifying at each end the subject and object of a semiotic doing or wanting, at the very least. Each of the shortcomings described, moreover, applies equally well to Jean Bête à la foire, with one caveat: while in the Barber, scenic space is invested with meaning in such a way that the concrete spheres of influence of the protagonists are clear and obvious (the interior belonging to the Doctor and the exterior being the realm of the Count), the spatial figurativization of authority in the parody is subtler: here, it is in fact the presence or absence of the "bonhomme Cassandre," Isabelle's father, that represents, during every occasion in which Isabelle encounters her lover Jean Bete, the analogous "advantage in" or "advantage out," to borrow terminology from another type of game. One must conclude that if the "mythical schema" championed by Greimas has the ambition of offering the scholar a sort of actantial "table of the elements," the founder of the Paris School did not, let us hope, intend for it to be applied in a universal and ubiquitous manner to all literary genres.

If it is true, as Scherer writes, that "Jean Bete's problems are those of Almaviva," then this is because Jean Bete, like the Count, must delude a "Bonhomme Cassandre" to be able to enter into a space that is not his own, in violation of certain taboos a space invested with numerous intensional or cultural senses in order to investigate the object
of his love her body, in the case of Jean Bete, and her heart's intentions, in the case of Rosine. Figure 1.3 therefore illustrates a possible variation on the Greimassian actantial schema as it might correctly apply to the comedies we are looking at here. The advantages of such an adaptation over the previous, apparently widely-accepted, model, are numerous: the functional oppositions are illustrated clearly (in the parallel roles of Harlequin and Gilles, for instance and the direct rivalry between Jean Bete and Cassandre); in addition, the position of the actantial object, concretely located within the “cultural space” of the barbon or opponent, is clearly depicted. Here, arrows directly represent the principal object of the doing, the action. The same schema applies equally well to *The Barber* (see Figure 1.4). In the latter case, however, we see that there are three characters, namely L'Eveille, LaJeunesse and Bazile, who occupy the function of *adjutant to the opponent*; we will return to this matter in dealing with the ambiguous duality of the functions of the characters of Bazile and Figaro.

While the hero of each of these plays under analysis has established the immediate goal of gaining access to an interior space where his lover finds herself imprisoned, this desire is translated in the global plane as an aim, ostensibly at least, at marriage. But before entering into an analysis of this institution’s functions within these comedies, it is necessary to consider the purposes of this nuptial teleology. One of the most important of these is related to the concept of the *pointlessness of the opposition* characterised by the struggles of Bartholo and Cassandre. Indeed, *The Barber of Seville* is alternately entitled *The Useless Precaution*, and

![Figure 1.4: Simplified Actantial Structure of the Barber of Seville](image-url)
Harlequin describes Cassandre as “one who locks open doors” (i: 181).

Marriage is an anthropological institution (a cultural object, whether or not figurativised on stage, nevertheless constitutes an intensional being and as such, an identity according to our definition). Furthermore, it is susceptible to various comical relativisations, and serves to clothe or veil the gambit of sexuality – indeed it is this latter “natural reality” that tends to ‘relativise’ and thus ridicule the “cultural reality” represented by the nuptial institution. On the whole, this conjunction of mutually exclusive cultural and natural realities (which paradoxically co-exist in single states) is the basic mechanism of theatrical humour, which is founded upon what we might describe as disjunctions of intensional being, and as such, as disjunctions of social context.

If Frye (1957: 163), in describing the basic structure of comedy, has been able to discern that the obstacle character constitutes the nucleus of a society of elders, and that the hero crystallises a society of youth around himself, it is because this casting of roles lends itself so well to the mechanism of comic theatre: the elder characters, armed with all the benefits that their culture can offer (power, money, hierarchical position in family, social, professional structures, etc.) while conversely the youths probably have no access to these advantages – a social phenomenon that is frequently reflected both in modern European literature and in antiquity – for which group finds its natural place at the heart of idealism, of revolt, in short, at the centre of any and all discontent towards society – if not Youth?

Moreover, while the long succession of comic scenes in such plays is punctuated by as many instances in which social truths are compromised by natural truth, one must recognize that this rhythmically recurring structure also manifests itself on the global scale of the comedy as a whole: indeed, the comedic plot is nothing if not the story of the collapse of a society which cultural norms would rather have seen upheld by a
These antithetical terms are used here not because the so-called society of nature is without culture – it ‘inhabits’ the same cultural space as its adversaries – but rather, in order to reflect the ideological difference that separates them, and consequently, the ‘theological’ difference displayed by the youths: their constant struggle is to overturn any and all cultural institutions that prohibit them from living according to their wishes – trickery and laughter are in fact their sole weapons. The society of cultural truth is edified and protected by these very same institutions – which explains their tendency to defend them incessantly, unlike the anti-orthodox activism of the “mocking revolutionaries” of youth.

Instead of referring to these conflicting micro-societies as “young” and “old” it would be more to the point to conceptualise them according to the dichotomy between natural truth and cultural truth: this is the crux of that which enables comedy to provoke laughter by criticising the contemporary world.

As a result, a comedic plot which irrevocably, and inevitably, carries the protagonists towards a victory for nature and love must make a mockery of the uselessness, foreseen by all, of the efforts of those who oppose the universal victors. It is thanks to a (perhaps subconscious) comprehension of this essential characteristic of comedy that Beaumarchais was able to appreciate the humour of the alternative title given to the Barber: The Useless Precaution. We will now examine a certain number of scenes which demonstrate of the way in which the socio-cultural universe is assailed by comic relativisation.

Let us first consider one of the weakest such examples: a scene during which no one from among the “society of cultural truth” is present. Figaro, after having drugged each of the Doctor’s domestic helpers, visits Rosine in her bedroom, having a mission to speak to her on behalf of “Lindor,” and to talk of love:

ROSINE. With whom were you speaking down there in such a lively manner? I couldn’t hear, but...
FIGARO. With a young bachelor, a friend of the family, a man of such great hopes, full of life, wit, sensitivity, talents and a very handsome face.
ROSINE. Oh, yes indeed, I assure you! His name is...?
FIGARO. Lindor. He is penniless: but if he hadn’t left Madrid so suddenly, he might have found something stable.
ROSINE, light-headed. Oh he will, Mr. Figaro, he will. A young man such as the one you describe is destined not to remain unknown.

3 These antithetical terms are used here not because the so-called society of nature is without culture – it ‘inhabits’ the same cultural space as its adversaries – but rather, in order to reflect the ideological difference that separates them, and consequently, the ‘theological’ difference displayed by the youths: their constant struggle is to overturn any and all cultural institutions that prohibit them from living according to their wishes – trickery and laughter are in fact their sole weapons. The society of cultural truth is edified and protected by these very same institutions – which explains their tendency to defend them incessantly, unlike the anti-orthodox activism of the “mocking revolutionaries” of youth.
FIGARO, aside. Very good. *(Aloud)* But he has a fault that will ever impede his advancement.

ROSINE. A fault, Mr. Figaro? A fault? Are you sure?

FIGARO. He is in love. [II, ii: 76-77]

Even if this scene features no polemic against Bartholo, or Society, the central source of its subtle humour, aside from the disguise of Lindor, is without doubt the manner in which Figaro plays Rosine by portraying love as a “fault,” and what’s more, as a fatal flaw which will “ever impede his advancement.” But this is none other than the problematic that comedy repeatedly stages: the mutual exclusiveness of humanity’s natural and cultural elements that belie our mixed ontic being. “Lindor,” in other words, cannot advance within cultural society as it is currently constructed, because he is in love, and behaves according to the “laws” of this natural affliction, at the expense of his assimilation of his culture’s conservative norms.

I postulate that the “strong situations” which, according to Beaumarchais, provoke laughter among the theatrical public – that is to say, the spice of the very sort of comical scenes and situations we are about to analyse – are none other than so many manifestations, and paradigmatic miniaturisations, of the precise structure of the comedic plot, whose crux is that of a struggle between a society of natural truth and a society of cultural truth. Or the converse: the plots of comedies are designed precisely in order to generate, and paradoxically to reflect, the entire range of comic paradigms possible within the casting of the *dramatis personae*, according to their conflicting social identities and ambitions.

Keeping this observation in mind, I will begin here a “dynamic” analysis, and consequently a logically transcendental study of the comic in *The Barber of Seville.*
If Scherer (Beaumarchais, 1982: 12) observed that this comedy in four acts hides, “beneath the purity of its lines, which constitutes its principal dramaturgical virtue, a number of barely-visible sleights and manoeuvres” allowing the play to generate (in spite of this simplicity) numerous contorted and embroiled situations, it is because comedy, a paradoxical genre par excellence, is nothing other than a machine designed to malfunction: it is an engine that brings into motion a micro-society whose structures, like a house of cards, are so precariously balanced that the spectator, charmed to see the unsteady rocking of each new poorly constructed layer, enjoys a cathartic and joyous release when the edifice collapses, bringing down with it every resident of the kingdom it comprised. A voice that is both precise and ambiguous, a verse that is eloquently confused, comedy is designed precisely to articulate the strange ambivalence of that cultured animal that is man, a being both physical and ethereal, reasoned and superstitious, transparent and mysterious – and whom comic theatre allows us to catch red-handed, in flagrante, with all his inherent contradictions.

The Barber creates this “happy malfunctioning” at every opportunity and in every possible respect – not only as a literary construction, but also in relation to the fictitious universe of the roles, and their conflictual struggle, their theatric agon – starting from the structure of its plot and progressing right into the form of each comical scene. No reasonable critic could doubt that “The Useless Precaution” could never have “taken place” without a fortunate but unlikely peripeteia, a coincidence that is as gratuitous (to the spectator) as it is necessary (to the author): the chance meeting, on the streets of Seville,
of a disguised Count and his former valet, both of whom are natives of Madrid. And if the comic in theatre is, as I have suggested, the result of a particular type of paradigmatic disjunction – which I will describe here hypothetically as *a collision between an objective logic and one or more cultural constructions governed by their own subjective metalegal rules* – it is not surprising that the author makes a concerted effort to generate as many manifestations as possible of such socio-cultural constructions – whether caricaturalised, exaggerated or otherwise deformed – on some occasions limiting himself to the world of the characters, on other occasions extending the mechanism to general identities existing also in the real world, or even playing upon real personalities. In short, if Frye (1954) has observed that the final resolution or “discovery” of a comedic plot normally arrives in the fashion of a *deus ex machina*, this is because a dramatic author must ensure the play’s characters return from their dream world, back through the Carroll-esque looking glass that transported them there in the first place. The momentum of the genesis of a comedic plot thus appears to be characterised by a passing-through an *improbable*, or even *impossible*, peripeteia, and so inviting the spectator to abandon his or her normal sense of gravity by rendering it, for the moment, entirely impracticable.

We shall see that even as early as the first few scenes of this comedy the author, while advancing his necessary plan to generate the plot, succeeds in mocking, parodying or even saluting, in a playful manner, numerous elements of contemporary society: writers, literary critics, censors, aristocrats, women, the Epicurean esprit, and so on. And the whole thing is introduced in a light tone due to the intensional structure of the beginning of this comedy.
Act One

The curtain opens, as we noticed in our Introduction, on the soliloquy of Count Almaviva, who is blathering about the situation into which he has placed himself: in love, he is stalking the young woman, whom he has followed to Seville from Madrid. At first sight, there is no evidence of any comic structure, aside from the cliché image of a young man in love. Nevertheless one cannot easily imagine or view the first scene without being gently transported by the subtly light-hearted spirit of the text. It seems that the soliloquy, an artifice that infringes on the normal grammar of speech pragmatics, is profoundly oriented towards a first, primary sort of comic disjunction. Furthermore, if the theatrical audience, sensing of course the slight strangeness of a man talking to himself at dawn, begins to feel a slight degree of amusement, however diminished for the moment, at the sight of speech addressed to no palpable listener, is it not true that the sudden entry of a second character, a potential interlocutor, augments the explicitness of this subtle comic effect, rendering it less ambiguous by virtue of being more visible?

Let us consider what there is in the intensional structure of this opening scene: beginning with a soliloquy, it ends when the Count, as if awoken from the distraction expressed in addressing himself to a void – communicating in total solitude – is suddenly aware of the presence of another. He hides, not because he fears being recognised by someone from Bartholo’s household – he is already suitably disguised – but because he fears being caught in a suspicious, contradictory act: “Drat, someone’s coming!” and he hides.

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4 A tragedy would of course be unlikely to begin in such a way: and if a tragic playwright dared to begin with a soliloquy, it would have to be on a very serious tone, such that the grave subject of the monologue would suffocate any possibility of taking the scene lightly.
If the Count causes anyone in the audience to smile by “dialoguing” all by himself, this is not only because speaking is an inherently social act, but one which implies a cultural metalogic: the manner in which one speaks, for example, to express a certain thought, depends upon the identity of the person one is speaking to, as well as upon the situation of enunciation. But in this scene the listener is a physical and cultural nothingness, since Almaviva is talking to no one. In other words, he is projecting onto a concrete state of affairs (his solitude among several Seville houses) a cultural intension – that of *recognizing an intelligence with which to communicate* – which proves “false.”

One could nevertheless imagine Almaviva talking to a statue, or a dog, to a corpse, or a sleeping person – but the status of the listener identity would be no less doubtful – on the contrary it would be even more so. This suggests that whatever one projects the concept of an anthropomorphic interlocutor identity onto is immaterial – as the projection is no less lacking when directed at a concrete object.

If Kalinowski (1985: 72) defines the intensional object as an thought entity towards which “our intellect can turn [...] in the manner of a real object,” this comic paradigm, perhaps the most fundamental, is created by an attempt by an intellect (the speaker) to “turn towards” an intensional object which, even according to the quasi-logical grammar of the immaterial, must be considered as having no existence or at the very least no effective presence. Figure 1.5 shows the syntax of this paradigm, according to a model I would qualify tentatively as “empirically hypothetical.” I will provisionally call this structure the *utopophilic comic paradigm*, as it finds its origins in a form of “attraction” (Gr. φίλος, *philos*) towards a “nowhere” (Gr. ὄτοπος, *utopias*)

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5 Another common example of this paradigm might be that of Don Quixote’s windmills (Cervantes, 1982). We will return later to the notion of the *Quixotic comic*, which is slightly more complex.

6 A word that did not actually exist in classical Greek, but which was coined during the Renaissance by Thomas More (*Utopia*).
that one nevertheless imagines as “being” at a certain place." In the illustration, the dotted-line circle represents this non-entity, the solid arrow being the (faulty) intellectual attempt at recognition, which consists of trying to project an absent intensional object onto one’s surroundings. The undulating arrow in response to the attempted recognition represents the destabilising consequence of this error, namely the disintension or “mental destruction” of those intensional structures which are present (i.e. the social being of the mistaken speaker), creating the illusion of a socio-cultural disorientation or free-fall – which provokes laughter (we will return to this in more detail). The symbol

![Figure 1.5: Pseudo-exogenous utopophilic disintension](image)

S* represents the transcendental subject, the six-pointed star signifying the three “dimensions” in which the subject’s existence is articulated, through (1) awareness and will in relation to a (2) material and immaterial universe that is manifested (3) in the self and the other. The inner circle surrounding the transcendental subject represents the notion of the subject’s physical being or body, and the concentric circle surrounding the physical being represents the various ontic classes of the subject’s intensional being.

Cf. the philosophical concept of the objective eidetic, the “Dasein” (“being-there”) in Heidegger (1978) and, in a different light, in the works of Jaspers.
The epistemological error that provokes amusement in such cases reveals a socio-cultural operation whose functioning is disjointed, and which can therefore be represented as a negated *conjunction*: to speak is, after all, not only to recognise the otherness of a *being*, it is also to project onto this being an intension, namely an ideal synthesis of abstractions representing a pertinently attentive *conscious intentionality* – so called because having the will and the intellectual competence to interpret communication. If the act of recognizing another – not only from the point of view of its physical otherness but in terms of a social identity as well – constitutes one of the simplest of social transactions, we might be comfortable in postulating that this comic paradigm is among the most fundamental, by virtue of its simplicity: *the error of conferring an identity (through the projection of a general intensional object) upon an entity which is unable to support such a projection, because the intensional grammar called-for by the situation does not allow for the entity to constitute an example of the general identity in question.* Here the general intensional object can obviously be any constructed socio-cultural functional unit or identity. If we reverse Bergson’s (1912:10) famous metaphoric formula describing the ridiculous, we arrive at something very close to our model: we are very nearly “grafting something living onto something mechanical.”

This model explains the comic spirit, however decidedly subtle, of Almaviva’s soliloquy, and in part, that of Figaro. In part? Indeed – as a more attentive reading of the text of Figaro’s entry reveals, as in the purest Shakespearean tradition, a stepwise augmentation, in *crescendo*, of this very same paradigm of *utopophilic disintension*: at first implicit (Scene i), then rendered explicit by the observation of a potential witness (Figaro’s entry, Scene ii) and now repeated (Figaro then speaks to himself), the comic essence of the situation becomes more and more evident.

Let us look at the text: the barber himself, exactly as we see the count has done, introduces himself by means of a soliloquy: furthermore we are now witnessing not
only a speaker who “fails to recognise” the inherent contradiction of his immediate situation, but who also shows himself to be unaware of another human presence that renders this contradiction more explicit. We even see that Figaro – unlike the Count who simply addresses his words into the emptiness – continues to augment the degree of explicitness of this same comic paradigm, first by speaking to himself in the same contradictory or illogical manner, and then, by singing to himself, thereby bringing onstage a culturally valorised and more replete form of speech. Indeed to sing is not only to represent, but to play, and to imagine a game whose “rules” supplement those normally implied by the social act of speaking. This implies a need to respect the purely cultural forms and customs associated with a form of communication invested with aesthetic, ideological and pathetic dimensions – through speech, verse and song:

Scene ii:Figaro, The Count, hidden.

*FIGARO, a guitar on his back attached by a wide strap: he hums happily, a pencil and paper in his hands:*

Let us banish sorrow,  
For it spites us  
And without good wine,  
Which reignites us,  
Reduced a good measure,  
Man, without pleasure,  
Lives unworthy,  
And dies too early. [I, i: 50]

Here we see that the vacuum created by the lack of interlocutor is somehow further emptied – paradoxically by its juxtaposition with a listener – while at the same time, we as theatrical spectators recognize the growth and increasing crystallisation of a social gesture addressed, more obviously than ever, to no one. Indeed, as Rabelais noted, verse constitutes a more cultivated form of articulation than prose, by virtue of its culture, traditions, and grammar.

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8 *Cf. Huizinga’s Homo Ludens,* in which the author (1950) studies the concept of play in social life. We will return to this subject below.
Thus the paradigm of *utopophilic disintension* is continued and expanded by Figaro. But that is not the only intensional comic element present in the scene’s *crescendo* – for throughout the amplification of this “melody” of utopophilic disintension we become aware of a counterpoint: the introduction of a second, nearly mirror-image, structure – indeed, if the projection of an intensional (nearly human) status where it doesn’t belong constitutes an infraction of the mixed metalogic of cultural states of affairs (which are semiotised), the converse amuses us by virtue of the converse type of malfunction (see Figure 1.6). Here there is a *failure to recognise and appropriately project* the correct intensional status onto the transcendental subject of a character who should be seen as an appropriate figure of the social interlocutor identity. This is exactly what happens when the presence of a hidden Count Almaviva increases the explicitness of the comic disintension operated by Figaro in his “pseudo-soliloquy.”9 In the latter illustration, we make use of a visual convention from electronic circuit diagrams, in which the absence of contact in a circuit is represented by a line “jumping over” another – meaning that

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9 We shall see that these first two comic paradigms together constitute the basis of the aesthetic of comic disguise, which causes laughter by invoking one or the other, or both, of these paradigms – for when a disguised character succeeds in tricking another in an amusing way, it is because that second subject recognises in the first an identity that doesn’t belong, and, or, fails to recognise an identity in the first subject which we know to belong but which is momentarily masked.
the socio-cultural conception projected by the transcendent subject $s_j$ onto his surroundings constitutes an ellipsis or missing element in what we see is the pertinent presence of another potential interlocutor, in the person of $s_j$. Furthermore, as this constitutes an error in terms of the perception of another, we term it “exogenous” (Gr. γένεσις, genesis, “origin,” ἐξ, exo-, “exterior”), relative to the subject who is in error.\(^{10}\)

Thus we have seen in the intensional syntax of just the first two scenes of the Barber the way in which the two simplest comic paradigms are constructed, and how an implicit realisation of the comic can be made more explicit, not only in terms of the comic act (whose degree of definition or visibility is increased) but also in terms of the ambient situation (whose incongruous relationship to the act is amplified).

If Bergson was, grosso modo, able to identify a sort of general formula – which seems to refer equally to two distinct paradigms according to my hypothetical model – we are obliged, in examining the semantics of Figaro’s song, to recall the more venerable observation on the comic by Socrates which we mentioned above (and one which happens to include or subsume that of Bergson). For Figaro, in his song, not only expresses himself consciously (he comments on his capacity as an author while authoring) but also subconsciously (he reveals a sort of self-portrait, very nearly a caricature, of his own person) in portraying himself as an archetypical hedonistic Iberian working-class loafer – which seems to recall Socrates’ hypothesis on the ridiculous, the failure of self-knowledge, although here its manifestation is quite attenuated:

Up to here, that’s not at all bad, eh?

And dies too early.
Wine and laziness
Compete for my heart

\(^{10}\) In this illustration I have reduced the paradigm to its simplest form. In fact in this case we are observing a double-ellipsis, as the non-recognition of the physical presence of the other accompanies and dramatises the failure to recognise his cultural identity, which is also overlooked in error. I could therefore have illustrated the interpretative arrow as also side-stepping Sj’s internal circle.
No, that’s not right! They reign there as one, peacefully and in harmony...

Share my heart together. [I,i: 50]

Regarding the nature and the functioning of the comic in caricature, what we have discovered up to this point will have to suffice for the moment – I will return when the nuances of the model under development permit further elaboration. What concerns us here in any case is the way in which it is suddenly possible for the audience, when Figaro interrupts himself in prose, is surprised to find that they are not simply observing a singer “articulating someone else’s written words in his own name,” but rather a creative instance creating in flagrante delicto, and in this sense who is speaking in the name of a “different” first person. This means that the first eight verses of the song are initially interpreted according to one modality of enunciation (a spontaneous expression witnessed by a second, hidden observer) and then according to another – the audience re-interprets the sense of the situation, as Almaviva had to do when he realised he was no longer alone, according to new information. In other words, the audience’s own socio-cultural consciousness is directly implicated in the play, as is that of Figaro and the Count, and the staging of “Socratic consciousnesses” finds itself subverted yet again by means of what might be termed in analytical philosophy an “Orwellian re-writing” of the perceptions at the foundation of the socio-cultural Gestalten of the articulation.

The spectator finds he or she is “teased” by an imaginary construction invented by the author – thanks to the paradigmatic multi-dimensionality of the structures that are present. A web of intensional structures that had been seen as having been in “correct” conjunction are now seen as “false” and one appropriate projection is seen to be

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12 To appreciate the theory represented by this metaphor – according to which one perception is entirely realised and then abandoned in favour of another which replaces it (cf. the competing theory of a “Stalinist suppression” of the first image, replaced before it is entirely manifested) – see the works of philosopher D.C. Dennett, especially Content and Consciousness (1969) and Brainstorms (1978) as well as Consciousness Explained (1992).
transformed, without having changed *per se*, into a utopophilic disjunction that is *exogenous with respect to the public.*

In addition, the new pragmatic dimension of this “dialogue of monologues” is no longer simply implicit (with just half of a conversation being articulated) but is now explicit – two distinct “voices” debate the song on an aesthetic and philosophical level: the singer of the verses expresses himself in a spontaneous aesthetic context, whereas the “other,” the “prosaic critic,” seems to be speaking in order to comment on what he has “observed” in the singer. In this sense the “interrupting voice” creates a sort of relativisation of the ceremonial act that is singing. Indeed, if this interruption of the poetic enunciation of song strikes us as a brusque discontinuity, this is because we are aware of an ephemeral intension belonging to the singer, something that might be considered a “special status” which, according to the cultural metalogic of public interpretation, would seem to forbid any such interruption, not by means of an explicit prohibition, but by means of a sort of subjective enchantment, a taboo. So the intervening “other” Figaro suddenly subverts the complementary roles of the singer and audience, all the while continuing to manifest a sort of “negligent” addressing of speech to himself, a subtly comical act that is, still funnily, observed by a hidden Almaviva.

It is clear in any case that where a given event raises doubts about a character’s self-awareness (vis-à-vis another), by means of his or her perceived ignorance of the actual intensional modalities the scene calls for, this is in fact an entire class of comic paradigms that can be reflected, repeated, made more explicit in many ways. And this is precisely what happens in the first few scenes, despite the inherent weakness of the paradigms’ manifestations: it is clear Beaumarchais is playing with the pragmatics of speech in a gently amusing manner. However the highly attenuated quality of the comic effect of these first two scenes in no way compromises the manner in which they succeed, generously punctuated with subtle quidproquos, in establishing the “free
lightheartedness” of the play, which disposes the spectator to become “conscious of the characters’ self-awareness” and thus to apprehend the subtle disjunctions of the social structures already featured on stage.

Let us return to the semantics of Figaro’s song. Clearly, it is appropriate to examine this scene in terms of this character’s role as an icon of the author; according to this point of view, his bacchic esprit recalls the “freedom” of the theatrical aesthetic the author holds in high regard, and the image of a life without wine may correspond to the perceived lack of “joie de vivre” that characterises the critics and censors the author has had to deal with in real life, and who did, in his eyes, lack a sense of fun.

This sort of interpretation may nonetheless appear doubtful – if it did not correspond harmoniously with the rest of the scene. Here Figaro, whose philosophy is the theatrical reflection of that of Beaumarchais, explicitly evokes an authorial introspection dealing with the problem of a potential criticism:

Does one say “share together?...” Hmm! my God, our makers of opéra-comiques aren’t so attentive to detail. Today, whatever is not worth saying, is sung. (He sings.)

Wine and idleness
Share my heart together. [I,ii, p.50]

Paradoxically, this faux duetto “Figaro the author / Figaro the critic” seems to recall the notion of self-ignorance – γιγνώσκειν ἑαυτόν – among his “colleagues” of the Opéra-comique; since the image of their career is pointedly put into question by doubts about their linguistic competence, this apparent lack of learnedness is directly relativised, seemingly without their knowledge, and without any scenic representation of their presence save within the intensional imagination, by their shortcomings. Furthermore, this taunting critique also evokes the traditional rivalry between the Comédie-Française and the Opéra-comique – such that the spectator is enjoined to imagine the identities of each side, despite their lack of staged representation, and to
imagine one side as succeeding in poking fun at the other. Thus it seems clear that the impossibility of responding during the play increases the vulnerability of the “victims,” whether or not they are present among the audience; where a socio-cultural rule prevents them from making any concrete response, we are observing a new compounded comic paradigm – which we shall for the moment call the “Mute Witness.”

My aim here is not, however, to evaluate the relative importance of the diegetic and extra-diegetic meanings of this passage in the contemporary social context; it will suffice at present to show that the reader, in interpreting the text according to the analytical stages of signification I have described above, can construct a diverse kaleidoscope of possible meanings – not only in respect to various social contexts, but according to several ontological perspectives at a time. Here we have evaluated a single enunciation, simultaneously, from the point of view of Figaro, from that of his relationship with his social milieu, from the point of view of Beaumarchais, and from that of the aesthetic and practice, reported by Figaro, of real contemporary authors of the Opéra-comique genre, and so forth. Indeed it seems that the text’s intensions require the spectator to take stock of a multiplicity of ontologically distinct structures all enveloped by the surface structures of the dialogue – which seems once again to support my model of the transcendental subject and its intensions. This ontic fecundity, far from obscuring and confounding the work’s structure, in fact serves to augment the number of comic possibilities present in the play.

The scene continues to develop itself by multiplying these mechanisms. Again, the semantic analysis of Figaro’s song must take account of the way in which the ballad participates in the characterisation of the role; if we are amused by the manner in which its lyrics paint a portrait of an ‘excessively Dionysian’ character, the allegria of this image can only be augmented by the fact that Figaro is unaware of the presence of another (a temporary but pertinent modality). The barber also seems ignorant of the way in which
his gaiety constitutes a sort of caricature of his own personality, of his Weltanschauung. This observation may appear subjective, but it is important to consider how important it is to know the character or person who appears to be in error, in order for his error relating to a failure of self-knowledge to provoke our laughter – for it is in relation to our sense of the identity in question that we are able to make a subtle judgment call on that character’s degree of self-awareness. Here the author increases the degree of completion of his portrait of Figaro while mocking, in a theatrical fashion, and through this role (a barber who wishes to imitate real authors), his own profession, that of the writer. Here we can only marvel at the clarity of the contrast between the insouciant spontaneity of Figaro, on the one hand, and the deliberate project of Beaumarchais on the other:

I would like to finish with something beautiful, and brilliant, something scintillating, and which resembles a thought. *(He goes down on one knee and writes while singing.)*

Share my heart together.
One has my tenderness...
The other makes my happiness.

Come now! that’s so flat. [...] I need an opposition, an antithesis [...] Ah! goodness, I’ve got it! [...] Very good, Figaro!... *(He writes while singing.)*

Wine and idleness
Share my heart together;
One is my mistress,
The other is my servant,
The other is my servant,
The other is my servant.

Hee hee, with some accompaniment along with it, we will yet see, gentlemen of the cabale, whether I know what I’m talking about. *(He sees the Count.)* I’ve seen that abbot before somewhere. *(He gets up.)* [I, ii: 51]

This reference to the censors (including many aristocrats) who were active against the author near the end of the eighteenth century – particularly the “Journaliste de Bouillon,” the “Men of Letters,” the Censor Marin and the “Critics” mentioned in the “Lettre modérée” that prefaces the four-act edition of 1774 – does not hesitate to draw
on the ‘new’ comic effect, a form of dramatic irony, that I have called the “Mute Witness:” if the audience sees that the spectacle of the play is evidently an entirely public affair, its members cannot fail to imagine that these “gentlemen,” who have no means of responding during the play itself, and are unable to participate in the imaginary scene set in Seville, are forced to consider themselves “absent” with respect to a Beaumarchais who mocks them through Figaro; this absence, furthermore, serves only to make more explicit their apparent “ignorance,” or their seeming lack of awareness, of a barb that nevertheless would seem to demand a response. Thus if this little “attack” succeeds in making him laugh, the spectator must imagine both of the paradigms that we have seen here, overlapped into a composite form – for any censor who actually witnesses a performance at the theatre, if he sees that he has been implicated, must nevertheless efface himself before the apostrophe; indeed, to recognize the insult proffered by a mere character would signify, in the extradiegetic context, allowing oneself to be provoked by an imaginary creature, which would be itself a ridiculous act – a utopophilic disintension; on the other hand, not to recognize the insult would constitute, within the ontology of Figaro’s imaginary universe, a failure to recognise a pertinent intensional reality which has otherwise been verified by the public’s laughter: to have allowed oneself to be unknowingly ridiculed. We can therefore abstract from this “Mute Witness” theatrical device the manner in which the playwright puts his prey, the “gentlemen” in question, into a sort of ontological “checkmate:” no recourse exists, and the mere possibility of looking for one has been eliminated. The theatrical aspect of this stroke of genius by Beaumarchais thus consists in applying an ontological multiplicity to a comic mechanism which, as we shall see, is normally seen as happening between characters (one who has lied is forced, for example, to submit to an inescapable blackmail by another who knows about the lie). In short, it is
clear that in comedy, the intensions of theatrical language are at least as important as the extensions semiotics normally concerns itself with.

The end of this “dialogue in soliloquy” is neither the traditional entry nor exit of another character – it is the mutual realisation by Figaro and Almaviva that the other is also present. Figaro, who has no real qualms for the time being about being overheard (he has nothing to hide, for the moment) jumps directly from a sudden awareness of another’s presence to the question of the identity of that other individual. We notice that he projects onto this human presence an intension, an identity, that we ‘know’ to be ‘false:’ “I’ve seen that abbot somewhere before.” This is the first manifestation of the extradiegetic structural purpose of the comedy: to contrive mistaken identities which amuse us as an exogenous disintension which is both elliptical (Figaro fails to recognize the true identity we see as ‘real’) and utopophilic (he ‘recognises’ a ‘non-existent’ intension in another’s identity). The Count is of course in disguise, as we know from his opening soliloquy. The hero doesn’t immediately recognise in Figaro his old friend and former valet, although he does express an awareness of some vague familiarity: “This man is not unknown to me!”

“Bravo” to the playwright once again for his efficacy: A comic spirit established in the first moments of the play has now led to the first concrete consequences of Almaviva’s disguise, a comic effect due to a mistaken identity, which, significantly, advances the plot by contriving the meeting that will launch its central theme:

THE COUNT. – That grotesque turn of phrase...
FIGARO. – I was right; it’s the Count Almaviva.
THE COUNT. – I think it’s that ne'er-do-well Figaro.
FIGARO. – Guilty as charged, Excellency.
THE COUNT. – Scoundrel! You’d better not say a word...
FIGARO. – Yes, I recognize you; there are the familiar affections with which you’ve always honoured me. [I,ii: 52]

A closer look at the entirety of this encounter reveals how amusing it is seeing a gradually filling-out of the roles’ true identities, a process which dramatises the comic
“errors” consisting initially in their misidentification. In this way we observe that these two characters, before entering into a concrete “contract” to launch a “stratagem” to help the count find his love, first “negotiate” in a state of “potential contract” that reveals, in a profound and lively manner, each of the differences in the men’s character and social identities (which are, again, individual projections of intensional objects) as well as their social classes (general intensions which can be projected onto individuals). This negotiation, as I have already pointed out, gives rise to an opportunity to poke fun at contemporary society, a process Beaumarchais himself has called “entertaining while correcting,” in direct reference to Molière’s saying that “comedy is an ingenious poem which, through agreeable lessons, tends to reproduce men’s faults.”

The audience immediately feels the way in which the playwright interweaves, within the “spiritual duel” that follows, both the recognition of an established hierarchy, and paradoxically, an exchange of “challenges” that is as light-hearted as it is affectionate. Here the author shows, through a mutually consensual word-game, that the relationship between the two characters is characterised by a certain friendship – and that they both manifest, from the outset, an exemplar and spokesman of their social milieu and their identity, not only in an absolute sense – each class has traits that seem to describe themselves clearly – but also in a relative fashion – for each class is defined in large measure with respect to the other. Here, whereas Almaviva teases Figaro for being a lazy epicurean, the barber plays along in his own way by painting himself in an exaggerated way as the “poor common man” – as though in order to protect himself from the power of his “betters” through an appeal to pity and generosity on the part of the aristocrat. In the passage itself, which follows here, we can make out a certain ambiguity in these class identities, which seem real even as they are called into question, making the spectator sense an implicit attempt by each to suggest some degree of hypocrisy on the part of the other:
THE COUNT. – I didn’t recognise you at first. Look how big and fat you’ve become.
FIGARO. – What can a man do, Excellency, in the face of poverty.
THE COUNT. – Poor little man! But what are you doing in Seville? I seem to remember recommending you for a decent job in an office.
FIGARO. – I got the job, Excellency, and I’m very grateful.
THE COUNT. – Call me Lindor. Can’t you see from my disguise that I don’t want to be recognised?
FIGARO. – I’ll go then, sir.
THE COUNT. – On the contrary. I’m waiting here for something, and two men chatting are less suspicious than one who walks alone. Let’s appear to be talking together. So, what about that job?

It is clear that the forms of address used by each man to verbally denote the other work in a parallel fashion – notably the second person singular – but are nevertheless distinguished by the way in which each must at the same time signify the other’s social identity – for the informal mode of address used by the count addresses Figaro directly as a human being, whereas the formality with which Figaro must address the nobleman allows him to denote Almaviva only indirectly, through signifying his social status verbally. This is even more evident in the original French, where vous (you) contrasts with tu (thou) alongside the more international formula of respect, monseigneur (my lord, excellency). In this way Figaro is permitted to refer to the count’s status rather than to his human person.

There we see the first details of the cultural being that characterises and defines all interactions between these two roles – in particular by concretising the social relations through which the comical elements of the scene are dramatised. If their social roles seem slightly “compromised” or subverted by the playful spirit of their conversation, it is because each man’s personality and status appear to call into question, in several ways, the cultural identity of the other. Specifically, the count abandons in part what his gentlemanly state would seem to require in terms of politeness, by evoking, as though he were merely making an objective observation on the difficulty of recognising Figaro, the barber’s very body, in particular his current portliness. “Look how big and fat you’ve become.” This observation is significant in that it shows the way in which an apparent objective logic
(governing the possibility or probability of recognising a person’s physical characteristics) serves to disguise a teasing intention consisting of the mention of his interlocutor’s body in a socially indelicate way. Thus the count evokes a pair of parallel antitheses which, implicitly, subvert the cultural metalogic of a polite encounter between two acquaintances: if the supposed “objective logic” seen here appears to compromise the ritual forms of politeness required by social custom, the body of a person is certainly not the first aspect of the other that it is “appropriate” to recognise in the contemporary European culture within which the dialogue is set.

This utterance of Almaviva’s allows us to identify, on its own, a new theoretical observation: that which is natural in a social situation – Figaro’s body in this example – can be articulated in such a way that it compromises a cultural aspect of that social event – a social identity that is meant to be recognised through a form of politeness – in such a way that one observes an entire class of comic paradigms, which I call disintensions or intensional dissolutions – that can be characterised by nature compromising culture. Hereafter I will refer to such paradigms as deculturations, which we can distinguish from relativisations, a class of disintensions that can be attributed to the compromising of one social institution by another belonging to the same imaginary realm but which is portrayed in a manner that is culturally incompatible with the first. We will return to this notion later on.

Let us return now to the way in which the apparent objective logic utilised by the count – who abstracts a corporeal property of Figaro’s body, focusses upon it, and evokes it specifically to make fun of the barber – creates a ‘false pretext’ that pretends to justify and forgive the faux pas constituted by the mention of an obese person’s physical characteristics, serves to disguise a teasing intention consisting of the mention of his interlocutor’s body in a socially indelicate way. Thus the count evokes a pair of parallel antitheses which, implicitly, subvert the cultural metalogic of a polite encounter between two acquaintances: if the supposed “objective logic” seen here appears to compromise the ritual forms of politeness required by social custom, the body of a person is certainly not the first aspect of the other that it is “appropriate” to recognise in the contemporary European culture within which the dialogue is set.

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Let us return now to the way in which the apparent objective logic utilised by the count – who abstracts a corporeal property of Figaro’s body, focusses upon it, and evokes it specifically to make fun of the barber – creates a ‘false pretext’ that pretends to justify and forgive the faux pas constituted by the mention of an obese person’s
weight. Here we are again dealing with a form of disguise: just as I have postulated that the socio-cultural consciousness of a transcendental subject is necessarily accompanied by a *will* that constitutes the breath that brings him or her to life, the very concept of identity must here be enlarged to include any culturally relevant manifestation of this intentionality-consciousness, whether or not it involves the borrowing and projection of a known archetypical identity from the ambient culture onto a social situation. In other words we can say that the count is here disguising his mocking intent, without adopting in any permanent sense a recognisable identity such as that of a clown or a fool. We are dealing with a *momentary posture* – which, by participating in the intensional make-up of the situation, must be counted among the modalities generating the comic spirit of the scene. This means that we are going to be obliged, in any rigorous analysis of comic effects, to take into account the Ricoeur’s conceptual distinction between the *idem-identity* and the *ipse-identity* – the latter being ephemeral like the count’s momentary posture, and the former being the rather more permanent aspects of any character’s identity. This nuance is significant in that it demonstrates the following: if both forms of identity participate in the comic, this leaves little doubt of the way in which it is *intensional objects*, specifically as they are seen in identities, which appear to constitute the sum of all anthropological institutions whose visible malfunctioning constitutes the universal comic stimulus.

Significantly, we can observe that the humorous aspect of the count’s remark is *not really hidden* by the pretext that generates it: this ‘disguise’ is, in a sense, made to fail – in fact it compromises itself. Indeed, neither Almaviva nor Figaro misses the way in which the count’s adopted posture is revealed as ‘insincere’ – because Almaviva wants Figaro to understand that he means to evoke something other than the reason he at first didn’t recognize his former valet. In other words, Almaviva wishes Figaro to be able to perceive a gentle mockery, and to be able to understand that what is meant is in fact a
sort of accusation – one which says that Figaro’s self-styled ‘misfortunes’ are not real. Figaro’s response is of particular interest then: he continues the ‘playing the same game,’ though recognizing that the count is right, and in so doing begins to mock himself, making light of his good health and solid financial situation. “What can one do, Sire, in the face of abject poverty?” Here Figaro pretends to refer to his portly state as something undesirable, a misfortune – which constitutes a posture meant to disguise, in a deliberately unsuccessful manner, that Figaro is making a very good living. This is the point that the count seems to wish to make, as though to disarm any possible attempt by the working-class man to ask anything of his former master. Such banter contributes to the characterization of the barber, as the spectator is able to identify in it that which these two roles see as the truth, and can easily distinguish from it what both see as an old falsehood: Figaro appears as a valet having previously been harmlessly manipulative, having been capable of tall tales designed to procure a little more money. Thus we see that here, the very idea of such mendacious stratagems is cause for amusement, by virtue of an ‘imaginary manifestation’ of the two paradigms of disguise.

The count wants to put an end to these playful lazzi, but not without getting in the last word himself: “Poor little man! But what are you doing in Seville?” Figaro, however, resumes his verbal game, which has nearly a familiar or friendly quality to it, even if it contains a potential subtle mockery of his former master, insofar as he seems to downplay the standing and influence of the young aristocrat; the barber begins again to play the role of the ‘pitiful little poor man’ while seeking to amuse the count by pretending to lament his own life’s situation. We recall here that Figaro is continuing to make conversation to help the count appear less “suspicious.”

FIGARO. – The Minister, having great regard for the recommendation made by Your Excellency, had me named, on the spot, to the post of Apothecary’s Apprentice.

THE COUNT. – In the Army’s hospitals?
Apart from the fact that Figaro is willing to make fun of himself – considering the result of the recommendation – we can also perceive that the comical quality of the passage resides in part in the projection upon Figaro’s person of the identity of the “Apothecary’s Apprentice.” This might be seen as a reasonably good job for a common man without means, and yet we get the impression the exchange contains the structure of a “joke” in the oral tradition – in that the juxtaposition of an obviously lazy and pleasure-seeking Figaro with a socio-cultural institution, however modest it may be, seems to evoke a sudden decline, particularly in light of the obvious instability of the projection. In other words, a tough job is noticeably incompatible with the character of the unmotivated Figaro we already know. The count, for his part, delighted to learn that Figaro had found a job after the recommendation he made, seems to wish to elevate his hopes – “In the Army’s hospitals?” – but Figaro’s response, again by means of a deculturation operated by a corporeal image, destroys the mental image of himself in such a fortunate post: “No, in an Andalusian stable.” Furthermore, it is clear that the fame of this region of Spain, which has long been well known for its fine equine breeding of pure Arabian descent, contributes to the mental image that destroys and subsumes that the count had hoped for. The clarity and power of the famous province’s steeds itself contributes to humour of the collapse of the ‘fortunate Figaro’ evoked in Almaviva’s question, for not only is an army job a very good one in contemporary Spain, but the mental synthesis the spectator is almost forced to make is the leap from an imagined Figaro helping human patients, army heroes, to an imagined Figaro working with animals, perhaps having to clear their back passages with his bare hands, for instance. The author is playing with the manner in which we must associate cultural identity-concepts such as occupations, social standing and trades with our notions of the roles.
On an extra-diegetic plane, outside the storyline, it is worth mentioning that these Iberian references would likely have been capable of increasing the French spectator’s enjoyment of the subtle comic nature of the scene. If French actors, in Paris, would be playing the roles of the comedy, they would be playing supposed Spaniards, in such a way that each time attention is drawn to this theatrical falsehood of identity, the sensitivity of the spectator would be drawn to, and encouraged in questioning the very nature of social being, in reality as well as on the stage.

The author is aware of this potential, and he resumes the identity-play regarding national archetypes, while continuing to provide the audience with evidence that Figaro’s character is incompatible with work, which makes him a theatrical archetype:

FIGARO. – The job wasn’t bad; because I was in charge of bandages and medicines, I used to sell men horse’s drugs....

THE COUNT. – Which no doubt killed subjects of the King!

FIGARO. – Ah! Ah! There is no universal remedy; because sometimes they also healed Galicians, Catalans and Auvergnats. [I, ii: 53-4]

The friendship shared by the characters shows itself here to be true, despite their vastly different social status: Figaro all but admits his former lying, cheating and even potential crimes, which would mean legal problems if discovered by other authorities. Yet the excuse he offers Almaviva (“there is no universal remedy”), which in other words means one cannot judge Figaro’s extra-curricular drug selling, is nevertheless a part of the series of “transparent lies” that constitute the humorous word-play both men enjoy. The humour of the story Figaro is telling is once again due to the way in which his actions, even grasped as mere memories he evokes, compromise the intensional value, the identity, that he is supposed to have taken on as an Apothecary’s assistant. Further, if Galicians and the like are often, in the Eighteenth Century, the object of ridicule (cf. Irishman and Pollock jokes in today’s England and America) – the claim that such men had been healed by horse medicines is not without significance regarding the supposed
lack of intelligence among these nationalities. Once again, the implication that they might be physiologically homologous to horses constitutes what I have called a deculturation of the social identity of such characters, though they are present only as the intensions of Figaro’s spoken words, which don’t truly denote any known actual individuals. It is not surprising that the Minister who had assigned Figaro, based on the Count’s recommendation, ended up firing him.

THE COUNT. – So why did you end up quitting?

FIGARO. – Quitting? It wasn’t my idea; someone informed the Authorities. Envy, with its crooked fingers, its pale, livid figure...

THE COUNT. – Oh! mercy, mercy, my friend! Do you also write poetry? I saw you here, writing on your knee, and singing since early morning.

FIGARO. – And that is precisely the cause of my troubles, Excellency. When the Minister heard what I was doing, and I might say I was doing it with some success, writing verses, sending riddles to the newspapers... there were even Madrigals going around that I had written; in a word, when he learnt I had been printed alive, he took the news tragically, and had me removed from my post, on grounds that a love of literature is incompatible with a working man’s ethic.

THE COUNT. – How very well reasoned! And you didn’t appeal....

FIGARO. – I considered myself lucky to have been forgotten after that. Great men do us a great deal of good just by doing us no harm. [I, ii: 54-55]

And there, once again, we see a recapitulation of the verbal “class struggle” represented, in a light-hearted manner, by the character of Figaro, who like his archetypes elsewhere in European comedy, evokes a second comedic structure in depicting an inter-cultural difference between the classes, which engenders cognitive disjunctions of social being in a manner similar to the way disguise achieves the effect.

Another significant aspect of this scene is that constituted by its references to real life outside the play, to Beaumarchais’ own social world. Here Figaro again seems to constitute an icon of the author, who had to endure relentless criticism by mainly aristocratic censors, in terms not unlike those Figaro complains he must endure. Again we are dealing here with an ontologically multiple paradigm (one with many sorts of
intension, as Martin would say), in which any of Beaumarchais’ critics present at the theatre would necessarily see himself as being implicated in Figaro’s rebukes. Furthermore, because such critics would be constrained by the required silence into not answering them, they would be seen as being the butt of the jokes. This is in any case the reason Beaumarchais can, by hiding himself behind the theatrical fiction, allow himself the liberty of representing, through a humorous character belonging to an underprivileged class, a sort of ‘apology’ for commoners with literary talent, and a championing of the lower class, at the expense of the nobles, which at the time was quite daring.

THE COUNT. – You’re not telling me everything.

FIGARO. – Well by God, Sire, they want the poor to be without fault.

THE COUNT. – Lazy, disturbed...

FIGARO. – With the virtues they demand in a servant, does Your Excellency know many masters worthy of being valets? [I, ii: 55]

This “class struggle” banter continues to punctuate the scene with its humour, and returns from time to time throughout the play – thus constituting another example of the tendency in comedy for the underprivileged to ridicule and joust against social structures in particular examples, and against the institution of social structure in general.

Afterwards the playwright, ever active in his project of augmenting and multiplying this comedy’s comic modalities, like a Bach whose taste for modulations and counterpoints ceaselessly manifest themselves in an elegant fugue, introduces a new intensional dimension, which itself was also cleverly prepared by the play’s introductory scene: Bartholo’s house awakens, and with it the imprisoned Rosine appears. It is interesting that the count notices the beginnings of morning household activity before the spectator hears anything at all from within the house. Let us look at the way in
which the author combines archetypical comic scenes from comedy’s history with his own sense of a modern, psychologically more nuanced spirit: while Figaro talks, just as the count asked him to do, Almaviva fails to devote his attention entirely to the words he’s meant to be pretending to hear, distracted because he’s thinking about Rosine, and looking for any sign of her. Beaumarchais does not let this opportunity to embroil these planes of reference to various sorts of real objects and intensions, all of which is explained by the count’s state, that of being in love.

THE COUNT, stopping him. – Just a moment... I thought it was her... Keep going, I’m listening.

FIGARO. – Upon my return to Madrid, I wanted to try my literary talents again; and the theatre seemed to me to be an honourable field...

THE COUNT. – Oh! Damnation! [I, ii: 55]

Following this, the didascalia indicates that the count “looks attentively at the window lattice.” The author skilfully creates seemingly natural and believable comic effect due to inattention – without specifically determining whether Figaro appreciates the real reason for the count’s regretful interjection, nor whether Almaviva is actually paying attention to his interlocutor. Here we are dealing with the mere possibility, the hint, in both characters, of the utopophilic and elliptical comic paradigms, despite neither being made explicit: it is possible to construe Almaviva’s exclamation, while his eyes incessantly look for his lover, as a reaction to what the Barber had been saying – “the theatre seemed to me to be an honourable field...” – engendering on the one hand an image of the utopophilic (erroneous and absent) perception which projects upon the count the expression of a position he did not intend to state, and which would seem to compromise Figaro’s philosophical evocation of the theatre; and on the other hand, it is at least as plausible that the count, his attentions being elsewhere, is no longer following a Figaro who, temporarily, seems once again to be speaking to himself, and in so doing to be projecting upon his “inactive listener” the ipse-identity of a pertinently attentive
consciousness, which we as readers and spectators no longer accept, thereby engendering a representation of the utopophilic comic paradigm on Figaro’s part, and the elliptical paradigm on the count’s. So as we saw in Scene Two, Almaviva’s obvious presence, along with the way he only a moment ago in this scene specifically requested Figaro to continue telling his story, causes an explicit expression of the spectator’s mental syntheses of the comic paradigms we have just witnessed, which makes them more visible, more obvious, and thus brighter and more amusing. In other words, the count’s socio-cultural consciousness is clearly put into question, and in consequence, so is Figaro’s. Here we see therefore that a disjunction of intensional ‘reality’ normally perceived in any communicative act is in fact contagious, causing a chain reaction which operates upon and causes the further disjunction of other identities. Also, we observe the way in which the misunderstanding here reprises the same paradigmatic comic structures engendered by disguise. We shall return to this point.

The remainder of the scene again evokes the motif of the icon of the author that Figaro represents: the Barber recounts to Almaviva how his literary ambitions had been bitterly foiled, exactly as though the author wished the public to think of his own life. This theatrical play once again brings into question the ambiguous nature of the ontological modalities of pragmatic issues such as who is speaking, and in whose name? And are the statements true or false? Here a fictive Spain becomes a paradigmatic simulacrum of the author’s France:

FIGARO. (During his line, the count looks attentively at the window lattice.) – In truth, I don’t know how I didn’t have much greater success, because I filled the floor with the most excellent Working Men; [...] But it was the efforts of the cabal....

THE COUNT. – Ah! the cabal! The great author falls! [I, ii: 56]

Nevertheless Figaro, whose light-heartedness appears indestructible, shows how his philosophy saved him from despair. Furthermore, it is not without amusement that the public contemplates the apostrophe of a Beaumarchais disguised within the well-
The developed character of the Barber, who naturally doesn’t appreciate the degree to which he appears “original,” being at once an old archetype and a new caricature. The following passage shows how Figaro, who has just stated that he hoped to be able to avenge himself against his critics, despite the self-satisfaction and gaiety that define his personality:

THE COUNT. – Really! But don’t you know that in court you have only twenty-four hours to curse your judges?

FIGARO. – You have twenty-four years in the theatre; life is too short to expend all the resentment I feel.

THE COUNT. – Your joyous anger is a delight. But you have yet to tell me why you left Madrid.

FIGARO. – It was my guardian angel, Sire, because I have been fortunate enough to find today my old Master. Seeing [...] that the Republic of Literature was a rat’s parlour, [...] I left Madrid and, with my baggage on my back, philosophically criss-crossing the two Castilles, la Mancha, Estremadura, the Sierra-Morena and Andalusia; welcomed in some cities, imprisoned in others and everywhere superior to the events; praised by one man, criticized by another; enjoying the good times, tolerating the bad; mocking fools, and daring the villainous; laughing at my poverty and shaving anyone’s beard; now you find me in Seville and ready to serve Your Excellency once again in any way he wishes to order me.

THE COUNT. – Who gave you such a cheerful philosophy?

FIGARO. – Repeated misfortunes. I make myself laugh at everything, otherwise things might make me cry. Why do you keep looking up there?

THE COUNT. – We must hide.

FIGARO. – Why?

THE COUNT. – Come on, you wretch, you’ll give me away. (They hide.) [I, ii: 56-8]

The ‘disguised’ quality of the author, who seems to be articulating Figaro’s lines on his own behalf, is rendered explicit only by the word “criticized” (‘blâmé’ in the original version) – as Beaumarchais was ‘blamed’ in France, in the juridical sense of the time: his rights as a citizen were removed following complaints made against him by members of the “cabal” at which he is taking aim throughout this scene. Significantly, the author does not allow his self-expression through Figaro to go unnoticed: if he plays the
disguise card for its comic value, he is aware that the contemporary public is cognisant of the multiple significative dimensions of the play.

The end of this scene constitutes a sort of *sermo mythicus* à la Lévi-Strauss: it recalls the plot-generating agon to the spectator, and represents an immediate analogon of the comedy’s overall manifest structure, just as each comic situation does. Indeed, the count, disguised as ‘Lindor’ in order to be certain that Rosine’s love is “for himself,” has placed himself in a difficult situation: he is now unable to play the card of his social status without revealing it – which, as we shall see, he finds undesirable in his interactions with both Rosine and Bartholo, her ‘tutor.’ Thus our hero, who awaits any sign of morning activity on the part of his love, wishes to remain unseen for the moment, which itself is not without comical consequences – as the difficulty of the obstacles heroes are faced with inevitably result in recourse to ruses.

Rosine, on the other hand, as the beginning of the third scene shows – through the intensional value of the window lattice that imprisons her – is in great difficulty in her situation with Bartholo. This is the reason she, too, in perfect harmony with the general structure of the theatrical genre, resorts to trickery in a way which causes a disjunction in the actantial modality of *knowing*, and thus, in the intensional reality of the on-stage universe. The following scene, whether or not it is comical in itself, shows this: she exists dramaturgically only to generate comical consequences, and ends up being, exactly like pretexts the count’s disguises will depend upon, a comedic artifice: if Bartholo imprisons Rosine, over whom he has an absolute power, she is unable to take any action at all other than inventing secret stratagems to mislead him.

It also seems quite evident, however, that Beaumarchais, before bringing into play the comic potential of the Rosine-Bartholo tension, sees a need to further justify this sort of recourse to “dishonest” practices while completing the actantial schema of the comedy’s beginning. He does this by showing us the degree to which Dr Bartholo
appears to “deserve” to be cheated – by clearly revealing the distasteful nature of the nearly warlike relationship between the roles. Here, while furthering his parody of contemporary society through common topoï which are themselves prone to ridicule, our playwright takes well-known archetypes from the comedic tradition, and very adroitly reinvents them; if Bartholo is clearly the character most often ridiculed in the play, this is precisely because he is the caricature and incarnation of what is culturally established in contemporary society’s bourgeois Establishment. In this sense comedy is shown to be a tool, as Nietzsche says, serving to overturn the icons of human society. For while Bartholo symbolises conservative social structures (he never stops citing “authority”) he embodies a rather unflattering portrait of it, and becomes the icon of everything the author is taking aim at in this endeavour to “entertain while correcting.” Thus we find, in the very first lines of the next scene, the cry for freedom of the imprisoned pupil:

SCENE III. BARTHOLO, ROSINE. As the lattice on the house’s second floor is opened, Bartholo and Rosine appear at the window.

ROSINE. – It’s so lovely to breathe the fresh air! The lattice is so rarely opened...

BARTHOLO. – What’s that paper you’re holding?

ROSINE. – It’s just a few lines of The Futile Precaution, which the singing teacher gave me yesterday.

BARTHOLO. – What’s the Futile Precaution?

ROSINE. – It’s a new play.

BARTHOLO. – Some other drama! some new kind of foolishness!

ROSINE. – I wouldn’t know.

BARTHOLO. – Well, don’t worry, the newspapers, the authorities, will deal with it for us. What a barbarous age we live in!

ROSINE. – You’re always badmouthing our poor century.

BARTHOLO. – So sorry for taking that liberty! What has it produced that we could praise? Nonsense of every kind: freedom of conscience, gravitational theory, electricity, tolerance, inoculation, quinine, the Encyclopaedias, and dramas... [I,iii: 58-9]
The author never ceases to multiply the ontological multiplicity of the comedy’s intentions – *The Futility Precaution*, as the spectator must know, is the *Barber of Seville*’s original title. Thus the public’s mind, as our analysis of the process of signification describes, is stimulated and encouraged to look for metaphoric significance in the author’s amusing theatricality. Indeed Beaumarchais, a master playwright, understands that subverting the play’s very structures is an excellent way of *increasing its comic efficacy.* The audience’s awareness being thus turned toward the contemporary context, they find, through what I have described above as the subconscious ranking of a hierarchy of possible significations, that they are guided toward the following meanings: Bartholo, who evokes the Newspapers and Authorities in a respectful, non-pejorative manner, turns himself into a caricature of them, and becomes, thanks to the playwright’s intensional manipulations, a frequent instrument serving to mock Beaumarchais’ real enemies; furthermore, the Doctor is paradigmatically portrayed as a figure of all that is undesirable in the contemporary “establishment:” usurped authority, undeserved privileges, hypocrisy, etc. *The society of cultural truth* that he represents is invested with values that make it the perfect target for ridicule – an opportunity that the *society of natural truth*, itself excluded for the most part from all power structures, seizes with brio throughout the four acts of the comedy.

It is in this sense that the author then stages the first ruse invented by the heroine, by manipulating the immanent structure of the agon in such a way that its comic potential is realized: Rosine, who hardly even possesses the right to consider herself a member of the society that oppresses her, makes an effort to trick Bartholo – which tells us she is aware of Lindor’s presence below at the street level; cleverly, she exploits values she does not share – for the sheet-music song, which is the property of the music Maestro hired by Bartholo, is an object he himself does not wish to see
blown away and lost, especially since he is suspicious of the possibility of any contact
between “his” Rosine and the world outside:

[The paper slips from Rosine's hand and falls into the road.]

ROSINE. – Oh! My song! My song! It dropped down there while I was
listening to you. Run down at once, Sir, or I shall lose my song.

BARTHOLO. – Why the deuce can’t folks stick to things when they’ve got
‘em. [Leaves balcony.]

ROSINE [Looking down and signalling]: Sst!
[The Count appears.]
Pick it up and get out of sight. [The Count springs forward, picks up the paper, and
returns to his hiding-place.]

BARTHOLO [coming out at the street door]. – Where is it? I can’t see anything.

ROSINE. – Under the balcony, by the wall.

BARTHOLO. – A nice sort of job you’ve given me! Has anyone come past?

ROSINE. – I haven’t seen anyone.

BARTHOLO, [to himself]. – And I was silly enough to come and look for it!
Bartholo, my lad, you are a simpleton. This will teach you never to open a
lattice that opens on to the street. [He goes back into the house.] [I,iii: 59-60]

Once the audience has identified Bartholo’s unlikeable characteristics, they find it easier
to laugh at him for his ignorance of the way in which ruses express the paradigm of a
comical ellipsis while questioning, in a very pertinent manner, his actantial role as the
count’s obstacle. If he evokes a certain suspicion, one nevertheless sees that the Doctor
is unsure of himself, for he addresses no explicit accusations. Thus his last line, above,
does not compromise the scene’s comic quality; yet it offers a certain contribution to
the further development of the Doctor’s identity, which will facilitate the future
apprehension of comic events by the audience.

From a theoretical standpoint, we observe that the author avoids vilifying the
young characters who constitute the “hero’s society” in the comedy. Thus Rosine
expresses, immediately, that she regretted having to stoop to lying, showing a sensitivity
even towards the old man she should hate – while speaking of what I have identified as
the *sine qua non* of the comedic plot – the inequality that leads necessarily to recourse to disguise and trickery. One will note here that the rather tender quality of the girl’s reflexions keep the audience from taking the soliloquy itself as comical; moreover, Rosine seems to be thinking of a teleological project that goes well beyond the fact of having briefly gotten rid of her master:

ROSINE, still on the balcony. – My unhappiness is my excuse. Alone, confined in the house, subject to the persecution of a man I hate, am I to blame if I endeavour to escape from slavery?

BARTHOLO, reappearing on the balcony. – Go inside again, Signora. It’s my fault if you’ve lost your music, but it’s a misfortune that shan’t occur again. I promise you. [He locks the shutters.] [I,iii]

Here Rosine’s actantial role is fully manifested: apart from her function as an object, she is part of a group of roles, a purely immanent “team” of accomplices which despite the evident spatial distribution of all characters in the outside camp or the inside one, has yet to be constituted or even established. Bartholo, for his part, is shown as the obstacle to his ward’s free will; the “alliance” that will ultimately unite her with the count, while it does not yet actually exist, is precisely what brings to birth, virtually before its conception, a direct rivalry between Bartholo and Almaviva. We shall return to this point – the passage from “potential contracts” to “actual contracts” is revealing: the very existence of collective identities makes necessary the existence of an intermediate state in which the individual identities begin to take on a the functionality of plural identities that are envisaged for the future – which confirms, in my view, the intensional nature of the phenomenon of identity. This is, in a sense, what has already begun to take shape in the Figaro-Almaviva partnership, in that the barber has avowed himself “ready to serve your excellency once again in any way he may be pleased to order me.” [I,ii]

Indeed, the following scene, which might be viewed by traditional analysis as being that which “generates the action of the plot,” is the one which manifests the
immanent in all that constitutes the actantial roles of the principal characters of the
comy; it is the scene which marks the end of the contractual becoming and the
beginnings of an explicitly recognized partnership, and furthermore, a strategy which –
as I have explained – will exploit intensional illusions in order to deceive an obstacle
cracter who, on the pragmatic plane, is in a situation of advantage over the young
roles. This is, once again, a physical and spatial exclusion, frequently described in the
didascalia, which shows the risks involved, as well as in the dialogue, which shows us
that what is amusing is the recourse to trickery against authority figures, not only thanks to the
staging of the two paradigms of socio-cultural disguise, but here it is seen even in
Figaro’s playful parody of Rosine’s trick:

Scene iv. [The Count and Figaro re-enter cautiously.]

THE COUNT. – Now that they have gone in we’ll have a look at this
mysterious song. There’s certainly something queer about it. Why! It’s a letter!

FIGARO. – And he wanted to know what the Futile Precaution was!

THE COUNT [reading excitedly]. – ‘Your devotion arouses my interest. As
soon as my guardian has left the house sing something or other to this tune –
something which will reveal to me the name, estate, and intentions of one
who seems to display such constancy in his attachment to the unfortunate
Rosine.’

FIGARO [imitating Rosine]. – My song! My song! It’s dropped down there! Oh
run down, Sir, run down. [He laughs.] Oh, these women! If you want to see
how clever the most artless of women can become – try locking her up! [I, iv]

Thus we observe not only that the utopophilic and elliptical paradigms can be subtly
integrated within a single situation – Rosine adopts the posture of a music pupil whose very
identity is partly put into question (she ought not to lose a song given to her by her teacher)
and at the same time, she is obviously hiding from Bartholo the diligent student she
“really” is, having in fact lost none of her materials and therefore not in any way
harming the binary relationship of the pupil with her teacher. Moreover, these two
comic paradigms, along with the entirety of the socio-cultural situation they imply, can
be and are in fact projected by Figaro onto himself to amuse the count. In other words, composite comical situations can be constituted by the creation of multiple individual paradigms by virtue of the ontologically “multiplicable and stackable” nature of the projection of mental intensional objects onto the transcendental Subject.

Here let us examine this example in detail (see Fig. 1.7). This illustration represents a series of comical disjunctions in which each compromises, in its own unique way, a cultural meta-logic, and which arise in each case directly from the signification of the text: (1) Figaro, $S_i^*$, momentarily leaves aside the social ‘reality’ of the situation, his dialogue with Almaviva, $S_j^*$. This elliptical comic paradigm is the ellipsis or ‘skipping over’ by Figaro’s conscious awareness (solid arrow) of his own true identity.
(solid circles surrounding his subject or self and the subject of the count). (2) Instead of recognizing his true situation of being in dialogue with the count, Figaro then playfully and mockingly but perfectly clearly projects onto his own person an imagined simulacrum of Rosine (the dotted line circle, representing a false identity, around himself), which can be described as a pseudo-utopophilic projection, as he is ‘seeing’ a social reality we do not recognize as present (utopophilic) but projects it onto a valid object, his person (thus the prefix-pseudo, meaning not entirely absent). (3) Next, Figaro projects onto this false self, this pseudo-utopophilic intension, the entire situation we just witnessed with Rosine and the Doctor, by addressing an imagined and absent simulacrum of Bartholo, {}, which, due to this factual absence of any subject or person onto whom to project the doctor, is a true utopophilic comic paradigm (his identity is represented in the illustration by the “false” dotted-line intensions surrounding the non-subject {}, in particular his physical being, the innermost dotted-line circle, his identity as her tutor, a binary relationship shown as connected circles in broken lines, while his identity as a doctor, being the middle dotted-line circle). (4) Within this purely imaginary situation (which is nevertheless accurately taken from Figaro’s memory of a ‘valid’ event) the evident falsehood of his posture (his apparent but exaggeratedly expressed excitement over the ‘loss’ of a song we know not to be lost) compromises the intensional consciousness of Bartholo, despite his actual absence. This is represented by the tiny undulating arrow (the wavy appearance is meant to depict intensionally destructive energy or effect). And finally (5) the caricature of Rosine that Figaro is enacting stages and makes obvious the falsehood of her entire posture, which has the effect of relativising and mocking, however gently in front of her lover, the very identity of Rosine herself, both as it is projected onto Figaro and as it exists in

14 I call it ‘pseudo-utopophilic’ because here Figaro is not represented as himself, in terms of the being upon which the intension of Rosine’s identity is projected, and is therefore both himself and a socio-cultural nullity, even though the projection is of the utopophilic class.
We also notice that in Figure 1.7 I have illustrated Rosine’s immaterial disguise, her feigned excitement over the false loss, only in terms of the illusion she creates; in fact she is also hiding a social reality, her desire to send a letter down to her suitor, but this was not needed in the illustration and would have made it even more difficult to interpret.\footnote{We also notice that in Figure 1.7 I have illustrated Rosine’s immaterial disguise, her feigned excitement over the false loss, only in terms of the illusion she creates; in fact she is also hiding a social reality, her desire to send a letter down to her suitor, but this was not needed in the illustration and would have made it even more difficult to interpret.}

We notice in this illustration that neither Figaro nor Almaviva see their own identities as being threatened by the disintensions caused by the comic quality of Figaro’s scene; in other words, on the one hand, the count’s identity is not ridiculed here, and on the other, Figaro’s is safe from ridicule as well, despite the way he implicates himself by himself playing a girl’s tricks, because he is operating an entirely conscious and deliberate projection – which means that the spectator sees Figaro’s identity as sharing none of the fragility and falsehood that we see in the imaginary Rosine he plays and compromised in “mnemonic effigy.” Therefore, we may conclude that a parody staged \textit{voluntarily} by a character seems \textit{not} to engender the ridiculous disintension of his own identities – unless he himself appears to overlook a pertinent intensional detail. We shall return to this point.

Following this amusing little scene, Beaumarchais, once again showing his penchant for subtle and complex situations, causes the situation to teeter, quite daringly, from the spirit of a traditional comedy and more toward a modern psychological drama; wherever his characters appear to be capable of realistic emotions, these feelings tend to \textit{decrease} the comic quality of the scene when they show themselves. Here for instance, the count is quite moved, after thinking of Rosine’s plight, and this subtly tender effect is not lost on Figaro, despite the fact that he, in keeping with his character, attempts to console his old master with more gentle levity:

\begin{quote}
THE COUNT. – My dearest Rosine!

FIGARO. – My Lord, I am no longer unaware of the motives of your masquerade; you are making love in perspective. [I, iv]
\end{quote}

\footnote{We also notice that in Figure 1.7 I have illustrated Rosine’s immaterial disguise, her feigned excitement over the false loss, only in terms of the illusion she creates; in fact she is also hiding a social reality, her desire to send a letter down to her suitor, but this was not needed in the illustration and would have made it even more difficult to interpret.}
By evoking both the topology of the concrete situation and that of the socio-cultural actantial reality, Figaro seems to be seeking to soften a difficult moment. The author is therefore capable of integrating humour and emotion, in a way that partly contradicts Bergson’s observation (1812: 4) that emotion “is the greatest enemy of laughter.” I would re-interpret this, therefore: rather than stating that emotion and laughter are mutually exclusive, it is perhaps more correct to observe a possibility of interference.

Neither is it the mere ambiguity of the word-play here on the word “perspective” that tends to stimulate a degree of laughter in the audience; rather, it is the way in which the two pertinent meanings, according to the analysis of signification we saw in the foreword, are favourably suggested by the contextual clues present in the scene: if one of the senses is relevantly evoked by the concrete situation (the angle of elevation toward Rosine’s balcony) and its objective logic, the other is perceived as an intensional “super-Gestalt” determined by the socio-cultural metalogic implied by the identities of the various actors, and of which the actantial situation is the reflection (the count must be constrained to qualify his hopes and mitigate his actions as a result of the cultural interdiction which legally protect the doctor’s advantages). Thus we observe once again that the preponderance of concrete logic seems effectively to ‘deculture’ a metalogic which is evidently more fragile as it lacks any palpable foundations. So it is indeed the way in which the physical sense subsumes the cultural reality that causes, as our theory of the comic explains, any slight amusement in this case.

The majority of the dialogue which follows this exchange is lacking in comic disintensions, which suggests this artful playwright is guided by some other purpose for the moment. This purpose, it turns out, is none other than the final stage of Figaro’s engagement in a contractual arrangement with the count, specifically an agreement to attempt a strategy which is risky in the sense that it constitutes a challenge to the ambient culture’s norms, and to its customs and laws, in just the manner suggested by
my term “society of natural truth.” The accomplices, while recognizing the existence of the cultural institutions they plan to overturn and subvert wherever possible, in fact only respect a “natural law” according to which a forced marriage would be undesirable and unjust if it lacked true love. In the following passage, we observe the manner in which Almaviva evaluates his adversary, while Figaro, continuing to serve the extra-diegetic function of icon of the author, actually explicitly evokes the manifest functions of comedy. The count has just learnt that Rosine is not, contrary to the Doctor’s form of address (“Signora”) yet married to Bartholo:

**THE COUNT.** [excitedly]. – [...] that’s good news indeed! [...] There isn’t a moment to lose. I must win her love and frustrate this base alliance that he’s planning for her. Do you know him, this guardian of hers?

**FIGARO.** – As well as my own mother.

**THE COUNT.** – What sort of a man is he?

**FIGARO.** – [...] Course, mean infatuated with his ward, jealous beyond all measure where she’s concerned, and she hates him like poison.

**THE COUNT.** – And his likeable qualities?

**FIGARO.** – He hasn’t any!

**THE COUNT.** – So much the better! Is he honest?

**FIGARO.** – Just enough to avoid being hanged.

**THE COUNT.** – Better still. To punish a rogue and at the same time to achieve one’s own happiness...

**FIGARO.** – Is to combine public interest and private advantage! Truly a master stroke of morality, My Lord! [I,iv]

As we have suggested, the aesthetic and the ideology of these two younger men, despite their differing social rank, are those of the *Mythos of Spring* coined by Northrop Frye (1957).

What follows is at last what one might call the “plot-generating scene” of the play; here the first stratagem is invented by a dialogue we have seen in part, and which explicitly evokes the actantial stakes of the comedy:
THE COUNT. – You were saying that it's fear of young men that makes him
lock his doors?

FIGARO. – Yes, to everyone, without exception. If he could wall her up with
bricks he would do so.

THE COUNT. – Ah! the Devil! That's not good. Could you by any chance
get access to the house?

FIGARO. – Could I? In the first place the house I'm living in belongs to the
worthy Doctor and he lodges me gratis. [...] And what's more his barber, his
surgeon, his apothecary. There's never a scrape of a razor or probe of a lancet
or squirt of a syringe in his household except at the hands of yours truly.

THE COUNT. Happy Figaro! You're going to see my Rosine! Do you realize
how lucky you are?

FIGARO. Those are truly the words of a lover! Do I adore her, too? If only
you could take my place!

THE COUNT. Ah, if only we could get around all the household staff!...

FIGARO. That's what I was just thinking. [...] By busying people with their
own interests, you can prevent them from interfering with those of others.

THE COUNT. True. And so?

FIGARO. Well I'm just considering in my head whether my medicine cabinet
might offer a few innocent little ways... [...] They all use my services. I would
only have to treat them all at the same time.

THE COUNT. But the old doctor might get suspicious.

FIGARO. We'll have to operate so fast that suspicion has no time to pop into
his mind. I've got an idea. The Royal Cavalry Regiment just arrived in this city.

THE COUNT. The Colonel is a friend of mine.

FIGARO. Good. Introduce yourself at the Doctor's house dressed as a
horseman, with a billeting notice; he will have to house you; and me, I'll take
care of the rest.

THE COUNT. Excellent!

FIGARO. It would be a good idea for you to act like you've had a few drinks.
[...] and act a bit wacky, in this inebriated appearance.

THE COUNT. What for?

FIGARO. Just so he drops his guard, and assumes you'll soon be in a hurry to
sleep, rather than scheming around his house. [I, iv: 65-6]
The reader and spectator who feel no amusement whatever at the mere mention of these disguises has not mobilized his or her socio-cultural imagination, which must mentally represent the plans *just as though they were actually perceived*. Again, the comic seems to be purely *paradigmatic in nature*, as an imagined situation can amuse for the same reasons as its actual realization does. In any case, to what degree can we speak of reality in the theatre? It is indeed this “ontological gap” that amuses us whenever theatricality deliberately disrupts the suspended disbelief in any case.

Continuing his display of mounting comic crescendos, the author creates, just after having evoked it with words, a “preparatory rehearsal” of the comedy’s first disguise. Doubting whether his noble accomplice is a good enough actor, Figaro, as a perfect *meneur de jeu*, has the count practice his impression of drunkenness, and despite the “two degrees of separation” (a fiction within a fiction) between the play and the public, we see once again how the audience is given cause for laughter by virtue of their intensional sensibility:

FIGARO. – The problem is you may not be able to play the part, which is difficult... A drunken soldier....

THE COUNT. – You’ve got to be kidding me. [Puts on a drunken manner.] Is this the house of Doctor Bartholo, friend?

FIGARO. – Not bad, I admit; your legs should just be a little more unsteady. [An even more drunken manner.] Is this not the house...?

THE COUNT. – Come now! That’s the drunkenness of a working man.

FIGARO. – It’s the right kind. The really enjoyable kind. [I,.iv]

We see here the way in which Figaro, as “champion of the people,” bests the nobles in several senses, because they are less “knowledgeable” in joie-de-vivre.

Before staging the first consequence of this actantial conflict – a first complete disguise that will gain the count entry into the realm of Bartholo’s house – the author, aware that *increasing* the inequality of the struggle will instill a greater “need” in the
society of youth, introduces still higher stakes: Bartholo decides he will take Rosine as his bride, despite her opposition, in just one day. Furthermore Beaumarchais, whose dramaturgical efficacy never ceases to impress us, reveals these bad tidings while introducing a new character, though absent, that of Don Bazile, the obstacle character’s only real adjutant, who is none other than Rosine’s music teacher. Figaro and Almaviva, realizing that someone is coming out of the house, hide themselves once again.

Scene V. The Count and Figaro, hidden. Bartholo comes out of the house talking.

BARTHOLO. – I’ll be right back. No one is permitted to enter. How stupid I was to have come downstairs! As soon as she asked, I should have known... And Bazile hasn’t arrived! He was supposed to have arranged everything for my marriage to take place secretly tomorrow, and I’ve received no news from him! Let’s go and see what’s holding him up. [I,v]

Figaro, as the strategist of the action, responds to this news, in a subtly theatrical way, by explaining its significance in terms of the plot; one could nearly say that he is aware of the manner in which the inequality of the agon increases the tension and quality of the ruses they have planned. Indeed, while the count himself is devastated by the news, Figaro is not discouraged – on the contrary, he is simply more motivated, nearly enthused: “My Lord, the difficulty of succeeding only adds to the necessity of trying.”

Almaviva now more than before feels the need to respond in secret to the “love letter” sent to him by Rosine. He is shown, because he is blocked by the “difficulty” of the situation, as being constrained to do so by means of a “private code” transmitted through the vehicle of a dissembling medium. Here we see the way in which the comic of the situation is constituted by the disguising of the very existence of this reply within an event that has no ostensible significance, a “something or other” of Seville music; Almaviva’s goals, his recognition of his interlocutor and the importance he attaches to the message must be “neglected” or not manifested (constituting in this way elliptical comic paradigms for those, such as the spectator, who recognize their “hidden
presence”) by an actor who seems, once again, to address himself without cause to a nothingness – which is what forces us to recognize the presence of the utopophilic paradigm which also characterizes the phenomenon of disguise:

FIGARO. – Doesn’t she say: **sing something or other?** which means, sing as though you were singing... just to sing.

THE COUNT. – Since I’ve aroused her interest without her knowing who I am, we’ll keep the assumed name of Lindor: I shall enjoy my triumph all the more. [He opens the paper which Rosine through down.] But how am I going to sing this? I can’t make up the words....

FIGARO. – Anything that comes into your head will do, My Lord. When it comes to love it doesn’t matter whether what one says makes sense or not. Here, take my guitar.

THE COUNT. – But what do you expect me to do with it? I play so badly.

FIGARO. – Surely there can’t be anything a man like you can’t make some attempt at! Go on! With the back of your hand..... So! **Plan, plan, plan,** you can’t sing without a guitar in Seville... you would be found out and sent about your business in no time! [Figaro keeps close to the wall under the balcony.]

THE COUNT [walking up and down, singing to his own accompaniment] –
Since you so wish, my name I will reveal
Although unknown I would adore.
Once known what can I hope for more?
But still – my mistress’ wish I must obeys.

FIGARO [whispering]. – Very good. Keep it up, My Lord.

THE COUNT [as before]. –
I am Lindor, a name
As yet unknown to rank and fame.
Wealth too, alas, I cannot proffer
My love for you is all I have to offer.

FIGARO. – The Devil! I couldn’t have done better myself, and I fancy my self at the game!

THE COUNT [at before]. –
Tenderly each day I sing
From love for you I hope for nothing
Save for a glimpse of those bright eyes
As you, my love, give ear unto my rhapsodies.

FIGARO. – Goodness me! For that last bit I can only.... [Kisses the hem of his master’s cloak.]

THE COUNT. – Figaro?!

FIGARO. – Excellency?
THE COUNT. – Do you think she heard me?

ROSINE [within, singing]. –

All things assure me that I ust
My heart to Lindor’s care entrust.

[The noise of a casement being slammed is heard.]

FIGARO. – Now do you think you’ve been heard? [I,vi]

This scene is rich in intensional structures, turned to the comical, which merit our attention. First let us look at the way in which it “proves” the ideological correctness, in terms of the “society of natural truth,” of the aims and the means of the Figaro-Count partnership; while despising alliances that respond, expediently, to traditional socio-cultural considerations such as family politics, birth, class and money, the count wishes to be loved for himself, without consideration for his fame and fortune, better known in Madrid than here in Seville. Here in this southern city, therefore, although a member of a distant elite, he claims to be a member of a “natural” society which rejects, in a manner which recalls the Buddhist concept of nirvana, the worldly and mundane cares of the ambient society, whose conservative norms, which are constraining and hierarchical in a manner that seems artificial and gratuitous in this light, are thus undesirable.

For Almaviva it’s true love that counts – and whose ‘natural’ quality seems, despite his aristocratic lot, to seduce this “leftist before his time” that is Figaro (who has, we will also recall, agreed to serve without promise of remuneration). The “proof” that they “are in the right” – that their philosophy is “just” – must be the way that “in matters of love, it doesn’t matter if it makes sense or not,” and the consequence of this “natural truth,” as we have seen, is the natural beauty that emanates from Almaviva’s song during this scene. And, is this not verified and validated by the way in which Rosine responds with acceptance of “Lindor’s” effort? The point is that one cannot overlook the importance of the way in which the count has deliberately, philosophically,
discarded the possibility of using rank and status, and in so doing he has taken a position that the status quo of the establishment and the powers that be have no primacy over the “natural law” of love. To take this position, as each spectator is no doubt constrained to do, is to take sides in favour of the “society of Spring” which mocks the society of culture – which underlines again the harmony between the story we find in comedy and the extradiegetic functions it possesses, as an instrument through which a contemporary society is ridiculed and criticised.

This “ideological” taking of sides is accompanied by a series of ontologically diverse consequences on the intensional and epistemological planes; each such communicative event, which incidentally appear to be perfectly sincere in a sense, to the two lovers, is mediated by an ensemble of amusing lies: the interpretation of the spoken word’s enunciation is here, as elsewhere in the comedy, is divided into four veridictory possibilities – including the points of view of Almaviva-Figaro, that of the “household” that has been fooled by the “something or other” indifference of the song, and that of Rosine, who, despite the sincerity of Almaviva’s expressed love, is the victim of an “innocent” lie operated by the disguise of the count within the role of a bachelor who has no money. All these are added, of course, to the fourth point of view, the theatrical frame of reference, according to which the entire thing is nothing but a fiction represented by actors playing a comedy piece by Beaumarchais.

Is it a pure coincidence that these four veridictory possibilities correspond exactly to what I have presented in the modified semiotic square of veridiction, in terms of the modalities of the relations between designation and signification? If the count’s message is entirely “false” to every real spectator in contemporary Paris, and “true” for Almaviva and Figaro, does it not constitute an “ellipsis” for Rosine, who doesn’t know that this suitor is an even better catch than he’s letting on? Furthermore, this singing telegram is, is it not, strictly a “lie” with respect to Bartholo’s household, who see it
exactly at face value, incorrectly, as the sound of some young man singing “something
or other” for the sake of singing?

It seems here that our playwright, with his fine sensitivity to the comic potential
of the spoken word, has instinctively attained the fullest height of the veridictory
fulfillment of the intensional grammar of disguise. Nevertheless, as we saw in
examining the comedy’s opening scene, the very creation of a paradigm causing a socio-
cultural disjunction, whose effect is naturally the disintension of the social context of
the situation, does not guarantee that the level of amusement of the audience is at its
highest: the latter also seems to depend upon the stakes or value of the intensional
error, not simply on the form of the comic paradigm – if the disguising of this
communicative transaction appears to be funny, is it not because any contact between
Rosine and the young suitor is precisely what Bartholo, and his entire team of domestic
employees, is trying to prevent? We are once again guided to an increased appreciation
of an expanded interpretation of the Socratic observation on the nature of the
ridiculous: whatever the degree of explicitness of a comic paradigm, the latter is a
necessary but not sufficient cause for laughter, because the paradigm must also bring
into question the “intensional sense of self” of the subject that commits the error in
question. If Bartholo were comically to manifest an ignorance of some aspect of the
law, for instance, that would amuse us considerably less than the possibility that he
showed a lack of understanding of some aspect of medicine – as he himself is a doctor.
The strength of the situation we have just examined, if its comic force is released by the
paradigms we have considered above, is derived also from the raising of the question of
Bartholo’s actantial identity; he is jealous, infatuated with Rosine and determined to gain
the upper hand over any opposition, and yet he allows himself to be taken in by a
simple ruse created by the “society of natural truth” whose evident goal is to effect a
seduction or wooing and a forbidden marriage. Therefore it is particularly clear that
while the cause of laughter is a socio-cultural disjunction provoking the collapse of an intension or identity that has some cultural significance, the value and definition (the degree of manifestation and thus “visibility”) of the intension thus compromised is precisely what determines, in the context of the whole state of affairs present, the degree of laughter. We shall return to this in the second part.

It is for this reason that the kind of theatricality realized by Figaro as spokesman of the author is particularly pleasing in this play: if these interventions on the author’s part are almost always a sort of comment on the way in which oppression of the young by society justifies and explains their recourse to trickery, this is because the well-defined nature of the actantial roles furnishes the disguises with their comical intensity. Furthermore, Beaumarchais seems to understand that these theatrical interruptions, far from compromising the value of the social intensions that the play represents, adds a dimension to the comic disjunctions it mediates. In other words, the author is aware that entirely fictitious paradigms provoke laughter in the same manner as disrupted intensions seen in true life experience – and thus that the play can rely on anthropological social structures to lend weight to the majority of its comic effects, while compromising these very structures to amuse the public. These paradigms, both internal and external with respect to the comedy’s fabula, are equally evoked with perfect clarity in Figaro’s multiply significative lines; at the end of the first act, for instance, seems to make comment on Rosine’s clever tricks while comparing the difficulty of the count’s situation with the challenges the playwright has set for himself:

FIGARO. – Such cunning! What love!
THE COUNT. – Do you think she’ll consent to be mine, Figaro?
FIGARO. – She’ll jump from that balcony rather than fail you.
THE COUNT. – Then it’s settled. I’m Rosine’s – for life!
FIGARO. – You are forgetting, My Lord, she can’t hear you now!
THE COUNT. – Master Figaro, just let me tell you this: She is going to be my wife. If you help me and conceal my identity.... you understand.... you know me sufficiently....

FIGARO. – Yes, I agree. Come, Figaro, my lad, forward to fortune!

THE COUNT. – Let us retire now in case we arouse suspicion.

FIGARO, vigorously. – Me, I’m going into the house – and with one stroke of my wand I’ll lull vigilance to sleep, awake the transports of love, thwart the machinations of jealousy, confound base intrigue, and overcome every obstacle that confronts us. As for you, My Lord, to my house, into soldier’s uniform with billeting notice in your hand and plenty of gold in your pockets.

THE COUNT. – We’ll need gold?

FIGARO. – Gold, my God yes, gold: it’s the nerve of all plots! [I, vi]

This end of the first act, besides its theatrical function consisting of the amalgamation of Figaro and the author, thus increases, paradoxically, both the light-heartedness and the excitement of the play, in order to guarantee the audience a good laugh. As we shall see, the comical crescendo of the play will continue to rise in this way – for Beaumarchais, knowing how to exploit the socio-cultural weight of the intensions that constitute the characters’ identities, does everything he can to mediate them in destabilising situations – whence our image of a “house of cards” whose fragility seems only to affect the “upper floors” consisting in the anthropomorphic structures representing the society of cultural truth. The youths, who are manifestly excluded from the relevant social institutions, need only remain faithful to their “ideology” in order to further both the “individual and public good” by overturning, by means of the comic, the contemporary establishment. Thus the “culture of theatre,” in the Barber’s time, had not yet made a conscious distinction between what I have called relativisation and deculturation: the “youths,” whose symbolic image is that of nature subverting culture, operates both types of disintensions without discrimination, although within the context of a supposedly “natural” politics.
Act Two

The first scene of the second act permits Rosine, at last alone for a moment, to write a new letter to “Lindor” without Bartholo’s knowledge (nor that of his domestic workers, who are potential spies.) Not only is she alone, however, she is also more imprisoned than before, and the need to act in absolute secrecy seems to her to be more acute than ever:

Scene One, Rosine, alone, a candlestick in her hand.
She sits down at the table and begins to write.

Marceline is sick, all the house is occupied, and no one will see me writing. I don’t know whether walls have eyes — or ears, or whether my Argus-eyed keeper has some wicked fairy who keeps him informed of everything that happens, but I can’t utter a word or move a hand or foot without his guessing my intentions at once... Ah, Lindor! [Sealing the letter] I’ll seal it now though I don’t know when or how I shall be able to get it into his hands. I saw him through the casement bars in conversation with Figaro the barber. He’s a good fellow and has often shown his sympathy for me. If I could have a word with him for a moment.... [II, I]

The mere sight of this victim of oppression, whose feelings are clearly visible, suffices to attenuate the comic potential of the fact that she is speaking in soliloquy: this pragmatic condition not being made explicit by any actant acting as an eavesdropper, the spectator’s attention is therefore directed in an empathetic movement, and the implicitly comic paradigm of a person speaking to himself or herself is relegated to the distant background: and if a member of the audience shows the slightest smile, he or she would likely attribute the phenomenon to the pleasure of the theatrical spectacle itself, whose artifices are accepted by convention.

This scene, which appears in the original French version at the beginning of the second act, serves mainly to advance the pragmatic logic of the plot, which although it generates a number of comical devices which will be exploited later, also must respond
to concrete exigencies, in particular the exchange of letters between the lovers. The following scene once again accentuates the ambiguous tension which can arise between the comic and other emotions; this suggests that the latter do not necessarily smother the former – for if Figaro here amuses himself without Rosine’s becoming aware of it, he is no less sensitive than the audience to the touching quality of her sincere worries.

ROSINE, startled. – Ah! Mister Figaro, I am glad to see you!

FIGARO. – I hope I find you well, Madam?

ROSINE. – Not very well, Figaro. I’m dying of boredom.

FIGARO. – I believe it. You’d need to be dull-witted to thrive in this sort of life.

ROSINE. – Who were you having such a lively conversation with out there? Not that I was noticing particularly, but...

FIGARO. – A young kinsman of mine. A most promising young man, clever, sensitive, talented, and quite attractive to look at.

ROSINE. – Very nice, I must say! And his name?

FIGARO. – Lindor. He hasn’t any money— but he might have found himself a good position if he hadn’t left Madrid in a hurry.

ROSINE, lightheadedly. – Oh, he’ll find something yet, Figaro, he’ll find something! A young man such as you’ve described can’t fail to make a name for himself.

FIGARO, aside. So far, so good. [To Rosine.] Unfortunately he has one great defect which will always stand in the way of his getting on in the world.

ROSINE. – A defect, Figaro? A defect? Are you sure?

FIGARO. – He’s in love.

This first dialogue between Rosine and Figaro shows us something of their relationship: cordial and respectful, yet quite sincere. Rosine had already said that she found him kind; here she hides neither her letter nor her unhappiness. This observation is important, as it shows us that the young woman, when she is rather at ease, is not at all of dishonest character. Figaro, for his part, if he is not quite insincere, he wraps his words in enigmas, word-play, and philosophical judgments, as always. One might
believe, nevertheless, that his tendency to comment on people has he does here (“boredom only pleases the dull-witted”) constitutes more than a mere development of his character: if the audience has become accustomed to his remarks, whose philosophical nature constantly recalls an “exterior and anthropological” take on human nature, this is because Beaumarchais is introducing into the spectator’s memory a context designed to guide his or her judgment, according to the “protocol of analysis of signification,” in such a way that the socio-critical and rather cynical meanings are seen as relevant parts of interpretation in the Gestalten through which the action is perceived. The author, in other words, is preparing the public for the apprehension of ironic, hidden and polemical significations. We shall return to this idea.

In this passage we also see the manner in which Figaro, who seems to be enjoying some degree of self-amusement, is always playing a double-role, although the words he utters do not seem quite insincere: the barber has already inspired our trust, in the sense that we are confident by now that he has the count’s interests at heart. In this way, his joking remarks, although they are made at naive Rosine’s expense to some extent, appear rather harmless. It is doubtless for this reason that we see no untoward interference between his humour, his “secret aims” on the one hand (he projects an image of himself which hides his gently cynical outlook) and Rosine’s sweet and amusing emotion on the other (she seems unaware of how transparent her love appears despite the attempt she makes at disguising it by means of apparently “disinterested” questions about Lindor, which shows up as a likeable timidity that the spectator interprets as a disguise paradigm, all the while remembering that “Lindor” isn’t what he appears either).

Thus we see three subtle disguises in action in the conversation’s continuation: Figaro, Rosine and Almaviva all present themselves, for different reasons, according to intensional structures which differ (rather innocently, one must agree) from what we see
as “true;” thus these lying games, if they provide us with some degree of amusement, signify no real treachery. We realize that if Figaro shows real concern for Rosine, he is pretending to have no ulterior motives, despite the stratagem he is pursuing; pretending in fact to criticize the count, he confirms his love for Rosine, while preserving the illusion that our young hero has created in order to “be loved for oneself.”

ROSINE. – He’s in love! And you call that a defect?
FIGARO. – Of course – considering that he hasn’t any money.

ROSINE. – Oh, isn’t fate unjust? And has he mentioned who it is... he’s in love with? I’m always inquisitive....
FIGARO. – You are the last person, Madam, to whom I wish to make such a disclosure.

ROSINE, concerned. – Why, Mr. Figaro? I’m very discreet and I’m very much interested in this young man of yours. Do tell me –
FIGARO, looking slyly at her. – Then think of the prettiest little creature imaginable, gentle, tender, charming, in fact quite irresistible. So light of foot, so trim of figure, such shapely arms, such rosy lips, such hands, such teeth, such eyes....

ROSINE. – And she’s here in this town?
FIGARO. – In this very neighbourhood.
ROSINE. – And on this street perhaps?
FIGARO. – Nearer than that.

ROSINE. – But how charming... for this young relation of yours. And the young lady is...
FIGARO. – Didn’t I mention her name?
ROSINE. – It’s the one thing you’ve forgotten, Mr. Figaro! Do tell me at once. If a certain person were to come into the room I might never know.
FIGARO. – And you really must know? Why then... the young lady is... the ward of your guardian. [II, ii]

We notice as readers or spectators the way in which these “lies,” which disguise the intentions of both characters present, along with those of Almaviva, seem only to exist
for the innocent purpose of decreasing the danger of their plans, which are collective
and shared risks in any case.