

**Toward a Semiotic Theory of the Comic and  
An Aesthetic of Comedy:**

Explanation and Interpretation of  
Eighteenth-Century French Comedy

*by*

Peter G. Martenson, Ph.D.

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## FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION (2002)

To everything there is a season; this book, an adaptation of research undertaken during my stay at the *Ecole normale supérieure* in Paris from 1996 to 1997, is substantially similar to the doctoral thesis I wrote there, with certain amendments: the most important of these is the change of methodological point of view. To be clear, I have not changed in any significant way my own attempts at useful approaches; what has been partly dispensed with is the need I perceived at that time to frame any discussion of semiotic theory within the context of how it differs from the school of Greimas, whose work is so well-known in Continental Europe that I believed it would greatly assist any reader if I were to take his methodological underpinning as a starting-point for a theoretical study written in French.

Certainly semiotics in English is much more frequently spoken of in terms of other schools of thought: Peirce, Eco, Culler and Sebeok are perhaps the best-known examples of these. Each school brings to our discipline a different set of virtues, with different potential weaknesses as well. This is perhaps why I found it most useful to develop carefully my own set of methodological tools, with the help of other well-established areas in the human sciences and philosophy; and thankfully I later found that this approach, while overly ambitious, has proven quite consistent with the new wave in philosophical semiotics: a *transcendental pragmatic* view that is gaining ground, in part thanks to such thinkers as Karl-Otto Apel.

So in certain discussions I have removed references to the Greimassian framework appearing in the original French edition of this work, sometimes substituting other comparisons that I hope will be helpful to the reader. I have

nevertheless decided to reproduce them faithfully in other places, to preserve the rhetorical flow of certain arguments and lines of reasoning.

## **FOREWORD TO THE FRENCH EDITION (1997)**

Current semiotics does not explain the comic literature; the question is whether this is because semiotics is not the relevant tool for the job, or if it is simply inadequate when faced with the problems of the former. In my view, the answer to this is clear: the comic is surely a part of that which semiotics studies, or is intended to explain – and so laughter constitutes evidence of the “incompleteness” of semiotics precisely in the 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

very stuff that constitutes the ridiculous as it is found in comic texts. With certain reformulations 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 “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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

philosophy underlying the discipline has resulted not only in a lack of criteria for objectivity but also for neutrality.<sup>3</sup> 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]

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

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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 supplemented ontological sensibility. In essence, semiotics must take in to account *both sides* of the metaphysical debate seen in Plato's *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's 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's 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's 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Its logic is a 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

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<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> *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.

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 “bitter-sweet.” 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 *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 figurativization 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 concretization (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 means, within the imagination of the interpreting intelligence; (3) the donation of cultural sense, by means of the same anthropomorphic archetypes specified by the culture of the listener and projected onto the intuitive notion of the concrete state of affairs denoted, and thus the construction, in large measure interoceptively, of an *intensional-extensional* paradigm (again an immaterial structure whose function is nevertheless to model a *mixed* state of affairs or event composed of the figures denoted and the intensions projected onto them; (4) the fusion of these materially and immaterially-originating notions and concepts into a Gestalt, a single image, a signification, that can be grasped by the consciousness. (B 2: the “receptive epilogue”)<sup>7</sup>: (5) the abstraction of a purely paradigmatic vision of this Gestalt by an

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

unconscious that is nevertheless sensitive to its contextual *topology*; (6) the construction, whether conscious or unconscious, based upon this abstract paradigm, of *an entire gamut* of representations of states of affairs that are hypothetical yet comparable to that abstracted, according to various modelling strategies; (7) the hierarchization, whether conscious or not, according to the criterion of *probable relevance*, of this whole “kaleidoscope” of possible significations, a process which takes into account a variety of logical and cultural figures originating not only in what has been communicated but also in the context of its enunciation, including the identity of the speaker, his or her character, apparent intentions, the anthropomorphic semantics of the situation as viewed by the listener’s culture, etc.; (8) the elimination 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 hermeneutical 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:

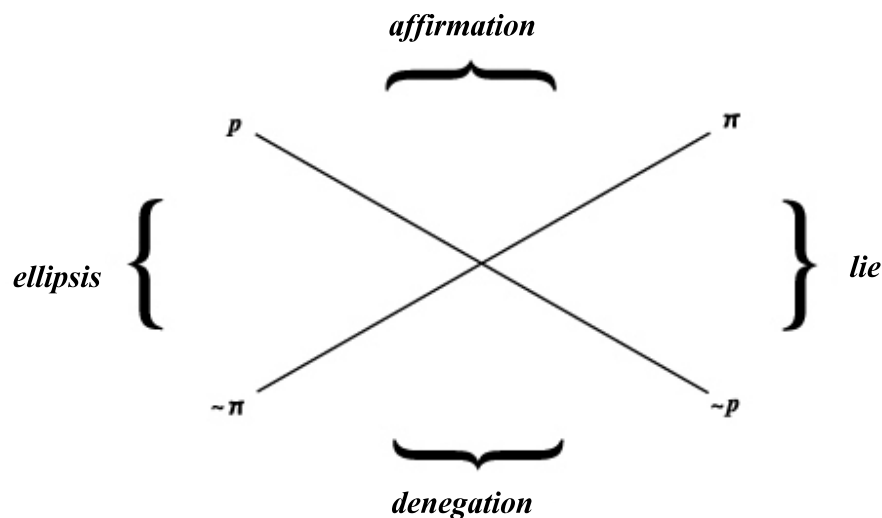
For Greimassian semiotics [...] generalized narrativity is considered the organizing principle of all discourse, and the narrative structures are what constitutes the deep structure of the semantic process. Indeed Petitot (1985) convincingly maintains that the narrative structures are experienced existentially 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 archetypal and intensional dimension, in order to create a conceptual intension that is valorized, semiotized 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



**Figure 0.1: Semiotic square of veridiction, in which a proposition  $P$  is analyzed as a function of the designation  $p$  and the signification  $\pi$ .**

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 archetypal *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 emblematically 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 “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 ( $\sim p$ ) by the name of gold ( $p$ ), signifying that it possesses the *enormous subjective value of an object of gold*, is false:

$$(1.1) \quad \vdash P \ni (\sim p \cap \pi) \ni L$$

where  $L = \ll \text{lie} \gg$ . 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 (*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

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

to an objective logic: “The consideration of an actant disrobed of its psychological cloak and defined purely by its deeds is the *sine qua non* condition of the development of a semiotics of action.”<sup>9</sup> 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 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 φύσις and τεχνε:

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,

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<sup>9</sup> *Sémiotique des passions*, p.8. [My translation].

axiomatization, 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.<sup>10</sup>

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 rudiments of discourse [...]. Thus an internal link of foundation conducts elementary

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<sup>10</sup> See Apel (1984) and his *transzendental-pragmatischer Sicht*, which, as Wismann points out (1986) seems to have been inspired at least in part by the ontological investigations concluded by Dilthey.

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.<sup>11</sup> Later, in his *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 *values*, on the basis of the structures of mental life, and by creating *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 structural whole there arises, among other things, the way in which each mental entity is *centred 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.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. the reference Thérien makes to “memory and imagination” cited above.

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.

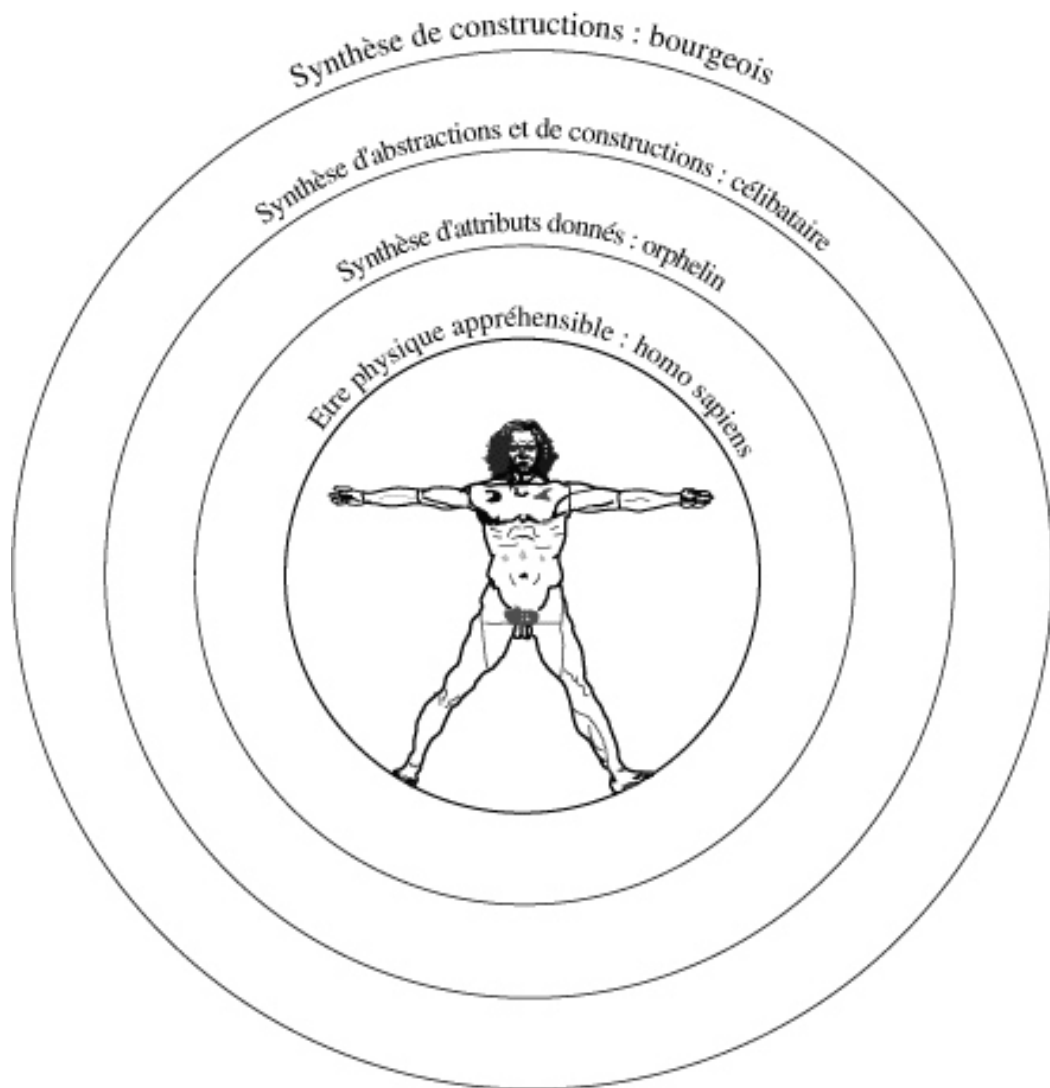
In traditional logic and in most modern theories, a term is regarded as having one and only one intension just as it is regarded as having one and only one extension or designatum. This traditional point of view obscures the fact that there are many different kinds of intensions to be discriminated carefully 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 reflexion 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



**Figure 0.2: Analytical illustration of the ideal syntheses involved in the material being and the intensional being of the character Dorante.**

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 in French): a synthesis of abstractions of a material state of affairs (Dorante 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).<sup>12</sup> *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 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

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<sup>12</sup> 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.

provided that other socio-cultural conditions prevail simultaneously, as we shall see later, throughout this book.

An obvious example suggests itself here: Dorante's 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: "το γελοιον ηντινά [...] μὴν ἐκεινῶ δηλον."<sup>13</sup> 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

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<sup>13</sup> "Laughter's cause is [...] the error of not knowing oneself." (Plato, *Philebus*, 48c).

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'm 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'll return shortly. I leave you with the duty to present your future husband to your mistress. Goodbye, my niece. (*Exit*) [L,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's 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 Benoit, 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,<sup>14</sup> 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 criteria.

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<sup>14</sup> Plato (*Symposium*, 223d) reports more precisely : [...] προαναγκάζειν τὸν Σωκράτη ὁμολογεῖν αὐτοὺς τὸν αὐτὸν ἀνδρὸς εἶναι κωμωδίαν καὶ τραγωδίαν ἐπίστασθαι ποιεῖν, καὶ τὸν τέκνη τραγωδοποιὸν ὄντα καὶ κωμωποιὸν 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<sup>15</sup> 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 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

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<sup>15</sup> 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.

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.<sup>16</sup>

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, 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-

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<sup>16</sup> 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.

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 intensions 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-Bete 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 heroes' "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*<sup>1</sup> or play-maker, 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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*).

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 Bete a la Foire*, such a modulation of the hero's identity is not needed – Jean-Bete already possesses all the necessary disadvantages, such that the heroes 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.

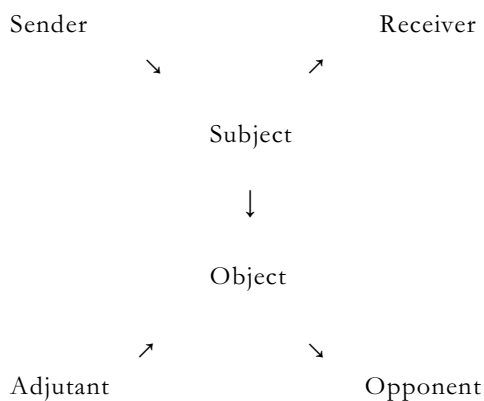


Figure 1.1 : the Greimassian Actantial Schema

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 adjuatant (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-fiction dimensions into a single schema whose generality deprives analysis of the very rigour and clarity it purports to deliver.<sup>2</sup> 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

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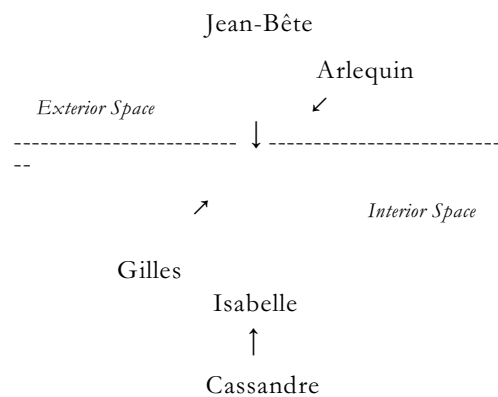
Bazile, L'Eveillé and La Jeunesse in the *Barber*. Lastly, this schema fails to show the spatial semantics that give the "barbon" a pragmatic advantage which, because of its intensional origins, shapes the entire profound structure of the plot: specifically, it omits consideration of Rosine's confinement, which, like that of Isabelle in *Jean Bête*, constitutes a socio-cultural prohibition, and subjugates the heroine in each case, such that she must recognize and submit to the authority of the 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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*)

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.

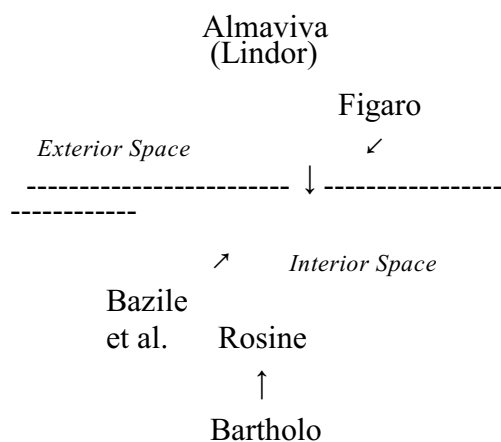
If it is true, as Scherer writes, that "Jean Bete's problems are those of Almaguiva," then this is because Jean Bete, like the Count, must delude a "Bonhomme Cassandre" to be able to enter into a space that is not his own, in violation of certain taboos a space invested with numerous intensional or cultural 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 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 usurping society which *respects only a chosen few socially constructed institutions* – those which agree with the youths' central preoccupation: love.

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.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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, *lightheadedly*. Oh he will, Mr. Figaro, he will. A young man such as the one you describe is destined not to remain unknown.

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*.

## AN IN-DEPTH STUDY OF THE *BARBER*

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 metalogical 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 Carrollesque 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 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

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.

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 Almagro 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 Almagro 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.<sup>5</sup> 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. ὕτοπος,<sup>6</sup> *utopos*)

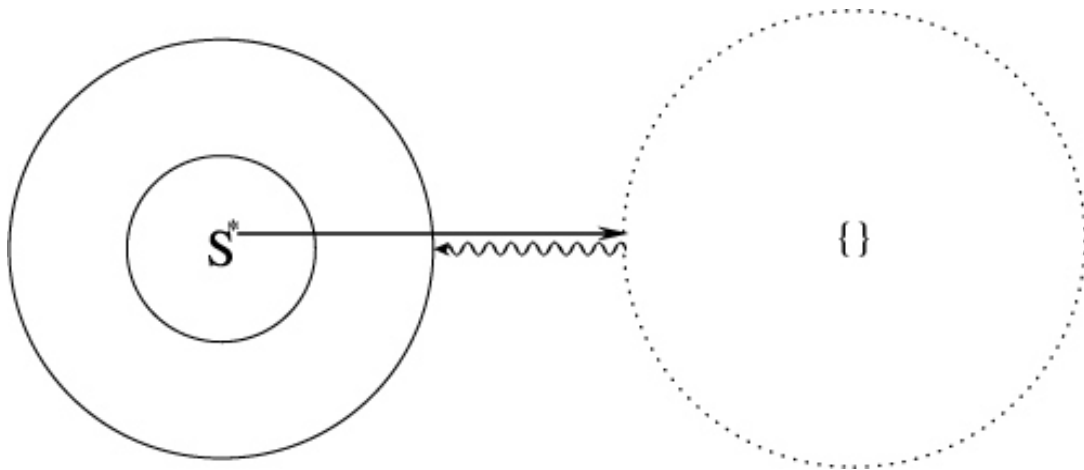


Figure 1.5: *Pseudo-exogenous utopophilic disintension*

that one nevertheless imagines as “being” at a certain place.<sup>7</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> A word that did not actually exist in classical Greek, but which was coined during the Renaissance by Thomas More (*Utopia*).

<sup>7</sup> 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.

“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 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.

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 *utopophobic 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.<sup>8</sup> 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,

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

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

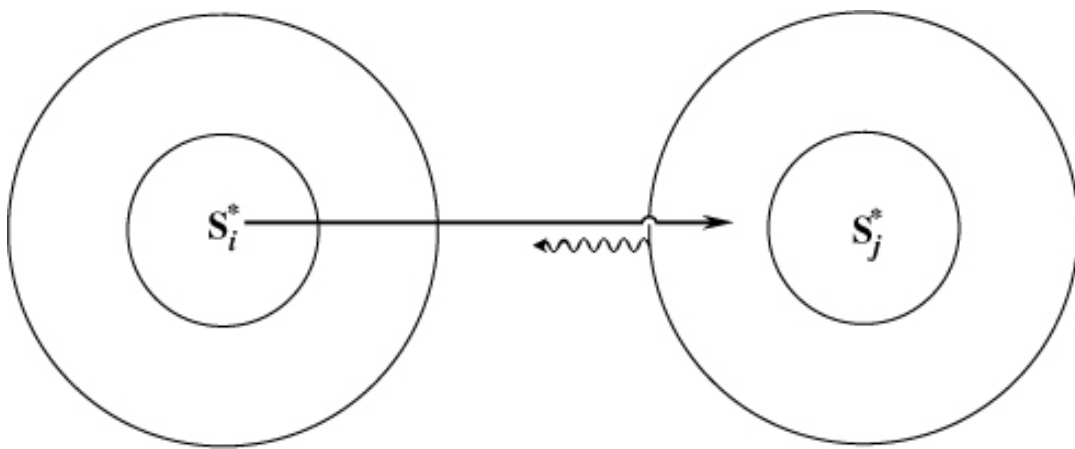


Figure 1.6: Exogenous elliptical disintension

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.

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.”<sup>9</sup> 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 the socio-cultural conception projected by the transcendental subject  $s_i^*$  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,” ἔξ, *exo-*, “exterior”), relative to the subject who is in error.<sup>10</sup>

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

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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  $S_j$ ’s internal circle.

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

No, that’s not right! They reign there as one, peacefully and in harmony...

Share my heart equally. [I,ii: 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,”<sup>11</sup> 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 Almoviva 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

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ubersfeld, *Lire le théâtre*, p.7.

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”<sup>12</sup> 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 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

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<sup>12</sup> 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).

continuing to manifest a sort of “negligent” addressing of speech to himself, a subtly comical act that is, still funnily, observed by a hidden Almoviva.

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 staged.