

Belated Meetings : Art History and Prague Structuralism

WENDY HOLMES

In 1988 Jan Mukarovsky, an important theorist of the Prague Linguistic Circle, was made an "honorary Frenchman" by Norman Bryson so that his "Art as a Semiological Fact" (1934) could be read in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, along with contributions from Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Louis Marin and Michel Serres.¹ In *The New Art History*, English style, another anthology of the same year, neither Mukarovsky, in particular, nor Prague School structuralism, in general, is mentioned; here, in a discussion of "Saussure versus Peirce: Models for a Semiotics of Visual Art," Roman Jakobson is referred to only as a "distinguished linguist," with roots in Russian Formalism and notable enthusiasms for Peirce (Iverson, 84). Yet Mukarovsky's 1938 essay on the semiotic function of architecture, conjoined to Jakobson's later discussion of the six primary elements and functions of linguistic communication, is pivotal in Donald Preziosi's architectural studies of 1979. Although Jakobson and Mukarovsky's stock has fallen some in Preziosi's later *Rethinking Art History : Reflections on a Coy Science*, as that of Derrida and Foucault (and the pervasive spectre of Nietzsche) has risen, he still maintains that Jakobson's communication model may provide guidance for on-going art historical research (1989,149-152).

A coincidence of *belatedness* links some varieties of new art history with old--but newly translated and disseminated-- Prague School semiotics. Not only are present interests in Czech structuralism belated, in the sense that earlier acquaintance might have cut through pervasive confusions in the field of art history about what it is that semiotics *does* or could do, and what *art historians* might do with semiotics, but, in their respective belatednesses, each now stands in an ambiguous relation to the dominant French strain of contemporary (semiotic/philosophic, psychological, ideological) "theory," as it has developed in a continuum of overlapping refutations, revisions, and refractions, from structuralism to poststructuralism, from Saussure to Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault. The Prague Linguistic Circle's earlier assimilation and critique of the *Cours*, its radical shift of emphasis from, *langue* to *parole*, from synchrony to diachrony, and from form to function, comprise a wealth of constructive corrections that *open semiotics to historical studies*. This early modification of Saussure, begun by Roman Jakobson and Jurij Tynjanov in the late twenties, had little influence on French structuralism of the sixties², the structuralism, of course, whose beyond is the dense poststructuralist "theory" of the present, in

which it survives both as an object and means of critique.. Part of the belatedness or the alienation of both art history and Czech structuralism from topical debates is that neither can be properly poststructuralist, having no (French) structuralist antecedents, never having made the (French) structuralist mistakes. And part of the "crisis " that new or revisionist art history brings to the discipline stems from its mixed deconstructive and reconstructive motives, the tangle of structuralist and poststructuralist perspectives that now descend on virgin territory, all together and at once.

Like Preziosi's *Rethinking*, Bryson's contributions to the semiotics of painting in three closely spaced books, *Word and image* (Wi 1981) *Vision and Paintingg* (VP, 1983), and *Tradition and Desire* (TD, 1984) are written in a mode of intermittent deconstruction (of Gombrich's alleged perceptualism, of certain semiotic constructs) and reconstruction (of a semiotic approach to painting), which creates an atmosphere of extreme semiotic density. Similarly, the perspectives of Rosalind Krauss's *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, are both constructive (in providing new insights on visual works or "texts" and laying out hitherto unnoticed relationships among them) and deconstructive (of "Modernist Myths," of the obsessive biographical rummaging of art historians). Both Bryson and Krauss are identified with an enfused "semiotic/deconstructive" position in "Conflicting Logics: Twentieth-Century Studies at the Crossroads" (1987), in which the rift between this alloyed revisionism and more traditional scholarship in art history is characterized by Donald Kuspit as so extreme that it can only be "staged" to exhibit the two irreconcilable and antagonistic perspectives. To the extent that Bryson, Krauss, and Preziosi as well (the three are among those most closely identified with semiotics in the minds of Anglo-American art historians) are genuinely deconstructive, Kuspit is of course right; they must continue to take an adversarial interest in the established disciplinary traditions whose various "myths" or "logocentrisms" remain to be exposed; the tradition can ignore deconstruction but there can be no "live and let live" at the opposite pole. When the compound label is decomposed, however, and the semiotic inspirations of their "practical" or constructive studies are examined, Jakobson becomes prominent as a source of semiotic distinctions and suggestions that they variously employ. It may be true, as Preziosi claims, that contemporary *theory* is "firmly and explicitly attentive to issues of signification and representation," (1989, 120) but if it yields no distinctive semiotic *method*, as he also claims, then the tentative ventures of those who write about visual artefacts or works of art from a semiotic point of view are guided by bits and pieces of earlier theories and earlier practices --venerable theories and surprisingly little bits. While the author of "Saussure versus Peirce:: Models for a semiotics of visual Art" ruminates about which theorist may provide the more useful frame work, in practice both are often drawn together

in contemporary studies (at times thanks to Jakobson's own efforts to integrate his ideas with those of Peirce).³ How Jakobson and Mukarovsky are useful or interesting to Bryson, Krauss, and Preziosi --and how they are not-- should help to dispel the notion of a unified "semiotic" or " semiotic/deconstructive "point of view, a false impression of solidarity held by many art historians who do not seem to realize that it is necessary to take a semiotic point of view, or to make one, and that semiotics is at least as varied, unsettled, and contentious a field as art history itself.

II

Before considering more recent writings, let me [point out the single reference to Jakobson in E..H.Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*. Gombrich states, in the context of his famous "Ping-pong" example, that : " It was Professor Roman Jakobson who first drew my attention to the fact that synesthesia concerns relationships" (370).If he had no further influence on art history,Jakobson's contribution to the field would already be immense. Though Gombrich is notoriously unimpressed by abstract art, his discussion of artistic "expression" in *Art and illusion* and *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* is still the best general semiotic description of how abstract art comes to take on the meanings that it has. Without ever using the linguistic terminology of "syntagmatic," "Paradigmatic ,"or "differential value." ⁴ Gombrich lucidly explains how these relational constructs enter into the significances that artists and beholders attribute to visual forms.

Krauss, for whom the "purely differential " making of meaning is an article of Saussurean faith, allies herself firmly with (French) "structuralism, with its later poststructuralist modifications ,(1985,2) the synchronic perspective, and the later enterprises of Barthes and Derrida. Jakobson enters into this frame of reference mainly through the intermediary of Barthes; he is cited by Krauss--in significant conjunction with Peirce --in only one essay of her recent anthology, the two-part "Notes on the Index," one of the earliest and , to my mind, the best of her theoretical efforts. This elegant meditation cuts through the apparent *stylistic diversity* of the art of the seventies to reveal an underlying *semiotic consistency* in its pervasive preoccupation with indexical signs. In Part I, a precedent -- not an " influence" --is found in Marcel Duchamp's self-conscious exploration of a wide variety of indexical devices, from the painted "panorama of the index" of 1918, *Tu M*,through Man Ray's photograph of the accumulation of dust on the surface of *The Large Glass* (1915-23), to *With My Tongue in My Cheek* of 1959, where an actual cast of the artist's cheek and jaw is continued as a drawn profile in the area of the nose, eyes, and brow (198-206). Through Duchamp, the index is related to the gesture of refusal, rupture, or loss of faith--that is , the refusal to stay within the preserve of the familiar "pictorial language " of images, or even its Cubist dismantling, and the still more

drastic refusal to continue to play the aesthetics game. And , through Duchamp's notes to *The Large Glass* , preserved and published as a primer to intelligibility, the dissolution of "pictorial language " is seen to engender, too, the need for linguistic reiteration or supplement.

Krauss points to the expanded role of the photograph in the visual art of seventies-- in photo- realism, of course, and video, but also in all the new forms that require either photographic documentation or linguistic explanation or both, such as earthworks, performances ,body art and story art (206). In photo-realism and its three- dimensional equivalents-- the cast, painted, and bewigged figures of Duane Hanson and John de Andrea-- the devices of direct casting and photographic replication have similar implications of refusal, for contemporary artists and viewers, that they had for Duchamp : " the indexical presence of either the photograph or the body-cast *demands that the work be viewed as a deliberate short - circuiting of issues of style*" (my emphasis, 208). The photograph is seen by Barthes as a "message without a code," a semiotic paradox. Although it can be faked or doctored-- made to lie-- the photograph's peculiar claim to descriptive adequacy, as Peirce says, is not in its iconic repleteness but in its indexical origin, that is, its "having been produced under such circumstances that were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature " (215).

As indices, photographs are kin to imprints, traces, and symptoms which refer back to the physical forces or events that cause them, and these more direct indices, too, are pervasively employed by artists discussed by Krauss. Indexical devices are related to the genre of the *installation piece* whose practitioners find inspiration in particular places or spaces or conditions of exhibition, allowing their works to enter into dialogue with their settings, conceiving them, like architects, in relation to particular sites; and they are reflected in "works " that are the bald residues of physical acts of cutting, strewing ,or heaping ,that make no "statements " beyond the demonstrations of the properties of various material substances and physical laws.

As Krauss' title indicates, these are *notes* on the index. The concept of indexicality (Peirce) is presented, deepened and complicated in relation to photographs (Barthes), to certain linguistic phenomena (Jakobson), and to psycho-linguistic traumas (Jakobson/Lacan), teased and traced through many artistic manifestations, and convincingly interpreted as a broad-based structural change (a counter-aesthetic/ a functional change). Krauss deftly extracts what is needed from her semiotic references: the equation of the pronominal "shifter" to the Peircian "indexical symbol" is readily made by Jakobson and conjoined to Barthes' discussion of the photographic paradox of " the message without a code." Krauss scoops up all of this "semiosis" and applies

it brilliantly to new problems in different regions. Semiotic constructs are demonstrated in visual applications. They are not belabored or overextended, and part of the essay's strength is its suggestive understatement. Although she clearly identifies a *functional* tendency and a functional *change*, Krauss does not refer to Jakobson's six part model. Yet his well-known definition of the poetic function as a projection of "the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (Sebeok, 358) would sharpen the distinction she makes between the relatively autonomous paintings of Ellsworth Kelly and the context dependent abstractions of Lucio Pozzi, who evades the strictures of a formal system by allowing the lines and colors of surrounding walls to determine the internal structure of his canvasses, so that they function "as shifters, empty signs (like the word *this*) that are filled with meaning only when physically juxtaposed with an external referent or object" (216). Nor does she deal fully with the index as part of the Peircian triad of icon/index/symbol⁵

There is something of an anomaly in the admission of the *index* to the Saussurean milieu of *The Originality of the Avant-garde and other Modernist Myths* and its centrality in this single influential essay⁶. If the only alternatives for the confirmed Saussurean are either to accept Jakobson's annexation of Peirce or else to disregard his contending semiotics, Krauss opts for the latter as much as possible --which may be wise if, as Umberto Eco argues, the Jakobsonian annexation falls to convince: "It was not until one of the greatest figures of contemporary linguistics, Roman Jakobson, came to consider the problem of a semiotic discipline, and brought into contact with each other the two traditions of Peirce and Saussure, that there began to emerge the outline of a conjunction which is still not fully realized today" (Sebeok, 1975, 10). But Jakobson's conjunction is not fully realized, Eco's own attempt (1976) is too tortuously complicated to be useful --and there is no question that some way of moving between the two theoretical schemes is, in discussions of visual signs, very useful indeed.

In *The Semiotics of the Built Environment*, Preziosi acknowledges the Problems that Eco raises but, nevertheless describes "architectonic meaning" from the overlapping perspectives of function and the Peircean triad. Of all visual "Semiotic/deconstructive" theorists, Preziosi is closest to the Prague School approach, especially to Jakobson's way of thinking. Preziosi knew Jakobson in Cambridge and cites his writings frequently: his painstaking descriptions of the formal and material structures of architecture and its "hierarchy of signs" indicate a thorough assimilation of principle of linguistic analysis. And yet Preziosi insists throughout that the built environment is not language-like in important respects and can only be fully understood in relation to other "immanent" social series or realms. In short, his semiotics of the built environment is based on Jakobson's general ideas as

well as on Mukarovsky's "On the Problem of Function in Architecture" (Burbank and Steiner, 236-50). But if Preziosi inherits the fruits of a sustained and sophisticated semiotic inquiry which enables him to reject the partiality of "the semiotics of the code" and to move surely from message to code and from synchrony to diachrony, he also inherits some of its problems.

How does a building mean? Every element of architectural structure has "meaning" Preziosi claims, in relation to other surrounding, containing an component forms (and materials);⁷ the 'meaning' of a given architectonic construct is internal to its own code whereas its 'reference' may implicate a culturally co-present set of texts, doctrines, or beliefs, which themselves comprise significant formations in their own right in adjacent codes" (1979a, 63) in relation to reference Preziosi maintains,

"The architectonic sign comprises a formation (*signans*) or that -which signifies, plus its referent (*signatum*), or that- which -is signified. In concurring generally with the Peircean notion of 'meaning' [*not the internal and differential 'meaning' described above*] as a translation or transmutation connecting one medium (e.g. a material formation) with another (e.g., a set of behaviours of a set of cognitive domains-- which may include the formation itself), we can assert that such translational connectives are of several types" (1979a, 70).

The connectives or grounds for reference that Preziosi describes are icon, index, and symbol.

Between the two discussions of meaning and reference quite above is an extended analysis of "architectonic multifunctionality," in the course of which Preziosi, following Mukarovsky, equates the referential function of a building with its customary *use*. Architectural signs and functions are drawn into close proximity by Mukarovsky's claim that "the affinity-- though not the identity-- of the problem of function with the problems of the sign follows from the fact that the object not only performs but also signifies its function" (Burbank and Steiner, 236). But how does a building signify its function? Mukarovsky does not specify and Preziosi invokes the Peircean triad to explain. The relation between the architectural formation (signified) and a use/referent (signified), such as "church" or "house" or "gathering place" is a symbolic (or conventional or arbitrary), Preziosi argues, on the ground that there is "no universal 'house' type because the notion of dwelling is a specific function of the definitions of given society. It is only the systemic sum of all architectonic types at a given place and time which characterizes the topological association of individual formations" (1979a, 64). But, given that signifieds or referents are culturally constituted, they may still be signified in multiple modes, a point that Preziosi often makes in other contexts. Too, there seems to be an indexical link between an architectural formation and its customary function, an associative bond of contiguity that "place

of worship" suggests-- but I do not wish to quibble with Preziosi's assignment of iconic, indexical, or symbolic labels as much as to consider his need for them. First, here is Preziosi's diagrammatic summary comparing "architectonic semiosis" to "linguistic semiosis" (1979a, 70) :

architectonic semiosis		linguistic semiosis	
orientation	function	orientation	function
context	: <i>referential (use)</i> ::	context:	: referential
<i>formation</i>	: aesthetic ::	message	: poetic
<i>code(struct)</i>	: allusory (<i>historic</i>) ::	code	: metalinguistics
contact	: territorial ::	contact	: phatic
addresser	: expressive ::	speaker	: emotive
addressee	: exhoritive ::	hearer	: conative

Preziosi makes many sensible and sensitive qualifications in bringing architecture and language into partial alignment, especially in relation to the possibly multiple or various identities of architectural addressers and the stipulation that behavior, not cognition or interpretation *per se*, may be the interpretive consequence of architectural signs. The terms that I have underlined, however, remain problematic, because the formal structures, hierarchical relations, and material distributions of architecture Preziosi describes are *not coded*, though he often refers to these *systems of forms and materials* as codes: perceptible elements and qualities have no more lexical or semantic sense than the elements of an abstract painting or a musical composition and their syntagmatic configurations are *not automatically messages*. Buildings say nothing, the stones are dumb, and it is only through difference, as Preziosi rightly notes, that meaning comes to inhere in things. That difference makes meaning is axiomatic to any Saussure-derived theory of signs. But it is precisely in order to get from *difference* to *reference*, to semanticize formal differences, that Peirce is brought in and the differential choices made manifest in perceptible structures are semanticized as iconic or indexical signs. For Preziosi, icons and indices hang on various elements and dimensions of architectural structure, just as they hang on various levels and aspects of language for Jakobson. But by assimilating "iconicity" too directly to "resemblance" neither theorist quite succeeds in bringing into visibility the difference between *showing* and *telling*, which is implicit in Peirce's semiotic scheme.

For Mukarovsky, I think, the problem of recognizing something as a church and identifying its dominant function, is on a par with recognizing a work of art and identifying its dominant aesthetic function. In both cases he is concerned with the link between a *material structure* that is "(1) a perceptible signifier, created by the artist" and a *social construct*, that is, "(2) a 'signification' /= aesthetic object, [for a practical object one might project] registered in the collective consciousness." But before allowing us to see just where the Peircean triad might be introduced, as the relation of (1) and (2), Mukarovsky takes off in another direction and avers that the third constituent of an "autonomous sign" is "(3) a relationship with that which is signified" (Matejka and Titunik, 6), not with anything in particular, but with a global and diffuse reflection of the sign's social milieu.

Preziosi notes the vaguely Peircean quality of this formulation, as well as its inherent vagueness, and speculates briefly about how the character of an "autonomous sign" might apply not only to works of art but "the entire range of artifactual systems in a society" (1989, 117)⁸. What Preziosi needs from Mukarovsky, and what Mukarovsky sometimes seems to be aiming toward in the distinctions he makes here between "autonomous" and "communicative" (and, elsewhere, between intentional/unintentional) signs, is something like Goodman's description of the "difference in direction" in *how we interpret things* on the basis of their perceptible qualities and our socially conditioned understanding of things and *how we interpret linguistic signs or the signs of any "arbitrary" system* on the basis of our prior knowledge of a code. Goodman's rejection of "resemblance" as grounds for reference is notorious, but his distinction between exemplification and denotation retains something of Peirce's differentiation of icon and symbol in respect to the "immediate interpretant" or potential "interpretability" of each (Peirce, 1953 p.36).

In Goodman's terms, our understanding or any denotative reference to "church," in a linguistic text or in a representational painting is entirely dependent on our understanding of the *readymade correlation of signifier/signified* in each (different but equally arbitrary) code. Understanding some material configuration of stone or brick as a "church," on the contrary, is to *make a correlation*² between a perceptible structure and a cultural construct (whose equivalent linguistic "label" is "church") and at the same time, since this is never done piecemeal, *to apply a differential frame* (schemata) (1968, 71-74). As an example of a place of worship, or Gothic Cathedral, or ribbed-vault construction, or, most broadly, as architecture, the same material structure may be cast into various conceptual frames, more or less general and more or less historically extended. It is "seen," therefore, in ways that fluctuate with the historical positions, knowledge, and interests, or interpreters. Goodman's nominalistic discussion of labels, ranges, realms and schemata generally reflects Mukarovsky's understanding of the differential workings of signs as well as of their

temporal mutability. The shift from the material to the phenomenal is characterized by Goodman as inherently semiotic; and although he considers exemplification as a "symptom" of the aesthetic examples may function "instrumentally" or "referentially" as a means of apprehending the abstractable information they contain.

Preziosi lays out the semiotic foundations of architecture in their syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions. He is enough of a classic structuralist to include a synchronic analysis of a corpus of "Minoan hall systems" in buildings erected on Crete around 1500B.C., along with a meticulous description of various levels and aspects of architectural structure-- units, combinations, and alternative patternings of material forms. The contrast between this exhaustively complex formal description (systemic/syntactic), its fragmentary projections into semantics (via isolated icons and symbols, the indexical implications of difference, and diagrammatic resemblances) and the relatively simple and succinct classification of (pragmatic) function, underscores the value of the latter. In terms of their overlapping and intersecting functions, signs that differ significantly in semantic/syntactic structure are comparable on the basis of their purposes and effects. Given their wealth of writings on linguistics and literature, Mukarovsky and Jakobson say relatively little about architecture and visual signs, so that applying their ideas in these domains is a rather difficult task of theoretical projection.

In my opinion, Preziosi is the best semiotic theorist among contemporary "semiotic/deconstructive" commentators (his architectural studies, moreover, are not deconstructive at all). Because he begins with an understanding of the complexities raised by the Prague School's sustained semiotic investigations, he has an eye on alternative and subsequent developments, and he recognizes certain arbitrary, but methodologically convenient, aspects of his own analytic stance. In contrast, Krauss seldom theorizes. She alludes, rather, to a bundle of structuralist/poststructuralist positions that are argued or unfolded else where. While Kuspit points to Krauss's uncritical acceptance of Barthes' and Derrida's ideas as "dogmatic platitudes" (127), he observes with approval that "Bryson... is as critical of the semiotic perspective as he is of the point of view he uses it to criticize" (117).

This is misleading. Bryson does not criticize the semiotic perspective, but merely certain aspects of the French structuralist/poststructuralist development that constitutes his primary frame of reference. Working forwards from Saussure's inaugural notes on structural linguistics and doubling back from the post-structuralisms of Barthes and Derrida, Bryson arrives at a position somewhere between the most Apollonian of semiotic projects and their wildest Dionysian reaches, eventually rejecting both varieties of "formalism" as the twin chimeras of *langue*. Bryson's frame of reference is ventilated and enriched by philosophic perspectives that provide a means of

correction or expansion of the structuralist/ poststructuralist continuum from without ("The misfortune of the French is not to have translated Wittgenstein; instead, they read Saussure." VP, 77). As a result, the full complexity of "the structuralist debate" floods into the center of art historical erudition and expertise, that is to say, the explication of "major monuments" of Western art, the paintings of Giotto and Massaccio, Vermeer, Watteau, Chardin, and David.

Whereas Preziosi begins with Prague School semiotics as the most adequate of available theories, however general and partial its understanding of architectural signs, Bryson's rejection of semiotic "formalism," his insistence on the constraints that socio-historical contexts exert on the free play of signs, and his emphasis on the active and transformational power of interpretation, project him into positions that correspond to those articulated by Prague School theorists, even though these are not directly discussed in *Word and Image*, *Vision and Painting*, and *Tradition and Desire*. After the fact, so to speak, after Bryson's major contribution to the semiotics of painting, his admiration for Muakrovsky is acknowledged (1988, xvii, xxviii). Within Bryson's own work, however, Mukarovsky is not mentioned and Jakobson is given only a limited part to play, rather, it is V. N. Volosinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* that represents the Slavavic alternative to French structuralist views, an alternative that Bryson largely accepts as corrective. No doubt, Bryson wants to make an explicit connection between semiotics and Marxism and, undoubtedly, he views his own double critique of structuralism and perceptualism on a par with Volosinov's double-barreled polemic against "abstract objectivism" (Saussure and his followers) and "individualistic subjectivism" (Wilhelm von Humboldt, et al). Yet much that interests Bryson in Volosinov's ideas is further developed by Mukarovsky and Jakobson. It is strange that he does not make use of the more refined Prague School constructs which would clearly be useful to him.¹⁰ But perhaps in the interests of (1) blocking out how his position contrasts with both French semiotics and the art historical tradition (*Vision and Painting*) and (2) demonstrating broadly how a history of painting's narrative structures would differ from the stylistic history of art (*Word and Image*) and (3) examining how David, Ingres, and Delacroix conceived and altered the inheritance of their artistic tradition (*Tradition and Desire*), he cannot afford to deal with the modifications and complexities that developed after Volosinov's prolegomena.

More importantly, Bryson begs the larger question of whether or not words and pictures signify differently and describe "reality" in fundamentally distinct ways by shifting attention to the issue of *how the effects of the real are produced in literature*, taking up the account of literary realism which suggests the varisemblance in writing results from a *supposed exteriority of the signified to the signifier*" (VP, 55). A fictive "reality" takes on credibility through the textual elaboration of details,

descriptions, and digressions which are largely peripheral to the development of any central narrative or theme of the whole. This sense of distance from the text as text, "distance from the patent site of meaning is interpreted as distance towards the real" (VP, 56), by analogy of narrative literature to narrative pictures, as paintings take viewers further and further from the narrative core of their literary/religious sources through various augmentations embellishments and devices of visual organization independent of the linguistic pre-texts. Similarly, distance away from the "minimal schema" or the "nuclear sentence" of an iconographic type may be understood as distance towards the real. Beginning from the idea of painting as narrative, rather than as description, Bryson claims that "the equivalent *within the image* to paradigm in language is the schema" (VP, 122, my emphasis); and narrative schema are identified with iconographic types, such as "Nativity," "Last Supper," or "Annunciation," which are doubly determined by (biblical or alternative) textual sources and the socio-religious forces, the very *raison d'être* for their visualization. The "discursive" in painting is itself identified with the *textual*, the *coded*, the *paradigmatic*, the *schematic*, as well as with the *denotation* of painting, its paraphrasable *referential* sense. The "figural," which supplements and contrasts with the "discursive," is "the area of predominance of syntagm over paradigm" (WI, 21); the "figural," in turn, is identified with the *extra-textual*, the *uncoded* or the *transgressive*, the *syntagmatic*, as well as with the *connotive*, which includes all the extra referential dimensions of the pictorial sign. The figural and the discursive *coexist within individual paintings* as an internal ratio. For example, the discursive part of Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation of Christ--Romans--whipping--Christ--* is confined to a small area of the painting's surface, while its syntagmatic expansion includes the large-scale observers in the foreground, together with Piero's mathematical perspective and his modeling of the figures, all of which are semantically irrelevant to denotative recognition of the iconographic theme. The "effect of the real" is described as "a specialized relationship between denotation and connotation where *connotation so confirms and substantiates denotation that the latter appears to rise to a level of truth*" (VP, 62).

Bryson is generally dealing with paintings that are densely "literary" or "narrative" in various interesting ways that his "discursive/figural" polarity genuinely illuminates, but there are a great many grounds for objection to his theoretical framework of discussion, some art historical¹¹ and some semiotic¹². Its extreme verbo-centrism is further extended into the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of systems of visual signs:

"If the founding axiom, of Jakobson's semiology is true-- that all sign-systems can be analysed into a vertical axis of selection from the repertory of available forms and a horizontal axis along which the selections are combined-- then in the case of

painting both axes of the sign are *veiled*: the schema is invoked only in order to be transgressed, taken out of the matrix of selection; the *duree* of painting is systematically disavowed. The result of this double assault on or obfuscation of the painting is its eventual unthinkability as sign --the impossibility of theorising the image except in terms of its own propaganda, as the re-presentation of perception, as the Zeuxian mirage" (VP, 130)."

Some of the obfuscations that Bryson discovers are inherent in how he applies the paradigmatic/syntagmatic distinction to images, especially in his equation of the visual syntagm to the temporal processes of its making and viewing. Jakobson, of course, understands the visual syntagm as spatial (1971, 334-44), not as "denying" or "arresting" the "syntagmatic movement" that it does not have (VP, 120, 122). While the axial structure of codes is stretched out of the shape of Jakobson's formulations (and Saussure's and Barthes'), one cannot just say that *Bryson does not understand Jakobson* because his discussion is "bracketed" by the "effect of the real," namely that which prevents the systems of painting from coming into view. Bryson knows very well that "a code is, by definition, a structure of permutation and multiplication," it is neither simple "addition, citation, inventory, list" (VP, 140) nor "the free play" of signs. His argument with Barthes' two views of literature as repetition or transgression, yielding *plaisir* or *jouissance*, is that both depend on the theorization of signification at the level of langue and are thus "outside the social formation, and outside history" (VP, 142). In the material practice of painting, however, the social and dialogic nature of painterly *parole* holds innovation within the bounds of intelligibility, so that repetition and transgression coexist. Although Bryson's emphasis on the social, the material, and the interactive, intermittently reflects the influence of Volosinov, this influence is not as thoroughly integrated into Bryson's understanding of signs as Barthes' constructs that have been put "under erasure" but keep showing through. Consequently, Bryson stays too much within the simple alternative of repetition or transgression on a global thematic plane. The "schema" is regarded as a fixed syntagma, a paradigmatic compound, more stereotype than type. Bryson often returns to the Byzantine icon as the prime example of the painted paradigm for, to the degree that an entire schema-- the subject in a particular compositional format-- must be *duplicated*, this is the closest that painting has come to the photographic message without a code." This equation of schema with stereotype keeps Bryson from theorizing how certain aspects of "connotation" or "expression" arise and are understood, as neither repetitions nor transgressions, but as manifestation of artistic choices of diverse hierarchical level and types.

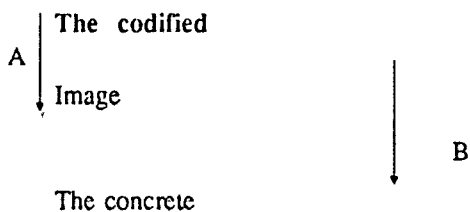
Although Bryson claims that the "excess of the image over discourse can only last as long as texts can" (WI, 12), the ratio of illustration between iconographic types and their individual tokens is only one manifestation of the *type-token relation*

which is central in Bryson's consideration of signs. As large-scale semantic wholes, *genre-types*, such as "landscape," "portrait," or "still-life" function similarly to "Nativity," "Annunciation," and the like, in establishing a certain ratio in complex pictorial signs. In subject-genres that are detached from specific narrative pre-texts, this ratio is more clearly between the standard and variant features of specific paintings or, more accurately, between standard and *historically emergent* contra-standard tokens of type. In Bryson's brief discussions of Gros' *The Battle of Eylau*, Gericault's *Madman*, and Manet's *Olympia*, established norms of the genres of "battle scenes," "portraits," and "odalisques" are clearly *transgressed not augmented*, and Bryson accounts for the "realism" of Leonardo's *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci* by "the fact that the inherited schema of portraiture has been hidden from view," giving the image an intensity of lifelikeness absent from Antonello (VP, 127). Bryson's first consideration of realism as an expansion of information and an accretion of gratuitous details is displaced by a second emphasis on norm-breaking novelty or deviation from established practice -- practice with which it was intertwined all along.

As Jakobson affirms, in fine formalist fettle, "the painted image becomes an ideogram, a formula to which the object portrayed is lined by contiguity. . . . The ideogram needs to be deformed. The artist-innovator must impose a new form on our perception, if we are to detect in a given thing those traits which went unnoticed the day before" (Matejka and Pomoraska, 40). To be sure, Jakobson also notes that *either* the familiar *or* the innovative may be honorifically equated with the real, so that it holds also true, as Goodman maintains, "that a picture looks like nature often means only that it looks the way nature is usually painted" (1968, 39). In these terms, either a Van Eyck or a Monet may become an "ideogram". What counts is not the quantity or quality of information that the "figural" contains but the fact that it is-- by Bryson's initial definition-- the novel of "deautomatizing" aspect of the image generating the "effect" of the real. For Bryson, the figural or the connotative "confirms and substantiates denotation" in the sense that the viewer or Giotto's *Betrayal* may be persuaded by the painter's (historically innovative) superior articulation of spaces and volumes of the reality of this biblical event or, on another level, the viewer may be moved to reflect-- by the painter's (historically innovative) expressive delineation of the profiles of Jesus and Judas-- on the deeper psychological and theological implications of the painting's theme. Such focus on the particulars of *this Betrayal*, this artistic message in all its palpable specificity points to the presence of an aesthetic set toward the image, as well as to an act of interpretive integration, an effort of semantic unification on the part of the viewer. With no differentiation of "functions" and no clear-cut differentiation between denotative and connotative

codes, the glaring weakness in Bryson's theory is that all- important *connotation* is so vaguely and variously described.

At times Bryson emphasizes the indistinct unauthorized quality of connotation, but at other times connotations stiffen into the three "great" or "crucial" codes of "the face and body in movement (pathognomics), the codes of the face at rest (physiognomics), and the codes of fashion or dress," knowledge of which is "distributed through the social formation in a diffuse, amorphous manner that contrasts sharply with the exact and legalistic knowledge of iconology [*iconography*]" (VP, 68-69). While denotative recognition is straightforward identification or decoding, " the codes of connotation are underdetermined and acquire intelligibility *in situ* " (VP, 159), they seem to engage the viewer in a private act of investigation far more intimate and personally determined than the public activity of iconographic recognition" (VP, 64); and because this "requires a certain amount of hermeneutic effort, because it must extract meaning from the image under conditions of difficulty and uncertainty, connotations are experienced as *found*. not made " (VP, 64). Bryson diagrams the inert "image" as semiotically vitiated from above by " the codified" and pointing down to the " the concrete" (VP, 76)¹³ .



What interests Bryson in Volosinov's discussion of signs (in which "semiotic" and "ideological" count as synonyms) is a sense of connotative "recognition" that falls somewhere between private mnemonic acts (I recognize someone that I have seen before) and straightforward decodings (I recognize the word because I know the code) in " the consciousness of the perceiver," which, according to Volosinov, is a changing social consciousness or a "changing behavioural ideology."

"The work combines with the whole content of the consciousness of those who perceive it and derive its apperceptive values only in the context of the consciousness. It is interpreted in the spirit of the particular content of consciousness (the consciousness of the perceiver) and is illuminated by it anew. This is what constitutes the vitality of an ideological production. In each period of its historical existence, a work must enter into close association with the changing behavioural ideology, become permeated with it, and draw new sustenance from it. Only to the degree that a work can enter into that kind of integral, organic association with the behavioural ideology of a given period is it viable for that period (and of course, for a given

social group). Outside its connection with behavioural ideology it ceases to exist, since it ceases to be experienced as something ideologically meaningful" (Volosinov, 91).

And Mukarovsky makes the same general point:

"The perceiver's initiative-- which is as a rule individual only to a small degree, being determined for the most part by general factors such as time, generation, and social milieu--provides the possibility that different perceivers (or rather different groups of perceivers) will invest the same work with different intentionality, sometimes considerably divergent from that which its originator gave it "(Burbank and Steiner, 98)"

To the extent that Volosinov's premises parallel those of Mukarovsky or are taken up and developed by him (cf. Galan, 133), Bryson perhaps gets the gist of "Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art" from *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, but his "connotation" might be defined through Mukarovsky's understanding of the dynamic interplay of "intentionality" and "unintentionality" in interpretive responses, who asserts, in his most radical formulations, that a work of art "*means the perceiver's existential experience, his mental world*"(Burbank and Steiner, 96, my emphasis) and "*is simultaneously a thing and a sign*" (Burbank and Steiner, 106, my emphasis). But this is precisely the point where Mukarovsky is most ambiguous, where the Saussurean frame work is least helpful, where signification is most diffuse, and where signification and function sometimes merge. As Preziosi observes in relation to architecture (1989, 118), there seems to be a theoretical gap in Mukarovsky's explication, which is most problematic outside of literary art and representational painting, when signs are least "communicative" and closest to things. Here, the interpreter's "semantic gesture" is more constructive than unifying, and as such it is more convincingly explained by Goodman (cf. Holmes, 1981) as motivated, grounded in exemplification, and differing in direction from other varieties of signification with which it may or may not be intertwined. Bryson's diagrammatic formulation of the image, floating between what has been put into it and what may be read from it, is reminiscent of Goodman, but then a great many semiotic theories hover around his discussion of connotation without coalescing into clear view¹⁴..

iii

The value of Prague School semiotics for theorists, historians, and critics of visual art is generally the same as it is for literary theorists and critics. Although some of Jakobson's and Mukarovsky's ideas on visual art and architecture suggest

directions for further investigation, it is on the level of a general theory of signs that their ideas are most useful. Jakobson's communication model, his and Mukarovsky's understanding of polyfunctionality, Jakobson's development of the double axes of language, Mukarovsky's focus on the perceiver's role on making and remaking meaning, yield powerful descriptive and analytic constructs which are as relevant to visual art and visual signs as to those in other modalities. In contrast to the "verbo-centric dogmatism" of later structuralism, Galan points out that "the founding [Czech] structuralists, nearly all of them highly distinguished linguists, were never tempted to commit the kind of linguistic fallacy that misled their French successors, most of whom lacked extensive training in linguistics"(39). Too much has been made of the obdurate conservatism of art history as reason for its coolness to French structuralism, whose didactic claims for the arbitrariness of signs, their double articulation and, for the superiority of the synchronic perspective, sets it at the greatest possible remove from the mainstream concerns of *historians* of a visual tradition in which *mimesis* has a special and problematic place and signifying systems are generally *non-articulate* or analogue at the level of form. Indeed, many of the structuralist roads not taken by art historians have proven to be scenic detours, if not methodological dead-ends, in other fields.

Focused as it is on the evolution of art in its cultural context, Prague School semiotics, both in its aims and its extra-linguistic dimension, is in closer alignment with art history's theoretical foundation. Mukarovsky was schooled in the same tradition of German philosophical aesthetics, whose influences Michael Podro traces from Riegl to Panofsky in *The Critical Historians of Art*, and in important respects in Czech theorists' determination to "steer the difficult course between two extremes: a theory which provides a history, but not mainly of art, and one which, by studying art itself, excludes the full dimension of history" (Galan, 2), converges with the central concern of the critical historians of art. 15 By leveling art historical theory to a native "perceptualism," Bryson deconstructs a straw-man position which nobody, least of all Gombrich, actually holds, and ignores the complexities of critical art history,¹⁶ while making gestures of approval toward the Slavic semiotic tradition with which it has most in common. Prague School semiotics is so little known to Anglo-American art historians that it is not mentioned in Christine Hasenmueller's "Panofsky, Iconography and Semiotics" (1978), in which the "historicity of Panofsky's method" alone is almost enough to deny its semiotic validity(297). In Preziosi's interesting brief comparison of Panofsky and Mukarovsky, on the other hand, it is the philosophical conservatism of both theorists that is emphasized and found wanting in relation to "(post)modernist semiology" (1989,120).¹⁷

Mukarovsky is ushered out of Preziosi's consideration of old art history at the same time that Bryson welcomes him, in *Calligram*, to the poststructuralist company

