Chapter 2 > “Do You See What I Mean?” > Artifact and the Subject of Vision
— Perspective, I repeat, is not a code, but it has this in common with language that in and by itself it institutes and constitutes itself under the auspices of a point, a factor analogous to the ‘subject’ or ‘person’ in language, always posited in relation to a ‘here’ or ‘there,’ accruing all the possibilities for movement from one position to another that this entails — (Damish 1995: 53).

With this remark, Damish accounts for the symbolic function of perspective in terms of what linguistics has called deixis. In language, indicators of deixis are the personal pronouns (‘I’ and ‘you’) as well as the demonstratives, adverbs and adjectives which organize the spatial and temporal relationships around the subject. Here, subjectivity means the capacity of a speaker to posit him or herself as a speaker by taking up the position of ‘I.’ In doing so, this ‘I’ posits another person, the one to whom the ‘I’ says ‘you’ and who in his or her turn says ‘you’ to this ‘I.’ These roles are endlessly reversible, as are the signifiers, which depend upon them: the person who functions as a speaker for one moment functions as a listener for the next.

This ‘I’ and ‘you’ are empty forms which each speaker, in the exercise of discourse, appropriates to himself or herself and which he or she relates to his or her ‘person,’ at the same time defining him or herself as an ‘I’ and a partner as ‘you.’ According to Emile Benveniste this deictic function of setting up positions — and not communication in the sense of transmitting absent meaning represented by signs — is the fundamental nature of language. Prior to communication language functions to set up the I/you polarity that enables (mis)communication to take place. The study of signification, therefore, cannot be isolated from the subject who uses language and who is defined by it.¹

In theories of the theatre, deixis has proved to be most useful for the analysis of dramatic speech, and the way in which this speech establishes character, space and action. Deixis describes the way relationships are set up between persons and other persons; persons and objects; here and there; earlier and later. An analysis of the function of deictic markers in dramatic or performance text illuminates how the world presented on stage ‘spaces-out’ in what is called the system of internal theatrical communication (the communication between the characters in the fictive cosmos represented there). Elam calls deixis the means by which language “gears itself to the speaker and receiver (through the personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’) and to the time and place of the action (through the adverbs ‘here’ and ‘now,’ etc.) as well as to the supposed physical environment at large and the objects that fill it (through the demonstratives ‘this’, ‘that’, etc.).” (Elam 1980: 26–27). The fictive cosmos that is the drama “consists first and foremost precisely in this, an I addressing a you here and now” as a result of which the drama is made present here and now (Elam 1980: 139, italics in the text).
What is left out in such an analysis of dramatic speech, however, is how this making present of the dramatic world ‘here and now’ is achieved not only by means of signs of deixis in the internal system of theatrical communication. Dramatic worlds depend at least as much on the absence or suppression of signs of deixis in the external system of theatrical communication, the communication between stage and auditorium. That is, what is left out is how what Szondi has termed the ‘absoluteness’ of drama is the effect of strategies not unlike those deployed in the perspectival painting, where the suppression of deixis serves to obscure the status of the painting as a sign presenting an address to a viewer. The suppression of signs of deixis in the external system of theatrical communication supports the suggestion that we, as audience, can see what is over there ‘as it is.’ It also suggests that vision in the theatre is ‘just looking,’ i.e. an unproblematic and immediate access to what is there to be seen. As Bryson (1983) observes, a painting may appear to present a moment of disclosed presence precisely as the result of suppression of deixis. Analogously, in the theatre the suppression of signs of deixis in the external system of theatrical communication supports the suggestion of another world on stage that can be seen as through Alberti’s finestra aperta, a window opened up by the proscenium arch.

In this chapter, I will show how the analogy between deixis and perspective as observed by Damisch sheds light on the address presented by the multi-media event that constitutes the theatre in terms of positioning and movement from one position to another. I will demonstrate how deixis presents a first step in exposing the invisible logic at work in the finestra aperta presented by the theatre. In this chapter, Artifact (1984) by Frankfurt based choreographer William Forsythe, will serve as my theoretical object.2

With Artifact, Forsythe presents a 20th-century equivalent of the 19th-century ‘story’ ballet. At the same time, the performance can be read as a meta-linguistic ‘story’ of how we make sense of what we see, and how this involves a position for the seer as the subject of vision. Artifact is a ballet, yet, it is constructed around words. These words also appear in the program book, arranged as a diagram. This diagram presents a key to the construction of the performance, while at the same time it is used in the performance as a tool to deconstruct language: the language of words, as well as the multi-media language of the stage.

**Meaning as Address** — In Artifact, the language of the stage itself is what is at stake. Like most theatre performances, Artifact invites the audience to make sense of what they see. Artifact self-consciously presents itself as an artifact (as opposed to the Kantian self-contained, autonomous work of art) constructed to present an address to the audience. This address is neatly summarized in the question “Do you see what I mean?” uttered by one of the characters on stage and directed towards the audience.
With this witty question, Artifact highlights the relationship between stage and auditorium, a relationship that often remains implicit or even explicitly denied, and, at the same time, literally calls this relationship into question. Artifact does so in a way that presents a critical engagement with issues concerning the theatrical production of meaning which reflect a distinctive turn in theatre semiotics that took place at about the same time that Artifact was created. These issues amounted to a shift in emphasis from a structuralist analysis of the dramatic or performance text towards a pragmatics of theatrical communication.3

This shift towards pragmatics extended the Saussurean model of signifier/signified by drawing attention to the necessarily third element in signification: the interpretant, which was given more attention by Peirce's model. Reception is built directly into Peirce's famous definition of a sign or representamen as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity," the interpretant being "the equivalent sign created in the mind of that person" (Peirce quoted in Nöth 1995: 42). Since every sign creates an interpretant that in its turn is the representamen of a second sign, semiosis results in a series of successive interpretants ad infinitum. There is no first and no last sign, but rather a continuous process of semiosis that can be interrupted but never be ended. This is a process, furthermore, in which what you see not does necessarily correspond with what I mean.

But Artifact has more to offer than a clever illustration of the fact that a sign can only stand for something in relation to somebody to whom it appears as such. In Artifact, the relation between this ‘I’ meaning and a ‘you’ seeing is at stake. Artifact can be read as a demonstration of how the ‘I’ and ‘you’ implied in this address – “Do you see what I mean?” – as well as the relationship between them, are constituted in and through this address. In doing so, Artifact presents a critique of semiotic models based on a static model of communication, in which a series of coded messages are sent or enacted and subsequently received and decoded by a spectator who is understood, in rather mechanistic or diagrammatical terms, as the receiver.4

The turn away from structuralist semiotic models, and models of theatrical communication concerned with codes and the production and transmission of meaning, resulted in a wide variety of new approaches usually brought together under the general rubric of pragmatics.5 The shift towards pragmatics, opened up a wide and diverse field. But, as Elam (1988) observes, there is no doubt that the most widely and frequently invoked analytical framework, the true “Prince of Pragma” as he calls it, is speech-act theory as developed by J.L. Austin and John Searle, as well as theorists that followed.6

Austin's observation that, in many cases, saying things is doing things with words rather than using these words to refer to some absent state of affairs, confirms what theatre makers have known for some time. Moreover, doing things with words is central to the functioning of dramatic text. It is little wonder then that speech-act theory proved to be productive for the analysis of how things are done on stage.

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Much more complicated again, it appears to be to bring speech-act theory to bear on the external system of theatrical communication, i.e. the transactions between stage and audience. Elam refers to Ross Chambers' attempt to understand theatrical performance as an overall communicative act that encodes an offer or invitation to the audience. "The performance or performers then send out a kind of polite visiting card to the spectators bearing the message 'come and interpret me'" (Elam 1988: 46). According to Elam, this approach proves to be not very productive for two reasons. In the first place because understanding the address created by the performance in this way converts the overall act performed by the performance into a tautological exercise in interpretation:

In practice, the visiting card sent out by Chamber's performative performance is no more than, nor less than, the founding convention of the theatrical transaction itself: the spectator knows as part of his elementary theatrical competence that he is called upon to interpret what he hears and sees. So that if each performance does no more than renew this statutory invitation, then the overall act it performs is at best tautological, not to say feeble (Elam 1988: 47).

In the second place, Elam observes a tendency in speech-act based analysis of the interaction between stage and audience to reduce the spectator to a decoding machine.

This, it seems to me, is one of the central ironies in contemporary semiotic inquiry: that the more 'pragmatic' it becomes, the less it has to do with actual pragma. There is much talk in contemporary literary and theatrical semiotics of the 'work' of the reader or spectator as the most important element in the communicational process, but more often than not, the labors assigned to the reader or spectator are such cerebral tasks as inferring or hypostazing or presupposing or, of course, understanding and interpreting the acts performed for his or her benefit (Elam 1988: 48).

Elam fears that understanding a performance as an address presented to a spectator to 'come and interpret me' will, again, reduce the spectator to a decoding machine and thus deny the work involved in responding to the address. He refers to Barthes' distinction between the *studium* as "the application to something the taste for something; a sort of alert but not particularly intense being interested," and the *punctum* as "an irresistibly pricking or injury," to conclude that much of what goes under the name of theatrical pragmatics (or theatre semiotics in general) is limited to the zone of the *studium* and keeps safe distance from the tropics or dangers of the *punctum* (Elam 1988: 48–49).

I will come back to this distinction and its possibilities for the analysis of theatre in chapter 5, where Barthes' *punctum* will be part of my argument for the usefulness of semiotic analysis for the theatre, provided that semiotics shift attention from what is 'to be seen over there' to a relational model that takes into account the relation between what is seen and the point of view.
from where it is seen. I will show how what Barthes calls punctum can serve as a meaningful pointer that helps to expose the relationship between what is seen and the point of view from where it is seen.

In this chapter, I will undertake a first step in this direction by having a closer look at what Elam calls "the founding convention of the theatrical transaction," that is, the spectator being called upon to interpret what he or she sees and hears.

**Speech-AACTs in the Field of Vision** — The (implicit) address presented by the performance to the audience and verbalized by Elam as 'come and interpret me,' is made explicit in *Artifact*, yet reformulated in a crucial way. "Do you see what I mean?" articulates this address in a more productive way.

By making explicit the 'I' and the 'you' involved in the address, *Artifact* draws attention to the close relationship between signification and subjectivity, a relationship that, as Kaja Silverman writes, "has long been apparent to readers of Freud and Lacan, but has remained perhaps less obvious to those semioticians who trace their lineage to Saussure" (Silverman 1983: 3). Peirce, and later Barthes and Derrida have taught us that meaning is much more open ended than de Saussure would have us believe and that it cannot be isolated from the symbolic order. This alignment of signification with the symbolic order was made possible by the inclusion of a third category — that of subjectivity. Here the work of Emile Benveniste is of crucial importance.

In *Problems in General Linguistics* (1971), Benveniste shows language and subjectivity to be completely interdependent. The individual finds his or her cultural identity only within discourse by means of the pronouns 'I' and 'you,' empty forms which each speaker, in the exercise of discourse, appropriates to his or her 'person,' at the same time defining her or himself as an 'I' opposed to a partner as a 'you.'

With this analysis, Benveniste shows speech-acts to be productive not only of the space around subjects; he shows them to be constitutive of subjectivity itself. Furthermore, he demonstrates how this constitution of subjectivity within the linguistic act involves not only the subject speaking, but also the addressee. Hence, Benveniste shows speaker and addressee to be mutually interdependent. Like de Saussure's linguistic sign, the subject relies on another term within the same paradigm for its meaning and value, and this paradigm can only be activated through discourse. This brings Benveniste to a notion of subjectivity that is both entirely relational and radically discontinuous. In the space between two discursive events, subjectivity, like the pronouns which sustain it, falls into abeyance.

Benveniste's approach makes possible an even more discontinuous and non-unitary conception of subjectivity, a conception of subjectivity that takes into account how different discursive acts presented by a multi-media event like the theatre present the addressee with different positions as the addressee of both verbal and visual signs. It also elucidates how these
different positions interact to produce the effect of what seems to be 'just looking' at what is 'there to be seen.'

In Artifact, the address presented by the question "Do you see what I mean?" draws attention to two different activities involved in this act of 'come and interpret me.' The question "Do you see what I mean?" presents an address to the audience as both listener and seer. Elam recognizes these two different activities when he describes the act performed by the audience as interpreting what he or she sees and hears. In his summary of the address presented by the performance as "Come and interpret me" however, these two are conflated into the single act of interpreting, and this obscures the way seeing and hearing imply different subject positions for an audience.

Artifact, taking these two apart again, draws attention to a complication of the use of speech-act theory for the analysis of visual text that is easily overlooked. This complication resides in the different subject positions for the addressee that hearing and seeing imply. This complication can also be seen at work in Damish's account of perspective in terms of deixis.

Damish observes that perspective presents an address to a viewer comparable with the way a speaker, 'I,' presents an address to a listener, 'you,' in a linguistic speech-act. However, this statement character, this character of an address made to a viewer, is precisely what tends to get obscured by the ambiguous relationship between seers and seen as given in perspective. Perspective works so effectively because it does not present the viewer with a position as second person – the 'you' addressed – but as the first person who 'owns' that world as it is seen. Instead of positioning the viewer as a 'you' opposed to an 'I' speaking, perspective aims at a conflation of the positions of 'I' and 'you,' as a result of which what the 'I' shows on stage can appear as just there to be seen by 'you.' The assumption is also that this 'you' does not position her or himself as a 'you,' but as an 'I.'

Seen in this way, conflating verbal and visual speech-acts here allows for another conflation as well; namely a conflation of the producer and the recipient. This conflation is, as Bryson has shown, constitutive of the effect of presence in painting.

Artifact shows the address of the performance and neatly summarizes in the question "Do you see what I mean?" revealing it to be a complicated address involving more than one subject position. This address presents the audience with at least two different positions to take up. On the one hand the woman as the subject of speech presents the audience with a position represented by the 'I' in her speech-utterance. This address can be understood as an invitation to identify with her point of view. "Do you see what I mean?" is an invitation to see it her way, to look at it from her point of view, and to be drawn into the world on stage as described by Szondi.

But "Do you see what I mean?" can also mean "Do you see what I (as a visual sign) mean?" In this case, the address presented to the audience is not an invitation directed to a 'you' to take up the position of the woman seen on stage. Instead, it presents an address to the viewer as an 'I' marking
the position from where she is seen. Understood this way, the performance makes explicit the address presented by Brechtian epic theatre to “see for yourselves.”

Finally, Artifact denaturalizes the position of this ‘I’ seeing by showing this position to be an effect of the address presented by the performance. The audience as listener is addressed as a ‘you’ as opposed to the ‘I’ speaking. At the same time, however, this speech act presents an invitation to this spectator to take up the position of an ‘I’ seeing, as opposed to the character speaking on stage who appears as a ‘you’ being seen. In the address “Do you see what I mean?,” these positions are conflated and deliberately, I would argue. In this way, Artifact draws attention to how the conflation can be understood as the effect of the structure of the address presented to the spectator, and how this serves to repress the position of the viewer in the theatre by absorbing him or her in the world on stage.

Thus on the one hand, Artifact draws attention to the way both verbal and visual address present the audience with positions in relation to what is there to be seen on stage, while on the other it can be read as a critique of the simple equation of positioning as it takes place in perspective with deixis in linguistic utterances as proposed by Damish.

Step Inside! — As the audience enters the auditorium, a silent figure dressed in a ballet tunic crosses a bare stage in the cold light of inspection lamps. Suddenly, a woman in elaborate historical dress appears from the wings. She claps her hands and music starts to play. Slowly, she approaches the audience, throwing kisses, making theatrical gestures of invitation and honoring the audience with elegant bows. Her dress brings to mind the baroque theatre organized in function of the vision of the king, and her salutation is certainly worthy of a king. With it, she performs the address implied by the architecture of a baroque theatre. She reaches out to the viewer in a way analogous to the address of perspectival drawing. Having reached the front of the stage she halts, pauses, stretches up, looks at the audience and says: “Step inside!”

She invites the audience to do that which many performances implicitly invite you to do, namely to leave your position in the auditorium and to project yourself into the world on stage. This makes her invitation an ambiguous gesture. It threatens to undermine what it pretends to install. For successfully projecting oneself into the world on stage depends on the seeming absence of the relationship that is highlighted by her performance. With her invitation which highlights the theatricality of the situation – its being theatre – she performs the critical gesture of Brechtian theatre where the gap separating stage and auditorium is closed in order to create distance.

Furthermore, something seems to be at stake in the order of things. In the case of Artifact, it is not the situation represented on stage that seduces the audience to ‘step inside.’ Rather it is the invitation itself that marks the
beginning of the action. This invitation marks the beginning of the theatrical event, as if to demonstrate that it is only by assuming the point of view she proposes that the event takes place; as if to demonstrate that the positioning of the audience is part and parcel of the performance taking place. With her gesture, the woman frames what is there to be seen on stage as theatre, while at the same time this gesture of framing consists literally of setting up a relationship between the seer ‘over here’ and the seen ‘over there,’ inviting this seer over there to ‘step inside,’ to leave behind reality and enter the fictive cosmos.

With her invitation, the woman gives a demonstration of what in narratology is called focalization. The term focalization was introduced by Gerard Genette to distinguish between two agents involved in the way events are presented in stories: the agent who ‘narrates’ and the agent who ‘sees.’ The concept was further developed by Mieke Bal upon whose work my use of the concept is based.

“Whenever events are presented” writes Bal “they are always presented from within a certain ‘vision.’ A point of view is chosen, a certain way of seeing things, a certain angle, whether ‘real’ historical facts are concerned or fictitious events” (Bal 1997: 142). Focalization describes the relationship between this vision and that which is ‘seen.’ The concept of focalization is therefore comparable in many ways to that of perspective. But there are important differences as well. Perspective tends to focus attention one-sidedly on what is seen and to direct attention away from the position from which things are seen and, in this way, it obscures the relation between seer and seen. Focalization describes precisely this relationship between a subject and an object of vision as given within the construction of the text.

Focalization originates from narratological theory designed for the analysis of verbal texts. Bal herself has demonstrated the usefulness of the concept for visual ‘texts’ as well. In her Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (1997), she uses a visual example – a relief in Arjuna, south India – to explain the principles of focalization. The relief shows the images of a cat, a man and several mice. Read in the right way, these images ‘tell’ a story. Bal demonstrates how this visual story ‘takes place’ as a result of the spectator’s ability to identify with the various positions presented by the mice, the cat and the man and to see as if from their points of view (Bal 1997: 144–145).

‘Identification’ here does not mean the kind of non-critical, passive reception whereby the spectator imagines her or himself to be the character represented. Bal’s concept of focalization involves a type of identification that does not aim at erasing difference between seer and seen, but is more like what Bruce Wilshire (1982) describes with the metaphor of ‘standing in.’ The spectator is invited to ‘step inside’ and to take up a position as represented within the work. In the Arjuna relief, for example, the seer is invited to take up the positions of the cat, the mice and the man and to see the situation represented as if through their eyes, as a result of which the story unfolds.
Acts of Meaning — In Artifact, the woman in the historical dress is the focalizor in person. She literally invites the audience to see what happens from her point of view, to step into her shoes and see it as she does. At first, she seems to be self-confident, not to say self-satisfied. Her text, entirely made up of constative statements and orders, gives her an air of authority. Her voice, amplified by a microphone, is loud and clear and surrounds the audience from all sides. After a little while, she is joined by a man dressed in a late 20th-century suit.

The relationship between the man and the woman is constructed along the lines of various binary oppositions: man/woman, history/present, extravert/introvert, constative/interrogative, and distance/closeness. The man, being a true antagonist, sets out to undermine the woman as wisdom broker. While the woman stays stationary, the man goes around, asking questions like “Which?” and “When?” and “Where?” and “How?” The man speaks these questions through a megaphone. The megaphone, like the microphone, amplifies his voice, but instead of suggesting omnipresence, the source of the sound is firmly located in relation to whom he addresses with it. Furthermore, the megaphone amplification does not obscure the distance between speaker and his audience but stresses it. With his vocal address coming from different angles he undermines the totalizing effect of her voice.

The man and the woman are involved in what seems to be an ongoing series of attempts to find out ‘how it is’ and to convey this to the audience. In their attempts to do so, they make use of ‘the words of Artifact’ to describe what they find themselves confronted with (fig. 2). In the program, these words are printed accompanied by dictionary definitions, as if to insure their meaning. In the performance, however, reference becomes something of a desperate plea, a demand, an address, to the sign to convey Presence, Being, Meaning – which it simply will not deliver.

The diagram functions as a miniature version of a Saussurean model of language as a self-regulating, abstract system in which meaning is the effect of the interplay between similarity and difference. According to de Saussure, the relationship between the linguistic sign and referent is arbitrary, yet regulated by convention. In Artifact, this arbitrariness is taken to extremes. In doing so, Artifact presents what appears to be a demonstration of Benveniste’s critique of de Saussure’s account of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.

Benveniste points out that linguistic arbitrariness does not mean relativity or anything goes, which it has often been construed to mean. The relation between signifier and signified may be arbitrary if seen from the detached point of view of one limited to externally observing the bond established between an objective reality and human behavior. Or as Benveniste so evocatively puts it, “under the impassive regard of Sirius” (Benveniste 1971: 44). Seen from Sirius, the linguistic sign is arbitrary because the same animal is called boeuf in one country and Ochs elsewhere. But as Benveniste observes, the real problem is far more profound. This real
fig. 2 — William Forsythe
The Words of Artifact
problem is that as soon as we leave this position "under the impassive regard of Sirius," the connection between signifier and signified is not arbitrary at all. From the perspective of an individual user of language the relation between signifier and signified is necessarily. Signifier and signified are two aspects of a single notion which together make up what Benveniste calls, "the ensemble as the emboider and the embodiment" (Benveniste 1971: 45). Through their necessary connection the world appears to us 'as it is.' Consequently, through this necessary connection that what appears to one person as an Ochs appears to another as a boeuf. Although our condition as discursive beings implies that all meaning is relative rather than absolute or ontologically given, it does not follow that the effects of discourse are experienced as being relative by those who participate in it. The discourse we are born into is not relative but formative for the world as it appears to us. This difference is what is at stake in the conflict represented in Artifact.

In Artifact, the two speaking characters use the words of Artifact printed in the diagram to produce syntactically correct sentences. They use these sentences in ways that suggest that they are meant to make sense of what is happening on stage, and between stage and audience. However, the degree to which the words relate to what is seen on stage is often difficult to grasp. The characters explore the various possible combinations of words as given in the diagram, using them again and again in different order or repeating the same syntactical structure using different words. While reference becomes increasingly problematic, discourse on stage becomes deictic to the extreme. The performance thus seems to prove Benveniste's point that deixis, and not reference, is the essence of language.

Deictic markers make up a large part of the 'words of Artifact.' And deixis is what is performed first and foremost through the language in the diagram, as well as through the multi-media language of the stage. Although it is often hard to say what exactly the words spoken on stage refer to, the use of these linguistic signs does make sense as an address, an address that invites a response even though it is not clear what the woman means. Indeed, when the woman asks the audience "Do you see what I mean?" her question is usually met with laughter.

While the question may be hilarious, it is also strikingly to the point. Audience members know what the words mean, but they haven't got the slightest idea what she means with them, nor what she, as a visual sign, is supposed to refer to. Nevertheless, her question is meaningful in the sense that the audience is taken along in a series of subjective transactions. Meaning and subjectivity come across through the play between 'me' and 'you' as positions produced a a function of linguistic signs, by means of an address through visual signs, through the directing of hands and eyes, through the choreography of bodies in space, and through the construction of perspective and point of view. The characters represent different perspectives on what is at stake and since reference is highly problematic, it is not possible to point out who is right and who is wrong. All attention is drawn
towards the mechanism of the dramatic conflict itself, revealing it to be a
drama of vision and positioning.

**Internal Focalization** — In *Artifact*, the man and the woman represent
different ‘positions’ in relation to what is seen, and this is shown to result in
different ‘stories’ about what is at stake.\(^\text{11}\) In doing so, both the man and the
woman act as focalizor. They are so called *internal focalizors*: characters who
mediate in the relationship between the audience and what is seen onstage
and invite us to see it as they see it. In doing so, they present an address
to the audience that, like the I/you polarity described by Benveniste, can be
understood in terms of the setting up of positions. Both the man and the
woman present an address to the audience as a ‘you’ to see it as they see
it. Yet, they do so by inviting the viewer to take up the position not of a ‘you’
implied in their address, but of the ‘I’ implied by the vision they represent.

In *Artifact*, the man and the woman, in their attempts to make sense
of what is going on on stage, represent conflicting points of view. The woman
represents a point of view like that of the Cartesian cogito with a transcen-
dental vantage point from where everything can be seen ‘as it is.’ The
position of the man corresponds to a postmodern critique of these universal-
ist pretensions as they characterize her point of view. He sets out to question
and deconstruct her vision of the world, pointing out that it could be
different. Their conflict reaches a climax in the third act when the woman
starts to knock over pieces of the cardboard set that show perspectival
drawings of theatrical space. In the fourth act, these pieces of cardboard are
placed side by side against the back wall of the theatre, presenting a view of
different perspectives on the space of the theatre as seen from different
points of view simultaneously and equally.

Their drama thus can be read as a preposterous staging of Lehmann’s
account of the development from dramatic to post-dramatic theatre.\(^\text{12}\)
*Artifact* presents an illustration of his argument formulated in the artistic
discourse of the theatre. It shows how a unitary framework on what is there to
be seen gets undermined and deconstructed and finally results in a multipli-
cation of frames. *Artifact* also draws attention to the relation between the
telos or goal implied in a particular story that frames how things are seen,
and the point of view from where these things seen are seen.

*Artifact* demonstrates how the architecture of the theatrical event plays
into the desire to conflate ‘I’ and ‘you’ typical of the dramatic theatre and to
see what ‘you’ mean or feel. This conflation can be seen at work in many of
responses to theatre performances that testify to the way a performance can
make the audience believe that we as audience know what the actors think
and see what they feel. Focalization exposes how the characters seen on
stage mediate in this forgetting of the distance between seer and seen by
inviting us to take up their position.
External Focalization — Apart from one or more internal focalizers there is always also an external focalizer. The external focalizer is the anonymous agent through whose eyes we as an audience see the performance 'as it is.' As long as this position remains invisible, the performance can appear as simply 'there to be seen,' and independent from any particular point of view. *Artifact* demonstrates how this position mediates in the relation between seer and seen. It also demonstrates how the event can be organized in such a way as to undercut this mechanism by denaturalizing the position presented by the external focalizer. To explain this, I will return once more to the invitation “Step inside!” presented to the audience at the beginning of the piece.

With the invitation to “step inside,” the woman shows the address made by the performance to be an act of what Althusser calls *interpellation*. Interpellation is a specific form of the more general second-personhood as theorized by Benveniste. It is the speech-act of the social environment. Althusser sees this speech-act embodied in the state’s representative, the policeman, who calls out “Hey you!” causing the subject to turn around because of being addressed, which in turn constitutes him or her as subject. The policeman saying ‘you’ makes ‘you’ specifically into ‘me,’ that is, it makes me turn around, feeling addressed at the same time as I feel unsettled, taken out of myself, already in prison (Bal 1999: 87). In *Artifact*, it is the audience that is compelled out of its seat and into the world on stage, and it is through this act of interpellation that the audience is constituted as the subject of vision.

Then, during the second act, the safety curtain suddenly comes down with a bang, throwing the audience – having ‘stepped inside’ – in one fell swoop back into their seats in the auditorium. With this powerful gesture, *Artifact* points attention to the ambiguity at work in the invitation presented by the performance to ‘step inside.’ ‘Stepping inside’ describes an embodied action, while this phrase is used in this context to invite the audience to take a certain distance from their bodies located in the auditorium and to get closer to what is seen on stage. This happens by means of an address to the seer in which this seer, bodily attached to his or her viewpoint, is at the same time released from this bodily ‘locus of looking,’ as a result of which the relationship between what is seen and who is seeing gets obscured. The coming down of the safety curtain highlights precisely this relationship by disturbing the unproblematic identification with the point of view of the disembodied eye. As a result, instead of being released from his or her ‘locus of looking,’ the seer is made aware anew of how he or she is bodily attached to it.

With this powerful gesture, *Artifact* draws attention to the way the performance produces a position for the audience as the subject of vision. This position is not represented on stage, but implied by it. *Artifact* demonstrates how this position functions like the vantage point of a perspectival drawing. By taking up this position, the framework itself that frames what is seen remains invisible. Furthermore, *Artifact* shows that this perspective implied by the performance involves a position in relation to what is seen, as well as notions of what it means to see and who is the subject of this vision.
1—Emile Benveniste’s most important essays have been translated into English and collected in one volume titled Problems in General Linguistics (University of Miami Press 1971). An excellent discussion of Benveniste’s importance for the semiotics of the subject can be found in Kaja Silverman (1983) The Subject of Semiotics, chapter 1.


3—Understanding theatre as a sign system began with the work of the Czech semioticians of the Prague School in the 1930s and 1940s who proposed that ‘all that is on stage is a sign.’ Their investigations into the nature of the theatrical sign concentrated on identifying the signifying role of stage-sign vehicles and analyzing their dynamic and generative capabilities. This work has been developed and taken in different directions by international theatre semioticians who include Marco de Marinis, Keir Elam, Tadeusz Kowzan, Patrice Pavis, Anne Ubersfeld and Erika Fischer-Lichte. Ultimately, the formal model of theatre semiotics has provided the framework and the vocabulary for identifying, classifying and analyzing the ‘parts’ which make up the theatrical whole. For an account of the early history of theatre semiotics, see Elam (1980: 5–31) and Elaine Ashton and George Savona (1991: 5–10). A fundamental premise of the semiotic approach is the understanding of theatre as a communication model in which a series of coded messages are sent or enacted and their meanings received or decoded. See Elam (1980: 32–97) for an extensive account of theatre as a communication model.

The most comprehensive example of the semiotic approach is Erika Fisher Lichte’s three volume Semiotik des Theaters (1983), translated into English as The Semiotics of Theatre (1992). The same year (1983) Marco de Marinis argued that the field had come to a crossroads. If theatre semiotics were to continue to emphasize the structural analysis of the dramatic or performance text, it ran the risk of becoming only a ‘propaedeutic support for critical and historical research,’ while if it were to become established as a discipline it must move beyond such analysis to develop a ‘pragmatics of theatrical communication,’ engaging in the historical and sociological context of both stage realization and reception. See Carson (1993: 505 ff) for a discussion of this shift. See Elaine Ashton and George Savona (1991) for an overview of the possibilities of semiotic analysis, and Elaine Aston (“Gender as Sign-System: the Feminist Spectator as Subject” in: Patrick Campbell (ed.) Performance Analysis. A Critical Reader, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996, 56–69) for a critique of the limitations of a semiotic approach from a feminist point of view.

4—Both Elam (1980) and Fisher-Lichte (1992) describe how, paradoxically, the effective historical starting point for research into theatrical communication was in fact a denial of its possibility. In 1969, the French linguist Georges Mounin challenged the classification of the relationship between performer and spectator as a communicative relationship on the grounds that genuine communication depends on the capacity of two (or more) parties involved in the exchange to employ the same code so that ‘the sender can become the receiver and the receiver the sender.’ This is not the case in the theatre, he argues, where the information giving process is unidirectional and the roles of the participants are fixed. Mounin’s denial of communicative status to the performance stems from his definition of communication according to the stimulus/response model. He insists that sender and receiver be in a position equally to employ a single code and a set of physical channels, thus transmitting similar signals, while, as Elam argues, a more generous conception of the communicative process – and one more generally accepted today – holds that it is sufficient that the receiver be acquainted with the sender’s code and so be able to decode the message (Elam 1980: 33–34.

5 — See Pavis (1998: 280-284) for an overview of various pragmatic approaches to the theatre.

6 — Austin distinguishes between two different types of utterances: constative and performative. Constative utterances describe a state of affairs, and can therefore be said to be true or false. Performative utterances do not describe but perform the action they designate. Austin's much discussed example here is the wedding ceremony in which, in pronouncing the words "I do" this "I" does not describe anything, but indulges in it.


8 — In Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis (chapter 5), Mieke Bal presents a critique of Damish in which she elaborates on precisely this point. This critique has been important for my reading of Damish.

The complications of using models and theories originating from the analysis of language for an analysis of visual material recur frequently in Bal's work. This is not to say that she would argue against such use of theory. On the contrary, much of her work is devoted to an exploration of how the verbal and the visual interact in the meaning making behavior of makers and recipients of cultural artifacts and how concepts 'travelling' from one field to the other can help to open up new insights. However, she also warns for uncritical transpositions of concepts from one field to the other. In "Reading Art" (Bal 1996a) she dis-uses the presumed analogy between the verbal and the visual as a source of both inspiration and confusion for the analysis of visual texts:

The mode or reading images based on speech-act theory rests on the assumed analogy between seeing and speaking. In its simple form, this analogy is untenable for two reasons: it conflates different modes of perception without examining the implications of that conflation – thinking and seeing; speaking is hardly an act of perception – and it conflates different subject positions in relation to acts – visually representing, not seeing, would be the act parallel to speech. To be sure, the insight that vision is as much subject to the social construction of the visual fields and the modes of semiosis we are trained to adopt as speech is subject to the social construction of discourse, has been an important impulse for a critical approach to visual art. But assuming an unargued analogy between 'I see,' 'I think,' and 'I say' is not the same thing as criticizing and undermining an unwarranted opposition between two media; rather it obscures the issues involved in such a critique. The analogy also allows another conflation, that between acts of production and acts of reception, to pass unnoticed (Bal 1996a: 31).

10 — Bruce Wilshire discusses the notion of 'standing in' in Role Playing and Identity. The Limits of Theatre as a Metaphor (1982). Wilshire introduces the notion of 'standing in' for the first time on p. 22-23:

The actor stands in for the character. But the character is a type of humanity with whom the audience member can identify, either directly as a stand-in for his own person, or indirectly as a stand-in for others whom the audience member recognizes and with whom he can be empathetically involved. If the character is one who stands in for us, then we can also stand in for him, and indeed we do stand in for him through the actor's standing in for him. [...] actors stand in for characters who stand in for other characters. The audience member stands in through the actor's standing in for characters who stand in an actor like way, and if the audience member intuits a similarity to offstage existence, then this existence must be theatre like.

See also chapter V: "Variations on the Theatrical Theme of Standing In and Authorization."

11 — In this drama presented by Artifact, language acts as a means of 'getting the story right;' since language appears as a means to negotiate 'how it is.' The man and the woman are involved in a process of negotiating and renegotiating what is actually the case in the situation in which they find themselves. They do so in a way comparable to the way young human beings 'enter into meaning' as described by Jerome Bruner (1990).

In Bruner's account, meaning appears as a way of dealing with the world one is confronted with and this happens through interpretative procedures. In these procedures, language does not just appear as a way of naming but also as a means to adjudicating different construals of reality. Here, narrative acts as a means to negotiate between conflicting points of view. Bruner thus argues for a view of cultural meaning making as a system concerned not solely with sense and reference but with what he calls 'felicity conditions': "the conditions by which differences in meaning can be resolved by invoking mitigating circumstances that account for divergent interpretations of 'reality'" (Bruner 1990: 67). He demonstrates how human beings, in interacting with one another, form a sense of the canonical and ordinary as a background against which to interpret and give narrative meaning to breaches in and deviations from 'normal' states. This function becomes most acute at moments of confrontation with something that does not fit into the usual and breaks with one's expectations. At such moments, the subject is forced to act upon what happens and actively make sense of it. At these moments, the seemingly unproblematic act of 'just looking' loses its apparent naturalness and the seer has to actively produce a story or reading of what is seen, a story that will make it cohere according to his or her point of view.

12 — I take this particular notion of 'preposterous' from Bal (1999)
