

The Empire of Signs

Because of the compulsion of work and production, we are losing the capacity to *play*. We only rarely make playful use of language; we only put it to *work*. It is obliged to communicate information or produce meaning. As a result, we have no access to forms of language that shine all by themselves. Language as a medium of information has no splendour. It does not seduce. Poems are structures with strict forms that shine all by themselves. Very often, they do not communicate a message. They are characterized by an *excess of the signifier*; they are *luxurious*. We enjoy in particular their perfection of form. In poetry, language *plays*. For this reason, we hardly read poems any more. Poems are *magic ceremonies of language*. The *poetic principle* returns pleasure to language through a radical break with the economy of the production of meaning. The poetic does not produce. This is why '[t]he poetic is

the insurrection of language against its own laws', against the laws that serve the purpose of producing meaning.¹ In poems we enjoy language itself. The working language of information, by contrast, cannot be enjoyed. The principle of work is opposed to the principle of pleasure.

Kant calls wit [den Witz] an 'intellectual luxury'.² In the case of wit, language succumbs to play. Thus, wit is 'blooming', just as 'nature seems to be carrying on more of a game with its flowers but a business with fruits'.³ A witticism [der Witz] is not an utterance that may be reduced to an unambiguous meaning. It is a luxury, that is, it luxates, deviates, from the 'business' of meaning production. It is a linguistic form in which meaning, the signified, is not all that important. While language's intelligence consists of the production of meaning, in the case of witticisms language plays dumb, so to speak:

Wit presents language with an opportunity to play dumber than it actually is, to evade its own dialectic and chains of meanings, in order to throw itself into a process of delirious contiguity . . . Wit demonstrates that language has an orientation toward non-meaning – provided it is enchained by its own play.⁴

In the case of witticisms, the effect emanates more from the signifier than the signified. Thus, they are difficult to paraphrase. Delirious contiguity is the poetic principle of wit. The signifiers licentiously enter into neighbourly relations without giving any consideration to the signified.

If the sign, the signifier, is completely absorbed by meaning, by the signified, then language loses all its magic and splendour. It becomes purely informational; it

works instead of plays. Eloquence and linguistic elegance also derive from the luxury of the signifier. Only through the overabundance, the excess, of the signifier does language appear magical, poetic and seductive:

This overabundant order of the signifier is that of magic (and poetry). . . . The long *work* of joining signifier and signified, the *work* of reason, somehow brakes and absorbs this fatal profusion. The magical seduction of the word must be reduced, annulled. And it will be so the day when all signifiers receive their signifieds, when all has become meaning and reality.⁵

What is mysterious is not the signified but the signifier without the signified. Magic spells do not convey any meaning. They are empty signs, so to speak. That is why they appear magical, like doors that lead nowhere.

Ritual signs cannot be assigned a determinate meaning either. Thus, they appear enigmatic. As language becomes increasingly functional and informational, the overabundance, the excess, of the signifier diminishes. Language is disenchanted. Pure information is nothing magical. It does not seduce. Language develops its magnificence, its seductive power, only thanks to the overabundance of the signifier. The culture of information has lost the magic that comes from the empty signifier. We now live in a *culture of the signified*, which dismisses the signifier, form, as something external. Our culture is hostile to pleasure and form.

Ritual is also characterized by an overabundance of the signifier. Thus, Roland Barthes idealizes Japan, a thoroughly ritualized country, as an empire of signs, a

ceremonial empire of signifiers. The haiku poetic form, for instance, is determined by the overabundance of the signifier. Haikus pay little attention to the signified. They do not communicate anything. They are a pure play with language, with signifiers, that produces no meaning. Haikus are linguistic ceremonies:

In the haiku, the limitation of language is the object of a concern which is inconceivable to us, for it is not a question of being concise (i.e., shortening the signifier without diminishing the density of the signified) but on the contrary of acting on the very root of meaning, so that this meaning will not melt, run, internalize, become implicit, disconnect, divagate . . . the haiku is not a rich thought reduced to a brief form, but a brief event which immediately finds its proper form.⁶

A haiku is subject to strict rules of play, and thus it cannot really be translated into another language. Forms which are proper to the Japanese language resist any kind of translation.

old pond
a frog jumps into
the sound of water⁷

The intense formalism and aestheticism that characterizes rituals in general also dominates everyday ritual practices in Japan. Take packaging, for instance. The Japanese put any trivial thing into a magnificent envelope. According to Barthes, the idea behind a Japanese parcel is 'that the triviality of the thing be disproportionate to the luxury

of the envelope'.⁸ In semiotic terms: the signifier (envelope) is more important than what it signifies, namely the signified, the content. The magnificent signifier delays the revelation of the possibly insignificant signified to a later time. It shines for itself, independently of the truth, the thing, it contains: 'what the Japanese carry, with a formicant energy, are actually empty signs'.⁹ *The liturgy of emptiness dispels the capitalist economy of the commodity.* The Japanese parcel does not reveal anything. It distracts us from the thing and, in the first instance, presents the magnificent envelope. Thus, the Japanese parcel is opposed to the *commodity*, for which the packaging is something purely external, something that only exists in order to be quickly removed again. In a similar way, the kimono veils the body with an overabundance of signifiers, a play of colour and form. The body as a bearer of signifiers is opposed to the pornographic body, which is unveiled, and hence obscene. The pornographic body, free of signifiers, indicates only the naked signified, the naked truth, namely the sexual organ [das Geschlecht].

A Japanese tea ceremony subjects us to a minutely detailed process of ritualized gesture. Here, there is no space for psychology. Participants are truly [regelrecht] de-psychologized.¹⁰ The proper movements of the hands and body have a *graphic clarity*, and there is no uncertainty about them deriving from the influence of the mind or soul. The actors immerse *themselves* in ritual gestures, and these gestures create an *absence*, a *forgetfulness of self*. In a tea ceremony, there is no communication. Nothing is communicated. There is ritual silence [Schweigen]. Ritual gesture takes the place of communication. *The soul falls silent.* In the stillness, participants exchange

gestures which generate an intense being-with. The soothing effect of a tea ceremony results from the fact that its ritual silence is so strongly opposed to today's communicative noise, today's communication without community. The ceremony brings forth a community without communication.

For Barthes, the Japanese eye is not a place filled with soul. It is empty. Barthes is suspicious of the Western mythology of the soul: 'The Western eye is subject to a whole mythology of the soul, central and secret, whose fire, sheltered in the orbital cavity, radiates toward a fleshy, sensuous, passionate exterior.'¹¹ The Japanese eye is flat, without depth. The pupils are not dramatized by the deep cavity of the eye. Hegel, who does subscribe to the Western mythology of the soul, says that 'the bones of the eye-socket' should be emphasized such that 'the strengthened shadow in the orbits gives us of itself a feeling of depth and undistracted inner life'. The depth of the soul is emphasized by 'the sharply cut outline of the orbits'. Thus, the eye 'should not protrude or, as it were, project itself into the external world'.¹² What might Hegel have said about those *flat* eyes of the Far East that appear more like a fleeting stroke of the brush on the face, rather than being deeply set back in the orbital bones?

The empire of signs also dispenses with the *moral signified*. It is dominated not by *law* but by *rules*, by signifiers without the signified. Ritual society is a society of rules. It is based not on virtues or conscience but on a *passion for rules*. Unlike the moral law, rules are not *internalized*. They are simply *obeyed*. Morality presupposes a soul, and a person who *works* on its perfection. The more a person advances on the path of morality, the more self-respect

she is due. Such narcissistic inwardness is wholly absent from the *ethics of politeness*.

Rules rest on agreement. They are formed through immanent sequences of signs, and therefore do not possess deep truth or transcendence. Rules do not have a metaphysical or theological foundation. The law, by contrast, presupposes a transcendent authority, such as God, that compels and prohibits. The pleasure derived from obeying a rule differs from the pleasure one takes in obeying or violating a law. The former is owed to a passion for play and for rules:

In order to understand the intensity of ritual forms, one must rid oneself of the idea that all happiness derives from nature, and all pleasure from the satisfaction of a desire. On the contrary, games, the sphere of play, reveal a passion for rules, a giddiness born of rules, and a force that comes from ceremony, and not desire.¹³

Capitalism is based on the economy of desire. Thus, it is incompatible with a ritual society. The intensity of the ritual form arises out of a passion for rules, which creates an altogether different form of pleasure.

Politeness is pure form. Nothing is *intended* by it. It is empty. As a ritual form, it is devoid of any moral content. It is a sign, a signifier, that differs radically from 'politeness of the heart', which suggests a moral signified:

Today we place the moral law above signs. The play of conventional forms is deemed hypocritical and immoral: we oppose it with 'the politeness of the heart' or even the radical impoliteness of desire. . . . It's true that eti-

quette and politeness (and ceremony in general) are no longer what they once were.¹⁴

As a form of ritual, politeness is without heart and without desire, without wish. It is more *art* than morality. It exhausts itself in the pure exchange of ritual gestures. Within the topology of Japanese politeness as a ritual form, there is no inside, no heart, that would render the politeness a merely external etiquette. It cannot be described using the opposition of inside and outside. It does not dwell in an outside that, as pure semblance, could be juxtaposed with the inside. Rather, one is *fully form, fully outside*:

in order to give a present, I bow down, virtually to the level of the floor, and to answer me, my partner does the same: one and the same low line, that of the ground, joins the giver, the recipient, and the stake of the protocol, a box which may well contain nothing – or virtually nothing.¹⁵

A 'graphic form . . . is thereby given to the act of exchange, in which, by this form, is erased any greediness (the gift remains suspended between two disappearances)'.¹⁶ The present, as a signifier without signified, is *pure mediation*, a *pure gift*.

The gift is alone:
it is touched
neither by generosity
nor by gratitude,
the soul does not contaminate it¹⁷

In the empire of signs, the soul, psychology, is erased. There is no soul to infect the holy seriousness of ritual play. The place of psychology is taken by a *passion for rules*, a *passion of form*. This empire of signs is opposed to today's *empire of souls* who expose themselves and constantly produce themselves. The ceremonial empire of signs makes it possible to conceive of another form of life, another society, which would be free of narcissism because, in it, the ego [das Ich] would immerse *itself* in the ritual play of signs. The passion for rules de-internalizes the self.

Contemporary society is characterized by constant and relentless moralizing. But at the same time society is becoming more and more brutal. Forms of politeness are disappearing, disregarded by the cult of authenticity. Beautiful forms of conduct are becoming ever rarer. In this respect, too, we are becoming hostile towards form. Apparently, the ascendancy of morality is compatible with the barbarization of society. Morality is formless. Moral inwardness dispenses with form. One might even say: *the more moralizing a society, the more impolite it is*. Against this formless morality, we must defend an *ethics of beautiful forms*.

