

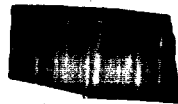


**SEMIOTICS OF ART**

**Prague School Contributions**

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**The MIT Press  
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England**



# Structure, Sign, and Function

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New Haven and London Yale University Press

## An Attempt at a Structural Analysis of a Dramatic Figure

Today the conception of a work of art as a structure, that is, a system of components aesthetically deautomatized and organized into a complex hierarchy, which is unified by the prevalence of one component over the others, is accepted in the theory of several arts. It is clear to theoreticians and historians of music and the visual arts that in the analysis of a certain work, or even in the history of a given art, we cannot either substitute the psychology of the artist's personality for a structural analysis or confuse the development of a given art with the history of culture or with that of ideology alone. Much of this is clear in the theory of literature as well, though certainly not everywhere nor for everyone. Nevertheless, it is quite risky to use the method of structural analysis for the art of acting, especially if it concerns a film actor who uses his real name for his performances and, moreover, even looks the same in all of his roles. The theoretician who tries to separate the appearance from the man and to study the structural organization of the dramatic figure, regardless of the actor's psyche and ethos, is in danger of being considered a scandalous cynic who denies the artist his human value. Permit him, therefore, for the sake of his defense and a lucid explanation to appeal to the recent photo-montage in the *Prager Presse* which juxtaposed a grey-haired man with an intelligent physiognomy and the simple-minded face of a black-haired man in a derby hat. . . . Despite its disadvantages a structural analysis of the dramatic figure has a certain small advantage: the equality of even quite different aesthetic canons is generally admitted in the dramatic arts more than in the other arts. The Hamlets of Kvapil and Hilar, Vojan and Kohout, are evaluated in a historical perspective without depreciating one another. Perhaps even this study, therefore, will not be criticized for lacking an evaluative orientation.

"Pokus o strukturní rozbor hereckého zjevu: Chaplin ve Světlech velkoměsta,"  
*Literární noviny* 5, no. 10 (1931).

We must first draw attention to the fact that the structure of the dramatic figure is merely a partial structure which acquires unambiguity only in the total structure of the dramatic work. Here it appears in multiple relations, for example, the actor and the stage space, the actor and the dramatic text, the actor and the other actors. We shall consider only one of these relations: the hierarchy of characters in the dramatic work. This hierarchy differs according to period and milieu and, in part, in relation to the dramatic text. Sometimes actors create a structurally bound whole in which no one has a dominant position and no one is the focal point of all the relations among the characters of the work. Sometimes one character (or several) becomes a focal point, dominating the others who seem to be there only to provide a background or retinue for the dominant figure (or figures). Sometimes all the characters appear to be equal and to lack structural relations. Their relationship is merely ornamentally compositional. In other words, the tasks and rights of theatrical directing are evaluated differently in different periods and different milieux. Chaplin's case obviously belongs in the second category. Chaplin is an axis around which the other characters gather, for which they are there. They emerge from the shadows only insofar as they are necessary for the dominant character. This assertion will be developed and proven only later.

Let us now turn our attention to the internal structure of the dramatic figure itself. The components of this structure are many and varied; nevertheless, we can arrange them in three distinct groups. First, there is the set of vocal components. It is quite complex (the pitch of the voice and its melodic undulation, the intensity and tone of the voice, tempo, etc.), but in the given case this group has no importance for us. Chaplin's films are "pantomimes" (Chaplin uses this term himself to distinguish his latest movie from the sound-track film). Later we shall explain why his movies have to be silent. The second group cannot be identified otherwise than by the triple designation: facial expressions, gestures, poses. These are three different components both from an objective and a structural standpoint. They can parallel one another, but they can also diverge so that their interrelation is felt to be an interference (an effective comic means). Moreover, one of them can subordinate the others to itself or, conversely, all of them can be in equilibrium. What is common to all three of these

components, however, is the fact that they are felt to be expressive, to be an expression of the character's mental state, especially his emotions. This property binds them into a unified group. The third group is composed of those movements of the body by which the actor's relation to the stage space is expressed and carried.<sup>1</sup> Frequently the components of this group cannot be objectively distinguished from those of the preceding group (e.g., the actor's walk can simultaneously be a gesture, an expression of a mental state, and can cause a change in his relation to the stage space); but functionally, as we have suggested, they are quite clearly distinct from the previous group and conjoin into an independent category.

We certainly do not have to provide extensive proof to propound the thesis that the dominant position in Chaplin belongs to the components of the second group. For the sake of expediency we shall simply call them gestures and thus extend this term to facial expressions and poses without undue distortion. As we have already said, the first group (vocal components) is completely suppressed in Chaplin, while the third group (movements) occupies a distinctly subordinate position. Even though movements which change the actor's relation to space occur, they are charged to the utmost with the function of gestures (Chaplin's walk sensitively reflects every change in his mental state). Hence the dominant position falls to gestures (expressive elements), constituting an uninterrupted series full of interferences and unexpected *pointes* which carries the entire dynamics not only of Chaplin's performance but also of the whole film. Chaplin's gestures are not subordinated to any other component; on the contrary, they subordinate all the other components. In this way Chaplin's acting distinctly differs from the usual cases. Even if an actor differentiates and emphasizes gestures, they usually serve a word, a movement, or the plot. They are a passive series whose peripety is motivated by other series.

But for Chaplin, the word which is most capable of influencing

1. Even in Chaplin, though he is a typical film actor, we can speak about the stage in the theatrical sense, that is, a static stage, because here the camera is almost passive. Even if it moves, it has only an auxiliary role—for the purpose of close-ups. To prove and elucidate this assertion let us recall the active role of the camera in Russian films where the changeability of standpoints and perspectives plays the dominant role in the structure of the work, whereas the dramatic figure is structurally subordinated.

gestures must be completely suppressed if the gestures are to be the dominant component. In a Chaplin film every distinct word would be a blotch: it would turn the hierarchy of components upside down. For this reason neither Chaplin himself nor the other characters speak. Typical in this respect is the introductory scene of *City Lights*, the unveiling of a monument, in which distinct words are replaced by sounds having only intonation and tone in common with words. As far as movements in the stage space are concerned, we have said that they are charged with the function of gestures; as a matter of fact, they are gestures. Moreover, Chaplin is a dramatic figure who does not move too much (his immobility is even stressed by an organic defect in his feet).

And now for the plot. The plot lacks any dynamism of its own: it is merely a series of events linked by a weak thread. Its function is to be the substratum of the dynamic sequence of gestures. The divisions between individual events serve only to provide pauses in the sequence of gestures and to render it coherent through this articulation. Even the incompleteness of the plot is an expression of its atomization. Chaplin's film does not end in a plot conclusion but in a gesture-*pointe*, indeed one of Chaplin's gestures (a look and a smile). This holds only for the European version of the film, but it is characteristic that such a way of concluding the movie is possible.

If we posit the sequence of gestures as the dominant component of Chaplin's dramatic figure, we must now define the character of this line. In a negative sense we can say that none of the three elements (facial expressions, gestures, poses) prevails over the others but that they assert themselves equally. A positive definition of the very essence of this sequence is: Its dynamics is carried by the interference (whether simultaneous or successive) of two types of gestures: gesture-signs and gesture-expressions. Here we must engage in a brief discussion of the function of gestures in general. We have already said that this function is essentially expressive in *all* gestures. But this expressiveness has its nuances. It can be immediate and individual; yet it can also acquire supra-individual validity. In such a case the gesture becomes a conventional sign, universally comprehensible (either in general or in a certain milieu). This is true, for example, of ritual gestures (a typical case: the gestures of a religious cult) or especially social gestures. Social gestures are signs which conventionally—like words—signal certain

emotions or mental states, for instance, sincere emotional participation, willingness, or respect. But there is no guarantee that the mental state of the person who uses the gesture corresponds to the mood of which the gesture is a sign. That is why all the Alcestes of the world are so angry at the insincerity of social conventions. The individual expressiveness ("sincerity") of a social gesture can be reliably recognized only if it is involuntarily accompanied by some nuance which alters its conventional course. It can happen that the particular emotion coincides with the mental state of which the gesture is the sign. In such a case the gesture-sign will be exaggerated beyond the conventional degree of its intensity (too deep a bow or too broad a smile). But even the opposite can occur: The particular mental state is different from the mood which is supposed to be feigned by the gesture-sign. In that case there will occur an interference, either *successive*, that is, such that the coordination of the series of gestures developing in time will be disturbed (the sudden invasion of an individually expressive, involuntary gesture into the series of gesture-signs), or *simultaneous*, that is, such that the gesture-sign provided, for example, by a facial expression will at the same time be negated by a contradictory gesticulation of the hand based on individual expression or vice versa.

Chaplin's case is typical of the interference of social gesture-signs with individually expressive gestures. Everything in Chaplin's acting is aimed at heightening and sharpening this interference, even his special appearance: formal attire which is ragged, gloves without fingers but a cane and a black derby. In particular, however, the social paradox of Chaplin contained in the very theme of the beggar with social aspirations serves to sharpen the interference of gestures. This provides the basis of the interference. The integrating emotional feature of the social gestures is the feeling of self-assurance and superiority, whereas the expressive gestures of Chaplin-the-beggar revolve around the emotional complex of inferiority. These two planes of gestures interweave through the entire performance in constant catachreses. To characterize this interweaving in detail would mean providing an endless enumeration of the verbal paraphrases of the individual moments of the performance. This would be monotonous and useless. Much more interesting is the fact that the duality of the plane of gestures is also reflected in the distribution of the supporting characters in

Chaplin's performance. There are two supporting characters: the blind flower girl and the drunk millionaire. All the others are demoted to the level of extras, either partially (the old woman) or completely (all the others). Each of the two supporting characters is modified so that he can perceive only one plane, one of the interfering series of Chaplin's gestures. Such a one-sided perception is motivated by blindness in the girl, by intoxication in the millionaire.

The girl perceives only the social gesture-signs. The deformed image which she gets of Chaplin is furnished toward the end of the film—through a remarkable process of realization. A man, a nondescript social type, comes to the now-seeing girl's shop to buy some flowers. His departure is accompanied by the caption: "I thought that it was *him*." All the scenes in which Chaplin meets the girl—they are always alone so that the presence of a third, seeing person will not shatter the girl's illusion—are founded upon the polar oscillation between the two planes of Chaplin's gestures: social and individually expressive gestures. Whenever Chaplin draws close to the girl in these scenes, the social gestures gain the upper hand, but as soon as he takes a few steps away from her, the expressive gestures suddenly prevail in each instance. This is especially evident in the scene in which Chaplin brings gifts to the girl and moves back and forth from the table where the bag of presents is lying to the chair on which the girl is sitting. Here the sudden changes in gestures, the transition from plane to plane, function almost like the *pointes* of epigrams. In this connection we shall also understand why Chaplin's film cannot have the usual "happy ending." A happy ending would entail the complete negation of the dramatic contradiction between the two levels of gestures upon which the film is based rather than upon its resolution. If concluded by the beggar's marrying the girl, the film would appear negligible in retrospect, because its dramatic contradiction would be impaired.

Now to the relationship between the beggar and the millionaire. The millionaire, as we have said, also has access to only one of the two interfering series of gestures, the individually expressive ones. He must, of course, be drunk for this deformation of vision to be operative. As soon as he becomes sober, he sees, as all the other people do, the comical interference of the two series, and he behaves toward Chaplin with the same disdain as all the others. But



whereas the girl's deformation of perception (the ability to see only one series of gestures) is permanent, and the solution occurs only at the very end of the film, the millionaire's state of deformed vision alternates with states of normal vision. This, of course, provides the hierarchy of the two supporting characters. The girl comes more to the fore, because the permanent deformation of perception provides a broader and stronger basis for the interference of the two planes of gestures than does the millionaire's intermittent intoxication. The millionaire is, however, necessary as the girl's opposite. From the first meeting with Chaplin when by means of his expressive gestures the beggar sings a pathetic hymn to the beauty of life ("And tomorrow the sun will rise again") in front of the millionaire, their relationship is full of outpourings of friendship, from one embrace to another. And thus we have quite imperceptibly proceeded from the structural analysis of a dramatic figure to the structure of the entire film. This is another proof of the extent to which the interference of the two levels of gestures is the axis of Chaplin's film.

Let us stop here, for we have probably said everything of substance. In conclusion, though, permit us to make a few evaluative comments. What causes the spectator's awe of Chaplin's figure is the immense span between the intensity of the effect which he achieves and the simplicity of his devices. He takes as the dominant of his structure a component that usually (in film) occupies a secondary position: gestures in the broad sense of the term (facial expressions, gestures proper, poses). And to this fragile dominant of limited capacity he manages to subordinate not only the structure of his own dramatic figure but even that of the entire film. This presupposes an almost unbelievable economy in all the other components. If any of them became only a little more emphatic, called only a little more attention to itself, the entire structure would collapse. The structure of Chaplin's acting resembles a three-dimensional figure which rests on the sharpest of its edges but nevertheless is in perfect equilibrium. Hence the illusion of immateriality: the pure lyrics of gestures freed from dependence upon a corporal substratum.