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Some Remarks on the Notion of Sign in Jakobson's Semiotics and in Czech Structuralism*

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The mid-war Prague School has justly been celebrated for its "shift towards semiotics" (Matejka 1978: xxv). In fact, the "creation of semiotic aesthetics", or rather the "semiotic reformulation of aesthetics", has been called its "crowning achievement" (Galan 1985: 82).

Indeed, whereas semiotic terminology is still absent in the Jakobson/Tynjanov "*Theses*", published in 1928, which can be regarded as a summarizing culmination of Russian formalism, we observe the term 'sign' several times in the "*Theses*" of the Prague Linguistic Circle, presented to the first International Congress of Slavists one year later, and published in the first volume of the "*Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague*".

There we find the statement, for example, that language has either a *communicative* function directed towards the signified, or a *poetic* function, directed towards the sign itself [Il a soit *une fonction de communication*, c.-à-d. qu'il est dirigé vers le signifié, soit *une fonction poétique*, c.-à-d. qu'il est dirigé vers le signe lui-même. (p. 14)] Somewhat more specifically, it is then claimed (p. 21) that it is a recipient's *orientation* [German: Einstellung; French: intention; Czech: zaměření] which is directed toward the sign itself [le signe lui-même], and not toward the signified [non pas sur le signifié].

It is important to keep in mind that right from the beginning of Czech structuralism, language was considered just one semiotic struc-

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ture among others [des autres structures sémiologiques]. With regard to verbal art, however, we obtain some deeper insight into the understanding of 'sign' implied. With respect to poetry, we read, the recipient's orientation is thus on the verbal expression [l'expression verbale].

As far as the notion of 'sign' implied in these comments is concerned, only one logical consequence may be drawn based on the preceding formulation: if the aesthetic orientation in art in general is toward the sign, and if in verbal art it is directed toward the expression, then the notion of sign implied here has to be understood as *monolateral*. The notion of sign in the form as it is presented here would thus be confined to the expression plane.

Since the expression plane, in turn, is related to some signified, one might object that, ultimately, we are dealing with a scholarly distinction, for in the process of signification it makes no great difference whether a signified is represented by something called either 'sign' or 'signifying'. We would be dealing with a phenomenon, which Husserl (1913: 23) in his *Logische Untersuchungen* had already termed the "double meaning of the term 'sign'". It will be argued below, however, that we are concerned not only with terminological issues, but with conceptual differences, too. We are led to such basic questions as: when are we talking about a semiotic reformulation of aesthetics, what is the notion of sign underlying it, where are its roots to be found, and, finally, in what terms is it useful to deal with these phenomena today?

In reconstructing the semiotic roots of Czech structuralism, many scholars have pointed out various sources of both endogeneous and exogeneous origin. Thus our attention has been drawn to the fact that "both Peirce's *semiotic* and Saussure's *semiology* (...) came to Prague, Czechoslovakia, during the early 1930s and found fertile ground (...)" (Matejka/Titunik 1976: ix). Actually, however, Peirce did not play any role in the formation of Czech structuralism; this has been pointed out by Thomas Winner (1978: 443), who maintains that "Peirce's fundamental semiotics studies were (...) not known to the members of the Prague Circle during the 1930s at the time of their early formulations of their semiotic ideas"; according to him, Roman Jakobson himself, who perhaps should know best, explicitly confirmed this.

The matter with Saussure is different. Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* was well known, at least it was claimed to be well known.

Mukařovský in his essay "*L'art comme fait sémiologique*" (1934) which actually can be regarded as the milestone of the "semiotic reformulation of aesthetics", makes an explicit reference to the Geneva linguist:

The work-thing functions, then, only as an exterior symbol (the *signifiant*, according to Saussure's terminology) to which corresponds in the collective consciousness a meaning (sometimes called the aesthetic object) given by what the subjective states of consciousness evoked in the members of a certain collectivity have in common.

It has been stated, therefore, that although "Mukařovský utilizes de Saussure's term *signifiant* for the material vehicle of the sign, he does not retain its counterpart, the *signifié*, but instead splits it into two categories — meaning and reference" (Steiner 1978: 371). In the same context, it has been argued that Mukařovský's inspiration for this step arose out of contemporary German philosophy, namely out of the work of Husserl, Bühler, and others.

Thus, at least one conclusion seems to be in place: one definitely cannot trace the Prague semiotic re-formulation of aesthetics back to one or two concrete sources; rather, different sources seem to have played an indefinite inspirational role. The notion of sign appears to have been used in some disparate and eclectic way, rather than in accordance with a strict terminological definition. Although the Prague scholars' broad interpretations of the notion of sign do not necessarily invalidate their work, they should be kept in mind.

In attempting to reconstruct the notion of sign in early Czech structuralism, it would be naive, then, to assume that one could ever arrive at a homogeneously used definition underlying the work of earlier Czechoslovakian structuralists.¹ In his seminal study *Costume as a Sign* [Kroj jako znak], written in 1936, Bogatyrev, for example, still explicitly mentions that he interprets the term 'sign' in its broadest sense. Almost a year after the publication of the introduction ['Uvod'] to the newly-founded periodical *Slovo a slovesnost*, written in 1935 by Havránek, Jakobson, Mathesius, Mukařovský and Trnka, Bogatyrev used the term 'sign' in an undifferentiated manner. This is cu-

¹ Relevant remarks can be found in Peter Burg's investigation of Czech structural aesthetics (Burg: 1985: 48ff., 276ff.).

rious given that in this introduction, the problem of sign is called "one of the most urgent philosophical problems of the contemporary cultural re-birth" [jeden z nejnaléhavějších problémů současného kulturního přerodu]. The *Uvod's* authors focus on the "internal structure of the sign in all its complexity" [vnitřní ustrojení znaku ... v celé své složitosti], "the relation between the symbol (e.g., sound, color etc.) and its meaning", and on "the manifold levels of meaning" [poměru mezi symbolem (na př. zvukem, barvou atp.) a jeho významem, jakož i pro zkoumání mnohonásobného navrstvení vyznamevého].

In the 1936 *Uvod*, then, the desire for theoretical clarification, or at least the recognition that a clear definition of 'sign' was lacking, was explicitly stated. Of course, many statements addressing the notion of sign can be found in relevant studies — but they are peripheral rather than central. One might ask whether it is justifiable to look only for explicitly semiotic terminology exclusively — not every use of the term 'sign' actually implies semiotic thinking, which, on the other hand, may well be implied in investigations not using corresponding terms. But then we are faced with another problem, namely that of our own terminology as we attempt to explicitly reconstruct formerly implicit concepts.

As far as I know, there are only two major investigations written in this early phase of Czechoslovakian structuralism which were directly devoted to our question: Sergej Karcevskij's 1929 article "*Du dualisme asymétrique du signe linguistique*", and Karel Svoboda's survey of "*La théorie Gréco-Romaine du signe linguistique*", published ten years later.

Karcevskij's central point is that the two components of a linguistic sign, which he terms *signifiant* and *signifié*, in complete agreement with Saussure's terminology, are asymmetric in nature and are in a state of unstable equilibrium. Thus, whereas the *signifiant* of a sign tends toward homonymy, its *signifié* tends toward synonymy; the identity of a sign in its application to concrete reality is guaranteed either by a sign user's neglect of differences between tokens of the same type, or by his mental creation of a *tertium comparationis* (cf. Steiner 1978).

These terminological parallels with Saussure are not coincidental. Karcevskij was born in Siberia (Tobolsk) in 1884. In 1903, he passed his State exam in Moscow. After the one year of imprisonment which

followed his 1906 arrest, Karcevskij emigrated to Geneva. There he studied linguistics with both Saussure and Saussure's disciples Bally and Sechehaye, returning to Moscow in March 1917. Later, Roman Jakobson (1962: 621) described the importance of Karcevskij's role in acquainting Russian linguists with Saussure's ideas: "(...) in 1917, S.J. Karcevskij returned to Moscow after years of study in Geneva and acquainted us with the essentials of the Saussurian doctrine". Fifteen years earlier, in the volume of the *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* dedicated to Karcevskij one year after his death, Jakobson (1956: 10) had already acknowledged Karcevskij's importance: "He was the first who in 1917-1919, during his shortlived return to Russia, fired the young generation of Moscow linguists with the *Cours de linguistique générale*."

It is important to bear in mind the significance of Karcevskij, who, after having lectured at Strasbourg University from 1920 on, came to Prague in 1922, because it was Karcevskij who defined the *signifiant* as being "phonique", whereas Saussure defined it as a psychological phenomenon, just as he saw the sign as a whole as a two-sided psychological entity [une entité psychique à deux faces]. This interpretation, or rather modification, of Saussure's concept is still characteristic of many current semiotic conceptions, particularly in Slavic countries.² It can also be found in the above-mentioned survey of ancient concepts of sign by the Brno philosopher Karel Svoboda, who explicitly stated about the Stoics: "Ils opposèrent le *signifiant* au *signifié* (...), comme l'a fait, à notre époque, Saussure (...). Le *signifiant*, c'est le son du mot, et le *signifié*, c'est le sens du mot (...)."

Even earlier, Svoboda had argued that structuralist views were not actually novel, but were based on what he assumed to be the ancient notion of the sign. Roman Jakobson adopted this view of Svoboda's, and he repeatedly pointed out the fact that "Saussure's approach to the sign both in concepts and terms originates, in fact, from a tradition lasting over two thousand years" (Jakobson 1959: 267). Thus, Jakobson was convinced that he had traced Saussure's doctrine back

² Still, already in 1939, Benveniste directed attention to Saussure's "veiled recourse to a third element", i.e. the thing itself, or reality; and in 1947, Ružička argued in favor of a *four-partite* notion of sign, taking into account the material quality of the sign as well.

two thousand years, in particular to the tradition of the Stoics and St. Augustine. Thus, on the one hand polemically arguing against the novelty of Saussure's approach, and on the other hand referring to a long tradition of which he regarded himself a part, Jakobson equated all the above-mentioned approaches by way of the following formula: «*signum* = *signans* + *signatum*», and he represented Karcevskij's terms by way of this formula, too.

Many scholars have repeatedly pointed out Jakobson's overwhelming importance and influence in the development of semiotics (cf. Eco 1977), and I can only modestly add my personal debt to his intriguing ruminations. Still, a few critical remarks on the above-mentioned equation are allowable:³

1. In one of his very first explicit semiotic statements, made in his 1933 article on the "Decline of Film?" [Úpadek filmu], Jakobson referred to St. Augustine's distinction between 'sign' [*signum*] and 'thing' [*res*], according to which every sign is also a thing, although not every thing needs to be (though it can be) a sign. Referring to the terms *signans* and *signatum* Jakobson speaks of "the good old terms of St. Augustine". That these two terms do not actually in St. Augustine's work notwithstanding, Jakobson's interpretation gives birth to more essential doubts. For Augustine, a sign [*signum*] is a thing [*res*] which, in addition to what it conveys to the senses [*sensus*], conveys something else [*aliud aliud*] to the mind [*cogitatio*].⁴ This means that Augustine is not concerned with two components of a sign, as Jakobson defines them (and as other scholars have long claimed), but with a double relation which the *signum* creates (cf. Ruef 1981).

2. Although practically all documents of the Stoic doctrine have been lost, one can judge quite reliably from other sources that for the Stoics neither the signifying (τὸ σημαῖνον, in their terminology) nor the signified (τὸ σημαίνόμενον) may be regarded as being of a psychological nature, and thus they cannot be equated with Saussure's definition. The Stoics explicitly qualified the signifying as 'corporeal'

³ For a more detailed analysis of this problem cf. Grzybek (1989: 104ff.).

⁴ Cf. St. Augustine's definitions in his "De doctrina christiana (II,1,1)" and in his "Principia dialectica (V)".

(1) Signum est enim res praeter speciem, quam ingerit sensibus, aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire.

(2) Signum est quod et se ipsum sensui et praeter se aliquid animo ostendit.

(σωματων, which may be re-termed as 'material'), and the signified, on the other hand, as σωματων (incorporeal, or immaterial). According to the Stoic doctrine, this means that the signified must not be regarded as psychological. Thus, the Stoics' semiotic foundations are significantly closer to Jakobson's than to Saussure's notion of sign. There remains only one minor problem: In the Stoic doctrine, the term 'σημεῖον' [i.e. 'sign'] does not occur in the context of the other two terms mentioned: its use was obviously confined exclusively to Stoic logic.

Thus, there seems to be no solid ground on which to equate either Augustine's or the Stoics' doctrine with Saussure's. Still, Jakobson consistently uses precisely these two terms, thereby binding himself to the authority of a long tradition and presenting his work as a continuation of it. According to Jakobson (1968: 699), "this more than bimillenary model remains the soundest and safest base for the newly developing and expanding semiotic research". Both in his doctrine and in his terminology, which, despite his own claims, must be labeled idiosyncratic, a *signans*, on the basis of its assumed 'material qualities', is defined as 'perceptible', and the *signatum*, on the other hand, is defined as 'intelligible' or 'translatable'.

Now, why am I so neurotic about terminology?

First, terminology is important if we are to reliably re-evaluate Jakobson's influential notion of sign by checking it against the assumed historical background. It turns out that Jakobson adopts Karcevskij's modification of Saussure and interprets it in the historical perspective outlined by Svoboda (whom he never mentions, by the way). Second, I turn to terminology because both Jakobson's doctrine and his terminology actually represent basic roots of modern aesthetic theory. Finally I stress terminology, because as is the case in this doctrine, terminological murkiness often masks deeper conceptual disagreements.

Some arbitrarily chosen examples might show how Jakobson's terminology serves as the basis for modern criticism, before we finally turn to the conceptual implications of Jakobson's terminological murkiness for modern aesthetics and semiotics.

Thus, in contemporary studies on Czech structuralism and its roots (the overall quality and value of which I do not want to call into question with my remarks), "St. Augustine's binary concept of *signum* as *signans* and *signatum*" is mentioned as one of the semiotic traditi-

ons which had impact on the Prague school (Matejka 1976: 265). We find passages such as the following: "Like Augustine, who realized that the *signum* is a Janus-faced entity consisting of the material *signans* and the immaterial *signatum*, Saussure maintained that the verbal sign binds together (...) the phonic *signifiant* with the conceptual *signifié*" (Galan 1985: 83). The author then transfers this notion of sign to poetic language and, with regard to both Jakobson and Mukařovský, the "introverted referral of the external *signans* to the internal *signatum*" is pointed out to us (Galan 1985: 126). In other studies, both Karcevskij and Mukařovský are interpreted on the basis of Jakobson's terms; thus we read: "For Mukařovský, selection (...) is a conscious effort to create a sign against the background of the existing linguistic system, to put together a *signans* and a *signatum* so as to bring about meaning. Mukařovský names this notion of selection 'designation'." Further dealing with poetic designation in particular, we then read: "Of course, Mukařovský is far from claiming that every poetic designation is a new or unusual linkage of *signans* and *signatum*" (Steiner/Steiner 1976: 73ff.).

It is important to notice, however, that as far as I know none of the members of the Prague school ever used the terms *signans* or *signatum* — and if I am not mistaken, even Jakobson himself used both terms conjointly to refer to the components of a sign only after 1939, during his Copenhagen time.⁵ Nevertheless, in reconstructions of the semiotic dimensions of Czech structuralism we often find interpretations based on precisely these two terms, such as: "The first scholar (...) who tried to make a clear distinction between the *signans* and the *signatum* in the field of acting was Otakar Zich" (Veltruský 1978: 555).— In this case, the author has in mind Zich's juxtaposition of the "stage figure" [herecká postava] and the *dramatis persona*. Previous presentations have pointed out Zich's overall importance for the semiotic atmosphere in early Czech structuralism, and they have clearly demonstrated the importance of re-interpreting Zich's writings from a semiotic point of view. Veltruský's interpretation of Zich as mentioned above turns out to be another example of the phenomenon I am talking about, since it is then admitted that Zich himself never actually adopted these semiotic concepts.

⁵ However, the terms 'signum' and 'signatum' can be found earlier, as, e.g., in Jakobson's (1936) "Remarks on the Poetry of the Hussite Era".

Now there can be no doubt about the fact that one can refer to the terms *signans* and *signatum* in such reconstructions. But actually, this is exactly the point at which we leave merely terminological ground and enter the realm of conceptual matters. To give but one example: in Veltruský's further analysis of the above-mentioned study of Zich, the problem of double semiosis in acting is dealt with first. We are then referred to Peirce's semiotics, and, on the basis of the bilateral notion of sign sketched out, terms such as "diagrammatic similarity" and "factual contiguity" are quoted (Veltruský 1978: 567). In fact, however, we are then confronted not with Peirce's semiotic model, but with Jakobson's interpretation of it.

Let us briefly recall Peirce's notion of sign in its essentials.⁶

According to Peirce, a sign has to be understood as a triadic phenomenon, which consists of three correlata: 1. the *representamen*, i.e. the 'sign vehicle' in its representative function (but not in its material qualities, as Morris later defined it), 2. the *interpretant* (the 'significance', or 'meaning', roughly speaking), and 3. the *immediate object*, i.e. the object as it is represented in the sign itself. The latter has to be distinguished from the *dynamical object*, which is the object of reference, but which is not an integral part of the sign relation in its strict sense.

Now Jakobson named Peirce not only as "the most inventive and versatile among American thinkers", but also as his "most powerful source of inspiration". One can say that Jakobson re-discovered Peirce and revealed his importance not only for semiotics, but for linguistic studies as well to a broad scholarly audience, beyond the United States. But Jakobson read Peirce very selectively, and he did not do justice to his doctrine.⁷

Jakobson's interpretation can be roughly summarized as follows: He equals Peirce's *representamen* with his *signans*, Peirce's *interpretant* with his *signatum*; but Jakobson never mentions the third obligatory correlate of a Peircian sign triad, the *immediate object*, which

⁶ For a more detailed interpretation of Peirce's semiotics as I understand it see Grzybek (1989: 230ff.); for a critical analysis of Jakobson's modification of Peirce see: *ibid.*, pp. 307ff.

⁷ For a similarly critical evaluation cf. Bruss (1978), who maintains that Jakobson "turns Peirce on his head".

can be understood as an iconic representation in the mind of a sign user. This seems somewhat strange, since Jakobson himself stressed the importance of iconic phenomena in language. However, in Jakobson's terminology, these iconic phenomena would have been tied to the *signans*, not to the *signatum*. To accept Peirce's 'immediate object' would have made it necessary to speak of three rather than of two components of the linguistic sign. Thus, just as Jakobson integrated and subordinated Saussure's notion of sign into his own doctrine, he gives the impression of a conceptual coincidence with Peirce by, so to speak, "dyadizing" the latter's triadic notion of sign.

The same process can be observed with regard to sign typology. Jakobson refers only to that sign typology, which, according to Peirce, is based on the relation between the sign, or rather the *representamen*, and the *dynamical object*, and which allows a distinction between icons, indices, and symbols. According to Jakobson, however, the three types of signs are differentiated not on the basis of their reference to a 'denotatum',⁸ but according to kinds of relations between *signans* and *signatum*. Such a view has not much in common with Peirce's doctrine, and soon leads to various problems; these problems become most evident in the case of indices, when Jakobson eventually speaks of the relation of the *signans* to some object (and not to the *signatum*), thus approaching Peirce's concept, but contradicting his own theoretical claims.

Of course, to re-interpret and even to modify others' doctrines are useful projects; but it would be helpful if Jakobson would state clearly that this is what he is doing. Jakobson, in any case, never made the mentioned terminological inconsistencies, much less the inaccuracies in his interpretation of Peirce's work, a separate topic.

The whole matter seems to be particularly relevant, since Jakobson transferred not only the terms *signans* and *signatum*, but also Peirce's sign typology, to the phenomenon of the functional asymmetry of the brain. Because of his neglect of Peirce's *immediate object*, which can be understood as a mental icon, Jakobson underestimates, or even neglects, important iconic components of symbolic processes, which seem to be important right-hemisphere contributions to semantic pro-

⁸ This term is used by Jakobson, though rather inconsistently, to distinguish the 'signatum' from the the object of reference.

cesses. True, Jakobson takes into account important contributions of the right hemisphere to communication, such as, e.g., intonation and other non-verbal elements. We are concerned here with more, however — namely, with a constant interplay of iconic and symbolic *constituents* in any kind of semiosis. Jakobson claims that the *signatum* is "translatable". In fact, however, these constituents cannot be translated into (and therefore cannot be substituted by) each other; rather, they represent the complex result of heterogeneous processes. (It might be extraordinarily interesting to re-evaluate Karcevskij's considerations on a 'tertium comparationis', from this perspective.)

Of course, the present conclusions go far beyond the initial question of the notion of sign underlying early Czech structuralism. But even if we confine our interest to this reconstruction — why should we operate with a notion of sign which does not seem to be sufficiently adequate for the understanding of relevant psychological or neuropsychological findings?

Taking a psychosemiotic or neurosemiotic perspective we might, on the one hand, be able to get a much deeper insight into the psychological and neuropsychological bases underlying sign processes; on the other hand, we might perhaps arrive at a more suitable definition of what a sign is if we do not pre-determine the interpretation of (neuro)psychological data by any one notion of sign.⁹ Without a doubt, the consideration of the notion of sign from a neurosemiotic or psychosemiotic perspective might result in more than just a (re)definition of what a sign is; some additional light might be shed on any kind of semiotic and, consequently, cultural phenomenon.

It seems to be quite in keeping with this view that some experts in cultural semiotics, such as Tartu scholar Jurij M. Lotman, have recently abandoned the interpretation of 'meaning' based on Shannon's definition of 'information' as being the invariant of equivalent transformations.¹⁰

Though speaking of different sign systems or subsystems, rather than of single signs in referring to cultural phenomena in general, Lotman (1977) speaks of the «translation of the untranslatable». It seems

⁹ Cf. Grzybek (1984), Grzybek (1990a), Grzybek (1990b).

¹⁰ Earlier, this definition of 'meaning' was unequivocally accepted both by the members of the Moscow/Tartu School and by Roman Jakobson.

reasonable, therefore, that close parallels might be found between the structure and typology of sign and of culture in general, and to confirm this on an empirical basis.¹¹

It would lead us too far afield, however, to outline and to pursue these perspectives here.

¹¹ This can be understood as a support of the ideas expressed by V.V. Ivanov (1978) in his monograph on "Čet i nečet. Asimetrija mozga i znakovykh sistem", which, however, suffers from precisely the same problems in sign definition as Jakobson's semiotics.

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Die Dialog-Teilnehmer und der sprachliche Kommunikationsprozeß

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Das Gespräch, wie auch jede andere Form sprachlicher Tätigkeit, setzt obligatorisch die Anwesenheit oder Mitanzwesenheit von mindestens zwei Teilnehmern der Interaktion voraus: den Sender, der die Mitteilung produziert, und den Empfänger, an den sich die Mitteilung wendet. Diese heutzutage schon triviale Feststellung, kann jedoch zu nichttrivialen methodologischen Entscheidungen führen. Die moderne strukturalistische Forschung (Semiotik, Textlinguistik), die sich auf die Mitteilung und ihre Systembedingungen konzentriert, situiert den Sender und den Empfänger auf einer hohen Abstraktionsstufe und reduziert beide auf einen modalen ICH-DU-Rahmen, oder aber berücksichtigt sie überhaupt nicht, um nachprüfbar Ergebnissen zu erreichen, die irrelevante Elemente vernachlässigen und den Text nur im Bezug auf die Sprache sehen. Dies ist eine Konsequenz, die sich aus der Bewußtwerdung der Grenzen semiotischer Analyse ergibt. Sie beseitigt aber nicht die Befürchtung, daß diese Methode den Übergang von der Struktur-Analyse hin zur Untersuchung der Bedeutungen, die dieser Struktur durch die Einbettung des Textes in den vollständigen, gesellschaftlichen Kommunikationsprozeß auferlegt wurden, nicht thematisieren kann (vgl. Rosner 1981: 30). Daher die Entscheidung, vor der die Semiotik steht — nämlich entweder eine Theorie der kommunikativen Universalien zu werden, oder eine Technik zur Beschreibung kommunikativer Situationen in Zeit und Raum zu verkörpern (vgl. Eco 1972: 148).

Die Untersuchungen der sog. "lebendigen Rede", die sich auf das Redeereignis an sich konzentrieren, zeigen die Unzulänglichkeit und den Schematismus der Systemanalyse. Sie beschränken die Mitteilung

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