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The Drama Review

Theatrical Theory Issue

The Visual Script:
Theory and Techniques

by David Cole

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Over the past twenty years there have been a number of scattered but promising experiments with visual scripts. (By "visual script" I mean a non-representational graphic pattern which an actor is handed and asked to find some way of performing.) In his 1958-9 *Graphis* project (T30), Dick Higgins provided actors with "scripts" that consisted of words spread out irregularly over a page with lines drawn between them. Performing the script was defined as physicalizing the process of moving from one word to another over the routes of semantic association suggested by the connecting lines. (For example, getting from "lock" to "locksmith" entailed a detour through "macaroni". . . .) More recently, in 1971, the Anna Halprin Company tried using a "graphic score" devised by John Muto as the basis for a piece called *Animal Ritual* (T59). This "score" furnished the dancers with a network of intersecting paths, labelled "the hunt," "contest," "random growth," etc., that were at once ways of moving through space and ways of relating to one another. In 1974 the Il Carrozzone company published the "visual scenario" of its production, *The Tired Woman Meets the Sun.* This was, in fact, a visual-verbal hybrid. The instructions to the actors were given in words, but the words were supplemented by suggestive graphic directives. (For example, superimposed on the verbal instruction "she shakes her fist" there appears a drawing of the "waves of anger" with which the actress must invest this gesture.)

Although in the early thirties Artaud was already calling for a new means of committing dramatic action to paper, the foregoing experiments have their more immediate roots in the field of contemporary music. For some time now composers have been abandoning notes and staves in order to experiment with non-traditional, and largely graphic, forms of musical notation. The aim, as Noel Llinos writes in *Notations*, John Cage's 1969 anthology of such experiments, is to "make shapes that speak for themselves, [that] tell the eye what the ear will hear." These days an instrumentalist may expect to find on his music stand anything from a constructivist drawing to a wiring diagram or road map.

This line of musical experiment was the direct inspiration for the first attempts to create theatre from visual patterns. At the time of the *Graphis* experiments, Dick Higgins was, by his own description, "a musician in rebellion against my medium," fascinated by the "extraordinary notations" of modern music. At the outset, Higgins was "doing notations for music and theatre together"; and in fact one of his node-and-line scripts appears—minus the words at the nodes—as a piece of music in the John Cage anthology. The visual scenario of *The Tired Woman Meets the Sun* also betrays the influence of musical experiments with unconventional notations, in that it is written out on music paper—but not, of course, in the standard musical symbols. (Artaud, incidentally, also mentions "musical transcription" as one possible form his new theatrical notation might take.)

The existence of these interesting but scattered experiments with visual scripts suggests to me that the "moment for theory" in this area has arrived. I believe that the theoretician should neither content himself with explaining what has already been fully explored in practice, nor, at the other extreme, attempt to dictate whole new directions in theatre practice out of his head. Rather, he should step in at the moment when some experiments have been made, so as to help the experimenters (himself perhaps included) see what they have—and thereby enable them to have more.

The chief theoretical interest of visual script work seems to me to lie in the following possibilities: that visual patterns used as scripts may be thought of as "models" of actual scripts; that working with such patterns could be a means of "modelling" the actor's experience of work on actual scripts; and that such modelling might constitute a "third way" between the alternatives of a merely theoretical and a merely practical form of engagement with theatre, between inactive study and unreflective practice, between never doing any more than thinking about it and never giving it a thought. My hopes on this last point are founded on what I take the nature of models and model-building to be. So let me begin by explaining the sense in which I am using these terms.

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A model may simulate either the appearance or the behavior of its original. Let us call a model that simulates appearance a *scale* model, and a model that simulates behavior a *functional* model. It is functional models that will concern us; but the two categories do not necessarily exclude each other. A scale model may also function: the mantelpiece schooner may be capable of a run across the pond. And conversely, a functional model may bear some degree of physical resemblance to the thing whose behavior it simulates: crash-dummies, for example, look something like automobile passengers. But with a functional model, while physical resemblance is never excluded, it is never essential. Computer circuits look nothing like brains, but model some types of brain behavior very effectively. This is an important point for our purposes. A visual pattern is physically a very different sort of thing from a dramatic text. But so long as it is *functional* modelling we are talking about, this lack of physical resemblance poses no obstacle to the one's serving as a model of the other.

Functional models are useful because they make familiar, easily observable systems available as aids in understanding the behavior of more abstract or difficult-to-observe systems. One cannot, for example, get in among a crowd of gas molecules to see how they move; but by modelling the molecule-swarm as a system of randomly colliding billiard balls, one can form some conception of the nature of molecular motion.

Functional models are thus more than mere analogies for what is already known; they are also means of acquiring new knowledge. By observing and manipulating the model, one can learn about properties of the original that in many cases are not accessible to direct investigation. For example, one cannot conduct experiments upon a nation's economy, but if one models economic flow as a hydraulic system, one can arrange the valve-openings and pipe-widths in such a way as to simulate any desired combination of economic conditions. Or consider maps, which are functional models of countrysides. A map makes visible at a glance the overall configuration of terrain which otherwise could never be experienced in its entirety. Theology, too, makes use of accessible systems to advance our understanding of less accessible ones. Familiar human relationships—parent/child, ruler/subject, lover/beloved—serve as models for thinking out the implications of the otherwise inconceivable relationship between God and man. In all such cases there takes place what the philosopher Max Black calls a "transfer of implications" from model to original, thanks to which one's growing understanding of how the model works becomes a growing understanding of the original.

It seems to me that model-building can provide theatre with a way out of the impasse that confronts all its efforts toward self-understanding: I mean the dilemma

that arises from the fact that neither of the two methods which, between them, seem to exhaust the possible ways of studying theatre—intellectual analysis and rehearsal exploration—is really very well suited to the job.

Intellectual analysis is an extraneous method of study, brought to bear upon theatre from without. One does not want to have to leave theatre methods behind in order to study them. So one turns to rehearsal exploration. But rehearsal exploration, while certainly intrinsic to theatre work, is too much an *instance* of the processes in question to be a way of *studying* them. What is really wanted is an *inherently theatrical* method of comprehending theatre. How, one wonders, might theatre use what it has to understand what it is?

An innately theatrical method of investigating theatre would have to fulfill two closely related criteria: (A) it would have to be situated somewhere between theory and practice (neither so detached from actual theatre-making as analysis is, nor so immersed in it as rehearsal is), and (B) it would have to be "of a piece with," yet not simply an instance of, the theatrical processes it sought to grasp. Model-building, as I have described it, meets both these conditions.

(A) A model is not simply an intellectual analysis; it is a thing, it works. Even a conceptual model—an equation or computer program—is a scenario for action. On the other hand, a model does not simply replicate the activity it studies. One builds the crash-dummy or stages the war-game so as to be able to study collisions and battles *without* having to go through accidents and wars. The model, as a method of investigation, is thus something between "merely thinking" and "merely doing." It partakes of both theory and practice without incurring the disadvantages of either.

(B) Although model-building has hitherto been employed mainly in the social and natural sciences, it is an inherently theatrical—perhaps *the* inherently theatrical—way of knowing. A model proceeds by "acting out." The careening billiard balls "imitate the action" of the molecules they "portray." In a word, modelling is mimesis and is undertaken in the confidence that through mimesis comes understanding. The theatrical overtones of such an attitude need hardly be insisted on. Indeed, theatre itself might well be described as the ultimate modelling technique. So in "building a model of theatre," one would, in effect, be turning back on theatre those very mimetic resources which theatre itself is accustomed to bring to bear on other subjects. This certainly sounds like the "inherently theatrical" method of studying theatre that we were aiming for.

But how does one go about "building a model of theatre"? What does one build? To limit the scope of the question somewhat, let us say that the aspects of theatre we are most interested in modelling are "the script" and "the actor's work on the script." The model that I am proposing for "the script" is a certain class of abstract visual patterns. The model that I am proposing for "work on the script" is a series of exercises involving those patterns—exercises which are enough like actual theatre work to provide the experiential element generally missing from intellectual analysis, yet at the same time, enough *un*like actual theatre work to allow for a degree of detached self-observation neither possible nor desirable in actual rehearsal situations.

3

Clearly, the first step in modelling a system is to decide what its essential properties are. And if it is a *functional* model one has in view, this means deciding what the system's essential *functions* are.

What are the essential functional properties of a script? Clearly not its booklet format, color, type-face, etc.; these would be of interest only to the builder of *scale models*. Well, then, how about dialog, plot, characters? An obvious enough list—but one that does not hold up very well to analysis. There can be scripts without dialog: for example, Beckett's *Act Without Words* or the scenario of a Happening. Equally, there can be scripts without a plot (by which I do not mean simply without a "story," but without any progressive entailment of the next moment of action by the preceding ones): for example, Peter Handke's *Calling for Help* (T49), which consists of a series of random tries to hit on a word corresponding to the impulse in consciousness to cry for help. Handke's work also affords an instance of a script without characters: in *Offending the Audience* the actors deliver their long speeches of vituperation "as themselves"—or perhaps one might say, "as the actors they are." If it is possible to have a script without dialog, or without plot, or without characters, then neither dialog nor plot nor characters can be essential defining properties of a script.

It seems that we have not been considering the problem in sufficiently general terms. In the broadest possible sense, a script is *a pattern of imaginative order achieved in some medium other than performance, which offers itself as the basis for a performance event.* But that which is to constitute the basis for a performance event must be capable of providing at least four things:

1. Material for actors to work with, both individually and in groups.
2. Some specification as to the nature of the performance space.
3. Some basis for establishing a network of relationships among the actors.
4. Some basis for arriving at the substance and sequence of incidents.

If these are the essential functional properties of a script that any model of one must seek to imitate, there may seem something perverse about the choice of an abstract graphic pattern to be that model. Certainly visual patterns are instances of "imaginative order achieved in some medium other than performance." But what has a spatial form to say on the subject of playing areas, interpersonal relationships, incident sequences? And above all, what has a visual pattern *to offer the actor*? This last is the core of the matter, for if actors cannot use visual scripts, the theatre cannot use them. I will come back to the question of how visual patterns can engender spaces, relationships, incidents. Our first question must be: how can a visual pattern provide an actor with what he needs to do his work?

The only real way of answering this question is to enumerate specific techniques; and I will shortly do so. But first I want to try to deal with the question on the theoretical level; for there are cogent-sounding theoretical objections to the very idea of performing visual material, which, if not disposed of, might discourage one from ever proceeding to the point of experiment.

4

Whatever problems may arise in the course of trying to perform visual patterns, no difficulty need be anticipated solely on the grounds that the material in question is non-verbal. Actors are animated by all sorts of non-verbal stimuli: musical rhythms,

the heft of a prop, the cut of a costume—and, of course, the gambits, provocations and energies of other actors.

The objection would seem to be, rather, to this particular *kind* of non-verbal material. A prop-sword is an invitation to swordplay; another actor's step toward me calls for an answering move on my part. But an abstract graphic pattern—completed, self-sufficient, still—seems to stand apart from the whole enterprise of getting up and performing.

But this is a characteristic of *all* scripts *as scripts*, not of graphic scripts as graphic. A booklet of words is not up there putting on the show, either. As we saw earlier, a script is by definition a pattern of imaginative order in some medium *other than* performance: this is precisely what enables it to serve as an *incitement to* performance. For if it is the nature of a script to be an ordering in some medium other than performance, it is the nature of production work to seek out the theatrical potential in forms of imagination that are not theatre's own. In a sense, nothing can be written *for* the stage. You cannot give the theatre what it wants, because what it wants is to find its own way of appropriating something that does not belong to it. That "something" is generally of a verbal nature, i.e., a playtext or scenario. But no one type of non-theatrical order has an exclusive or even a prior claim to be explored. The essential thing is the investigation of non-theatrical material for its performance potential—not the medium of the non-theatrical material under investigation.

Still, from the very standpoint of "performance potential," the verbal script appears to possess one decisive advantage over the visual pattern: it can prescribe a *sequence* of actions. Here, surely, we touch on the fundamental limitation of visual scripts: not that they provide no words—for neither do scenarios or improvisation premises—but that they do not seem capable of giving rise to a course of events. And yet, as a number of the subsequent exercises will show, visual images *can* be made to generate event-sequences. How is this possible? For one thing, because the distinction between a "simultaneous" pattern and a "sequential" action is itself far from an absolute one.

No visual pattern is ever really perceived "simultaneously." Experiments with eye-movements have shown that the eye does not take in all the elements of a configuration at a glance, but rather makes an elaborate perceptual itinerary from region to region. Nor, of course, can a pattern be brought into being all at once: stroke must be added to stroke. The conclusion seems inescapable: not only is it possible for visual patterns to exist as sequences, but strictly speaking they can exist in no other way.

Conversely, the successive elements of a sequential pattern like a script can just as well be thought of as all subsisting simultaneously with each other, as if they were the points or sections of a form in space. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the spatial character of so many of the terms employed in the analysis of dramatic structure. Critics are forever referring to the "shape" of a play, the "curve" of its action, the "parallels" between its episodes or characters—indeed, "structure" and "form" are *themselves* originally spatial terms. Mark Rose likens the Shakespearean scene to a "centerpiece" with "side panels." Wilson Knight speaks of the Shakespearean play as possessing a "circumference," from which "each incident, each turn of thought, each suggestive symbol . . . radiates inward." Even that term which most directly designates action in its sequential aspect—"plot"—originally meant, as Harry Levin has noted, a stretch of ground or an architectural design: i.e., not a sequence, but a space. Behind all such usages seems to lie a sense of (to quote Wilson Knight again) "the whole play laid out . . . as an area . . . [as] a set of correspondences which relate to each other independently of the time-sequence."

It would be going too far, on the basis of such evidence, to deny all distinction between "simultaneous" and "sequential" orderings. But it does appear that each of these kinds of order possesses the potential to be restated in terms of the other. This in turn suggests that the difference between a "simultaneous" visual script and a "sequential" verbal script may ultimately be only one of emphasis, each type of script coming forward with a kind of information that the other keeps back, while holding back a kind of information that the other brings forward. The sequential, verbal script is easily accessible in its *successive* aspect (one can just read it *through*). But only careful analysis will bring out the atemporal pattern of its "spatial"—i.e., thematic and formal—relationships. The visual script, on the other hand, is immediately comprehensible in its *simultaneous* aspect: its "shape" and "builds" and "through lines" are out there for all to see. True to its nature as a functional model, it gives easy access to what was hidden or inaccessible in the original. But in order to do so (and this, too, is highly characteristic of functional models), it has to submerge some of the original's more obvious features, namely, action, movement and sequence—all qualities that can only be elicited from a visual pattern by such special techniques as I shall describe.

It may strike the reader that in this, and in each of the parallels I have been making between verbal and visual scripts, it has been necessary to exaggerate some difficulty about the verbal script in order to maintain the parallel. Yes, verbal scripts are of another order than performances—but they are not *so* much unlike them as visual patterns are. Yes, some searching out must occur before a verbal script can serve as a basis for performance—but the dramatic potential is not *so* far to seek as in the case of a graphic pattern. And, yes, verbal scripts may have a spatial aspect—but they do not exist *solely* as forms in space.

But overstatement—especially overstatement of difficulties—is the essence of the relation between a model and its original. It was by exaggerating certain aspects of the original that one first *obtained* the model—imagine gas molecules larger, simpler, more regular, and you have in effect *already* imagined them as billiard balls—and it is this built-in tendency toward exaggeration that gives models much of their usefulness. The drastic, overstated way in which the model represents all features of its original ensures that any problematic or ambiguous features will be seen with new clarity and felt with new force. Modelling, in this respect, has much in common with Brecht's alienation technique. A model makes the familiar seem "strange"—so as to reawaken us to the strangeness of what has grown over-familiar.

In this category, I am afraid, must be placed the whole phenomenon of *scripts* and *working from scripts*—a mystery that has lost its mystery. We take it for granted that there should just *be* a process by which what is not a performance becomes one. But with visual scripts such a process *cannot* be taken for granted; and so visual script work can be a means of restoring our awareness that, in reality, no such process ever can. For example, the way a visual script leaves the actor in the lurch—without words or action or situation—is intended to bring home to him that in the last analysis *every* script leaves the actor in the lurch: it sets him down before an imaginative structure fashioned out of materials not his own, which he must somehow re-imagine and re-create in his own wholly different medium of gesture and sound.

In short, the difficulties that arise in work on a visual script are only a heightened form of the difficulties that arise in all work on all scripts. What to do with a script is never an obvious question—and never a hopeless one.

On that note of muted optimism, I turn to a consideration of specific techniques for acting from graphic patterns.

5

My own experience has been that in working with actors on visual material, the crucial thing is to ease into it. An actor will not simply freeze at the new demands of a visual script if he is shown, at each stage of the work, how he can use techniques he already possesses to meet those new demands. The following series of exercises is designed to lead a group of actors *gradually* from work with the kinds of scripts they are familiar with (playtexts and improvisation premises), to work with visual scripts retaining some semblance of "narrative" sequence (for example, Diagram 12), to work with visual scripts that are nothing more than a single, suggestive image (for example, Diagrams 13 and 15).

GROUP I. *Exercises in discovering common ground between familiar acting problems and the challenges of the visual script.*

EXERCISE I.1   *Scene-analysis, with the drawing out of objectives, subtextual material, etc., presented as the extraction of a hidden dramatic order from the given non-dramatic (verbal) order—in other words, as basically the same process one must go through in attempting to extract hidden dramatic potential from a visual pattern.*
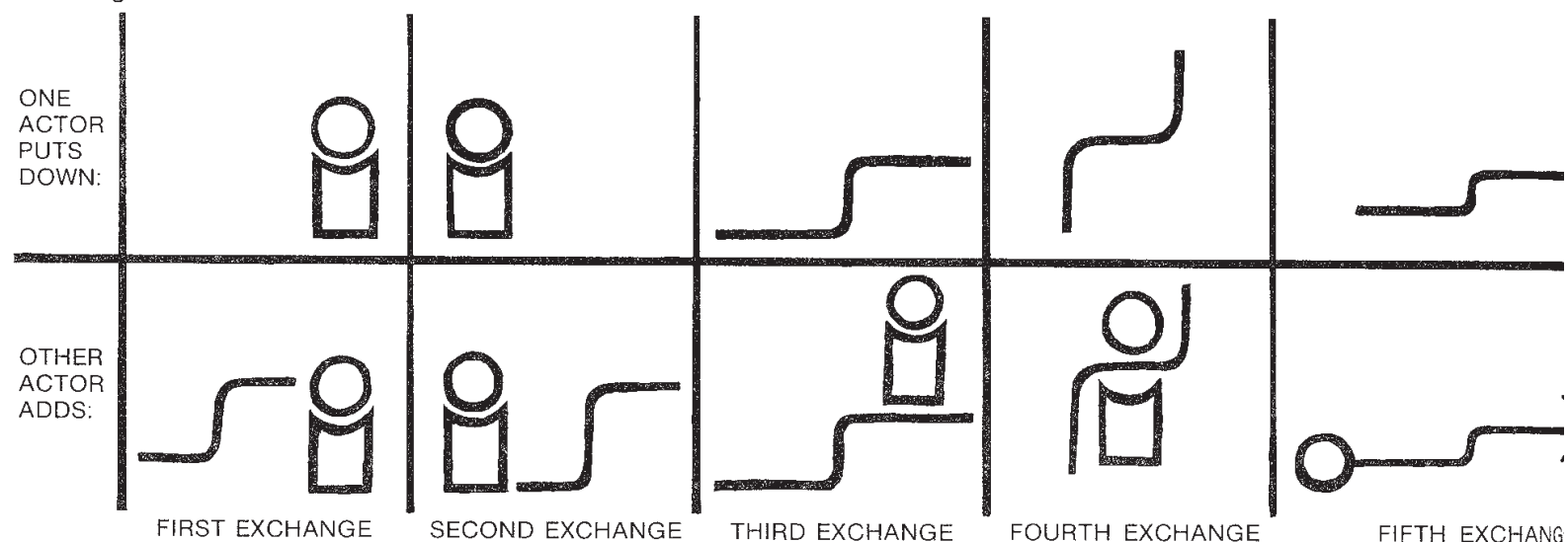
EXERCISE I.2   *Acting from an improvisation premise and then from a fully scripted version of the same situation as that given in the premise. Here the aim is to make the actor more aware of what strategies he employs in approaching less than fully explicit script material; for these are the strategies he will have to adapt and build on in his work with visual scripts.*

EXERCISE I.3   *Attempts at developing a graphic notation into which simple verbal improvisation premises can be translated. The object is to help the actors feel that there is a shared range of suggestiveness common to at least some verbal and some graphic stimuli.*

GROUP II. *Exercises in learning to conduct dramatic relationships in visual terms.*

EXERCISE II.1   *Two actors at a blackboard each try to top or one-up the other by drawing an assigned symbol in such a way that it appears to dominate or neutralize the other actor's assigned symbol.*
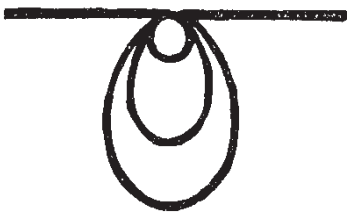
Diagram 1.

ONE ACTOR PUTS DOWN:				
OTHER ACTOR ADDS:				
FIRST EXCHANGE	SECOND EXCHANGE	THIRD EXCHANGE	FOURTH EXCHANGE	FIFTH EXCHANG

EXERCISE II.2 *Vary Exercise II.1 as follows: The first actor makes his challenge directly, in the form of a physical movement; the second actor responds by drawing on the blackboard a pattern intended to top or neutralize the challenge posed by the first actor.*

EXERCISE II.3 *Reverse Exercise II.2: that is, this time the first actor draws the challenge; the second actor gestures the response.*

GROUP III. *Exercises in learning to let a pattern show you HOW.*

Eventually, of course, the aim is to derive action itself from visual patterns. But at the outset, to make things easier, the actions themselves may be given verbally, with the patterns fulfilling only the "directorial" function of showing the actor *in what manner* he is to perform the stated action.

EXERCISE III.1 *(Different visual directives applied to a single action) Pick yourself up from a fall like this:*

then like this:

Diagram 2.

then like this:
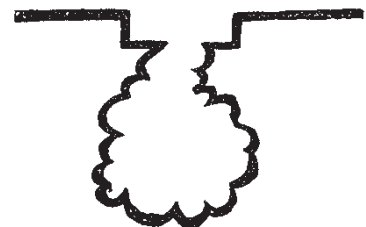
Diagram 3.

Diagram 4.

EXERCISE III.2 *(A single visual directive applied to different actions.) Perform each of the following actions in the manner suggested by the final visual directive in Exercise III.1 (Diagram 4): starting a fire; walking a tightrope; arranging some flowers.*

EXERCISE III.3 *(Graphic variations in the form of the directive as nuances in the meaning of the directive) Join an ongoing conversation like this:*
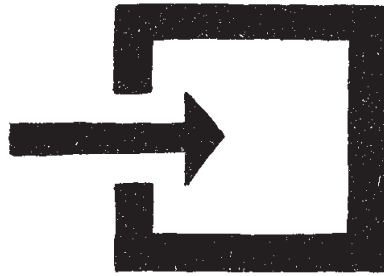

Diagram 5.

then like this:

Diagram 6.

then like this:

Diagram 7.

EXERCISE III.4 *(Stylistic variations in the "calligraphy" of the directive as nuances in the meaning of the directive) Excuse yourself from a boring group of people like this:*
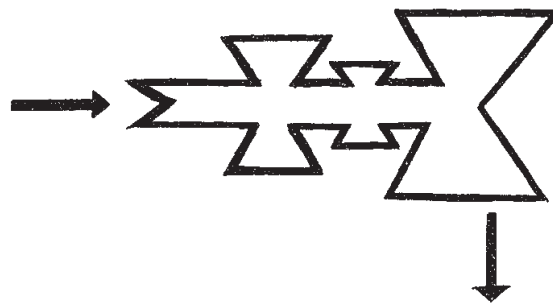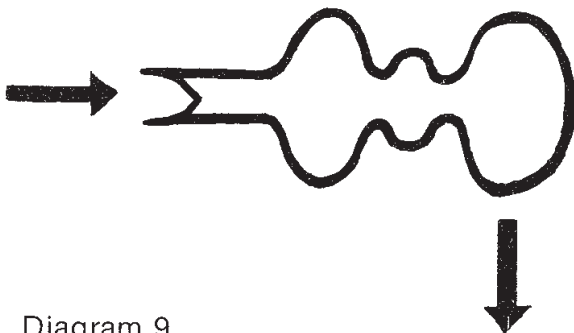

Diagram 8.

then like this:
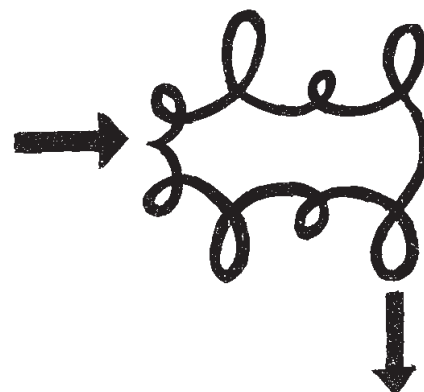

Diagram 9.

then like this:

Diagram 10.

EXERCISE III.5 *Actor A "directs" Actor B in a (previously stated) action by drawing him a visual directive. Then, by modifying or adding to the original directive, he brings Actor B's performance more and more in line with his conception.*

EXERCISE III.6 *Two actors perform a specified* joint *action, following* synchronized *visual directives. For example, Actor A challenges Actor B to knock at a forbidding-looking gate in this manner:*
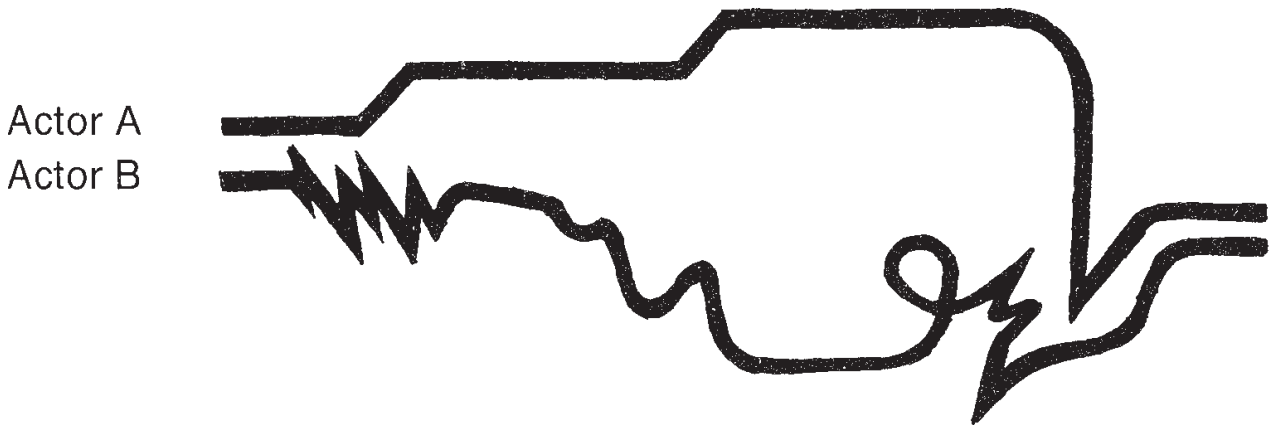
Actor A
Actor B

Diagram 11.

GROUP IV. *Exercises in deriving action from a sequence of patterns with "narrative" overtones.*

In this Exercise-group we work with patterns that are capable of suggesting the *substance* of a human interaction (not just the *manner*, as in the preceding group). The look of the graphic forms in an "abstract narrative" such as Diagram 12 suggests the dynamics and general tone of a two-person relationship, while the successive "frames" suggest stages in a developing action between two such persons.

EXERCISE IV.1 *Improvise from the sequence:*

1.   2.   3.

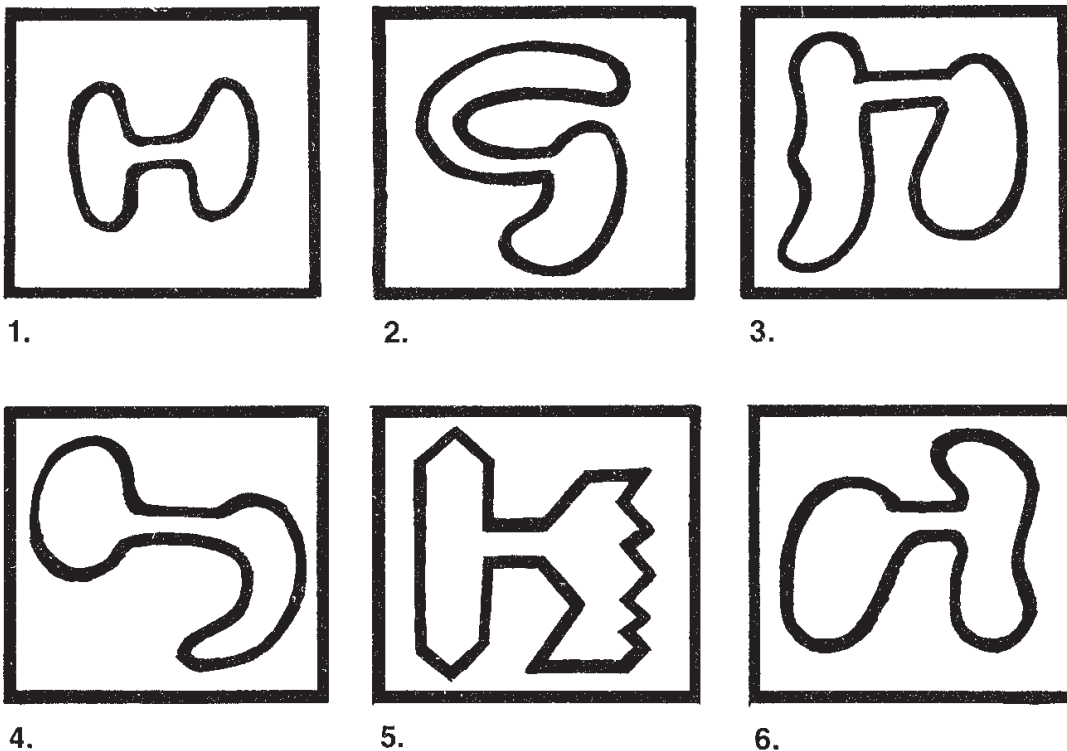4.   5.   6.

Diagram 12.

EXERCISE IV.2 *Try using one of the challenge-and-response sequences from Exercise II.1 (for example, Diagram 1) as the basis for a two-person improvisation.*

GROUP V. *Exercises in deriving action from a single-image, non-sequential pattern of "dramatic" appearance.*

A pattern itself need not be (like the patterns in Exercise-group IV) a sequence, in order to be capable of suggesting sequences of events.

EXERCISE V.1   *Improvise the argument or fight that seems to you to be implied by:*
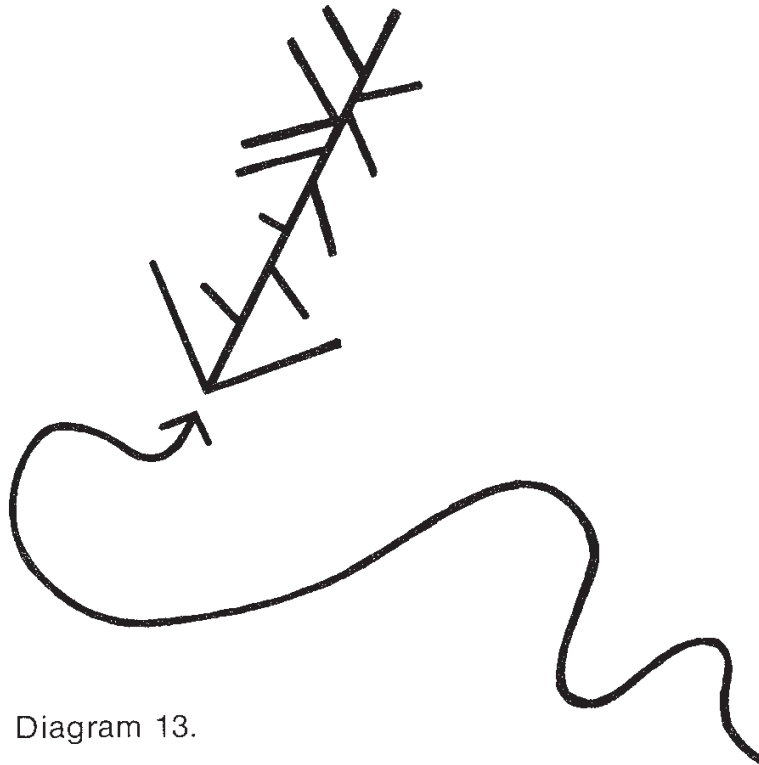

Diagram 13.

EXERCISE V.2 *Improvise a scene between two people the dynamics of whose relationship are shown by:*
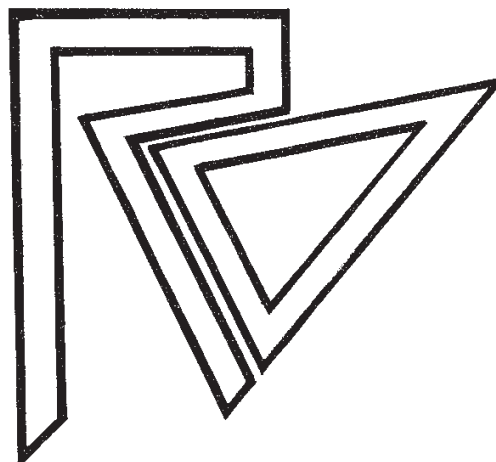

Diagram 14.

GROUP VI. *Exercises in discovering the dramatic potential in single-image visual patterns that do not immediately suggest action.*

This is the most difficult kind of pattern to use as a visual script, since the actor must not only *respond* to a graphic stimulus, but must himself help to *find* the stimulus which he is going to respond to. Let us take as an example of such a pattern the type of Buddhist meditation diagram known as a yantra:
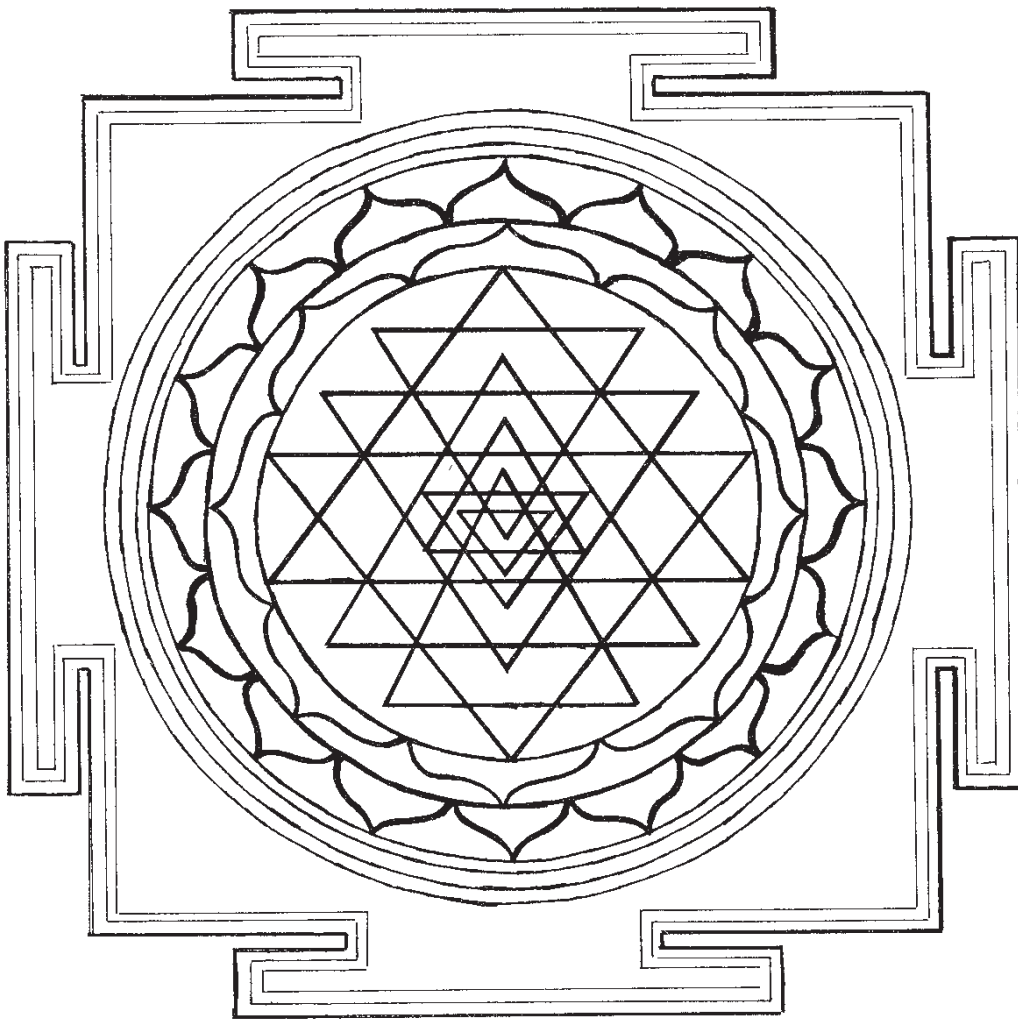

Diagram 15.

The yantra has two properties, essential to its function of inducing meditative states, which should recommend it to actors: it helps to increase concentration, and it tends to evoke mental images. However, unlike the patterns of Exercise-group V, it does not "look like action"; it is, rather, in complex repose. The following exercises show how action may be brought out of it and other similar patterns, which, for all their graphic interest, are either too stable or too complicated to be immediately suggestive of things like "conflicting objectives," "clashing temperaments," etc.

EXERCISE VI.1   *Meditate on the pattern, opening your mind to any images that may arise; then attempt to enact those images.*

EXERCISE VI.2   *Enact your struggle to disentangle visually the graphic elements of the pattern.*

EXERCISE VI.3   *Look for and enact the movement of forces that brought the pattern into being.*

EXERCISE VI.4   *Look for and enact the conflict of forces which the pattern seems to be holding in balance.*

EXERCISE VI.5   *Take elements out of the pattern, arrange them in a "narrative" sequence of the sort described in Exercise-group IV, and enact the implied sequence. For example:*
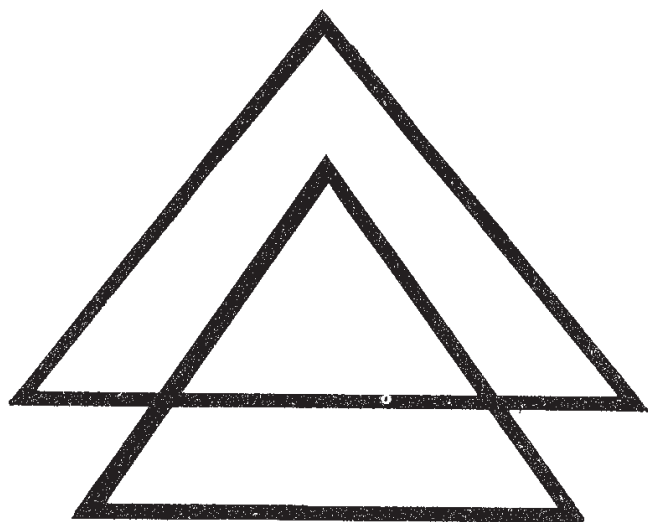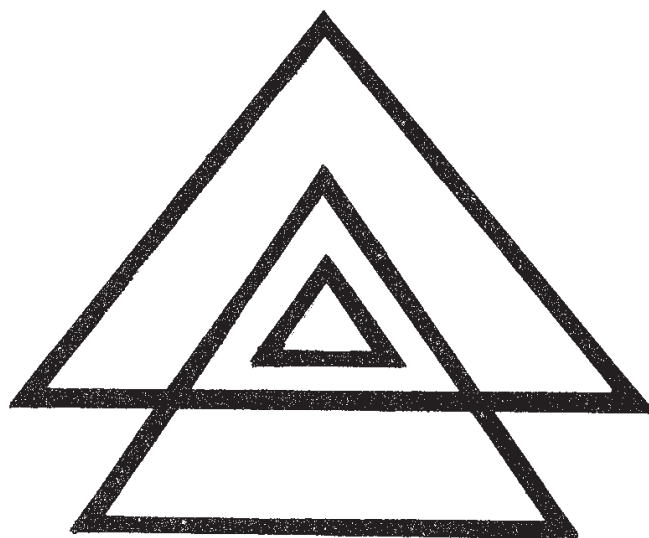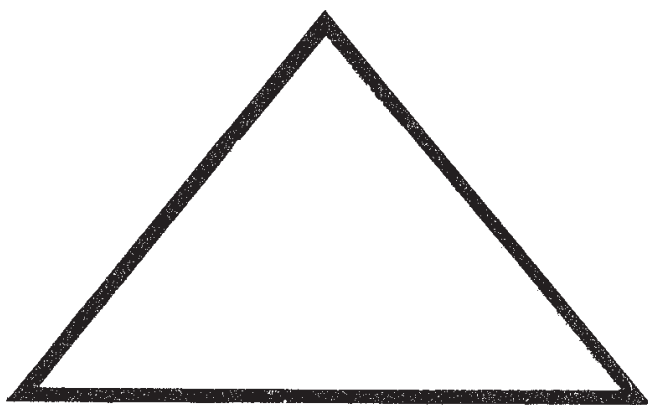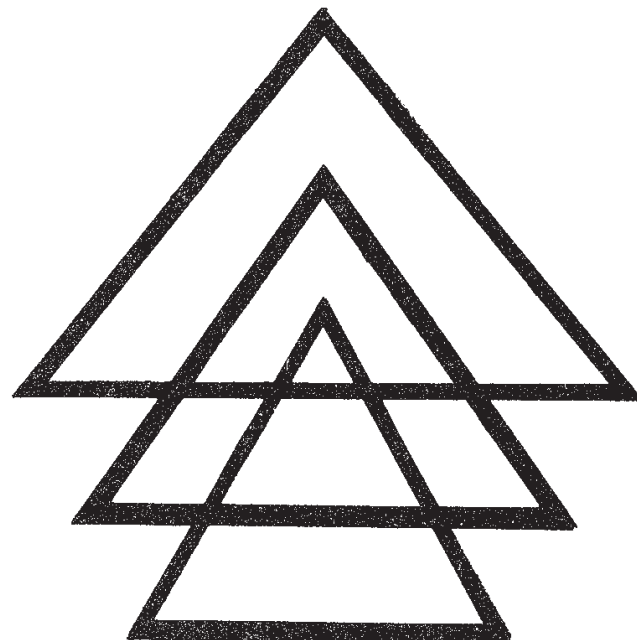
Diagram 16.

EXERCISE VI.6 *Move a template slowly over the pattern, so as to bring into prominence any submotifs or regions which may possess greater dramatic suggestiveness than the pattern as a whole. For example:*
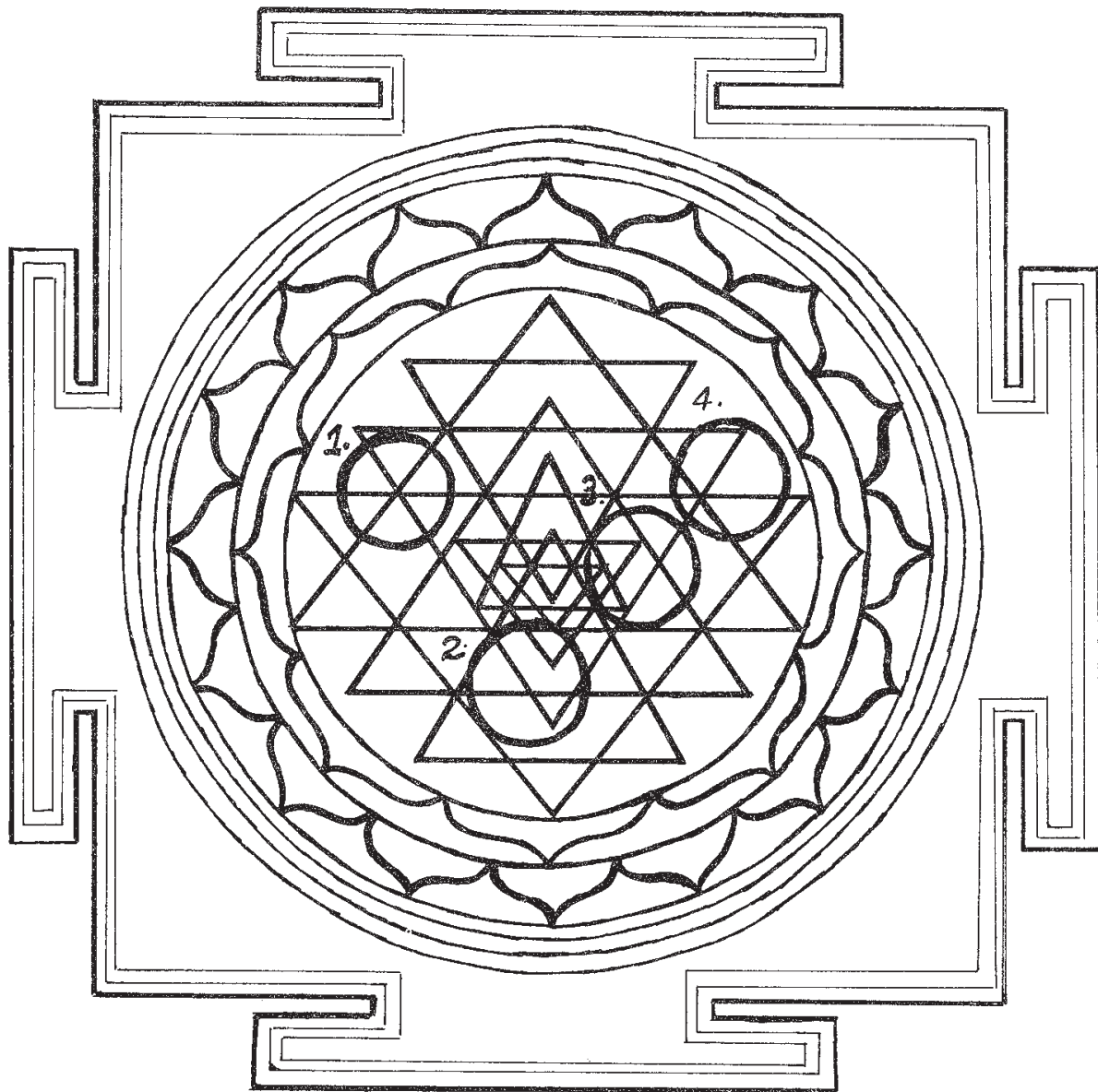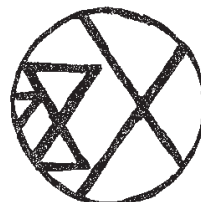
Diagram 17.

EXERCISE VI.7   *Make several variants of the pattern (e.g., by coloring it or distorting it in different ways); then arrange these variants in a "narrative" sequence of the sort described in Exercise-group IV; and enact the sequence. For example:*

Diagram 18.

EXERCISE VI.8 *Isolate elements of the pattern and build wooden or cardboard replicas of them on the scale of handprops and freestanding props. Discover how you want to handle and move among these objects. Become aware of any patterns of handling or movement that the objects seem to impose on you.*
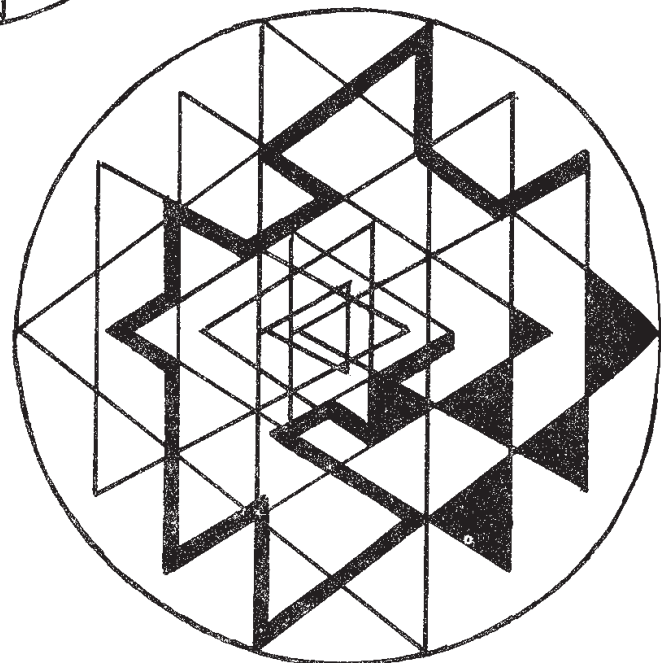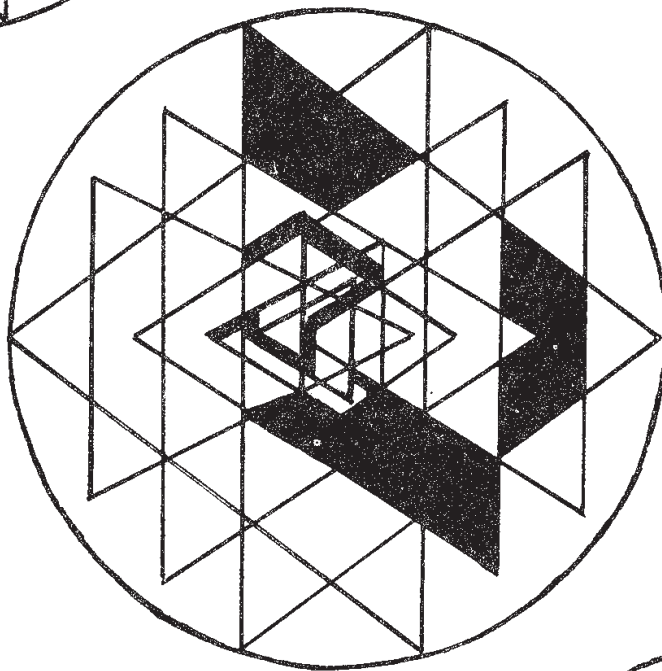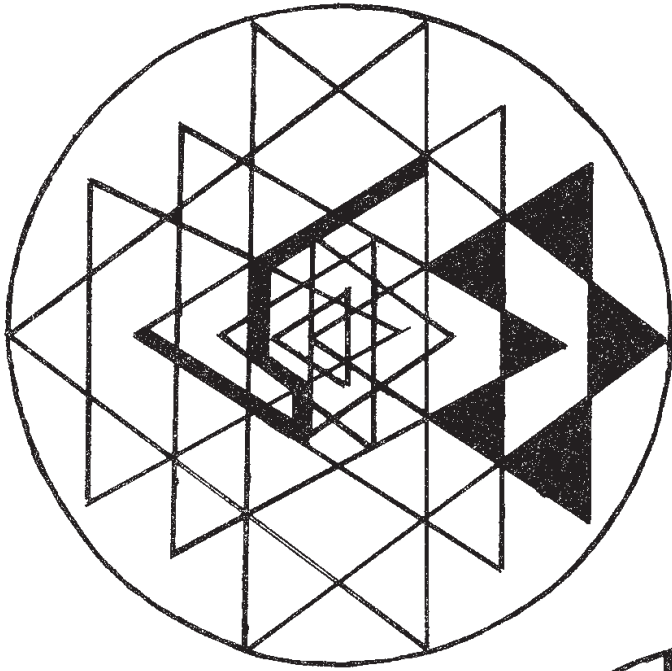
EXERCISE VI.9 *Chalk out an enlarged version of the whole pattern on the floor, so that it becomes your playing area. Then:*

> *a. Discover the rules that seem to govern movement through the pattern.*
>
> *b. Treat the pattern as a maze or prison, and try to find your way out of it.*
>
> *c. Identify the pattern with a period in your life, or a problem you face, or an aspect of the society you live in—and move through it accordingly.*
>
> *d. Take another actor through the pattern, trying to make him share your experience of what moving through it is like.*
>
> *e. Two or more actors simultaneously explore the pattern, assisting or opposing each other's explorations.*

EXERCISE VI.10 *Several actors* constitute *the pattern by stationing themselves at key points on the chalk diagram of Exercise VI.9. They then let the* spatial *relationship suggest ways of behaving and relating to one another.*

The last two exercises illustrate how the individual actor's work on a visual pattern can expand to model a company's shared experience of deepening involvement with the script it is rehearsing. Exercise VI.9.e, for example, models the transition from private to joint work: each actor adjusts his personal exploration of the script (here an actual *physical* exploration) to his colleagues' simultaneously progressing exploration of it. A script of any kind eventually goes—and a visual script *visibly* goes—from being an object external to those who work on it to being a space which, together, they inhabit and explore.

Similarly, Exercise VI.10 models the way actors gradually come into the configuration with each other that the script sets up between the characters they portray. Just as in the exercise the actors replace the chalked pattern with a grouping made up of their own bodies, so in work on a production the actors gradually replace the pattern of script relationships among their characters with a network of interpersonal relationships among themselves.

It is appropriate that these latter exercises, through which visual script work expands into a model of the rehearsal process as a whole, should proceed by *spatialization* (mental explorations becoming movement across the stage, character relationships becoming actor groupings). For, as gesture, blocking, scenography and lighting design all illustrate, spatialization of the psychological is the basic method of theatre work. Once again it is a case of the visual script model bringing theatre's own resources to bear on theatre itself.

6

I have now discussed, from both the theoretical and practical standpoints, how a visual pattern can model the first of a script's essential properties: its ability to stimulate the imagination of actors. It remains to be seen whether visual patterns can also supply the three other essential properties of a script set forth above: implied performance space, a basis for inter-actor relationships, and a structure of incident. On these points I must be brief, both for reasons of space and because my opportunities for experiment have been few.

Actually, the two final acting exercises already give some indication of the approaches to be followed in these areas. Exercise VI.9 suggests that a visual script can provide, when sufficiently enlarged, a performance space simply by *becoming* one. And Exercise VI.10 shows that a visual script can provide a basis for relations between actors simply by offering its spatial paradigm to be their social paradigm. Interpersonal relationships can be, and often are, represented in spatial form: for example, by means of such "sociograms" as:

─────────► = "lords it over"
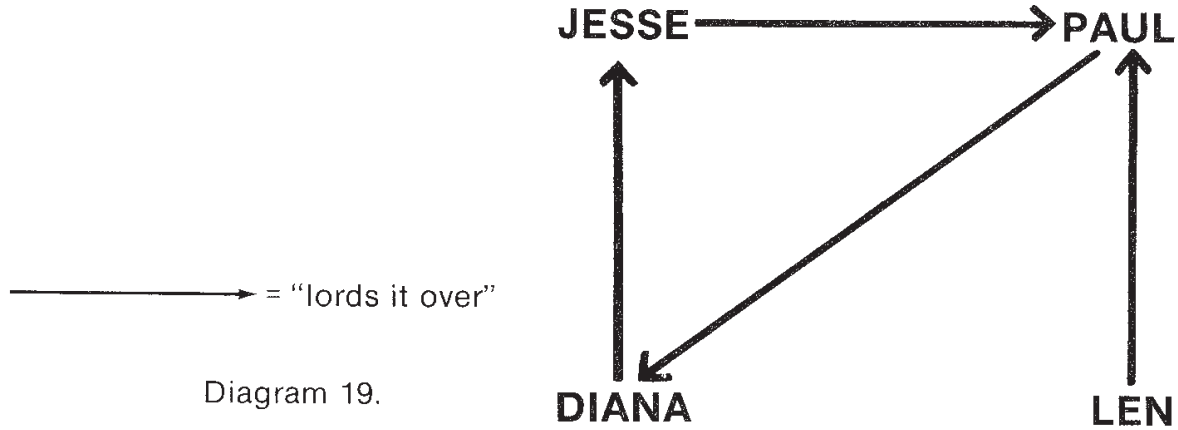
Diagram 19.

A visual script might prescribe relations between actors simply by reversing this diagramming process. That is, assuming the visual pattern before them to be an unlabelled sociogram, the actors would try to find a pattern of relationships corresponding to it—and then take this pattern of relationships as existing among themselves.

As for the fourth essential script property, structure of incident, I know of at least one kind of visual pattern capable of suggesting it—the flowchart:
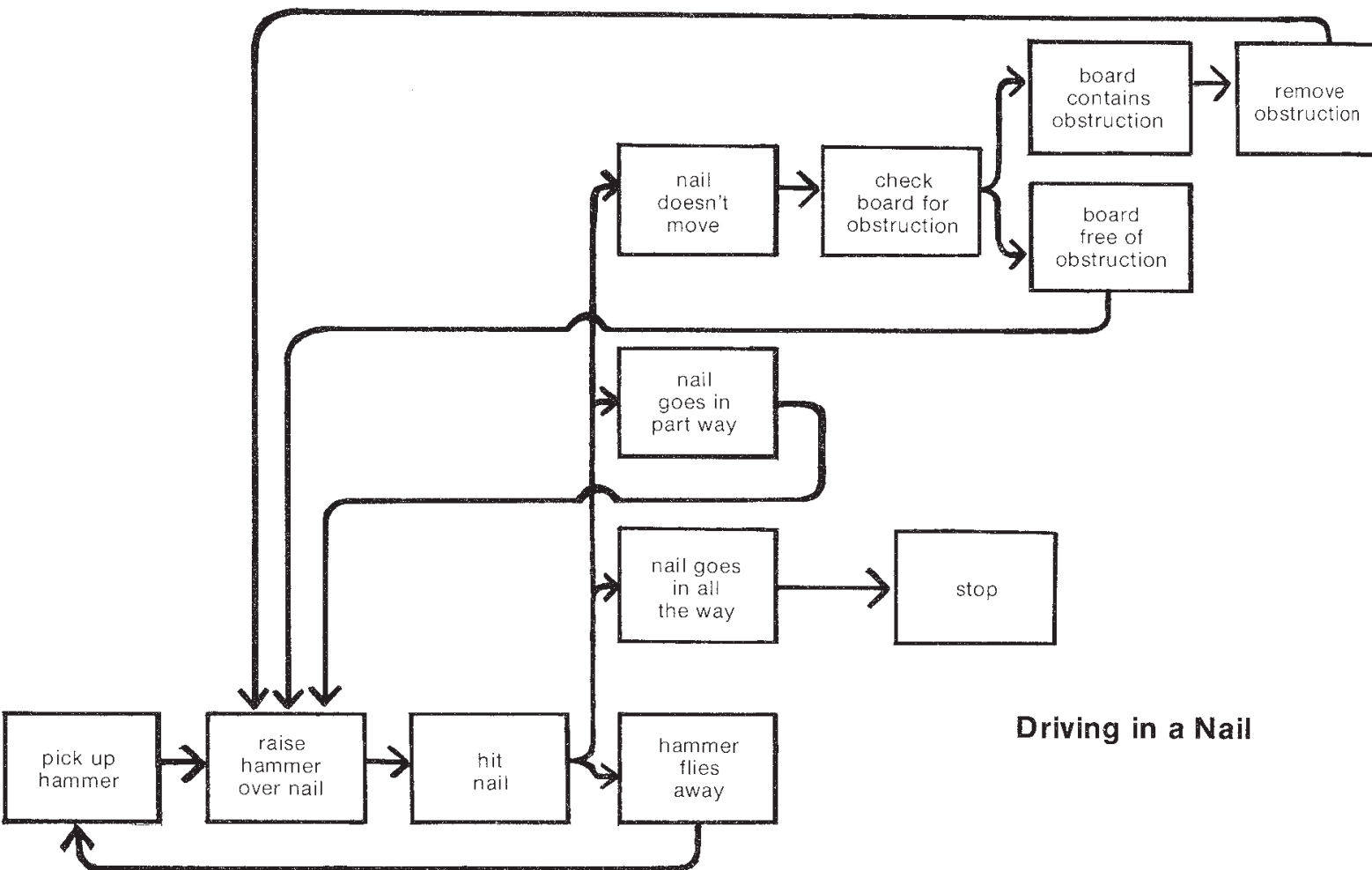

Driving in a Nail

Diagram 20.

Patterns of this sort, because they can clearly show such characteristics of action as causation, conflict, reciprocity, parallellism and choice, have already proved useful in the analysis of dramatic structure. Jan Kott has represented the "circulation of poisons" in *Women of Trachis*, and Jacques Ehrmann the "structures of exchange" in *Cinna*, by means of flowchart-like diagrams. Here again, as with sociograms, it is possible (though of course not certain) that the process may prove reversible: i.e., that given a blank flowchart as their visual script, the actors will be able to find and perform an action whose development it may be taken as representing.

What is difficult is not so much to find visual patterns that will *either* spark actors *or* enlarge to performance spaces *or* imply relationships *or* dictate action. What is difficult is to find *one* type of visual pattern that will do *all* these things. The same pattern that starts things going in an actor's head may not, when enlarged, provide very much in the way of a performance space. Another pattern may help the members of the company establish lines of relationship among themselves but may not say anything to anybody on the subject of incident. Or, a pattern may prove useful for two, or even three, of the required purposes, yet still be deficient in some important respect. Let me give an example of this last situation.

(a)   (b)
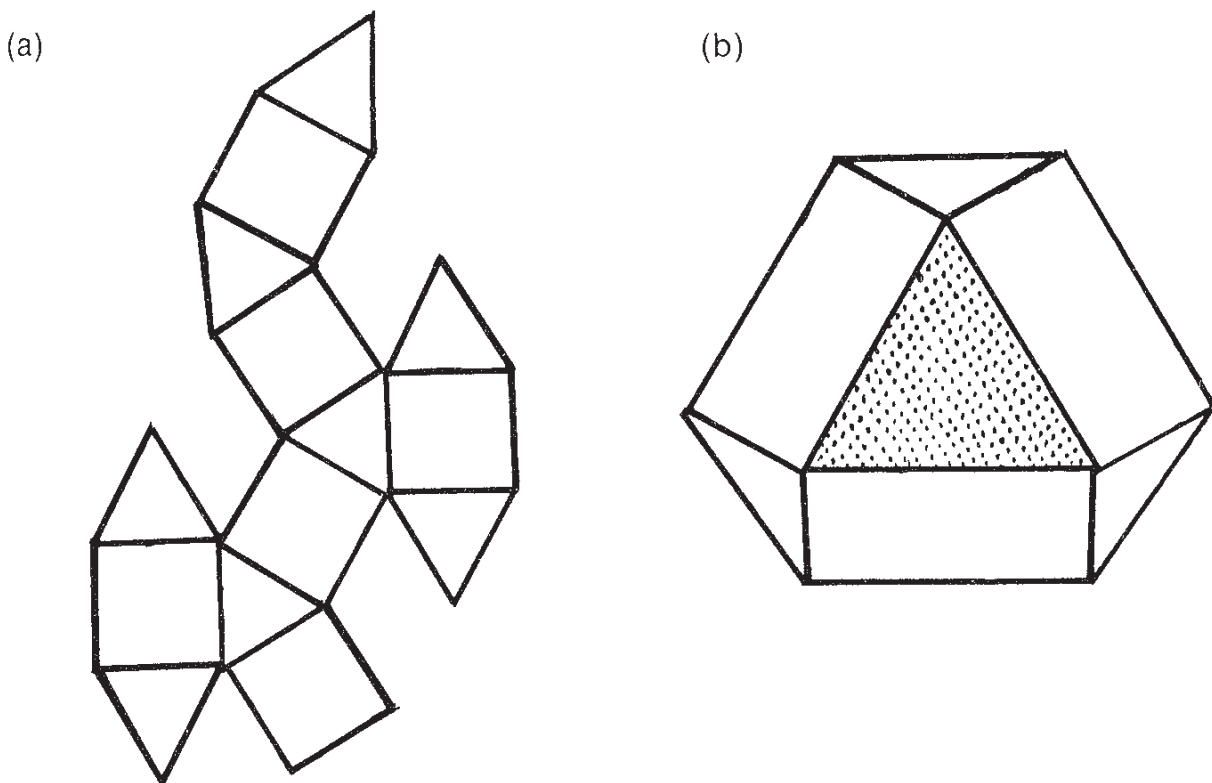
Diagram 21.

The figure in Diagram 21a certainly "looks like a course of action." Furthermore, since it can be folded up to produce the polyhedral frame shown in Diagram 21b, it is capable of providing not only the floorplan of a playing area, but a full-fledged three-dimensional performance space. But for all its ability to suggest action and define space, this pattern does not (to my eye, at least) possess any great potential for representing human beings in relationship, and thus seems likely to fall one property short of a fully adequate model.

Now of course a verbal script is not always equally successful in all respects, either. One certainly has no difficulty calling to mind plays that sacrifice incident to character, or characterization to structure, etc. But any verbal script can be relied upon to provide at least *some* guidance in each of the four crucial areas: *one text* suffices for the work of actor, designer and director. Any visual pattern which aspires to model the verbal script must be capable of at least as much: that is, it must display at least some aptitude for fulfilling each of the four essential script-functions.

There is one type of graphic pattern which I think may quite possibly possess the required degree of versatility; but pending further experiment, I put it forward only tentatively. I am referring to the sort of pattern that one forms by setting down a certain number of points or nodes, and then connecting some of the points to others by a network of lines. For example:
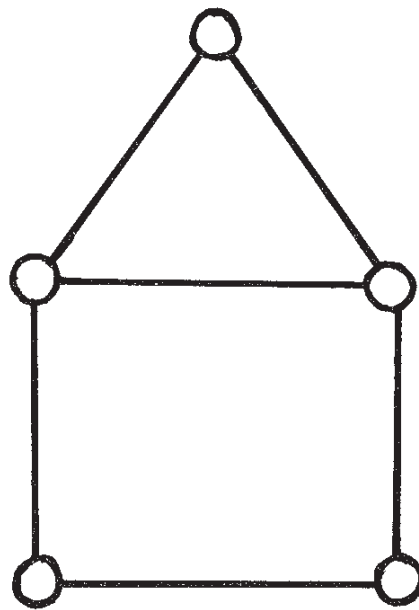
Diagram 22.

In mathematics, such node-and-line structures are known as "graphs." (I will keep "graph" with this meaning in quotation marks to set it off from more common senses of the word.) I do not know if Dick Higgins was aware of this mathematical usage when he entitled his visual script series *Graphis*, but all the visual scripts of his I have seen were, in fact, of the node-and-line variety.

However, there was something at once both *closed* and *arbitrary* about Higgins's "graphs"—in one, for example, the pattern of nodes and lines was obtained randomly (by tracing) and then the meaning of each node was set rigidly (by assigning a particular word to it)—whereas the great promise of "graphs" as visual scripts seems to me to lie in the way they combine *openness* (of interpretation) with *fixity* (of underlying structure). In any "graph" the connections *between* nodes are settled once and for all—they are given in the structure of the "graph"—but the nodes *themselves* may be assigned any set of meanings one wishes—or even (and this is what will be of interest to us) several sets of meanings at once.

For example, if one reads the nodes of a "graph" as representing individual incidents, then the "graph" as a whole displays alternative ways of developing an action out of those incidents. (It is no coincidence that the flowchart, discussed above as a means of depicting, and perhaps generating, dramatic action, is, in basic form, a "graph.")

If one reads the nodes as representing individual actors, then the "graph" as a whole displays the network of possible relationships in which these actors may stand to one another. (It is no coincidence that the sociogram, discussed above as a means of depicting, and perhaps suggesting, interpersonal relationships, is also, in basic form, a "graph.")

If one reads the nodes as specifying points on, or sections of, a stage (not necessarily all in the same plane), then the "graph" as a whole, when enlarged (either two-dimensionally as a floorplan, or three-dimensionally as a system of levels and ramps), gives both the playing areas, and the routes between playing areas, of a performance space.

And finally, if one reads the nodes as standing for mental images or insights on the part of the individual actor, then the "graph" as a whole becomes a network of guidelines for connecting and relating isolated perceptions. But these same images and insights which the actor now *connects* by means of the "graph," he will initially have *obtained* from the graph, through the application of such techniques as those of Exercise-group VI. Here, for example, is a possible result of applying Exercise VI.7 (distort the basic pattern different ways; then arrange these distortions into an "abstract narrative") to the "graph" in Diagram 22:
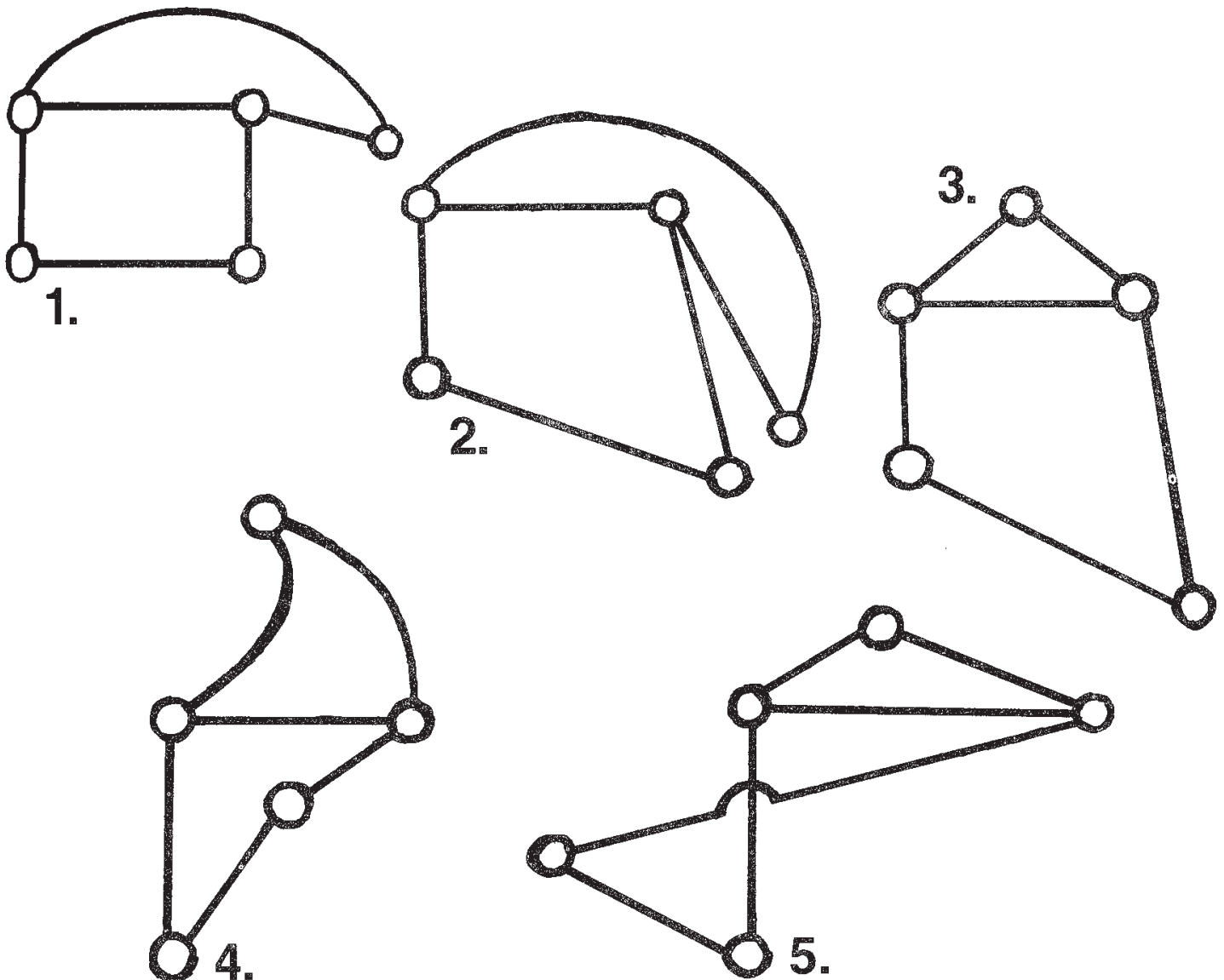

Diagram 23.

Thus the "graph" type of visual script provides the actor with what he needs at every stage of his work: initially, with raw perceptions (images and insights); then, with an "assembly plan" for interconnecting those perceptions. This process of returning to the "graph" for guidance in using what it has already given one may be repeated as often as desired: as each successive "generation" of new perceptions emerges, these in turn are "placed" on the nodes and allowed to come into whatever relation with each other is suggested by the network of connecting lines.

Now the point is: not only are all of the above possible ways of reading a "graph," but there is nothing to prevent a *single* "graph" from being read in *all* these ways—that is, as indicating action, relationships, performance space and acting approach—*simultaneously*. Here, then, is a kind of pattern which seems capable of modelling every essential property of a script at once—and so of constituting a complete visual model of the verbal script. (Of course there is no guarantee that any *particular* graph will be a success as a model. Not even visual scripts write themselves.)

7

If a "graph" or any other type of visual pattern should actually turn out to possess this degree of versatility, its value would extend far beyond that of an effective modelling device. In it we might well have found a means of realizing two of the most persistent dreams of modern theatre: (1) *the freeing of performance from all dependence on texts*, and (2) *the totally integrated theatre production (gesamtkunstwerk)*.

(1) *Visual scripts and the freeing of performance from all dependence on texts*. The reader has doubtless been wondering what role, if any, language is destined to play in work on a type of script where the only "lines" in evidence are drawn ones. My answer is: as much or as little as in any other type of improvisatory work. If the visual material seems to cry out for words and sentences for its realization, why should the actors not speak? On the other hand, if movement and gesture seem like more promising avenues to pursue, why should the actors not keep silent? Neither their speech nor their silence is at issue. However much or little dialog it may contain, a performance based on a visual script is never beholden to any linguistic structure for its structure as an event.

Most forms of "non-verbal" theatre (e.g., the Bauhaus and Futurist experiments, Happenings, mime) are non-verbal only to the extent that they contain no speeches— or at least, no articulate speech. They are "all action." But the action derives from some sort of scenario, which is itself a text—not only in the obvious sense that it is made up of words, but in a more fundamental way as well. Scenarios are stories; and stories, as the Structuralists have taught us to see, are profoundly syntactical—i.e., linguistic—structures. A sentence is a brief narrative, complete with a protagonist (the subject), actions (the verbs), digressions (the dependent clauses), etc. And conversely, a narrative, whatever its length, must in the last analysis be looked upon as an expanded sentence, complete with a subject (the protagonist), verbs (the actions), dependent clauses (the digressions), etc. Hence a scenario—even a scenario for a mime—is, simply by virtue of being a narrative structure, linguistic to the core. By contrast, a visual pattern was never linguistically ordered to start with; and so even the most verbal performances deriving from such patterns would remain free of textual *basis* to a degree that, previously, not even improvisatory performance could hope to attain.

In short, to establish theatre upon a non-textual basis is not at all the same thing as to deprive it of a voice. What is wanted is that performance should *take its start* from something other than language or language-based structures. It is not a question of replacing the playwright with the graphic artist; on the contrary, to model the composition of dramatic texts as the devising of graphic patterns might be of interest largely as a way of posing some searching questions about the nature of playwriting. Nor is it a matter of making theatre "more visual." An art that already depends upon movement, facial expression, blocking, color and space could hardly be any more visual. The point is that the visual should have a new *priority.* Hitherto visual elements have played a mainly *interpretive* role in theatre: they have served to *manifest* dramatic relations, not to *create* them. Visual script work offers visual form a chance to be, for once, the *source* of meaning in the theatre, rather than merely the *expression* of it.

(2) *Visual scripts and the totally integrated theatre production (gesamtkunstwerk).* Because the impetus for total production unity has often come from figures with an antiliterary bias (e.g., Artaud and Craig), there has been a tendency to confuse this movement with the crusade for a "theatre without texts," which I have just been discussing. Actually, the two goals are not only separate, but incompatible, since the basis for unity in an integrated production is, inevitably, a text of some kind. The non-linguistic elements of a *gesamtkunstwerk* ultimately all cohere with each other by each cohering with the script.

From this one might conclude that in depriving theatre of texts, the visual script approach deprives it of all likelihood of coherence. But in fact, visual script work holds out the possibility of unifying production at a more fundamental level than ever before.

With a verbal script providing the unity, there is a built-in limitation on how unified a production can be. Reading a good script, one may have the impression that only *these* relationships could result in *those* actions, that only *such* a setting could be the site of language like *that*, and so forth. One may have this impression, but it cannot, in the nature of the thing, literally be so. The kind of pattern that a set of characters makes has no literal way of corresponding with the kind of pattern that a sequence of actions—or a range of verbal usages, or a selection of spatial contours—makes. The cast, action, language and setting of a play are *each a different kind of order*, however suggestively adjusted each kind may be to the others. The script, which is the sum of these adjustments, is *itself* straining for coherence; it cannot serve the production as a source of unity which it does not possess.

Where the verbal script is, at best, unified, the visual script is truly unitary: a *single* kind of order which, depending on how it is read, can give rise to action, relationships, rehearsal material, performance space. It has the perfect (if somewhat empty) unity that comes of being *only one thing.* No production of such a script is, on that account alone, guaranteed to be coherent; but, on the other hand, no production of such a script starts out under the handicap of having to seek coherence from a source that does not have it to give.

Perhaps even the skeptical reader, unprepared to turn in his copy of *King Lear* for a triangle-cluster, will grant me this: in work on a verbal script or scenario, those things that one is seeking to draw into a unity are only the *expressive dimensions of the finished product*: gesture, sound, color, movement, etc. But in work on a visual script, those things that one is seeking to draw into a unity are the *constitutive elements of the production process*: what is to happen, how the actors are to stand related, what each actor's inner work experience is to be, what sort of place it is all to occur in. Production of a visual script can aspire to a more fundamental degree of

unity than production of a playtext, if only because the aspects of theatre that it seeks to unify are themselves more fundamental ones.

•   ◦   •   ◉

The visual script as a means of freeing theatre from its dependence on texts, the visual script as the key to total unification of the production process—these may sound like rather grand aims for what began as merely an instructive model of rehearsal experience. But it is in the nature of both models and theatre that a new technique of modelling theatre should evolve into a new way of doing it. Indeed, it is even a little misleading to speak of an "evolution." Modelling is already theatrical activity—this is what drew our attention to it in the first place—and consequently, a new way of modelling cannot help but be, at the same time, a new kind of performance. Visual script work has as its primary aim to bring about a deeper understanding of theatre as we know it. But setting out to understand what theatre is has never been incompatible with the creation of new forms of theatre. On the contrary: when theatre has grown wholly intent on grasping the thing it is, *that* is the moment it becomes something new.

David Cole *is a playwright and the author of* The Theatrical Event, *a study of the relation between shamanism and theatre (Wesleyan University Press).*

Diagrams 5, 6 and 7 adapted from H. Dreyfuss, *Symbol Sourcebook.*

Diagram 12 adapted from M. M. Bongard, *Pattern Recognition.*

Diagram 14 adapted from Frank Stella, drawing for *Eccentric Shaped.*

Diagram 21 adapted from K. Critchlow, *Order in Space.*