The title given, as a cover, to these few, too brief remarks on the scope and implications of a possible semiotic approach to artistic practices is, with its false simplicity, suspect, like all titles of this double-entry type ('art and revolution', 'civilization and technology', etc.) where two uncertainly defined terms are coordinated in the service of a demonstration, usually of an ideological nature. For this conjunction can, according to circumstances, denote union just as much as opposition (semiotics as allied to iconography or, conversely, as its opponent?), adjunction as much as exclusion (semiotics and iconography, semiotics or iconography), and even dependence (iconography as the servant of semiotics, or conversely as its 'blueprint', in the sense that, as for Saussure, linguistics was to be the 'blueprint' of all semiology). But this conjunction takes on a still more equivocal function, in so far as it may appear to balance the two terms against each other, while at the same time introducing an element of doubt. To question the status of iconographic studies (of iconography, in Panofsky's definition, as 'a method applicable to the history of art') in their connexion with a semiotics of the visual arts considered as possible means, in fact, to question the very validity of semiotics' attempts at analysing the products of Art (if not their application to the history of Art itself), and above all to question their novelty, and originality [35].

By the same token a first justification is found for the covering title, delineating as it does the boundaries assigned to the text and imposing its own regimen upon it. And even if it is to reset the whole stake of the semiotic and iconographical work, at least it should ensure, from the start, freedom from the imperialism as well as the dogmatism and a-priorism which all too often characterize semiotic discourse. For it might seem that in the field of the visual arts iconography has already achieved, if perhaps on too empirical a plane, a large part of the analytical work which semiotics, for its part, obstinately puts off undertaking. Does this mean that in this respect semiotics (like, according to Panofsky, iconology before it) is no more than a word, a new label for an already ancient practice?

Certainly, the moment that it recognizes the existence of a meaning, if not a denotation, in artistic images, and undertakes, for instance,
to identify figures from their attributes, or to establish the repertory of motives, symbols, themes, etc., characteristic of the art of an epoch, iconography seems to justify the introduction into art studies of a problematics of the sign, while imposing the idea that an image is not intended solely for perception and contemplation, but demands a real effort of reading, even of interpretation. When, moreover, having designated the figures (having, as the old textbooks say, 'declared' them), it then sees them as the protagonists of scenes, or, as Alberti puts it, 'Stories', which are themselves identifiable and recognizable as such, it may seem to open the way for an analysis of a semiotic kind, of the syntactic, and even the narrative structures of the image. But semiotics, in so far as its object is taken as the 'life of signs' and the functioning of signifying systems, establishes itself on another level. Whereas iconography attempts essentially to state what the images represent, to 'declare' their meaning (if we accept Wittgenstein's assertion of the equivalence between the meaning of an image and what it represents), semiotics, on the contrary, is intent on stripping down the mechanism of signifying, on bringing to light the mainsprings of the signifying process, of which the work of art is, at the same time, the locus and the possible outcome. In view of the almost artisanal modesty of its declared intent, could iconography, having once been the servant of the history of Art, become the servant of semiotics, providing it with part of its raw material, while semiotics in return would reinforce it with its
own theoretical apparatus and enable it to widen its scope, to elaborate its aims?

We are in fact a long way from any such division of labour, since iconography persists in serving exclusively a history of Art which—now that the great period of Riegl, Dvorak, Wölfflin and others is past, and excepting a few prestigious but isolated enterprises (such as that of Meyer Schapiro, virtually unique of its kind nowadays)—has shown itself to be totally incapable of renovating its method, and above all of taking any account of the potential contribution from the most advanced lines of research in linguistics, psychoanalysis and, a fortiori, semiotics, not to mention Marxism, which has entered this field only in its most caricatural form. Nor does this resistance point merely to the epistemological abdication of an intellectual discipline which, in its day, was one of the best-attested sources of the Formalist movement, and thereby of the semiotic venture itself. Even at its best, it answers the perfectly legitimate concern to assert the specificity of artistic, and principally plastic phenomena, and to preserve their study from any contamination by verbal models, whether linguistic or psychoanalytic, since the characteristic articulation and import of the work of art are assumed to be irreducible to the order and dimension of discourse.

It is a paradox that, while making iconography a privileged weapon in its methodological arsenal, art history has never ceased in practice—and this quite innocently—to adhere to the logocentric model which it claimed to be denouncing, at the very moment when, for their part, linguistics and the philosophy of language were beginning to take notice of the image, which Saussure and Wittgenstein were about to set at the operative core of sign and proposition: Saussure, by defining the sign as a two-faced entity consisting of an 'acoustic-image' associated to a concept, itself represented by a drawing; Wittgenstein, by establishing the image, in its 'logical form', the form it has in common with reality, to the principle of language and proposition. In so far as iconography concerns itself primarily with the 'signified' in images, and reduces the plastic 'signifier' to a question of treatment, a connotation of 'style', it must necessarily be led to confuse meaning and—at any rate verbal—denotation. Of course, what the image signifies cannot be in any way reduced to what it gives us to see: on any supposedly natural meaning, corresponding to a strictly iconic level of articulation, to the image as it addresses itself to perception, there is often superposed (in accordance with the theory of levels of reading and interpretation developed by Panofsky) a conventional, if not arbitrary meaning (the figure of a naked woman with her head wreathed in clouds will be read as the sign of 'Beauty'). The important point is that on both levels, if the image lends itself to a reading, and eventually to an interpretation, it is only to the extent that the elements—figures and/or signs—of which it is made up allow themselves to be identified and indicated: the
reading necessarily proceeding according to a declarative order in which each element comes up in turn to be named.

Of course iconography, at least in its most sophisticated form, can in no way be reduced to a mere nomenclature: but even at this elementary level, it already implies a reference to pre-existing knowledge, which pre-dates the reading, and has been elaborated externally to it. And this knowledge is not merely 'anthropological', as Roland Barthes would say, inscribed at the deepest level in each of the individuals sharing one culture, and allowing them to recognize immediately in a given configuration of lines or dots the image of a house, a tree, an apple or a horse; on the contrary, it is a knowledge which is 'cultivated', elaborated, linked, in the final analysis, to the textual order. In most cases of doubt a textual reference will carry the day by providing a 'key' which allows the image to be interpreted. But the same is true at the level of the 'subject', of the 'story', a level where iconography mostly applies Poussin's precept literally: 'Read both the story and the picture to know whether each thing is appropriate to the subject.' In parentheses, one could note that such a precept bears testimony that the metaphor of reading, as applied to the works of art, was introduced long before semiotics emerged as a specific discipline, implicit as it was from the beginning in the practice of iconography. To read both the story and the picture certainly does not mean envisaging the picture as a text, and even less citing painting before the jurisdiction of the text, as semiotics, in its most elaborate form, attempts to do. It means introducing into the analysis of the picture the authority of the text from which the picture is supposed to derive its arrangement through a kind of figurative and/or symbolical application, in which each pictural element corresponds to a linguistic term. This is an important distinction, and one with epistemological implications. The iconographic method, iconography as a method, is theoretically founded on the postulate that the artistic image (and indeed any relevant image) achieves a signifying articulation only within and because of the textual reference which passes through and eventually imprints itself in it.

If this is the case, we must admit that any iconographic reading of the image is, as it were, appended to the verbal chain (text or discourse) which 'declares' its figures. But it is precisely this complicity between the method as such and the logocentric model—an inborn, although never explicit, never theorized, complicity—which explains why iconography can nowadays try to some extent to appear not only as part of a semiotics of art (still to be formally established), but also as a 'blueprint' for it, as the model whose pattern and articulations should be copied by any similar enterprise. The essential fact (but also the one most difficult to elaborate into a theory) is the degree to which the idealistic conception of the image implied in the iconographic approach as defined above is indissolubly bound up with a representat-
ive structure whose limits, historical as well as geographical, have now been recognized. Such a structure, from the moment it claims to base its effects demonstratively on the repetition of the experimental conditions of vision, seems indeed to imply a purely denoted level, referable immediately to external reality.

This claim to a truth value, if not a reality value (what Frege, precisely, means by denotation), which was one of the mainsprings of the ‘break’ that occurred in the visual arts at the beginning of the fifteenth century, is clearly illustrated in a famous painting by Rogier van der Weyden, ‘St. Luke painting the Virgin’ (Boston Museum of Fine Arts); whereas a Byzantine (or perhaps medieval) icon reproduced a ‘prototype’, a pre-existing image, which acted as its referent, the modern painter is not afraid of showing the making of the prototype itself, placing its creator, and his model as well, in the position of what is denoted. The Virgin (and, as in a mirror, the painter himself, a latter-day St. Luke) is installed in contemporary costume in front of a window framing a familiar landscape, Alberti’s ‘window’ in fact, and the painting assimilated to an aperture in the wall, opening on to the outside; in this way it is ‘reiterated’ within the painting itself, according to the schema of double inscription which governs the representative system (any representation, as Peirce says, being a representation of a representation). The schema calls for a further elaboration, as soon as a more acute observation reveals that the painter (‘St. Luke’) is not painting the Virgin but drawing her, that he is making a sketch from nature with a pencil, the operation introducing one more relay in the representative circuit, as well as alluding to the function devoted, in such a circuit, to drawing and to the process of intra-semiotic translation.

A painting of this type requires not so much a reading as an interpretation (the one roughly outlined here, or some other). But if the process of interpretation can thus short-circuit the reading process, if the interpretation does not assume an antecedent theoretical constitution and articulation of the pictural text, this is because no trace of the creative apparatus which produced the image as such can be found in the picture; it cannot be too much emphasized that this creative apparatus, in the case of Rogier van der Weyden’s painting, cannot even be hypothetically reduced to some ‘perspectivist’ model (that of the ‘camera obscura’, the principle of which the photographic camera was to reproduce), for while defining it one must equally take into account the actual process of coloured ‘reproduction’, and of illusionist texture linked to the ‘discovery’ of painting with oils (whose position in the system corresponds to the one assigned, in the circuit of photographic registration, to the sensitized plate or film).

If iconography operates from a privileged position within the system of representation, which it goes so far as to take literally, it does so
precisely to the extent that this system introduces a decisive split between a denotative plane presented as ‘natural’ and the network of symbolic, even stylistic connotations which can be grafted on to it. But by the same token it takes its place within the historical limits of the iconological venture as Cesare Ripa, in the ‘Proemio’ of his Iconology (1593), had already defined it. This ‘iconology’—the first responding to this name—insisted on dealing solely, to the exclusion of all others, with such images as were meant to signify something different from what they offered to view (like the image of ‘Beauty’), that is the very definition which Panofsky was to adopt—without referring to Ripa and without distinguishing between the different types of images—to characterize the second of the levels of meaning which he recognizes in the work of art, the strictly iconographical level where the image is invested with a conventional meaning which may be at any distance from the primary, ‘natural’ meaning. The fact remains that Ripa’s text went much further towards an iconology, a science of images, than any of the ‘iconographies’ which have flourished since its time, in as much as he was the first and only one of his kind able to enunciate the programme and conditions both of a logic of images (ragionamenti d’imagini) and of a discourse of meaning applicable to images, while marking quite sharply, if not quite clearly, the distinction between the register of formare and that of dichiarare, as well as that between the strictly iconic constitution of the image and its logical articulation, between its description and its explanation. The ‘iconological operator’ puts into work a logic of concatenation which paves the way for an analysis of the image as a visual definition, articulated in metaphorical and allegorical terms.

The image conceived in the mode of definition: such a formula may sound extravagant (how can it be conceived, Peirce was to ask, that something like an iconic proposition can exist?); it nevertheless fits in, in spite of its assumed naivety, with the attempt to set up a semiotics of art totally conditioned by the category of the sign, and by the hypothesis of the axiomatic interdependence of image and concept, such as was already clear in Saussure’s schema of the operation of translation, characterized by acoustic and conceptual images switching positions.

The iconographic project is thus linked in its principle to a representational structure which implies the erasing of the externality of the signifier, and, first of all, the obliteration of the actual substance of expression, as long as the signified seems to be directly attainable, before any attention is to be paid to the figurative system. It is consequently easy to see the value of all those attempts made at breaking down the naturalist prejudices which cling to images conceived in the illusionist mode. In this way, in the field opened by Panofsky’s Perspective as Symbolic Form, the now classical study of B. A. Uspenskij on ancient Russian icons sets about demonstrating the existence of a primary level
of articulation of the painted image corresponding to the phonological level in natural language: that is the level of figuration corresponding to the most general processes (non-significant in themselves?), which allow the painter to represent relations of time and space and on which are superimposed semantic (figurative), grammatical (ideographic), even idiomatic (symbolic) levels.

Of course, such a cleavage is still modelled after the linguistic ‘blueprint’. But the very idea that different systems of organization for one and the same figurative material might exist, or even coexist (one recalls that Buffon meant by ‘figuration’ a specific mode of the organization of matter, characteristic of minerals, as ‘vegetation’ is of plants and ‘life’ of animals), this idea cannot have any theoretical consequences until the split, constitutive of the representative system, between the (figurative) level of denotation and the (symbolic) levels of connotation has been questioned. The image is always seen, whatever its constitution as image, as the prop, the vehicle for any and every signified injected into it from outside, and research still obeys a model of signifying, of communication, which leads to a radical distinction between that aspect of the image which belongs to the order of perception, and that which has properly semiotic dimensions.

Iconography has its roots deeply entrenched in the metaphysics of the sign. But where the old Platonic theory, which assimilated the relation between the image and its signified to that between body and soul—the perceptible body of the image being supposed to awaken in the spectator a wish, a desire to know its soul (i.e. its meaning)—did at least pose the problem of the articulation of the visible and the legible, iconography no longer heeds the sensible body of the image. Phenomenology comes to its aid, with its notion of the ‘neutralization’, if not the ‘neantization’ of the material element of the image, as does a strictly logocentric linguistics, according to which the sound as such does not belong to the realm of langue, whose system takes its cue from the acoustic, the verbal image. Although less metaphorical than the platonistic theory, Freud’s notion of regression also registers the question of the relation between visual and verbalized thought within the dependence of desire: the (dream) image is not the mirrored double, the perceptible manifestation of thought as constituted in the element of language; it is both the locus and the product of an activity which allows impulses originating in the unconscious, and which have been refused all possibility of verbalization, to find expression through figurative means and to move at ease (in Freud’s own terms) on a stage other than that of language.

It so happens, remarkably, that the most subtle research engendered by the iconographic method cuts across, up to a point, Freud’s schemata. Panofsky has refuted a too-narrow notion of iconography, intended as an auxiliary discipline, a purely classificatory one, which
would provide the historian with a first localisation in space and time of the works he has to deal with. Moreover, at a more elaborate level, he has been led to go much beyond a strictly lexical approach. His work on symbolism in Flemish painting and on the figurative procedures used by the Van Eycks to represent, through purely visual means, abstract notions and relations (such as the opposition of ‘before’ and ‘after’, of the old and the new Law, etc., as indicated by the juxtaposition within a single painting of architectural elements of the Romanesque and Gothic styles) belongs, in a formal sense, in the line of Freud’s analysis of the dream-work and the acceptance of figurability (Darstellbarkeit). A decisive encounter, yet insufficient to break the circle of icon and sign as it has been drawn by a centuries old tradition which has passed through great crises (fits of iconoclasm) without really being shaken. Peirce, once again, in his last writings, was to introduce, together with the distinction between icon and hypoicon, the idea that the icon is not necessarily a sign, that it does not necessarily follow the triadic order of representation, and that inside that order itself there is something not to be accounted for in terms of this relation. (Peirce even goes so far as to mention the ‘immediate, characteristic flavour’ of a tragedy such as King Lear; but what about a painting like Titian’s ‘Sacred and profane love’ or Picasso’s ‘Demoiselles d’Avignon’?) The images of art might primarily be hypoicons: an idea which is hard to grasp, just as it is hard to see not only the visual products of alien cultures, but also those of the very few artists of our time who, from Cézanne to Mondriaan, from Matisse to Rothko and Barnett Newman, seem to carry out their work on the near side of the figure if not against it, on the near side of the sign, if not against it.

The Impressionists had already brought to the fore the question of coloured articulation instead of figurative denotation, thus forcing the spectator to read traditional works of art in this new light, in order to recognize in them everything that, in the icon itself, eludes the order of the sign in the strict sense of the word (on this point, I cannot do better than refer the reader back to Schapiro’s essay on ‘Field and Vehicle in Image—signs’). Like possibly the Byzantine or the Chinese image, the modern image imposes a different concept of ‘signification’, of meaning and of its ‘cuisine’ (Barthes’ term), and consequently a different notion of taste in the most profound sense of that word, irreducible to the norms of communication (except in so far as it would be possible to determine what factors in the notion of information itself belong with a theory of form, or even with the formless). This, rather than the logocentric starting-point which a humanist history of Art refuses to give up, is the area in which a semiotics of art, whose very existence depends on its being comparative, might have a chance to develop.