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# Body Talk: Deafness, Sign and Visual Language in the Ancien Régime

NICHOLAS MIRZOEFF

THE BODY TALKS—but it does so in mysterious ways. In representation, it appears not as itself but as a sign. The body cannot but represent both itself and a range of metaphorical meanings, which the artist cannot control, but only seeks to limit by the use of context, framing, and style. Under both the monarchy and the Republic in France, the body was the central image for political authority, giving it a redoubled importance and metaphoricity.<sup>1</sup> If, as Habermas suggests, the public sphere itself was structured by representation, it is particularly important to consider the means by which the body was represented in the *ancien régime*.<sup>2</sup>

The depiction of the body in the eighteenth century was transformed by the state-sponsored rise of Neo-Classical art. In considering the emergence of the “corporal sign” of Neo-Classicism, it is

The research for this paper was begun while I was a Fellow at the UCLA Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies. I should like to thank the director John Brewer, Clark Professor Ann Bermingham, and my colleagues Lawrence Klein and Jay Tribby for their invaluable support and advice. My thanks also to Mary Sheriff, Richard Shiff, and especially Kathleen Wilson.

<sup>1</sup> On the political body, see Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987) and Marcia Pointon, *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting 1839–1908* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> See Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, tr. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 5–14 and 40–43.

now important to address the techniques by and through which this sign was constituted and signified as a meeting place for the discourses of punitive, political, and linguistic reason, rather than as an unproblematic “[c]reation of images of heroic revolutionary dignity for men.”<sup>3</sup> While the body forms an individual whole, it may represent many bodies and have a role in many different technologies.<sup>4</sup> Foucault has argued that the eighteenth century saw the rise of a new notion of the subject, under the discipline of surveillance techniques that concentrated their attention upon “[a] political technology of the body in which might be read a common history of power relations and object relations.” But the poles of subject and body, rather than being distinct areas, were mediated and linked by a dense layer of discourse, labeled “punitive reason” by Foucault.<sup>5</sup> The body in representation presents one possible rendering of this corporal reason. It was precisely because the body conveyed so many transient fragments of meaning that artists sought a clear and natural way of conveying their intentions and avoiding a confusing excess of signification.

In reading representations of the body in the *ancien régime*, art historians have concentrated on Charles Le Brun’s famous treatise on the passions. But Le Brun’s scheme sought only to represent the expressions of the real body in art, as described and explained by Descartes in his *Treatise on the Passions*. It is therefore only useful in analyzing one level of meaning in the painted body, that of the animal passions, but the linguistic communication invested in the corporal sign cannot be deciphered or explained using this text. Artists of the *ancien régime* sought mediating strategies between the silent artwork and the conversing spectator, trying to achieve the legibility and transparency of the voice through their deployment of signs.

It is thus all the more surprising that the repeated use by Enlightenment artists, critics, and philosophers of the sign language of the

<sup>3</sup> Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> See Lynn Hunt, “The Many Bodies of Marie-Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution,” in Lynn Hunt, ed., *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 108–31.

<sup>5</sup> H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1983), p. 144.

deaf (detailed below), the one intelligible corporal language, has been consistently overlooked in writing the history of the body.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it is unthinkable that art could be inspired by those we now consider “handicapped.” But once such prejudice is overcome, real difficulties of interpretation remain. Sign language was described as early as Plato, but sign language itself has not developed a transcribable format. Indeed, although hearing and deaf people have no doubt always conversed, it awaited the pioneering efforts of the Abbé de l’Épée in the late eighteenth century for the gestural sign to be permanently recorded or classified. As we simply do not know what deaf sign looked like, gesture in art prior to this date may or not be an imitation of deaf sign language—the case can neither be proven nor dismissed.

Such an empiricist position presents difficulties of its own. Firstly, it asks us to ignore a substantial body of writing by artists and critics of the period, sources which are normally considered of prime importance. Secondly, it relies on an understanding of the sign that is inconsistent with that of the eighteenth century. In our impatience to decide whether a gesture is rhetorical, theatrical, or even from the vocabulary of deaf sign language, we act as if the boundaries between such signs are clearly distinct. This modern hierarchy of the sign, introduced around the time of Kant, replaced an earlier semiotic equivalency. For example, in the introduction to his *Essay on Human Knowledge*, Condillac notes that language is one of the two subjects of his work:

I have begun with the language of action: here the reader will see how it has produced every art proper to express our thoughts; such as gesture, dancing, speech, declamation, arbitrary marks for words or things, pantomimes, music, poetry, eloquence, writing and the different characters of language.<sup>7</sup>

In Condillac’s semiotics, every sign was but a secondary production

<sup>6</sup> See Dorothy Johnson’s important essay “Corporality and Communication: The Gestural Revolution of Diderot, David and the ‘Oath of the Horatii’,” *Art Bulletin*, March 1989, Vol.LXXI, pp. 92–116. Johnson nonetheless overlooks the contribution of deaf sign language. The outstanding history of the deaf is Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* (New York: Random House, 1984, repr. Viking, 1989), which contains a very full bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Jacques Derrida, *The Archaeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac*, trans. John P. Leavey (Lincoln and London: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 109.

of the original language of action, and one purpose of his philosophical investigation was to uncover this originary process of translation. Signs, whether gestural, painted, or written, were all fragmentary productions of this original language that were equivalent to each other for epistemological purposes. To impose modern hierarchical structures of meaning on this diverse and fluid semiotic field is to render it illegible.<sup>8</sup> If we attempt to look beyond what Paul de Man described as “[t]he blinded vision” of such misreadings, signs interact in a manner that reveals both their contingency and common, deferred origin.<sup>9</sup>

Deaf sign language was a key resource in this signifying system. In depicting the body as sign, artists, critics and theoreticians of the *ancien régime* used the gestural sign language of the deaf as a technology of signification peculiarly well suited to the silent artwork, in keeping with the polysemicity and diversity of the body and the sign. In his taxonomy of deaf sign, Epée described how the same sign—a cupping of the right hand at the hairline—stood for hairstyle, the feminine gender, and woman.<sup>10</sup> The sign was thus always contingent: metaphorical or metonymic, depending on context, but always polysemic—and gendered.

This fragmented and gendered sign was exemplified in Vincent’s painting *Zeuxis choissant pour modèles les plus belles filles de la ville de Crotone* (Paris, Musée du Louvre), exhibited at the Salon of 1789 (Figure 1). Since the Salon of 1783, Francois-André Vincent, one of the founders of Neo-Classicism, had been regarded as one of the outstanding artists of the day, but his *Zeuxis* has perhaps not received enough attention in the shadow of David’s entry, the

<sup>8</sup> Our grid of reading has been formed by what Michel Foucault has termed “[t]he medical bi-polarity of the normal and the pathological,” dating from the early nineteenth century. Sign language was thus read as pathological. Quoted in Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> See Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Blindness” in *Blindness and Insight; Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Francine Markovits, “L’Abbé de l’Epée: du langage intérieure au langage des gestes” in Alexis Karacostas, ed., *Le Pouvoir des Signes: Sourds et Citoyens* (Paris: Institut National des Jeunes Sourds, 1989), p. 42.

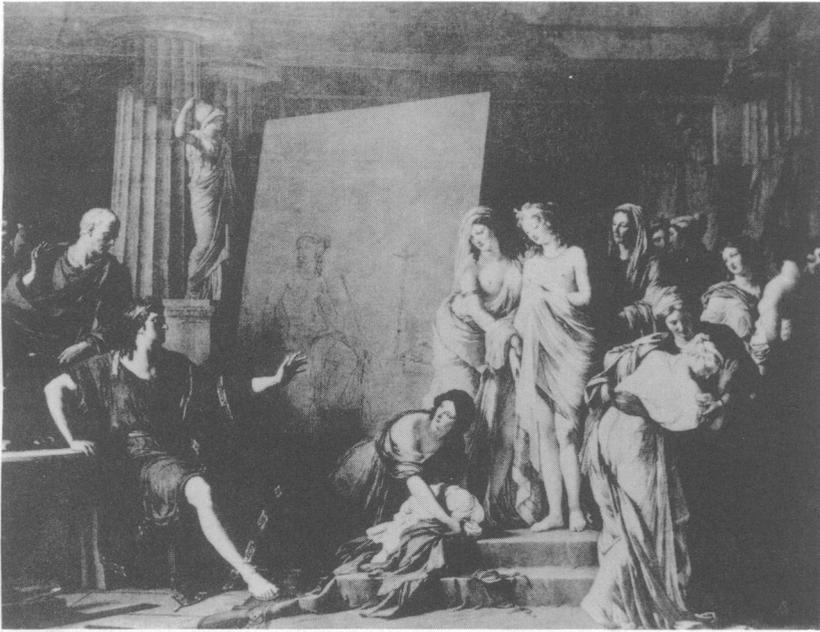


FIGURE 1. François-André Vincent, *Zeuxis Choosing as Models the Most Beautiful Girls of the Town of Crotona*, 1789. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

quickly canonized *Brutus*.<sup>11</sup> Vincent depicted the fabled Greek artist composing the figure of Helen from the most beautiful fragments of women's bodies that he could discover in the town of Crotona where he lived. This subject might seem a peculiar choice with which to combat David's stern style, but in fact Vincent had selected a traditional Academic theme with which to claim his ascendance. As early as 1671, Félibien, an early Academic theorist, had compared Zeuxis' necessary labours to achieve "[t]he perfect model of Beauty" with the good fortune of the seventeenth-century artist who could find perfection in the sole person of Louis XIV.<sup>12</sup> In returning to this

<sup>11</sup> "M. Vincent et M. David peuvent être regardés comme ayant produit les deux chefs d'œuvres du salon [de 1783]," quoted by Henry Lemonnier, "Notes sur le Peintre Vincent," *Gazette de Beaux Arts* (32) Oct. 1904, p. 293.

<sup>12</sup> Félibien, "Le Portrait du Roy" in *Description des divers ouvrages de Peinture faits pour le Roy* (Paris, 1671), p. 111. For important discussions of this text, see Louis

mythic archetype of the artist, Vincent sought to emphasize that the new school of French painting was decisively marked by its inheritance from the golden age of the seventeenth century, and was the logical conclusion of the return to the Classical principles of Poussin.

Despite mixed reviews, the composition was praised for its brilliance by the *Mercure*, which deserves consideration. The single figure of the male artist is balanced by, and contrasted with, the group of women. The point of their interaction is across the scene of painting itself, the blank canvas on which Zeuxis has been drawing. Vincent highlights gender difference as a state of being different. The drawing of the body is here presented not as a straightforward opposition of male and female but as the interaction between one man and many women. The body was an assembly of fragments, drawn from many different sources, in the absence of a perfect model such as Louis XIV.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, such multiple constructions of the body had impeccable Antique credentials. In the *Symposium*, Plato mused on the origin of the sexual drives and theorized that “[i]n the first place the sexes were originally three in number, not as they are now; there was man, woman, and the union of the two.” These doubled beings were divided in half by Zeus, and, since then, “[t]he two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, threw their arms about one another, eager to grow into one.”<sup>14</sup> The fragmented parts of Vincent’s composition were thus driven together by an urge for unity and were linked by the spectator’s gaze, called and held by Zeuxis’ outward look. The myth of Zeuxis’ creation of beauty from fragments represented corporal reason at the outbreak of the Revolution. Neo-Classicism announced a movement in the late eighteenth century towards reading cultural products as masculine reifi-

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Marin, *The Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha Houle (London, 1988) and Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the ancien régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 22–23.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 189e–199e. This passage was later quoted by Freud in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, tr. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), pp. 69–70. See Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982) for a discussion of this relationship between Plato and Freud.

cations of the intuitive feminine leap across the divide between nature and culture, incarnated in the fleeting gesture or moment of speech. The single, masculine realm of culture was formed from the broad, natural mass of the feminine.

### *La Poesie Muette*

The forms of men must have attitudes appropriate to the activities that they engage in, so that when you see them you will understand what they think or say.

This can be done by copying the motions of the dumb, who speak with movements of their hands and eyes and eyebrows and their whole person, in their desire to express that which is in their minds. Do not laugh at me because I propose a teacher without speech to you, who is to teach you an art which he does not know himself, for he will teach you better through facts than will all the other masters through words.

Leonardo da Vinci<sup>15</sup>

Leonardo's suggestion was an attempt to offer artists the best factual source for the imitation of gesture. But after the 1651 publication of Leonardo's text in France, at the initiative of Roland Fréart de Chambray, a friend of Poussin's and one of Richelieu's agents,<sup>16</sup> his comments were reinterpreted in the Ancients and Moderns debates on the theory of painting in France under the *ancien régime*. For the Moderns, the cliché of Academic theory that painting was *la poésie muette* (dumb/silent poetry) had metaphorical as well as literal sense. In his Latin poem *On the Art of Painting* (1668) (soon translated into French by Roger de Piles), du Fresnoy emphasized both the imitation of sign language and the affinity between the visual language of the deaf and the silent artwork: "Mutes have no other way of speaking (or expressing their thoughts) but only by their gesture and their actions, 'tis certain that they do it in a manner more expressive than those who have the use of Speech, for which reason the Picture,

<sup>15</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, trans. Philip McMahon (Princeton Univ. Press, 1956), Vol. 1, p. 105. In the *ancien régime*, terms such as "deaf," "deaf-mute," and "mute" were synonyms, for it was assumed that the two sensory disfunctions were causally related.

<sup>16</sup> See Henri Chardon, *Les Frères Chantelou* (Paris, 1867) and my "Pictorial Sign and Social Order in France 1638-1752" (PhD, Warwick University, 1990), chapters one and three for details on de Chambray and the printing of the Leonardo manuscript.

which is mute ought to imitate them, so as to make itself understood."<sup>17</sup> After the triumph of the Moderns in the Academy, and the installation of de Piles as their theoretician, Academic art and theory began to explore fully deaf sign language, for it was to be dominated by the Coypel family, old friends of de Piles, for over forty years.<sup>18</sup>

Antoine Coypel, First Painter and Director of the Academy said in 1718 that "[t]he Rules of Declamation are needed for Painting, to reconcile the gesture with the expression on the face. The painter, who unfortunately is unable to give speech to his figures, should replace it by the lively expression of the gestures and actions that mutes ordinarily use to make themselves understood."<sup>19</sup> While art historians have often had recourse to manuals on gesture for orators in attempting to explain the painted gesture, oratory may not be the best means with which to explain the silent image. Even when Coypel explicitly referred to the rules of oratory, he advised painters to draw from the deaf rather than the established text books on oratorical gesture. The orator's gesture was a supplement to the arbitrary spoken word, whereas both painting and sign attempted to represent nature itself.

For Coypel, deafness was thus a metaphor that might explain the

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Diderot, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Hermann, 1978), tome IV, n.48 p. 148. Translation by John Dryden, *De Arte Graphica: The Art of Painting by C. A. du Fresnoy* (London: J. Hepinstall, 1695), p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> Noel Coypel (d. 1707) was Director of the Academy of Rome from 1672 and became Director of the Academy itself in 1695. His son, Antoine Coypel (1661–1772), became First Painter to the King in 1715, a job which his son Charles-Antoine Coypel (1694–1752) took over. On the Coypels see Thierry Lefrançois, "L'influence d'Antoine Watteau sur l'œuvre de Charles Coypel," in Pierre Rosenberg, ed., *Watteau 1684–1721: le peintre, son temps et sa légende* (Paris, 1984), pp. 68–71, and Antoine Schnapper, "Musées de Lille et de Brest: A propos de deux nouvelles acquisitions: Chef d'Œuvre d'un Muet, ou La Tentative de Charles Coypel," *Revue du Louvre* 1968, pp. 253–64. Even with the word 'mute' in his title, Schnapper made no allusion to deafness. Theatricality was widely attacked by Michael Fried in his *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980). For example, in validating his claim that David was the first modern painter, Fried cites his "[d]etermined pursuit of naiveté and a passionate revulsion against the theatrical in Diderot's sense of the terms," p. 137. However, as Marian Hobson's *The Object of Art: The Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, 1982) has shown, Diderot's theory of theater was far more complex than Fried or his nineteenth-century predecessors would allow.

<sup>19</sup> Antoine Coypel, *Discours prononcé dans les Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture* (Paris: Jacques Collombat, 1721), p. 167. Translated by Margaret Morgan Grasselli and Pierre Rosenberg, *Watteau (1684–1721)*, (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1984), pp. 437–8.

very function of art, taking its importance for art history far beyond the impossible task of identifying deaf signs in painting. In a later address to the Academy, he defined painting in the following terms: "It is a language that could be common to all peoples, which the deaf understand and through which the mute can make themselves understood."<sup>20</sup> This interaction between the widespread Enlightenment desire for a universal language, painting, and deaf sign language was to be of considerable importance throughout the *ancien régime*.<sup>21</sup>

It was his son, Charles-Antoine Coypel, who fully developed this gestural language of painting. The younger Coypel was a remarkable figure, a playwright, critic, and theorist as well as a painter. In a speech to the Academy and its pupils, he attempted once again to define painting as if it were oratory and found pictorial equivalents for a wide range of rhetorical terms and devices such as disposition, narration, and invention. However, when Coypel considered the depiction of contradictory emotion in art, no vocal parallel existed, leading him to the mediatory possibilities of sign language:

I believe I can forcefully say that the use of this figure is more difficult for the Painter than the Great Writer. The Actors whom we place on the scene have no other language than gesture and the movements of the face: in speaking there is no man who can easily make it understood at which point he is torn by two contradictory emotions, but this would be the *chef d'œuvre* of a deaf-mute who, in a similar case, could inform us of the opposing movements which agitated him.<sup>22</sup>

Neither Le Brun's system of expressions nor rhetorical gesture could assist Coypel in this central task of History painting which sought to depict the supreme emotional moment of a narrative.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Antoine Coypel, "L'excellence de la Peinture," 7 December 1720, reprinted in Henri Jouin (ed.), *Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture* (Paris: A. Quantin, 1883), p. 217.

<sup>21</sup> Coypel's own work showed a marked awareness of gesture and its interaction with expression—see his *Adieux d'Andromaque et d'Hector* (Musée de Troyes), discussed by Schapper, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Charle-Antoine Coypel, "Parallele de l'Eloquence et de la Peinture," *Mercur de France*, May 1751, pp. 8–38, p. 33–34.

<sup>23</sup> It is clear from the context that, although Coypel was a man of the theatre, his reference to actors meant painted characters and not real thespians. See his definition of *disposition*: "N'est-ce que de placer les Acteurs de la scène, que notre tableau doit représenter, dans le rang qui convient à chacun?" *Ibid.*, p. 13.

*A Theater without Words*

The long-standing tradition of deaf characters in French popular theatre and its interaction with painting provides a striking example of the contingency and fluidity of gesture and the sign. As early as the sixteenth century, *Le Sourd* appears as a character in short comedies, and the role continued and developed as time went on.<sup>24</sup> These “deaf” characters normally spoke and often were pretending to be deaf in order to deceive others in pursuit of a love affair. One of the most successful plays of this type was *Le Muet* by Jean de Bigot Palaprat (1650–1721) and David-Augustin de Brueys. The Chevalier, the hero, impersonates a deaf-mute in order to gain access to the house of the Comtesse, where his love Zaide lives. The Comtesse has been searching for a mute to entertain her, and the Chevalier, deftly substituted by the valet Frontin, fits the bill: “Everyone made signs to him to which he responded with a grace by which everyone was charmed.” What these signs were and how the audience might have understood them is undecidable. Signs also played an interesting role in popular comedy as one of the theatrical devices that were necessary because, as Palaprat indignantly pointed out in his “Introduction,” theatre audiences were noisy, disruptive, and anything but homogeneous. In a busy theatre, the author needed all his ingenuity to get a hearing, competing with the *Spectateurs* of the *parterre*, who did not come to watch the play but to meet friends and have fun.

Coypel brought this understanding of the theatrical sign and public to his artistic work and criticism. In his review of the Salon of 1747, Coypel looked to see if “[t]he characters in the scene expressed that which they could not say.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, William Hogarth noted that “[m]y picture was my stage and men and women my actors who were by means of certain Actions and express[ions] to Exhibit a dumb shew.”<sup>26</sup> For both artists, the problem in both theater and the exhibi-

<sup>24</sup> See “*Le Sourd, son varlet et l’Iverogne*” in Leroux de Lincy et Francisque Michel, eds., *Receuil des Farces, Moralités et Sermons Joyeux* (Paris: Techener, 1837), the original MS dating from c.1500–1550 from Rouen.

<sup>25</sup> Charles-Antoine Coypel, “Sur l’Exposition des Tableaux dans le Sallon du Louvre, en 1747,” reprinted in *Mercure de France*, Nov. 1751, pp. 59–73.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted by Shearer West in *The Image of the Actor: Verbal and Visual Representation in the Age of Garrick and Kemble* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990), p. 3.

tion was attracting and keeping the attention of the viewer in order to create an audience. The specific problem for painting and the dumb show, or mime, was that no voice could be used in this already difficult task. The public, rather than being a clearly defined agent to whom the artist or writer could respond, appears here as the product of a successful work. If a piece had merit, it would find and construct a public; if not, there were ample alternative distractions for the pleasure-seeker. Within this framework, gestural sign was both a spectacle in itself and a means of making the silent action comprehensible.

Coytel's own work, both theatrical and artistic, was fully aware of this problem and used gesture, among other devices, as a means of catching the audience's attention.<sup>27</sup> Coytel blended his emphasis on gesture with Poussin's technique of separating the hero from the other characters by use of lighting. In his *Joseph accusé par la femme de Potiphar* (1737, Priv. Coll.), this technique was further refined so that the light picks out not just the hero, Joseph, but the hands of all the actors. Potiphar's wife points out Joseph as her seducer with an open palm while he avoids her gaze and blocks her accusatory gesture with the back of his right hand. His downturned left hand indicated his dismay at the situation, while Potiphar's outstretched palm and clenched fist show his fury and disbelief. This painting exemplifies Coytel's theory that gesture could allow the painter to express more than one emotion at once and hence depict pivotal moments in History with clarity. For the Salon of 1741, Coytel returned to the story of Joseph in his *Joseph reconnu par ses frères* (1740, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center). Joseph again stands in the principal light while his brothers recognize and embrace him. A contemporary critic noted that "[t]heir embrace, handled with spirit in the theatrical style, allows all the action to be understood."<sup>28</sup> The public, at this time, understood and appreciated Coytel's interaction of gesture, painting, and theatre.

<sup>27</sup> Coytel wrote a play that featured a cameo appearance by the King, a storm, dancing, seduction, kidnap, stage directions for gestures, and the characters of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, *Les Folies de Cardenio: Pièce Heroi-Comique, Deuxième Ballet dansé par le Roy dans son Château des Tuileries* (Paris: J-B-C Ballard, 1720).

<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Antoine Schnapper, op. cit., p. 260, who reproduces the works discussed here unless otherwise indicated.

Increasingly, however, gesture and the sign came to be understood as both feminine and philosophical, a twin challenge to artists which found a variety of responses. Coypel's work came to be haunted by the figure of the murderess, armed with a knife, whose aggressive gesture was counterpoised with relaxed male figures. She first appeared in an early work, *Médée et Jason* (1715, Berlin), as Medea whose contradictory role as woman, lover, and killer fully achieved the contrasting effect sought by Academic artists for their History paintings. She appeared again in his *Armide shown with the intention of stabbing Renaud in his sleep* (n.d., Neufchâtel, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire), a scene from Quinault's opera, in which she makes a striking contrast with the abundance of nymphs, cupids, and assorted *putti* surrounding the sleeping Renaud.<sup>29</sup> Armide's expansive gesture, ferocious expression, and centrality to the composition make her a remarkable figure. Coypel later drew a cartoon of the work for the Gobelins tapestry manufactures, giving the image a wider audience. If, as Mary Sheriff has pointed out, the male artist could make use of the *négligence* of his brushstroke to generate erotic enjoyment, then he seems here to have found a counterpart in the hard, direct gesture of the murderess.<sup>30</sup> Armide's steely advance contrasts noticeably with the languid repose of Renaud, vainly protected by Cupid's arrows against this altogether more concrete assault. This relaxed state seems to suggest that the very unnaturalness of the threat posed renders it insubstantial and unlikely to be achieved. It is therefore not surprising that this aggressive intent was soon turned with greater success against the female protagonist. In his *Cléopâtre avalant le poison* (1749, Paris, Musée du Louvre), Coypel depicted the denouement of Corneille's *Rodogune* in which his by now familiar figure of the aggressive woman suffers the effects of the poison she had intended for Antiochus and Rodogune. The saved couple stand apart, concerned, but aware that such unnatural intent could not have succeeded, as Antiochus' diminishing gesture

<sup>29</sup> Denys Sutton, ed., *France in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1968), p. 62, Fig. 141. This catalogue incorrectly attributes the work to Coypel's uncle, Noel Nicholas, but the stylistic and iconographic similarities seem far too strong to support this idea. See Schnapper, *op. cit.*, p. 255, n.31.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago and London: Chicago Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 149–51.

indicates. In the most ambiguous of these works, *Athalie et Joas* (1741, Musée de Brest, derived from Racine's *Athalie*, the Queen looks with terror at the child, who she has seen stabbing her to death in a dream but, in the words of the Salon catalogue, "[s]he could not prevent herself from admiring his grace and nobility." Death by the knife has now visited the sleeping female lead, but the sublime repose of the male character remains constant throughout, as the child looks to Heaven as an assurance of his safety. Gesture now sets a complex, Zeuxian multiplicity in play in French painting. On the one hand, the *public éclairé* appreciated the gestural skill of the male artist, as evidenced in his use of *le faire*, and quietly appreciated the erotic overtones thereby implied.<sup>31</sup> The sexualized looseness of technique contrasted with the dangerous feminine gesture, in which the woman is metaphorically read as her gesture, all too ready to transform herself into a fatal blow. The use of gestural language, literally and metaphorically related to the signs of the deaf, appealed to a wider audience and gave the work clarity. Finally, the depiction of dramatic, even murderous, gestures acted as a device to catch everyone's attention and generate a public response to the work. The dynamic interaction of these gestures and signs, borrowing and learning from each other, was the basis of their semiotic power.

### *The Philosopher's Sign*

No doubt Carle Van Loo felt that his rendering of *Un sujet de Médée et Jason* at the Salon of 1759 (Berlin, Schloss Charlottenburg), featuring a portrait of Mlle Clairon, a recent star in the role, would be an assured success. But, although much anticipated, it disappointed the critics. Diderot despaired: "Oh, my good friend, what a disaster! It is a theatrical decoration with all its falseness, a riot of colour that one cannot believe."<sup>32</sup> The interventions of Diderot and Condillac had by now transformed the status of gesture from popular entertainment into a philosophical and linguistic sign. Van Loo's attempt to tap into the earlier popular genre of gesture was only successful when the figure of Medea was engraved—the resulting print sold heavily. It took the peculiar genius of the Abbé de l'Épée to reunite

<sup>31</sup> See Sheriff, *op. cit.*, pp. 141–49.

<sup>32</sup> Sutton, *op. cit.*, p. 96, fig. 154. Diderot, *Salons de 1759, 1761, 1763*, J. Seznec, ed., (Paris: Flammarion, 1967), I, p. 11.

the popular and philosophical conceptions of gesture in a way that would again be of importance to artists.

In his *Lettre Sur les Sourds-Muets* (1755), Diderot commented widely on linguistic theory, poetry, painting, and, almost incidentally, the deaf. He conversed with a prelingually deaf friend to test his theories on the origins of language and also asked hearing people to translate their ideas into signs. He believed that there were various stages in the evolution of language and the gestural sign was a “[n]atural language.” Describing this experiment, Diderot wrote: “One could almost substitute the gestures with their equivalents in words; I say almost, because there are sublime gestures which all the eloquence of oratory will never capture.”<sup>33</sup> Like Coypel, Diderot identified qualities in deaf sign language that could not be matched by the orators, and, in his Salons, he highlighted Greuze’s use of gesture as an example of this sublimity. Following Locke’s notion that the idea preceded the sign, he found this language so convincingly natural that, when looking at paintings, he would pretend to be deaf and watching other deaf people conversing about a subject known to them. If the scene was convincing, looked at in this manner, he judged it to be successful.<sup>34</sup> The naturalness of the sign was of inestimable use to the artist who was trying to show the thing itself, unlike the poet and the musician who created “[h]ieroglyphs.”<sup>35</sup> In this respect, Diderot had simply taken the earlier recommendations of the Academy’s teachers, given them a philosophical gloss, and deployed them in his criticism. His notion of the sublimity of gesture certainly matched Academic practice. In the formulaic textbook by Dandr -Bardon, who taught Vincent and David at the Academy, the previous lengthy discussions on gesture were part of the standard Academic repertoire. He wrote: “One gesture alone . . . can be sublime. Such is the gesture which Poussin gave to Eudamias’ doctor in that painting where this Philosopher left his testament.”<sup>36</sup> Like

<sup>33</sup> Diderot, *Lettre sur les Sourds et Muets   l’usage de ceux qui entendent et qui parlent*, 1755, reprinted in *Oeuvres Compl tes* (Paris: Hermann, 1978), ed. Jacques Chouillet, tome IV, p. 142–43.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185. See Dubos’ similar theory (1720): “The signs with which painters address us, are not arbitrary or instituted, such as words employed in poetry. Painting makes use of natural signs, the energy of which does not depend on education,” *Critical Reflexions on Poetry, Painting and Music*, tr. Thomas Nugent (London: J. Nourse, 1748), I, p. 322.

<sup>36</sup> Dandr -Bardon, *Traite de Peinture* (1765) (repr. Geneva: Minkoff, 1972), p. 60.

Diderot's philosophy, this pedagogy was prepared to use one system of visual language, deaf signs, to reinforce its artistic practice without feeling the need to distinguish or hierarchize amongst them.

Just as artists, critics and pedagogues used deafness to conceptualize painting, so too did the Abbé de l'Épée think of art as a means of instructing the deaf. Charles-Michel de l'Épée had a rather unsuccessful career, first as a Jansenist priest and later as a barrister, until, in his fifties, he encountered two deaf sisters in a poor district of Paris. Épée observed the women signing and realized that they were in fact conversing, providing him with an unsuspected opportunity to save their souls for the Church. He believed that he had found the universal language which so many had sought, albeit in a rude state requiring certain additions. But, once refined, this language "[c]ould become a meeting place for all men."<sup>37</sup> He had at last found a vocation.<sup>38</sup> Working with the sisters, he taught himself the rudiments of their language and proceeded to attempt to teach them written French. In Épée's classes, teaching concentrated mostly on the unifying principles of grammar, on the assumption that it was only through speech that they could naturally be assimilated.<sup>39</sup> In announcing his work, Épée claimed that it served to "[s]upplement the mistake of nature and to develop successively the intelligence of these Beings, who have been regarded up to now as types of semi-automatons."<sup>40</sup> He thus constructed a series of methodical signs for grammatical constructions which, in accompaniment with French sign language vocabulary, were held to replicate the processes of speech. Épée's course moved rapidly from an introduction, to general principles of

<sup>37</sup> Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée, *Institution des Sourds et Muets* (Paris, 1776), p. 136. Despite its greater degree of philosophical sophistication, this first version of Épée's work has been somewhat overlooked since the re-issue of the 1784 edition, *La Véritable Manière d'Instruire les Sourds et Muets* (repr. Paris: Fayard, 1984). The two texts will be distinguished by original date of publication in subsequent citations.

<sup>38</sup> See Lane, op. cit., p. 55f for details of this encounter.

<sup>39</sup> For a description of this phonologism, see Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," *Glyph*, Vol. I, 1977, pp. 172-98. Derrida quotes Condillac: "Men in a state of communicating their thoughts by means of sounds, felt the necessity of imagining new signs, capable of perpetuating those thoughts and making them known to persons who are absent" (p. 176). But in the evolutionary scheme of language implied here, it was not possible for those who only used the primitive communication ("mimicry") of sign language to proceed directly to writing with no intermediate stage.

<sup>40</sup> Épée, (1784), p. 141.

naming, to complex grammatical formulae. This was the seventh lesson given after students had grasped the idea of several nouns: "To dictate the word 'greatness,' for instance, we first make the sign for 'great,' an adjective, and then add the sign for noun, which signals that the adjective is a substantive and so modifiable by other adjectives."<sup>41</sup> This process became still more complicated once the verb was introduced with all its attendant questions of number, tense, and voice.

Yet Epée's cumbersome and difficult method, combining seventeenth-century technical handbooks with the philosophy of Condillac, nonetheless seemed to work.<sup>42</sup> From the moment his school opened in 1755—the same year as Diderot's *Lettre*—he enjoyed remarkable success, teaching his pupils how to read and write, and attracting widespread public acclaim. However, the deaf he taught already knew the structures of language through sign. In the first published work by a deaf author in France, Pierre Desloges noted that deaf people who had never been to Epée's lessons were nonetheless active and informed: "We express ourselves on all subjects with as much order, precision, and rapidity as if we enjoyed the faculty of speech and hearing."<sup>43</sup> Desloges compared sign language to a foreign language from the point of view of a French speaker. Epée's tuition thus introduced native signers to French in their own language, just as any other language teacher would, and used what he termed the "[n]atural language of signs" to overcome difficulties in his system. Nonetheless, it was not until Roch-Ambroise Bébien began to teach at the Institute for the Deaf in the early nineteenth century that a hearing instructor was prepared to consider sign as a fully capable language.<sup>44</sup> Epée's linguistic achievement was as an educator who realised that the deaf could be taught the written language of the hearing majority. Furthermore, even though he himself acknowledged his Spanish predecessor, Bonet, he was the first to

<sup>41</sup> Lane and Philip, op. cit., p. 61.

<sup>42</sup> The works in question are J. P. Bonet's *Reducción de las Letras y Arte para Enseñar à Ablar los Mudos* (Madrid: Abarca de Angulo, 1620), a manual alphabet, and J. C. Amman's *Dissertatio de loquela Surdorum et Mutorum* (Amsterdam: Wetstenium, 1692), a textbook on oral education.

<sup>43</sup> Lane and Philip, op. cit., p. 36. For the pioneering modern work on the grammatical and linguistic capacities of sign, see William Stokoe, "The Study and Use of Sign Language" in W. Stokoe, ed., *Sign and Culture: A Reader for Students of American Sign Language* (Silver Spring, MD: Linstok Press, 1982), pp. 10–52.

<sup>44</sup> See Lane and Philip, op. cit., pp. 122–161, for Bébien's account of his work.

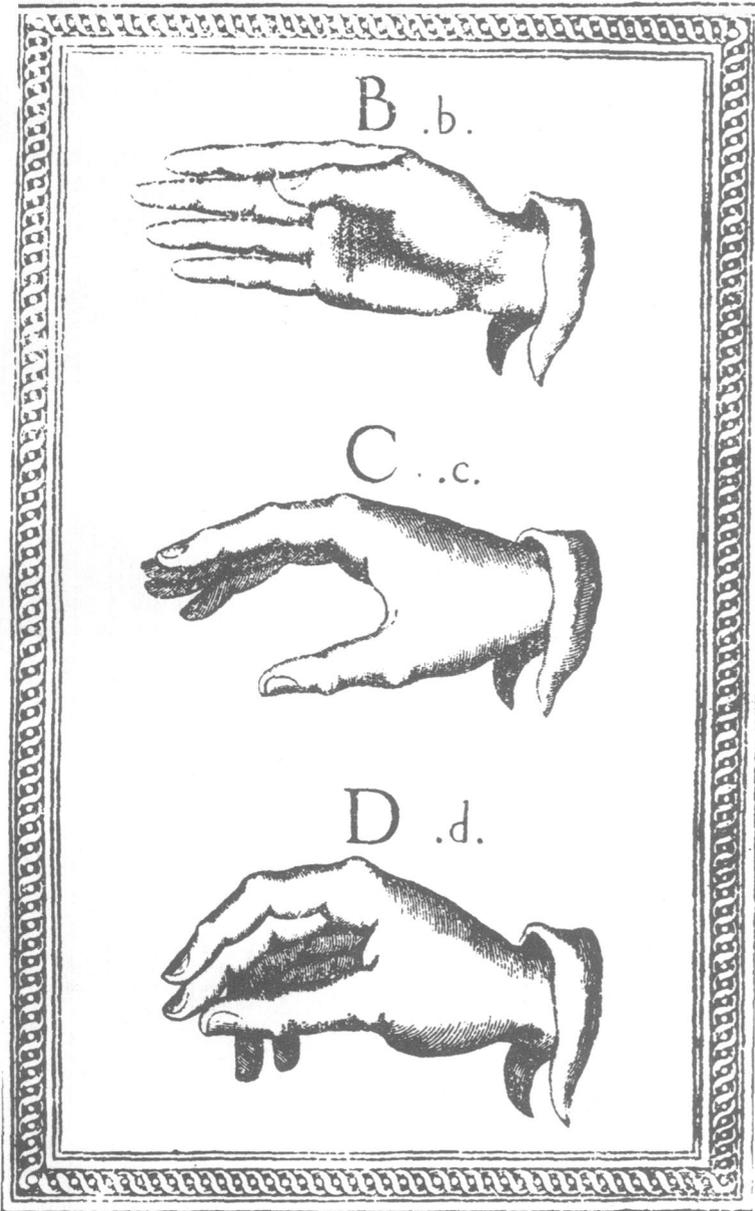


FIGURE 2. The Manual Alphabet as adopted by Epée from J. P. Bonet, *Reducción de las Letras y Arte para Enseñar à Ablar los Mudos*. Madrid, 1620.

teach the impoverished deaf and as such has been remembered as the originator of deaf education.<sup>45</sup> (See Figure 2.)

His widespread success, however, also owed much to his talents as a showman. Epée took the tradition of deafness and sign language in the theater and made it into the very subject of the performance, blended with salon culture and scientific display. Epée opened his house on Tuesday and Friday mornings for demonstrations of his method, which were attended at various times by Marie-Antoinette and the Emperor Joseph II, and were so popular that those attending were asked to stay for no more than two hours. Epée's purpose was to demonstrate to the hearing that his pupils were capable of understanding the principles of grammar and metaphysics, which both Enlightenment philosophy and public opinion put far beyond their reach.<sup>46</sup> Students had to identify parts of speech from lists provided and respond in written French to Epée's questions concerning, for example, the nature of the Eucharist and other religious teachings. These proceedings were inevitably slow, as Epée's signs were so cumbersome. Presumably, for the hearing audience, this provided an opportunity to discuss the event and what it entailed. The renown that these displays brought Epée was such that the King awarded him a salary, which enabled him to increase the size of his school and place it on a more permanent footing.

### *Signs of Origin*

Epée's leap of comprehension took him beyond his philosophical mentor, Condillac, whose *Essay on Human Knowledge* investigated the origins of language. Condillac held that the first form of language was the gesture. Soon the gesture was accompanied by a sound which, in turn, came to replace the gesture altogether. Sounds were then combined to form phrases and sentences. It was thus impossible for a gestural language to have grammar, as it preceded the grammatical stage in the evolution of language.<sup>47</sup> Philosophically, therefore,

<sup>45</sup> Epée (1776), p. 184. See Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Deaf In America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), chapter two on the Epée myth.

<sup>46</sup> Epée (1776), p. 74.

<sup>47</sup> Condillac, *Essai sur les origines des connaissances humaines*, précédé par *L'Archéologie du Frivole* par Jacques Derrida (Paris: Galilée, 1973), pp. 128–31.

sign language was understood as the common origin of language, albeit a primitive one.<sup>48</sup> Condillac used the case of a deaf man from Chartres, who regained his hearing at the age of twenty-three, as a material proof of his ideas. But, as he admitted, those who had observed this event did not ask the young man questions about his former life, “[w]hich we can only supplement with conjectures.” This immediate reintroduction of theoretical speculation into the supposed empirical proof of his theory is archetypal of the supplementary logic that dominated linguistic discussion in the Enlightenment. Condillac held that as the deaf man would have been

[i]ncapable of exactly fixing and determining the ideas which he received through his senses, he would not have been able, either by piecing them together or by breaking them down, to form notions for himself at will. Not having signs sufficiently commodious to compare his most trivial ideas, it would have been rare that he formed any judgements. It is indeed possible that, during the first twenty-three years of his life, he did not carry out one single act of reasoning.<sup>49</sup>

For Condillac, gestural signs sufficed only to serve the most basic needs of the deaf but they could not educate the mind, an assertion for which he had no proof other than his conjecture. He noted: “You will ask me, are natural signs nothing? I answer that, until commerce, natural signs are not at all properly signs.”<sup>50</sup> Deprived of “commerce” with other men, the deaf could not acquire the faculty of memory and thus could not develop the most basic function of language in Condillac’s theory, the use of names to refer to absent objects. Without memory, there was no imagination and little, if any, possibility of reflexion.

But, just as Condillac’s thesis depended on the supplementarity of his conjectures, Epée supplemented his own conjecture to his reading of Condillac. Drawing on the notion that all knowledge comes from the senses, he wondered if one might attempt “[t]o insinuate into the

<sup>48</sup> The gestural origins of language were widely accepted throughout the eighteenth century. Rousseau argued that gesture fulfilled the animal needs, speculating that animals, such as beavers and ants, have a gestural language: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Origin of Language*, trans. John H. Moran & Alexander Gode (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 9–10.

<sup>49</sup> Condillac, *op. cit.*, pp. 168–69.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted by Derrida, *The Archeology of the Frivolous*, p. 111.

spirit of the deaf by the canal of their eyes that which one cannot introduce through the opening of their ears."<sup>51</sup> Epée rejected any notion of the unitary body and instead believed that, like Condillac's famous statue, it could be worked on piece by piece. His evidence was artistic practice:

Painting is a mute art, which only speaks to the eyes, and the skill of the artist consists in knowing how to attract the gazes of spectators, fixing their attention on his work and deserving their praise. . . . Like painting, the art of methodical Signs is a silent language which only speaks to the eyes. . . . However, after this explanation, where have we got to? We are no more advanced than a Painter, who might have in his studio eyes, noses, ears, mouths, hands and feet represented on the canvas with all the force and the delicacy of his art. I went to an artist's place looking for a picture in this style made up of several figures; and I could not find even one whole figure there.<sup>52</sup>

Both painting and sign language are conceived of as silent languages that "[s]peak to the eyes," beginning from fragments with individual meaning but requiring some overall principle—beauty or grammar—in order to constitute a larger whole. Linguistic supplementary logic found its counterpart in the representation of the body. Neither the corporal nor linguistic sign could speak on its own without some unifying rational principle to generate meaning. The fragments became a whole by use of the principle of analogy, following Condillac: "Nature, which starts everything, starts the language of articulated sounds, just as it has begun the language of action; and analogy, which completes languages, forms them correctly, if it continues as nature has begun."<sup>53</sup> In a curious reversal, the artist who had sought to understand his work by analogy with deaf sign language was now used by Epée as an analogy for the completion of natural sign language. Condillac knew that on the transition between the natural and the arbitrary sign "[m]y work is not at all clear,"<sup>54</sup> and Epée attempted to conceive of this transition in terms of artistic practice, just as Condillac had envisaged the original Man as a deaf, blind artwork—the statue. Within this analogy, through a joint awareness

<sup>51</sup> Epée (1784) p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Epée (1776), pp. 181–82.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted by Derrida, *Archeology of the Frivolous*, p. 82.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

of the separation of signifier from signified, and of the fragmentary body, Epée could theorize a language, constructed through gestural sign, being capable of educating the deaf.<sup>55</sup> So he perceived the sisters' gestures as signs with semantic content rather than as a purely physical manifestation of need. Thus, *ancien régime* semiotics, which might appear to be trapped in an unworkable chain of similitudes, was in fact remarkably productive, particularly in the analogous consideration of the origins of painting and writing.

Epée described sign language as writing in the air, making apparent the contingency of both spoken and written signs.<sup>56</sup> For Condillac, by extension, "[i]t was most likely by the necessity of thus tracing our thoughts to which painting owes its origin, and that necessity has without doubt contributed to the preservation of the language of action, as that which can be painted most easily."<sup>57</sup> In his "Essay on the Origins of Language," Rousseau reflected on the myth of Dibutade, whose tracing of her lover on the eve of his departure was also said to be the origin of painting and was often depicted at the Salon: "Love, it is said, was the inventor of drawing. It might also have invented speech, although less happily. Not being well pleased with it, it disdains it; it has livelier ways of expressing itself. How could she say things to her beloved, who traced his shadow with such pleasure! What sounds might she use to work such magic? . . . This leads me to think that if the only needs we ever experienced were physical, we should most likely never have been able to speak; we would fully express our meanings by the language of gesture alone."<sup>58</sup> The gesture of mythical woman has changed from the knife-thrust of Medea to the pencil tracing of Dibutade, and in the process becomes a creative, though limited, activity. We might note that the male object of her affections remains as reposed as Coypel's

<sup>55</sup> Epée (1784), p. 110: "I understood, moreover, that in every Nation speech and writing only signify something by a purely arbitrary agreement amongst the people of that country, and that everywhere there must have been signs which would have given to both speech and writing—and as perfectly by writing as through speech—the virtue of recalling to the spirit the idea of things whose names one had pronounced or written, written or pronounced, whilst showing them by some sign of the hand or the eyes."

<sup>56</sup> Epée (1776), p. 30.

<sup>57</sup> Condillac, *Essai sur les Origines des Connaissances Humaines*, II, xiii, #128.

<sup>58</sup> Rousseau, loc. cit. On the Maid see Ann Bermingham, "The Origin of Painting and the Ends of Art: Wright of Derby's *Corinthian Maid*" in John Barrell, ed., *Painting and the Politics of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, forthcoming).

heroes. The maid stands between physical language and the language of the passions, between gesture and speech, between nature and culture. She is on the point of inscribing that small difference that will become known as the origin of painting but, in the terms of the legend, she is unaware of this in her state of nature. In terms of Pliny's legend, it takes her father or his descendant the artist to supplement her trace and fix her movement into culture. "Conventional language is characteristic of man alone," noted Rousseau.<sup>59</sup>

In a recent exhibition at the Louvre, Jacques Derrida has called attention to the moment of blindness inherent in this myth of painting. He noted that Dibutade's representation of her lover begins as she ceases to look at him: "[t]his writing of shadows inaugurated an art of blindness."<sup>60</sup> Representation is thus an operation of memory rather than one of vision. Paradoxically, however, this "blindness" of the artist was interpreted by the "deafness" of the critic's silent gaze. The Convention would later house the deaf and the blind in the same institution in the belief that they could render useful assistance to each other. In a pamphlet entitled *La Muette qui parle au Salon* (1781) (The Deaf Woman Speaks at the Salon), a criticism of the Academy's annual painting exhibition was presented as if from a deaf woman's point of view. In front of the majority of uninteresting works she has nothing to say, but before selected "quality" paintings, she miraculously rediscovers the power of speech—only to lose it as soon as the next mediocre work presents itself. Here the male critic uses the doubly "natural" figure of the deaf woman as his mediator to the realm of culture. She speaks as a symptomatic response to culture but is unable to sustain what is, for her, the hysterical condition of speech. For the sign-as-symptom indicates both repression and the process of transition from one system in the psychical apparatus to another.<sup>61</sup> However, the symptom-bearer cannot diagnose herself. The female body is both a sign and the site of the sign, conceived as an alien presence, comparable to a virus or hysteria.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Rousseau, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires d'aveugle: L'autoportrait et autres ruines* (Paris: Editions des Réunions des Musées Nationaux, 1990), p. 54.

<sup>61</sup> On the symptom in the visual image, see Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1987), p. 44.

<sup>62</sup> Lynn Hunt has noted how Marie-Antoinette, accused of incest with her son, was denounced by the Jacobin club for passing on "[t]he virus that now runs through [the

In order for the sign to speak fully, it requires the intervention of the male critic to write down her commentary. Epée's "discovery" of sign language was perhaps the living example of these mythological origins. His assimilation of the deaf sisters' sign language brought him fame and access to the highest levels of society, but we do not even know the women's names.

It is perhaps time to look again at Vincent's *Zeuxis* in the light of this conception of the body as sign, an assembly of fragmentary signs and place of signification.<sup>63</sup> On the canvas, only the outline of Helen's figure has been drawn in. *Zeuxis* has taken the stylus from Dibutade and, with it, the right to control the sign, even at its origin. The seemingly empty space between *Zeuxis* and his models is where the sign exchanges its natural physical status for the artificial or composed, making it possible for critics to praise the composition of this apparently disjointed work. But now the sign has become gendered so that it required a male prototype to create the composed, civilized, intellectual sign from the natural, simple female. One woman was not enough to construct the plentitude of Rousseau's "conventional language," for the figure of woman is equivalent to the simple sign. Like the natural signs of the deaf, women had to be combined and composed in order to signify. In an awareness that signs can never be natural but must always and already be reproductions, the masculine drive of Neo-Classicism reclaimed the scene of representation.<sup>64</sup> Yet in so doing, it retained the earlier passivity of the male figure, exemplified by Vincent's seated *Zeuxis* whose receptivity of the sign is proposed as a natural attribute of his mascu-

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boy's] veins and which perhaps carries the germs of all sorts of accidents," p. 115. Here, the "virus" carries a moral contagion as it did for David who denounced "[t]he Academic virus" that had corrupted French art—quoted by E. J. Delécluze, *Louis David: Son Ecole et Son Temps* (Paris: Didier et Cie, 1860), 2nd ed., p. 57.

<sup>63</sup> See Nancy K. Miller, "Rereading as a Woman: The Body in Practice" in Susan R. Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 354–62, for a discussion of Valmont's writing to the Presidente on Emilie who "[m]ust remain invisible since her function is merely and classically to facilitate the exchange of women and/or signs," p. 358, n.5.

<sup>64</sup> On the notion of a scene of representation, see Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 196–232.

linity. This compositional structure was interestingly paralleled by David's *Brutus*, hanging nearby. In this case, the solitary figure of the consul looks out, separated from the group of mourning women by an empty space. As David's ideas for this work advanced, his drawings show an ever increasing concentration on rendering the women as a mass, rather than as individuals, for he was also intent on depicting the contrast between a single male figure and a group of women.<sup>65</sup> His friend Sue recalled how David, rather than painting women as he saw them, "[w]ould always take care to choose only beautiful heads for women."<sup>66</sup> The major narrative component of the *Brutus*, the return of the dead sons, is signaled by David's use of a corporal synecdoche in which the feet of one son tells their story. In taking over the transmission and reception of the sign, both revolutionaries and artists would soon come to look for help, which was provided by the paternalist republic.<sup>67</sup>

In July 1791 the Jacobin Prieur de la Marne proposed to the National Assembly that Epée's school for the deaf should now be administered by the government. In a speech which neatly encapsulated the results of over a hundred years thought on the sign, Prieur declared:

What is more, the deaf have a language of signs which can be considered as one of the most fortunate discoveries of the human spirit. It perfectly replaces, and with the greatest rapidity, the organ of speech . . . . It does not consist solely of cold signs and those of pure convention; it paints the most secret affections of the soul which, by the play of the organs, and particularly that of the eyes, are much mixed into its elements.

If one were ever to realize the much desired project of a universal language, this would perhaps be that which would merit preference; at the least, it is the most ancient of all.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> See Antoine Schnapper, "De Belisaire à Brutus," in *David* (Paris: Editions des Réunions des Musées Nationaux, 1989), p. 198.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Anon, "David et ses Elèves," *Les Arts*, Oct. 1913, pp. 2-18.

<sup>67</sup> See Mirzoeff, "Signs and Citizens: Sign Language and Pictorial Sign in the French Revolution," in *Consumption and Culture in the Early Modern Period*, Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, eds., (London: Routledge, forthcoming) for an analysis of paternalism and the sign in the French Revolution.

<sup>68</sup> *Le Moniteur Universel*, no. 205, 23 July 1791, p. 202. See also *Mercure Universelle et Correspondance Nationale*, same date, and Le Hodey, ed., *Journal des Etats Généraux Convoqués par Louis XVI le 27 Avril 1789 aujourd'hui Assemblée Nationale Permanente*, tome 30, p. 208.

Prieur appreciated that gestural sign was, as Condillac had said, the first language, but that, as Epée maintained, its natural signs had required the addition of conventional ones to make it a fully operative language. Sign language was not the original language, whose pursuit had been abandoned, but was the most ancient of all. He appreciated that its uniquely visual quality made it a variety of painting, which helped give it the possibility of becoming a universal language. It was therefore appropriate that, in appointing a Professor of Painting for the new Institution, he should choose none other than Vincent. One month later, clearly believing that his *Zeuxis* had considerable, even revolutionary, significance, Vincent exhibited it again at the Salon of 1791.

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