

THE FETISHISM OF SIGNS

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Introduction

Semiotics has been hailed as a revolutionary breakthrough in the various disciplines, a breakthrough beyond disciplinary thought, indeed, the revolutionary breakthrough of our time (MacCannell and MacCannell, 1982). It challenges accepted modes of thought across the sciences, humanities, and practicing arts. Yet, like money (and before that, religion), it can also be seen as the new equivalent to Marx's "fetishism of commodities," one fitted to an Age of Abstractionism.

I would like to claim that contemporary semiotics on the whole represents a cultural distortion. It may be easier to see how a theory of signs can represent cultural distortion by briefly considering Freud's turn-of-the-century Vienna and theory of symbolism. With its repressive politics and sexual life, its inverting of value systems to raise the low to the high, the dissonant from means to end, and so forth, as well as Freud's admiration of the English utilitarians and the neurological equivalent to their philosophy, namely the nineteenth century reflex-arc concept which is rooted in the pleasure and pain principle; we see a theory that tells us more about Freud, Vienna, and modernism than about the nature of symbolism. Despite interesting insights into the fantastic dynamics of the psyche, Freud's semiotic, with its claim that the id is real, that the ego is a secondary system of representation superimposed on the id, and that therefore the attainment of that reality which lies behind the veil of representation, the very answer to the riddle of the Sphinx, is blindness instead of insight, is fragmentation instead of relation, is murder and incest, or

simply Hate instead of Love, reveals itself in the end to be a variation of the myth of Hobbes, subject to the same "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" as Hobbes. Similarly, I want to claim that contemporary semiotics tells us much more about the advanced culture of Abstractionism or uprooted rationality than about the nature and purpose of signs.

One of the key problems in contemporary semiotics is the question of how meaning is organized. Whether it be called structure, code, or some kind of system, whether "system of signification," "system of symbols and meanings," and so forth, the organization of meaning appears as a rather remote and inflexible system frequently unsusceptible to criticism and correction, or, for that matter, to self-destructive consequences. This theoretical tendency seems to me to be itself a mirror of our culture of nominalism, in which label and technique have replaced living interpretation rooted in concrete sign-practices. If one is merely an avatar of a code or system, with no critical capacities of one's own, then surely the world is arbitrary and no one is responsible: Blame it on the system.

The tendency to espouse semiotics as a technical all-purpose panacea that will melt away all obdurate facts, disciplinary boundaries, biosocial imperatives, or human individuality in a sea of semiosis obscures the fact that semiotics is, in the end, a means for interpretation and not a religion. Hence, despite the attention devoted to it, the concept of sign remains acritical. And the frequently opaque language of semioticians, whether the high-tech jargon of positivism or the fancy footwork of post-rationalist rationalism, acts as a means of mystification, and not as a means of clarity and fuller understanding.

In Gulliver's travels to Lagado, he meets with scholars who could be described by today's standards as positivists, or, with a slight twist, as postmodernist semioticians. Realizing the unnecessary hegemony of words, words, words, they propose a project to abolish words completely on the principle that, "since words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on."

If we simply twist the idea a bit from things to signs, and continue:

. . . many of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by things,

which hath only this inconvenience attending it, that if a man's business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged in proportion to carry a greater bundle of things upon his back, unless he can afford one or two strong servants to attend him. I have often beheld two of those sages almost sinking under the weight of their packs, like peddlers among us; who, when they meet in the streets, would lay down their loads, open their sacks, and hold conversation for an hour together; then put up their implements, help each other to resume their burdens, and take their leave. But for short conversations a man may carry implements in his pockets and under his arms, enough to supply him, and in his house he cannot be at a loss. Therefore the room where company meet who practice this art, is full of all things ready at hand, requisite to furnish matter for this kind of artificial discourse.

If we think of this kind of artificial discourse as a kind of x-ray of the contemporary semiotician, we might imagine what looks like an otherwise average person to the normal vision as instead appearing festooned with the elaborate terminology of semiotics: Saussurian, Morrisean, Peircean, and other varieties of signs, bulging out and overflowing every pocket, ready to be conspicuously displayed--and even consumed, weighing down and possessing their possessor by their sheer bulkiness so that communication becomes merely a wearisome and purposeless exhibition of semiotic goods, albeit freed from the strictures of rational discourse.

Despite these tendencies, I must acknowledge what seems to me the broad possibilities of semiotics for contributing to and revolutionizing "post postmodern" culture, but in order for this to happen a radical transformation must take place: the fetishism of signs that now constitutes semiotics must give way to an animism of signs.

Just as humankind has frequently been misled into seeing "the definite social relations between men," assume the reified and fantastic forms of religious or, more recently, economic myths that deny human relationship in its own terms, so too does contemporary semiotics, with some exceptions, appear to be the latest incarnation of modern alienated rationalism. I would like to suggest, for example, that in rigidly separating language (as meaning-system) from speech (as mere instance), the semiological tradition appropriates

meaning from living human action and speech, denying what for the Greeks was the essence of human nature itself, the capability to engage in living communicative dialogue, to cultivate and criticize purposive community. Meaning, as the medium of human social life, not only is robbed of its critical dimension as human instrument, but vanishes from the concrete world itself to that nether-region of "the deep structure." Signs may be constituted by conventional "codes," but codes themselves operate within a broader sign-web of purpose. Structuralism, as well as the positivist variety of semiotics launched by Charles Morris, simply do not address this larger question--What are codes for? --yet it seems to me this should be the ultimate aim of the semiotic perspective (See Rochberg-Halton, *Situation, Structure, and the Context of Meaning*," 1982; Rochberg-Halton and McMurtrey, 1983). Semiotologists, including poststructuralists, like to make the claim that they are a critical form of discourse, capable of lifting the veil of illusion that hides from our faces the workings of codes. Perhaps this is the positive contribution of the semiological tradition. But is the notion of conventions or codes so original to this tradition? Marx, Veblen, and a number of other social theorists would clearly say not. And must codes be so rigidly dichotomized from action, from sentiment, from nature? Marx and Veblen would say no, but all the binary

thought-world of structuralism would shout en masse *Oui!* Should we take them at their word that speech is meaningless and that their shout amounts to nothing?

The semiological tradition does not monopolize the fetishism of signs, however. All one has to do is read a selection of Charles Morris's *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, almost at random, to find a mind so possessed by mythic scientism that it is incapable of clear and logical expression of ideas and terms-- something we should assume should be at the essence of scientific discourse.

Avatars of Abstractionism

Semioticians frequently cite Charles Morris's Foundations of the Theory of Signs as the most influential book, apart from Saussure and the semiological tradition, for the development of the field of semiotics. This monograph was first published in 1938 and made use of Peirce's theory for Morris's own ends. Here Morris, drawing from logical positivism and pragmatism,

introduced the distinction of "syntax, semantics, and pragmatics" as the division of semiotic, and this threefold division was used by the philosopher Rudolph Carnap and others, and has since influenced whole generations of philosophers and social scientists. Elsewhere I have shown how Morris's tradic division of semiotic is based upon an unacknowledged debt to Peirce, one that not only does not credit Peirce, but which radically distorts Peirce's carefully conceived semiotic into an antisemiotic positivism, while yet retaining Peircean terminology (Rochberg-Halton and McMurtrey, 1983). "Pragmatics," for example, refers to the relation between signs and their users (Morris, 1938:29-30). Involved in this idea is Morris's distortion of Peirce's term "interpretant." Morris identifies "interpretant" with a phenomenal "interpreter" or "user," instead of presenting it as Peirce intended, as itself a sign in the continuing sign process. Hence Peirce's pragmatic theory of signs is reduced to the nominalistic behaviorism he spent his life arguing against in Morris's term "pragmatics" (For a complete criticism see Dewey, 1946; Rochberg-Halton and McMurtrey, "The Foundations of Modern Semiotic," 1983; see also Apel's critique of Morris, 1980).

In Morris we see the myth of pseudosemiotic scientism systematically dominating his thought, so that "interpreters" and their dispositions to respond to a sign, that is, "interpretants" (Morris's appropriation of Peirce's term), exist on a purely technical level of "response-sequences of some behavior-family" (Morris, 1946:17), whereby what will complete a sign-interpretation is that which will meet the exigencies of a particular organism's needs or a behavioral setting. Interpretation is thus reduced to an acritical expediency that remains opaque both to its own fallibility and to its ability to generate new meaning. In this sense Morris (as well as in his own quite different way, Claude Levi-Strauss) is merely an avatar of the modern myth of Scientism, espousing a view that not only erases the purposive and critical individual and community, but that ultimately undermines the possibility of science itself.

Another currently popular and widely read book, but in my opinion equally distorting, is A Theory of Semiotics, by Umberto Eco. We see there a combination of the Cartesian dualisms of semiology with the positivistic scientism of Morris. For example, one of the main distinctions Eco sets up in his book is that between "systems of signification" and "processes of

communication," in a kind of an echo of Saussure's langue and parole distinction.

A signification system is an autonomous semiotic construct that has an abstract mode of existence independent of any possible communicative act it makes possible. On the contrary (except for stimulation processes) every act of communication to or between human beings--or any other intelligent biological or mechanical apparatus--presupposes a significant system as its necessary condition.

It is possible, if not perhaps particularly desirable, to establish a semiotics of signification independently of a semiotics of communication: but it is impossible to establish a semiotics of communication without a semiotics of signification (Eco 1976: 9).

A "signification system", contrary to Eco, cannot exist independently of possible communicative acts. Such a system would have to exist in the void, since apart from "any possible communicative act" we could never know of it. If Eco means that the general is not reducible to the particular that is one thing, but what he says is that signification has no necessary content or embodiment and that communication is not in itself general. In fact, Eco's structuralist formulation is approximately the opposite of what Peirce meant by pragmatism. The interpretant makes the sign process mediate and processual, and communication occurs within the sign process itself, it is general and not simply an instance.

Eco later says:

It is incorrect to say that every act of inference is a "semiotic" act--even though Peirce did so--and it is probably too rash a statement to assert that every semiotic process implies an act of inference, but it can be maintained that there exist acts of inference which must be recognized as semiotic acts (Eco 1976: 17).

An example Eco might give of something non-inferential is a direct perception, such as the perceived stimulus of a table here in the present. Eco, contrary to Peirce, does not regard perceived stimuli as inferential and as signs (Eco 1976: 19). For Eco, a thing may be regarded as a sign, ". . . if and only if

there exists a convention which allows it to stand for something else . . . , " and semiotics is limited to and synonymous with, a concept of culture (Eco, 1976:28), or more precisely, cultural convention. In Peirce's broader semiotic there can be natural signs (such as a symptom) as well as conventional signs, and even the most basic perceptions are inferential and all inferences are signs. In Peirce's broader view perception is, quite simply, interpretative. The most basic perceptions involve "perceptual judgments," which, although inferential, are acritical and not subject to self-control (see Bernstein 1964). A perception is a sign addressed to an interpretation, the interpretant gives meaning to the sign (e.g., this bundle of perceptions is a table), and because this process occurs in time, we can never "know" the absolute present noninferentially since our knowledge always comes "too late." Peirce's semiotic, though available to Eco as a cultural resource, is simply whittled down, as it had been in Charles Morris, to a much narrower view of semiosis. The semiotics of Saussure, Morris, and Eco preserve a positivist substratum to which signs do not penetrate, the fictional substratum of nominalism. In so doing they exclude too much of what should be considered sign phenomena, resulting in a divorce of living human purpose from reality. Reality is cold and impenetrable and human meaning is arbitrary, unfeeling, and unpurposeful. Consider Eco's statement (1976: 49-50):

Semiotics suggests a sort of molecular landscape in which what we are accustomed to recognize as everyday forms turn out to be the result of transitory chemical aggregations and so-called 'things' are only the surface appearance assumed by an underlying network of more elementary units. Or rather, semiotics gives us a sort of photochemical explanation of semiosis, revealing that where we thought we saw images there were only strategically arranged aggregations of black and white points, alternations of presence and absence, the insignificant basic features of a raster, sometimes differentiated in shape, position and chromatic intensity. Semiotics, like musical theory, states that where we recognize familiar melodies there is only a sophisticated intertwining of intervals and notes, and where we perceive notes there are only a bunch of formants.

Here feeling means nothing and purpose is only an illusion based on, festooned with, and dominated by an underlying discrete technology of signs. Semiotics only serves to puncture reality and not to critically further it.

Eco says elsewhere that "basing myself on a highly reliable philosophical and semiotical tradition . . . semiotically speaking--there is not a substantial difference between peanuts and peanut butter, on the one hand, and the words /peanuts/ and /peanut butter/ on the other. Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign" (1976: 7). To be more accurate, Eco should have said there is not a substantial difference between his "theory of semiotics" and peanut butter. For when he says that "semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie" (1976: 59), and that "the possibility of lying is the proprium of semiotics" (1976: 59), and the basis for an intensional semantics, when he bases truth in existential instances that are irrational, as if the facts of an inquiry can be conceived outside of inquiry or semiosis, he shows us that like peanut butter, his semiotics is rather hard to swallow.

Eco claims in his recent Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language (1984) that semiotics can be "scientifically" predictive, capable of achieving a comprehensive social engineering (1984: 5, 6). These remarks, like many others that pervade his work, display a limited view of science in general and the human sciences in particular, veritably a shrunken view of science when one compares it to that given by Peirce's semiotic. His work signifies, from the unnecessary slash marks, numbering system, diagrams, and so forth, to the semicybernetic robot talk that predominates, a domination by the abstract mechanism he purports to explain, with no sense of living, purposive human activity that transcends both the arbitrary and the merely technical. Though his fiction may admittedly come out smelling like a rose, Eco's theoretical work thus far is simply too metallic to encompass living human purpose and too narrow to provide the comprehensive theory of meaning social theory is currently attempting to formulate.

From Fetishism to Animism

One of the problems with structuralisms, whether French, Freudian, or Marxist, is that they do not allow

things to be what they are; instead they must always stand for something else. Yet an object's own qualities and physicality can also convey and signify something about that object beyond cultural convention: sometimes a cigar is, after all, a cigar; sometimes a painting by one's child is a unique token of love, a remembrance of a certain experience not repeatable. The fact that an object is part of a general code or cultural convention does not prevent it from also having its own inherent quality or esthetic meaning, in the broad sense of this term, as an iconic sign.

A much broader view of signs is needed in contemporary semiotics and social theory, one that can admit that nature itself is general, a "sensuous code" if you will, that includes "necessary" or indexical signs, ranging from genetic signalling material to death itself, as well as the more conventional ones characterizing much of human social life, such as the personal and social meanings of life and death. Instead of the shared views of sociobiologists and their conceptualist opposites in the structuralist tradition that human sentiment and instinct only serve greedy self-interest and mechanical law, a broadened view of signs would recognize that human sentiment and even instinct motivate the highest human activities as well, and that the goal of rationality is not to imperialistically devour all the world unto itself, but to give itself, over time, to sentiment: to transform itself from the most immature of our capacities of mind to maturity by gradually becoming instinct, a paradoxical instinct that is yet also critical. I realize that these words must sound strange to those who accept the modernist dichotomy between nature and culture, but to me the idea that nature is unintelligent is far stranger.

A transformation is needed from our Age of Abstractionism, with its fetishism of signs, to an animism of signs in which the Imagination and the signs it gives birth to can not only reconnect us with our biocultural heritage, but can also animate us to cultivate living purpose and not merely inert code. A healthy culture is not one in which instinct and reason are irreconcilably opposed, as the nature versus culture dichotomists hold, but one in which natural inclinations could find expression in and act upon the process of discursive reason.

Culture is far more than the signification of rational codes and communication of "information." And semiotics is far more than the conspicuous display of the unintelligible in the name of the obscure. Sem-

iotics must become the living attempt to render meaning clear, its language as supple as we can fashion, and its ultimate object that mysterious encompassing sign-web that is not only greater than human rationality, but that animates the very nature of things. To give ourselves to the task of enlarging the scope of living human purpose through critical interpretation of signs need not be mere fetishism, but the beginning of a new cultural template in which the cultivation of signs in turn animates us toward a greater Reasonableness.