

Literary Semiotics

A Critical Approach

Scott Simpkins



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à Paul Bouissac

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Introduction: Shaking Up Semiotics

One afternoon in the spring of 1996 I was napping when the phone rang. It was Paul Bouissac calling to tell me about a new project he was working on, the Open Cyber Semiotic Institute (the "Open" was later dropped). Paul wanted to know if I'd be one of the first lecturers to sign on for developing and operating an Internet course on some facet of semiotics. Since about a month earlier I had vowed to not take on any more projects until I finished some of the ones I had in progress, I of course immediately agreed. While we talked, I outlined an eight-lecture course on "Critical Semiotics," hung up, and couldn't get back to sleep because I was so excited about this venture. I had already written a number of critiques of semiotics and this seemed like an ideal opportunity to collect my thoughts and develop a much larger, more substantial study on the subject.

The plan was that the lecturers would produce a new lecture once a month until all eight were up and running on the Internet. I quickly discovered, however, that this was extremely optimistic, and it took me about five months to get the first lecture in final form. The other lectures continued to come forth in a similarly belabored fashion, with each growing increasingly larger as I tied together the previous lectures in the process. Two years later, I was left with a sprawling, quickly composed array of thoughts and arguments that provided an enticing remainder of my research and writing on the subject.¹ After two more years of reflection and revision, *Literary Semiotics: A Critical Approach* is the result.

Briefly, *Literary Semiotics* is patterned in part after the "critical linguistics" project of Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress. It scrutinizes a number of often-conflicting views of sign theory in order to identify potentially fruitful areas for further developments in semiotic thought and practice, particularly in relation to literary theory and analysis.

The initial assumption in this study is that semiotics can be viewed as a collective "discussion" which can be probed in a manner that yields considerable insight into its strengths and weaknesses. The discussion derives from the works of a handful of writers who have drawn primarily upon studies in semiotics related to the writings of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.

As the book develops, Umberto Eco becomes its primary focus as the unofficial representative of this group, although secondary considerations are also made of writers such as M. A. K. Halliday, Louis Hjelmslev, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, James Carse, John Stewart, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Hodge and Kress, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, A. J. Greimas, Floyd Merrell, and others.

A detailed analysis of James Thurber's short story, "The Catbird Seat," is used as a conclusion to demonstrate potential applications of the techniques and principles associated with a "critical" semiotics in relation to literary analysis. (The story appears in its entirety as an appendix following the final chapter.)

This book is a bumpy, sometimes turbulent, tour through the discussion of semiotics. It also is a-thematic. By that, I mean that it doesn't exactly develop a thesis, or "go somewhere." (The conclusion is, appropriately, entitled: "No Conclusion.") In part, this is intentional because, for me at least, such a discourse produces the kinds of yields you don't get out of more conventional, linear works. In this sense it's somewhat spatial in design (or lack thereof). It reminds me of the structures Samuel Beckett employed in some of his novels, or Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, or Gertrude Stein's work, or aleatory music, or James Joyce's last two novels, or Roland Barthes' magnificent *S/Z*, or Alfred Hitchcock's film, "The Birds."

I thought that form of structuration was what Lyotard was employing in his incredible *Libidinal Economy* as I was working my way through it, but amazingly enough he pulls it all together at the end. I guess that's the one thing that disappoints me about it, too. And it's that disappointment that I'm trying to avoid here.

In *Literary Semiotics* I develop a program of "critical" semiotics in relation to literary interpretation practices, an extremely self-conscious attempt at approaching sign theory and practice in a manner that attempts to resist the temptations of rationalistic reduction. One way of looking at my method could be called "asymmetrical", in the sense that the term has been used to refer to terrorist techniques that circumvent conventional war procedures. The *New York Times* recently reported on what the Pentagon refers to as "asymmetric warfare" along these lines in relation to the bombing of the destroyer Cole.² "We are so powerful and have such good equipment that our enemies see that they have to use asymmetric methods," Gen. Richard Neal remarks. "But there is no magic bullet to solve the asymmetric method." Asymmetrical techniques are clearly effective when terrorists want to make a powerful statement about far more powerful and well-established opponents who don't necessarily want them to make such statements. "They involve the use of dramatic events to enable a militarily weaker power to attack a stronger power," Gen. Wesley K. Clark notes. "It is going to be a continuing problem."

This is exactly the point behind my methodology here, given the firmly entrenched status of what could be provisionally called mainstream semiotics. This agenda hardly positions me as a "rogue" semiotician, though, or even the "bad boy" of semiotics. Rather, it appears to me that the only way to resist becoming

co-opted by the "discussion" of semiotics is to approach it asymmetrically, making nonarguments that "go" nowhere, in effect, but nonetheless serve as little salvos against targets that feel smugly assured of their entrenched status.

One way to achieve this is to avoid heavy emphasis on probably the most influential semiotic theorist in the twentieth century: Charles Sanders Peirce. Which is why he appears here so seldom, at least directly.

Another way is to draw upon studies that are not exactly semiotic in nature, hence the appearance of diverse thinkers outside of semiotics.

By discussing some of the examples here in what is undoubtedly an infuriatingly superficial manner at times, I also attempt to avoid the heavy submersion into argumentation that often comes across to me as ponderous, something that kills the magic of so many scholarly studies. Instead, I engage this material in a way that is decidedly breezy in order to keep things moving, offering the beginnings of ideas that other scholars, I hope, will develop further on their own.

Aligned perhaps most closely with Lyotard's ferocious critique of semiotics in *Libidinal Economy* and Barthes's playfully "open" works, *Literary Semiotics: A Critical Approach* provides an engaged—even aggressive—interrogation of the tendency within this discussion to embrace the crippling restraints of a decidedly conservative semiotics. Overall, the book is a wild roller coaster ride through a terrain that has become increasingly safe during the last 25 years and is, indeed, in need of vibrant revitalization. In this respect, *Literary Semiotics* provides a series of minor jump starts for semiotics. With any luck, it may get some previously inactive engines up and running again.

Notes

1. On this form of composition and its impact on Romantic literature, see my essay, "Acolian Composition: The Semiotics of the Unwritten Text," in *Semiotics 1993*, ed. Karen Haworth et al. (Lanham, N. Y.: University Press of America, 1994), 337-43.

2. Michael R. Gordon, "Superpower Suddenly Finds Itself Threatened by Sophisticated Terrorists," *The New York Times* (Oct. 14, 2000), A9.

The Lingua Franca of Semioticians

The Discussion of Semiotics

"Semiotics" could be said to exist only as a topic of discussion.

Although it is commonly referred to as though it were a concretely established discipline (or even a science), the legerdemain behind this practice cannot be exaggerated.

A more responsive handling of this situation is found in the case of Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress' depiction of a "traditional semiotics."¹ They oppose this term to another form they designate—a *social* semiotics—based on the presumption that positing a "mainstream" discipline allows them to talk about "variant" manifestations as a result. Yet they acknowledge that, in fact, "the 'tradition' of traditional semiotics is not monolithic or even an agreed body of theories and concepts." Through this tentativity, Hodge and Kress openly acknowledge the sleight of hand that is usually employed surreptitiously by discussions that presume "semiotics" to exist as a conceptually homogeneous enterprise. Consequently, as well, Hodge and Kress offer a discussion of semiotics that is unusually sensitive in this fashion by questioning the assumed existence of what is frequently accorded the status of an entire discipline. (Their approach is somewhat parallel, in this respect, to placing a concept *sous rature*, or "under erasure," as Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida have [with admittedly different purposes], by literally crossing-out these terms when they feel obliged to use them, thereby suggesting that the expression of that concept is inadequate, yet necessary. This gesture will be figuratively extended here by proposing a critical semiotics that exists only potentially as a process of dialogue, as opposed to a maturely conceived and consensually established field.)

The Dominant Paradigm?

A more common approach to semiotics involves presenting it, on the one hand, as a multidirectional and often ideologically invested rehearsal of discussions about the nature of signs and signification that have gone on for centuries, while, on the other hand, also maintaining that it is ultimately a well-grounded discipline informed by an elaborate and precise conceptual agreement embraced by semioticians in general. This is demonstrated by Daniel Chandler's very popular 1995 internet text "Semiotics for Beginners," which declares that "these notes do not stray far from a current consensus as to key terms" used in semiotics.² John Deely's *Basics of Semiotics* reveals this maneuver in its title itself. While the blurb on the back cover suggests that Deely realizes "Semioticians still lack a unified theory of the purposes of semiotics as a discipline as well as a comprehensive rationale for the linking of semiosis at the levels of culture, society, and nature," at the same time it goes on to assert that "This short, cogent, philosophically oriented book outlines and analyzes the basic concepts of semiotics in a coherent, overall framework" (emphasis added). For Deely, and other similarly inclined writers on semiotics, the only way this domain can be rendered cogently, coherently, and with brevity, is to rely upon illusory assumptions of consensus about essentially unresolvable disagreements regarding sign models and their concomitant theoretical presuppositions. Obviously, a great deal of descriptive subtlety is lost in the process of presenting "semiotics" as a conveniently organized enterprise in a manner that glosses over the immense complexity required to account for the conflicting views regarding every facet of it.

Accordingly, when Umberto Eco somewhat casually refers to *A Theory of Semiotics* as "an attempt to introduce into the semiotic framework a theory of referents," he has slipped into his assertion an essential assumption about the existence of such a framework without sufficiently qualifying the extremely problematic implications of this assertion.³ Likewise, the editors' comments in the preface to *Frontiers in Semiotics* incline toward totalization as they remark: "The readings [included in the anthology] globally taken provide . . . a corrective and an enhancement of popular conceptions of semiotic today."⁴ Yet, in the end, these essays clearly make just one more contribution to a series of popular conceptions because there appears to be no way to situate an authoritative correction, and possibly not even an enhancement of semiotic theory, although the potential value they hold for contributing to the ongoing discussion of semiotics always remains a possibility.

The Benefits of Tentativity

Hodge and Kress again usefully demonstrate one benefit of semiotic discussion in that nonexistent or immaterial entities can be posited and explored much in the same way that existent or material ones can. "Unicorns" would be a good

example. We could talk about their manifestations throughout history, the structural, relational, and symbolic properties they are said to possess, and even the ways in which they have acquired a type of materiality as the topic of a shared conversation.

The same is true for semiotics itself.

Nevertheless, a study of this discussion (as this first chapter introduces) can help to reveal—or perhaps at least offer a provisional construction of—the contours of what, in certain very local circles, modern semiotics could be said to entail. Rather than following the lead of the early Wittgenstein and resigning ourselves to passing over in silence those issues associated with semiotics that resist comfortable agreement, it could be quite fruitful to explore the points of contention related to this discipline as a means of engendering further conversations about it.

The Discussion of Semiotics

Without implying that one could accurately grasp the nature of a given conversation about semiotics, and certainly without privileging this explanation as revealing the "basics" of semiotics, one can offer observations about a conversation in order to introduce and interrogate what some writers view as central components of semiotics. The conversation explored here takes place among an arguably related group of writers who focus primarily on semiotic studies undertaken by, and derived from, the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, and to a far lesser extent, that of Ferdinand de Saussure.

For the sake of convenience, I will refer to a select group of writers on semiotics here as constituting a discussion. Many of the concepts from within this discussion will be derived from the texts referred to at the beginning of this chapter and should be seen only as very specific, and perhaps even idiosyncratic, perspectives on what could be called *semiotics*. In other words, they no more present a unified conception of semiotics than anybody else does (or, more precisely, than anybody else *can*); they will be used only to facilitate conversation about one discussion of semiotics as an example of the numerous others that have taken place, or are currently under way.

Within this discussion, semiotics is viewed as the study of signs and the ways in which sign systems convey (and are used to convey) meaning. Immediately, of course, problems arise even with what seem to be fairly simplistic concepts. What, for instance, is meant by a *sign* and in what ways do signs relate to supposedly similar signs to constitute a system? Moreover, is this systemic relation immanent, or imposed to neatly arrange something in a manner that in no way reflects the actual nature of sign relations? And, could we determine what that *actual nature* is in order to test the validity of this presumed system? Furthermore, what is meant by *meaning*? Is it related to, or grounded firmly by, context, or intention, or structure, or cultural convention? Obviously, such questions

effectively undermine an attempt to posit a sense of agreement or essential definition for semiotics, and this is where the major limitations of presumably "semiotic" discussions arise.⁵

The Sign According to the Discussion: The Case of Eco

While numerous competing models of the sign have been offered, they share enough conceptual similarities to constitute something of a consensus among the discussions of these semioticians. Consider the way that Umberto Eco defines semiotics as a discipline "concerned with everything that can be *taken* as a sign." "A sign," he argues, "is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else" (*Theory* 7). (Similarly, Charles Morris suggests that "something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by some interpreter" [quoted in Eco's *Theory* 16].) Eco's model posits a sign-decoder relationship; in other words, it agrees with Peirce's general contention—as reiterated by Eco—that a sign is something that means (or "stands for") something to someone.

Eco positions the sign component as external to the signifying entity. This would be a form of extraphenomenological communication, one that entails not the exchange or interaction of consciousness characteristic of phenomenology, but instead, entails an importation or extrapolation of meaning derived from semiotic components supposedly originating from the decoder. Significantly, this definition denies the possible significance of sign-vehicle agency—the impact of an encoder of a sign, etc.—and allows, as a result, for the signifying entity to possess semioticity separate from its possible association with an encoder. Recognizing that a cloud signifies the potential approach of rain would be a sign in this fashion. This would be an example of what have been called "natural signs."⁶

Elsewhere Eco asserts that "it is not necessary that the source or the transmitter be human, provided that they emit the signal [or message] following a system of rules by the human addressee" (*Theory* 8). Again, though, this *emission* or *transmission* of meaning implies that the decoder performs a sending agency, or even intention, that serves as a basis for grounding meaning that is further specified through semiotic convention. Moreover, it is mediated by an androcentric agency that is in no way directly linked with what might inhere within the signifying object (i.e., something that would constitute its nature). Although Eco qualifies this by observing that signs differ "according to whether they originate from a *sender* or a *natural source*" (177), his previously cited statement necessitates that the natural source (something that one takes away from) somehow emits a meaning not unlike intention—a problematic issue indeed.

The Imposition of Meaning

Within this isolated example from Eco, the claim of privileged knowledge of context or intention or meaning is truly difficult to support, especially considering that this would be a meaning constructed by the decoder as opposed to the encoder. In fact, it seems certain that an encoder is ultimately incapable of enforcing any significant control over what the decoder does with a given sign-vehicle. As Saussure argues, even if you created your own language system, one in which you specify very concretely the denotations, connotations, etc. of each unit and subsequent combinations thereof, you would immediately lose all power to control the use of that language once it were put into circulation and utilized by others. Conversely, the decoder has no means of grounding the act of decoding within this model because, following Eco's restriction that the message has to be constructed according to "a system of rules [known] by the human addressee," this "system" could doubtlessly vary tremendously from one addressee to the next. Thus, the addressee (or decoder) could be simply rendering a sign intelligible in virtual isolation from consideration of elements such as the system, society, or convention, insofar as none of these facets can exercise genuine control over a decoder's attempts to project meaning onto something.

While this might seem like an occurrence of what Martin Krampen refers to as "suffering the imposition of meaning," this imposition cannot be avoided since it typically is considered the basic mechanism behind semiosis according to its rendering by these semioticians (as indicated by this specific illustration from Eco).⁷ Think about the static, mechanical ways that semiosis would work if the decoder were only capable of understanding a sign based on an accurate, intended meaning somehow originating from, and only authorized by, the encoder (as opposed to an external encoding agent). At the same time, however, we all know how frustrating it is to, for example, have someone claim to know what we really meant by saying something or misconstruing our intention related to an utterance. Eco makes a compelling argument when he claims that, "although of considerable importance within its proper domain, the notion of 'referent' has most unfortunate results within the framework of a theory of codes, and to underestimate its malignant influence leads to a *referential fallacy*" (*Theory* 58).

Other forms of "imposition" of meaning of this nature can be found in Krampen's description of the semiotics of plant design ("Phytosemiotics" 90) or Eco's depiction of the "message" of a staircase (*Theory* 260). It also can be seen in Herman Melville's short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener," in which the narrator—someone who has allegedly had extensive contact with the inscrutable Bartleby—attempts to illuminate this mysterious figure for us through several anecdotes and a closing revelation that Bartleby's strange disquietude may have been caused by the philosophical ramifications of his temporary employment in a dead letter office. Bartleby's puzzling response to requests to explain his behavior—"I would prefer not to"—leads the narrator to desperately secure a narrative intelligibility for it, and thus Bartleby also suffers the imposition of meaning upon his decidedly quirky social interaction.

Obviously, other types of semiotic exchanges *do* have an encoding agency originating from the signifying entity itself, a factor which Eco's definition neglects. I might send a note to someone with a clear intention to inform her of a specific condition, for instance. The comprehension of my message by the decoder would not be a matter of *taking* my note (and the accompanying signifying process and components) as a sign regardless of my originating motive; rather, it would be a matter of drawing upon a wide array of semiotic practices (linguistic competency, social awareness of the "note" genre as well as knowledge about the social event of "note passing," the history of interpersonal relations between us, etc.) that would enable my decoder to intelligibly produce meaning from my act of note transmission. And my originating motive could clearly be among the meanings she produces.

Note, too, that in the example mentioned earlier, Eco stresses "significance" in a way that unnecessarily limits the range of his definition by making a distinction without concretely elaborating on its relevance. Surely "insignificant" details in the creation of a sign are more accurately described as having *lesser* or *inoperative* significance, as opposed to no significance whatsoever. The kind of paper I use in my note example above would illustrate this point. While it might appear unimportant, it nonetheless is a necessary element for the transmission of my message. Think, moreover, of the possible relevance of the kinds of paper used for resumes or *billets-doux*, or the ways in which stationery figures significantly in Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Purloined Letter," as a bibliographical code that the crafty Dupin is not only able to "crack," but to effectively manipulate as well. In this respect, Eco's emphasis on "significance" can be viewed as an attempt to propose an airtight definition of semiotics that, ultimately, is full of holes.

Terminological Problems

Eco's model dramatizes the potential vulnerability of semiotics in general and also helps to explain its status as a lingua franca among the discussion of a group one could construct for the sake of an illustration, as I have here. While everybody approaches semiotics from a singular perspective on different models and different interpretations of them, the use of a single, common term to designate this practice contributes to the illusion that everybody is talking about the same thing. Thomas Sebeok, long-time editor of *Semiotica*, appears to reflect this view in his survey of the various terms used to label what is referred to here as semiotics when he notes: "While every contributor to *Semiotica*—to stick with a parochial illustration—may indulge his personal taste when attaching a label to the theory of signs, his terminology within the same piece of discourse will not oscillate *ad libitum*, for his initial selection will have signaled to his sophisticated readership whether he has chosen to align himself with the Locke-Peirce-Morris tradition, the Mead variation, or the Saussurean pattern of thought and action."⁸ But, each of these traditions is ceaselessly contested among both its

adherents and its detractors, and it is undeniable that the "oscillation" Sebeok depicts does indeed continue without likely cessation into a cohesive body that could be honestly called, to use Sebeok's phrase, "the theory of signs."

An easy way out of this bind is to adopt a syncretic position that seems to be grounded by judiciously selected and lucidly defined "key" concepts. Chandler advises readers of "Semiotics for Beginners" that explicit term definition is not necessary if they stick to the agreed-upon "key terms" of semiotics and adds that "if you use other semiotic terms you need to make clear whose definition of them you are using." The actual situation in the discussion of semiotics is much more complex than that, however, because all of the terms or concepts found within it are always vulnerable to semiotic slippage, the deferral of meaning inherent in a process of signification based on difference and relation as opposed to the transparent conveyance of *meaning without mediation*. To suggest that simply designating whose terms you're using will clear up this problem is to deny that there is a conceptual problem underlying semiotics to begin with.

Authority and Primary Sources

Even drawing upon the terms derived from what could be called the "primary sources" of modern semiotics—Peirce and Saussure, for example—would hardly provide a substantial basis for a solid depiction of the constituent elements and concerns of semiotics. In part, this is the result of the deferral characteristic of semiosis (mentioned above) in which the thing itself cannot be used to signify something (while still maintaining its essential quality as the thing itself) because, within this model, something else is always used to signify the thing itself. But, it is also the result of the fallacy behind the presumption of authority associated with the use of "primary" sources which, in the case of both Peirce and Saussure, are undeniably inadequate, although in radically opposed ways.

That is because Saussure essentially said too little about what constitutes semiotics and Peirce said too much at times, which inevitably led to an equally inadequate condition. One could argue that the gist of Saussure's commentary on semiotics can be found in this one statement: "I call the combination of a concept [or signified] and a sound-image [or signifier] a *sign*."⁹ Peirce, to the contrary, frequently reworked his models, adding new terms and new forms of earlier conceptualization that resulted in a bewildering panorama of sign commentary without necessarily illuminating precisely his notion of semiosis.

His three triadic divisions of signs illustrate this point well: Peirce posited these divisions of signs within his semiotic scaffolding through fairly vague definitions and rendered them all the more confusing through reconsideration. Although he commonly used these three divisions (qualisign, sinsign, legisign; icon, index, symbol; and rheme, dicisign/dicent, argument) that produced ten sign classes, he referred to them in other ways as well so that, as Thomas Goudge notes, when reading these texts, "one can never be sure whether some new facet of semiotic is being discriminated or whether an old aspect is simply being

given a new label."¹⁰ Furthermore, Peirce later expanded these divisions into ten trichotomies that produced sixty-six sign classes, but then failed to fully explain them.

Within this dilemma, then, the notion of semiotic authority is certainly questionable, so that Sebeok's contention regarding sophistication of understanding among semioticians is more a case of agreeing to use inadequate and incomplete models of the sign than an instance of real understanding because such an understanding cannot ultimately find complete authorization. An emphatic example of this is Umberto Eco who, at least in the popular conception, is held to possess a truly sophisticated grasp of semiotics. Yet his works are often criticized for their needless, erroneous, or heavy-handed reductions. (In one case, *The American Journal of Semiotics* even published an essay by Victorino Tejera that asked: "Has Eco Understood Peirce?")

Model Shortcomings

The process of selecting and eliminating seemingly constituent parts of the overall process of semiosis also leads to conveniently explicable models that, at the same time, are limited precisely to the degree that this excision and shaping take place. Peirce, for instance, was very sensitive to potential criticism regarding his penchant for triadic models which arrange arguably fluid and chaotic elements into a possibly inaccurate, but alluringly systemic order. Or, consider Eco's elimination of many other components of semiosis in order to posit a conceptual correlation between merely the "expression plane" and the "content plane" (*Theory* 48) or to portray semiosis as "a correspondence as realized during a transmission process" (54).

Peirce's triad of signs based on their relation to the thing they represent—icon, index, and symbol—serves as a convenient illustration of easy and imprecise appropriation in the discussion of semiotics. Even though Peirce has noted that they can intertwine in potentially subtle and complex ways, and therefore do not stand as distinctly different categories as much as interdependent gradations, they nevertheless are frequently used as though they were separate entities. (This also happens with Saussure's concept of the signifier and the signified.)

To take one example: the icon. At one point, Peirce defines it (not very helpfully) as "a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses, just the same, whether any such Object actually exists or not. . . . Anything whatever, be it quality, existent individual, or law, is an Icon of anything, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it."¹¹ In the course of their attempts to make vague definitions like this one more precise, many semioticians in what I am proposing as the discussion have resorted to imposing tight perimeters around such terms and thereby sacrifice the larger conceptual potential that they evidently had for someone like Peirce.

Joseph Ransdell, in this fashion, identifies the mechanism of the icon as that of conceptual "likeness".¹² Charles Morris says it's "any sign which is similar in some respects to what it denotes" (quoted in Eco's *Theory* 192). Eco adds that "iconic signs do not possess the 'same' physical properties as do their objects but they rely on the 'same' perceptual 'structure', or on the same system of relations (one could say that they possess the same perceptual sense but not the same perceptual physical support)" (*Theory* 193). These "surrogate stimuli" (194) are seen in a sign based on onomatopoeia that essentially signifies something by imitating, and thus reproducing, it, he asserts. (Eco even presents an extensive "critique of iconism" in *Theory* 191-217.)

What these efforts to clarify the icon lead to, though, is the aforementioned conceptual myopia that fails to adequately reflect the multiplicitous relation that Peirce apparently had in mind. After all, consider the icon in this way: in order to render an icon intelligible, you have to know (through experience, etc.) that there is some meaningful relation between it and the thing it stands for. This would draw upon the index. Additionally, these relations are culturally determined so that the symbol component of this function would need to be considered at the same time. Thus, the icon is really only part of a web of interrelated sign-relations as opposed to an autonomous entity existing in isolation. The discussion of semiotics, as I have characterized it here, tends to reify this presumed autonomy, often at the expense of a much more dynamic view of semiosis.

Sebeok appears to offer a nuanced description of what has been called *semiosis* (or what John Deely depicts as "the action of signs"¹³) when he asserts: "A message is a sign, or a string of signs, transmitted from a sign-producer, or source, to a sign-receiver, or destination" ("Congeners" 36). To Sebeok, the "sign" is something concrete that is "transmitted" to someone, as opposed to other conceptions, such as a popular one by Peirce, which view it as a *process* of intellection. But, while Sebeok considers the potentially dual nature of the initiating source of a sign-process (unlike Eco's description above), he nonetheless privileges the phenomenological view at the expense of the extraphenomenological. In order for a decoder to be figured as as "a sign-receiver, or destination," the sign has to be actively originated. While Eco allows for the possibility of *negative* agency, Sebeok makes agency a necessary component of semiosis. This view of the sign presupposes a sign-creator (or encoder) of some kind, so again a sign relay between encoder and decoder is assumed for a semiosis based on what Deely calls "subjective interaction" (*Basics* 23) that results in message transmission. Along these lines, Paul Perron argues that a sign is "first of all a construct" (quoted in Deely's *Basics* 2) and Eco similarly opines that communication consists of "the *passage* of a symbol," so it is assumed that somebody, some agent, must be doing this constructing and passing (*Theory* 8, emphasis added). The cloud-rain connection as a "sign" of possible rain would, indeed, lack both a sender and a message-goal (correlatives of Sebeok's "sign-producer, or source" and "sign-receiver, or destination"). One could argue, though, for the existence of a "natural" phenomenon as a sort of "sign-producer, or source" in this case and the "sign-receiver, or destination" serving to designate whoever might en-

counter the cloud and make a connection that produces an intelligible sign indicating potential rain.

Working with the Lingua Franca

In order to make most models of the sign fully workable, you typically have to refine and extrapolate from their conceptual components to accommodate exceptional instances and conceptual flaws overlooked by their originators. This is one of the more fruitful aspects of the lingua franca of semiotics as is demonstrated by the extent to which discussions identified with semiotics spend so much time fine-tuning the conversations of other semioticians. This would be consistent with Deely's contention that "semiosis is above all an *assimilative* process" (*Basics* 102), and anybody who has even only just begun to decode the outside world (not to mention the inside one) is already well aware of the "semiotic competence" (Eco, *Theory* 241) that day-to-day living requires: the significance and usefulness of gestures, for instance, or intonation, or feedback by the encoder, or previous interaction between the encoder and the decoder. A virtually limitless array of components associated with this process can figure into the analysis of semiosis as well, according to its contours as depicted by the discussion of semiotics.

The same is true for dealing with texts purporting to outline semiotic theory and practice, wherein you have to negotiate between what you associate with semiotics and what everybody else involved in the discussion associates (and often quite differently) with it. Of course, parallels with the interruption of the Tower of Babel construction come to mind regarding this situation.

Notes

1. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress, *Social Semiotics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988).
2. Daniel Chandler, "Semiotics for Beginners" (1995), <http://www.Music.indiana.edu/~ltomlin/semiotic.html#top>
3. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), viii, emphasis added.
4. John Deely, Brooke Williams, and Felicia Kruse, eds., *Frontiers in Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), xvii.
5. For an extensive discussion of one view of the implications associated with the various terms aligned with this enterprise ("semiotic", "semiology", "semeiotic", etc.) see Deely et al., *Frontiers*, 255-63.
6. Umberto Eco, Roberto Lambertini, Costantino Marmo, and Andrea Tabarroni, "'Latratu Canis' or: The Dog's Barking," in *Frontiers*, 63-73, 69.
7. Martin Krampen, "Phytosemiotics," in *Frontiers*, 83-95, 90.
8. Thomas Sebeok, "'Semiotics' and Its Congeners," in *Frontiers*, 255-63, 262.

9. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course de Linguistique Générale*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger, trans. Wade Baskin as *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1916), 67.
10. Thomas Goudge, *The Thought of C. S. Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1950), 139.
11. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Division of Signs," in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. I-VI, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935), 2.247.
12. Joseph Ransdell, "Semiotic Objectivity," in *Frontiers*, 236-54, 248.
13. John Deely, *Basics of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 11.

Semiotics Under Fire

Disciplines, unlike cows, yield least when most contented.

—Hodge and Kress, *Language as Ideology*

No “Basic” Concepts in Semiotics

If semiotics is considered as a wide-ranging and heterogeneous discussion, then perhaps it follows that it cannot possess basic concepts. Despite the tacit refusal of most semiotic studies to acknowledge this condition (as seen in titles like *Basics of Semiotics* by John Deely [see chapter 1]), this condition undeniably remains—and remains irresolvably so. Nonetheless, it can be rewarding to analyze the various attempts by semioticians to discuss what clearly are recurrent “semiotic” assumptions and terminologies (denotation, context, signifier, syntagm, interpretant, etc.) among studies associated with it. This approach does not, of course, correspondingly imply that recurrence constitutes anything like a consensus, a ground on which basic concepts could be drawn. Even a cursory perusal of any two or more studies in this area will reveal this to be the case (as do studies by the same author, as Peirce demonstrates so aptly).

The two studies addressed here—*Language As Articulate Contact* and *Social Semiotics*—offer good examples of responsive and nuanced projects designed to move beyond the imprecise but handy assumptions that often undermine semiotic studies. John Stewart’s back-cover blurb on *Language As Articulate Contact* reveals this with the contention that “From the perspective of communication theory, this book extends some features of the postmodern critique of representationalism to develop a post-semiotic account of the nature of language as dialogic.” Rather than begging the question about the homogeneity of semiotics, Stewart identifies his undertaking as one that isolates certain features that can be crafted into a rendition of some semiotic studies. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress’s cover of *Social Semiotics* also characterizes “semiotics as an evolving theory.” For them, “texts and contexts, agents and objects of meaning,

social structures and forces, and their complex interrelationships together constitute the irreducible object of semiotic analysis." However, these approaches to semiotics also are vulnerable to critiques similar to the ones they offer themselves. Again, though, identifying the presumptions behind these two studies will hardly negate whatever value they offer to future semiotic discussions. To the contrary, this examination will point to areas that are ripe for explorations to come.

Stop Signs: Stewart

John Stewart condemns semiotics for relying upon the symbol model for its basic paradigm, announces its consequent obsolescence, and asserts that the only possible hope hinges on a "post-" manifestation. (Stewart's use of "the symbol model" refers to an eclectic assortment of paradigms sharing a common feature configured as a sign.) Stewart reflects this sentiment when he identifies the main shortcoming of semiotic studies of language as the assumption that language is "fundamentally a system of signs or symbols."¹ Consequently, "semiotic accounts of the nature of language are crippled," he asserts, "by . . . serious problems of plausibility, coherence, and applicability" (xii). These "problems" result from a handful of what Stewart refers to as "theoretical commitments" that, he argues, hamper a productive and accountable analysis of the nature of linguistic (specifically, in this case) communication.

The commitment that most significantly hinders semiotic analysis for Stewart is the two-world *problem*. This results from the belief in "a fundamental distinction between two realms or worlds, the world of the sign and the signifier, symbol and symbolized, name and named, word and thought" (*Language* 6-7). Such a distinction does not coherently account for a comprehensible interface between two realms that cannot co-exist simultaneously, Stewart maintains, and an ontological impasse results. Since these worlds don't intersect, this position must rely upon the assumption of an unnecessary plane that impedes the intelligibility of a semiotic account of language. "Distinguish[ing] . . . between two worlds alters the historical sense of the term *world* as the *single* coherent sphere that humans inhabit" (105). We don't live in the world of conceptual signs, this position holds, and as a result, we can't conceive of such a sphere. Nor can it be used to adequately explain a pragmatic sense of language usage that we all draw upon every day in conversation consisting of "two-person dialogue in real time" (xiii).

The other commitments Stewart aligns with semiotics extend from this initial assertion. Stewart attacks the practice of partitioning, identifying small (or the smallest) units of a given aspect of language as a means of breaking it down to what are assumed its essential elements. This practice, he insists, has spurred a false assumption of primary or foundational segments in language. It also has an accompanying skewed view of a synergistic process that is insufficiently represented if its disparate constituent elements are not considered as a whole.

Representationalism similarly extends the independent-unit fallacy. It posits a two-world combination that resists our tangible conception of only one existent world, the one we inhabit consciously. The particular shortcoming of this commitment arises, for Stewart, in the case of represented concepts (like negations) that would exist only in the world of representation without an accompanying real-world correlative. In other words, this situation "ultimately keeps a wedge driven between the two worlds . . . because one entity of a given ontological status cannot coherently be said to 'represent' another entity of the *same* ontological status" (*Language* 103). Stewart stresses analyzing "living language" (104) to restrict his analyses to the realm of a practical, and dialogic, discourse, as opposed to proposing a language system separate from its demonstrable use.

His final commitment attacks the instrumental view of language as a semiotic system. Instrumentalism, he says, "hypostatizes what is lived as event and imports the subject-object distinction into language scholarship" (*Language* 29). Language is rendered even further distant from its social facet if it is conceived as not only a system, but a system with a pedestrian use-function. It should be considered instead, he maintains, as a decidedly human practice characterized by commonsense competence gained through interpersonal communication.

"Articulate Contact"

A great deal of Stewart's discussion is undeniably attractive. Indeed, he constructs an alternative to semiotics that would seem to answer many of the charges leveled against it in recent years. (In part, this is due to its apparent linkage with structuralism—a contention Daniel Chandler makes, for instance, when he avers that "semiotics is difficult to disentangle from structuralism."²) Stewart emphasizes demonstrability in the analysis of communication and posits an impossible link between the real world and the conceptual one. These positions, along with his preference for studying "actual" language use over a sterile, lifeless system, are clearly compelling. Yet, at the same time, to propose that this form of analysis has to exist beyond (or after) semiotics clearly ignores the possibility of "thickening" the discussion of semiotics (something that has taken place, at least in limited—and limiting—ways, since the 1960s). In fact, as Stewart proceeds to narrate a tradition of symbol-model articulations of semiotics throughout history, it becomes increasingly apparent that he can sustain his critique of semiotic's commitments only by a very selective "thinning" of the accounts he draws upon. And the further he goes the thinner his history becomes. Again, this is virtually a given in any analysis that stakes out a territorial claim and then works it vigorously to generate sufficient yield. Yet, once more, a possible contribution to semiotics may be found by producing a different yield by retaining Stewart's leeriness of underscrutinized conceptualizations that so often litter semiotic analyses.

First, however, Stewart's *modus operandi* for creating his "credible alternative" (*Language* ix) to semiotics: an analysis of a post-semiotic "articulate con-

tact" that consists of the decidedly human practice of interpersonal communication. Stewart stresses the interpersonal nature of such exchanges, the give-and-take of dialogue that typically is unscripted and even chaotic in structure. His approach also is centered on generic social tasks of some kind (the job interview, the apology, etc.). But, in the process of touting his own perspective, Stewart reveals the investments underlying his endeavor in the ways he praises it. It's "credible" (ix). Its foundation is "coherent". It results in a rendition of language usage that constitutes "a plausible whole." And, it's grounded on viewpoints that enjoy "a significant contemporary consensus among philosophers and communication theorists" (x). While these value-rich descriptions sound reasonable (and even desirable), there is little of substance underlying them. This is a major weakness of Stewart's project: a conceptual sand base on which he tries to construct a vast, rigid scaffolding.

Stewart's proposed communicative model is essentially the opposite of the commitments he outlines. "There is only one human world and it is linguistic" (*Language* 30), he says, which effectively negates the conceptual aspect of the sign model that appears frequently in semiotic discussions. Stewart also stresses analysis focusing exclusively on "events of speech communicating" for explanatory models of the nature of language. He proposes analyzing texts derived from instances of human communication, texts that would presumably consist of "naturally-occurring interchanges" (17). By studying "language as it is lived" (19), he endeavors to conceptualize language with an interactive basis. He views language use as a form of community instead of a lifeless system. To Stewart, conceiving language as a system leaves its components microscopically (and unnaturally) taxonomied in accordance with artificially mechanical, determined laws, not actual social practice. Furthermore, "language as living event can best be understood," he asserts, "by recognizing that its first business is contact." It is a distinctly human (and humanistic) enterprise, and by no means something that is primarily instrumental by design.

Stewart's alternative to semiotics is based on the assumption that "understanding is a mode of being manifested in concrete events of conversing and that ultimately these *events* are what the term *language* labels" (*Language* 112). Studying language from a systemic standpoint, on the other hand, leads to the sterile segmentation mentioned above. This misrepresents the interactive gestalt of language use as a social practice, as opposed to *language* which addresses "understanding in events of speech communicating" (123). "Efforts to analyze syntactic or semantic aspects of . . . the 'system' of language need to be broadened to acknowledge both the indivisible interrelationships between the verbal and the nonverbal and the inherently relational nature of events of articulate contact," he contends. Only by framing language as an entity constituted by human interaction can an analysis reflect its existence as a fluid, heterogeneous human undertaking. "The anchor for understanding languaging should be the contact event as its participants live it," Stewart declares (125). "Little purpose is served by focusing one's explicative energy exclusively on reducing language to its atoms."

Signs in the Real World

Reflecting a partial alignment with post-structuralism, Stewart opines that instead of mediating between two worlds, "language is constitutive." Language "does not represent world," he contends, "but builds or develops it" (*Language* 31). In effect, Stewart bases his entire schema of post-semiotics on this hypothesis. "The study of reported speech can provide insights into the basic processes of understanding and communication, conceived of as social, dialogical processes" (188), he suggests. Accordingly, his means of information gathering centers on the study of transcribed interactive speech.

Stewart goes so far as to inject an ethical aspect of his account of a post-semiotic orientation, suggesting that the analysis of language as a system discounts, or even entirely neglects, the human side of semiosis. "Semiotic accounts of the nature of language permit discourse to be disconnected from its ethical and ontological consequences," he argues. But, "this post-semiotic account permits no such disconnection; it points toward the intimate connection between human speech communicating and human being" (*Language* 130).

By grounding post-semiotics in real-time human interaction, Stewart attempts to bring communication analysis to the realm of the actual, or single-world, perspective. This view can be experienced directly as opposed to the conceptual world that he considers immaterial in the two-world view. This approach yields a tangible "facticity", an "acknowledgement or affirmation" that this world's existence takes place "separate from the viewer" (*Language* 117). Such a world consists of a reality affirmed through interactive language use by actual beings separate from a conceptual plane or from the constraints of a system that exists only conceptually as well. "Humans participate in the constituting of the coherent spheres we inhabit," Stewart says, "by engaging both proactively and responsibly in the play of language events" (119).

Stewart's proposal also endeavors to focus on language study as an undertaking that, from his perspective, should always remain in the realm of the tangible, again, as opposed to the intangibly conceptual. Language, he says, should be considered as "constitutive or productive of (necessarily partial, tentative, and changing) ways of understanding rather than reproductive of cognitive states, things, or other units of language" (*Language* 125). Humans cannot prove the existence of these states, palpably experience abstract things (like negations), or detect segmentation when speaking in a string of unpremeditated units. These things essentially cannot exist for us in a "real" way. "Speech communicating is a principal not a surrogational dynamic," he suggests.

Actually, a lot can be said for Stewart's position here. Many complaints have been raised regarding the neglect of human subjectivity that seems to result from systemic analyses. One of the best illustrations of an arguably parallel instance can be found in Michael Riffaterre's attack on Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson's structural analysis of a poem. In "Describing Poetic Structures: Two Approaches to Baudelaire's 'Les Chats'," Riffaterre allows for the "reasonable assumption" that "there is a causal relationship between the pres-

ence of [specifically poetic] features in the text and our empirical feeling that we have before us a poem."³ But, he suggests, this can be taken much too far beyond the realm of human detectability. Thus a microscopic study of linguistic features of a poem's system can detect effects that are essentially beyond human detection. In this sense, such features are, in a significant way, *not there*—even though they appear to function as part of the microstructure of the text's signifying system on different linguistic planes. Riffaterre also admits the possibility that a "poem may contain certain structures that play no part in its function and effect [on the reader] as a literary work of art." He adds that "there may be no way for structural linguistics to distinguish between these unmarked structures and those that are literarily active." And, "conversely, there may well be strictly poetic structures that cannot be recognized as such by an analysis not geared to the specificity of poetic language" (28). Riffaterre eschews linguistic elements that are, in his view, "inaccessible to the normal reader" and argues that even the identification of elements that are accessible "do[es] not explain what establishes contact between poetry and reader." "No grammatical analysis of a poem," he concludes, "can give us more than the grammar of the poem" (36). Stewart takes this approach when he tries to account for the human use of language which may exist and function separately from what an emphasis on language as a system is capable of revealing.

One of the obvious benefits of Stewart's assertion here is that he shifts semiotics (or a post-semiotics) toward a *felt* enterprise. This experience may indeed seem more relevant because it's familiar to us while a sub-atomic anatomization of language usage from a systemic standpoint may come across as alien because it analyzes language usage in slow-time, as opposed to the real-time blur of languaging that usually occurs during human semiotic interaction. However, it is undeniable that any such social interaction ultimately takes place as a form of system, one that is rule-bound (to whatever extent of formal regimentation of these rules). Moreover, this interaction is—to draw upon models of the sign like those generated from disparate commentary by Peirce and Saussure—implicitly conceptual in nature. Denying these aspects of language usage will not make semiotics go away.

Similarly, language use appears based on a predominantly unconscious internalization of these rules and paradigms. This occurs to such an extent that humans seldom consider speaking as using language from the instrumental perspective Stewart decries. "Humans cannot live in the subject-object relationship with language that the tool analogy requires," Stewart declares. "Insofar as world is linguistic, we *inhabit* or live in our language; we do not simply use it as a tool" (*Language* 126). Yet, studies such as Sigmund Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives*, or Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* amply demonstrate that systematic analysis of lived experience can offer a great deal of insight into supposedly unscripted or unconscious social behavior. To deny the instrumentality or systemic facet of this behavior requires a refusal to acknowledge this facet of semiotics, as Stewart demonstrates here. Ultimately, he stresses a "connection-

ist" view of language analysis that avoids what he sees as the pitfalls of representationalism. Stewart accomplishes this by emphasizing language in its forms of human usage as opposed, again, to a systemic view devoid of agency.

Forget Pluralism

It might appear logical that a *post-semiotics* could provide a pluralistic improvement over semiotics, a use of its so-called key concepts that seeks to employ them more responsively. Yet Stewart adamantly opposes blending "a coherent nonrepresentational account of linguistic or discursive reference" (*Language* 238) with a position grounded on symbol models and their concomitant implications. Stewart depicts dire consequences should "semiotic and post-semiotic views collide" (198) because semiotics always taints its "post-" manifestation. A good illustration of this collision is found in his analysis of the shortcomings of Kenneth Burke's writings on language. Burke's attempt to meld a conception of language as both "dynamic and processual" and yet somehow composed of "identifiable, discrete units" generates a "pervasive tension." Stewart charges that tension of this nature forestalls any possible progress in semiotic analysis.

Stewart insists that a pluralistic enterprise geared toward illuminating "the basic nature of language itself" would fail to yield "coherent and useful" results (*Language* 113). "Language cannot be coherently treated as simultaneously a world-constituting, characteristically human *way of being*, and as a *system* that is instrumentally employed by *already*-constituted humans to represent aspects of their worlds and accomplish other goals." For Stewart, semiotics remains uninterested in concerns such as "the relationship between the individual and the social, the dynamics of narrative collaboration, the discursive development of subject matter, or the conversational achievement of intimacy." Consequently, the two disciplines can never meet.

This, of course, is absurd. Numerous semiotic discussions focus on the same concerns that Stewart relegates exclusively to the domain of post-semiotics. It becomes evident while proceeding through *Language as Articulate Contact* that Stewart has to construct narrow views of the vast array of semiotic studies in order to characterize it in this fashion. For instance, he claims that the two-world disjunction has to be discarded. "No contemporary scholar would seriously contend that one can specify any sort of one-to-one correspondence between specific signifier and specific signified" (*Language* 21). However, it's unlikely that he could find someone writing on semiotics to support this claim. Even semioticians who argue that the decoder's practice can be controlled or limited would not assert that verifiable correspondences of the kind Stewart identifies are possible.

A Post-Semiotic Demonstration

A revealing illustration of Stewart's assessment of *articulate contact* appears in his commentary on a transcription of "naturally-occurring interchanges" analyzed by Douglas Maynard (*Language* 17). This exchange is pedestrian and extremely "unplanned" which, to Stewart, proves the unsystematic nature of language as it is used in real life. "These transcripts capture something much closer to language as it actually occurs than the examples commonly used by philosophers, linguists, and semioticians to support their claims about the nature of language" (19), Stewart maintains. Since these are examples of "language as it is lived," he continues, "these examples are surely more paradigmatic than the hypotheticals typically discussed." Such conversations are "relatively 'spontaneous' and 'natural.'" And, they reveal the inadequacy of a "description of the nature of language offered by those who characterize it as a system of signs or symbols functioning representationally and instrumentally."

By emphasizing articulate contact, Stewart reveals components "that would not be apparent if [one] were to treat this language simply as the systematic use of symbols" (*Language* 127). Stewart employs Maynard's notion of "*perspective-display sequence*" to guide this analysis of conversation "operating syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically" (129). Maynard suggests, in Stewart's words, that "conversation partners use this strategy . . . to adapt a personal opinion to their listener's frame of reference." This is employed by "first soliciting the other's opinion and then producing one's own report in a way that takes the other's into account."

The conversation considered involves the problem of dangerous bicyclists and two university students' attempts to cope with campus overcrowding. From this standpoint, the opening utterance—*So*—and the remainder of the first three lines of the discussion entail an initial "*perspective-display invitation*" (*Language* 127). This is followed by a reply which then elicits a statement of opinion by the first speaker:

1. John: So what do you think about the bicycles on campus?
2. Judy: I think they're terrible.
3. John: Sure is about a million of 'em.

(Note: I have not maintained the transcription conventions employed in Maynard's rendering of this conversation.) In his examination of Maynard's analysis, Stewart asserts that this approach uncovers human practices of communication the symbol model would neglect. Maynard, for example, "finds evidence about the relationship displayed between the individual and the social, the dynamics of narrative collaboration, the discursive development of subject matter ('bicycles'), and the achievement of intimacy" (128). And, he does so "without getting caught up in any effort to analyze 'signifiers' and 'signifieds.'" This is crucial to Stewart's condemnation of the symbol model approach. Maynard, he insists, "notices what he does in this discourse *because* he recognizes that these interloc-

utors are coconstructing the world they share in the aural-oral contact." Moreover, they "both produce stories that are 'wrapped in' the other's parallel story" to constitute what Stewart calls "*collaborative construction*." The conversational stresses that mark their exchanges "[reveal] another level of the interlocutors' intimacy, one embedded in the aural-oral dimensions of intonation, emphasis, and facial expression" (129). Finally, "each speaker displays a world open to the other's participation, and both positively affirm the other's involvement in their worlds."

Although the depiction of Stewart's account of an articulate contact is necessarily truncated here, it should suffice to reveal his approach. Once again, he has to engage in considerable truncation of semiotics himself in order to make post-semiotics significantly different from, as well as superior to, semiotics. In effect, he employs a form of semiotic analysis (if one could precisely determine what that involves) without using the terminology and concepts frequently associated with semiotics (no "signifiers" or "signifieds," etc.). Through several fuzzy distinctions that set up ontological roadblocks to derail symbol-model based inquiry, he constructs in its place essentially the same approach with different terminological distinctions.

Thus, Stewart is simply calling for the type of semiotics that already focuses on the very issues he claims are beyond its scope. And one of the best examples of this is Hodge and Kress's *Social Semiotics*. In fact, take away the frequently myopic critique of semiotics from Stewart's book and he makes many of the same arguments found in Hodge and Kress's study.

The Social System: Hodge and Kress

Hodge and Kress's earlier study, *Language as Ideology*, outlined a "critical linguistics" that stressed "the primacy of the social dimension in understanding language structures and processes."⁴ Their stated goal was to yield "a theory of language whose aim was to provide an illuminating account of verbal language as a social phenomenon." They particularly wanted to assist "critical theorists in a range of disciplines . . . who wanted to explore social and political forces and processes as they act through and on texts and forms of discourse." (Although this sounds like just what Stewart has in mind, significantly, he doesn't refer to either study by Hodge and Kress.) Hodge and Kress recount feeling unnecessarily constrained by focusing on verbal language alone (a similar problem with Stewart's study from a semiotic standpoint). They subsequently broadened their focus to consider "all sign systems" in *Social Semiotics*.⁵ "Meaning resides so strongly and pervasively in other systems of meaning, in a multiplicity of visual, aural, behavioural and other codes, that a concentration on words alone is not enough." As a result, they attempt to produce "a general theory of the social processes through which meaning is constituted and has its effects." Hodge and Kress, again like Stewart, also endeavor to redirect semiotics by emphasizing