

Feminism and Semiotics

By Barbara Godard

The addition of feminism to semiotics creates the “ampersand problem.” As supplement, feminism deconstructs the presuppositions of semiotics to expose a prior and unexamined binary opposition privileging the masculine of which women are the unnamed constituent part. Feminist critique has established the ideological dimensions of semiosis and so contributed to the elaboration of a critical, materialist semiotics and the development of cultural studies. In the process, the “sex/gender system” (Rubin 1975) has been shown to be an important signifying practice through which relations of power are enacted.

Feminists’ relations to semiotic theory are ambivalent. The theory affords a sophisticated understanding of women’s subordinate condition as cultural not natural. However, it must be transformed if it is to serve a feminist emancipatory project of constituting women as the subjects who know rather than the invisible objects of knowledge. While feminists have made important contributions to semiotic theory, these are frequently marginalized within mainstream semiotics as feminist theory not semiotics “proper.” The gap is marked explicitly in Umberto Eco’s (1976) refusal of Julia Kristeva’s (1973) “speaking subject.” Teresa de Lauretis (1984) considers this a “cross-roads” in semiotic research, split between a theory of meaning and a ghostly self-divided subject. De Lauretis follows Eco’s path to consider the social constraints rather than the pre-symbolic drives in the signifying process, so denaturalizing it as cultural materialist praxis. However, her subsequent extension of Eco’s work to theorize a materialist subject of semiosis has similarly been positioned on the opposite side of this disciplinary distinction which separates analysis of semiotic structures from subjective determinants. The emphasis on textuality partakes of semiotic theory’s focus on the sign and universals - “logocentrism” - which

feminists have challenged in the name of the signifying network and the embodied subject to advance models of dynamic processes of signification within theories of complexity. The insights of feminism into power, difference and the signifying process of identification have contributed to the emergence of studies of racialized difference, postcolonial studies, lesbian and gay studies, and queer theory.

The characteristic feminist stance in semiotics has been to assess the limitations of and then creatively rewrite the master theories. Feminist interventions in semiotics have critiqued its structuralist tendencies for the positivism of their logico-mathematical paradigms taken for the real and advocated a critical semiotics that would recognize the discursive aspects of its paradigms as representations structuring the real. Feminist engagements with semiotics have contributed to, even as they have benefited from, poststructuralist theories of meaning as both polysemic - deferred in an infinite web of textuality - and ideological - stories told from an interested perspective. As the only “science” explicitly concerned with elaborating a theory of representation, asserts Kristeva (1969), semiotics becomes self-reflexively critical as well as critical of the representational models of other “sciences.” To be a critical theory, however, as Mieke Bal (1985) points out, semiotics needs a social theory and a theory of subjectivity with which to account for the dynamic interactions between the individual and social processes that are mediated transformatively in signification. As Terry Threadgold (1997) sums this up, there is no semiosis without subjectivity and no subjectivity without semiosis. In their “dialogic” relation to semiotic theory, to use the term of Bakhtin (1895-1975), feminist semioticians rework established concepts so as to transform their implicit misogyny and create the potential for

what Luce Irigaray (1985a) terms “becoming woman,” a potential position for women as speaking subjects of theory. This entails a project of working within the interstices of semiotic theory to expose the masculine theorists’ elision of their own embodiment, which they displace onto women as Other in the constitution of a rational, self-sufficient subject. Feminist rewriting has made important contributions to semiotic theory in a number of areas including: subjectivity, intertextuality, the symptom, linguistic value, differential regimes of signification, theories of enunciation, representation, narrative, and non-linguistic signifying processes.

In the development of feminist approaches to semiotics, there have been two main phases, one emerging in France in the late 1960s which embraced the project of *Tel Quel* to combine the theories of De Saussure (1857-1913) with those of Marx (1818-1883) and Freud (1856-1939), and expansions on those theories and/or reworking of the theories of other key semiotic theoreticians which occurred in the English-speaking world in the 1980s. Julia Kristeva, the first major contributor to feminist critical reworkings of semiotic theory, introduced the category of the subject into semiosis. She rewrote Bakhtin’s concept of “dialogism,” an untotizable and context-bound theory of meaning, into the concept of “intertextuality” or “ideologeme” (1967), then into “transposition” of texts (1984) to establish a dynamic model of signification that insists on its productivity to *make* meaning. The text carries out a redistributive function to bring about change and heterogeneity that constitutes a decentered “speaking subject” (1973). Meaning is located not in the isolated sign with its relation of signifier and signified, but is produced “intertextually” (a network of differentiations) through the interaction of verbal texts and the texts of society and history within the transformation of the “ideologeme” (value-laden utterance) as a “signifying practice” (1969). Although Kristeva insists after Bakhtin that there is “no general theory of language” (1977) and that a theory of metalanguage is always a representation, an “ideologeme” (1969), her emphasis on textuality as dynamism rather than “dialogics” transforms Bakhtin’s materialist theory of signification. A “combinatory,” textual transformation involves the interaction of a “geno” (the “production of signification”) with a “pheno” text (the surface “communicative function”) (1969). Subsequently, she turns to psychoanalysis and posits the subject as text. Dynamism is reformulated as the interaction of the “semiotic” (the energy of the unconscious drive functions) with the “symbolic” (the rational structuring forces) (1984). The trace of the corporeal, of the rhythms and musicality of the drives and the body, may be located only through the structured syntax of the phenotext, but persists

The Semiotic Review of Books

Volume 13.2 (2003)

Table of Contents

Editorial: Feminism and Semiotics

By Barbara Godard 1-5

Formal Insistence

By Paul Hegarty 6-9

Liberating Semiotics

By William Pencak 10-11

Echo Chamber

By William Walters 11-12

Web Site <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/srb>

Rates	Canada	USA	Others
Individual	\$30	US \$30	US \$35
Institution	\$40	US \$40	US \$45

General Editor: Gary Genosko

Associate Editors: Verena Andermatt Conley (Harvard) Samir Gandesha (Simon Fraser), Barbara Godard (York), Tom Kemple (UBC)

Section Editors: Leslie Boldt-Irons (Brock), William Conklin (Windsor), Akira Lippit (UCal-Irvine), Alice den Otter (Lakehead), Scott Simpkins (UN Texas), Bart Testa (Toronto), Peter Van Wyck (Concordia), Anne Zeller (Waterloo)

Layout: Gail Zanette, Lakehead University Graphics

Address: Department of Sociology, Lakehead University, 955 Oliver Road, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada P7B 5E1

Tel.: 807-343-8391; Fax: 807-346-7831

E-mail: genosko@mail1.lakeheadu.ca or genosko@tbaytel.net

Founding Editor: Paul Bouissac, Professor Emeritus, Victoria University, Victoria College 205, 73 Queen’s Prk Cr. E., Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5S 1K7
E-mail: bouissa@attglobal.net

The *SRB* is published 3 times per year in the Fall, Winter and Spring/Summer.

as negativity disrupting any singular or transparent meaning. The “semiotic” is most easily discerned in poetic and avant-garde texts and constitutes the “revolution” carried out “in poetic language” (1984). The poetic as transformative process of signification pulverizes and remakes meaning. As text, the subject remains divided between the “semiotic” (an unconscious archaic feminine principle) and the “symbolic” (rational name/law of the father). Subjectivity is thus constituted within language, the symbolic system of culture, as decentered.

In gendering the “semiotic” feminine and the “symbolic” masculine, Kristeva follows classic psychoanalytic models of signification and subjectivity. These are ordered by the Oedipal scenario and castration which must be surmounted by a series of substitutions to constitute a subject in language. Within this scenario, the feminine who lacks castration is relegated to absence as non-subject. In Kristeva’s model, the drives become the site of interaction and socialization as the paternal linguistic function channels them and inscribes its power on the body. Toril Moi (1985) finds Kristeva’s theory of the “subject-in-process” (subjectivity as continuous transformation) extremely productive for feminist theory to avoid the reductiveness of identity politics. However, De Lauretis (1984) and Terry Threadgold (1997) fault Kristeva’s primary focus on language and on high art texts and her neglect of a social theory. Elizabeth Grosz (1989) faults Kristeva for limiting the feminine to the maternal function and failing to theorize women’s desire more complexly. To counteract the Oedipal model of signification as loss, Kristeva gives considerable attention to how the feminine works invisibly through culture. She theorizes the “semiotic” as the “pre-symbolic” site of the maternal which persists as trace within the symbolic in an alternate form of meaning-making she terms “*signifiance*” (1984). Subsequently, she theorized a number of subject positions characterized by their incomplete separation of subject from object, with dispositions giving more place to the “semiotic,” and analyzed these signifying processes in a variety of literary and artistic texts (1982; 1989). Borderline states, they constitute sites of abnormality or “horror.” As “negativity,” they may function as sites of transference processes for the authors or readers of the texts. Though diffusing the feminine everywhere in the textual, Kristeva nonetheless positions women as the ineffable vanishing point and invisible prop supporting a masculinized norm of meaning and subjectivity.

However, in “Women’s Time” (1981), Kristeva briefly challenged the sacrificial logic of the symbolic contract founded in matricide. Against this scapegoating of women, she notes the force of the feminist movement organizing for change in the social contract. Yet she cautions against feminists’ development of a reverse discourse giving primacy to women that would merely perpetuate symbolic violence. She posits instead a third person – her own theory – that internalizes gender opposition as self-differentiation which inserts a “cutting edge” into subjectivity. By multiplying the possible identifications for each person, it “pulverizes” any concept of a centered or authoritative subject. Motherhood is the model for Kristeva’s decentered subject. Maternity constitutes a process of distinction between self and other that is not absolute. The mother’s mixed feelings of

connection with and separation from the child she carries in her body constitute an alternative to castration as a model of subject formation (1981). Abandoning European culture, Kristeva (1986) finds in China a model for feminine subjectivity as contradiction and heterogeneity. She highlights the figure of the mother’s “*jouissance*” (orgasmic mother) as an excess that confounds the hierarchical binary of the Oedipal scenario. Chinese double matrilineal and patrilineal kinship structures produce dual symbolic fields. The speaking subject in China, she argues, is articulated in a “dramatic combinatory” which challenges the principle of self-sufficient rationality of European subjectivity. This idealization of Chinese women constitutes an instance of Orientalist thinking. Kristeva diagnoses the current subordinate state of women in the social rather than transforming it, though she highlights the feminine as the sign of change.

Subsequent feminist semiotic theory follows Kristeva in taking as premise that subjectivity is an effect of signification and that theories are value-laden representations enacting gender differences. However, it differs from her in critiquing the Oedipal model of signification as loss and displacement posited by Freud and Lévi-Strauss (1949) as foundation of the distinction between nature and culture. In doing so, it makes important contributions to the theory of representation and narrative, as well as to concepts of meaning-making as action in the social. Important here is the work of Irigaray. Noting like Kristeva the omnipresence of the feminine body in the texts of philosophy, psychoanalysis and anthropology, she analyzes it as symptom of masculine hysteria whose somatization (bodily sign production) has been displaced unto the female body (1985a). This is a politicized critique following the reversal-displacement technique of a deconstructive reading. Irigaray exposes the missing masculine body of theory in order to postulate a different organization of the symbolic – a dual symbolic field – that would recognize sexual differences and constitute women as subjects for each other. Irigaray is concerned with radical alterity, with the “other of the other” not the “other of the same.” She seeks to make visible the relations of women as other with other women to replace the “a-woman” object who is the silent prop of a masculine subject (the “self-same”) (1985a). What dominates at present is a model of “hom(m)o[sociality]” (1985b) in which the feminine is appropriated by the masculine. Relations between masculine subjects are made possible by women as mute objects exchanged between men. The utopian order she posits would be founded on an exchange of signs between women under a contingent theory of value which posits signification as combination along the syntagmatic or metonymic axis (Jakobson 1957) in a complex series of interconnected differentiations (1985b). Her theoretical fiction figuring the feminine as heterogeneity is offered as an alternative to the disciplinary hypotheses of subjectivity and signification as lack.

Irigaray stages her theoretical intervention through what Gayatri Spivak (1987) calls a “symptomatic reading” of the master texts of European philosophy to make visible the work of signification that has resulted in the exclusion of women. Reading between the lines of the texts from her position as non-subject, she attends to their repetitions and paradoxes as

the trace of the subject’s inscription. Through her insertion of questions and parentheses into textual commentary, Irigaray disrupts their logic by emphasizing the textual rhetoric. This foregrounds the dilemma of deconstructing a metaphysics of identity, yet remaining caught in a masculinist ideology. She thus frames her theory as an utterance within a specific speech exchange, implicitly theorizing philosophy as the enunciation of a situated subject, a self-reflexive critical awareness lacking in Kristeva. Exposing the scandal of women’s lack as a masculine fantasy, Irigaray reworks the classic semiotic distinction between symptom and sign. Whereas the sign is considered to be an objective significate effect, the symptom is either indeterminate or subjective – what is apparently real. Corporeality is a slighted semiotic system. By rewriting Freud as a producer of symptoms rather than knowledge, Irigaray exposes and reverses the prior gendering of this distinction: women (hysterics) produce symptoms while men (theorists) produce signs or knowledge. All signs are shown to be symptoms of someone’s desire endlessly displaced. Meaning is always embodied meaning. Freud’s Oedipal theory as well as his theory of hysteria are exposed as fictions. They manifest the pervasiveness of a gender-based paradigm or fiction regulating cultural value in a distinction between production, linked to paternity and authority, and reproduction, linked to repetition and procreation.

This distinction also structures the discourse of philosophy as a separation of logic (signification) from bodies, as Irigaray demonstrates in the second part of her study in a deconstruction of the representational quality of truth. This is also a theorization of representation in the triple sense of the term; as an image of something, as a proxy for somebody in the political arena, and as a re-presentation or staging for an audience (addressee) in a specific instance of enunciation. Signification as enunciation is explored implicitly through the section headings and metaphors that frame Irigaray’s reading as a restaging for a different audience of Plato’s earlier “dramatic” dialogue, the allegory of the cave in *The Republic*, where he distinguishes philosophical truth (good) from artistic representation or (bad) *mimesis*. “Miming,” Irigaray (1985a) terms this second form of repetition and plays on the double meaning of “repetition” in French. It is not a bad “copy,” but a “rehearsal” leading to something different. Judith Butler (1990) succinctly summarizes Irigaray’s point. There is no authentic sexual identity: “woman” is an unstable term that gains its signification only as a relational term. It is “performatively produced” through the repetition of “coherent gender sequences” which order various attributes. The performative, a speech act, posits signification as a doing not an image, a doing whose meaning effect is context dependent.

Irigaray exposes these gender sequences at work in the very theorization of representation. Plato’s theory is entangled in a move to separate the intelligible from the sensible, reason from the body, that sexualizes and hierarchizes the distinction. Irigaray reads Plato through Derrida (1982), reversing the hierarchy to put signification before philosophy, rhetoric before logic. In the deconstructionist logic of paradox, she shows how Derrida too locates his philosophical project in this mind/body, masculine/feminine, opposition. Through metaphor, the philosopher appropriates female

reproduction in the name of creative insight. Irigaray emphasizes touch and contiguity in the cave over sight and distance outside. Contiguity, along with combination, are the activities occurring on the metonymic axis of signification (Saussure 1959, Jakobson 1971). Irigaray pursues the insights of Saussure into the production of linguistic meaning as value, not signification, analogous to economic exchange (an analogy used by Marx). Saussure posits a necessary intersection of metonymic and metaphoric axes in sciences of value. Irigaray rewrites Derrida to focus not on the dead (conventional) metaphor but on metonymy. This underscores Saussure's observation, that the value of any term is determined by its "surroundings" or context, to posit gender as a relative term or social value. Her emphasis on the metonymic axis of endless combination along a chain of differentiations connects verbal and non-verbal signifiers in an expanding network (Godard 1991). Signification is multiply determined. Not only corporeal signs, but those of the material context of enunciation, are linked along this axis which focuses on production over final meaning. In attempting to reverse the dualism of mind and body, Irigaray has converted a politics of language into a political poetics of the body. Anglo-American feminist critics have faulted Irigaray for "essentialism" (Moi 1985). They have overlooked her theorization of the female body as an effect of semiosis reproduced in disciplinary discourses.

This model of embodied signification challenges the foundation of structuralist semiotics. Lévi-Strauss's (1949) theory of the production of meaning and culture, of narrative structures and kinship systems, through the exchange of women is posited as foundational to semiotics by Eco (1976). However, Simone de Beauvoir (1952) noted the lack of reciprocity in this exchange which constituted a singular masculine subject through sexual difference. Gail Rubin (1975) also noted the entanglement of this theory of culture in the establishment of the "sex/gender system." Woman, as sign, is paradoxically both nature and culture, a silent contradiction underpinning discursive systems. The scandal of this theory ordered by the Oedipal narrative is not incest, Irigaray demonstrates, but "hom(m)o[sociality]". While Derrida (1978) challenges the concept of system by deconstructing the instability of incest as both the sign of nature and a cultural construct, Irigaray (1985a) challenges the gendered binaries of Lévi-Strauss's semiotic square by focusing on its unstated term - homosexuality. Signification is not bound up in castration and loss, but rather in excess, the excess of the same difference - the same which is different - in the relation between two men consolidated by the exchange of women. What would it mean if women as "the goods" to be exchanged refused to come to market and started exchanging amongst themselves? This could only happen, Irigaray argues (1985b), if the full force of the heterogeneity of meaning were unleashed. A "mechanics of fluids," or economy of limitless combinations along the metonymic chain of signification, might be such a model of radical differentiation, a heterogeneity of economies of desire and meaning. This would displace the cycle of reproduction and production under the ruling "mechanics of solids" valorizing a singular (phallic) meaning. Rather than expand on the analogy of "libidinal economy" (Lyotard 1993)

to develop a social theory, in more recent work Irigaray has focused on the linguistic constitution of subjectivity with little attention to social context (1987, 1990). Drawing on Benveniste's (1966) theorization of enunciation (Stephenson 1989), she has engaged in empirical analysis to demonstrate that women use convoluted sentence structures so as to avoid producing a feminine speaking subject. The absence of any attention to the addressee in the enunciation to develop a more context-bound theory of enunciation, and the failure to take into account the cross-cultural dimensions of the analysis carried out in a number of countries and languages, severely limit the conclusions of this work. It marks a significant shift away from the theoretical contributions of Irigaray's earlier work on the complex non-verbal dimensions of signification as social action and on the heterogeneity of regimes of enunciation which would produce women as knowing subjects.

Hélène Cixous (1986) likewise fails to develop the materialist insights of her work into an expanded social theory. She too advances economic, linguistic and subjective systems as mutual determinants in the signifying network. To challenge the Oedipal economy of scarcity and lack which produces binaries, she turns instead to the model of the gift or potlatch and an economy of excess and unending circulation, derived from Marcel Mauss's (1969) analysis of Amerindian cultures. Her reworking of the myth of Medusa to transform her from a figuration of castration into one of abundance, of laughter not matricide, constitutes the feminine as sign of rupture and transformation (1981). *Poesis* or meaning-making is how Cixous terms this negativity which dismantles established order. She later rejected the label of "theorist" for that of playwright. Reading this "inner theatre" of subjectivity and signification in light of her venture into "world theatre" highlights the performative dimension of the subject and her focus on the instance of enunciation. Though the audience or addressee is important in theatrical semiosis, Cixous does not analyze this facet of signification, focusing on the speaking or writing subject. Nor does she go beyond an implicit socio-cultural model of signification in her countering of one anthropological model of the economy of signs by another. The concluding dialogue with Catherine Clément stages a quarrel within feminism between historicized class struggle and language in which Cixous's plea for *poesis* resonates.

Further work in feminist semiotics develops the theory of enunciation to bridge this opposition. Kaja Silverman (1983) makes the subject and discourse central to semiotics by reworking Benveniste's (1966) theory of enunciation which relates meaning to the moment of speech, especially his important concept of the "shifter" (*deixis*) and the reciprocal relation of subject and addressee. She posits three positions for the subject in each utterance, that of "speaking subject" (enunciation) and of "subject of speech" (*énoncé*), as well as the "spoken subject" or addressee. Combining this with Lacan's theory of suture and phantasy, she develops a theory of spectatorship for film and of reading for literature that accounts for the ways in which the *you* of address is brought to identify with, and take up a position of subject in alignment with, these representational forms. This theory

of identification demonstrates the means by which subjects are constituted by signification as socially differentiated. She subsequently extended this work to theorize masculinity and visual pleasure (1992).

Gayatri Spivak has further developed a theory of enunciation to take into account more complex social identifications of subjects, especially racialized relations within the framework of imperialism, and to articulate the dynamics of power. She posits women not as constituted in the family romance as excess, as the *outside* of social relations of power, but as constituted as women through economic, legal and political structures. Like Irigaray, she deconstructs Derrida's deconstruction which reproduces phallogocentrism in taking woman as figure of displacement. She too advocates "fabricat[ing] strategic 'misreadings'" or "useful and scrupulous fake readings" to propose alternate fictions of the real to received misogynist theories (1983). Significantly, she deconstructs feminism's "truth of global sisterhood" to expose its metaphorical constitution of a feminine plural, a *we* of feminism, that overlooks the power differentials dividing women on grounds of class, race and nation (1986). Her focus is on the other of the other woman. This entails a reading of archival documents of imperialism in a reversal-displacement to expose the complexities and contradictions of the formation of multiply divided racialized and sexualized subjectivities (1985). These readings engage more with the fabrications of representations of historical reality than with language as signifying system. Spivak accounts for her fuller treatment of the socio-political context of enunciation, in both the need to consider power relations in the production of the investigating subject's enunciation, and to attend to the micro-political in the everyday. Not divorced from consciousness, the entire *socius* is a "continuous sign-chain" (1985). Language, she writes, "is not everything," only the place where the subject's boundaries unravel (1993). She posits a complex model of language as "rhetoric, logic and silence." Rhetoric disrupts the logical system of a language or propositional "content." Rhetoric orients speaking toward an addressee in the enunciative context of a social practice. Encountering silence as "the founding violence at work in rhetoric," she finds not the languageness of language, like Derrida, but the social reasonableness in which language is immersed as politicized utterance, sociality which determines what is sayable and receivable. The possibility for social action lies in the dynamics of breaking and rethinking the signifying chain.

Teresa de Lauretis's (1984) dialogue with Umberto Eco (1976) also posits semiosis as a dynamic and infinite reworking - within cultural practice, not language, however. She reformulates Eco's questions and gives different replies that redefine the field of semiotics by introducing a gendered subject of semiosis. Like Eco, though, she understands semiosis as human labour whose significate effects are a doing in the social. Most significantly, De Lauretis formulates a theoretical response to the contradiction of "double identification" at the heart of feminist theories. How to develop a speaking position for women as subjects when woman is both excluded from discourse and confined within it? Challenging semiotics from within by reworking its premises founded in the exchange of women (Lévi-Strauss 1949; Eco 1976; De Lauretis 1984), she elaborates a complex model of semiosis

involving the “multileveled interaction of many heterogeneous sign vehicles.” Taking from Eco an understanding of the process of semiosis as “invention,” a making of new meanings in which the pertinent features are “mapped” from one material medium to another to transform both the representation and perception of reality, she assigns pertinency to different features. This is precisely the task of (feminist) theory, “to construct the terms of another frame of reference.” Perception involves not just cognition, as Eco postulated in his rewriting of Peirce’s “interpretant,” but also memory, desire, pain, labour. Perception, indeed, is a “signifying practice.” Semiosis is not natural but socially and historically “overdetermined.” Nor can it ever be separated from a process of enunciation that involves the complete history of the speaking subject. The complexity of these perceptive operations of meaning making as they interact with the social assures the production of difference. Such heterogeneity includes both the modalities of sign-production and the relations of address in speech acts. So “imaging,” as De Lauretis terms this theory of meaning as production, can be reduced neither to the linguistic nor the iconic, but exceeds them and involves other modes of perception/signification. So too, the positions of address are not fixed definitively, but are produced and defined temporarily within social formations. Though these have been preeminently patriarchal, the dominant ideology does not have a monopoly, but is only one possible set of codes among many. Pertinence both individual and social is critical here to construct the frame for resistance. A sign is significant for a subject in a mental or muscular effort only within the “subject’s experience of a social practice.” Feminism as a social practice could change as well as reproduce meanings and codes to produce a position for a woman subject of semiosis.

De Lauretis’s return to Peirce through Eco also constitutes a rewriting of much feminist semiotic theory whose positions are inflected by Lacanian psychoanalysis. She retains from film theory its theorization of enunciation as an address that constitutes the spectator as spoken subject. However, she challenges its psychoanalytic model of signification, with its fixed binary positions of enunciation supported by an unexamined presupposition of sexual difference, so as to posit the potential for social change. This model is founded on the Oedipal narrative. De Lauretis responds to the contradiction that woman is sign of both nature and culture with the call to make visible the nature of this narrative. The task of theoretical feminism and cultural practices such as film is to articulate the relation of the female subject to representation. Rather than destroying it, narrative should be reworked in a number of variations that involve a multiplicity of speaking positions and modes of address that will open up the “contradictory but not impossible space of female desire.” While formulating the potential of heterogeneity, of stories, De Lauretis engages in history, examining the history of narrative theory entangled with that of semiotic theory. She notes the legacy of Lévi-Strauss’s model of narrative transformation in the Oedipal story of masculine desire in narratology and semiotics as well as in psychoanalysis. Unlike Irigaray, De Lauretis considers the performative effects of narrative as enunciation for the addressee in whom it produces changes.

Embodiment is not relegated to some archaic and pre-symbolic site, as in Kristeva’s theory, but is eminently social and historical. De Lauretis (1987) will later call narrative a “technology of gender” establishing relations of address to interpellate subjects and habituate them to certain practices. To produce a change in habit, new relations of address are necessary, more complex and multivalent than Oedipal lack.

De Lauretis’s theory differs from other feminist approaches in moving beyond a critical semiotics to outline a revisionary theory for a female subject of semiosis. Her major contribution to semiotic and feminist theory is to posit a model of experience as semiosis. Experience is multidimensional and interactive, not fixed in a mind/body dualism. As example, she offers Virginia Woolf’s narrative of her encounter with the beadle as she walked across the Oxford grass. Her “instinct” that she was both a woman and out of place is in fact a “kind of knowledge internalized from daily, secular repetition of actions, impressions and meanings” whose effect has been accepted as necessary. Subjectivity is produced by such personal “engagement in practices, discourses and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning and affect) to the world.” Gender, a learned habitual mode of behaving, is thus the effect of both representation and self-representation. De Lauretis’s account of the signification processes of the “interpretant” in a chain of semiotic mediations positions Peirce against Eco. Peirce’s tripartite model of “proper signification effects” includes the emotional interpretant, the energetic interpretant involving muscular or mental action, and “habit-change,” produced through the first two and modifying dispositions to act. This last is the logical interpretant, a “living logical conclusion that is habit,” the result of the social production of meaning. Eco, however, in a “surgical operation” excised the subjective component of semiosis from Peirce’s model to limit it to the publicly “testable and describable” interpretants. In De Lauretis’s account, meaning and consciousness are worked through the body. It has no ontological status prior to language, as in the psychoanalytic model of signification, but is the effect of culturally pertinent perceptions/significations. What is necessary for the constitution of a feminist subject of semiosis is a change in the terms of pertinence. Such a change in perception, De Lauretis suggests, may be brought about through the feminist consciousness-raising group which, through a kind of “imaging,” offers a different frame of reference to resignify the learned habituated behaviours of subordinate femininity as social and hence changeable. This reframing in the politicized context of feminism occurs not outside but inside the infinite signifying chain to produce new affect, value and meaning. De Lauretis’s formulation of semiosis both displaces the primacy accorded consciousness and language in meaning making, to make a place for visual signifying practices, especially film. Beginning with the socio-cultural, it also prepares the way for cultural studies which analyzes the signifying practices of the everyday.

Two other approaches to semiotics should be noted, the one focused on narratology, the other on the historicized signifying practices of the everyday. Mieke Bal (1985) examines

narrative semiotics in light of the critique generated by a meta-semiotic that attempts to distinguish between models as explanations of readings and models as sets of implicit instructions or presuppositions followed by adherents to a theoretical convention. Narratology is caught in an impasse, not having become such a transmissible tool available for critique. Drawing on Habermas’s “critical theory,” and Peirce’s discursive account of cognitive processes in the functioning of the “interpretant” in a chain of semiotic mediations, Bal argues for “focalization” in narrative as constitutive of a non-humanist subject of semiosis. Narrative here becomes a technology in De Lauretis’s sense for producing social subjects. Bal then uses Greimas’s “semiotic square” (1983), developed from Lévi-Strauss’s (1949) model of narrative transformation in the Oedipal myth and kinship systems, against the grain as a tool or interpretive paradigm. Her analysis of narratives in the Judeo-Christian Bible which relate the murder of women performs a critique of the misogyny of this foundational text of Western culture. This stages a double reversal or “double exposure,” making use of a model grounded in a myth of one patriarchal culture to critique the patriarchal practices in other cultures’ mythic texts. Bal’s is a critical not an emancipatory use of narratology to expose the social mediation of women’s subordinate condition. Subsequently Bal (1996) turned from linguistic to visual semiotics to consider their specific exchange within the museum’s semiosis of “display” or “showing off,” comparable to the semiosis of “imaging” in film. The subject who speaks through this sign system is cultural process, racializing, gendering and otherwise making distinctions.

Terry Threadgold (1997) too is concerned with semiotics as critical “meta-language.” Expanding on De Lauretis’s theorizing of “imaging” or representation as “interpretant,” she insists on *poesis* or “poetics” as meaning-making. Semiotic theories are instances of *poesis*, and hence interested stories shaping the real to be reworked to feminist ends. In this argument she extends the materialist dimensions of De Lauretis’s concept of experience as semiotized “habit,” by means of sociologists’ theorizing of the meaning-making practices of power in the lived embodied relations of the social, particularly Bourdieu’s (1980) concept of “habitus.” De Certeau’s (1984) concept of practice as story, of history as interested story, is combined with Dorothy Smith’s (1987) theorization of the gendered practices of ruling in the everyday. Threadgold synthesizes these theories of embodiment and its relation to consciousness, of differential access to economic, cultural and symbolic capital, of the relations of power and discursively constituted subjectivity. Then she reads a signifying chain of intertextual reworkings of written and oral narratives over a century. These relate the Governor murders in Australia in a variety of ways productive of class, race and gender relations. This more fully articulated cultural and social theory is used to assess the limits and rewrite the social semiotics of M.A.K. Halliday (1978). His theory of the social is an upward projection from language to context and social system, despite its origins in social anthropology. In his emphasis on structures and institutions, the materiality of bodies and spatial contexts lingers only as trace. Against this,

Threadgold draws on social theories postulating structures of feeling and action as states of the body, not the mind. Against the “feminine” of psychoanalytic universals, she invokes Eco’s and De Lauretis’s theories of the “labouring subject of semiosis” to account for historicized and differentiated subjects. Bodily marked as gendered, classed or raced by previous semiotic encounters, this subject would change the space of a single semiotic privileging the powerful. “Infinite semiosis” or intertextuality - telling many stories at once - is a way of telling complexly or differently. This rewriting makes a place for embodied women subjects of semiosis producing change not exchange. The project of feminist semiotics to theorize non-verbal semiosis and heterogeneity is displayed here as a meta-semiotic critique of a paradigmatic mind/body dichotomy operating in semiotics and other theories to exclude women’s differentiated experiences of the social.

An important moment in the diffusion of feminist semiotic theory was the 1987 International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies which brought to Toronto professors Teresa de Lauretis, Luce Irigaray, Kaja Silverman, Terry Threadgold and others. Semiotic theory remains influential in feminist poststructuralist approaches, though the specific terminology and conceptual rigour of these pioneering theorists are rare. Perhaps their most significant contribution is to have developed semiotics as a critical theory and semiosis as social action producing change. They have attempted to transform the terms of cultural transmission by making visible the absent masculine body in modernity’s theories of the rational subject and the complicitous relations of the subject who knows to the object of knowledge.

Barbara Godard is active in the fields of feminist theory, semiotics and narratology, Canadian and Quebec literatures, and translation studies. She is a founding co-editor of the feminist literary periodical *Téssera*, and a contributing editor of *Open Letter* and *TOPIA: A Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*. She teaches at York University in Toronto.

References

- Bal, M. (1985) *Femmes imaginaires: L’Ancien Testament au risque d’une narratologie critique*. Utrecht: HES Uitgevers and Montreal: HMH.
- (1986) *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Benveniste, E. (1971) [1966] *Problems in General Linguistics*. Trans. M.E. Meek. Coral Gables: Miami University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990) [1980] *The Logic of Practice*. Trans. R. Nice. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Cixous, H. (1981) [1975] “The Laugh of the Medusa,” In E. Marks and I. de Courtivron (Eds.) *New French Feminists*. New York: Schocken, pp. 245-264.
- and C. Clément. (1986) [1977] *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. B. Wing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- De Beauvoir, H. (1952) [1949] *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. New York: Knopf.
- De Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- De Lauretis, T. (1984) *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . (1987) *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1978) [1967] “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Writing and Difference*. Trans. A. Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- . (1982) [1971] “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. A. Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eco, U. (1976) *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Freud, S. (1953-74) [1933] “Femininity,” *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. J. Strachey (Ed.) Vol 22. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 112-135.
- Godard, B. (1991) “Translating (with) *The Speculum*,” *Traduction, Terminologie, Redaction* 4, 2: 85-121.
- Greimas, A. J. (1983) [1970] *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*. Trans. P. Perron and F.H. Collins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Grosz, E. (1989) *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1978) *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Irigaray, L. (1985a) [1974] *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. G. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- . (1985b) [1977] *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. C. Porter. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- . (1987) “Le Sexe linguistique,” *Langages* 89.
- . (1990) *Sexes et genres à travers les langues*. Paris: Grasset.
- Jakobson, R. (1971) [1957] “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” *Selected Writings*. vol 2. The Hague: Mouton.
- Kristeva, J. (1967) “Le mot, le dialogue et le roman,” *Critique* 21, no 14 (April). In *Desire in Language*.
- . (1970) *Le Texte du roman*. The Hague: Mouton.
- . (1973) “The System and the Speaking Subject,” *Times Literary Supplement* 12 (October): 1249.
- . (1977) “De la généralité sémiotique,” Interview with C. Bauer and P. Ouellet. *Etudes littéraires* 10, 3: 337-46.
- (1980) *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Art and Literature*. Ed. and Trans. L. Roudiez. New York: Columbia.
- . (1981) [1975] “Women’s Time,” Trans. A. Jardine and H. Blake. *Signs* 7, 1: 13-35.
- . (1982) [1980] *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. L. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP.
- . (1984) [1974] *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. M. Waller. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . (1986) [1974] *About Chinese Women*. London: Marion Boyars.
- Lacan, J. (1982) [1975] “A Love Letter,” *Feminine Sexuality*. Trans. J. Rose. New York: Pantheon.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1969) [1949]. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Trans. C. Jacobson and B.G. Schoepf. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.
- Liotard, J.-F. (1993) [1974] *Libidinal Economy*. Trans. I. Grant. Bloomington: Indiana University UP.
- Mauss, M. (1954) [1950] *The Gift: Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. I. Cunnison. London: Cohen & West.
- Moi, T. (1985) *Sexual/Textual Politics*. London: Methuen.
- Peirce, C.S. (1931-1958) *Collected Papers*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rubin, G. (1975) “The Traffic in Women: The ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.” In R. Reiter (Ed.) *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Saussure, F. (1959) [1915] *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. W. Baskin. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Silverman, K. (1983) *The Subject of Semiotics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . (1992) *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, D.E. (1987) *The Everyday World as Problematic*. Boston: Northeastern UP.
- Spivak, G.C. (1983) “Displacement and the Discourse of Woman.” In M. Krupnick (Ed.) *Displacement: Derrida and After*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, pp. 169-190.
- . (1985) “The Rani of Sirmur.” In *Europe and Its Others*. F. Barker (Ed.) Colchester: University of Essex, pp. 128-151.
- . (1986) “Imperialism and Sexual Difference,” *Oxford Literary Review* 8, 1-2: 225-240.
- . (1987) “French Feminism in an International Frame.” In *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York & London: Methuen, pp. 134-153.
- . (1993) “The Politics of Translation,” *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York: Routledge, pp. 173-200.
- Stephenson, K. 1989 “Luce Irigaray: Theoretical and Empirical Approaches to the Representation of Subjectivity and Sexual Difference in Language Use.” In *Semiotics 1988*. J. Deely, T. Prewitt and K. Haworth (Eds.) Lanham: University Press of America, pp. 412-417.
- Threadgold, T. (1997) *Feminist Poetics: Poesis, Performance, Histories*. London & New York: Routledge.

Formal Insistence

Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York: Zone Books, 1997.

By Paul Hegarty

I. Reading and using informe/formless

In recent years, "informe" or formless has come to be seen as a key concept in the work of Georges Bataille, and also to be of great use to those who seek to expand on his work. It chimes neatly with concerns raised in contemporary art and theory, and at some level, arguably, with postmodern politics where identity and power are seen more as processes than as fixed entities to be accepted or rejected. Bois and Krauss' book, *Formless: A User's Guide*, works as a theorisation of modern art through concepts generated principally by Bataille, focusing in particular on the idea of formless, as a new way of (dis)ordering categories of modern art. Initially an exhibition and catalogue, the catalogue does much more than one would expect (like Bataille's *dictionnaire critique* in *Documents*), and has exceeded its frame to become a key reference for those interested in Bataille, art theory, and the processes and trajectories of modern art.

In the now famous, brief, article, "Informe," Bataille sought to define a concept - a concept which, as it was being defined, would come apart, and become indefinite, indefinable, and, ultimately, an expression of the undefined. The article purports to be both a dictionary article and the location of the concept of Bataille's perverse *dictionnaire critique* - a status it shares with the article *Encyclopédie* in the eponymous 18th century work. "Informe" aims to delineate a dictionary where it is not "the meaning of words, but their tasks" that are given (Bataille 1985a: 31). Terms would no longer be allocated a clear locatable meaning, but would become the processes they already should be. The word that above all has such a task is "informe" - and the choice of such a word rather than meaning, function, form, definition or use, signals not only that these are redundant in terms of content, but also in terms of form - i.e. they do not do the thing Bataille wants the critical dictionary to do. Nonetheless, informe/formless becomes a term, "a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form" (ibid.). It would be easy to conclude that the formless is somehow a new privileged term, that it represents what is most interesting for Bataille, the most erotic, sacred, transgressive, etc. That it brings things down can be seen as "good," in the light of other articles from the 1930s, but that it "requir[es] that each thing have its form" (ibid.) seems to run counter to what we know of Bataille's logic of excess. In fact, informe/formless is the term that allows all form, as it organises all that is without form into one formless form. But Bataille does not intend informe/formless to stop there. The removal of the article, such that we do not have "the formless," or "l'informe" is the clearest indication of this move. Secondly, it is thereby distinguished from formlessness (the habitual sense of "l'informe"), and is removed from the religious (e.g. Augustine, Aquinas) realm where nothingness/formlessness takes on a new value. Gnosticism is still allowed in (see Bataille 1985b) because it, like all alchemy, is about transformation, even if in the end it is about a quest for ultimate truth.

Bataille further removes the privilege of defining all that is without form in the next sentence: "what it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm" (Bataille 1985a: 31). As the word works, its work is undone. In so doing it joins creatures assigned a "low" value, ones humanity shuns. Those who seek to conceptualise the world, he continues, impose form, covering matter with "a mathematical frock coat" (ibid.), bringing it into language, meaning, and hierarchies of suitability, moral goodness, truthfulness. Against this is informe/formless: "on the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit" (ibid.), which then replaces, or persistently undoes the imposition of forms. Everything is now in the realm of the formless, with form an unfortunate and ideological limiter.

Critics tend to emphasize one element over another, even within this text of one paragraph: Bois and Krauss insist on the task that is informe/formless; Georges Didi-Huberman (1995) on resemblance and its undoing. Neither seems to account for the taking on of arbitrary form. The earthworm, spider and spit have been read for content, and read as low, as things feared by humans, as things to be disposed of. Earthworms signal our mortality, spit our location in an economy of waste and excess (and, eventually, death again), the spider an alien invader, itself an excretive producer of note. But when the spider is first mentioned, along with the worm, it is to be destroyed. They lose their form, and their menace at the level of meaning, to become even stranger, even more excluded. When the spider returns, the universe is "*something like*" a spider or spit - spit here is not an amorphous waste liquid - it is a precise, if only chaotically predictable form, the *crachat* is a gob of spit, as opposed to spit in general. The spider already has a form. So the text refers to two forms, but undermines their solidity in the "something like." In my view, this signals the arbitrariness of forms, and that informe/formless is the way in which formlessness is present (or better still, absent) in all form.

What is clear is that this text is not about aesthetics, but perception and matter. The only intentionality, or purposiveness exists in the guise of the making of the "mathematical frock coat," and is there to be undone. So can we get to an aesthetics from here? The grounds on which we can do that consist essentially of the presumption that Bataille's thought is a unitary one, however exploded this unity, and that informe/formless ties in with his notions of materialism, scatology, heterology, the sacred, *dépense*. The next question is whether you assume a total unity, and include later works such as *Manet*, *Lascaux*, or *The Tears of Eros*. Whilst Didi-Huberman is inclined to rove over Bataille's *œuvre*, Bois and Krauss more or less limit their research to the 1930s, and to *Documents* in particular. Arguably, Bataille cannot have an aesthetics, a domain of rational judgements. On the other hand, art has a clear and consistent place in his writings, one defined by its relation to the sacred and to inner experience.

Despite what we might infer from his theoretical writings, Bataille is hopelessly in thrall to figurative art, and maintains a gothic aesthetic in terms of that which is figured in the art he favours and writes on. In the pre-war writings, Surrealism, or associated painters such as Picasso and Miro, takes centre stage, primarily because such art summons something dark and hidden by respectable society, notably in the form of eroticism (Dali, though, joined Breton in criticising Bataille's take on surrealism as puerile and obsessed with dirt - this being a bad thing for Dali and Breton, but not wholly inaccurate with regard to Bataille). After the war, after the writings on inner experience and general economy, we get his analyses of prehistoric cave paintings, which serve as an illustration of the primacy of Bataille's own version of the sacred in establishing humanity, and a consideration of the human face as deformed, or unformed (Didi-Huberman reads this back, through articles such as "Figure humaine," into informe/formless), compared to the animals depicted. Bataille's book on Manet is the closest he gets to a reading based on formal concerns rather than a discussion of themes, but it still fits with his overall project (even though this would have been seen as an anti-project). *The Tears of Eros* offers a history of art based on depictions of suffering, death and the erotic. The book is almost a parodic illustration of Bataille's thought, but what is most significant is that it is the experience induced by certain images that counts, hence his unproblematic inclusion of documentary photographs alongside paintings and drawings spanning several centuries of Western art. As well as the exemplification of his thought in the analyses of art, we can also see another surprising continuity: the intention of the artists is, at best, deemed to be secondary. Admittedly, this does not seem to be due to an explicit decision by Bataille, but emerges inexorably from the insistence on experience of (from) the image, such that the "true" purpose of an image is irrelevant. Indeed, its artfulness is equally irrelevant.

Equally interesting in a possible Bataillean aesthetic is what is missed out: other than a couple of cursory mentions, Dada is absent; abstract art, including the contentiously labelled *art informel* eludes his attention entirely (although Masson is deemed important in the development of postwar abstract art, Bataille's reading of his work de-emphasizes the abstraction, the painting, and even, ironically, the materiality of the painting). We can often forget how late Bataille died in terms of the history of modernism: he is unaware of *arte povera*, of conceptual art of any sort. There would be strong Bataillean arguments against the latter in particular, but he does not make them. Taken as a whole, there can be no doubt that Bataille's conception of art is strangely limited, but his other writings offer considerable scope for thinking contemporary art, and this is where Bois and Krauss come in, into a space cleared through, on the one hand, a significant

failure or absence in Bataille, and on the other, the potential unleashed in his perversely modernist notions such as informe/formless.

Bois and Krauss argue that modernist art has a lot to do with various ways in which informe/formless comes about, or works its way through things. They “intend to put the formless to work, not only to map certain trajectories, or slippages, but in some way to ‘perform’ them” (*Formless*, 18-21). There can be no final definition or new taxonomic order, as “nothing in and of itself, the formless has only an operational existence: it is a performative [...]. The formless is an operation” (18). Bois and Krauss are well aware of the dangers of putting something to use, even if they under-read Hollier’s “The Use-value of the Impossible” as authorising an alternative, subversive use-value, rather than suggesting a subverted use-value. They insist that informe/formless is working, is at work in any case – they are casting themselves and the works of art discussed into “the” formless, unrecuperating as they go. However, even at this early stage, a criticism must appear: why this emphasis on work? Admittedly, it removes the disinterestedness that the aesthetic realm purports to work from, but in Bataillean terms, a return to work seems odd. The problem seems to be in reading *besogne*/task as something neutral, whereas there is obligation involved: the work is unwanted. Informe/formless is forced to work for form to be, not for itself. In other words, the emphasis on work is justified, but should not be praised, or set up as positive, for example in the sleight of hand hidden in the term “process.”

Given the strange conditions of constructing a Bataillean non-aesthetic where there is no aesthetic as such, the question of faithfulness to Bataille comes up forcibly. The two writers specify that they are not in the business of following the thought of informe/formless through Bataille’s work, and, more significantly, that they reject the viability of a thematic reading of the formless:

(... Nothing would be easier than to imagine something like ‘the formless in art’, on the same pattern as ‘the dog in art’ or ‘the pastoral landscape’); our vigilance in this regard explains certain exclusions. For example, *Artist’s Shit (1961)* by Piero Manzoni was absent from the section devoted to ‘base materialism’ since the risk was too great that, despite ourselves, we would end up promoting a fetishization of excrement – something very foreign to Bataille’s thought. (22)

Leaving aside the tenuousness of the last statement, we have some essential guidelines here as to what will follow in the exhibition/book. Given the way in which Bataille’s formless works, the rejection of thematics is an important move. However, if we are being faithful to Bataille, we could certainly include the obvious. This rejection is not an error though, but an indication of the interesting problematic of this book (on the theory side) which is that to be faithful to Bataille is to reject much of what he wrote: we are therefore in a position of sovereign failure, a refusal to succeed (and thereby damn the analysis to a more mundane failure in Bataillean terms).

There is a problem here though – one that crops up on several occasions throughout the book. Bois and Krauss are strangely beholden to the intentions of an artist, or what seems to be the primary purpose of a work. The exceptions

to this are in a patronising aside on Dubuffet (142) to which I return below, and a more successful analysis of some of Mike Kelley’s work. Kelley would be just as much of an obvious example of formlessness as Manzoni, and yet Krauss finds something more at work (247-51). Manzoni could be read into a Bataillean history such as this by linking the basic consumerist critique with the unassimilability of the enclosed (or excluded) shit, or, for example by thinking about the process of production as such, in its materiality. Are Bois and Krauss guilty of the same squeamishness as Breton? They also exclude abject art on roughly the same basis. Again, this comes from a gesture of faith in the artist’s intention, the imputability of a meaning to the work: abject art is too literal, and therefore does not engage with the processes of informe/formless goes the argument (23, 146). Meanwhile, there are other artworks which cannot be included because this would in some way betray them (“how could we have presented a happening without casting it in concrete?” (24)).

These exclusions reveal another hidden faith, a faith in formalism, i.e. that the right objects to read are those whose purpose can be revealed through a formal reading. Despite Bataille, Bois and Krauss read the material processes and products of a work. This is certainly what is missing in Bataille, but does it run the risk of precisely missing that which might be closer to the formless? Have Bois and Krauss stopped too readily at the point where informe/formless is just a type of form, and therefore exactly the pre-Bataillean sense of the formless as the place where all these unformed things go? How is Smithson’s *Glue Pour* (1969) less literal than Manzoni’s shit?

II. How to get Low Enough

The “User’s Guide” follows the same organisational principle as the *dictionnaire critique* – that is to say there is one, but it is arbitrary, and suggests an order that is not quite there, neatly illustrating the formless working itself through this book. The individual pieces are gathered into four sections: base materialism, horizontality, pulse, and entropy, which the authors deem the key processes of informe/formless to be found in and through certain types of (largely) modernist works of art. The first important theoretical point made by Bois is that Bataille’s work is structured through dichotomies, and that these are opposed to the dialectic (going against Didi-Huberman’s claim to this effect), as they offer no resolution. Neither can they be seen as traditional binary oppositions that recent theory identifies in order to undermine. What we see in Bataille is a “double use’ of everything. There is an elevated use, consecrated by metaphysical idealism and rational humanism, and there is a low use” (47). So the mouth has a high function – speaking, and a low one, where it expels matter rather than words. Systematic dichotomy is undone as system through the process of interaction, as exemplified through “the low” as it lowers the high:

Everything splits into two, but this division is not symmetrical (there is no simple separation of sides by means of a vertical axis), it is dynamic (the line of division is horizontal): the low implicates the high in its own fall. It is the low use, its imperious affirmation, that

fells the hot-air balloons of the ideal with one malevolent blow. (ibid.)

What we have here is one of the best statements of Bataille’s systematising, and of how his notion of relations exceeds both linear and dialectic logic. In the “Dialectic” section, Bois confirms this exceeding: “one must not confuse dialectics with scission (the division of everything in two, each having its high and low part” (67), a particularly apt distinction, given the role of “scission” in the processes outlined in Bataille’s *Eroticism*. The overall argument has to be borne in mind throughout the four sections, where “base materialism” is the “low” of idealism; the horizontal the “low” to vertical’s “high”; pulse the low form to the high of steady meaning; entropy the counterpart to accumulation (of form).

“Base materialism” is Bataille’s term for a materialism that would escape all idealism, conceptualisation or formalisation. The informe is a lowering of form (51), a rendering into material, such that material comes to be as only material. Works that are brought in to typify this movement are Fontana’s *Ceramica spaziale* (1949) and Rauschenberg’s *Untitled* (1951). The former is a dark mass, its contours jagged. It is a huge lump that seems to have been chewed and then spat out (see 56-7). The latter is an expanse of black, with the random undulations of the newspaper that lies underneath disturbing the (notion of) surface. “The painting is a whole, like the fecal cube by Fontana, an undifferentiated piece of matter” (59). These are clear examples of how informe/formless plays itself out across, under and through a surface, but the next move might surprise, as Rauschenberg’s pictures involving dirt are praised, whilst Dubuffet is half-heartedly valorised. The exclusion of Dubuffet begins here, as his insistence on “rehabilitating” dirt, and, worse still, titling his paintings (see 142), essentially removes him from those who *intend* the informe (59, 62). Also mobilised is the authenticity of Rauschenberg’s dirt (59) – his wish to not do anything to dirt somehow naturalising the dirt he uses to not do anything with....

The problem for all who seek to show, bring or let be the formless, is transposition. For something to stay outside the world of form requires that an object remain a process, disabling the imposition of form at all stages. Arguably this is impossible, and that is its interest: the attempt can only ever fail, and this failing is formless/informe (the same could be said of attempts to theorise or demonstrate the formless).

Before closing on this section of the book, we have to return to the informe as work. According to Bois, the informe has a task: “each time the homogeneous raises its head and reconstitutes itself (which it never stops doing since society coheres only by means of its cement), the job of the *informe*, base materialism, and scission is to decapitate it” (71). Are we in the presence of a very normal use value? Can the informe be mobilised so readily? Why is the informe on the side we wish to be on? If we valorise it for its usefulness, aren’t we falling into the trap Breton does when proclaiming Sade a misunderstood liberationist? According to Bataille, those who were against Sade were closer to the truth (see Bataille 1985d). The heterogeneous is not to be mobilised. Even “letting it happen” implies too much control. I would argue that in order to recognise this, we need to look beyond the aims of artists or particular artworks. Given that a “base material” artwork is a play of failures, we should look for

what fails to come to form or formlessness – then we might be on to where the formless might (not) be in relation to art.

The second section of the book focuses on “horizontal,” with the central premise being that Western culture is predicated on the supremacy of vision, which represents the height of reason, and offers what seems to be unmediated access to the truth of the world. Our upright posture is the signal of our having left the animal world, with the face replacing the anus as a point of reference (see Bataille, “The Pineal Eye,” “Big Toe”). Also, unlike animals, Krauss claims, our version of sight is based on distance:

The vision of animals [is] focused on the horizontal ground on which they and their prey both travel, a vision that is therefore, in certain ways, merely an extension of the sense of touch; [but] with the sightedness of mankind recharacterized as ‘beholding’. Qualified by its acknowledgement of the distance that separates the ‘beholder’ from his object, the gap built into the human perceptual relation is what provides a space for all those varieties of vision which separate man from animals: contemplation, wonder, scientific inquiry, disinterestedness, aesthetic pleasure. (90)

So the work of “informe/formless” can be seen in work that horizontalizes in order to remove the control of “what is to be seen” through mankind’s “expanded” vision. It is a double operation: the privileging of that which exists to be seen horizontally from a vertical position (e.g. pictures on a wall) is to be removed; secondly, in undoing the verticality inherent in what has been deemed proper art (in the modern and early modern period presumably), our conception of what we see will be brought low.

These processes are exemplified in Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, where the canvas is literally brought low – often unprimed, it is set on the floor, and acts as the site of a different kind of painting. Painting the pictures on the ground makes them initially “horizontal” (“the floor, Pollock’s work seemed to propose, in being below culture, was out of the axis of the body, and thus also below form,” 95). Pollock refuses the gestures of standard technique, and in so doing, manages to maintain the horizontalization even when the picture is raised to the wall:

The power of Pollock’s mark as index meant that it continued to bear witness to the horizontal’s resistance to the vertical, and that it was the material condition of this testimony – the oily, scabby, shiny, ropey qualities of the self evidently horizontal mark – that would pit itself against the visual formation of the Gestalt, thus securing the condition of the work as formless. (97)

Whilst Pollock might seem an obvious choice, it is not in the superficial appearance of formlessness that his work can be seen as formless in Bataille’s sense. Warhol’s dance steps and oxidation pictures balance the epic of Pollock’s painting (Krauss is perhaps disingenuous in dismissing the relevance of Pollock’s titles, on the basis that someone else provided them, 95), and this balance is taken further with a consideration of kitsch. Interestingly, the kitsch is sought in artists

not normally associated with it (Fautrier, Fontana). According to Bois, kitsch could have featured in *Documents* as a form of lowering high art expectations (118), but presumes that Bataille didn’t approve of kitsch because it requires ironic distance (119). This is generous, as whilst it is theoretically consistent with Bataille, the evidence suggests he didn’t like irony because it wasn’t obvious, literal or figural enough. The reference to kitsch is also anachronistic, because it only gradually acquires self-conscious expression (i.e. as kitsch, rather than as “lovely”).

This section of the book contains much that advances Bataille and moves on from him, but once again, takes things very literally, on the basis of certain aesthetic pre-judgements. I don’t see why Dubuffet doesn’t do the same things as Pollock: if we take the pictures Bois and Krauss grudgingly allow in (the *Matériologies* of the 1950s), then isn’t something similar happening in terms of the maintenance of the horizontal, when what is supposedly the earth, made of low art materials, is tilted out of its plane on to the wall? Similarly, for Bois and Krauss, early Giacometti is part of the informe/formless disruption of modernist critical history, for as long as his sculptures stay in the horizontal plane (and/or involve motion, the focus of the third section of the book). The main body of his sculpture – the tapering, tall, blasted figures – do not count. It would seem that the exaggerated feet (often merged into one foot), the strangely elongated bodies, ending in tiny heads *could* be construed within Bataille’s logic of base materialism (although the aspiration could be seen as upward rather than down). The surface of the bodies merges with the interior – these are not the body as Body, but the decay of that Idea, the materialisation of bodies as process. Their dismissal on the grounds of verticality is superficial. Giacometti’s later sculptures trouble the vertical, and trouble the three-dimensionality they purport to work in – absolutely different figures appear according to the perspective adopted. Arguably the exclusion is justified as these figures are actually transposed from the horizontal, even from death.¹ The question of transposition is the first point at which we might start thinking Giacometti outside of the realm of informe/formless, but, in short, this is the kind of argument or discussion that does not occur in this case, even though it does appear for other equally canonical artists.

Bois and Krauss are more convincing when including artists, as in the case of Morris, interested as he is in the play of form – the example here is of the felt piece that has a pattern when laid down, but is to be hung, such that this pattern is undone, replaced by a “formless” pile of dangling strips of felt. The piece illustrates that form has to be somewhere in the vicinity of formlessness for there to be any informe/formless. It does, however, also insist on the importance of consciously mobilising this process, this *besogne*/task.

III. In and Out

The next section “Pulse” again talks of the undermining of meaning and form, this time in terms of motion, of instability. This can be literal, as in the case of Duchamp’s *Anémic cinéma* (1925), or indirect, as with Cy Twombly’s *Olympia* (1957). It is also defined negatively (Dubuffet and Beuys are not “pulsing”). Krauss argues that Duchamp’s rotating sculptures (and films thereof) disrupt the possibility of saying

meaning is *here* – as any meaning that is found is lost in movement. Beyond this, mobile art is literally strange within art in general: is it sculpture? Film? A succession of pictorial works? This could be extended to non-narrative film, particularly the less self-consciously non-narrative film of early cinema. Later non-narrative film (Warhol’s work is often seen as exemplary here. Krauss refers to James Coleman’s “flicker films,” 161-3) might rely on a stilling of pulse (as a reaction to narrative film). Giacometti’s early swinging sculpture is cited, as are Lygia Clark’s pieces that inflate/deflate (such as *Air and Stone* 1967).

This section is also the occasion to attack certain art strategies, in the guise of wondering whether they fit the informe or not. Here informe/formless becomes, a bit too readily, a paradigm. Art informel is excluded, absolutely correctly, as being a misnomer, a term that makes some feeble postwar art seem more adventurous than it was or is. A few works by Fautrier, Wols (photographs) and Dubuffet are doing something formless, but Dubuffet is essentially excluded, on the basis that not only is he interested in form rather than “formless,” he is interested in figuration, in the bringing to figuration (141). Part of the problem is the insistence on titles, which then encourage the viewer to bring the form along with Dubuffet (142). Bois has not sufficiently dealt with this work to dismiss it so fully: what if the bringing to figuration doesn’t work, or is not meant to? Could this failed bringing to form be “more” formless than many of the examples selected in this book? What if the titles dismantle possible readings of what is going on in the pictures (I’m not suggesting this applies to all Dubuffet’s work)? Most tellingly, in terms of the book’s overall strategy, how come the words are a problem in Dubuffet, but the source of interest in Twombly in the very next sub-section (Krauss, “Olympia,” 147-52)?²

Joseph Beuys is also attacked (143-6), with an impatience that goes beyond the question of criteria for admittance into the formless club. Beuys might seem Bataille because of an interest in a perverse form of the sacred, a wish to reinvent ritual, and an interest in materials and ideas not traditionally brought in to the art world. But Krauss convincingly and economically dispenses with any such thought, stating that Beuys reintroduces the transcendent, with his “redemptive phrase ‘each man is an artist’” (145). Beuys is after meaning, however strangely, and nothing distances him from the mystic asceticism Bataille persistently rejected. The section closes with some psychoanalysis, another systematic imposition of meaning Bataille’s theories reject, but that is clearly an important analytical tool for Krauss in particular.

The last of the four sections, selections of pictures, is “Entropy.” Bois links entropy to excess, even if they are ostensibly radically opposed in Bataille’s thought (224). For Bataille, although excess is a generative process, and entropy implies running down and homogenisation, according to Bois, what we see in Bataille is an entropic principle, where entropy itself changes status. This section of the book/exhibition concentrates on the use/display/mobilisation of waste, waste products, decay, decline. We see tearing (Arp, Serra, Clark), melting and unbuilding (Gordon Matta-Clark), machines that move slowly (Pol Bury, Morris, Medalla). But it is not the theme that counts in the end: “properly speaking, it is not an issue of

tearing or of work, but of the tearing up of the concept of the work" (210).

One focus is on urban waste, with Claes Oldenberg's collecting of "ray guns" in all materials, from around the city, and also the décollages of Jacques Villeglé and Raymond Hains (i.e. what seem to be multilayered billboards/fences etc, with only strips of the initial images and/or words remaining). Villeglé and Hains are guilty of illustrating that intentional informe is way less interesting than when it occurs in other ways. Is this stuff supposed to be social critique, perhaps? Even if it is, this type of art is stealing, recuperating the critical position anyone outside the art world could have come up with. If, by some stretch of good will, that could be seen as the point, then it only needs making once. The worst problem here, in terms of informe/formless is that it is impossible to find a more limited set of art works, or a more monological strategy. If only Bois and Krauss had allowed themselves a "failure" section, there would be no problem (this to go with the missing "despite the artist's intentions" section).

Of much more interest is Matta-Clark. His is a conceptual art not bound by the logic and inherent rationalism, or idealism, of much conceptual art. He manages to be profoundly critical, and one of the ways that is ensured is through the decay of the works themselves (buildings to be knocked down, works in buildings to be knocked down, from destroyed spaces, spaces that could never be). Bois tells us, somewhat unnecessarily, that Matta-Clark was against architecture, that he would reject its implication in power relations, its position as upholder of rationality as well as economic might (191). Bois saves himself a bit with the excellent and imaginative "Very Slow," on works whose movement might be initially undiscernible, and is subtly wrong, tying in with Krauss's otherwise superfluous "Uncanny."

Krauss provides possibly the strongest "article" in the book ("X Marks the Spot"), wherein Bruce Nauman's casts "of space" are set against the rationalist idealism of minimalist sculpture. Amongst other pieces, Nauman's *Space Under My Steel Chair in Düsseldorf* (1965-68) "takes the path of implosion or congealing, and the thing to which it submits this stranglehold of immobility is not matter, but what vehiculates and subtends it: space itself" (215). The piece also resists transposition, as "the congealing of space into this rigidly entropic condition also strips it of being 'like' anything" (216). Allan McCollum's casts of fossils are also brought in, and the two artists both bring "the very specificity of the trace itself (the 'this') as a form of entropy, a congealing of the paradigm" (219). In this article, not only is there a highly insightful reading, but also the avoidance of many of the problems that occur elsewhere in the book (with regard to choice of materials, titling, how literally something is formless or not).

The closing piece by Krauss, "The Destiny of the *Informe*," subtly argues for why abject art is not something connected with a Bataillean informe/formless. Basically, the abjection that is generally being referred to is Kristeva's version, which Krauss argues is based on psychoanalysis, and the problematic of the subject (237). I would disagree about the level of difference between Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and Bataille's position, and would argue that *The Accursed Share*, vol II would come very close to Kristeva's

position, when combined with Bataille's article on abjection (and Mary Douglas 1991). The use made of abjection, though, has tended to be on some sort of psychoanalytic basis (not always Freudian), and therefore is to be excluded from formless. Even more importantly, abject art is highly purposeful, cathartic, and therefore transcendent, however radical, threatening, dangerous or unpleasant the work. Earlier, writing on Beuys and performance art, Krauss states "the *formless* is inimical to this drive toward the transcendental, which always tries to recuperate the excremental, or the sacrificial fall, by remaking it as *theme*" (146).

Nonetheless, the closing chapter sees Cindy Sherman (some of her more overtly disturbing pictures) and Mike Kelley brought into the fold. Krauss argues that we can go beyond the abject content, theme, or even form of the works, to discern an operation: "it would be a matter of thinking the concept [abjection] operationally, as a process of 'alteration'" (245). Alteration is the opposite of transposition, which fixes form, "brings high." So it is not Kelley at his most disgusting that we are looking at, but his drawings, drawings which work through their "indeterminacy" (250).

Once again, though, we have to look at the arbitrary dividing line drawn between Kelley on one side, and The Vienna Actionists on the other. I have no doubt that Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus, Otto Muehl and Rudolf Schvarkogler were after some sort of heretical transcendence, and that this applies to much performance art of the extreme variety, whether male or female (Bois and Krauss do not even mention any female performance art of this type). But the process we are calling informe could still be working, even, but maybe especially, despite the intentions of the artists. Maybe there is an excess within the operations of the event itself – for example, the unpredictability of the event, the *material* that is way lower than any mentioned in this book – usually bodily material, sometimes attached, sometimes excreted, sometimes removed. Whilst agreeing with Krauss's argument as a whole, I do not think the question has been sufficiently asked of performance art (most of what goes under the banner of abject art). Can we really say that Marina Abramovic, Orlan, Ron Athey, Vita Acconci, Chris Burden, Gina Pane can all be dismissed without mention? If there are practical reasons for this exclusion, involving the curation of the exhibition, then we would presumably have been told, so we are left with unargued condemnations and absences. We can only conclude that somehow these artists didn't fit. Were they too formless? Was their literalism a problem? It wouldn't be for Bataille.

There are several problems with this book, as there are with the rival text of Didi-Huberman. But much of this comes from the paradoxes of Bataille's own "aesthetic" – how far do we accept it, in order to use it? Can or should we *use* it? How faithful do we want to be? How polemical should we be? At a more general level, what do we make of artists' intentions, or the ostensible purpose of a particular work? Despite the prejudices of this book, the writers have construed an impressive theorisation, that, I think, actually works a lot of the time, particularly when they follow their own injunction to stay away from obvious

themes and content (because of their attitudes to obvious themes and content). The exhibition does re-organise the categories of modern art to an interesting, if not threatening extent. The book represents the two functions (theory/exhibition) well, although the French edition is significantly better illustrated. The art here emerges from all kinds of different art practices, and yet. And yet, for a book based on "bringing low," on removing the privilege of rational thought, I'm left with a question – how come all this art is visual? What about the other senses, or works which reduce the capacity of the senses to be processed? How far are we from form in the end? Is it a problem?

Paul Hegarty teaches in the French Department at University College Cork, Ireland. He is the author of *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (2000).

References

- Bataille, Georges (1980) *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*. London: Macmillan.
- (1973) *Literature and Evil*. London: Calder and Boyars.
- (1983) *Manet*. London: Macmillan.
- (1985) *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- (1985a) "Formless," in *Visions of Excess*, 31. Translation of "Informe," in *OCI*, 217.
- (1985b) "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," in *Visions of Excess*, 45-52.
- (1985c) "The Pineal Eye," in *Visions of Excess*, 79-90.
- (1985d) "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade," in *Visions of Excess*, 91-102.
- (1987) *Eroticism*. London: Marion Boyars.
- (1989) *The Tears of Eros*. San Francisco: City Lights.
- (1991) *The Accursed Share*, vols II and III. New York: Zone Books.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges (1995) *La Ressemblance informe: ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*. Paris: Macula.
- Douglas, Mary (1991) *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Genet, Jean (1991) "Alberto Giacometti's Studio," in *Alberto Giacometti*. Liverpool: Tate Gallery, pp. 16-32.
- Gill, Carolyn Bailey, ed. (1995) *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*. London: Routledge.
- Hollier, Denis (1995) "The Use-value of the Impossible," in Gill, ed. (1995).
- Kristeva, Julia (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Endnotes

¹ On this point, see Genet (1991). Genet's reading is not one Bataille would agree with, echoing as it does Sartre's take on Genet, criticised in Bataille (1973).

² Intriguingly, all references to Dubuffet in this book are in sections written by Bois. Does Krauss perhaps dispute his view? Or is Dubuffet simply not worth mentioning? My own view is that there must be some level of agreement, given the vigorousness of the attack.

Liberating Semiotics

Scott Simpkins, *Literary Semiotics: A Critical Approach*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, and Oxford: Lexington Books, 2001.

By William Pencak

I chose "Liberating Semiotics" as the title of my review for that is exactly what Scott Simpkins has done in this fine book. His purpose is to present current semiotic theories, and theories critical of semiotics, "as a collective 'discussion' which can be probed in a manner that yields considerable insight into its strengths and weaknesses" (1). Simpkins describes - rather than defines, for his very method eschews definition, discussions of which reduce a whole to a part as with the blind men and the elephant - the goal of his book as "an extremely self-conscious attempt at approaching sign theory and practice in a manner that attempts to resist the temptations of rationalistic reduction," an "interrogation of the tendency within this discussion to embrace the crippling restraints of a decidedly conservative semiotics" (2-3).

Simpkins first turns his attention to authors who criticize the whole enterprise of semiotics. They can only do so, he argues, by "sleight of hand" through "surreptitiously" defining semiotics "as a conceptually homogeneous enterprise" (5), based on their misperceptions and narrow range of reading. For instance, John Stewart insists that semiotic analysis rests on the false understanding that language be both "world-constituting" and yet "a *system* that is instrumentally employed by already-constituted humans to represent aspects of their world." Looking primarily at linguistically inclined semioticians, he claims that semiotics ignores "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" (1995: 113). Similarly, Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress criticize a semiotic straw man when they maintain that we must go beyond semiotics to realize that "meaning resides so strongly and pervasively in other systems of meaning . . . that a concentration on words alone is not enough" (1988: 2). Simpkins responds unequivocally: "this, of course, is absurd. Numerous semiotics discussion focus on the same concerns" (23): for instance, semiotic analyses of art, history, law, the natural world, and literature investigate overlapping and interacting aspects of the universe without necessarily privileging any of the them. Stewart, and others who insist semiotics denies the objective reality of a real world apart from linguistic codes, are invoking the extreme to judge the norm (i.e. all Muslims are terrorists).

Although caricatures of semiotics have hindered its progress in academic circles - How many semioticians does it take to screw in a light bulb? What light bulb? Simpkins regards such misrepresentations as a minor intellectual (as opposed to major practical) obstacle to the proper employment and understanding of semiotics. The real obstacle semiotics must overcome to realize its full potential is the fear by some of its most prominent practitioners of uncertainty, of an open universe, and their desire to set limits within which interpretation of signs may legitimately proceed. Simpkins'

main target is none other than Umberto Eco, the best-known semiotician in the world and probably the only one generally known outside the world of academe.

Simpkins points out Eco's vacillation between holding that a text is open to infinite interpretation and his belief that there must be some control to prevent indefinite interpretation that would lead to "anything goes." "I feel sympathetic with the project of opening readings," Eco states, but adds: "I also feel the fundamental duty of protecting [readings]. . . . to defend the rights of interpretation against the mere use of a text" (1990: 54, 62). Simpkins' insight is to show how Eco's own writing style employs economic metaphors which show that his real interpretive commitment is to set bounds to interpretive creativity. Eco warns against "semantic waste," or a "surplus of possible and still imprecise significations conveyed by something that - in terms of conversational or narrative economy - should not be there" (1990: 138-139). In contrast, Simpkins applauds Floyd Merrell's use of natural as opposed to economic metaphors to describe a dialogic, ongoing, and open-ended process of interpretation: "Neither signs nor consciousness can hope to arrest the semiotic flow within which they are caught. . . . They are swept along by the current," which "eventually becomes the flow of signs Peirce dubbed *semiosis* - which at times twists and turns into whitewater, and on occasion even appears chaotic, and infinitely complex maelstrom" (1995: 5-6). Eco thus emerges in Simpkins analysis not only as an interpreter but as a sign himself - of humanity's seemingly eternal quest for certainty, for boundaries - the very quest which semiotics eschews.

It is tempting simply to give Simpkins the palm of victory, since a moment's glance at history reveals both the philosophical and practical fecundity of interpretations that the originators of texts would have regarded as absurd. (Perhaps the most ludicrous example is the way people who otherwise pretend to take the Bible - parts of it, that is - literally - based on a translation at least a thousand years younger than the text - reveal their semiotic audacity when it comes to the Book of Revelations. Perhaps the most wonderful example is how some of the very same people have created marvelous art and literature from the same audacity.)

Yet - and here pragmatism as well as semiotics come into play - we simply have to stop interpreting from time to time to get our bearings. Eco, I think, both embodies and is more sympathetic than Simpkins to the all-too-human fact that we need signposts as well as signs, even if these are only provisionally planted. Simpkins indeed recognizes this, but whereas with Eco I sense the angst, and awareness of the paradoxical nature of human existence - caught between a desire for freedom and order, for selfhood and community, for ritual and creativity - whereas Simpkins, it seems to me, solves the problem correctly, but just a bit too easily. Still, I agree with him, and with Merrell, whom he again quotes to show the

difference between the semiotician and the ideologue who both pause to create a text or perform an action: the latter bases his action on "truth," whereas the former maintains awareness "that there is neither any original sign nor final sign," but we "assume the existence of some unfathomable sign somewhere, sometime" (1996: 27-8).

The path of the true semiotician thus leads to tolerance (except of intolerance), a sense of one's own limitations, and yet also a sense of joy (and sadness) that people are creating the universe each moment in novel and unpredictable ways. Hence, as many of my younger colleagues say when discussing an interpretation, what matters is not whether it is right or wrong, but what work does it do - which takes us back to the pragmatism (or pragmatism) which Peirce developed in tandem with semiotics.

Simpkins demonstrates as well as articulates his conception of semiotics with a brilliant and extended analysis of a short story by Thornton Wilder, "The Catbird Seat." The story occupies seven pages, Simpkins' discussion fifty-seven. A powerful woman comes to an office, where she runs amuck firing people. A timid, non-smoking, teetotaling clerk successfully plots her downfall by telling her he is planning to kill the boss. Her accusations that he has made this threat are not believed, especially when she notes he has (he really has) drunk a Scotch and smoked in her presence. Simpkins shows how Wilder is playing with gender (a manly woman, a womanly man), revealing numerous riches in the story. If I may play a little myself on his notion of infinite semiosis, let me add that the story takes place in World War II when all the "real" men are supposedly at the front, and women are taking their jobs. This is viewed by men as disruptive, but the men win in the end: women are convinced they have a different psychological nature than men and exist to keep house and rear children, just as Mrs. Barrows is considered insane for pointing out the improbable truth that an employee wants to kill his boss. We could play even more by stating that the last file the clerk Martin (who has the same name as the conservative Republican leader of the House of Representatives at the time) looks at is "W20" - women received the right to vote in 1920 - and that he walks toward it "with studious concentration," suggesting that the outcome of women's suffrage still needs to be considered. Martin has in fact worked with the company for twenty-two years, that is, since the end of World War I, when women last were required to assume men's jobs before being discarded. I offer these insights primarily to show that Simpkins is right - that given my own context (I am a historian of the United States) I would indeed look for these and other historical signs, whereas Simpkins, a professor of English, looked at the story more from a literary and psychological perspective.

Simpkins' book is a triumphant exposition and vindication of Peircean semiotics. He discusses many other theorists

far more briefly than Merrell and Eco, along the way brilliantly defending the playful, post-structuralist, later Roland Barthes of *S/Z* and criticizing Jean-François Lyotard, who like Eco invokes (*Libidinal Economy*). My only regret is that Simpkins did not mention the work of the late Roberta Kevelson (1931-1998), who more intuitively and poetically, although less systematically, also championed the unbounded semiosis which in fact constitutes the human adventure. “Any decrease in predictability ... increases incoherence and intensifies meaning,” Kevelson wrote. “Any break in the continuity of the message . . . violates a unity and creates a pause. Pauses signal emphasis, expression, disruption, and literally break the statement to signify a shift of order and a restructuring” (1977:46). Whereas Eco’s call for a “normal” and “controlled” decoder is to avoid such novelty, Kevelson proclaims that “it is in dadism, in surrealism and post-surrealism, in absurd theater, in the science of Chaos, that we detect germination of Peirce’s seminal thought.” In her last completed manuscript, a still-unpublished essay on “Peirce and Bosanquet,” she wrote: “Peirce, as we know, acknowledged the quest for interior orders, for provisional harmonies, but his objective is to lead from order to further Chaos in order to open boundaries to create new questions, and to recognize the importance of

the discordant: of going against the grain” (1998).

Kevelson would surely have applauded Simpkins book, which he accurately describes as “a wild roller coaster ride through a terrain that has become increasingly safe during the last 35 years and is, indeed, in need of vibrant revitalization” (3). The great sociologist Max Weber once mourned the routinization of charisma, how what begins as a new and vital movement with charismatic founders and proselytizers becomes, if successful, another “system” (a word and concept whose limitations Simpkins discusses in depth) much like the one it replaced. If semiotics is to retain its cutting edge as the “discipline of disciplines,” the critical examination of other methods, “the method of methods,” which points out how nearly all other ways of thinking foreclose freedom of thought, we need to hear more from Scott Simpkins and those who agree with him.

William Pencak, Professor of History at Penn State University, was president of The Semiotic Society of America in 1999-2000. His major work in the field is *History, Signing In: Studies in History and Semiotics*, published by Peter Lang in 1993. He has also edited for Peter Lang *From Absurdity to Zen: The Wit and Wisdom of Roberta Kevelson*.

References

- Eco, Umberto (1990) *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hodge, Robert, and Kress, Gunther (1988) *Social Semiotics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kevelson, Roberta (1977) *The Inverted Pyramid: An Introduction to a Semiotics of Media Language*. Bloomington and Lisse: Indiana University Press with Peter de Ridder.
- (1998). Fragment, “Peirce and Bosanquet,” cited in William Pencak and Cindy Palecek, eds. *From Absurdity to Zen: The Wit and Wisdom of Roberta Kevelson..* New York: Peter Lang, 2002.
- Merrell, Floyd (1995). *Semiosis in the Post-Modern Age*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press.
- (1996). *Signs Grow: Semiotics and Life Processes*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Stewart, John (1995) *Language as Articulate Contact: Toward A Post-Semiotic Philosophy Of Communications*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Echo Chamber

Peter Pericles Trifonas, *Umberto Eco and Football*. Duxford, Cambridge (UK): Icon Books, 2001.

By William Walters

What’s wrong with football? I’ll tell you what’s wrong with football! Money! These days it’s all about money. Ruining the game. The players are all overpaid primadonnas. The big clubs are driving the small ones out of business. There’s no loyalty left in the game. Whatever happened to the lad who grew up near the ground and played for the same team all his career. Today’s footballers move wherever the money takes them. It’s not TV; I blame the agents, all grubbing for their 20%...

Tune in to any football chat show on TV or radio in a country like Britain, or hang around any typical pub, and you’re likely to hear these sorts of comments filling the air. I don’t know if Umberto Eco would share them. I doubt it. But having read Peter Pericles Trifonas’ short essay, *Umberto Eco and Football*, I do know that the celebrated novelist, semiotician and cultural theorist experiences a powerful unease about the very way in which such conversations take place, in all their intensity, passion and fervour. For this is a book concerning Eco’s profound unease towards the culture of football. And one of the things that Eco really dislikes about football – and to be clear, his criticisms are almost entirely directed not at the sport, the physical activity, but the exalted place of football within our culture – is the way that football simulates a kind of false political community. Whether it’s through the countless acres of newsprint that get devoted to football commentary; the ceaseless chatter of TV and radio shows inviting the audience to debate the

merits of this or that coach, the probity of this or that referee; or the arguments which we carry on about football in our homes, workplaces, pubs and buses, football allows us to adopt partisan positions, to simulate political debates about something that is essentially banal. “Sports talk comes to be a surrogate speech for disputation about politics” (51). As Eco sees it, football enacts what we might call a displacement of citizenship: it occupies the cultural and social space which, presumably in a better society, might host debates and passions of more meaningful political significance.

Football versus citizenship, then - this is one big match that citizenship is losing. But this is far from being the only thing about football culture which Eco laments. Trifonas presents us with several others. For instance, there is its symbolic and physical violence, its deployment of the Other. With its team colours, banners, trumpets and drums, fireworks, popular songs, and the habitual taunting of rival fans, the spectacle of football is certainly carnivalesque. Nevertheless, this carnival has its unpleasant underside. To be a football fan is to become implicated in the practices and the mentality of bands; it is to experience forms of gang solidarity with fellow supporters; they are inextricably linked to acts of ritualized aggression and hatred towards supporters of other clubs and nations. Eco is particularly critical of the mentality of the fan. Football fans know all about the substitute – the “supersub” who enters the game with perhaps 10 minutes remaining, the two

sides locked in a stalemate ... and scores the dramatic winner. Perhaps we can say that with Eco we encounter the territory of The Substitute. Recurring throughout his analysis are themes of violence and sexual repression. As Eco sees it, fans are drawn to big football matches through some kind of Freudian death wish, a yearning for danger. But he also sees a system of sexual repression and sublimation at work. Football is presented as a “psychopathology of repressed desire” in which fans exhibit “obsessive compulsive behaviour” and engage in “voyeurism”. Fans crave football, they have to have it. But when the final whistle sounds, and the stadium clears, they are always left *lacking*. Until next week or season.

Many of Eco’s football essays were written during the 1970s and 1980s, a period which perhaps marked a nadir for European football. These were indeed a kind of soccer “dark ages.” On the field there was a general deterioration in the art of the game which, with the exception of the marvellous Dutch teams of Cruyff and Neeskens, became more defensive and negative in its tactics. But off the field there was a series of disturbing developments which included the granting of the World Cup finals to a military dictatorship (Argentina 1978), the prevalence of racism aimed at black players, and, more generally, the phenomenon of football hooliganism. This was also a period which saw the disasters of Heysel and Hillsborough and the terrible loss of spectators’ lives. It is perhaps Eco’s

proximity to this time, but also the fact that such hooliganism has perhaps proved even more deeply rooted in Italy than other European countries, which partly explains the sense of foreboding and pessimism running throughout Eco's engagement with football. It is this proximity, surely, and not just Eco's penchant for hyperbole (which, Trifonas reminds us, Eco sees as a tactic to be used in his skirmishes with societies of cultural excess) which explains how Eco could begin to draw links between the culture of sport and something as cataclysmic as the "dehumanization of man" (32). Otherwise, it is rather hard to take seriously the suggestion that Eco's decoding of football, its exposure as just a game and not a way of life, has as its stakes the very "salvation of society" (23).

Unfortunately, Trifonas makes little attempt to provide any context of this sort. There are passing references to football disasters like Heysel, the Argentinian Junta, and to the entanglements between football and professional politics, but very little in the way of an account of the social context of Eco's critique. This makes for a rather atemporal analysis – a point to which I return below. It is almost as if there were a football-in-general. But what marks the book in particular is that Trifonas shows virtually no inclination to provide anything more than a summary or affirmation of Eco's reflections. This is definitely a weakness for Eco's accounts of football culture, at least as far as Trifonas presents them, while they draw attention to its perversities, racisms, insecurities, deities, not to mention its function as a mechanism of social control, are unnecessarily one-sided and at times verge on the one-dimensional. Football can certainly be analyzed as bread and circuses, but it symbolizes much else which does not always fit so neatly into this potentially cliched concept.

Take the case of Eco's dissection of the World Cup, the pinnacle of football's calendar. "The social and cultural impact of the World Cup is not the athletic prowess that the players exhibit to enthusiasts and aficionados of the game, but the chance that a country has to display and

claim itself and its people as the universal champions, for four years at least" (53). There can be no doubting the fact that the World Cup, along with other international competitions, can certainly provide a focus for nationalism, chauvinism, and competition. Apart from anything else, it remains an opportunity for unimaginative TV commentators to rehearse an increasingly tired stock of national, and often racial stereotypes. For instance, in Britain there are invariably references to the programmed discipline of the Germans, the athletic prowess but also the tactical naïveté of the African teams, the courage of the English, and the mendacity of the Latin-European and Latin Americans. This is indeed a case of football's malign pedagogy. But the World Cup is not reducible to such semiotics. Nor is it solely a celebration of national superiority. If it were, how could we explain the fact that millions of people watch it despite the fact that their countries are not participating. No, the experience of the World Cup, and football more generally, I would like to argue, is far more complex than Eco would have us believe. People watch because it's eventful. It's the joy of seeing a mighty football nation brought to its knees by outsiders like Cameroon, Ireland or Senegal. Or the pleasure one can take from its many plays of movement, strategy, tactics and counter-tactics.

The book's main aim is to present Eco's ideas on football, and to demonstrate more generally the value and challenge of semiotic analysis as a form of cultural critique. This is fine, and Trifonas does a nice job using football as his vehicle to introduce semiotics to the beginner (there's even a helpful glossary of semiotic terms at the back). However, I can't help thinking that he has limited himself unnecessarily. Eco's thoughts seem to circle relentlessly back around the connection football-circus-violence-sacrifice. It is the tribalism, the ritual, the over-excited crowd which he places at the centre. But football is more a multiplicity than a singular machine. As such it surely lends itself to other lines of inquiry. What of its many affirmative features?

Where is the marvellous humour and cultural inventiveness of so many fans? We are warned about its nationalism, but surely we should also note the internationalism and cosmopolitanism of football culture. The European Commission has gone to great lengths to foster a positive sense of "European identity" amongst "its" citizens. But I'd bet that the regular football matches which now take place between Europe's elite teams under the format of the Champion's League have done much more to encourage a lived sense of Europe than the official flag, anthem or pedagogy of the Commission.

Finally, there is something else curiously absent from *Umberto Eco and Football* – a sense that football is subject to social and cultural change. It is not a static system of signs, but historically dynamic and changing. This book is published, and, I assume, commissioned in the UK, a country that perhaps more than most others has in recent years witnessed a most fascinating and profound transformation in its football culture. It was probably only at the start of the 1990s that football became fully a national-popular sport appealing to working- and middle-class alike. At about the same time, it also became a site of intellectual activity – a subject of university courses and cultural theories. We might call this the moment of *Feverpitch* – in deference to Nick Hornby's best-selling account of personal football obsession. Trifonas' book is, of course, a part of this cultural transformation. Indeed, it owes its existence to such developments. The book is being marketed within a series called "Postmodern Encounters." While the book is certainly a valuable contribution to the growing field of cultural studies of football, it would have been a more genuinely postmodern encounter had it offered us some more reflection concerning its own conditions of possibility.

William Walters teaches political theory at Carleton University, in Ottawa. He is the author of *Unemployment and Government: Genealogies of the Social* (2000).

“

Paul [Bouissac] has taken a consistent, some would say mistaken, stance towards academic institutions. In these debates his rhetoric is wonderful. Its emotional intensity suggests autobiographical motivation. What grates on the nerves of some people is the extent to which he idealizes marginal institutions and vilifies the mainstream. Semiotics "has subsisted for a long time in the interstices and cracks of mainstream institutions, being sometimes tolerated, sometimes ignored, nevertheless relentlessly working toward the hybridization of knowledge under the nose, so to speak, of the self-confident 'apparatchiks' of mainstream disciplines." He compares semioticians' search for intellectual validity in the works of founding fathers as "totemism." The big names of modern semiotics are dismissed as "grand barons." Most discrediting of all is his belief that intellectual continuity - the ideal for many – may be an indication of failure: "Would it not be possible to entertain the idea that semioticians form a sort of medieval rear guard, intellectually fascinated and paralyzed by a model (the sign) and cultivating an outdated doxa in the form of a terribly repetitive history?" (220)

Excerpt from Stephen Harold Riggins, *The Pleasures of Time: Two Men, A Life*. Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2003.

Used with the kind permission of Insomniac Press, Toronto.