The End of Decoding PART 2

By Scott Simpkins

A related illustration of this type of decoding strategy is found in Roland Barthes's apparent assertion that some sign vehicles can only be decoded as signifiers without a signified. Essentially, though, he breaks the magicians' code of maintaining professional secrecy when he explains the illusion behind decoding by revealing how something that appears to be non-signifying can be handily transported into the realm of the intelligible through the process of artful decoding. Barthes's paired decodings offer a striking example, however, insofar as the concluding punctuation does not establish an either/or opposition (e.g., a case of this or that?), but rather, an oscillation around mutually inclusive possibilities, with only two among many other decoding options. Additionally, the placement of this example at the end of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* with no apparent ligature is also puzzling. What exactly is the reader supposed to make of this paratext (if that is what it is)? Is it like the abrupt coda to Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" in which the narrator offers a satisfactory, although translucent at best, decoding of Bartleby's malady? Or, is it like Poe's narrator (discussed earlier) when he finally comes up with a reading that crystallizes a decoding, yielding a sharp focus that renders intelligible the otherwise inscrutable stranger?

In the first chapter of *The Valley of Fear*, Arthur Conan Doyle presents a textual scenario along these lines that is common among the crime-solving narratives so cherished by semioticians as models of successful decoding. In the opening chapter of this detective fiction (which in itself is frequently offered as a synecdoche for semiotic methodology without questioning its aptness as a comparison), Sherlock Holmes and his companion Dr. Watson decode a message without benefit of possessing the key to its code, an operation which all the more appears to confirm the autotelic viability of semiotic analysis.

The chapter begins with Holmes "absorbed with his own thoughts" and seemingly baffled by a letter he had recently received (1914: 471). He goes so far as to examine the text using alternative means – "he stared at the slip of paper which he had just drawn from its envelope," a type of perspective-changing approach like moving closer and further away from a painting – and even scrutinizes its delivery vehicle as a possibly significant paratext: "he took the envelope itself, held it up to the light, and very carefully studied both the exterior and the flap."

"'It is Porlock's writing'," Holmes say, "thoughtfully." "'I can hardly doubt that it is Porlock's writing, though I have only seen it twice before. The Greek "e" with the peculiar top flourish is distinctive. But if it is from Porlock, then it must be something of the very first importance'" (1914: 471). This is an example of the discourse scenario common between the two men, as Holmes often uses Watson more as a sounding board –an externalized form of inner speech (Thibault) – for himself than as an autonomous interlocutor ("He was speaking to himself rather than to me," Watson notes; Dr. House on "House" does the same thing.). This also demonstrates Holmes's remarkable attention to detail because the average person could hardly make this observation unless the handwriting referred to is striking in some manner. Holmes draws upon general but distinct encoder information about Porlock (and, most importantly, his connection with Holmes's nemesis, Professor Moriarity) as a means of supplementing the linguistic component of the signifier at hand. Furthermore, he reiterates the weight of a message from Porlock (asserting once more that he is an encoder of "'extreme importance'" who has established a record of providing Holmes with "'advance information which has been of value – that highest value which anticipates and prevents rather than avenges crime'"), implying that in every case Porlock's texts are of serious significance, and therefore by extension they must follow a grave encoding agenda. As Holmes – in a revealing manner, indeed – asserts: "'I cannot doubt that if we had the cipher we should find that this communication is of the nature that I indicate'" (472). Clearly, like any other semiotician who is heavily invested in the notion of viable decoding, Holmes *has* to believe in the faith of the sign (i.e., I can hardly doubt; I cannot doubt).

The "curious inscription" Porlock sent reads:

534 C2 13 127 36 31 4 17 21 41
DOUGLAS 109 293 5 37 BIRLSTONE
26 BIRLSTONE 9 127 171

This text leads to a pained discussion between the two men who face a decoding conundrum:

> "What do you make of it, Holmes?"
> "It is obviously an attempt to convey secret information."
> "But what is the use of a cipher message without the cipher?"
> "In this instance, none at all."
> "Why do you say 'in this instance'?"
> "Because there are many ciphers which I would read as easily as I do the apocrypha of the agony column. Such crude devices amuse the intelligence without fatiguing it. But this is different. It is clearly a reference to the words in a page of some book." (1914: 472)

For Holmes, the semiotic operation behind this text is marked "obviously" and "clearly" as such, as if this text – like the ostensibly "richer" volume of literary or figurative language versus ordinary or literal language – is imbued with a substantial signifying density (e.g., Shakespeare's plays versus an aesthetically "poor" text such as an American animated television show).

Through the use of abduction, Holmes then precedes to frame intelligibly the lack of seemingly necessary information from Porlock regarding the book (its title would have come under separate cover to keep the two strategically apart), something which is seemingly confirmed by the *deus ex machina* appearance of a second letter, which unfortunately conveys danger rather than the key to the first letter. Porlock relates being frustrated in his efforts to send Holmes "the key to the cipher" (1914: 473), a detail which confirms that this text is not a signifier without a signified.

"'Porlock is evidently scared out of his senses'," Holmes conjectures after drawing upon a bibliographical/paratextual cue (he points out that the address on the envelope, unlike the letter itself, is "'hardly legible'" [1914: 473]). Dr. Watson, of course, gives up on the coded message as long as it lacks a "key" ("'It's pretty maddening to think that an important secret may lie here on this slip of paper, and that it is beyond human power to penetrate it.'") while Holmes reflects on whether the text – even such an overtly encoded one – nevertheless is indeed autotelic in the hands of a sufficiently agile decoder. "'I wonder'," Holmes says. "'Let us consider the problem in the light of pure reason. This man's reference is to a book. That is our point of departure'." Drawing upon relatively formal means of abductive reasoning (never merely *guessing*, as he repeatedly insists throughout these works), might allow them to import a grid of intelligibility onto something that presumably possessed such a feature when entirely prior to dissemination, Holmes suggests "'Let us see, then, if we can narrow it down'," he says. "'As I focus my mind upon it, it seems rather less impenetrable'" (474).

Here, Holmes implies that not only does decoding have to be a real possibility, its success appears to rely merely upon sufficient concentration by the decoder. Holmes begins with two grounding assumptions: the numbers refer to something anybody is likely to possess in common with others, and they must then look for books familiar to households in general, and perhaps his in particular, since the encoder sent the message to a specific decoder he knew personally. Porlock's note appears to suggest that "'the book is one which he thought that I would have no difficulty in finding for myself'," Holmes abduces. "'He had it, and he imagined that I would have it too. In short, Watson, it is a very common book'" (1914: 474).

Watson surmises, in a typically blunt leap that allows Holmes to demonstrate his superior acumen, that it must be a Christian Bible. "'Good, Watson, good!'" he says somewhat patronizingly:

> "But not, if I may say so, quite good enough. Even if I accepted the compliment for myself, I could hardly name any volume which would be less likely to lie at the elbow of one of Moriarty's associates. Besides, the editions of Holy Writ are so numerous that he could hardly suppose that two copies would have the same pagination. This is clearly a book which is standardized." (1914: 474)

This presumption of "standardization" is crucial to the theological function of decoding as an institutionalized

The Semiotic Review of Books
Volume 20.1 2011

Table of Contents

The End of Decoding, Part 2 1 - 4
By Scott Simpkins

The Greatest Show on Earth 5 - 6
By Dan Maxwell

The Risk of Critique: Voices Across the Generations 6 - 7
By Barbara Godard

Media Garbology 7 - 8
By Jussi Parikka

Web site: http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/semiotics/

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

General Editor: Gary Genosko

Editorial Associates:

William Conklin (Windsor), Verena Conley (Harvard), Christopher Drohan (Sheridan), Kane X. Faucher (UWO), Monica Flegel (Lakehead), Samir Gandesha (SFU), Paul Hegarty (Cork), Tom Kemple (UBC), Scott Pound (Lakehead), Inna Semetsky (Newcastle, NSW), Bart Testa (Toronto), Anne Urbancic (Toronto), Peter van Wyck (Concordia), Anne Zeller (Waterloo)

Layout: Ben Kaminski, Lakehead University Graphics

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

Tel: 807-766-7152 (Technoculture Lab);
Fax: 807-346-7831

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

Founding Editor: Paul Bouissac, Professor Emeritus, Victoria University, Victoria College 205, 73 Queen's Park Cr. E., Toronto,Ontario, Canada M5S 1K7

E-mail: bouissa@attglobal.net

The **SRB** is published three times per year.

practice insofar as it implies a consensual basis for all actions that thus renders them static, but, and more importantly, it also reduces the encoder's freedom of choice.

Accordingly, Holmes tells Watson: "'Our search is narrowed down to standardized books which anyone may be supposed to possess'" (1914: 474). Given this assumption, he simply builds upon it through hypothetical extrapolation. It must be a large book (if "534" is a page number, etc.); the juxtaposed small numbers must refer to columns on a page (since they could not be chapter numbers); besides the Bible, Holmes rules out Bradshaw's guide to British railways and the dictionary for similar reasons, before Watson hits upon Whitaker's *Almanack*.

Of course, this wouldn't be a Sherlock Holmes novel if that was that. After the two men find that their almanac produces a nonsensical message, they are stymied, until Holmes realizes that "'We pay the price, Watson, for being too up-to-date...We are before our time, and suffer the usual penalties. Being the seventh of January, we have very properly laid in the new almanack. It is more than likely that Porlock took his message from the old one. No doubt he would have told us so had his letter of explanation been written'." "Holmes's eyes were gleaming with excitement," Watson recounts, as he revels in the joy of seemingly corroborated decoding, and concludes with a triumphant laugh ("'Ha! ha!'") when he reads the message: "'There is danger–may–come–very–soon–one–... Douglas ... rich–country–now–at–Birl-stone–confidence–is–pressing'" (1914: 744).

Although Watson complains that Porlock's message is "'a queer, scrambling way of expressing... meaning!'" Holmes argues that "'When you search a single column for words with which to express your meaning, you can hardly expect to get everything you want. You are bound to leave something to the intelligence of your correspondent. The purport is perfectly clear'" (1914: 744). It is more than ironic here that Holmes would employ a term later associated with Hjelmslevian semiotics, as well as crediting the decoder's activity as being a necessary – nay, even unavoidable – part of the overall process of semiosis.

Nevertheless, this endeavour by Holmes remains in the realm of "Theory" that he is so often criticized for (mainly by those inept decoders, the police) until Inspector Alec MacDonald of Scotland Yard shows up and expresses astonishment at the message the two have just produced. While, as Watson notes, MacDonald is no Sherlock Holmes, he nevertheless does have sense enough to recognize this and ask for help from the master semiotician ("talent instantly recognizes genius") whenever he really needs it. It is no surprise, then, that MacDonald was transfixed "with absolute amazement" when he saw "the enigmatic message" they had just decoded. While MacDonald declares their actions little short of "'witchcraft'," Holmes downplays its status, calling it merely a "'a cipher that Dr. Watson and I have had occasion to solve'." With "dazed astonishment," MacDonald confirms the veracity of the message by relating that "'Mr Douglas, of Birlstone Manor House, was horribly murdered this morning'." As is often the case in the Holmes tales, either a perpetrator or someone else in the know is able to confirm the theories that Holmes generates, thereby providing a form of semiosic conclusion that, in the actual realm of semiosis, cannot be achieved. Real semiosis, in other words, never finds – can never hope to find – such corroboration.

David Rabe problematizes this convenient form of semiotic confirmation even further in his play, *Hurlburly*, in which one member of a group of acquaintances (Phil) dies in an automobile accident on Mulholland Drive in Los Angeles that appears to be suicide. While this group attempts to cope with Phil's death, a seemingly straightforward letter from him posted the same day he died arrives. The letter reads: "The guy who dies in an accident understands the nature of destiny. Phil." (1984: 337). To the ostensibly average decoder, this appears quite clear, but it throws the two characters in the scene (just as in Doyle's novel) into a quandary.

Rabe demonstrates well how decoders' personal investments influence their interpretive approaches, for one character, Eddie, liked Phil (or found him useful, at least) whereas another, Mickey, did not. Eddie immediately assumes some great significance behind the text since, after all, the genre of the suicide note typically is serious in tone and purport (although, the late-eighteenth century British poet, Thomas Chatterton, left a sarcastic "Will" which would challenge this generic assumption. Louise Kaplan notes that this was a familiar, "playful" literary genre of the period "written in mock will style," and, in fact, Chatterton wrote several non-serious yet strategically calculated suicide notes [1988: 138-40]). Mickey, on the other hand, sees the note as just one more example of Phil's mischief. He dismisses the letter by saying, "with a shrug," that "'It's a fucking fortune cookie'" (1984: 338). "'This is a dead end is all I'm saying'," Mickey adds (339). "'There's no traffic with this thing. You go in, you don't come out. The guy made a decision beyond communication'." Ultimately, he says of Phil's note, "'It's part of his goof, you know, that he was a rational human being, when he wasn't'."

Eddie takes the institutionalized, "public" approach to the text, however: "'I'm going to look up the words'" (1984: 340). As was mentioned earlier, this leads nowhere fast, for using a dictionary only provides an endless source for semiosic slippage. This becomes eminently clear when both Eddie and Mickey employ the same strategy (connotative decoding under the guise of denotation) for creating a new interpretant.

"'What's to look up?'," Mickey says, and leans back to demonstrate his decoding approach to what he again refers to as "'a fucking fortune cookie'" (1984: 340):

> "'A guy who.' That's him...'Dies.' In case we didn't know, he gave us a demonstration... 'Accident' is to propel yourself into a brief but unsustainable orbit, and then attempt to land in a tree on the side of a cliff-like incline...'Understand' is what he had no part of. 'Nature' is the tree, and 'destiny' is, if you're him, you're an asshole."

Eddie's response to this negative reading is to take a Saussurian approach to finding decodable avenues. "'Count the letters'," he says. "'Maybe it's an anagram'" (341). Nonetheless, using a dictionary provides Eddie with the most viable positive decoding he can come up with:

> "So I have 'accident' here, and 'destiny.' 'Accident: a happening that is not expected, foreseen or intended. Two, an unfortunate occurrence or mishap, sudden fall, collision, usually resulting in physical injury.' Blah-blah, just repeats basically. And 'destiny,' we have, 'The inevitable or necessary succession of events. What will necessarily happen to any person or thing.' So....*(with a sense of discovery, he moves toward Mickey on the couch)*...if you die in a happening that is not expected, foreseen or intended, you understand the inevitable or necessary succession of events." (343)

"'It makes sense!'," he says with a "triumphant" ejaculation. "'I mean, we owe him to understand as best we can what he wanted. Nobody has to believe it. IT MAKES FUCKING SENSE'."

Eddie's conclusion here is hardly insignificant in that it reframes the "fortune cookie" reading that Mickey offered, which apparently implies that the text is malleable and loosely decodable based on idiosyncratic connections with any given individual (like horoscopes). In other words, the text now moves into the same realm of "sense" as seen in the Sherlock Holmes novels where something that appears unintelligible is reframed intelligibly.

This is an illustration of a message rendered incomplete, but incompleteable, in the hands of an agile semiotician. The larger body of detective fiction (thus, possessing a code related to genre) supplies endless examples of this practice, as does Doyle's own propensity toward using this technique frequently in the Sherlock Holmes stories. Holmes also supplies a critique of his own decoding methodology in the course of attempting different semiotic strategies (e.g., trial and error, the scientific method, consideration of general "coded" message practices) before hitting upon one that "makes sense" (from this standpoint, "successful" decoding is something that, at least metaphorically, falls into place or is useful in some way. See Fish's promotion of the pedagogical effectiveness of using his reader-response theory through his testimonial that, in class, "it works" [1970: 99]).

Moreover, Holmes has a history of successful encoding-decoding experiences with this specific message encoder, as he relates to Dr. Watson at the beginning of this operation. This implies, too, that a message doesn't necessarily have to come with encoder-generated decoding information (hence, the death of the encoder), although, what is demonstrated here is the necessity of figuring out the "system" of an encoding in order to be able to decode in this fashion to begin with. This is revealed in Dr. Watson's function in the Holmes stories as someone who has not mastered this operation versus someone who has.

This semiotic situation is related to the forms of double-coded speech used by American slaves, as described by Frederick Douglass and Henry Louis Gates, as well as that used by women within oppressively phallocentric cultures whose messages that can be decoded only by those with a specialized key. For instance, Susan S. Lanser analyzes a letter purportedly written by a "newly married" (cited in 1997: 679) young woman whose husband vetted all of her out-going letters (it, like Poe's story, also appeared in *Atkinson's Casket*, whose full journal name includes several qualifiers: *"...of Gems of Literature, Wit and Sentiment"*, in 1832). This marital situation supposedly forced the bride to use strategic encoding in order to complain about her husband without detection (so to speak). In the published version, titled "Female Ingenuity," the letter – addressed to an "intimate friend" – is written in a form akin to poetry featuring distinct line breaks, and following the letter is a one-line addendum, which reads: "N.B.: The key to the above letter, is to read the first and then every alternate line."

The main text reads:

> I cannot be satisfied, my Dearest Friend!
> blest as I am in the matrimonial state.
> unless I pour into your friendly bosom,
> which has ever been in unison with mine,
> the various deep sensations which swell
> with the liveliest emotions of pleasure
> my almost bursting heart. I tell you my dear
> husband is one of the most amiable of men,
> I have been married seven weeks, and
> have never found the least reason to
> repent the day that joined us, my husband is
> in person and manners far from resembling
> ugly, crass, old, disagreeable, and jealous
> monsters, who think by confining to secure;
> a wife, it is his maxim to treat as a bosom-
> friend and confidant, and not as a plaything
> or menial slave, the woman chosen to be his
> companion. Neither party he says ought to
> obey implicitly; – but each yield to the other
> by turns – An ancient maiden aunt, near
> seventy, a cheerful, venerable, and pleasant
> old lady, lives in the house with us–she is the
> de-light of both young and old – she is ci-vil
> to all the neighborhood round, generous
> and charitable to the poor – I know my
> husband loves nothing more than he does
> me; he flatters me more than the glass, and
> his intoxication (for so I must call the excess
> of his love) often makes me blush for the
> unworthiness of its object, and I wish I could
> be more deserving of the man whose name I
> bear. To say all in one word, my dear, and to
> crown the whole, my former gallant lover
> is now my indulgent husband, my fondness
> is returned, and I might have had
> a Prince, without the felicity I find with
> him. Adieu! May you be as blest as I am un-
> able to wish that I could be more
> happy. (cited in 1997: 679-80)

The alternate-line subtext is much different, however:

> I cannot be satisfied, my Dearest Friend
> unless I pour into your friendly bosom,
> the various deep sensations which swell
> my almost bursting heart. I tell you my
> dear I have been married seven weeks, and
> repent the day that joined us, my husband
> is ugly, crass, old, disagreeable, and
> jealous[;] a wife, it is his maxim to treat as a
> plaything or menial slave, the woman
> he says ought to obey implicitly;
> An ancient maiden aunt, near seventy,
> lives in the house with us–she is the de-
> vil to all the neighbourhood round.
> I know my husband loves nothing more
> than the glass, and his intoxication
> often makes me blush, for the
> unworthiness of the man whose name
> I bear. To crown the whole, my former
> gallant lover is returned, and I might have
> had him. Adieu! May you be as blest as I
> am un-happy. (cited in 1997: 680)

"Written for two readers (the prying husband and the intimate friend) this letter is in *an unusually obvious* sense a double construction, a *blatant* specimen of writing over and under censorship," Lanser maintains. "The surface text and the subtext are strikingly different both in story and narration, and a narrative theory adequate for describing the whole will have to account for both and for the narrative frame that binds them" (1997: 680, emphasis added). Perhaps, though, what Lanser describes is not wholly "accurate," insofar as the decoded "subtext" could arguably be called the "primary" text, and everything else (i.e., the "surface" text, as she calls it; the signifying vehicle, as I will call it) is discarded after so-called decoding takes place. Once that occurs, the "message" is revealed in all its transparency, as is seen following the delivery of the punch-line of a joke, and its genre (among the three offered in the journal's name) becomes apparently clear. This isn't a work of literature, in other words, it's a text of "wit."

As a feminist, Lanser provides a type of agenda-based operation in this act of decoding, so that rather than serving as a monosemous semiosic exhaustion, it actually engages in a fluid give-and-take which maintains a delicate and powerful signifying balance. "The subtext also exposes the surface text, and hence the surface voice, as a subterfuge, revealing the 'feminine style' to be a caricature donned to mask a surer voice in the process of communicating to a woman under the watchful eyes of a man," she contends. "But this also means that the powerless form called 'women's language' is revealed as a potentially subversive – hence powerful – tool" (1997: 681). Lanser goes so far as to posit that additional, but *immaterial*, texts are created by the existence of more than one version of a text (e.g., a film with and without voice over, such as "Brazil" or "Blade Runner"). The "two" letters, along this argument, create yet another letter: "a third: a story, a third voice, a third audience," Lanser suggests. "For the negativity makes the surface text not one narrator's simple proclamation of happiness

but the indictment of an entire social system" (682). "The subtext, then, becomes an instance of the surface text rather than its antithesis," she concludes; "the two versions reveal not opposing but related truths" (this is similar to a poem I wrote about one of my inexcusable colleagues that contains an insulting statement about him if you read the first letter of each line of the poem from the top down. This arguably could only be seen as a monosemously encoded sign vehicle, given the extreme unlikelihood that such a biographically specific message could have appeared solely by chance. So, does that rule out chance (or unintentional messages – what Eco calls "text intention") in sign vehicles, then? As will be discussed later, what about Saussure's work with the anagrams that he "discovered" in classical poetry? [Bouissac 2010: 67-68]).

An intriguing challenge to decoder empowerment in this manner can be seen in the set of numbers that appears in Joyce Carol Oates's short story, "Where are You Going, Where Have You Been?" The story involves a young woman home alone on a summer afternoon while her family members are away for the day. As she starts to daydream two strange men pull up in a car in the driveway of her family's isolated house. Arnold Friend, the young man who does the talking for the two, declares that he has arrived for his "date" with her, and as long as she comes with him willingly, there won't be any harm to her family. In the course of their discussion, she inquires about the signifiers painted on his car. Some of them are familiar high-school sayings, etc., but one baffles Connie. "'Now these numbers are a secret code, honey'," he tells her. "He read off the numbers 33, 19, 17 and raised his eyebrows at her to see what she thought of that, but she didn't think much of it" (698). That's it! Oates never brings it up again and eventually Connie leaves with Arnold for some sort of mysterious, presumably both sexual and negative, outcome.

Most readers with "literary competence" are likely to assume that if they worked hard enough at it, they could come up with a decoding of these numbers to spell something intelligible and probable, like S-E-X, but I never pursued it. Several years ago, however, one of my students claimed she had "cracked" the code of these numbers. She explained that they appear to refer to a biblical passage (Arthur Conan Doyle does this sort of thing all the time with Sherlock Holmes). She said that hunting down the passage proceeding chronologically from the front to the back of the bible did not work (like Holmes examining the most recent almanac), but going from the back to the front enabled her to "explain" the meaning of Arnold's "secret code". Following this technique, she came to the book of Judges, and then 19.17. This part of the biblical book involves a story roughly similar to Oates's, and approximately the same line in the title is asked of a stranger seeking accommodation for the evening by his potential host: "'Where are you going, and where do you come from?'" Furthermore, this section of Judges is about the visitor being called out of the host's home by a group of men who want to engage in involuntary sex with him. In the end, a woman is sent out instead to appease the men, who have sex with her so violently that she dies from the experience. The story parallels are fairly clear here, as well as an "explanation" of Oates's title, which otherwise is inexplicable.

But, the question raised here is: did my student really *discover* anything of absolute significance here? Besides providing an interesting perspective on the title and some of the events in the story, does this decoding strategy actually succeed in "fully" describing the code of its system? After all, without pursuing this much further, there are so many variations from the intertext to the primary text that it's difficult to say whether my student uncovered a clue that substantially explains what occurs in the story. To the contrary, perhaps what she has done is yet again equal to encountering an unfamiliar word in a text and looking up its definitions in a dictionary. Just because the decoder has decoded what something *apparently* means to someone else, what has been learned here, ultimately? As Barthes demonstrates in *S/Z*, asymmetrical decoding can be used idiosyncratically to produce all sorts of interesting connections in a text that apparently are liberated from the kind of corroboration seen in this short story.

Not all semioticians, however, can accept such freedom with equanimity. Bouissac, for instance, speculates that Sasssure's work on decoding anagrams in ancient literature "apparently came to an abrupt end" when he decided that "he might have been the victim of a delusion and his inquiry was biased by his expectations. There are, after all, a limited number of phonemes in any language and they are bound to recur in various combinations in any text" (2010: 68).

A striking example of the need for decoding control along these lines in relation to sexual harassment theory in the USA, on the other hand, can be found in a legal development related to the now-famous episode (season 4, episode 60) of the popular American television sitcom, "Seinfeld." An American employee described the episode to his co-worker at his work place in what he declared was "intended" as an amusing anecdote. It turns out, though, that in such a situation in American culture, it is the decoder who determines the semiosic valence of a sign vehicle. For, the co-worker alleged that she felt she was sexually harassed by this description and filed charges accordingly. (The episode referred to here was titled "The Junior Mints." Jerry [the titular character] forgot the name of a woman he had recently begun dating. The only mnemonic device he had to go on was her remark that she had been taunted as a youth because her name rhymed with a female body organ. [Jerry's best guess up to the point of eventual recollection was that her name might be "Mulva".] At the end of the episode, Jerry finally remembered – albeit too late – that her name was Dolores.)

A revealing illustration of the contours of decoding control or input also can be found in the model of theology, as is seen in a recent portrait of an influential Iranian scholar, Abdulkarim Soroush. "Who Wrote the Koran?" relates how Soroush generated a great deal of negative response in Iran by promoting his contention that the Prophet Muhammad had a "'prophetic experience'" which led to his composition of the Koran, rather than merely serving as the *receiver* of a transmission verbatim to him from God (2008: 24). Indeed, Soroush told interviewer Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar that he believed Mohammad "'was at the same time the receiver and the producer of the Koran or, if you will, the subject and the object of the revelation'." "'When you read the Koran'," he added, "'you have to feel that a human being is speaking to you, i.e. the words, images, rules and regulations and the like are all coming from a human mind...This mind, of course, is special in the sense that it imbued with divinity and inspired by God'." This perspective acknowledges a contributory function/mediation by the decoder, as opposed to promoting the notion that the decoder is simply reproducing an originary message without adding any "external" influence on it.

This is not unlike the argument regarding the necessity of the decoder's contribution to semiosis as revealed in an interview with the Israeli filmmaker, Ari Folman. Folman had been one of the original writers on the Israeli show, "In Treatment," which was adapted by HBO and the interviewer, Deborah Solomon, asked if he had been through psychoanalysis himself. He replied that "'I'm not a great believer in psychotherapy...I've been analyzed way too much'," and she responded by saying: "'The problem with therapy is that you're listening to no one but yourself. How can you learn anything?'" (2009:11). One could argue, along these lines, that if decoders actually add something significant to the act of decoding, they then become "contributing" encoders, possibly to such an extent that what results from this process derives solely from the decoders themselves. After all, where should the line be drawn to differentiate between the encoder and decoders in this respect?

This lack of encoder guidance (or input) is even seen in the faith-based alcohol-addiction support group, Alcoholics Anonymous. Its members are reminded at daily meetings that a God "of their understanding" directs everything they do. In theory, at least, this leads AA to be a relatively anarchistic group insofar as it stresses the avoidance of imposing one's will in any fashion. No one human is therefore given hierarchical prominence over any member. But, AA is a mammoth organization, and it does elect (from its members) "trusted servants" who perform jobs in both local and larger institutional entities (regional and national). This would seem to contradict its teachings regarding God's sole reach over everything, except that AA configures God as manifesting itself, as seen in Pantheism, in everything and everybody on earth. Everybody who is inspired by Godly intervention (which is pretty much everybody in AA), accordingly, appears to be acting not in a human capacity as an autonomous agent of God, but rather is always subject to overruling by the "group conscience," an elected collection of trusted servants (elected, presumably, with God putting a fix in on the outcome or, even better, allowing an individual inclined toward self-will to be elected only to be later not re-elected as a sign of his failure to successfully serve the overall group via the group conscience).

In fact, the AA manifestoes stress that no one individual can be certain that inspiration attributed to God as an encoding source is credible. One of its founders, for instance, recounts how he believed he was inspired by God to turn AA into a professional, for-profit organization. Going home to relate this vision to the handful of recovering alcoholics staying with him (a prototype, it turns out, of the group conscience), he discovered to his chagrin that they opposed this new direction in AA. As a result, he allowed the group to convince him that his individual, ostensibly "divine" vision was overruled by a greater, consensus-based (yet still also "divine") inspiration to the contrary. With this development, the co-founder concluded that no single human could claim irrefutable divine intervention; that it could be located only in the consensual agreement that functions not unlike a group of independent researchers who collectively can reproduce –and thereby "confirm" – results found by an initial researcher. In effect, the individual alone cannot claim to be a source of divinely generated information; that information can only come from something like a modern institution (let's say, semiotics, for example). For, this sense of decoding is effected through a human agent, but without significant (i.e., impositional) human agency.

To return to my previous example, in Iran, Soroush encountered a similar opposition to individual decoding agency (in this case, his interpretation of what Muhammad was doing when writing the Koran) through the counter-argument that when Muhammad was relaying God's message, no *decoding* imposition took place. It was written thus without any encoding mediation. Technically speaking, no re-encoding per se was involved in the task. This would be something like a totally transparent form of en/decoding so that a sign would be something that is passed on directly without any form of interpretive decoding transformation. Instead of standing for something to someone else, the sign would therefore *be* that something. (This is not unlike a naive conception of the flawless function of the iconic sign, something that *shows* without decoding what it signifies; or, in other words, what it signifies is what it shows, as in the case of onomatopoeia or international traffic signs.)

Soroush's detractors found textual "evidence" to support their interpretation of the composition of the Koran that indicated "God is the revealer and Muhammad the receiver" of the text. As a result, the compositional "commands are coming from elsewhere rather than from the heart or the mind of the prophet himself" (2008: 24). Soroush's response was that "'the prophet was no parrot'." Using a simile, Soroush maintained that the prophet "'was like a bee who produces honey itself, even though the mechanism for making the honey is placed in him by God'." Soroush employed a passage from the Koran to support this: "And your Lord inspired to the bee: take for yourself among the mountains, houses...then eat from all the fruits...there emerges from their bellies a drink...in which there is healing for people." This outlines a view toward the Koran that resists the "literalist" perspective of en/decoding, one which would suggest that Muhammad was again merely relaying what had been given to him directly by God. Significantly, Soroush's detractors, rather than attempting to silence him or his hypotheses, plan instead to rely upon "religious truths" to refute him.

This is exactly what the supporters of decoding would claim as well: that what they *believe* is, in fact, a form of truth; ignoring, of course, the epistemological sham taking place with this maneuver. For, religious truth is of the same oxymoronic camp as expressions such as "true belief" or "good taste." A faith in the success of decoding is no different. It is a matter of taste or belief; what any given semiotician feels she wants, or needs. It is, as Nietzsche says, a discovery that is truly qualified, at best. As Nietzsche says: "When someone hides something behind a bush and looks for it again in the same place and finds it there as well, there is not much to praise in such seeking and finding. If I make up the definition of a mammal, and then, after inspecting a camel, declare 'look, a mammal,' I have indeed brought a truth to light in this way, but it is a truth of limited value" (1873: 892).

People want to believe in the efficacy of decoding – no, they *need* to believe in it. But decoding may actually produce only what I will call "decoration," modeled after Barthes's concept of structuration versus structure. Nevertheless, the end of decoding (in this sense of ending) is something to celebrate, after all, since it, like the death of the author, merely acknowledges the agency of the decoder. The death of decoding, in effect, produces the birth of the re-encoder. And, anybody who can appreciate the rubber pencil ought to be able to appreciate that, too.

Scott Simpkins (1958-2010) was an Associate Editor of *The Semiotic Review of Books*.

References

Auerbach, Nina (1985) *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail (1986) *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Barthes, Roland (1994) *Roland Barthes By Roland Barthes*, trans. R. Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press.

-- (1972) "Myth Today." *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers. New York, Hill and Wang, 109-59.

Baxter, Charles 2008. E-mail to the author. 28 August.

-- (1997) "The Next Building I Plan to Bomb." Believers: A Novella and Stories. New York: Vintage Books, 63-73.

Benjamin, Walter (1968) "The Task of the Translator." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 69-82.

Bouissac, Paul (2010) *Saussure: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum.

Culler, Jonathan (1980) "Literary Competence." *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Ed. Jane Tompkins. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 101-17.

Doyle, Arthur Conan (1986) *The Four Novels and the Fifty-Six Short Stories Complete*. Ed. William S. Baring-Gould. New York: Clarkson N. Potter.

Eco, Umberto (1976) *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana: University of Indiana Press.
Eco, Umberto and Thomas A. Sebeok, eds. (1983) *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

Fish, Stanley (1980) *Is There A Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

-- "Literature in the Reader." (1980) *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Ed. J. Tompkins. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 70-100.

Foucault, Michel (1977) "What is an Author?" Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 124-27.

Gallop, Jane (2002) *Anecdotal Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Culture*. NY: Basic Books.

Goffman, Erving (1973) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Woodstock: Overlook Press.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel (1974) "The Minister's Black Veil." *Twice-Told Tales*. Ed. William Charvat et al. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 37-53.

Hodge, Robert and Gunther Kress (1988) *Social Semiotics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kaplan, Louise J. (1988) *The Family Romance of the Impostor-Poet Thomas Chatterton*. New York: Atheneum.

Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe (2001) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. 2nd ed. London: Verso.

Lanser, Susan S. (1997) "Toward A Feminist Narratology." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. Rev. ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 674-93.

Nietzsche, Friendrich (1990) "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." Trans. Daniel Breazeale. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. Eds. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 888-96.

Poe, Edgar Allan (2000) "The Man of the Crowd." *Tales and Sketches*. Ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 505-18.

Rabe, David (1995) *Hurlyburly* and *Those the River Keeps*. New York: Grove Press.

Reinhart, Tanya (1976) "Patterns, Intuitions, and the Sense of Nonsense: An Analysis of Cummings' 'anyone lived in a pretty how town'." *PTL* (Poetics and the Theory of Literature) I, l: l90-209.

Ruhl, Charles (1989) *On Monosemy: A Study in Linguistic Semantics*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Ryle, Gilbert (1971) *The Thinking of Thoughts: What is 'Le Penseur' Doing? Collected Papers*. 2. London: Hutchinson, 480-96.

Simpkins, Scott (2001) *Literary Semiotics: A Critical Approach*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

-- (1992) "In the Thick of It: Semiotics, Linguistics and Literary Criticism." *Language and Literature*. 17: 39-58.

-- (1990) "The Agency of the Title: *Finnegans Wake*." *James Joyce Quarterly*. (Summer): 735-43.

Solomon, Deborah (2009) "The Peacemaker" (interview with Ari Folman). *The New York Times Magazine* (January 6): 11.

Stillinger, Jack (1999) *Reading The Eve of St. Agnes: The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

-- (1971) "Who Says What to Whom at the End of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*?" *"The Hoodwinking of Madeline" and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 158-66.

Tabaar, Mohammad Ayatollahi (2008) "Who Wrote the Koran?" (interview with Abdulkarim Soroush). *The New York Times Magazine*. (December 5): 24.

Thibault, Paul J. (2004) *Brain, Mind and the Signifying Body: An Ecosocial Semiotic Theory*. London: Continuum.

The Greatest Show on Earth

Paul Bouissac, *Semiotics at the Circus*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2010.

By Dan Maxwell

After handing this reviewer a freshly cataloged copy of *Semiotics at the Circus*, a librarian friend quipped, "Well, now I've seen it all. Someone has written about clowns!" Bouissac's subject matter is indeed exotic. Yet his evident love of circus acts and perceptive analysis of them makes his latest book on the subject a real gem.

Semiotics at the Circus is a collection of essays which deal with various facets of circus performance. The author does not develop a single, overarching theme in the book. And because of that, chapters are not tightly integrated and can be read independently of each other. Much of the material in chapters 2, 3, 6, 8, and 9 has already appeared as published articles, but it has been extended and modified for this book (10). The rest of the chapters represent new work which has not yet been published. The reader will appreciate – even laugh over – some of the anecdotes Bouissac presents in the chapter introductions. These introduce the topic at hand in a light-hearted way while summarizing key points to come.

Bouissac firmly grounds his thought in the semiotic tradition, in both the biological and classical versions of it. The influence of the biological or biosemiotic tradition is pronounced. For instance, Bouissac introduces the basic concepts of circus time and space in chapters one and two. Whether he made an explicit decision to start the book this way cannot be clearly answered from the text. Nevertheless, the decision to do so gives the book a Kantian-like feel to it. It certainly accords with Kant's (1781/2007) basic insight that these two categories underlie all thinking processes. A focus on space-time considerations is a hallmark of biosemiotic scholarship. Jakob von Uexkull (1926) who is largely credited with initiating the biosemiotic tradition devotes chapters one and two of *Theoretical Biology* to questions of space and time. And others working within this tradition frequently follow Uexkull's lead, a notable example being Heini Hediger (1964, 1968, 1969) who explores various facets of animal space-time systems in his ground-breaking books and articles.

As one reviewer of the author's earlier work noted, Bouissac clearly belongs in the great Durkheim and Levi-Strauss tradition (Mair 1980). Yet the influence of Saussure should not be ignored either. Clearly, the author has more than a passing interest in Saussure's work. For in 2010, Continuum published a concise introduction to the work of this eminent French linguist written by him. Unlike the present work, the structuralist and classic semiotic influence is more pronounced in *Circus and Culture*, Bouissac's earlier book on the subject. In chapter two of that monograph, for example, he advances the provocative idea that the circus is not just an institution but a multi-media language as well. Thus its various acts can be read and interpreted as a finely structured text. Thinking of the circus in this way, as both an institution and as a sign-bearing system, links Bouissac to Saussure. For according to Saussure, at least two points "resisted any doubt: language was both a kind of *system* and a kind of *institution*" (77).

The ten chapters of *Semiotics at the Circus* group naturally into five categories. They are: circus space and time, animal acts, human acts, marketing, and methodology. In chapters one and two, Bouissac sets the stage for the acts that are to follow. The focus of chapter one, as noted earlier, is circus space. In it the author highlights some of the inherent contradictions in the way circuses use space. Circus space must often be made at the expense of costly urban space. It must show and hide the wonders of the circus. And finally, circus space is conical and pyramidal which is just the opposite of cityscapes which are rectangular. Circus space even has a sociological dimension to it in that it reflects the "political geography of circus personnel" (16).

In chapter two, Bouissac explores the nature of circus time, arguing that it is essentially different from linear or cyclical time. What makes it different is that it is tied to the completion of an act. In a sense, time stops while an act is in the process of completion. Take, for instance, a tight-rope walker. A unit of action time begins as the performer gingerly steps onto the wire, and it stops as he or she steps off it and onto the platform on the other side. At that point, the plan has been enacted, thus closing the action loop and the unit of time associated with it.

The author draws some interesting conclusions from his analysis of action time. If one accepts this proposition, then circus acts are templates, revealing to onlookers what a completed action looks like in a given culture. Circus performances also give the audience a precise sense of timing and rhythm. In fact, the musical and rhythmic quality of an act is so important that even small deviations in timing can affect the quality of the audience reaction, as happened with an acrobatic act which was receiving less applause due largely to a loss of precision. The acrobats had unconsciously made the act routine through endless repetition. Bouissac concludes that many of the tools found in the circus ring (trampolines, chairs, and what not) are not aimed at transforming a portion of space but a portion of time (34). In this he reveals a truly unique and creative understanding of circus tool use.

The spotlight in chapters three through five is on circus animal acts. Most of chapter three comes from a paper published in 1981 in the *Annals New York Academy of Science* (Bouissac 1981). In short, this chapter – and the original article on which it is based – is a classic in the field of human-animal interaction. It, along with Hediger's *Communication between Man and Animal* (1974), ought to be read by anyone studying the dynamics of human-animal interaction. In this chapter, Bouissac advances the argument that three semiotic spheres are operating within the circus ring during an animal act. First, there is the semiotic system that exists between the trainer and his or her audience. Second, there is the semiotic interaction system between the trainer and the animals. And finally, there is a system of communication, innately derived, in and between the animals themselves. As chief conductor, the trainer is responsible for the interactional dance between these three systems, ensuring that all parties concerned derive the proper meaning from the words and unspoken gestures.

In chapter four, Bouissac explores the curious phenomenon of horses and ostrich feathers. He introduces the chapter by noting that horses in the Japanese circus do not usually have feathers attached to them but big red bows instead. From there, Bouissac explores the link between feathers and horse acts in the West. He posits that the feathers used in horse acts link them to female acts of the 19th and 20th centuries. Curiously, a friend tells him that the red bows found in the Japanese circus are exactly like the ones geishas used to wear (55). In the West, of course, ostrich feathers were popular with show girls. Following this initial lead, the author then adds the analysis of Levi-Strauss and Leach to make the case that the symbolic connection between horses and women has a long and varied history in the West.

Bouissac analyzes the introduction of a new technology (the bicycle) and its relation to horse acts in chapter five. In many ways, the bicycle is simply an extension of the human body, acting as a special kind of prosthesis. It was readily accepted in the circus

largely because it represented a natural evolutionary path forward from the horse. Furthermore, the bicycle was an important milestone precisely because it displayed and enhanced a number of humanity's core biological competencies. Those abilities are: keeping one's balance, grasping and maintaining a grip, clearing obstacles, throwing and catching implements, and controlling predators (74).

In chapters six through eight, Bouissac turns his attention to human performances. The first chapter in this group focuses on the visual dimensions of circus acts. In circus acts, order and chaos follow each other in a patterned rhythm. The pyramid is often displayed because it represents stability. Yet order quickly becomes disorder as structures dissolve and are then reconfigured. Circus performers may not even be consciously aware of the larger patterns of stability and chaos being conveyed to the audience. They simply work with various patterns and gauge audience reaction to them. And in doing so, the tacit cultural rules of a particular society emerge from within the performance.

The logic of clown faces is the theme of chapter seven. Bouissac's creative analysis in this chapter is breathtaking, as he explores the reason why clown faces are white and made up the way they are. In analyzing the reason why clown make-up is white, the author argues that there are sound biological reasons for this decision. He links the white make-up to Leuco-signals found in nature. In nature, bright white is often a signalling mechanism. The white in tiger ears, for example, act as warning signals, alerting rivals that their presence has been noted. White also allows clowns to project the expressions of the face better, a fact of considerable importance when one's audience is at a distance, as is the case for circus audiences.

For Goffman fans, chapter eight will be a real delight. In this chapter, Bouissac first explores the strengths and limitations of Goffman's approach and then uses his notion of negative experience to analyze George Carl's clown act. The author argues that Goffman took a dictionary-like approach to the study of human behaviour. Though scientific, the challenge of finding enough examples from which to make generalized conclusions is a considerable limitation. Furthermore, the act of framing a situation is itself a dynamic process which requires an outer or meta-frame to guide the process. In other words, framing is not as static or as simple as some of Goffman's illustrations make it out to be.

A primary theme in Goffman's work is "repair work." Repair work occurs whenever social actors encounter a negative or disruptive experience. At that point, rips appear in the social or interaction order which then obligate participants to fix the situation. Goffman appreciated the value of negative experience because it often exposed the hidden and underlying rules which governed the interaction order. He was famously noted as creating disruptions himself just to see how actors in the situation would respond.

Bouissac rhetorically asks, "If Goffman was a circus clown, who would he be?" He concludes that he would be George Carl. The author writes that "Carl's act was an experiment with the negative – in the photographic sense – of the very system which makes experience possible" (134). As Carl fumbles around with his microphone, props, and even his own clothes – all elements of the interaction order which ought to make a performance possible – the audience sees how incorrect use of these structures reveals their proper, socially acceptable, ways of use. But for Carl, this is never to be, as his attempts at putting on an "acceptable" performance repeatedly fall short. Yet therein rests the genius of Carl's negative performance.

Chapters nine and ten wrap up the author's five-part act. Chapter nine briefly explores the marketing of performance, the five golden rules of performance, and the importance of framing circus acts in terms of risk. The element of risk is important in that it pre-shapes the audience's expectations, thereby allowing them to "extract the semiotic juice from it" (160). Given that the author was once a circus owner himself, having to market his own traveling troupe, this chapter holds important information for others tasked with the marketing of a performance.

In the last chapter of the book, Bouissac briefly explains his methodology, what he calls verbal copy. First, he rhetorically asks if it is even possible to create a reliable method "which would allow the observer to distance himself from the engrossing experience" of a performance (163). Hediger raises a similar question when he notes that human-animal interaction studies are inherently non-scientific. For in studying these unique interaction spaces one is not trying to remove the observer's effect from them. In other words, the variable of the human observer is recognized and even valued as part of the dynamic system. Naturally, this is not the case in a scientific experiment where any effect the observer might have on the outcome is rigorously controlled and completely negated if possible.

Given this reality, two approaches are frequently pursued in the study of performance. Within the context of the humanities, original metaphors are acceptable, even admired for their explanatory power. Scientific description, on the other hand, seeks to describe experience using quantitative data, excluding emotional components as far as possible, thereby maintaining objectivity. Bouissac points out that the risk is that the researcher will use one of these ways of description which is not appropriate, given that they were created for completely different purposes. What is needed is a middle way, one that acknowledges the observer's ongoing and active participation in the performance while putting enough distance between them and it to come to an objective understanding.

In a performance context, the greatest challenge for the observer is to transform the performance experience into a text which can then be analyzed. The author calls his approach verbal copy. In his own words, "A verbal copy must be far more inclusive and must obey a different set of selective constraints. It must fully describe the performance in all of its dimensions" (169). Bouissac takes a traditional approach to data acquisition, arguing that modern sound and video recording technologies are loaded with methodological fallacies. A key problem is that both reduce the three-dimensional act to a single dimension. And in doing so, much is lost. Video recording, in particular, tends to move from one vantage point to another, rarely allowing the observer to grasp the act as a whole. And besides, once the researcher has a video or sound recording they still have to create a textual representation of it. So why not focus on the text right up-front?

According to Bouissac, the best way to do that is to start by creating a cognitive matrix of elements you wish to observe in a particular performance. Be sure to properly name each variable or element, and then simply go and observe the performance through this filter. As defined by the author, "A cognitive matrix is a structure or a conceptual graph which determines which kind of information is relevant to the performance and should be entered as part of the copy" (172). The creation of a cognitive matrix is an important first step because it allows one to create a set of formal definitions up-front. Doing this prevents the researcher from falling into the methodological trap of uncritically describing what they see. It is important to keep in mind that verbal copy as a method **is not** simple description. A well considered matrix ensures that the process of "seeing" a performance is directed along analytical lines.

Ultimately, what one wants to create is a matrix of variables which is fairly complete, comprehensive enough to create a textual rendering of the performance which includes each of the signs that played a key role in it. The author believes that multiple viewings of an act are as important as the features of it one attends to. In fact, he recommends that one view a given performance a couple of times before creating an initial cognitive matrix. It helps too if one has extensive experience of the phenomenon under investigation as such prior knowledge makes matrix construction easier (personal communication, March 9, 2011).

Repeated observations (repeatability) are an important element of verbal copy. Indeed, one can hardly be expected to remember all of the variables listed in a cognitive matrix while watching a particular act. Thus multiple viewings are needed to ensure that each variable listed has been attended to in at least one observation. The necessity for repeated observation has an interesting correlate in ethology. In ethology, it is well understood that the observer has no experimental control over the animal under observation. Or to put it differently, the ability to manipulate a single variable – the gold-standard in science – is missing. What one can control, however, is the way observations are made as well as their frequency (Dawkins 2007).

Once a cognitive matrix has been developed, the researcher is now ready to attend a performance and take notes. The author does not take a paper copy of the matrix with him each time he observes an act. Instead, he jots down impressions in a notepad and then uses short-term memory after the fact to fill in the details (personal communication, March 9, 2011). The purpose of the matrix is to add structure to an observation, to act as an external check which ensures that each semiotic element listed in it is properly developed in the researcher's notes. A cognitive matrix should not be thought of as some sort of fill-in-the-blank approach to observation. If a variable is missed in a viewing, one clearly needs to go back and watch the performance again. But that does not mean they should ignore everything else while doing so.

The creation of the verbal copy commences as soon as the researcher has a complete set of notes, as defined by the cognitive matrix. In short, each variable listed in the matrix ought to be addressed somewhere in one's notes before synthesis begins. What finally emerges from a synthesis of these multiple observations and notes is an accurate representation of what happened during the performance to the extent that anyone reading it could understand its full semiotic significance. That, in brief, is verbal copy. It is not simple description or journalism. Instead, verbal copy is a formally defined semiotic depiction of a performance, and the method which produces it works surprisingly well. After reading the author's description of George Carl's clown act in chapter eight, this reviewer went to YouTube and found a video of a Carl act from the early 1990s. Bouissac's verbal copy was surprisingly accurate, even though he had never seen this specific performance. Even more surprising was the way in which the author's textual rendering of this clown act highlighted its salient semiotic and sociological features.

With verbal copy in-hand, the researcher can now proceed with analysis. Bouissac admits that he borrows insights from anywhere and everywhere as he seeks to make sense of a given performance. His approach is often messy, certainly eclectic, and reflects a commitment on his part to bottom-up analysis. In contrast, top-down approaches – i.e. those in which the investigator starts with a strong commitment to some theory –create more problems than they solve. For as the author pointed out to this reviewer, "Those with strong top-down commitments always find what they're looking for" (personal communication, March 9, 2011).

Given the fact that methods and approaches are so infrequently discussed in the semiotic literature, Bouissac's original contribution ought to be highly valued. What might be helpful, especially for those working in the performance studies arena, would be for Bouissac to expand this chapter into a full-length book. The addition of practical working examples, cognitive matrices used, and field notes from the author's personal collection would be tremendously useful. As a method, verbal copy is not without its weaknesses. It is clearly not suited for those seeking universal truths. Yet the same could probably be said of many other methods where the number of observations made is inadequate to support generalized inferences.

An even-handed evaluation of *Semiotics at the Circus* should probably begin with an acknowledgement of Bouissac's distinctive contribution to methodology. The combination of rigour and creativity which characterizes verbal copy is unique and deserves further exploration. Indeed, this is a key strength of the book, the one which allowed the author to develop such an astonishing array of creative insights in the first place. Others may need to slightly modify the author's method to fit their unique circumstances – as this reviewer plans to do in a forthcoming dissertation – but that is to be expected. Overall verbal copy shows great potential.

In addition to methodology, mention should also be made of the book's strong academic tone. On the one hand, this is a definite strength. Bouissac's writing style is richly textured and supports multiple readings. A couple of chapters, specifically chapter eight which addresses Goffman's methodology, ought to be slowly digested only after a second reading. The author is clearly a product of the great French intellectual tradition, and his writing style reflects its influence, as well as that of Claude Levi-Strauss one of his early mentors.

The academic tone, however, comes at a price. Non-academic readers – i.e. the reading public – may find the nuanced text a difficult read. In brief, the book may not find a large audience. This is unfortunate in that it narrows the potential market to academic specialists, thereby limiting production volume and dramatically driving up the price. De Gruyter lists the book for $155.00. The average reader, or thread-bare academic for that matter, may find this too expensive, opting instead to borrow it from a local library.

A third strength of this book is that the author speaks authoritatively because he once owned a circus himself. Academics with hands-on circus management experience are rare indeed, though the author admitted that the experimental circus he once owned was run on a "shoe-string budget" (personal communication, February, 2011). Nevertheless, this practical experience lends an air of credibility to Bouissac's entire enterprise. The circus industry as a whole owes Bouissac a debt of gratitude. For in making plain the inner-workings and history of the circus – knowledge most shows jealously guard – the reader gains a better appreciation of this unique and all too human institution. In an age in which circuses are under increasing scrutiny, especially from special interest groups, greater transparency and accountability should be welcomed by all.

Special mention should be made of the way Bouissac handles biological considerations in this book. His approach is both balanced and objective. This stands in marked contrast to others who have explored the biological basis of human behaviour without the requisite finesse. Edward Wilson and the sociobiology dust-up which occurred in the late 1970's and early 1980's come immediately to mind. Thankfully, Bouissac avoids the kind of presentation that landed Wilson in so much controversy. The possible links he finds are indeed fascinating. But the way in which he develops and weaves the biological illustrations into the text are models of probity and sound scholarship.

One note of surprise is that with this latest book on the subject, Bouissac does not greatly expand or build on insights from *Circus and Culture*, his 1976 work on this topic. Take, for instance, the two primary semiotic systems a trainer must manage in every animal act: that of the animal and that of the audience. In chapter four of that book, Bouissac presents a detailed diagram of these two systems, their constituent elements and the relations between them. Yet that diagram is never mentioned or referred to in chapter three of this book where he discusses the semiotics of animal acts. It is apparent that

a lot of work and thought went into the creation of that illustration, but its potential as a theoretical device has yet to be fully researched and explored by the author.

Bouissac has clearly matured his view of the circus since 1976, and he recognizes that fact in the present book. He notes that that earlier work was characterized by ad-hoc borrowings from a variety of disciplines. It was not as rigorous. And the level of observation was similar, in many ways, to that of an "attentive spectator immersed in the circus performance situation" (22). Nevertheless, many of the insights and diagrams in that earlier work – when combined with the sophistication of a methodology such as verbal copy – have the potential to revolutionize the way we watch, research, and analyze performance.

The lack of an explicit continuity between the author's earlier and later work has a Goffman-like feel to it. Critics have often commented that Goffman seemed to revel in starting afresh each time he wrote something new, and they often wondered what held everything together (Drew 1988). Was there a conceptual foundation? Though Bouissac clearly has no aspirations of pursuing a theoretical agenda, it might be interesting nonetheless for someone to further explore the links between his many essays

However, the question of continuity is minor, as are a few other issues discovered while reading the book. The first is technical. There are a couple places in the book where citations appear in the text but are absent from the references. Again, this is not a major issue, though one might expect a higher level of editorial attention given the price of the book. The second item, though many may not consider this a weakness, has to do with the fact that Bouissac does not draw heavily from the emerging field of performance studies – Richard Schechner being but one noteworthy name in this field. Obviously, time and money constraints prevent one from investigating every possible research lead. So this is not a direct criticism of the author per se, just the recognition that other valuable connections await discovery.

In conclusion, Bouissac's performance in this book is superb. One can only hope that it will attract a large enough audience to make it a foundational act for others who wish to extend his analysis and research into other performing arenas. *Semiotics at the Circus* is noteworthy for the breadth of insights offered, the interdisciplinary nature of the inquiry, a new and potentially ground-breaking methodology, and even the insightful and often humorous anecdotes at the start of each chapter. In short, this book will make a valuable and useful addition to just about any library. Or as a circus barker might yell, "Folks, this is one show you don't want to miss!"

Dan Maxwell is presently a graduate student at Fielding Graduate University. The focus of his doctoral studies is the semiotic dimensions of human-animal interaction. In his spare time, Dan enjoys practicing the art of classical dressage. He also works as an eResource Librarian at Southern Adventist University.

References

Bouissac, P. (2010) *Saussure: A guide for the perplexed*. London; New York: Continuum.

-- (1976) *Circus and culture: A semiotic approach*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Dawkins, M. S. (2007) *Observing animal behaviour: Design and analysis of quantitative data*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Drew, P., & Wootton, A. (1988) *Erving Goffman: Exploring the interaction order*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Hediger, H. (1974) Communication between man and animal. *Image Roche, 62*, 27-40.

-- (1969) *Man and animal in the zoo: Zoo biology*. New York: Delacorte Press.

-- (1968) *The psychology and behaviour of animals in zoos and circuses*. New York: Dover Publications.

-- (1964) *Wild animals in captivity*. New York: Dover Publications.

Kant, I., Weigelt, M., & Müller, F. M. (2007) *Critique of pure reason*. London; New York: Penguin.

Mair, M. (1980) The melody of the text. *Semiotica, 32*(1-2), 119-138.

Uexküll, J., & Mackinnon, D. L. (1926) *Theoretical biology*. London, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

The Risk of Critique: Voices Across the Generations

By Barbara Godard

I was jolted twice this summer by signs of the deep penetration of technology into pedagogical relations and scholarly research in the increasingly corporatized university. I was shocked first when the bright red object on the cover of the latest issue of my professional magazine, English Studies in Canada, turned out to be a"hot chili," much coveted as sign of student approval by professors contributing to a "Readers Forum" about RateMyProfessors.com, a commercial on-line rating system. The second shock came at summer's close on receipt of an email from the university library inviting professors to attend "Research Frontiers Day" where the opening session would focus on using Facebook, del.icio.us, and other "online social networking tools" to "plug in" to a research network, organize research or connect with other researchers. Together these incidents are symptomatic of the profound changes occurring in the university today with the commodification and privatization of knowledge and decline in social commitment which have followed upon the extension of corporate control over the university's key functions. In this essay, I reflect on these issues and comment on what might be done to address them.

Transmitting complex knowledge across generations has long been a responsibility of the university. Through its traditional roles of teaching, research and community service, the university has generated and shared critical knowledge to sustain the public good. There are signs today that the university is no longer fulfilling its historical function, even as the media proclaim the need for more graduates in our contemporary "knowledge society." Troubling in the university today is the commodification of knowledge along with a loss of collegiality and social commitment which have followed upon the increasing direct control of the private sector over the university's operations. What disturbs me most is the complicity of professors in for-profit digital networks which displace the university's key activities of knowledge creation and transfer outside itself in ways that limit the practice of publicly engaged inquiry and the dissemination of critical knowledge. Such acceptance of the corporatization of university culture as an inevitable "reality" abdicates the traditional "self-policing" (Jacobs 2004: 24) of the teaching profession in resistance to encroachments on its pursuit of free inquiry in the broader public good. Collegial critique interrogating academic practices will wither in the mediatized consensus of a bureaucratized culture unless another generation of university scholars becomes engaged in renewing collective responsibility to continue the struggle for emancipatory knowledge against the creeping credentialization of professional accomplishment.

Already in the 1960s under the rapid expansion in a post-Sputnik era, the university was criticized for its dehumanization of learning in the "knowledge factories" of the military-industrial complex. However, the sixties was also an era of increased government funding for higher education, especially for basic scientific research, which provided universities with a margin of manoeuvre outside the logic of the market. Government support might well have increased the "large-scale marketing of facts" (Innis 1980: 268) rather than the traditional training of judgment, but its intervention introduced necessary balance to enable the university to escape the domination of any one group's monopoly of knowledge whether that of the church, as in the past, or commerce, as in the future. Moreover, students and faculty actively resisted the transformations underway and challenged the increasing utilitarian emphasis in the name of a more egalitarian "community of scholars" whose proper function is to be a "creator and destroyer of ideas" (Innis 1980: 171).

In the 1990s, under the neo-liberal transformation of public post-secondary education credentials came to replace ideas. Decreases in government funding led to steep increases in tuition fees as well as in class sizes, turning students into clients for whom a degree was linked to the promise of jobs. Diplomas came to be viewed as a purchasable right. Today, universities may still serve as the "publicly subsidized testing service for 'private' enterprise," but it is less in their sixties function of producing the "knowledgeable" with the "know how that enables the corporate state to expand," the managers that allow it to manipulate efficiently (Davidson 1967-68:103), than in facilitating the proliferation of the corporate state's cybernetic systems among a compliant clientele. With corporatization penetrating every aspect of teaching and learning, the university has become a mass marketer for the high-tech industries as professors and students groove together on the latest mobile gadgets. On-line, on-demand instruction on the Internet, podcasts, chat groups, Facebook and even virtual classes on *Second Life*, are offered by universities so that "difficult concepts" can be introduced in an "unthreatening way" (Church 2007: A16) making learning easy. Instead of taking students out of their adolescent subculture and establishing a difference conducive to critical reflection, the university interacts with students in their play. Teachers are reduced to mere content providers of infotainment for digital enterprises when students become consumers. "I want them to think psychology is cool," one young professor says about his podcast to a class of 3000. "Cool tools" is what it's all about in an era of "education for the high-tech savvy" (Church 2007: A16). If the burning question of the 1960s was "knowledge for whom?", today the question might well be reframed as "what's knowledge got to do with it?"

Coolness lies at the heart of students' university experience, I was troubled to read in the Readers Forum on RateMyProfessors.com (RMP). Students value participation in "peer culture--"be[ing] cool"--rather than engaging with "issues and ideas" (Zwicker 2005: 24). This gap between generations incites professorial interest in student opinion. Introduced as a Forum on pedagogy, the essays focus on the quantifiable measurement of outcomes, the performance indicators of the corporatized university, rather than on teaching philosophies or methodologies that might better awaken students' "engagement, hard work and curiosity" -- the "stuff of critical thinking" (2005:23). The English teachers repeat the gesture of the young psychology professor in "going over" to the students in their desire for positive ratings: they write about their own "primarily emotional responses" to student comments, most of them negative (Morrison 2005: 17). With criteria for evaluation as vague as "Clarity" or as antithetical to learning as "Easiness," RMP does little to elicit responses about the kind of critical analysis or disciplinary methodologies imparted in a course. Without a specific prompt for information about course content, the rating can only indicate tautologically whether there was any static in the communication channel. RMP invites a contentless, phatic or a-signifying interchange, a pure flow of bits and bytes as computers connect to network, linking to the RMP website or downloading a podcast lecture. Only the passionate extremes of high, but mostly low, get registered in RMP's digital realm. With the prize of chili peppers for professors who are "hot," pleasure in the classroom is heavily eroticized. Affect is what circulates in the pedagogical interchange performing "immaterial labour" (Hardt 1999: 93). Contributors to the Forum generally overlooked the social relations of power mobilizing this labour in the shift to services and informatization of late capitalism. Instead they relate anecdotes exhibiting the effects of a generalized circulation of anxiety in students' anger and their own abjection that erupt in a "rudeness endemic to the digital realm" (Morrison 2005: 20). For the angry or pleasure seeking, RMP is a "formidable engine for the manufacture of 'popular opinion'" as it mobilizes affect into "bankable forms of knowledge" (Slemon 2005: 29).

In the face of the pervasive web-based systems for teaching and research, and the enthusiasm of young professors for such "cool tools," I was disquieted by a change in understanding of both "community" and "scholars." Any link made by the professors to a history of scholarship in a discipline is outweighed by their desire to make courses not only relevant but high in the popularity polls. Nor do they invoke broader social values that might assert alternative claims beyond the purely disciplinary or instant connectivity. A modelling of critical thought through long study and attentive mentoring is disappearing in an age that views a university degree on a fee for service basis and substitutes the anonymity of distributed networks for face to face debate. Contact through an informational flow of digital codes is confused with knowledge in all its conflicts and contradictions

necessitating critical judgment. Moreover, the proprietary software mediating relations among users and the intrusive advertising on search engines and websites serve students up to the corporate economy. The extension of property rights over scientific and textual databases multiplies the risk of closing down the information commons and spaces for dissent as publicly funded research is captured for private gain.

The space for critical thought shrinks with the consequent changes in both the inquiring subject and the object of knowledge. No longer does biopower produce self-regulating subjects with habits inculcated through the confinement of schooling. The "control society" of contemporary capitalism exercises power through the "continuous control and instant communication" of computers in an informational economy that flattens subjects to "dividua[ls]" or numerical codes (Deleuze 1995: 182). Additionally, the conflicts between political power and its critique, once internal to the modern university, have now been displaced onto a relation with an invasive outside. The responsibility to justice which Kant (1798) posited as central to the university was caught then in a conflict between royal power and pure reason which pitted the faculties closest to power, with their applied knowledges of theology, law and medicine, against the "lower faculties" of the humanities with their critique and history. Today it is no longer possible to maintain this boundary between the "lettered" technicians, instruments of power trained in the university, and the scholar-professors engaged in the free exercise of judgment in the service of truth. With the archive placed outside the university in web-based data banks, the university no longer retains the prerogative of knowledge and arbitration of truth but has surrendered this "mission" to "trans-State capitalist powers" (Derrida 2004: 94).

Nor can the boundary be sustained within the scholar, in the split between the exercise of the technical functions of one's profession and the obligation as a member of "a society of world citizens" to make "public use of [one's] reason" to criticize the effects of these functions. "Courage," Kant wrote (1963: 5-6), was required for the scholar to assume this contradiction between action and truth in order to examine reflexively the social conditions of possibility of one's special competence as professor. With the emergence of new technologies, the public sphere for such free exercise of reason has been transformed so that media-savvy "publicists" ("médiatiques"), masters of the sound bite, have taken on the guise of scholars (Bourdieu 1991: 665) as the media has absorbed the public sphere more completely into the technocratic functions of corporate capital. The vigilance the professoriate exercises in ensuring its responsibilities are carried out for the general social good derives from the venerable obligations of the scholar. However, the scope of such self-scrutiny has been transformed from the intellectual's philosophizing on social (in)justice for a reading public to the swift emotional charge of the "celetoid" (Rojek 2001) or TV celebrity. In the resulting intensification of connectivity, affect, not reason, becomes the cultural currency, the means by which capitalism in its present form "seeks to sell its services, and . . . to buy, activities" (Deleuze 1995: 182).

The conditions for the circulation of affect, especially anxiety, have been produced by a number of major technico-political transformations within and without the university. The weight of corporate-dominated boards of governors and behind them private fundraising bodies have extended their extra-statutory reach over university affairs to undermine the authority of collegial governance in university senates and faculties. Information flows bureaucratically down from the administration's marketers as a culture of secrecy replaces a community of dissensus. In such a culture of managed consensus, Facebook might well seem a welcome alternative in which to exchange information. However, such sites favour instant publicity of accomplishments which promotes a culture of celebrity while enmeshing "scholars" ever more deeply in the tangles of the corporate economy under the control of proprietary rules which regulate access to technology and software.

Underlying these transformations in university governance are policies of the Canadian state which have produced a general climate of insecurity. Aggressively since the mid 1990s, policy changes have redistributed the wealth of citizens away from support for ongoing operations of educational and other social institutions to build capital for the rich through tax breaks for corporations. Cancellation of funding for bursaries with a resulting shift to loans administered by banks has thrust students into the bondage of debt to the corporate sector. Reductions in social transfers from federal to provincial governments with no specific allocations for education have limited funding for universities with a consequent compression in the number of professors. Class sizes have swelled to the monstrous 3000 students assigned to the young psychology professor, while university fees have risen astronomically. Any increase in government funding in recent years has been tied to private-public partnerships which have deepened the penetration of corporate culture in university governance. Funds are now targeted for designated fields of research and programme development, moves that have impoverished the Humanities and Social Sciences - Kant's "lower" faculties specializing in critical thought.

Other policies advanced in the name of globalization have simultaneously contributed to this destabilization by radically changing the conditions of labour. With the outsourcing of many industries to Third World countries and the takeover of Canadian corporations by foreign owners, the chances for graduates finding a job with that B.A. have greatly diminished, making student debt an ever more frightening burden. At the same time, universities have met the demands of teaching large numbers of students through an increased use of part-time faculty and graduate, or even undergraduate, teaching assistants. The casualization of labour among university teachers has heightened the power of the course evaluation, the sword of surveillance hanging over these exploited workers, between them and the possibility of a coveted tenure track position or just continuing work. Corporate capitalism has everything to gain from lobbying governments to maintain the climate of fear which, in the resulting scramble for work, produces a manipulable population, preoccupied with constantly reorienting itself. Such sudden transformations are the way the control society operates (Deleuze 1995: 182). Students prolong their adolescence as they cling to the peer group, seeking to socialize with friends, "fit in, and to be cool" (Zwicker 2005: 24). Teachers struggle between their role as temporary corporate employees and their scholarly responsibility to disseminate critical thought about the politics of insecurity. The chili pepper is a hot item indeed in this precarious world.

Is another world possible? Memories of a different university linger, for not all those members of the 1960s have retired. The rating systems now captive to corporate capital were, before their current use as surveillance by university administrations, once the creation of student activists who first developed counter calendars in the aim of democratizing the university. Inspired by the student syndicalism which transformed Canadian universities in the 1960s, students understood themselves to be intellectual workers with a responsibility to participate actively as citizens in socio-political transformation. They recognized that student problems, in particular problems of education, have their origin in socio-economic structures. Student critiques of the academy and society asserted the claims of social justice in the creation of more equitable structures. The ethical impulse of the traditional university training in character and judgment was enhanced in this period by the additional exercise of practical ethics in the wider politico-economic interests of society - an effective process of cultural renewal.

Ghostly voices from that era linger, as in a recent CBC rebroadcast of "George Grant: The Moving Image of Eternity." Matt Cohen, then a Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CUCND) activist, TA and student of Grant, later a well-known novelist, reminisced about his relationship to the celebrated philosopher and anti-nuclear advocate. What Cohen remembered most clearly is how Grant's teaching flowed seamlessly from the lecture hall through the seminar room and on to his house where students joined professors and other intellectuals. Their discussions, not only of classical philosophical texts, but of current social and political issues, would take them together to a Teach-In or into the streets in protest against the rise of the military-industrial complex. In this kind of mentoring, students were introduced into the world of professors in multifaceted relationships which fostered a wide ranging transdisciplinary education linking reflective judgment to action. More complex affect informs these interpersonal relations than the distanced digital professor-student interactions of today. A smaller university where faculty student ratios were more balanced made such relations possible.

Some of the younger generation hear the voices of the past and recall the era of the intellectual worker as a "golden age" which they regrettably missed. They hope to keep its spirit alive in "manifestos" for their generation in these "neoliberal times" (Kurosawa 2007). Advocating an active response to the climate of insecurity, they embrace "intellectual risk taking" and "publicly engaged scholarly research" so as to invent alternatives to the prevailing "resigned quietism or instrumental careerism" (Kurosawa 2007: 21-22). Against the demands of instant electronic connectivity, this slow learning requires a scholarly "practice of intellectual craftwork" (Kurosawa 2007: 11). Creation has always differed from communication and may through its possibilities for "transversal organization" help the emergence of new collective forms of resistance to the "control society" (Deleuze 1995: 175). Above all, younger generations need to learn to reconnect the socio-political to the economic in order to understand the role of the state in engineering the corporatization of the universities and the economic changes in the conditions of labour at the root of their anxiety. Professors need to remain alert to the tensions of their position caught between technocratic subordination and the public use of reason. "Courage," as Kant's voice echoes across the centuries to the future, is necessary to assume this dialectical contradiction and take the risk of critique to make public the social relations of power limiting the exercise of reason.

Barbara Godard (1941-2010) was an Associate Editor of *The Semiotic Review of Books*.

References

Bourdieu, Pierre (1991) "Universal Corporatism: The Role of the Intellectuals in the Modern World." Trans. Gisele Shapiro. *Poetics Today* 12, 4: 655-669.

Cayley, David (1986) *George Grant: The Moving Image of Eternity*, Toronto: CBC *Ideas*.

Christian, William, ed. (1980) *The Idea File of Harold Adams Innis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Church, Elizabeth (2007) "Higher education for the high-tech savvy," *Globe and Mail.* (September 7): A16.

Davidson, Carl (1967-68) "Towards a Movement of Student Syndicalism," *Our Generation.* 5, 1: 102-111.

Deleuze, Gilles (1995) *Negotiations: 1972-1990*. Trans. Martin Joughin. New York: Columbia University Press.

Derrida, Jacques (2004 [1990]) *Eyes of the University: The Right to Philosophy*. Trans. Jan Plug. Stanford: Stanford U P.

Hardt, Michael (1999) "Affective Labor," *Boundary 2* 26,2: 89-100.

Hayles, N. Katherine and Nicholas Gessler (2005) "Rating RateMyProfessors.com," *English Studies in Canada* 31, 4 (December): 6-9.

Jacobs, Jane. (2004) *Dark Age Ahead*. Toronto: Random House.

Kant, Immanuel (1963) "What is Enlightenment?" *On History*. Ed and trans. Lewis W. Beck. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, pp. 3-10.

-- (1979 [1798]) *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Trans. Mary J. Gregor. New York: Abaris Books.

Kurosawa, Fuyuki (2007) "The State of Intellectual Play: A Generational Manifesto for Neoliberal Times," *Topia* 18: 11-42.

Morrison, Aimée (2005) "Some Things, You're Better Off Not Knowing ... Thoughts on RateMyProfessors.com," *English Studies in Canada*. 31, 4 (December): 16-21.

Rojek, Chris (2001) *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books.

Slemon, Stephen (2005) "dot-com agency: The Politics of Knowing," *English Studies in Canada*. 31, 4 (December): 27-29.

Zwicker, Heather (2005) "They're Just Not That into You." *English Studies in Canada*. 31, 4 (December): 22-26.

Media Garbology

Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011.

By Jussi Parikka

Jennifer Gabrys' Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics is one of those books that you wish you had written – in my case, because of the elegance which with it ties together the ecological residue of electronic media culture, regimes of memory extending outside the human (and hence rethinking what the archive is), and for its (new) materialist way of materializing that what we hallucinated for a while as immaterial (new media). Hence, this text is not only a "review" of the book, but a short meditation on time, media archaeology and waste.

Digital Rubbish is a book about how electronic media is woven into various materialities. As a correction to some of the enthusiasm of the 1990s for "cyber-concepts," the past 10 years of media theory has increasingly focused on the material: the protocols, hardware, technologies, infrastructures, labour, and materiality of software, too. Considering "waste" in this context makes perfect sense. In a manner that has been recently flagged by, for instance, Sean Cubitt, we need to understand the different technologies, components and processes through which our screen cultures are constructed. This leads one to realize that at one end, specific materials and automated modes of production afford what we tend to take as "mass media," and at the other end of the spectrum, such products return somewhere. Quite often through various passages from attics and spare rooms to recycling centres, e-waste dumps in China, resale markets in Asia and Africa, as well as landfills. Gabrys is able to specify not only the material basis of electronic culture, but also its processes; for instance, after discarding media, it just does not disappear, nor is it recycled, but the process is more complex, and involves labour processes, techniques, and various cycles. Media never just dies – as I write with Garnet Hertz in our "Zombie Media" piece – but stays as a living dead, whether recycled, repurposed, or discarded as environmentally hazardous material. Gabrys argues the same, and with such finesse and elegance that it does more than convince; it is written in a style that is also enjoyable to read.

The study works as a natural history of electronics, which Gabrys adopts from Walter Benjamin (what to me is one media archaeological context for the book). Benjamin's method was to investigate everyday consumer objects as fossils of the emerging capitalism of nineteenth century Paris, an object-oriented media theoretical view to political economy entangled with social desires, and sedimentation of time through a varia of things. Gabrys picks up on this natural history of artifice, and extends it to electronics and its remainders, in order to tap into the miscellany of what we left behind in terms of gadgets and screens, toys and tools.

What such a natural history reveals is how, through an investigation into the materialities of such things, we can tap into what I would emphasize as the non-human element that surfaces with electronics. Instead of temporalities that we usually associate, and marketing discourses constantly consolidate, with high-technology such as progress, speed and novelty, Gabrys talks of other layers. For instance, dust and soil become grounds for the temporalities we should understand as relevant to high-technology.

Gabrys writes:

> Within the usual pronouncements on the progress, speed, abundance, and overload of new technologies, the dust is most often overlooked. But dust may, in fact, be a more accurate gauge of these technological objects. For all the successive doubling of computing speed and for all the flurry of new electronic innovations there is a corresponding degree of electronic obsolescence. (105)

The dust is a marker of this time of obsolescence, and similarly the soil, as the ground into which toxins and heavy metals from abandoned electronics in landfills leaks. This time is outside our use value, but is still is "dead media" in the sense of Bruce Sterling, but undead – zombie media.

Gabrys addresses such themes for instance in her chapter on "Museum of Failure." Failure is here referred to as the stuff of "forgotten dreams" and "collapsed utopias," a sense of abandonment but also the very material logic of decay that is not restricted to organic substance. Indeed, as Gabrys argues, preservation is about management of decay, something that we have attached as a process and a practice to cultural heritage but is both connected to the other institutions in which failure is registered: for instance, recycling centres. This double bind between what is materially waste, and that which we register as cultural heritage, is interesting. Gabrys is able to flag the problems that have to do with institutional storage of electronic culture: the fleeting ephemerality of internet-based cultures, with a nod towards Friedrich Kittler, when she quotes him: "the medium that archives all media cannot archive itself." This much every museum and archive professional knows, and grapples with: how do we store dynamic processes, electronic culture, and software? In terms of the others of this memory, such objects and devices end up discarded and just forgotten, but still bearing a special sign of an archive of electronic culture that introduces novel temporalities. What Gabrys does really well is pick open such themes of temporality as obsolescence, impermanence, delay and decay, and the specific materialities in this economy of time.

Gabrys is senior lecturer in design at Goldsmiths College (London), and does not embrace an affiliation with a media archaeological strand of writing, but, to me, the book is completely media archaeological. It is not in the sense of what media archaeology has been – an excavation of lost paths and recurring themes of media culture – but in the sense of what it can develop towards: a non-human view towards human practices of design, political economy of media, obsolescence, ecology and waste, a media archaeology cum media garbology, for which digging through remains of mediatic devices is not only about the quirky past, but about the frightening present and futures destroyed because of the heavy metals, toxins that leak to nature. Hence, Gabrys could have easily gone that route too, and engaged with the deep potential in media archaeology (she mentions only briefly Siegfried Zielinski).

One option would have been to elaborate the way in which Benjamin's idea of a natural history of commodities is embedded in his emphasis on discontinuities. This also serves as the starting point for so much of media archaeological thought. Benjamin steered clear of the emphasis on teleology that is found in various historical writings as well as the cultures of memory demonstrated, for instance, in the institution of the Victorian museum. As Michelle Henning (2007: 74) articulates, Benjamin was keen to develop a notion of history as one of collage, constellations and denaturalization, a shock to the present. Henning continues to elaborate Benjamin's view of the historian as "a ragpicker, picking through the detritus of modernity, finding all that has been left over or rendered obsolete" (2007: 75). Such an image is a powerful conceptual way to understand electronic media waste and the programmed obsolescence of consumer culture as a specific function of regimes of memory.

Interestingly, as flagged above, media studies scholars such as Cubitt display a similar emphasis on waste, as well as Garnet Hertz in his Dead Media-creative research lab, through circuit bending and related DIY practices, and eminent philosophers as Michel Serres as well. Serres' (2010) point seems to relate to how in addition to the heavy pollution from factories ("material abuse"), we are suffering from mental pollution ("messaging abuse"). As such, Serres seems to be following Félix Guattari's example in thinking ecology through not only nature, but the various other levels of social and political investment, including the psyche. And the same accounts for the pollution as well: one can also track pollution as a multi-layered social-aesthetic-material phenomena from the social to the mediatic, and hence extending towards "media ecology.". Yet, what Serres misses – and Gabrys picks up so well – is that these regimes are topologically connected. It's not only that nature is "heavily polluted" by factories, cars, airline industries, but that the machines of communication and messaging are themselves material assemblages that extend from the social to the natural. This is the middle that Serres does not address, and what is even more crucial to he media cultural agenda.

The question becomes even more complex when we consider the energetics of technical media cultures through data farm-ecologies (Cubitt, Hassan and Volkmer 2011; cf. Pasquinelli 2011 for a slightly different emphasis on energetics of digital culture). Such different material and energetic regimes demand fresh insights into the media-nature-science triangle that escapes from sight under the conceptualizations of "cloud computing," such seemingly fleeting formations of lightness, but supported by long, heavy networks of energy supply. In this context, again, I recommend Gabrys' book as offering a very insightful perspective. It does not remain only an overview of the problems, but is able to flag the importance of such themes for design futures, or what could also perhaps be called micropolitics of design, where such themes as "planned obsolescence" are revealed as less a vague ideology and as more of a concrete design strategy. It is from this microlevel that the building and decay of digital culture starts.

Jussi Parikka is Reader in Media & Design, Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton. Visit his Web site at http://jussiparikka.net.

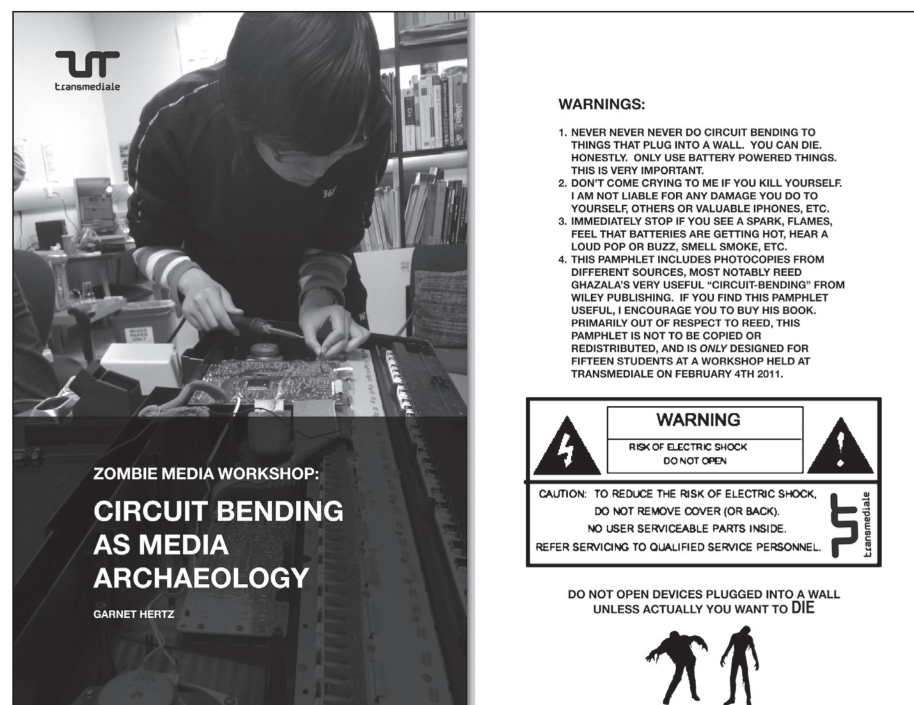
References

Robert Hassan and Ingrid Volkmer (2011) "Does Cloud Computing Have a Silver Lining?" *Media, Culture & Society* 33 (1): 149-158.

Henning, Michelle (2007) "The Return of Curiosity: The World Wide Web as Curiosity Museum," in *Multimedia Histories. From the Magic Lantern to the Internet*, eds. James Lyons and John Plunkett, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, pp. 72-84.

Hertz, Garnet and Parikka, Jussi (2012) "Zombie Media: Circuit Bending Media Archaeology into an Art Method," forthcoming in *Leonardo*.

Serres, Michel (2010) *Malfeasance: Appropriation Through Pollution?* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.



Garnet Hertz is a Fulbright Scholar and contemporary artist whose work explores themes of technological progress, creativity, innovation and interdisciplinarity. He is Artist in Residence and Research Scientist in Informatics at UC Irvine, as well as Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Media Design Program at Art Center College of Design, and is currently nominated for the Transmediale 2011 Vilém Flusser Theory Award. For more information visit his Web site http://conceptlab.com.