

# The Other Language: Visual Semiotics and Meaning

Review of Fernande Saint-Martin, *Le sens du langage visuel: essai de sémantique visuelle psychanalytique*. Québec : Presse de l'Université du Québec, 2007 and *L'immersion dans l'art : comment donner sens aux œuvres de 7 artistes*. Québec : Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2010.

By Jakub Zdebik

In two books that could best be described as complex and comprehensive, namely *Le sens du langage visuel* (2007) and *L'immersion dans l'art* (2010), Fernande Saint-Martin undertakes the complicated task of establishing a definitive ground for a visual semiotic theory, and then systematically applies her theories to the work of various artists, be they medieval masters or legends of abstraction.

The continuum I propose to establish between both books is not wholly arbitrary. The task Saint-Martin sets out to accomplish in *Le sens du langage* is best explicated by an application to works of art, as one of the annexes to the book demonstrates with a brief application of its theories to a work by Alfred Pellin. *L'immersion dans l'art*, for its part, never strays from a multilayered philosophical and psychoanalytic method in its intricate dissections of artworks. If *Le sens du langage visuel* lays the historical ground of a theory of visual semiotics in an expansive overview of the attempts of twentieth century philosophers and theorists to define the concept of meaning, *L'immersion dans l'art* works out, on a case by case basis, the result of such a theory.

But in both books, Saint-Martin communicates her central thesis, which is the topological semiotic mapping of the surface of painting in order to articulate meaning. And if meaning is extrapolated from a historical assessment of philosophy in the first book, it is articulated artistically in the second. In her attempt to seek a multilayered and complete description of the concept of meaning, Saint-Martin never strays far from the notion of space. The two books are a spectacular epistemological deployment of the notion of space. This spatial deployment is part of an ambitious program that the author articulates on the double front of philosophy and art.

In what follows, I will first attempt to summarize Saint-Martin's impressive undertaking in bringing attention to the way twentieth

century philosophy has dealt with the question of meaning in visual systems. And second, I will offer a glimpse of the complex way she describes individual works of art by focusing on a restricted selection from her vast array of critical examples.

*Le sens du langage visuel* is divided into two parts. In the first part, the author surveys the history of twentieth century philosophy in order to show that all major philosophical schools failed to provide a systematized description of meaning especially in the context of visual semiotics. In the second part, the author plumbs psychoanalysis to see how a workable semiotic theory can be established.

The number of philosophical traditions and philosopher's writings Saint-Martin is fluent in is dizzying. In the course of describing the major currents of philosophy in the twentieth century, from iconology to phenomenology, semiotics and Anglo-Saxon theory, she writes about most major figures from Cassirer, Jung, Lévi-Strauss, Panofsky, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, Hjelmslev, Derrida, Peirce, Korzybski and Chomsky among many others. The expansive nature of this list of figures is supported by a chronological trajectory to her analysis and a display of thorough citations that make this work a reference for the philosophical history of meaning. Furthermore, in order to reinforce the systematic order of her analysis, the author deploys a series of provisional assessments that summarize the wealth of information at strategic places in the book, giving it the thought-out style of a philosophical manual. She also provides a series of annexes to buttress the body of the book with commentary and examples of the application of her theories which suggest that the author still has much more to say. And that is why *L'immersion dans l'art* seems to continue the efforts of *Le sens du langage visuel*.

Saint-Martin's point of focus is what she calls "the other language," namely visual language. She states that the goal of her research

is to establish a method for the interpretation of visual language, a hermeneutic of visual sources: "Cette sémantique permet de reconnaître une 'compréhension' minimale à tout spectateur ou spectatrice qui veut bien 'regarder' les œuvres." (2007: 2) Her way of establishing its visual interpretative methodology is multidisciplinary. She says that apart from linguistics and semiology, she will look into advances in biology, physiology, psychology, history and philosophy. Saint-Martin will also touch upon physics and mathematics. Of course, psychoanalysis is a major part of her work because, as she states: "les sciences cognitives n'abordent pas le monde de l'affect, incontournable en art, ni même les conduits irrationnelles obscurées empiriquement dans la vie quotidienne." (2007: 2) Perhaps, Saint-Martin asks, philosophical traditions were unable to come up with a complete theory of meaning because they do not take into consideration the contingencies and subjective ambiguities in which psychoanalysis is versed. In her thorough overview of twentieth century theoretical schools, Saint-Martin makes sure to bring the discussion to the plane of visual aesthetics.

It must be noted that Saint-Martin writes from a specific context. Her perspective on semiotics comes from a Quebec background. Her brand of semiotics, as she explains, is topological, which already involves a spatial dimension and a pluridisciplinarity:

La sémiologie visuelle québécoise vise la compréhension et l'interprétation des représentations visuelles conçues comme discours et non une sémiotique des objets naturels ou mondains, qui ne prétendent pas à une fonction symbolique représentative. La première étape consista à reconnaître, à la suite de témoignages millénaires, que les représentations visuelles constituent une forme de langage, pour autant qu'un langage se définisse comme 'un système de communication utilisant des signes organisés de façon particulière' pour véhiculer du sens. (2007: 2-3)

Her method focuses on the work of art and not, as a commentator has lamented, the everyday object. (Sonesson 1990: 6-8) Saint-Martin developed a semiotics that involves a particular organization, which is the grammar or the syntax that this visual language utilizes. It is a topological semiology, which already involves a spatial dimension, and is pluridisciplinary. The pluridisciplinarity is important because, according to Saint-Martin, there is no single, coherent theory of meaning, understanding and interpretation in semiotics, and it must be tracked by all possible means: "Cette sémantique visuelle apparaît d'autant plus nouvelle que, de l'aveu des philosophes et linguistes que nous avons consultés, aucune théorie cohérente du sens n'a été formulée quant au langage verbal. Nous ferons état, en première étape, de cette absence surprenante de théories explicites du sens en linguistique." (2007: 3) As the author explains, the articulation of a new visual semantics will emerge from a description of a lacuna in verbal semantics. The description

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of this void, and demonstration of this negative element, necessitates on her part a decisively exhaustive compilation of the spaces where meaning is treated in linguistic theories.

The issue here is that the concept of meaning is elusive. It needs to be tracked across several disciplines and philosophical traditions. For example, Saint-Martin (2007: 6) illustrates the concept's wiliness in the opening pages of her book when she asks about its origins and shows how they cannot be pinpointed:

Le sens réside-t-il dans toute  
connotation projetée sur un objet  
ou un mot? Ou est-ce une émotion  
causée par quelque chose ou les traces  
mnésiques éveillées par un stimulus?  
Ou encore, le sens réside-t-il dans les  
conséquences théoriques ou pratiques  
découlant d'un énoncé et de l'usage  
qui en sera fait par le destinataire? Le  
sens est-il ce à quoi un locuteur 'doit'  
se référer quand il utilise un terme, et  
non pas ce qu'il veut lui-même dire?  
Ou bien, est-ce à quoi l'on pense se  
référer soi-même quand on parle, ou ce  
à quoi un interprète veut se référer ou  
croit que le locuteur se réfère, et ainsi  
de suite?

Even if these questions seem to be commonsensical, the answer to them is anything but simple. Her questions about sense depend on the place of the producer and the viewer vis-à-vis visual objects which introduces complexity into her thesis. In fact, this is reminiscent of another great opening question about origins, namely Martin Heidegger's (1976: 15) questions about the origins of the work of art. Heidegger's question also depended on the viewer and the artist in relation to the work of art. But whereas Heidegger's hermeneutic circle demonstrates how the concentration of terms origin, work and art tighten around a definition, if somewhat a circular one, Saint-Martin takes the reader on a cross-disciplinary line of flight which ends up out of the realm of semiotics and into the realm of quantum physics. Throughout her investigations, the author shows the importance of visual expression to the completion the notion of meaning.

In a few short pages, Saint-Martin skips from Lacan to Benveniste and their pronouncements that meaning is either religious or has to be avoided, to the fact that philosophy, because of its reliance on primary causes, be they formal, material, final or instrumental, does not consider meaning in these causes. She provides, as an example among others, Kant's paradoxical definition of art (*finalité sans fin*); she mentions how Camus pinpointed the notion of the absurd on the idea of an absence of meaning; and she explains how Merleau-Ponty and Freud's views on meaning are revelatory of a fresh terrain of inquiry: "Hélas, cette théorie [du sens] générale n'existe pas!" Perhaps the issue is with understanding. We have to understand the notion of comprehension before we apply it to meaning. Maybe it is a question of translation between the visual and the verbal. She finally gets the reader to see that the problem is far more encompassing and has to consider cognition and the physical to explain it: "Par définition, les relations établies entre des objets extraits sensoriellement du continuum sont des entités abstraites/concrètes, fabriquées par le système nerveux à même le réel. Elles deviennent des 'objet mentaux' auxquels seront liés divers modes de représentation linguistique pour être connus et communiqués." (2007: 9) Yet meaning is still elusive. From Nietzsche to Croce to Wittgenstein and Todorov, Saint-Martin finally leads her reader to a strange place, that of quantum physics where ambiguity and elusiveness are the order of the day. The realm of quantum physics is one beyond the senses and could not be computed by the mind. Saint-Martin links this to psychoanalysis and shows how it is important for the articulation of

ambiguity. It is not a circuitous route that Saint-Martin takes but an exhaustive one. And if the text is complex and dense, it is also surprising and thrilling. In effect, right from the beginning, Saint-Martin with this trajectory reveals her overall method, which leaves no stone unturned.

This type of theoretical narrative is put forward on several levels of the book. We can observe this in the chapter in which Saint-Martin traces a short history of semiotics, in her treatment of space within the tradition of Anglo-Saxon linguistic philosophy and in her use of psychoanalysis.

An intriguing aspect of Saint-Martin's book is her critical approach to the question of meaning in philosophy and linguistics. Take for example the beginning of chapter four, entitled "A Semantic Void in Semiotics." Following a chapter in which she demonstrates the instances in which phenomenology wrestles with the idea of meaning, concluding that it is phenomenology's refusal to take into consideration the mental representation of things that prevents its analysis of visual works, (2007: 63) she trains her sights on linguistics: "Après l'échec millénaire de la philosophie à cerner le phénomène du sens, l'espoir a germé au cours du XXe siècle que les sciences du langage, la linguistique et la sémiotique, pourraient y contribuer plus efficacement. Mais la linguistique a fait le pari bizarre de prétendre parler du langage sans toucher à la question de sa relation au sens, ce qui 'lui a permis de marcher d'un pas allègre.'" (2007: 65) Abandoning meaning as a cause for concern, linguistics was able to cover a great deal of terrain. But even though it has, for the most part, become the most important analytical tool for criticism, the lacunae in its midst remained a sore point. This very lacuna is the hinge on which Saint-Martin works out her theory of visual semantics.

Despite its shortcomings, linguistic theory was able to create an important innovation in its description of the sign, which, as a duality, is composed on the one hand of a sensorial and perceptible signifier and on the other a signified which is hidden and therefore imperceptible to the senses. (2007: 66) This duality in the sign makes it a relational device. The relationality of the sign is what makes it a critical building block of aesthetic analysis. Yet, a problem remains in the arbitrary nature of the relation between the verbal signifier and that which it signifies: "La relation du signifiant verbal à son référent, comme à son signifié, est arbitraire, immotivée et changeante, rien ne pouvant expliquer ou justifier qu'un objet soit désigné par tels groupes de sons et non par d'autres." (2007: 68) On the other hand, there is a clear superiority to the visual discourse: "À l'opposé, le discours visuel est continu et pluridirectionnel, motivé (par une ressemblance entre le signe et son référent), tridimensionnel—mettant en jeu une profondeur réelle (sculpture, architecture) ou suggérée (peinture, photographie), aux résonances encore inconnues. On peut reproduire approximativement l'énoncé visuel par des ensembles de points discrétisés, amis sur un fond analogique. Ainsi le verbal est syntaxiquement digital et le visuel analogique, menant à des sémantiques différentes." (2007: 68) The digital/analog division is given a chronological justification at the end of the book: "Nous postulons que les espaces sensoriels, organiques et perceptuels, évoqués dans une représentation visuelle, représentent la première référence de ce langage, c'est-à-dire 'ce dont il parle', reconnaissable à travers les percepts. On ne peut guère s'étonner qu'une civilisation fondée sur l'abstrait et le conceptuel n'ait pu 'comprendre' le langage visuel." (2007: 270-1) In conjunction with the development of a linguistics from De Saussure to Barthes' assessment of photography and Damisch's description of a new visual semiotic based on /cloud/, Saint-Martin provides a concise and interesting chronicle of the early twentieth-century Avant-Garde and

the way that language was made more complex through visual art. She weaves theory with its artistic context, starting with Kandinsky, who changes the syntax of painting; Malevitch, who rejects a figurative syntax; Futurist phonetic poems and their relationship to language; Russian paintings, constructed and not composed, and their relationship to music, theatre and décor; and finally Duchamp, who studies the "condition of language."

Saint-Martin's treatment of space and a general assessment of early twentieth-century Avant-Garde art provides clear and fluid connections between theorists, thinkers and the conditions of art, which is a touchstone for readers interested in concise yet complex evaluations of theoretical history. The strength of Saint-Martin's analysis is this interweaving of theory, epistemology and art history which makes her work a great multifunctional handbook.

Space is the main currency in Saint-Martin's assessment of the notion of relation, which is itself indispensable for an understanding of meaning. One of the most interesting parts of the book is Saint-Martin's description of the notion of cartography in the section entitled "The general semantics of Korzybski." This section mixes semiotics, psychology, biology and physics into a holistic study of meaning in language. Saint-Martin mixes notions of cognitive *mapping* with cartographic metaphors with evocative and effective results:

À travers la connaissance, le sujet élabore un *mapping* du réel, terme mal traduit par celui trop pointu de 'cartographie.' Si les mots produisent une sorte de carte du réel, 'la carte n'est pas le territoire.' Certaines cartes sont valables, d'autres pas; une carte géographique indiquant que pour se rendre de Paris à Varsovie, il faut passer par Dresde, est une carte erronée qui peut entraîner bien des ennuis. Et la permanence d'un mot n'engage pas la permanence de la chose visée ou de ses propriétés. (2007: 119)

Coming back to the notion of relation as one of her definitions of meaning, Saint-Martin shows how a mental map links heterogeneous elements and is therefore a device that traces the path of a potential topological reversal between the inside and the outside: "Une 'carte mentale' adéquate fait état des relations pertinentes entre événements, c'est-à-dire à une structure ou configuration qui définit les liens entre eux." (2007: 123) She is here referring to Gregory Bateson and the notion of interaction and relation and then moves on to Noam Chomsky and the notion of arborescent diagrams:

Ces arborescences ou dessins par traits, graphes ou 'diagrammes d'arbre', présentent des éléments vectoriels sur un fond, soit des paramètres spatiaux tridimensionnels... pour désigner des profondeurs non-euclidiennes. Il s'agit bien de hauteur, largeur, position, dimension, insertion, variations intensives, sauts, surimpression, liens diagonaux, emboitements, enchâssements, possibilité de transports ou redondances, etc. (2007: 128)

This line of analysis has the advantage of illustrating the multiple spaces Saint-Martin refers to in her theories by giving the reader the full advantage of imagining an abstract yet real form of semiotic representation. These types of visual devices provide a way of establishing a multidirectional and multidisciplinary syntax through which to read the many links made by the author: "Les grammaires cognitives subséquentes exigent la construction d'imageries et de modèles mentaux spatiaux: de schèmes, de trajets et de scripts, de domaines, de point de vue et perspectives, de déictiques, de centralité, de superposition et de périphérie, de distances et

limites, de prototypes, etc.” (2007: 132) After all, the terrain covered by Saint-Martin is that between the viewer and the visual object of art. This type of cognitive cartography, with its familiar spatial language, helps to understand the subjective position of seeing: “Regarder un tableau, c’est observer la façon dont une autre personne organise son champ symbolique visuel et non y interférer. Le spectateur ou la spectatrice n’occupe naturellement pas la position spatiale de l’artiste et observe des organisations spatiales construites par autrui en vue d’une expérience cognitive et affective.” (2007: 258) The trajectory from viewer to object is the duality which will bring about the topological reversal between the real and the abstract. Hence the important link between the psychology and materiality of the work of art: “Les principaux mécanismes de la construction du sens dans un texte visuel sont reliés par la sémiologie topologique aux processus psychiques, tels que décrits par la psychanalyse. Cette sémantique visuelle s’élabore sur la dynamique de la pulsion, à travers ‘expérimentation affectivo-sensorielle des représentants de chose et de mot, d’une théorie de la référence et d’une théorie du sens proprement dite.” (2007: 288) Meaning, for Saint-Martin, is not a simple verbal statement which can be judged from the perspective of accuracy, but rather, a putting into relation of various levels of the virtual and actual spaces of a visual experience.

*Le sens du langage visuel* is a touchstone of semiotics. Multiple times, Saint-Martin starts new histories of semiotics resulting in a multifaceted assessment of meaning that deploys like an epistemological fractal.

*L’immersion dans l’art: comment donner sens aux œuvres de 7 artistes* is a much briefer volume than *Le sens du langage visuel*. The title is suggestive of a vaguely pedagogical program. Saint-Martin systematically teaches us how to look at seven different paintings through a precise and exhaustive analysis. Each of the seven chapters deals with a single work of art, the reproduction of which has been divided into topographical zones and charted via a numbered system which allows Saint-Martin to describe abstract details of each painting.

The analysis of painting spans from the middle ages to contemporary art but the choice of the Master de Flémalle’s *The Annunciation* (c. 1500) already establishes the spatial and geometric focus of Saint-Martin’s critical perspective. Most interesting is the ease with which Saint-Martin is able to move from formal to psychological aspects of analysis. The Master de Flémalle’s painting, under the scrutiny of Saint-Martin, becomes a geometric surface replete with psychoanalytic drama and mystery, from the telling geometric interpretation of the Virgin’s dress to the psychosexual connotation of Joseph’s mouse-trap. This balance between the formal and affective elements of a painting are also underscored in the second chapter where she analyzes the strangely organized winter landscape of Ozias Leduc. There, she is able to show the reader precise elements in the structure of a barren landscape that speak in a religious or most mystical register. Leduc’s *L’heure mauve* (1921) is seen as a network of iconicity that relays antagonistic forces to serene snowy white fields: “Les percepteurs ont aussi ‘senti’ des sources euphoriques de paix, de fusion, de réjuvenation et de jouissance, sans pouvoir les fonder dans le détail de l’œuvre, faute d’identifier le *continu topologique*. D’une part, certes, une scène de désolation, crépusculaire, où sévissent l’absence de vie, le froid, le gel et la mort, mais les mots ‘manquent’ pour décrire les lieux de satisfaction.” (2010: 44) Even though the concept of the topological continuity within a work of art is a mainstay of Saint-Martin’s theory, a case by case illustration of the concept would not be superfluous on the part of the author. Yet, in Leduc’s awkwardly framed snow covered forest patch, the semiotic notion of topology is illustrated convincingly.

The same interweaving pattern of

emotion and structure can be found in her analysis of Rothko’s work. Saint-Martin navigates the incommensurability between the artist’s intention of giving shape to a destabilizing picture of tragedy and ecstasy and the calm and fresh view spectators have of the work. (2010: 132) Saint-Martin’s analysis starts with a formalistic thoroughness that involves the charting of the work: “L’analyse préliminaire offre le bilan suivant: 17 liaisons entre régions, surtout par tintes, textures et vectorialités horizontales; 43 disjonctions, par les formes et dimensions. Le grand nombre de disjonctions explique aisément la difficulté de la personne qui regarde à unifier ce champ dans une forme globale, familière ou non.” (2010: 136) Furthermore, there are fifteen indexes of junctions and disjunctions that create, between variable zones on the surface, a destabilizing effect for the viewer. (2010: 136) Following on Wölfflin’s description of the dynamic aspect of the baroque, Saint-Martin describes Rothko as a complex series of floating shapes. From an analysis of the colourfield painting as a landscape, Saint-Martin finds the articulation of black holes, and finally, a portrait made up of several floating zones of colour. (2010: 139) A topological manipulation between landscape and portrait level to a psychoanalytic interpretation: “D’où le ‘portrait’ d’un monde interne où alternent des affrontements agressifs (R2), des souffrances posturales (R4), des isolations kinesthésiques, un refus répété de jonctions, soit un champ de luttes virulentes, seulement atténuées par le traitement topologique de plusieurs régions.” (2010: 150) Saint-Martin concludes her analysis of Rothko’s painting on a cartographic note. She says that Rothko creates a portrait of stabilized, isolated and identified sites dominated by an unhappy region opposed to an energetic red zone modulated by an orange fabric: “En recréant ce ‘mapping’ à travers sa perception, le spectateur ou la spectatrice peuvent l’‘éprouver’ comme apte à décrire leur propre monde intérieur et le ressentir, par quelques fragments chromatiques, comme évocateur de lieux de plénitude et de paix. Mais à un niveau plus profond, on y verra plutôt un rappel de conflits internes, de disjonctions, isolation, rancœurs, etc. toujours douloureux à éprouver.” (2010: 150) Rothko’s emotionally charged Abstract Expressionist painting is an apt illustration of the abstract-formal, inside-outside topological relation between painting and viewer.

At the center of *L’immersion dans l’art*, two chapters form an interesting duality. In chapter four, Saint-Martin tackles one of Mondrian’s compositions and in chapter five, she describes a “fake” Mondrian painted by Lichtenstein entitled *Non-Objective I* (1964). These two analyses side by side are revelatory of the different dimensions Saint-Martin layers in her studies. The Mondrian unfolds into several different abstract and ideal dimensions whereas the Lichtenstein stylistically thrives near the surface. If Mondrian’s painting is connected to cosmic forces, the Benday dots of Lichtenstein’s painting seem to Saint-Martin like graffiti tacked-on to a work of art like Duchamp’s moustachioed Mona Lisa. (2010: 123)

Saint-Martin’s analysis of *Composition in red, yellow, and blue* (1939-42) is complex and multilayered. Moving from the material (a painting possesses meaning only on the level of its plastic arrangements visually perceived; 2010: 82) to the universal (where individual expression can only have resonance when it is translated to the universal; 2010: 83), Saint-Martin discusses the real-abstract knot within Mondrian’s art. This real-abstract, a relation between being and thing, is the pivot point for a topological reversal of the universal and the individual located in abstract art. In Saint-Martin’s analysis, the work of art becomes a multi-disciplinary nexus: “La peinture, qui a pour objet l’organisation d’espaces fictionnels sur une surface plane, entretient des relations avec les diverses géométries, sciences de l’espace.” (2010: 86) She uses Rudolf Steiner’s theories of theosophy in order to show the theory

behind Mondrian’s art and the forces at work in his paintings:

Cette théorie peut se résumer comme suit. Sur Terre, l’on existe grâce aux forces qui nous viennent de l’extérieur de la Terre. En effet, le corps de l’être humain se constitue par des éléments venus de l’externe (oxygène, chaleur, eau, minéraux et végétaux, etc.). Cette dépendance manifeste de l’être humain du monde externe, pour sa vie et sa survie, rend néfaste le sentiment d’être ‘séparé’ du cosmos. (2010: 86)

Art is the unifying principle between man and the universe, according to Mondrian, and is the first form of a cosmic ecology. The great power of art comes from its topological nature. In a new type of geometry, space is reconfigured: “Le point y est vu comme la rencontre d’une infinité de lignes, une ligne d’une infinité de plans et un plan, de lignes et de volumes.” (2010: 86) Topology, Saint-Martin explains, is the study of geometric representations of objects susceptible of a continued variation. (2010: 87) The continuous variation of points, lines and planes are in constant play until their progress stops and an actual form comes to be. The virtual movement of points, lines and planes is not perceived, only felt.

The geometry of Mondrian’s grid-patterned paintings is considered from a non-Euclidean spatial perspective. If Euclidean geometry sees space as an empty room furnished with discreet, finite and measurable forms, a non-Euclidean conception of space is full, animated and in motion. (2010: 87-8) This is why Mondrian’s paintings are not seen as grids formed by straight lines but as supple, tubular masses conducting energy while making the surface breathe. (2010: 93) One is reminded of Rosalind Krauss’s analysis of the grid as a modernist emblem that turned away from a public that was not able to read its mute, foreboding form. Krauss (1979a: 50) writes: “The barrier has lowered between the arts of vision and those of language [that] has been almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech.” Of course, Saint-Martin’s spatial semiology is an attempt to look past this barrier. Her take on the public’s difficulty with Mondrian’s painting is vastly different: “Pour la perception commune, les ‘blancs,’ conçus par Mondrian comme la plus grande plénitude de lumière, module par les interactions tonales, sont perçus comme des ‘vides,’ où rien n’est donné à percevoir, d’où le sentiment d’être ‘floué,’ par manque de stimuli. L’absence d’un centre ‘géométrique’ désoriente aussi la vision qui voudrait toujours s’y accrocher.” (2010: 101) The swindle of modern art is also brought up by Krauss in another one of her essays, where she discusses the fraudulence central to modernist art: “The issue is rather that within the art itself, once it is cut free for a certain relation to tradition, it is difficult to establish the difference between the fake and the genuine...” (1979b: 130) And even though Krauss discusses how fraudulence is also perceived in photography because of the lack of effort involved in its mechanical process of capturing images, which prevented some from considering it a proper artistic language, the technical aspect at the centre of the meaning of Mondrian’s lines is wholly different for Saint-Martin. For Mondrian, knowing is to perceive clearly and the meaning of a work comes out of the consciousness, however vague, of feelings with regard to the technical apparatus of the painting:

Le sens sera donc produit par une synthèse inclusive des points les plus importants ‘ressentis’ et retenus d’une ‘lecture’ adéquate de l’œuvre. Nous définissons, en effet, le sens comme l’union de la dénotation perceptuelle à un ‘signifié’ non verbal, une synthèse dont la structure sera ‘analogue’ à celle du niveau plastique. (2010: 108)

The denotation of the work will be a weave of all the possible topological spaces put into motion. What the work will signify is an ensemble of feelings, which could be described, Saint-Martin writes, as a world teeming with internal-external dynamisms which are in a constant state of interrelation. The painting, by making us feel the virtual potential between us and the cosmos, brings attention to the relationship we have to the whole and in fact creates a topological folding-unfolding between the individual and the universal.

The issue of the modernist swindle has already been raised between Saint-Martin and Krauss, which is why it is interesting to see that the chapter following the analysis of Mondrian's painting deals with a "fake" Mondrian painting by Lichtenstein. In her analysis of Lichtenstein's work, Saint-Martin takes the opportunity to critique the notion of style by saying that there has not yet been an adequate unified theory of style. The notion of style is highly problematic for art history, Saint-Martin states, because in order to be adequately defined as a working analytical tool, it would have to encompass far too many variables. Meyer Shapiro tackled this problem only to demonstrate that the idea of style is applied to vague and limitless ensembles or, when borrowed from philosophy, it is easily dismantled by detailed critique. (2010: 114) After showing how the notion of style is inadequate for scientific inquiry, she mentions that style, as a descriptive term, is often met with derision. (2010: 115) Of course, the vagueness of style is what is at issue in Lichtenstein's appropriation of Mondrian's style of painting in *Non-Objective I* (1964) and the fact that the first critique that Lichtenstein received was that he did not take into consideration the

goals of neo-plasticism. Furthermore, the size itself, over seven feet in height, would be an inadequate homage to Mondrian, who paints on a much smaller scale. This question of scale in Lichtenstein, as a determining factor in the creation of a new type of object, a new type of reality, was discussed by Arthur Danto (1964: 574) in "The Artworld." There, Danto described the context that determines the reality of art at any given moment in history. Saint-Martin seems to be doing the same here, testing to see how the basic elements of a particular painting can change when they are translated into another time and another form. The object becomes ersatz, a copy of lesser value, (2010: 118) which opens questions about parody, irony and analogy in the exchange of certain elements of a design from one style to another.

At the crux of this exchange are the Benday dots Lichtenstein used in his paintings and that became his signature. Obviously, Mondrian did not paint dots in his geometric fields and Lichtenstein's adding of these dots enforces a particular type of understanding of the artificiality of the work, how it is a copy. Furthermore, the Benday dots, because they are usually seen on printed matter only from very close up, provide a particular visual paradox: what we usually see as small and from close up is perceived from far away and on a large scale. Finally, the dots modulate our impression of space: "Par leur aspect iconique de matérialité, elles produisent un effet de support et de semi-encadrement fixe au grand carré blanc central, qui le fait reculer, comme un 'vide' par rapport à leur concrétude." (2010: 124) What was the white space of the swindle in Mondrian is here underscored by a visual mechanism that owns up to the illusion, in effect suggesting a reproduction.

Between the flatness of the reproduction and the virtual space of the original, further modulation in the perception of space is articulated for the viewer. So despite Lichtenstein's cheeky insistence on the flatness of his painting, he is able to reactivate the play of multidimensional spaces that were at work in the utopian painting of Mondrian.

*L'immersion dans l'art* is a continuous description of the active dynamism of the surface of painting. The book exemplifies the far reaching implications of semiotics on art theory. For this reason, it is a useful manual for those interested in the articulation of visual theory that does not restrict itself to particular limiting methods. It will also be of interest to scholars of modernist art who will benefit from Saint-Martin's philosophical erudition.

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# Edusemiosis

By Christopher M. Drohan

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Insofar as the experience of learning introduces each one of us to new understandings of the world, learning necessitates signs. Faced with the unknown, existentially what is unfamiliar to us grips us with apprehension as we struggle to make sense of its place in the world relative to our own. As Deleuze tells us:

Learning is essentially concerned with signs. Signs are the object of a temporal apprenticeship, not of an abstract knowledge. To learn is first of all to consider a substance, an object, a being as if they emitted signs to be deciphered, interpreted. There is no apprentice who is not "the Egyptologist" of something. One becomes a carpenter only by becoming sensitive to the signs of wood, a physician by becoming sensitive to the signs of disease. Vocation is always predestination with regard to signs. Everything which teaches us something emits signs, every act of learning is an interpretation of signs or hieroglyphs. (Deleuze 2000: 4)

Accordingly, each of the authors in this volume approach education as semiosis and apprenticeship to hitherto unknown signs.

In this way, Semetsky has assembled a unique collection of articles that emphasize the role of semiosis in education at all its levels: theoretical, administrative, personal, etc. What emerges from this anthology are not only convincing arguments for the semiotic nature of education, but a number of radical arguments why semiotics needs to be immediately incorporated into the educational system from top to bottom. Realizing that education

is semiosis has profound consequences for teaching methods and methodologies, curricula, and the administrative frameworks that guide our educational systems. Against top-down models of education and teacher-student dialectics, this book presents us with an alternative vision of education as a life-long engagement with the world. Consequently, teachers and educational professionals must reconcile with the fact that such an engagement cannot be dictated nor captured by curricula; rather, it must be carefully facilitated and cultivated by teachers in symbiosis with their students. In this way Semetsky's volume is a direct challenge to meaning-based learning, instead offering a vision of teachers and students working together as 'Egyptologists', reversing the primacy of curricula in favour of the learning process itself.

Towards this end, some of the philosophic misconceptions that haunt academia need to be resolved. At the heart of these, Andrew Stables draws attention to a fundamental misunderstanding of semiotics itself and the role it has to play in education. He begins by drawing a difference in kind between semiotics that proceeds in a "dualist" fashion and one that denies a "categorical distinction between mind and body" like De Saussure's classical signifier/signified dialectic – the quintessential specimen of semiotic dualism. Instead, Stables allies himself with Peirce, whose triadic conception of the sign stresses the activity of examining signs (i.e. semiosis) as ontologically prior to semiotics and semiology. As he aptly points out, De Saussure is too "anthropocentric" insofar as he offers a language-based conception of the sign. Instead, Stables advocates a "fully semiotic perspective" of seeing everything we do as human beings as a "response to signs and signals." (21-22) Going a step further, Stable offers a "pan-semiotic" approach,

arguing that "everything, living or otherwise, can be explained in semiotic terms." This means that all self-aware creatures negotiate their lives as semiosis. He summarizes this argument saying, "[i]f all living is semiotic engagement, then learning must be an aspect of living, and learning must also be semiotic engagement." (26) It is not that we spend our lives learning signs, rather it is on account of signs that we learn and it is because we are semiotic creatures that learning is even possible. Semiosis is therefore the "curriculum" of our lives, rendering all learning and understanding – in their significant senses – a mere accident of that curriculum. (25-30) He ends his paper offering some suggestions for formal schooling as to how it can encourage and promote "semiotic engagement" in both children and adults – an education that is more "rationalizing" (i.e. the activity of exploring signs) than "rational" (i.e. one based on passive significations). (30)

In his article "Curriculum as Semiotic Formation," Whitson corroborates Stables' idea of semiosis as the curriculum of life. He starts with quotes and arguments from Maxine Greene, Sartre, and Deely, emphasizing that knowing is more about "praxis" than "stuff to be acquired by learners." (83) Whitson reiterates Deely in "referring here to humans as being 'semiotic animals' – as being aware of semiosis." Existentially, the formation of knowledge and "human being" is "not reducible to production", meaning that education is a formative process that has no given teleology, no final significance or significant product, rather we "use *experience* for the engaged activity of human being in which *the formation* of human being emerges." (84) Semiosis, Whitson argues, must be 'appreciated' as "the *formation* of human being, and not just in the communication of meaningfully structured

information.” (85) In light of this, the written and structured curricula of today’s formal classrooms should be questioned. That a significant agenda of a school’s administration could or should precede the pedagogue’s greater task of inspiring their students towards semiosis seems specious. Whereby all learning is necessarily semiosis, the significant content of a teacher’s lesson is always secondary to cultivating the executive skills required for a lifetime of exploring signs and learning from them.

Just as any significant representation of human being is different in kind from the actual formation and becoming of that human being, the written curricula of a teacher is different in kind from the acts of teaching and learning. This is reminiscent of Heidegger’s famous passage in *What is Called Thinking?* where he says that one “shall never learn what ‘is called’ swimming, for example, or what it ‘calls for’, by reading a treatise on swimming. Only the leap in the river tells us what is called swimming.” (Heidegger 1968: 21) One cannot just ‘think about’ swimming in order to swim. Rather, one’s body and mind must engage the body and movements of the water itself so as to allow for a transversal relation between them. Likewise, meaningful education and teaching consist of encouraging students to take similar ‘leaps’ into semiotic and transversal relations with the materials and ideas at hand.

Meaning is “something that is *done*” Whitson tells us, and “*is something that signs do*, just as *dancing is something that dancers do*.” (86) A semiotic engagement with signs becomes the activity of building meaning, the practice of extending human being in the world such that “sign-activity or semiosis, is the medium of meaning, just as movement is the medium of dancing.” (89) This leaves every teacher with the difficult task of getting their students to engage with signs, which Whitson acknowledges is a bit of “a conundrum, since signs are, in fact, the *medium* in which meaning is done – while, at the same time, it is signs that *do* the meaning.” (88) Consider this in reference to the analogy of dance: movement is the medium in which dancing is done, but it seems absurd to say that movement does the dancing. Whitson offers a fruitful way of sorting through this mess by distinguishing the particular “subjects,” “activities,” and “media” involved. The subject of the activity of dance is the “dancer” who utilizes the medium of “movement.” Similarly, the “sign-user” engages in the act of making “meaning” in the medium of “signs/semiosis.” (90) Thus, the swimmer learns to swim by allowing their body to embrace and engage with the body of water, just as the dancer learns to dance by embracing the movements of the bodies around them.

The question remains as to how this kind of engagement and this kind of semiosis can be asserted and implemented in the classroom. Sébastien Pesce observes that just as the French “science of signs” acknowledges a difference in kind between “*semiology* and *semiotics*,” so too should educational professionals acknowledge a distinction between “educational semiotics” and the “semiotics of teaching.” (106) The latter “studies the construction of knowledge, the processes of meaning-making and the acquisition of concepts by students.” (107) In other words, it explores “general” ways in which the significant “meaning of textbooks or dictionaries” and the “stable meaning” of assigned curricula can be established and programmed into classrooms, rendering teaching a matter of “the transmission of existing knowledge.” (107) Contrariwise, educational semiotics concerns itself with the ways in which the processes “of meaning-making are perceived and accounted for by teachers and students.” Education becomes an “apprenticeship,” allowing for the “production of a core of meaning, negotiated through the expression of several interpretants.” (108) This is to say that educational semiotics is essentially focused on semiosis, while the semiotics of

teaching is focused on building semiological understandings.

Ronald Bogue and Semetsky are quick to point out that it is Deleuze who fully develops this concept of education as semiosis and “apprenticeship” in *Proust and Signs*. Not only educators, but “genuine philosophers, as well as creative writers and artists are first and foremost semioticians and symptomatologists: they read, interpret and create signs.” (117) In art as much as in learning, one creates new meaning from signs in the effort to find “a new way of perceiving and understanding the world” and “overcome stock notions in the form of “natural” or habitual modes of comprehending reality.” Unfortunately, the kind of learning found in most of our formal institutions is “simply the reinforcement of common-sense notions, standard codes and orthodox beliefs.” (119) Bogue and Semetsky aptly recall Deleuze and Guattari’s concerns about the future of education expressed in *What is Philosophy?* and remind us that it “is pedagogy of the concept that educates us towards becoming-other in terms of creating new meanings.” (120) A pedagogy of the concept, in turn, leads to a pedagogy of the sign, as the creation and extension of concepts forces us to engage the unknown in such a way as to re-conceptualize not only the world but ourselves. In this way, genuine thinking and learning can be “disorienting” as one encounters “something new, different, truly other” – signs that “force us to face something not known in advance” but which lead us towards ‘creative’ and ‘novel’ realms. (127)

With regards to the type of pedagogy this process engenders, Bogue and Semetsky recall Deleuze’s own reflections on teaching at Vincennes and how he encouraged his students to “defy the necessity of some superior educational aim which is imposed from without” and to instead look at their education as a gift of signs to be taken up and apprenticed to as they saw fit. (126) In order to generate such an abundance of signs, this in turn requires that teachers themselves remain ‘learners’, so that they and their students can enter into an “encounter with signs and an engagement with problems that present a shock to thought and jump-start the process of individuation as becoming-other.” (128)

*Semiotics Education Experience* concludes by offering a number of examples of such a ‘shock to thought’. In her article “Simplifying Complexity”, Semetsky explains how tarot cards can be used as a lesson in both Peircean abduction and genuine intuition, and how their symbols can lure the tarot reader into a powerful encounter with signs and semiosis. Deborah L. Smith-Shank considers semiotic pedagogy in relation to the visual culture curriculum, advocating “unlimited semiosis” in the classroom. By this Smith-Shank promotes a learning process in which a teacher continually strives to have their lessons connect with their students’ “collateral experiences” (i.e. their previous experiences outside the classroom). (249-50) The idea is to then help students break out of their own *Umwelten* with signs that “go beyond” their “immediate experience,” forcing them to “imagine the impossible.” Smith-Shank concludes her essay by giving some examples of how this could be applied to teaching visual culture so as to “help students become aware of ways in which cultures code knowledge.” (252) Finally, Tomasz Szkudlarek’s paper, “Meaning and Power: Education as Political Semiosis,” gives a scathing critique of what he calls the “political economy of education,” the tendency to define “education in terms of its economic functions” with the intention of creating “policies aimed at implementation of economic rationality into educational institutions and practices.” (256) Even education itself is considered a form of “capital” as it is used by the privileged to help maintain their hegemonies of wealth and power. Szkudlarek goes on to expose how “learning and the *diploma* become fetishes in knowledge society,” creating a “*neurosis of learning*” that plagues academia. (271)

Szkudlarek argues that this fetish must be exposed and shed if we are to genuinely be able to teach our students and restore education to its rightful semiotic pursuit.

Overall, Semetsky has done an outstanding job of collecting a number of timely and fascinating reflections on the state of contemporary education and how semiotics informs it. Scholars will be impressed by the myriad ways in which all of the authors merge and extend the ideas of an impressive list of writers in the edusemiotic vein. Wilfred Noth’s article, “The Semiotics of Teaching and the Teaching of Semiotics,” is particularly noteworthy in this respect, and contains an unparalleled list of the essential authors and institutions at the very heart of the field. Accordingly, this volume is an essential read for anyone studying either semiotics or the philosophy of education, though it would also prove fruitful for those interested in visual culture, ethics, media theory, communications, cultural theory, psychology, and politics.

What is particularly satisfying about this collection is that all of the essays successfully bridge refreshing ideas with helpful, concrete examples of the thoughts at hand. Instructors will find plenty of inspiration here, and will walk away from this volume not only with new ideas for the classroom, but with a number of strategies that will change the very ways in which they teach. One cannot help but be reassured by the image of education suggested in this book, and hopeful at the strides it takes towards restoring the primacy of semiosis and semiotic research in all classrooms.

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# Ideology and Politics in the Circus Ring

By Paul Bouissac

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## Poetics and politics of the body

The circus is celebrated in modern art and literature as a humanistic tradition which displays beautiful bodies and exemplifies a demanding physical and mental discipline. In most circus programs, acrobatics in its many forms is indeed prominently represented. The men and women who engage in exacting feats of strength and balance usually are not encumbered by fabrics which hide their natural morphology. Although they perform sometimes in light versions of formal dresses or suits, their most frequent and more functional costumes minimally cover their bodies. As their training generally develops their muscles in a harmonious manner, their tightfitting leotards enhance their natural forms and their stage trunks and bras reveal their partial nudity. Their behaviour, though, is usually constrained by the technical and aesthetic requirements of their acrobatic specialties, and they refrain from overtly indulging in gestures or facial expressions which could be construed as sexually provocative. Even if, in general, the spectators' attention is captured by the challenging tasks acrobats endeavour to achieve, nevertheless the latter's attractiveness cannot nevertheless be ignored and certainly plays a role in securing inclusive audiences. There is a joke among circus directors who often promote circus as a family entertainment, which hints at this tacit dimension: "you need three things to make up a program: animals and clowns for the children, girls for the fathers, and acrobats for the mothers". This crude, cynical, and politically incorrect, albeit revealing guideline does not do full justice to the artistic merits of most acrobatic acts and to their genuine aesthetic appreciation by amateurs of the circus.

There are indeed many qualities which acrobats share in common with the highbrow arts such as ballet, sculpture, and opera: first, acrobats are similar to dancers both of the classical and avant-garde brands with respect to movements and rhythm; second, they are sometimes compared to live statues and quite often they explicitly imitate in their poses Greek, Renaissance, and modern marble icons; finally, their acts are constructed with a flair for dramatic suspense and lead to triumphal climaxes with appropriate musical accompaniments. There are differences, though, which bring forth the specificity of the circus: musical scores are adapted to the acrobats' movements rather than the reverse; the statues they compose have the colour and dynamic of warm bodies; and their dramas are performed without words in a universal visual, even at times voyeuristic language. These are precisely the specific qualities which focus the attention of the spectators on the bodies which are displayed, if not exhibited, in the full light of the circus ring.

Eroticism, of course, is in the eyes of the beholders. There is nothing pornographic in the staging of regular circus acts. The costumes, even when they are functionally reduced to the minimum because the movements of acrobats cannot be impeded by extra weight or interfering decorations, are within the range of the circus dress code. Moreover, the intense perspiration caused by physical exertion must be allowed to evaporate as quickly as possible. The demeanour of the acrobats from their entrance to their exit is regulated by artistic conventions and etiquette. But the broad smiles they broadcast toward the public can be at times enticing and everybody in the audience may fancy herself or himself as the privileged addressee of these attractive strangers' eye contacts and inviting gestures.

Although there are usually some solo

performers in circus programs, the majority of acrobatic acts involve two or more individuals who display close, if not intimate body contact as a part of their routine. This cannot fail to raise the issue of sexual politics even if mentions of their family relationships are often made in the printed program or in their introduction by the presenter. Such indications are assumed to be true by the audience but, in some cases, this results from staging decisions which betray a concern for respectability by the artists or the circus management. Framing these acts as family cooperative works defuses, to some extent, their erotic charge whether they involve members of both sexes or same-sex duos and groups. This semiotic move also makes more acceptable to conservative audiences the mixing of genders and ages which is very prominent in some acrobatics acts. However, it is not always as simple as adding a mere verbal labelling to an act. There are indeed cultural constraints which cannot be transgressed with respect to the norms prevailing in some countries. We will discuss two examples below, which show that sexual politics is ever present in the multimodal discourse of circus acrobatics.

The Indian circus is a huge industry which, during the last quarter of the previous century when I had many opportunities to observe it, presented only single sex acts. Men and women were segregated in the ring. Most acrobatic acts on the ground or in the air were performed by troupes of unrelated females, including some very young girls. All major circuses could display as many as fifty to one hundred of them in a great variety of acrobatic specialties: balancing, bicycle tricks, jumps, hanging by the teeth or the hair, climbing, trapeze, etc. Featuring a man and a woman, both being lightly dressed, who interact in close contact on a single trapeze, as is often seen in American and European circuses, would have been unacceptable in the context of a culture which enforces norms incompatible with such exhibitions in public settings. Naturally, the status and destiny of these circus girls, who were displayed in relative nudity with respect to the common standards, could not fail to raise some serious concerns as documented in *Starkiss*, a courageous film by Chris Relleke and Yasha De Wilde. These two Dutch film-makers provide evidence that, at least in some major circuses, the acrobat girls and young women were kept in quasi slavery. In these spectacles, there were also troupes of men only, particularly specializing in flying trapeze acts.

The second example deals with a age-old taboo in Western societies concerning homosexuality. Until the gay liberation movement brought about a relative change of mind in Europe and North America, two acrobats on a single trapeze, balancing and catching each other, and going through synchronized movements which necessarily involved close and continuous body contacts, could only feature a man and a woman. These acts form a rich paradigm which is often explicitly staged as a romantic display with appropriate music. Some of them play out very effectively the passionate dimension of the acrobats' interactions while some others keep the erotic potential at a lower level. Traditionally, featuring two women in such acts was acceptable as long as they were billed as sisters and the emphasis was on the gracefulness of their acrobatics rather than on the danger implied by these kinds of exercises. However, no circus would have dared to include two men performing such a single trapeze act which was strongly identified with the heterosexual stereotype of absolute romantic love, potentially involving death in

a kind of "Romeo and Juliet" mode since the two aerialist acrobats survived life-threatening situations thanks not only to their skill but also to their mutual, unconditional trust. Indeed, these acts often include one of the two partners making an unsecured jump from a higher position to be caught at the last moment by the other who grasps his/her feet or hands. Fatal accidents have occurred in the past and this memory keeps haunting the vision of this trick when it is performed without a safety net or lunge.

When the new, innovative *Zirkus Roncalli* included in its programs such an act involving two men, it was perceived as a strong statement of sexual politics. Billed as "The Lindors", Martin Ender and Walter Joss, were featured, for instance, in the 1983 program. With their radiant smiles, theatrical gestures, and daring acrobatics they were coming out as partners in life as well as in the ring. There was no pretence that they were brothers and the romantic flavour of their act was unapologetically played out. Audiences in Germany and Holland responded very positively to this demonstration of inclusiveness in the circus visual discourse but no circus director would have tried then to feature this act or similar acts in Southern Europe where homophobia was still the norm. It is around the same time that the French all-women circus, *Cirque de Barbarie*, performed in France and Northern Europe with an explicitly feminist if not Lesbian inspiration. Nowadays, same-sex acrobatic couples can be observed in most circuses, such as the two-male aerial act which is unambiguously billed as the "Duo Sorellas" [the two sisters in Spanish]. Like the Lindors in the 1980s, these two men display the dramatic performance of absolute mutual trust high above the ground. These acts, however, appear to remain context-sensitive in the sense that they can be perceived as too provocative by conservative audiences. The heterosexual stereotype remains, indeed, the dominant productive paradigm which generates inspiring acrobatics and staging. The following section will further demonstrate the capacity of the circus as a language to articulate a multimodal discourse by using all the resources of poetics and rhetoric in the service of both traditional and alternative sexual politics.

## Erotic circus: the tame and the wild

The image of the circus as an innocuous spectacle which is appropriate for entertaining and instructing children is historically relatively recent. Circus has been progressively made morally aseptic through deliberate efforts to gain respectability. Its fairgrounds origins, with the ruthless enticing of male customers by means of displaying female acrobats and dancers mixed with other attractive feats of strength and balance in front of the show's enclosure, have never been totally eradicated from its ethos and its folklore. We will see in the next chapter how an assumed sexual licence coloured the abundant novels and films which have used the circus as a context for fiction and fantasy. But the image which has prevailed in the modern circuses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a tame version of the potential eroticism of its displays. A focus on the family status of its performers has played an important role in this process at the expense of arousing desire through displaying exotic and seemingly emancipated bodies of either sex in suggestive postures and interactions. But even when the family theme is not foregrounded, most contemporary circuses remain within the conventional boundaries of a genre which steers clear of explicit sexual contents. This, of course,

does not mean that eroticism is absent. We will probe now from this point of view one of the first programs of *Cirque du Soleil* and we will see how this erotic dimension was orchestrated in three successive acrobatic acts each involving a young woman and a young man. We will examine these three acts in the context of the program in which they appeared.

The *Cirque du Soleil* masterfully demonstrates that technique, poetics, and rhetoric are all required for the felicitous conception, composition and performance of circus acts and programs. The 1988 spectacle provided a beautiful balance between teamwork at the beginning, middle and end of the show (chair balancing, teeter board, trick cycling), and items performed by a couple (tightrope walkers, hand-to-hand balancing, and aerial acrobatics). The presentation of these three latter acts deserves special mention not only for their individual artistry and acrobatic merits but also because of their relative positions in the program. This reveals *Cirque du Soleil's* deep sense of the power of the art it has inherited and its capacity for unfolding a discourse which produces more meaning through its composition than what could be derived from mere technical, literal descriptions of the individual acts. This 1988 program incorporated the theme of the couple as an anaphora leading to a climax.

Three young couples were involved, each with their own acrobatic specialty. Their acts could be performed at any point of this program or separately in other, different circuses as they have done during the last few years. But having been contracted for that season by the *Cirque du Soleil*, their proximity and order of appearance brought forth dimensions which otherwise might not have been fully apparent.

The first couple, "Agathe et Antoine," displayed courtship behaviour on the tightrope. The young man played oboe as he danced on the wire facing the girl who, in turn, made her gracious steps while her suitor watched. An acrobatic dialogue was taking place with increasing intensity culminating with somersaults executed by the man and daring balancing by the girl. The act included extraordinary feats such as Antoine making a head-stand on the tight cable and concluded by face-to-face synchronous splits. At no time, though, did the acrobats touch each other, except for a very brief moment when, walking one toward the other, they crossed on the wire – incidentally, a notable feat from a technical point of view. During the act, their acknowledgements of the public applause were discreet; their demeanour suggested mutual fascination and idealization rather than showmanship. This strategy evoked the first steps of love, adolescence more than maturity.

In the second act, "Eric et Amélie" performed a hand-to-hand balancing routine beautifully blended into a tango. The printed program commented: "Theirs is a world of passion, of perfect yet unspoken communication, of two bodies and minds moving, feeling and thinking as one." Their acrobatic specialty implied a constant physical contact of the limbs and head rather than the whole body. The staging conveyed a sense of seduction, passion, foreplay, and reciprocal attraction. It also displayed signs of mutual respect as the woman was in turn the bearer, balancing the man on her hands – a meaningful "detail" which was instantly caught by the audience and usually triggered an intense response. In agreement with the sexual politics that was emerging at the time, the woman was not represented as the "object" being manipulated by the man but as an equal partner who could perform feats of strength as well as her companion.

The last act, an aerial act high above the ground, brought the image of the couple to its full realization. "The Andrews" – note that the two acrobats are now introduced by a patronymic stage name – were dressed in a nuptial white in contrast

to the pastels of the first act and the deep colours of the tango; the music picked up the earlier theme of the oboe but in a rich orchestration. The introduction of the act unfolded as a ceremony, the two acrobats ascending toward their *cradle* – the technical term for the metal frame in which the catcher secures his/her hold – from the midst of a huge veil of white gauze. "With nothing but one another for support," as the program underlined, they displayed exercises which involved full body contact between the hand-catching and leg-grasping episodes. In brief, this act was staged as a metaphor of love both in the sense of absolute bond – literally a matter of life and death – and complementary labour including once again an occasional switching of roles. That is, showing the woman in the catcher's position. However, this apotheosis of the couple was not the conclusion of the spectacle. The three stages of love: courtship, seduction, and consummation, were bracketed by team acts – as were the solo items ( juggler, contortionist, bicycle acrobatics).

The final display, which succeeded a bicycling collective act, foregrounded the communal dimension which characterized *Cirque du Soleil* at its beginnings: all artists appeared in a climactic charivari not as individual heroes, but as the group from which all talents had emerged and into which they now all returned. As we will see in the next section, the language of the circus can indeed express ideological and political values beyond the sexual politics we are probing here. An alternative, often witnessed in the traditional Western circus, consists in bringing back to the ring, for a last salute, the individual performers in increasing order of importance, expectedly concluding with the owner of the circus or his/her representative.

The resurgence of the circus as a major popular art during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided opportunities for innovative staging. We will examine some of the most significant ones in the last chapter in this book. Let us focus here on the ways in which the erotic relevance of circus performances was liberated, so to speak, and in some cases ran wild. Circus *Archaos*, which was founded by Frenchman Pierre Bidon in 1984, is a good example of how far the potential sexualisation of circus acts can be spectacularly developed.

*May 3, 1991. Stop-over in Koeln to see Cirque Archaos. For the last two years, rave reviews have appeared in the cool media. The conservative press, though, has repeatedly asked: but is this circus? No parent would dream of taking their children there. Where are the elegant equestrians and the clowns? Whither the decorum and the pompous music? It is a huge success in Germany. The tent is set up in the industrial outskirts of the city, actually in a wasteland, among some remnants of an old factory which has been half dismantled. The show is to start when the night starts falling. There is already a crowd struggling to reach the ticket booth made of recycled corrugated metal sheets. We have to walk among car skeletons and barrels of burning oil, spewing acrid smells and eye-burning smoke, like a Dantesque descent to hell to see "The Last Show on Earth". It is almost sold out. I manage to get a portion of plank at the top of the scaffoldings which serve as 3 rows of seats. It is dark and smokey inside. Heavy-metal type music saturates the inside of the tent which looks more like a messy warehouse with stuff spread around: containers, barrels, broken-down cars and twisted bicycles. It soon becomes clear that this is planned chaos. Mayhem explodes at the set time; hordes of ragged musicians and horror clowns invade the ill-defined performing space. Suddenly some spotlights target a billiard pool. On the green felt, a very lightly clad couple, a man and a woman, engage in a hand-to-hand strength and balancing act. The two bodies slide against each other more slowly than it is usual in this type of acrobatics. The technique is superior. These are not sex-workers on a teasing stint. This is a high-class circus act which is played without pretending to be purely muscular and comes through as a sublime homage to*

*human sexuality, oscillating between dominance and submission, pleasure and pain, hate and love. Located in the space around the ring and in higher positions on the scaffoldings which surround the gate, I notice that the male circus hands, obviously as part of the staging, simulate masturbation under their overalls.*

For two decades, *Archaos* has performed in the industrial outskirts of major European and North American cities. In the latter, though, the sexual contents were subdued and the circus boys kept their arms crossed on their chest during the hand-to-hand act. The staging of all acrobatic acts can indeed be modulated along a scale between the tame and the wild. But it should be clear that the latter is ever present even if it is performed in a restrained, modest manner. The successive programs of *Cirque Archaos* have expressed to a maximum the erotic spectrum of the circus while consistently featuring some of the best acrobatic acts available at the time.

Circus Charles Knie which we have encountered in earlier chapters in this book could not be reproached for such excesses. It is a traditional circus *par excellence*. It features regular items such as horses, seals, lions and tigers, balancing and juggling acts, a flying trapeze troupe, and the like. The Master of Ceremonies is authoritative and eloquent. The equestrian is formally dressed in an embroidered costume. Only the twelve-dancer ballet, including ten girls and two males, which appear between the acts to provide a visual link and establish the themes, occasionally indulge in emphasizing body curvatures and undulating movements.

However, when the circus visits a major German city such as Frankfurt, Hamburg, Berlin, or Stuttgart, it schedules a "Gay Circus Night". For the time of a performance, all the sexual potential of the acts is unleashed without symbolic restraint: the show is introduced by a drag queen; the Master Equestrian dons a black-leather minimal outfit of the kinds which are found in sex-shops, exposing his butt through a cut-out bottom with a mere G-string in the middle; the pas-de-deux acrobatics executed by a man and a woman on their two horses is transformed by their substituting SM fetishist uniforms for their usual romantic costumes; the boys of the flying trapeze act enter the ring in tight jeans and climb the rope ladder to their platforms where they undress suggestively before revealing their leather briefs in which they will go through their flying routines; the hula-hoop girl, the woman who trains the seals, the dancers, all reveal more skin and let their hair down. Technically, the acts are not changed with respect to the regular program except that their erotic potential is played out. These displays should not be interpreted as a coming out of the artists but as a representation which reflects the values and icons of a powerful subculture which is a very much alive in the population at large. On such nights, the circus is packed and the crowd is ecstatic. But this is not a pornographic show. It is sexual politics expressed through the language of the circus.

## Ideology, politics, and propaganda

*August 26, 1983. After a semiotic conference at the Technische Universitaet Berlin, my colleague Professor Roland Posner offers to drive me to Berlin East to visit the National Armenian Circus which is hosted by the official Zirkus Busch. Roland is curious to observe my heuristics. He obviously wants to examine first-hand how I conduct my fieldwork which was the topic of my paper at the conference. As the show starts I quickly scribble words and diagrams on a small notebook. I was then using a pen which had a battery-powered miniature bulb at the tip so that I could monitor my handwriting even during the dimming of the lights and the black-outs which often punctuate a performance to enhance the drama. Roland cannot believe that I can write down every single detail. The rate of information is too fast. However, as I explain to him, a familiarity with circus acts makes them very predictable. I know what horses do*

in a liberty act. I just need some key-words as shorthand symbols. I note only what new information for me is, any creative deviations from the norms. Suddenly, as the wild-cat act is starting after the intermission, I can hardly cope with the flow. This is not the run-of-the-mill tiger and lion act I am used to. This one has a political agenda. It is, at the same time, a beautifully staged cage act with lighting and music moving from a pastoral, bucolic mode to heroic and tragic accents.

The spotlights first reveal a rock shelter and a cave at the base of a ragged hill with a backdrop of mountain trees. Bare chest, with an animal skin wrapped around his hips, a man plays with wolves which join him as they enter the ring from the mouth of the cave. But an ominous, powerful orchestral music changes the atmosphere as the spotlights move toward the top of the hill. Tigers and lions appear and descend toward the ring following inclined passages which meander toward the ground. They form an impressive and menacing column walking slowly but irrepressibly. The ring is now illuminated by six massive burning torches spread along the periphery of the steel cage and a Roman imperial décor, all red and gilded, emerges from the shadow. With ritualistic countenance the man stands in the center of the ring as an ancient warrior outfit is hoisted down from above. Once he has donned it, the first lions and tigers reach the ground. He confronts them and drives them to their stools. These are long, decorated platforms on which the animals recline in the position of the Egyptian Sphinx. Obviously, the wolves had retired while the public's attention was focused on the newcomers. Now more lions and tigers arrive with two pumas and a black panther.

Regular routines in the fighting mode unfold in the ring. The ferocity of the animals is played out. But progressively, they calm down and act submissively. With his bare hands, he gives them big chunks of red meat which they come to eat at his feet. The man even feeds one lion with one of his hands kept behind his back. That is, the lion takes the meat from behind, an act of total trust in his power on the part of the man, which is also a sign of total submission on the part of the animal since it implies that the trainer has gained absolute control over the wild beast. All the animals are placed around him while a sword slowly descends from the top of the tent. He seizes it and executes a sabre dance in front of them. He then drives the wild cats out of the ring accompanied by a triumphal music with Wagnerian accents. After reading the comments printed in the program, Roland explains to me that this type of act is a specialty of the famous Yerevan Circus which commonly uses the rich Armenian folktale tradition. Special mention is made of S. Isahakyan who gave a new direction to the training and staging of wild animal acts. The act we had seen was inspired by the story of Brave Nazar, a comic character who ended up as an epic hero.

This performance was taking place toward the end of the Cold War. This was the official circus of a Soviet Republic. The Roman Empire imagery distracted from the temptation of reading allusions to the current political situation. But the trainer was impersonating a folk hero of the Armenian past, a simple man who lived with wolves which were local animals when, willy-nilly, he took it upon himself to defend his homeland against ferocious invaders with the help of a magic sword. Obviously, a political agenda was hidden behind the mask of an anachronistic legend. Who were these invaders coming down from the mountain? What was the meaning of their association with an imperial setting? Were they not overcome by a simple man from the countryside with the help of heavenly powers? Was not his symbolic triumph against forces much stronger than he was, ominous for the Party officials who were clapping their hands at the end of the show?

The language of the circus can be used metaphorically to convey political propaganda and ideologies. This results from spontaneous representations of the ethos of a culture. The American dream is an individualistic proposition. Thriving for excellence and efficacy brings rewards to those individuals who dare to take major risks. The American circus tradition glorifies the

lone acrobat who surpasses everybody else by exemplifying self-reliance and courage. This, of course, involves a high degree of staging even if it is based on skills acquired through demanding training with the invisible help of others.

The Soviet Union circus which was touring the world in the 1950s and 1960s with the goal of presenting a positive image of Communist culture was emphasizing human concern and artistry as opposed to the assumed recklessness and gaudiness of the American circus. Acrobats performing highly skilled but dangerous exercises were protected by a safety lunge on the grounds that letting a human being risk his or her life to entertain a crowd was inhuman and a symptom of the cruelty of the Capitalist system. After all, an acrobat in a private circus is a worker exploited by a wealthy owner. At the same time, great effort was brought to the artistic choreography and staging of the acts and classical music was often played with stunning aesthetic effects. Two examples will be offered to illustrate this point.

The first one is a high wire act which was observed in August 1986 in Buenos Aires. The Moscow Circus was performing for several weeks with great success at Luna Park. This was the first act of the second part which included only two acts, the last one being the spectacular transformations and manipulations of a magician. The large printed program provided enough blank space for me to take extensive notes. The act includes five acrobats, two women and three men, led by Nikolai Nikolski. My diagram of the apparatus shows a straight cable between two poles with small platforms on each one which constitutes the first level. There is a second straight cable about 4 to 5 meters higher, parallel to the first one, which is the second level. An oblique wire joins the two across the space from the left platform of the first level to the right platform of the second level. From the latter another oblique cable reaches up to another platform which is located much higher, almost at the top of the building. Seven exercises are performed in succession involving first the crossing of the wire by one acrobat, then by an acrobat balancing two women on his shoulders. The first oblique cable is ascended by the acrobats and the second level cable is crossed with various acrobatic combinations. The eighth and final segment of the act is staged in a way which introduces a dramatic dimension in addition to the performance of technically demanding feats of balance. The goal is set among the three men on the platform: to reach the last platform at the very top. With the supportive attention of the other two, one man undertakes the ascension but, as he is almost at the end, he fails and slides back to the platform. Another one will try. His companions show concern and support. This one achieves the goal but the staging has construed this eventual victory as the result of a collective endeavour rather than the brash triumph of a lone hero.

The irony is that, a week later, the following news was broadcast by Reuters: "Two Soviet high-wire performers, who slipped away from the Moscow Circus while performing in Buenos Aires were granted asylum in the United States. "We did not come here to buy blue jeans or clothes", Bertalina Kazakova told reporters through an interpreter. "We came here for freedom."

She and her husband, Nikolai Nokolski, both 35, were quickly cleared through customs at Miami International Airport and taken away for hours of interviews with immigration officials." The Nikolskis were soon recycled as dare devils in the American circus, starring in Circus USA's big top in South Florida as announced in the September 27, 1986, issue of *Amusement Business*.

The second example is a flying trapeze act which was a part of the Moscow Circus which visited Canada in 1988. It was entitled "The cranes", an allusion to the Slavic belief that the souls of heroic warriors who have died for their homeland were embodied in the graceful white cranes who return each year to the countryside. It

was a flying trapeze act with a more complex set of trapezes and platforms than the regular straight frame with a single bar swaying like a pendulum under the impulsion of the flyer until the latter releases his or her grip and is caught by the catcher after a somersault. In this eight-acrobat act, two different levels of trapeze and two diametrical axes crossing above the ring were combined. The choreography involved dramatic sequences during which, for instance, an acrobat simulated a fall in the net. As if he were a wounded soldier on a battlefield, two of his companions gracefully descended to rescue him and bring him back to the secure platform. Some bungee cords were making slower flying effects possible. The lighting and the music were lending an eerie atmosphere of poetic mystery and solemnity. The general theme was solidarity and self-sacrifice. It was an organic kind of team in which everybody was a hero. This contrasted with the typical narrative of the Western-style flying-trapeze act in which the one who concludes the act with a triple somersault is treated as the triumphant hero irrespective of the fact that the catcher has an equal merit since he finely tuned his timing to be at the right place at the right time in the air, and grasped the hands of the flyer with an appropriate strength to prevent a hurtful shock and a fall.

But the ideological dimension of the Soviet Union circus acts was not always as subtle as the two examples above showed. Straightforward propaganda was often the order of the day, particularly in time of international crises. In the summer of 1983, NATO under the leadership of the United States was planning to deploy in Western Europe mid-range Pershing missiles which could reach strategic targets in the Soviet Union. This plan was resisted by large segments of the population in Western Europe because they feared that this would put them on the frontline if there were retaliations in case of a NATO attack. This issue became a topic of interest in elections which were to be held that year in several countries. Influencing the European populations was obviously on Moscow's agenda. The language of the circus could be used to deliver subliminal messages aimed at making people think twice before they agree to host batteries of Pershing rockets. Some circus acts could indeed be staged toward this goal without compromising their acrobatic and aesthetic integrity. The Russian State Circus presented at least two such acts with a propaganda tinge in the program which toured Europe. Both acts were technically and artistically irreproachable. Eventually, though, the missiles were deployed in West Germany in November 1983.

The first one was a low-flying trapeze act. Two metallic towers were erected facing each other across the ring. Two acrobats were standing on platforms fixed on the top. The act consisted of swinging a flyer several times to gain speed and momentum, and to release him or her so that the flyer would shoot through space and be caught by the man standing across on the other platform. Various tricks were performed in succession. In the final trick, the two flyers were launched with such timing that they could pass each other in their flights to reach their respective catchers. However, before they implemented this last exercise, the launchers (who also were alternately the catchers) were giving the impression that they intended to propel the two flyers one against the other. At this moment the clown Nikulin, who was intervening from time to time during the show with gags and comments, stopped them, mimicked with his hands the two bodies which were going to crash into each other in the middle, and made a sign meaning "they are mad" by pointing repeatedly to his forehead with his index. Launching two projectiles at the same time on the same trajectory is indeed suicidal behaviour. This episode in the act was executed with great clarity of gestural expression and carefully staged so that nobody in the audience could miss the message.

The second act displayed acrobatics on



horseback. Five men impersonated American cowboys and a scantily clad woman evoked a character usually found in the saloons of the movies set in the Far West. The men wore cowboy hats and had typical belts with gun holsters. They performed their ground and horse tricks with mutually defiant attitudes, bullying each other, and firing blank shots under the first pretext. At the end, as they were all riding the horse one behind the other, they all pulled their guns and, in a gesture of mindless violence, shot each other. All tumbled to the ground and a sudden blackout provided a few seconds of darkness and silence so that the audience could ponder this “shot” at the American ethos and the reckless politics it was assumed to inspire. Portraying one’s enemies through negative images is one of the staples of war propaganda. This latter act, though, was more subtle as it undermined the very icon of the American hero in Europe, the Cowboy, which had permeated popular culture through its countless dramatic representations in films and in comics.

## The body politic in performance

The idea of the body politic is a biological metaphor which construes the various parts of a society as organs serving complementary functions. It implies constraints according to which each group, class, or caste is assigned a place in the social structure. Ultimately it relates individual bodies to the political and cosmological order. It regulates the behaviour and demeanour of each group whose identity and destiny are expressed by a pervasive discourse. Each one is held in place by powerful semiotic systems which determine the ways individual bodies conform to the rules of the dominant ideology. It is in this sense that the body politics we have discussed above can be understood in the wider context of particular cultures. These often tacit rules apply to clothes, food, speech, mating, working, and expectations. These constraints are taken for granted but they become manifest when they happen to be transgressed either by chance or by design. Any dysfunction or disruption of the body politic is perceived as pathological. Depending on the magnitude of this tinkering with the rules, the perpetrators are ridiculed by laughter or repressed through legal and physical violence.

In its self-presenting discourse and imagery, the circus projects itself as a perfectly functional body politic which reproduces on a smaller scale the orderly system within which it exists without totally coinciding with it. The circus is both inside and outside society. It is characterized as a city within the cities it visits. Its image is one of diversity, cooperation, and hierarchy with its own norms and values. The root metaphors which irrigate the discourse of and on the circus are the family tree, the pyramidal organization, and the body itself. Some circuses do not shy away from making bolder claims such as the Director of a traditional German circus who included in her introduction to the show: “Circus is a well-ordered microcosm that reflects a harmonious society in which everybody works at the place which God has assigned to them”.

*December 1985. Cannanore (India). Duccio Canestrini, a former doctoral student who has joined me to research the Indian circus, and I are working our way through the dense crowd which assaults the ticket booths of the Venus Circus. We feel lucky to be guided by Mahesh Mangalat, a student at the local university, who has agreed to assist us and shows us how to survive the inch by inch struggle to reach the wickets. The tent forms a huge space with a capacity of at least four thousand if not more when everybody is squeezed together on the bleachers. The rainy season is over and the countless holes in the canvas create a kind of starry milky way all across the big top. Many people carry a book with them. Mahesh proudly tells us that the State of Kerala has reached one hundred percent literacy – a detail whose relevance will appear below.*

*The show starts with a parade of some fifty girls*

*and women in their acrobatic outfits, holding colourful flags representing imaginary countries. Then the program unfolds in a way which we feel could be a little more formal. We have already realized when we were in Mumbai, then Bombay, that the appreciation of the Indian circus must be an acquired taste. We understand now that this is true of all circuses anywhere in the world and we really enjoy the show. When the clown act comes, I immediately recognize an old staple of the European circus repertory: the crazy taxi. However, it soon becomes obvious that it is an idiosyncratic version of it. A woman dressed in a short skirt sits down on the ring’s border with a dwarf who follows her. When a taxi enters, the dwarf tries to stop it so that the woman can board it. Unfortunately, there are already two men dressed in local garb occupying the taxi; one is next to the driver, the other in the back seat. Some argument and tussling ensue because the woman wants to take her place in the front seat. The first man moves to the back with the other passenger. As soon as everybody is situated and ready to go, something goes wrong with the car. This is repeated a number of time. A succession of mishaps ( flat tire, falling wheel, motor breakdown, water tank explosion, abundant smoke) force the passenger to leave the taxi and wait for the problem to be fixed. Some gags are clear to us. Some others are puzzling. Eventually, the car leaves the ring with everybody on board but on its way out, it explodes, splits into two connected parts and the backseats tip over. The taxi exits with the two men upside down with their feet wagging in the air. It was truly difficult to account for the constant bursts of laughter which these antics were triggering. This is a question I would ask Mahesh while we eat our spicy chicken curry after the show.*

In research as in life, a lot can be learnt from mistakes. The ethnographer cannot take anything for granted. Even what seems obvious may be deceptively so. I found myself in such a pitfall when I asked Mahesh if he could clarify a few aspects of the taxi clown act we had just seen. I tried to list what I had understood, starting with the first character which had entered the ring, the woman in a short skirt. To me, it was a prostitute hiking a lift from passing cars. This remark triggered in Mahesh a loud laugh. First, she was not a woman but a man in drag. It would be unacceptable to have a woman perform in a clown act. But, more to the point, she represented an Anglo-Indian lady, that is, the daughter of a mixed couple from the time of the Raj. This was clear from the European style of her clothes. She was very proper and was escorted by her servant who was played by the dwarf. The taxi driver and the dwarf were local folks. But one of the passengers in the taxi was impersonating a Hindu priest from Tamil-Nadu, a state which shares its South-West borders with the state of Kerala where we were. The other one represented an intellectual Muslim from the North of India. How could Mahesh know this? The way they were dressed, of course. They were stereotypes of their respective social class. The fat “priest” was a Brahmin typical of conservative and religious Tamil-Nadu, with his white loin cloth which partially draped his bare body. He was bearing signs of his sacred functions such as some marking on his forehead, some small objects hanging from his neck, and, above all, his demeanour was unmistakable for the audience. As to the other man, his elegant suit fitting a slim body, his hat from the North, the way he was holding a book and kept reading in the taxi, all this was declaring visually his faith, culture, and geographical origin: an intellectual Muslim from Kashmir or Gujarat. The act was suddenly becoming much more complex and interesting than I had first thought. It was clear that the audience was engaged for good reasons. They were Kerala people, the first state which elected a communist government after independence and had achieved total literacy. The tree main characters in the act were like cartoons and their antics were loaded with meaning.

Let us return to the beginning: a taxi carries two unacquainted passengers, a common trait of the Indian way of life. However, the

preferred place on the back seat is occupied by a Hindu and the secondary seat next to the driver by a Muslim. The driver is a common man. Everybody is at the right place according to their comparative status in the Indian body politic. There are no women. The car is functional. The *status quo* can last.

By her own hybrid class, the woman represents a disruption of the system. Moreover, she wants to be transported in the taxi, thus mixing sexes and forcing a reconfiguration of the positions. How are the seats to be distributed so that she can be accommodated? This is what triggers a series of upsets which forms the substance of this comedy. The two men are made to get out and after trying several impossible combinations, it is decided that the woman will take the seat in front, next to the driver, and the two men be together in the back. As soon as this plan is implemented, the first breakdown occurs: a flat tire. Everybody has to get off the taxi and wait while the repair is completed. But how to make sure that they will stay apart and the woman will be safe? The driver makes them sit down on the ring’s curb at a distance from each other. But both men try to get close to the woman with obvious intentions of seducing her. There are some scuffles which are staged as gags. One of them is particularly significant: in order to pull the priest away from the lady, the driver grasps the white piece of cotton which is coiled around his body. As he pulls on the fabric the priest starts whirling and the piece of cloth keeps unrolling endlessly until it reaches the other side of the ring. This is a version of a gag which has become routine in the Western circus: a clown pulls the shirt of another clown but it is an extra-long shirt whose lower part was folded in his pants and keeps coming out as the shirt is pulled. However, there was a special twist to this gag as it was applied to the priest. It irresistibly evoked in the audience a well-known episode of the Mahabharata, the Hindu epic whose characters and narratives permeate Indian culture. To make a long story short: Draupadi, a woman, has been lost in a game of chance by her husbands (several brothers could indeed marry the same woman in ancient times). When the winner wants to enjoy his prize and starts unfolding her sari, the god Krishna miraculously transforms her sari into an endless piece of silk. Applying this trick to a fat Hindu priest, who starts spinning madly in the center of the ring, changes the miraculous into the ridiculous.

Four times, the car breaks down as soon as everybody has boarded it again. The pace goes faster. They get in. The motor explodes. They get out. They come in. A wheel runs loose. Eventually, the taxi seems ready to go and, as it takes the road to the exit, the back part of the car tips over and the two leave the ring with their legs up and their heads down.

Mahesh appreciates the sophistication of the comedy in spite of the crudeness of some gags. He shows pride in the fact that the population in the state Kerala is free-minded enough to be able to accept these jokes. But he insists that such an act can be performed only in Kerala. In conservative Tamil-Nadu, making fun of a high priest would not be taken kindly. In any case, this one does not look like a local one. As you move toward the North, a comedy like this one could easily trigger communal violence. The next day, when we meet the actors after the show, they confirm the risks that this comedy would imply, should they perform it outside Kerala. They are actually professional actors who enjoy the continuous success they meet in this circus, playing for large popular audiences.

Incidentally, twenty-five years later, this act was still being performed in the same circus as it was witnessed by Mahesh Mangalat, now a Professor of Malayalam Literature, and Dr. James Skidmore who was then pursuing Post-doctoral research on the Indian circus. It should be noted, though, that the crazy taxi act at the Venus Circus

was not a unique creation but rather a skilled development and interpretation of a narrative kernel which can generate a variety of versions. During the same year, I recorded such an act in a small circus which was performing in a suburb of Kolkata, then Calcutta. It was reduced to three actors and the vehicle was a rickshaw. A Hindu priest was seated in it. An Anglo-Indian “woman” wanted to be transported. This disruption triggered a cascade of gags with all things ending upside down as the outcome of the process.

Over two hundred years of Indian history must be kept in mind if one is to understand the socio-political relevance of this clown act: the British Empire, the fight for independence, the partition, and the ensuing delicate balance between the two main communities which make up modern India. It is symptomatic that in both versions of the narrative which these performances embody, the factor that triggers the crisis is a symbol of the Raj, a child of a union between the dominant conqueror and a local

inhabitant. The Anglo-Indian woman symbolizes through her demeanour the outside intervention which generated imbalance and violence. Significantly, if one of the three main characters has to be eliminated from the cast for the sake of simplification, economy, or self-censorship as it might have been the case in the Calcutta version, it is the Muslim character who is dispensed with. Take out the woman and the very possibility of the act disappears.

Vehicles of all kinds – horse-drawn or motor-driven – traditionally have been used as metaphors of the State. Carrying people side by side over a distance is like guiding a political institution over time while maintaining peace among the population. The circus comedy we have described and pondered is loaded with political significance. It illustrates how the body politic becomes dysfunctional and eventually is turned upside down when an intruder compromises the balance which the centuries had worked out. Of course, this is not an objective,

scientific account of the rich and variegated history of India. It concerns rather the ideal vision which is fostered at a given time in the public imagination. But it is with respect to this discourse that the language of the circus articulates its own multimodal text which produces a deep, albeit tacit meaning for its audience. This is why, in spite of its oddities, the circus makes so much sense.

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# Social Media Semiosis: Twitter and Slippery Signs

By Kane X. Faucher

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What are the sign-memories one takes away after an engagement with Twitter? Of course, it should be noted that for each user with his or her complement of those he or she follows, the data would always be particular and anecdotal. As well, with real-time feed, the signs that are displayed will be perpetually fluid, shifting, a kind of digitized Heraclitean river. These features of social media renders objective, quantitative analysis of these networks nearly impossible on account of what Eli Pariser calls “the filter bubble,” which might require a significant shift in research methodology if we are to extract meaningful data from the activity of social web.<sup>1</sup> I am reminded of two locations reported in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*; the first, the city of Despina, where, depending on approach, the city will appear differently (if one approaches by land, Despina takes on the appearance of a windjammer about to set sail, but if one approaches by sea, Despina resembles a camel prepared to make a desert trek), and the second being the city of Zirna which relies on redundancy in order to make its impression on the visitor who will take all examples of lunatics on skyscraper cornices as a single lunatic, a case where a class of beings is reduced to one example (Calvino 1974: 17-19).<sup>2</sup>

In 2010, The Library of Congress announced its plan to archive tweets, ostensibly creating a permanent digital record for the purposes of posterity (LOC, 2010). Leaving aside what someone like Geert Lovink (2012) quite aptly diagnoses as the post-9/11 anxious collective compensation of archiving everything in the event that some catastrophe occurs, one wonders what value all this information will have when its sheer volume would make it nearly impossible to derive any general statement about “the way we were.” Over 97% of all information ever produced has occurred in the last twenty years, and there is over a zettabyte of information available online (Arthur 2011). I am reminded of Borges’ Library of Babel where the profusion of permutations that make up the volumes of that potentially infinite library make only interpretation, never verifiable meaning, possible (Borges 2007).

What are the signs of Twitter? There is an immediate separation here: first we have the software architecture unique to this micro-blogging site, the newsfeed writ massively social and originally devised by those like Dave Winer. The social web, then, ceases to be a static noun-

object and takes on the characteristic of the perpetual verb (and we mean this as a process, not as the convention of popularity that migrates nouns like Google or Facebook into verbs within the public discourse). Unlike social sites such as Facebook, Twitter’s main principle that dominates its algorithm is strictly analog time in digital space--it is contingent upon user input for display of all output unless one restricts display options to determine relevance.<sup>3</sup> The first order of signs is the brand of Twitter with its logo and its specific interface. This is the categorical frame in which “unique” content is produced; however, we must suspend “unique” here to take into consideration the large volume of redundancy one may encounter with tweets. I [am] re-signed to re-tweeting, which thus performs two functions: the first being the viral dissemination of a message, and the second being the minimum action I can take in social participation by means of contact with another user. On news comment sites, this can take the form of the visual sign of the thumb in position up or down, whereas on Facebook choice is restricted to non-response, or the infamous “like.” As a feedback mechanism, the re-tweet represents the order of reiteration, social media’s answer to both the echo and reverse echolocation (by re-tweeting, the initial tweeter can discover who re-tweeted the content).

Lest we forget Guy Debord’s Lukacsian-style warnings about the process of triple alienation (from self, others, and world), and how the “spectacle” (itself the inverting process of a false transcendental that takes on the position of the dominant social category, suspiciously as scholastic in its delivery of rationalizing nostrums as the big E-word “economy” functions in this age of austerity) is fixed on the accumulation of images (Debord 1983). It is perhaps no longer the collection fetishism of accumulated images that is worrisome anymore (such things, in a Hannah Arendt sense, have been normalized to the point of banality and acceptance), but instead a feverish *accumulation of signs*. We already see it in the “felicitous” merger presented by Klaus M. Bernsau’s construction of a corporate semiosis with respect to Twitter, and his belief that corporations ought to embrace a holistic semiotic process that will improve brand positioning by applying Greimas’ square (Bernsau 2011). What this program amounts to is in the development of advertising that is not inert, but generates real-time social interactivity online by the careful construction of syntactical utterances that allow for social processes to develop. This,

presumably, is part of the next wave of advertising where ads are still targeted at segments and niches, but the audience is no longer a passive body that is advertised *at*. Bernsau suggests that this sidesteps the general raft of criticism from those like Naomi Klein in so far as the brand is reconfigured from its previous inert monolith status to become more akin to the icon that functions as the interactive portal to the socially generative processes corporations ought to cultivate in this age of constant, immediate feedback mechanisms.

Recently, the Canadian literary doyenne Margaret Atwood heaped praise on Twitter as instrumental in increasing literacy (CBC 2011). Apart from not providing us with an operational definition of literacy (literacy itself is a complex concept that requires specific treatment), and despite not supplying any quantitative data to support said claim, Atwood’s Twitter encounter is very much like Calvino’s city of Despina: she is basing her claim on those she follows, from her own unique vantage point. It is not Twitter as a whole, which might be impossible to view given the filter bubble. She continues by drawing an equivalence between Twitter and the following: smoke signals, telegrams, telephone calls, carving a message on a tree. These are not comparable media outside of the very general description of “means of communicating.” Atwood misses the very unique aspects of Twitter that alter the content of messages in ways that carving on trees or sending a telegram do not have. Writing an email is not like writing a letter as such, although some of us try to view it in this way. Each of these communication media carry different purposes, and thus alter the way in which we use signs.

Supposing that we subtract from Twitter all those user accounts that are simply re-tweets of product links, all self-promotional messages, all redundancies and banality. One wonders what is left. If I visit Twitter and encounter the same tweet re-tweeted by thirty users, what memory of the sign do I take away? Do I, like visitors to the city of Zirna, collapse this into a single sign? Do I accord it with much more emphasis because of its reiteration, that it plays into the idea of online social capital in being adopted by a large quantity of users (the general algorithm of popularity which may persuade us to believe it is closer to being good and true)?

Repetition itself is an assumption based on a long-standing metaphysical prejudice, and one

that Deleuze exposes in *Difference and Repetition*. This gains an unlikely ally in mathematics and physics that understands no events are determined as such because there is no way to verify by means of repetition. A satirical article by James Chaffee disabuses his readers of the vulgar notions of chaos, randomness, and noise. There is no way to reproduce all the minute conditions to stage the same event twice. This would leave us to consider repetition in its mundane context, as simply the repetition of data. One would think from a purely formal understanding of repeating data (such as the pulse or signal of a device), that a re-tweet is the sign cloned, while the social context is all that differs since we are dealing with the passage of time in which users are both in the world and encountering the tweet in their specific temporal and cognitive contexts, not to mention varying in the intentions they may have in re-tweeting the sign. But even in formal understanding, this is false. It assumes that machines, no matter how finely calibrated, do not deviate. I am obliged to quote Chaffee here:

Anyone who has worked with electronic gizmos on spacecraft will have experienced these mechanisms getting out of hand. In the early days of the GPS (Global Positioning System) when the satellites disappeared from view for a few hours, on-board atomic clocks might decide to leap in time. When they reappeared they would be so far off that the Kalman filter at the Master Control Station could be falsely persuaded by new measurements that the satellite had hopped to a lunar orbit (2008).

And, as a different reiteration: "Even more interesting is metastability in certain binary electronic devices known as flip-flops. With only two possible states, the device can become confused and take an indeterminate (random) time to decide whether to flip or flop" (2008).

To tweet or re-tweet. Just as it would be to admit generalization across all communication media, perhaps what is required is to re-imagine the sign with respect to the alterations it has experienced in being migrated to a digital milieu, to not assume that there is a strict equivalence between the written sign in print and the typed sign online which may belie the unique characteristics of social media signs on the basis of understanding them through the lens of traditional print technologies. Micro-blogging sites such as Twitter are not text in the same way-- they may not even be ergodic in Aarseth's sense.<sup>4</sup> Instead, they may be infinite marginalia. If the margins refer to a textual centre, and that centre is the user him- or herself, would this be the "author resurrected"? Most likely not since that would

suffer oversimplification in an age where social capital is indexed on linkages, digital connective tissue. The margin becomes the centre, the centre displaced, deconstruction digitized. What is the nature of the sign in the digital context?

Ultimately, this is a clarion call for continued study into the nature of the digital sign in the social media context. A whole new set of rules may be required, and we cannot necessarily be complicit with how we have engaged the sign before in other communication contexts. What I propose here is a dedicated group of researchers to investigate the digital sign through a dual lens: the first via social media technologies and critical internet studies, and the second through an appeal to set theory and algorithms so that we may come to understand both the social processes in digital semiosis and the choice functions that apply to online "sign-reading" and interpretation. The excessive personalization of the web--a form of the most extreme relativism--makes interpretive efforts difficult, somewhat akin to a one-use-only and one-way cipher where users encipher their content with a unique key each time, but there is very little means to decipher it unless we as researchers can access the whole of the web in real-time.

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#### Notes

1 This issue of excessive personalization is initially broached by Cass Sunstein in the book, *Republic.com*' (2001) and later taken up by Eli Pariser in his recent book, *The Filter Bubble* in 2011.

2 For an interesting response to how the web "answers" the problem of the Library of Babel, see James Grimmelman's article, "Information Policy for the Library of Babel" in the *Maryland Journal of Business and Technology Law*, November 2007.

3 The discrete nature of digital time provides us with a series of snapshots, reminiscent of Henri Bergson's discussion of memory as being cinematographic rather than a continuum. The warning over decontextualized snapshots is sounded by Adorno's tutor, Siegfried Kracauer, in his essay on photography which indicates the extirpation of meaning in a bleaker way than Benjamin's comparatively milder discussion on the end of the auratic. The contiguity of tweets, no matter how tightly bundled or multiplicitous in its use of hyperlinking, is not a replacement for duration, nor is rich content the royal road to deep context (a point that is taken up in a different context by Edward Tufte).

4 See Epsen J. Aarseth's *Cybertext - Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997). Technically, ergodic literature must involve non-trivial effort, which means that reading becomes an act of making decisions from a set of multiple choices. In a traditionally printed book, our eyes move "trivially" left to right. In cybertext, we are presented with options. So, on Twitter, we scan from up to down (scroll-reading), and have the option to activate tweeted links that bring us to different content. To extend the concept of the ergodic which involves text that comes with its own rules, we could say that the rules are hidden; i.e., that content is generated afresh by user input and by means of the algorithm. However, this does not present the reader with a choice function per se as agency is limited to what is displayed at any given moment.

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**THE SEMIOTIC  
REVIEW  
OF BOOKS**

## SEMIOSIS SINCE 1990

The Semiotic Review of Books is a multi-disciplinary journal publishing review articles and original research. It endeavours to monitor those domains in the Humanities, the Social and the Natural Sciences which bear upon symbolic and communicative behaviour, culture and innovation, cognitive systems and processes, and the study of information, meaning and signification in all forms.

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# Ten Years After

By Gary Genosko

In 2000 I became general editor of *The Semiotic Review of Books*. At that time the journal was entering its tenth year of consecutive publication. I relocated it from University of Toronto to Lakehead University, although the web operation remained with Computing in the Humanities and Social Sciences (CHASS) at U of T. During this period a number of international mirror sites hosted the journal online. Although Lakehead had little experience with journal publishing – the *LU Review* was a short-lived university-wide publication in 1968-74/76-77 – the start-up costs for my first issue, SRB 11.1 (July 2000), were provided by the offices of the Dean of Arts and Vice-President Research. Shortly thereafter the publication enjoyed stable funding for 10 years through the Canada Research Chairs program and the contributions of Lakehead University to my CRC, and found a home in my Technoculture Lab courtesy of a Canada Foundation for Innovation grant. A number of colleagues participated in the life of the journal – writing and reviewing manuscripts, and assisting me in more mundane tasks such as picking up the issue from the print shop, and stuffing envelopes. I am grateful for the assistance of this Lakehead Operations Group. I would like to thank Scott Pound (who now co-edits the web journal *Amodern*) for his reviews and logistical support. The SRB was for the first few years produced in-house at Lakehead through the Graphics and Printing Departments; eventually it was printed outside the university. The high-quality paper was sourced through the university print shop. This made the broadsheet format of the SRB less like a newspaper and more like a bulletin. Around 2003 the clean, contemporary look of the SRB was finally achieved, and the days of the somewhat crowded appearance of fussy newsprint were over. The ‘branding’ exercise that created the sheriff’s badge bearing the P99 code – reflecting the Library of Congress sub-class ‘P’ for languages and literatures and ‘99’ for holdings in semiotics, was designed in-house by Nicole Sutherland.

The older protocol of an ‘Editorial’ statement with which issues began slowly disappeared under pressure from concerns raised to contributors by their chairs and deans about what type of achievement this was, how it should be listed, and accounted for, and whether or not it was invited. This bureaucratic concern originated with Australian and British contributors as their productivity assessments began to morph under the weight of proliferating pseudo-criteria, and the SRB ‘Editorial’ – always an honorary designation simply expressing that a position was being taken and an issue kicked off – ended in early 2008.

The CRC funding enabled me to engage editorial interns such as Kristina Marcellus who assumed a managerial role during my sabbatical in 2006. This training of highly qualified personnel was an important part of running the journal, especially for doctoral and post-doctoral contributors. Moreover, by encouraging junior faculty to participate, as well as building bridges across units towards a transdisciplinary horizon, I hoped to use the SRB to create an intellectual community with its feet on the local ground and its virtual appendages extending around the world. Aligning with the Semioticon.com web site of SRB founding editor Paul Bouissac, helped to achieve this goal.

Transdisciplinary research often organizes itself around the problem of how to build a microinstitution through the creation of a technological infrastructure adequate to its goals. Transdisciplinary activities give shape to institutional microspaces and their interdependent assemblages as they are worked out in the rough drafts, corrected proofs, meetings, external relations with publishers and printers and designers, and cash flows. Such an institution is partially actualized through technological matters; typically, paper artifacts and web sites. A journal like the SRB is the site in and around which the rituals of a microinstitution are enacted, where groups take shape, labour is divided, affective relations wax and wane. Microinstitutional substance is engendered by the production process and its effects on readers. The microinstitution is not separate from the self-constituting activities, both failures and successes. Again, it is not separate from the facilities that assisted it along the way. Of course, any journal generates a good deal of not so well-formed substances that are left on the cutting room floor, as it were. A journal is a remarkable kind of resource for a researcher interested in how knowledge is produced and how small institutions are constituted and maintained over time.

The tragic loss of both Barbara Godard and Scott Simpkins, two active and engaged editorial board members, in the same year was a shock to the SRB. Both were stalwart manuscript reviewers and excelled in beating the right bushes for contributors. Barbara was also active in generating institutional subscriptions, in addition to assisting me in the packaging and sale of complete hard copy runs of the journal to research libraries.

Throughout the ten years of my editorship I emphasized the humanities side, that is, the theoretical dimensions of semiosis, focusing on developments in philosophy, literary theory, social and political thought, art, media, and popular culture. This direction was not mine alone, but a product of a lively mixture of the ideas of editorial associates as well as chance encounters.

The SRB was supported by institutional library subscriptions, many in Europe, most in the US and Canada. Three major subscriptions services managed these contacts and kept tabs on our publishing timelines. Personal subscriptions were a lifeline to readers, some of whom have supported the journal for almost two decades. The SRB web site is a sprawling repository of 20 years of material. It requires constant attention and regular upgrading. It is to the web site that I direct friends of the SRB for information about its future direction.

Founded in 1990, twenty years of semiosis in the SRB is coming to a pause, of sorts, in the forms of a transition from hardcopy to an online afterlife (many journals have made this transition over the past few years and the path is well-trodden), and a changing of the editorship. I am delighted to introduce the new general editor of the SRB, linguistic and semiotic anthropologist Dr. Paul Manning, associate professor in the Department of Anthropology, Trent University.

# THE SEMIOTIC REVIEW OF BOOKS

THE SEMIOTIC REVIEW OF BOOKS