

The Mold of Culture

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What does it mean to approach culture from a semiotic perspective? The question suggests that we could also approach culture from a perspective that is not semiotic. But the semiotic perspective forces itself upon us from whatever direction we approach the phenomenon of culture. All culture, in its enormous variety of forms, ranging from language to clothing, from the built environment to social institutions and tools, from ideology to art, shares this one single feature. To exist *as culture*, it depends on representation. We here touch upon the problem of the *ontology* of the cultural phenomenon. Whether we investigate the contents of a book, the function of a building, the meaning of a gesture, or the structure of an organization: the empirical reality of culture is not the reality of the sounds, the bricks, the gestures, the behavior and the artifacts -- it is the reality of the act(s) of representation. But what exactly is the empirical reality of representations? And what do we mean by "empirical"? Intuitively, we tend to assume that the empirical reality has to do with "brute facts" -- with something being the case independently of our representations of it. But can we ever speak and think about "facts" without using representations? We cannot, evidently. Both "brute" and "facts" are representations. (On the other hand, there is the "brute fact" that we represent facts!) And yet, we can argue that it is also intuitively clear to us that facts exist "beyond" our representations, even though we cannot conceive them without these representations. The fact (!) that we use representations to know about facts does not mean that there are no such things as facts. One of the peculiar things about representations, which semiotics must explain, is that we are in general so well aware of representations as "just representations". This is one of the reasons why we so often tend to forget about our representations all together. Which isn't the right thing to do either, of course. Facts are not representations of facts, but how do we know? How to "bypass" representations? We can do so intuitively of course, in the process of representation itself, but we can also try to circumvent "facts as representations" on the level of scientific reflection, through establishing *what kind of fact* the representation is, and how this "fact of representation" relates to other facts! Our task is to find out, again by using representations, what is factual about representations, that is, what is true about representations independently of our representations of them. We do not, therefore, assume that to explain culture, we need a different ontology. Culture consists of facts that are not, in principle, different from sounds, bricks, textile, or gestures. Culture probably has a physical structure. But how should we proceed to discover and explain this structure? Let us first try to identify the phenomenon to explain. What do we know about representations? A representation, and it is here that we touch upon semiotic theorizing, is a kind of behavior, of "doing". It (the text for example, the architecture, or the organization) is something, which stands, *for somebody*, for something else, in some respect. The characterization will probably ring a bell -- it may remind you of Peirce's definition of the sign often quoted at the beginning of so many semiotic papers and monographs. (I wonder whether one can say that representations are signs. Certainly representations depend upon signs, but maybe a representation is a whole of signs -- where the sign is the minimal representing unit. In that case, we could use the concept of "representation" as synonymous with "semiosis" or "text", understood in its broad, not strictly linguistic meaning.) But what do we know about signs? Do we know what kind of fact signs are?

The science of semiotics does not offer us, for the time being, a unified theory of semiosis. Its unity, if there is one at all, is to be found in this common object: signs and the use of signs in semiosis. Within the semiotic field it is possible, however, to distinguish a restricted number of theoretical paradigms. Signs refer to a world, real and imagined, present and absent, concrete and abstract. They make knowledge possible. The founding father of systematic cognitive semiotics is, of course, Charles Sanders Peirce. This does not mean, however, that this theoretical position as such did not exist before Peirce. On the contrary, the idea of signs as knowledge is at least as old as Western philosophy.

From another theoretical perspective, signs are seen as *stimuli* that generate specific responses. Charles Morris put this behaviorist paradigm in place in semiotics. In Morris' semiotics, the highly complex structure of Peirce's theory of the "semeiotic" is reduced to a theory of learned behavior. The two paradigms relate directly, of course, to the two main approaches in Western science: the logico-deductive in Peirce and the empirical-inductive in Morris.

But signs have also been studied as cultural *conventions*. Language now becomes the prototypical sign system. Signs convey messages, we use them to share our experience within a community. The theoretical basis for this perspective may be found in saussurean linguistics, more specifically in the work of Louis Hjelmslev (1943), who worked out a strictly formal glossematics, and in Karl Bühler's *Sprachtheorie* (1934). The basic tenets are formulated by Umberto Eco, in his *Theory of semiotics* (1976).

Fourthly, signs have also been understood as *adaptive behavior*. Signs play an important role in the interaction of organisms with their environment. They are dynamic realities, their basic function is *representation*. It is assumed that a specific form of representation is constitutive of human experience, including communication and cognition. This biological-anthropological perspective is strongly related to biology and neurophysiology. The philosophical and theoretical background is found in the work of Jakob Von Uexküll (1920, 1940) and Ernst Cassirer (1923-1929, 1944).

Finally, from a phenomenological perspective, signs and semiosis have been regarded as the building blocks of *consciousness*. The philosophical basis may be found in the works of Edmund Husserl (1922) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1960).

So semiotics, as a field, is demarcated roughly by an object, but divided among competing and partly overlapping theoretical perspectives. A standard view is still wishful thinking. I consider the biological-anthropological perspective to be the most promising perspective - and this for a simple reason: it is the only perspective that takes the emergence of signs, and of the semiotic in general, into account. Both the epistemological and the linguistic perspective take the existence of signs for granted. Instead of being the phenomenon to explain, the sign is the starting point for theoretical explorations. Although strongly oriented towards biology, the behaviorist perspective seems to offer no fruitful alternative, as it turns signs into signals. It has no eye for the basic semiotic issues of representation (signs are about something) and interpretation (signs can be about so many things). The phenomenological perspective is highly

interesting, because it draws our attention to a basic human experience: the experience that the reality we live in is always a mediated or semiotic reality. However, phenomenology does not provide us with a theory that could explain this human condition. It makes us strongly aware of our semiotic being, of course, but it doesn't offer a satisfactory perspective for research. For the time being, therefore, the path of biology and anthropology seems to be the most promising. The questions we have to ask are: how could semiosis, and how could human semiosis, arise in evolution and how did it evolve? How did it fit into the adaptive behavior of different species? Which were the biological realities, both environmental and within organisms, that made the appearance of semiotic capabilities both possible and successful?

These questions immediately take us back to the main question we have to answer, being: what exactly are we looking for? What is this semiosis all about? Our goal should be, if we want to give an explanatory definition of the semiotic phenomenon, not to smuggle the *explanandum* into the *explanans* too quickly. This seems to be a major problem in semiotics. We should beware, therefore, of relying on concepts like "convention" or "reference" or even "standing for", because these concepts are nothing but "masked" synonyms for the concepts we want to explain. If we define a sign by saying that it is "something which stands for something else", this definition has no explanatory value at all, as the "standing for" simply restates our problem: what does it mean "to stand for"? How can something "stand for" something else? And why should it do so? This is simply begging the question or, what seems to amount to the same thing: to rely on tacit, common sense knowledge about what a sign is.

Before tackling the issue of semiosis, there is one other thing that should be mentioned. I will be dealing only with human semiosis. According to Cassirer (1923-1929, 1944), man is the symbolic animal (*animal symbolicum*), and this view has been reformulated emphatically in recent research (see, for instance, Donald 1991, Mithen 1996, Deacon 1997). Is human semiosis that "single determining activity" (Bickerton 1995) which at the same time accounts both for the human mind's specificity and for the myriad of forms, the almost endless variety of human behavior this mind has generated? I take human semiosis to be a very specific form of a general semiotic faculty, which allows living organisms to construct representations of their environment. These representations determine the interaction of the organism with its environment and are in turn determined by this interaction. The representation is part of a feedback loop, which constitutes the organism's *Umwelt* (the term was coined by Von Uexküll 1920, 1940). We have to ask ourselves how human semiosis differs from semiosis in other organisms, especially in non-human primates, and how this faculty of representation evolved in humans (Donald 1991).

It may well be that the semiotic perspective will allow us, in future, to take cognition and language, as well as other human activities and attitudes, such as humor, play and laughter, greed, aggression and hate, together under one conceptual umbrella. Will semiotics provide us with a theory of "how the mind works"? At first sight, one would say that the use of signs is basic to the human mental life. Both cognition and language seem to rely heavily on signs. It may therefore be fruitful, although some will fiercely oppose the idea, to look once again at human mental behavior as behavior with one relatively simple basic, *semiotic* structure. Semiotics might provide us in the future with a kind of periodic table of human behavior, a theory that would be able to explain "why the behavior of all other species is, relatively speaking, so limited, while that of one single species should be so broad" (Bickerton 1995: 6).

But whether semiotics will provide us with an interesting explanatory theory for human mental behavior will depend upon the impact the research into human semiosis will have in the study of human perception, language, cognition and other faculties such as intelligence, humor, madness, and ritual. At this moment, the strength of the semiotic perspective seems to be that it allows us to add to the bulk of empirical data, which have been gathered over the past decades, a fresh theoretical dimension. Semiotics offers a new "top down" approach which should be confronted with the great amount of "bottom up" research done in the sciences of man.

Let us come back, after this brief "tour d'horizon", to the definition given above: a representation is something, which stands, for somebody, for something else, in some respect. The main problem with this definition, as I see it, results from the ambiguity of the "something else". This "something else" can in fact refer to two very different kinds of things. Take the example of an ambassador representing her country in a foreign state. The ambassador represents "something else", namely, her country. In a similar way, linguistic sounds and graphic forms represent meanings, and indices represent natural causes, and pictures represent the objects or situations depicted. Fundamentally, the relation of representation is a relation *between forms*. Both forms can be known: countries, linguistic meanings, natural causes, situations are known to us as forms, and the reach of semiotics as the study of relations between forms (both "natural" and conventional, or iconic, symbolic and indexical) has become enormous. As I have argued in my study on literary semiosis (Van Heusden 1997), this "move" from representation to form explains the "semiotic imperialism". Everything has become an object for semiotics, as long as it is conceived as form, that is, as a syntactico-semantic whole. Form, the sympathetic substitute for the complex and tricky sign, has turned out to be an omnivorous monster busy devouring the semiotics that generated it.

An alternative and much more promising route, leading us in the opposite direction, opens up if we assume that the "something else" in the definition is not a something with a form but is, instead, something lacking a form, which, precisely for that reason, is in need of some form to represent it. In our example of the ambassador, for instance, apart from the country, there is something else represented. Something (a somebody, in this case) is assumed to be an ambassador, with all the knowledge this entails about international politics, diplomatic customs and so forth. Now a situation, a "something", is being represented as, for instance, the swearing into office of an ambassador. The "standing for" relation has drastically changed. The "known ambassador form" stands for, or refers to, an as yet undetermined situation, which could have been interpreted (or signified) in a number of other ways. Therefore, a known form ("ambassador") is related, in the process of representation, to an absence of form, and it is *this relation to an absence of form* which gives a form its true semiotic dimension.

We thus move beyond theories of the sign-as-form to a theory of the form-as-sign. The semiotic process underlying all culture is more than an actualization of forms given. It is a process in which forms are used to deal with an absence of form. "An absence of form", however, is easier said than understood. How can we be aware of what is semiotically not yet determined? This "scandal" of the absence of form is one of the important issues which a theory of the semiotic will have to deal with. If we assume that perception is basically pattern-matching, what makes human perception specifically semiotic, and thus different from similar processes in other organisms and machines, is the fact that, as humans, we are

aware of a discrepancy, however slight, between memory and actuality. Humans are aware of the fact that they do not perceive forms (or schemata, or prototypes, or patterns), but that they perceive *with* forms, that forms are instruments of cognition. The world presents itself to us as being different from a remembered past. It is this awareness of difference which is the basis and starting point of every (human) semiotic process. It makes semiosis possible and necessary because it separates form from perception, and thus turns forms into signs and cognition into semiosis.

This ubiquity of the particular makes human cognition semiotic. Whatever we consciously perceive, imagine, and think resembles what we know and expect, more or less. All of conscious cognition lies on a scale between the two unattainable limits of, on the one hand, pure identity between what we experience and what we expect (a world as form) and, on the other, pure difference between expectation and experienced reality (a world without form). But how can difference arise in perception? If something is always "seen as" something else, how do we know about its being "something"? Although these may seem sophistries, I think they are not.

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