CHAPITRE 2:

**Semiotics**

This section proposes to familiarize readers with the semiotic approach. A brief outline of the aims of semiotic theory and working method is followed by a reference section providing definitions of terms and models used in semiotic metalanguage, and finally an example of semiotic analysis applied to a text.

**Preliminaries- What is semiotics?**

We live in a world of signs, and of signs about signs. Semiotics examines the ways linguistic and nonlinguistic objects and behaviours operate symbolically to « tell » us something. In terms of literary analysis, semiotics is interested in literary conventions and sign system. A sign system is a linguistic or nonlinguistic object or behaviour that can be analysed as if it were a specialized language. For semioticians, anything can be a sign. The whole world of human culture is a « text » waiting to be « read ».

The term semiotics is derived from the Greek word *sèmeion* denoting 'sign'. Already in the seventeenth century, the philosopher John Locke referred to *semiotika*, which he defined as 'the Doctrine of Signs, [...]; the business whereof, is to consider the Nature of Signs, the Mind makes use of for the understanding of Things, or conveying its Knowledge to others'. (Denis Bertrand, 'Narrativity and Discursivity', in *Paris School Semiotics*, vol. 1, trans, and ed. by P. Perron and F. Collins (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1989).

Semiotics designates, on the one hand, a *cognitive faculty* and on the other, a discipline of knowledge. As cognitive faculty, it is the name of the neurological-mental operational ability that man has for the production of any kind of signs (among them, from the perspective I have chosen, the linguistic ones). As discipline of knowledge, it designates the study of all kind of signs: basically icons, indexes and symbols tending to produce the explanation of why, how and with which effectiveness are produced, circulating and transformed the significations in force in a given social field.

In modern usage the concept semiotics refers to a theory of signification. There are different branches of semiotics under this heading:

1. **The American branch** influenced by C. S. Peirce. Much of Peirce's work is devoted to the development of sign categories such as making a distinction between icon, index and symbol.
2. **The European branch** represented by the Paris School (Ecole *de* Paris) founded by A. J. Greimas.The Paris School is concerned primarily with the relationship between signs, and with the manner in which they produce meaning within a given text or discourse.

We live in a world of signs, and of signs about signs. Semiotics *examines the ways linguistic and nonlinguistic objects and behaviours operate symbolically to « tell » us something*. In terms of literary analysis, semiotics is interested in literary conventions and sign system.

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Semiotics can be best defined as a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society. As such it is equally concerned with processes of signification and with those of communication: the means whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged. Its objects are the different sign-systems and codes at work in society and the actual messages and texts produced thereby.

Semiotics examines the ways linguistic and nonlinguistic objects or behaviour operate symbolically to “tell” something. In its application to literature, semiotics will be interested in literary conventions: the rules, literary devices, and other formal elements that constitute literary structures.

To semioticians, language is a fundamental sign system to be decrypted beyond the saussurian notion of signified and signifier. In fact, language also includes objects, gestures, activities, sounds, images, or else anything that can be perceived by the senses. The signifier is given a wide angle of malleability and possibilities in the semiotic field in that it wishes to isolate and analyze the symbolic function of sign systems under variegated situations and contexts.

* Semiotics is a multidisciplinary science whose precise concern is the better understanding of our own meaning-bearing behavior, the process of construction of the signification*.*
* Semiotics proposes answers to the problem of the explanation and production of meaning, from the assumption that no semiosis is self-sufficient to carry out such task. Semiosis is a given system (therefore virtual) of a given quality of sign (may be of any of the three kinds usually systematized: icons, indexes or symbols or others emerging from their combination), from which are being constructed the semiotic expressions (therefore existential) with which the members of a given community shape (visually, behaviorally or conceptually) their environment.

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be seen as a sign, Semiotics emerges as a kind of master science that has utility in all areas of knowledge, especially in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. It has been used in criticism of the fine arts, literature, film, and popular fiction as well as in interpreting architecture, in studying fashion, in analyzing facial expression, in interpreting magazine advertisements and radio and television commercials, in medicine, and in many other areas. A sign can also be defined as anything that can be used to stand for something else, but understanding how signs function is somewhat complicated.

**THE SEMIOTIC OBJECT**

The following statement deserves our scrutiny:“ **le signe signifie, mais devenu forme, il aspire à se signifier, il crée son nouveau sens, il se cherche un contenu, il lui donne une vie jeune par des associations, par des dislocations de moules verbaux »** ( Henri Focillon, *Vie des formes*, 1943, p.8)

The possible identification of the two objects of knowledge: the signsand the semiotic objects. In both cases we are in presence of signs, but they perform different semiotic functions, in a sense close to that of Louis Hjelmslev when he spoke of “semiotic function” and not of “sign” (1971/1966: 49). When we call them “*signs*”, we bear in mind their effectiveness to *produce* what we call *“semiotic objects”*;

- When we call them *“semiotic objects”* we bear in mind the *result* of their productive effectiveness, but, in both cases, it is about signs. That is why a *semiotic object can perform a function of sign* when it produces the identification of other semiotic objects; and *a sign can be considered as semiotic object* when we bear in mind the sign that has produced it.

“Semiotic object” is what is known about the object or phenomenon.Semiotization of object consists in grounding the explanation on the textuality of one or more given semiosis i.e., on the materiality of the discourses in force, not only verbal, but also visual, auditory (musical), gestural, behavioral, etc. in a given text.

So, here there exists a science of semiotics. Semiosis: the process by which a sign vehicle functions as assign: the sign vehicle; the designatum and the interpretant, and the interpreter.

A sign system is a linguistic or nonlinguistic object or behaviour that can be analysed as if it were a specialized language. For semioticians, anything can be a sign. The whole world of human culture is a « text » waiting to be « read ».

**OUTSTANDING FIGUREHEADS OF SEMIOTICS**

* **Ferdinand de Saussure**

In his posthumousty published book *A Course in General Linguistics , 1974( Cours de linguistique générale, 1916),*Saussure (1966) states :

**Language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing […] But it is the most important of all these systems.  A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from Greek, semeion "sign") Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. (p. 16).**

This quotation forms much of the basis of Saussure’s semiotic thought. He states that the linguistic sign is the combination of signifier (sound, object, image, or the like) and signified (concept). The relation that exists between the signifier and the signified is **arbitrary**, based on convention, or, to use the technical term, **unmotivated (p. 68, 69)**: “the bond between the signifier and thr signified is arbitrary… the linguistic sign is arbitrary” (p.68). In addition, Saussure asserts that concepts do not mean anything in themselves; they gain their meanings only relationally  or differentially: "Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive characteristics but negatively by their relations with the other  terms of  the system" (p.ll7). For all practical purposes, the most important relationship among terms is binary opposition.

In terms of signification, a tripartite system exists, even though Saussure only mentions the binarism signifier/ signified, united in the sign. We must add a third term to avoid confusion at this stage: **referent** ( from the German philosopher Gottlob Frege). The referent is the “item” to which the sign ( unifying the signifier and the signified) refers. Thus there is not simply a “word” and a “thing”, there is a **word,** a **concept** and a **referent.** The referent is only one-third of the meaning. So signification centres on the words which appear to perform those functions. .Meaning is possible only by virtue of its systemic function.

* CHARLES WILLIAM MORRIS

Morris is an American philosopher of language. He grouped certain aspects of language under three headings which he called “ semiotic categories”: (p.26)

* Syntax - this is the formal relation between signs and other signs ( words), the ordering of elements in a text, and the relations which exist between those elements.
* Semantics- is the relation between signs and the world.. it is concerned with sense and meaning.
* Pragmatics- is the relation between signs and interpreters and users.

In the years 1930, Morris establishes a link between pragmatism and the analysis of the sign. He is an American philosopher of language ( in ***Signs, Language, Behavior,*** New York, George Brazilier, 1946.

THE CATEGORISATION OF SIGN ACCORDING TO MORRIS

1. **SIGN – SIGN DIMENSIONS**

* People are interpreters of signs. A sign has three factors that guide interpretation:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Sign (sign dimensions) | INTERPRETATION |
| The designative aspect | It direct to a particular object |
| The appraisive aspect | It highlights object qualities for an evaluation |
| The prescriptive aspect | It leads us to respond in a specific way |

1. **SIGNS – VALUE DIMENSIONS**

* Three signs with specific values

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Sign ( values dimensions) | Interpretation |
| Detachment | To show that autonomy is maintained, independence |
| Dominance | To take control or dominate another persons or system |
| Dependence | The person or system is control by another person or system |

1. **SIGNS- ACTION STAGES**

* This is perceived through three ways or stages

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Sign ( action stages) | Interpretation |
| The perception stage | The person is aware of the sign |
| The manipulation stage | He interprets the sign |
| The consummation stage | He responds to it |

* BARTHES ( -1980)

Bathes is one of Saussure’s most powerful interpreters in the matter of semiotics has been Roland Barthes. In his essay ‘Myth Today’ he puts the case that any semiotic analysis must postulate a relationship between the two terms *signifier* and *signified* which is not one of “equality” but of “equivalence”.

“A connotative semiotic” ( Hjelmslev1943.: 77)

the second-order significations of any particular element. Signification: the set of conditions under which the sign denotes something.

* A text is “a real informational polyphony” and “a density of signs” (Barthes,1972: 261-7).

There is a certain amount of technical language involved with semiotic analysis that cannot be avoided.

Semiotics is a form of applied linguistics: it is has been applied to everything from fashion to advertising. The most fundamental concept in semiotics is the sign; semiotic theorists posit human beings as sign-making and sign-interpreting animals. It is with signs that this discussion of semiotics and cultural criticism begins.

Each sign in the system has meaning only by virtue of its difference from others. To Barthes, everything ends up being explained in words, thus, ultimately, it would be the theoretical system of linguistics, which explains the production of the meaning accomplished by the action of various signs, whatever their nature: images, symbols, objects, behaviors.

What we *grasp* in the relationship is not the sequential ordering whereby one term *leads to* the other, but the correlation which *unites* them. In respect of language this ‘structural relationship’ between *sound-image* (signifier) and *concept* (signified) constitutes what Saussure calls the *linguistic sign*.

In respect of *non-linguistic* systems, says Barthes, this ‘associative total’ of signifier and signified constitutes simply the *sign.* Barthes moves on to consider the ways in which ‘myth’ signifies in society (and by ‘myth’ he means, as we have seen above, not ‘*classical’ mythology so much as the complex system of images and beliefs which a society constructs in order to sustain and authenticate its sense of its own being: i.e. the very fabric of its system of ‘meaning’*. In the case of myth, Barthes argues, we find again the tripartite signifying operation described above: the signifier, the signified, and their product, the sign. However, myth is peculiar in that it invariably functions as a *second-order* semiotic system constructed on the basis of a semiotic chain which exists before it.

**Codes**

We can understand by “code”, the registry, ordered by some explicit criterion decided by its author or compiler, of a given set of signs, described according to their possibilities of syntactic interrelation and to their possible semantic contents relating to a given social phenomenon.

Barthes’s analysis of the nature of the codes involved in reading and writing, and of their potential for ecstasy. For this, we must turn to ***S/Z*** (1970) to analyse the “textual signifiers” in terms of five codes (pp25-27), as follows:

1. The hermeneutic code

This consists of “all the units whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution”

1. **The code of semes or signifiers**

This is a code of connotations which utilizes hints or ‘flickers of meaning’ generated by certain signifiers

1. **The symbolic code**

This is the code of recognizable ‘groupings’ or configurations, regularly repeated in various modes and by various means in the text, which ultimately generates the dominant figure in the carpet.

1. **The proairetic code**

This is the code of “actions”. Derived from the concept of *proairesis*, ‘the ability rationally to determine the result of an action’, this code is also embodied in sequences such as *lexia*.

1. **The “cultural” code (or “reference” code)**

This code manifests itself as a ‘gnomic’, collective, anonymous and authoritative voice which speaks for and about what it aims to establish as ‘accepted’ knowledge or wisdom.

* UMBERTO ECO ( -2018)

ECO formulated an initial classification wherein he distinguishes artificial signs and natural signs.

*Artificial signs* are divided into two classes: (1) signs intentionally produced in order to signify; (2) signs intentionally produced as functions.

Natural signs are divided into two classes: (1) signs identified with natural things or events; (2) signs unintentionally produced by a human agent.

“All that is on stage is sign”: natural and artificial signs. Phenomena assume a signifying function on stage to the extent that their relation to what they signify is perceived as being deliberately intended. In real life the utilitarian function of an object is usually more important than its signification. On a theatrical set the signification is all important.

* CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE (……)

One difference between semiotics and semiology is that semiotics draws its basic ideas from a trichotomy elaborated by C. S  Peirce (1958). According to Peirce, there are three kinds  of signs-icons, indexes, and symbols.A sign or *representamen* is ‘something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity’ (*ibid.*, Vol. 2, para. 228): it is ‘anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*)’ (*ibid.*, Vol. 2, para. 303).

A sign thus *stands for* something (its *object*); it stands for something *to* somebody (its *interpretant*); and finally it stands for something to somebody *in some respect* (this respect is called its *ground*).

These terms, *representamen,* *object, interpretant* and *ground* can thus be seen to refer to the means by which the sign signifies; the relationship between them determines the precise nature of the process of *semiosis*.

The American founder of semiotics, Peirce distinguished between three basic kinds of sign. There was the iconic, where the sign somehow resembled what it stood for (a photograph of a person, for example); indexical (smoke) ; the symbolic, where as with Saussure the sign is only arbitrarily or conventionally linked with its referent.

Semiotics takes up this and many other classifications: it distinguishes between « denotation » (what the sign stands for) and « connotation » (other signs associated with it); between codes (the sign-governed structures which produce meanings) and the messages transmitted by them; between the “paradigmatic“ ( a whole class of signs which may stand in for one another) in a a chain“). It speaks of “metalanguages”, where one sign-system denotes another sign-system (the relation between literary criticism and literature, for instance), “polysemic” signs which have more than one meaning, and a great many other technical concepts.(Eagleton, p.88).

**SEMIOTICS AS A TOOL FOR ANALYSIS**

There are four basic principles on which the semiotic analysis of texts is based:

* Meaning is not inherent in objects, objects do not signify by themselves. Meaning, rather, is constructed by what is known as a competent observer, i.e. by a subject capable of 'giving form' to objects.
* Semiotics views the text, any text, as an autonomous unit, that is, one that is internally coherent. Rather than starting with ideas/ meanings external to the text and showing how they are reflected within it, an approach that is still widely adopted in the academic world.

Semiotic analysis begins with a study of the actual language and structures of the text, showing how meanings are constructed and, of course, at the same time what these meanings are. Semiotic analysis becomes, then, a discovery method and is clearly an invaluable tool for all those engaged in original research.

Semiotics posits that story structure or narrativity underlies all discourse, not just what is commonly known as a story. For instance, it underlies political, sociological and legal discourse. One can even go as far as to say that narrativity underlies our very concept of truth: recent studies in the field of legal discourse, for example, have shown that those witnesses in a law court whose account conforms most closely to archetypal story patterns are those whose version is most likely to be believed.

A text must, therefore, be studied at these different levels of depth and not just at the surface level as is the case with traditional linguistics. Keeping in mind these principles, semiotic analysis is aided further by *schemas* or *models* whose application contributes to decoding the meaning of texts. We will give a brief survey of the most important of these and explain how they relate to different textual levels.

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