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# Cultural Semiotics and Anthropology

### Introduction

The growth of concern both in the East and in the West with problems of meaning and change in cultural context as inseparable from cultural structures or systems, as well as the renewed interest in the search for a common perspective that can unite all human behavior within a general framework, is everywhere in evidence, in spite of varied interpretations and considerable disagreements about ways to solve the new problems implied. For example, within the last five to six years there has been a veritable explosion of anthropological publications in the West under the various labels of semantic, cognitive, structural, symbolic and semiotic studies that have manifested such concerns, while studies specifically utilizing the term cultural semiotics have been extremely important in East Europe during the last decade, particularly in the socalled Moscow-Tartu School. If, as Peirce held, the whole universe is "perfused with signs, if not composed entirely of signs" (Peirce 1965-66: 5:448, n. 1), if, as Saussure said, "we need a science that studies the life of signs in society," and if, as Jakobson has held, the sign is a "renvoi" (1975) which Bär has said signals to us the polyvalence of the whole notion of semiotics (Bär 1976:380), then it follows that the broad approach called here cultural semiotics must be interdisciplinary in scope, using all data available from all cultures in time and space, in its attempt to elucidate and interrelate the many levels of culture within a semiotic framework.

In this sense cultural semiotics encompasses a broad domain within the still wider domain of general semiotics which is a part of the general theory of communications, and all of these areas share certain structural properties. In the most inclusive framework, Boulding's view of the universe as a general system assumes that all sciences, physical and social, share a common pattern of relationships, although each in differing degrees, and furthermore that the greatest task for the scientific community has been to transcend the mechanical and materialistic orientation which dominated its early history (Boulding 1977 in Singell1978: 89).

It appears that general semiotics and its subdivisions fall within this grand design. Accordingly, I propose that we may view cultural semiotics as a new paradigm or world view in Kuhn's term, unified by broad themes and yet divided by wide differences and interpretations, and possibly encompassing several closely related, contiguous but differing, subparadigms. Kuhn has described revolutions as shifts of vision, or transitions between incompatible paradigms or world views. While paradigms exist in relation of tension to each other, common values may unite separate world views, which facilitates communication between them. However, communication goes on by translation, comparable to the process of translating into separate languages. As Kuhn has noted, translation is a very threatening process (Kuhn 1970:203). However, it is unavoidable since groups that have systematically different sensations on receipt of the same stimuli, do ~ in a sense ~ live in different worlds. "Our world is populated in the first instance not by stimuli but by the objects of our sensations and thus need not be the same ... group to group" (Kuhn 1970:193).

To Kuhn, paradigms are very broad constellations affecting the way a community perceives reality, covering on the one hand, beliefs, values, and techniques shared by a given community, and on the other hand, concrete puzzle solutions or "exemplars" which are used as models for solving problems (ibid.:170). However, according to Kuhn, rules, a kind of interpretation and rationalization of the prior paradigm, may be absent, or merely implicit or highly divergent (ibid.:42-44). Thus research projects within a paradigm may not share a common and full set of rules and assumptions that characterize a tradition. Rather they "may relate by resemblance and by modeling to one or another part of the scientific corpus ..." (ibid.:44-46). Clearly a translation between subparadigms and paradigms is the more difficult when rules and assumptions are merely implicit.

As Kuhn has written, probably the most prevalent claim advanced by the proponents of a new paradigm is that they can solve problems that led the old ones to a crisis, and that the new theory is neater, more suitable, and has an aesthetic appeal (ibid.:155). If cultural semiotics suggests to us one of Kuhn's revolutions (which simply means a crisis of an old paradigm and a move to a new one whether perceived or not as a revolution), then among the unsolved problems that cultural semiotics attacks are the reconciliation of the static and synchronic with the dynamic and diachronic within cultural systems, the relation of meaning and content to form and structure, and the question of how cultural systems are internally organized, how such systems change, how they are related to each other, and finally what is the significant unit of culture. Some of these problems were already significantly advanced in the thirties, before cultural semiotics became a recognized domain, by the earlier work of the Prague Linguistic Circle and by Mukařovský's extension of his semiotic and aesthetic concepts to culture in general (1970) as well as by Bogatyrev's early semiotic study of folk costumes (1971). But only in the last decades has cultural semiotics become a recognized term signifying a whole new kind of anthropology that has been most specifically advanced by the so-called Moscow-Tartu school. But the outlook implied is worldwide. Anthropologists, from Japan to Eastern and Western Europe to the United States, Canada and Latin America, are now working in this broad direction.

Considering cultural semiotics as a broad paradigm, encompassing contiguous subparadigms which share underlying values and traditions that provide a general framework for the varying interpretations, assumptions and rules adopted, we note that all versions partake, to a greater or lesser extent, in the values and concepts of the sign as developed from the Stoics through medieval and enlightenment views to Peirce's and Saussure's extension of the concept of sign to all culture. Furthermore, all share, though in some cases only indirectly, in the later syntheses emanating from the structural linguistics and aesthetics of the Prague Linguistic Circle. However, while in a broad sense a paradigm of cultural semiotics is generating considerable research both in the East and in the West, it is nevertheless clear that there is lacking what Kuhn called "a full interpenetration or rationalization of it...."Also lacking is "a standard interpretation or an agreed reduction to rules" (Kuhn 1970: 44).

It is the task of this discussion to isolate a few of the tensions within the general paradigm of cultural semiotics. My thesis here is that the greatest divergence is between the developments in cultural semiotics most directly influenced by the work of the early Prague Linguistic Circle, namely Moscow- Tartu semiotics and other East European groups and some Western scholars on the one hand, and several other Western semiotic traditions stemming from diverse other influences on the other hand. I do not suggest, however, that either Western or Eastern approaches are homogenous. There are significant differences here also. All approaches are to some extent influenced by Levi-Strauss whose work has been effected by various influences from the Prague scholars and who is, in this sense, a mediator of a kind, conscious or not, between traditions. In this discussion I consider some American and English anthropological semiotic approaches, and comparisons are made to Levi-Strauss and to Moscow-Tartu semiotics. All those scholars, working within this new paradigm, share a dominating interest in the problem of meaning and culture ruled out by the positivists, and in the mediating role of cultural world views in effecting perception. All, or nearly all, have de-parted from the assumption that there are many systems of signs of which language is only one, although probably the privileged one, and have concerned themselves, to some degree at least, with the interrelation of langue and parole. However, what the modeling role of language is, whether it is the model, what the significant unit of study in a culture is, and how open and dynamic structures are, these are some of the fundamentally unsettled issues, as well as others to be noted.

### Concepts and Trends Leading to and Forming Part of Semiotics of Culture

### Common Heritage

The roots of contemporary semiotics reach back to the writings of the Stoics, to St. Augustine, to Kant's emphasis on the thinking and perceiving mind, to Locke's concept of the sign and to Vico's hypothesis that man knows the world only imperfectly, since he knows only what he can do or make. Thus natural language is simply an adequate medium of communication, not a precise instrument, and is, in fact, a reflection of a whole cultural way of life. Vico's anticartesianism and his view that understanding culture is like understanding a language, since ways of life are embedded in ways of speaking, makes him a most important forerunner of semiotic anthropology and of semiotics of culture.

The immediate developments which made modern semiotics possible can be traced to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, specifically to two mutually isolated sources: the writings of the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1915), both of whom independently laid the basis for the formal study of semiotics. For Peirce, semiotics became the focus of a general logic where the sign is seen as something that stands to somebody for something to which it points and with which it is never identical. While Peirce was essentially concerned with language as the most important sign system, he anticipated in important ways the extension of semiotics to other cultural systems. The positions that a sign is only a sign when it is perceived and interpreted, that every sign has an interpretant (another sign), and that signs must be typologized by the varying and interpenetrating and changing relations of expression to content, all anticipate semiotics of culture, since Peirce's signs are inherently dynamic and contextual.

For Saussure, semiotics was implied by the development of structural linguistic theory and methodology. Of fundamental importance for cultural semiotics is Saussure's distinction between langue and parole, his position that the verbal sign is arbitrary, the relational approach to sound and meaning and the foresighted advocacy of the extension of the field of semiotics to nonlinguistic and all cultural behavior. As Saussure wrote:

Language is a system of signs that express ideas and is therefore comparable to the system of writing, the alphabet of deaf mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all these systems. A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable... I shall call it semiology (Saussure 1966:16).

Furthermore, Saussure concluded:

By studying rites, customs, etc., as signs, I believe that we shall throw new light on the facts and point up the need for including them in a science of semiology and explaining them by its laws (ibid.:17).

### The Prague Linguistic Circle

The groundwork for modern theories of semiotics of culture, which were called for by Saussure, must be attributed to the pioneering work of the Prague Linguistic Circle which was formed in 1926, the multiform roots of which were Russian Formalism, Husserlian phenomenology, Gestalt psychology and the Czech formalism of the so-called Herbartian School as well as Hegelian dialectics, and the writings of Saussure. (Peirce's writings were integrated into this tradition only later by Jakobson, beginning in the 1950s.)

The Prague structuralist movement arose partially as a rebellion against notions of static and closed systems, and against the idea that there are any areas that exist outside of system. Rather, the scholars of the Prague Linguistic Circle held that system is everywhere and that all systems are to a greater or lesser extent, interrelated, and thus they insisted on resolving the Saussurian dichotomy of langue/parole. In early statements, the basis was laid for a broad theory of structure encompassing both synchrony and diachrony, and harmony and conflict. The concept of immanence of structures was replaced by that of autonomy, since intrinsic and extrinsic elements were held to be dynamically interrelated by the process of change. Thus while intrinsic relations accounted for the specific characteristics of particular changes, extrinsic forms accounted for the particular direction and the speed of evolution. Furthermore, all structures were held to be in mutual relations forming a structure of structures (see Jakobson and Tynjanov 1928:37 and the Theses of the Prague Linguistic Circle 1929).

By the 1930s this group began to interest itself directly in theories of the sign and, by extension, in the semiotics of culture. Mukařovský, the leading aesthetician of the Prague Linguistic Circle who quickly extended his perspective to culture in general, discussed the evolution of structures (referring to verbal art) as an uninterrupted self-motion (using the Hegelian concept of Selbstbewegung) which, while directed by its own immanent laws, does not occur in isolation from other cultural phenomena. For all cultural phenomena are held to be mutually independent and in active interrelation- ship (Mukařovský 1934b). Furthermore Mukařovský considered art from a semiotic point of view and soon applied a semiotic approach, particularly his concept of polyfunctionality of human behavior and the dynamic aesthetic function, to all cultural behavior (1936, 1970) (see I.P. Winner 1978a for a discussion of the cultural implications of the aesthetic function).

As Mukařovský stated, the aesthetic function is universally present, whether dominant or subsidiary, its norm-breaking characteristics fundamentally affecting cultural behavior.

This sphere is related to the sum of human activity, as well as to the whole world of things; every activity and everything can become due to social convention or individual will – vehicles, permanent or transitory, of the aesthetic function (1937:54).

Mukařovský emphasized the social and cultural role of the aesthetic function in his very original and far-reaching essay of 1936. Furthermore, Mukařovský's interpretation of the sign foresaw the importance of the many-leveled approach of modern semiotics. As he stated it:

All psychic content exceeding the limits of individual consciousness acquires the character of a sign by the very fact of its communicability. The science of the sign ... must be elaborated in its entire scope; just as contemporary linguistics enlarges the field of semantics in treating from this point of view all the elements of the linguistic system, indeed even sounds, the results of linguistic semantics should be applied to all other series of signs and should be differentiated according to their special characteristics (1936:85).

Most importantly, Mukařovský also pointed out that sign systems are to be understood not only in terms of function, which he saw as a teleological concept relating to the goal of the sign, but also in relation to value (how well the sign fulfills, in view of the sign's cultural agents, its function) and norms (the rules that govern the production and perception of sign messages). While norms are similar to Saussure's langue, the "grammar" of sign systems, Mukařovský did not fully accept Saussure's position of arbitrariness, although Saussure also qualified this position. Suggesting Peircean concepts with which Mukařovský was not familiar at that time, Mukařovský posited a multiform, ambiguous relation of art works, understood as signs, to reality. Thus he implied some kind of iconicity, although he did not use this term. In the same vein, Mukařovský's "semantic gesture" has been traced to the concept of "sound gesture" developed by the Russian linguist Polivanov (Cf. Steiner 1976:373), which assumes a nonarbitrary relation between some features of sound and emotional states. Thus the relation between signifier and signified may be motivated and nonarbitrary, as well as arbitrary, an extremely important concept for the later cultural semiotics.

It was Jakobson, however, who first formally synthesized the Peircean and Saussurian views of signs. Jakobson's synthesis of sign types works out the complex problem of what signs are arbitrary or conventional, as opposed to iconic and indexical, and demonstrates the interpenetration of these levels in all signs, a problem that had been foreseen by Mukařovský. His extension of the Peircean taxonomy of signs by the addition of imputed similarity (Jakobson 1970:12-13) has important implications for cultural semiotics, since it implies, as does Kuhn in the earlier quoted statement, that what is similar to reality in one world view may be different from reality in another, depending on underlying cultural values and categories.

One of the first practical investigations of the extensions of semiotics beyond the verbal behavior and beyond the arts in general was carried out by a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Petr Bogatyrev, who in a pioneering work, The Functions of Folk Costumes in Moravian Slovakia, published over thirty years ago, investigated the semiotics of the folk costume in all its functions. Bogatyrev, who was originally an ethnographer at the University of Moscow where he worked extensively on folklore, demonstrated in this essay (1971) and in other important essays (1936a, 1936b, 1939) the transition of Slovak folk costumes from everyday to holiday to ceremonial and, finally, to ritual stages in respect to their changing hierarchy of functions marked by the weakening of the practical function and the strengthening of the aesthetic and other functions. While the problem of the relation between sign and object is not completely resolved by Bogatyrev, the semiotic role of costumes seems to have been his primary point of departure. Thus he states that "in order to grasp the social function of costumes, we must learn to read them as signs in the same way that we learn to read and understand different languages" (1971:83). However several decades elapsed before others took up the challenge laid down by Bogatyrev and began to investigate the various sign systems that compose culture.

#### Moscow-Tartu Semiotics of Culture

The specific approach called "semiotics of culture" was first advanced by the Moscow-Tartu group which by now has produced a considerable body of publications expanding this point of view. Starting from the semiotics of various art systems, this group has devoted increasing attention to the semiotics of other cultural systems and to their mutual translatability. It was under the leadership of Jurij M. Lotman of the University of Tartu that summer schools on sign systems were initiated in Kaariku in Soviet Estonia from 1964 to 1972, and by the 1970s the first attempts were made to integrate the various areas with which semiotics had begun to be preoccupied under one over-arching concept, namely that of culture seen as a system of information and communication. In an important essay of 1970, Lotman described culture as a "semiotic mechanism for the output and storage of information" (1970:2) and "a historically evolved bundle of semiotic systems (languages) which can be composed into a single hierarchy (supralanguages) which can also be a symbiosis of independent systems (ibid.:8). The underly-

ing concept in this approach is an analogy to memory of mankind or to some segment of mankind, memory implying here the capacity of systems for storage and accumulation of information.

It was not until 1973 that the Soviet scholars published an over-all statement advancing the semiotics of culture, the so-called "Theses on Semiotic Study of Culture" (Theses 1973. For a discussion of the Theses see Winner & Winner: 1976). The five signers of the Theses, Uspenskij, Ivanov, Toporov, Pjatigorskij, and Lotman, all are engaged in extensive research on the subject of semiotics of culture as are other Russian scholars.

The Theses opens with the following definition of culture (references refer to paragraph numbers):

In the study of culture the initial premise is that all human activity concerned with the processing, exchange, and storage of information possesses a certain unity. Individual sign systems, though they presuppose immanently organized structures, function only in unity, supported by one another. None of the sign systems possess a mechanism which would enable it to function culturally in isolation. Hence it follows that, together with an approach which permits us to construct a series of relatively autonomous sciences of the semiotic cycle, we shall admit another approach, according to which all of them examine particular aspects of the semiotics of culture, of the study of the functional correlation of different sign systems (Theses 1973:1.0.0).

This view of culture encompasses various far-reaching assumptions, among the most important of which are the following: 1) the understanding of culture as composing three inseparable realms: syntactics (the internal organization of structures and the relation of structures to each other), semantics (meaning at all levels from the most abstract basic oppositions to more and more specific contextual cultural symbols), and pragmatics (the perception of reality, the creation of sign systems, their encoding and decoding, how sign systems change, the dynamics of context and point of view); 2) the position that natural language is the primary and universal model, in relation to which all other semiotic systems are perceived as "secondary modeling systems," the arrangement being hierarchical. (However, as is discussed subsequently, this position has been increasingly modified even within the Theses since, even though natural language is the necessary sign system for culture, no culture exists with only one type of sign system, and it is possible that natural language does not provide the primary model for all other cultural sign systems.) 3) Finally, the last assumption appears to be the crucial one ~ that is the notion that texts are the primary element or basic significant unit of culture. (The concept of text is discussed in the final section of this paper.)

### Divergent Interpretations of Philosophical Bases of Structural and Cultural Semiotics

Various philosophical currents underscoring the dynamics of the subject and the receiver as well as of perception in general, and departing strongly from positivistic and formalistic traditions, had a marked effect upon Prague theories, although these are often not considered as part of structuralism or of cultural semiotics by Western scholars. Among them we note the following two areas.

### The Role of Phenomenology

Western scholars frequently dismiss the influence of phenomenology upon structuralism in general, and overlook its influence upon the Prague scholars, holding that structuralism is purely formal. For example, according to the British philosopher Pettit, Levi-Strauss completely rejects subjective consciousness, intuition and empathy, and other phenomenological views. And according to the editors of the First Reader in Symbolic Anthropology, the structuralist approach (attributed primarily to Levi-Strauss and other French scholars) radically separates problems of the form of thought (and therefore its expression) from the problem of its contents. In this respect, it is claimed, structuralism differs from a phenomenological perspective "which attempts to transcend Kant's extreme differentiation of form and content through the study of the workings of form." The editors assert that the structuralist's task is limited to demonstrating that all mental phenomena make use of basic structures (Dolgin, Kemnitzer and Schneider 1977: 30).

However, it is not clear that such critiques are justified insofar as they apply to East European traditions, or even to Levi-Strauss. In fact, Husserl's differentiation of Gegenstand and Bedeutung, his refusal to separate the act and its object, as well as his theory of intention, were extremely important stimuli for the Prague group, effecting Jakobson's functional approach to language. Thus Holenstein documents his claim that Jakobson is a "phenomenological structuralist," holding that it was in Husserl's work that Jakobson found the first systematic formulation of general laws operative for a structural unit (Holenstein 1976:2). According to Holenstein, there are three specific themes where Husserl's influence can be directly observed, namely: the relation of linguistics to psychology, the program for universal grammar, and the defense of semantics as an integral part of linguistics. Indeed, Holenstein holds:

There is hardly a basic theoretical methodological concept of structural linguistics and poetics that does not undergo an explicit or implicit phenomenological determination and elaboration by Jakobson (Holenstein 1976:3).

Affinity to phenomenology exists, according to Holenstein, in Husserl's division of phenomenology into four overlapping areas: 1) static phenomenology, the delineation of structural types, including the relation of the object to the subject by which it is intended (here we might add, Mukařovský particularly inquired into the role of the subject, emphasizing its dynamic aspects); 2) genetic phenomenology, related to Jakobson's teleological orientation; 3) eidetic phenomenology, related to the semiotic search for universals; and 4) transcendental phenomenology, i.e. all data are elucidated according to how their structure and signification appear to a subject, which would correlate with the semiotic of pragmatics (Holenstein 1976:4-5). Furthermore, Holenstein has also held that Jakobson's theory of binary oppositions and the marked/unmarked relationship have affinities to phenomenological principles of fundamental relations (Holenstein 1975:35).

### Influence of Gestalt

Similarly, Western scholars have frequently dismissed the influence of Gestalt psychology on structuralism in general and on Jakobson's linguistics and semiotic theories of culture. For example Pettit, who believes structuralism owes much to Jakobson, nevertheless holds that in the area beyond the sentence, structuralism has failed to establish an intuitively felt structure, and thus a unit like a text in culture is simply not intuitively felt (1975:47). Others imply that structuralism is still an additive concept, apparently having advanced little, if at all, beyond Russian formalism. For example, the editors of Symbolic Anthropology call structuralism "static formalism" (Dolgin et al. 1977:30). Such critiques are again countered by Holenstein. As he points out, the Prague School shares the anti-atomistic and holistic attitudes of Gestalt psychology, from which it follows that networks of relations are a part of the simplest data of perception and that "the natural parts into which perception can be dissected are already struc-

tured and have also a holistic character." Thus, for example, the "Gestalt" position that all perception is structured into partial wholes influenced Jakobson's concept of phonology (Holenstein 1976:16). We may add that it also underlies the Prague school investigation of larger units (up to the level of the text), and the interest in the relation of linguistic to aesthetic and cultural realms in general.

Still, Holenstein points out, Prague structuralism and semiotics also diverged from Gestalt theory in its emphasis on hierarchically organized systems rather than on fields, in the greater stress on the dynamic, and not static, aspect of systems, and on the dominant role of binary oppositions and conflicts, as well as in the emphasis on interrelations of systems that are not closed (cf. Holenstein 1978:18). Thus the important role of context and the effect of culture upon perception are emphases of cultural semiotics which are not necessarily implied by Gestalt theory.

## Recent Divergences: Moscow-Tartu and Western Approaches to Semiotics of Culture

Turning to more specifically contemporary issues, differently interpreted by scholars working in cultural semiotics in the East and the West, we note four areas which represent a relatively arbitrary number of the many possibilities, but which, nevertheless, signal focal tension points: They are the theory of the sign, the status of the linguistic model, the relation of cultural codes to nature, and reduction and meaning.

#### The Theory and Dynamics of the Sign

Some Western schools, in the broad tradition expressed by Cassirer utilize the term "symbol" for the entire signifying function or as the only, or primary, sign as does Geertz (who, following Langer, uses symbol "for any object, act, event, quantity or relation which serves as a vehicle or a conception. The conception is the symbol's meaning" (Geertz 1973:91)). Others consider symbol to cover multivalent iconic, but not arbitrary, signs (Ricoeur 1970:11-12; Turner 1975:152). However, many scholars in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union, as well as Levi-Strauss and Leach and others in the West, distinguish different sign types, following more closely the Peircean typology of signs and Jakobson's extension of such typologies, although some use symbol in both senses, in the broad sense of Ricoeur as well as in the more technical and restricted Peircean one. Furthermore, various interpretations of Peircean traditions, East and West (Ecco, Kristeva, Damisch, Jakobson, Lotman, etc.) have recently shown that the sign category and types of signs are not rigidly demarked areas. Thus Darnisch sees art which is only a semi-sign (1975:35), and Lotman (1975) sees texts that are prior to signs. Furthermore, such analytical approaches attempt to overcome naive views of the signifier/signified relationship. For example, in the effort to surmount rigid structural dichotomies, the Tel Quel group has, as Bar has remarked, gone so far as to reverse the Saussurian model for the sign. Thus the intelligible, signifie, becomes instrumental for the sensory, signifiant. "They dispense temporarily with the conceptual level of semiotic performances in order to reappropriate the sensory infrastructure" (Bar 1976:379). This re-emphasis on the iconic quality of the sign also preoccupies Jakobson in his forthcoming study on Sounds of Language.

As Kuhn noted, when people see the same situation differently, and use the same words, they are speaking from different viewpoints and translations are needed (Kuhn 1970:200). It seems that underlying problems contributing to this terminological and theoretical confusion are not only lack of agree- ments concerning ways to distinguish between iconici-