

Editor's preface: For a minor semiotics

Ott Puumeister¹

Sign Systems Studies is celebrating the centenary of Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) with a special issue on Deleuze and Guattari and semiotics. In a way, we are thus also celebrating in advance the centenary of Félix Guattari (1930–1992), which will arrive in five years' time. In any case, Guattari should be present in festivities dedicated to Deleuze as his closest collaborator and friend in the philosophical sense. This collection will give us an opportunity to explore their joint contributions to semiotics, sometimes with a stronger emphasis on the one, sometimes on the other.

Deleuze and Guattari's semiotics is quite peculiar in that they do not focus on representation but strive to understand what goes on beneath it. In fact, their work is forcefully critical of representation, either in the history of Western philosophy (Deleuze 1994[1968]) or in psychoanalysis (Deleuze, Guattari 1983[1972]). While it is true that they do not directly target semiotic theory, their critique can easily be extended to the latter, in so far as its central category is representation. So what is the matter with this category? In short, it tends to divide reality into a pre-existing realm of objects and a domain of subjects who give meaning to the former. The central problem arising from this division is: how to represent the "world" to oneself so that it would be possible to behave according to the given order of things? The problem is that of recognition: how to recognize objects for what they are and oneself as a subject who could handle, and act upon, them. The purpose of representation is recognition or, in other words, classifying and fixing in place. Deleuze (1994[1968]) calls this frame the 'image of thought'.

This image does not really help semiotics, because it frames signs and language in which people think as secondary to the object domain that is reflected in them. Sign systems are "laid over" reality, but do not form a part of it, so that "reality" is always something outside signification. Consequently, it is necessary to invent a "semiotic reality" with its own "objectivity" apart from the things out there, as has been done by, for example, John Deely (2009). Or again, it is necessary to

¹ Department of Semiotics, Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, University of Tartu, Estonia; e-mail: ott.puumeister@ut.ee.

proliferate realities that function based on meaning and signification: social reality, cultural reality, textual reality, subjective reality, phenomenal reality, etc. Yet none of these “realities” are *real*, they are mere copies, reflections, more or less adequate reproductions.² This is why they are constantly being evaluated according to their (non-)correspondence to what lies outside their limits, the so-called “physical reality”: how do signs relate to the “real world”? When semiotics fashions itself according to this image, it is still decidedly Platonic, possessed by the idea of a pure physical reality in which it can participate only by separation, only by betrayal.

Deleuze and Guattari refuse to apply this separation. And thus, for them, it does not make sense to ask which (pre-existent) object(s) a sign represents, because representation has not yet taken place. Yet in this case, do signs even exist? In which form? Viewed from the semiotic perspective, staying on this side of representation plunges us into a strange world where signs have neither objects nor signifieds, nor are they operated by subjects. We must now speak of non-representational and a-signifying signs, which might sound strange, but is far from mystical or ungraspable. Rather, these signs are *pragmatic* and thus very much of this world. For instance, in Chapter 4 of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987[1980]) outline a pragmatic theory of language that understands it not as representation but as *intervention* (see also Caló 2021). Language is not a network laid over the world, but one of the many expressive processes constantly at work in it. For them, the “elementary unit of language – the statement – is the order-word”; with this concept, they highlight that “language is the transmission of the word as order-word, not the communication of a sign as information” (Deleuze, Guattari 1987[1980]: 76, 77). Thus, the primary function of language has changed. It is no longer used to speak about something else lying mute outside language (objects, signifieds), but to create effects, to transform the situations in which it is used. Every statement has a double function: to say something and simultaneously to reproduce how this something must be said and understood – to order both in the sense of commanding and organizing.

Deleuze and Guattari thus move J. L. Austin’s (1967) performative speech acts to the very core of language as a system. All language is performative in the sense that it transforms both the senders and receivers of ‘order-words’ into subjects tasked with reproducing both the correct rules of language and the organization of

² A telling recent example is provided by the overall theme of the 16th World Congress of Semiotics that took place in Warsaw in 2024: “Signs and realities”. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2015: 40) reminds us, the conjunction ‘and’ allows for relations of any type, except one: identity. By naming the congress “Signs *and* realities”, the organizers continued bifurcating the situation into words and things, cultures and nature, etc.

the state of affairs. By doing this, Deleuze and Guattari no longer understand pragmatics as something external to the linguistic system, as the use and realization of language in speech. When the system's elementary unit becomes the order-word, language becomes wholly pragmatic – a political affair concerned with the order of society, neighbourhood, culture, nature, etc. An important aspect to note is that by turning the linguistic system into a pragmatic one, Deleuze and Guattari do not say that language captures its outside (the world, society, etc.) within itself so that everything becomes language. Quite the contrary: we can, through language, attempt to order and organize as much as we want, but other expressive systems, or rather, other types of articulation between expression and content, constantly resist and foil those attempts. And, to make things even more difficult for language (the human sign system *par excellence*), Deleuze and Guattari (1987[1980]) understand Earth itself as being in a permanent process of articulation: even geological stratification is operated by the “double pincers” of content and expression, not to mention stratification in ecological systems. Thus, human language cannot claim any kind of transcendence for itself in relation to the “world” or “reality”, all it can do is have immanent effects.

Non-signifying or a-signifying semiotics is aimed at understanding and analysing these effects. Non-representational signs are not deprived of meaning and sense, nothing has been taken away from them. They assume meaning through different means. These signs are produced in encounters that force one not to interpret in order to recognize and identify, but to take the sign and experiment with it; to start a process of co-differentiation with the sign. Signs are not tools for “saming”, but for “othering”. Or, more precisely, encountering signs which we do not immediately understand – and these are the true signs – puts us on a path on which we ourselves enter into a becoming, a transformation. We do not interpret to make the sign-emitting other into a representation of ourselves, but experiment so that we can transform together, create something new: a new text, a new situation, a new relation. Deleuze and Guattari's semiotics is the study of these becomings. In their terms, it would be a ‘minor science’ as opposed to a ‘major science’ (Deleuze, Guattari 1987[1980]). The latter strives to capture the outside to its interiority, by constituting, for example, a semiotic reality; and attempts to constantly expand its borders (by “lowering” the semiotic threshold and admitting entrance also to wasps and orchids, and by asking how they use representation: whether it is iconic or indexical). Semiotics as a ‘minor science’ would, on the contrary, follow the encounter of wasps and orchids and ask how they transform, how they constitute and maintain their difference together, because, taken separately, it is not possible to say what they are capable of. Capacities are defined only in encounters, interactions. So, minor semiotics would concentrate on the reality of

differentiation in the encounter, or the reality of becoming – and this is, ultimately, the only reality we have: being is becoming. Major and minor sciences thus have entirely different procedures:

[...] one consists in “reproducing”, the other in “following”. The first involves reproduction, iteration and reiteration; the other, involving itineration, is the sum of the itinerant, ambulant sciences. Itineration is too readily reduced to a modality of technology, or of the application and verification of science. But this is not the case: *following is not at all the same thing as reproducing*, and one never follows in order to reproduce. (Deleuze, Guattari 1987[1980]: 372)

Instead of creating a hierarchical interiority (e.g. a “semiotic reality” as the territory ruled over by semiotic theory), the procedure of minor sciences is *following*, and when one follows, it is impossible to remain the same: one is taken up in the pursuit and may have to leave behind all the conceptual baggage that has been trained into one. Following always takes place outside – inside exteriority. Here, it is necessary to invent concepts on the move, while attempting to map the situation and asking what is happening.

Let us see what becomes of semiotics when it encounters Deleuze and Guattari. Will it try to capture and represent them as a major state science would, or will it follow them and find that it might be necessary to proceed on a path of becoming-minor? The authors contributing to this special issue follow Deleuze’s (2004[1972]: 192) dictum that “[n]o book *against* anything ever has any importance; all that counts are books *for* something, and that know how to produce it.” The contributors thus follow asignifying and non-representational semioses to outline potential paths for the becoming of semiotics.

To start with, Roger Dawkins proposes some reference points for outlining Deleuze’s radical structuralism and constructing a model to apply on the world and bodies. Deleuzian structure is not without its tricks, however, and this is why the model will be mediated by the figure of the joker. The application of Dawkins’s model is never straightforward, but follows immanent differences or external relations. Next, Kamini Vellodi uses the concept of ‘asignifying signs’ to push understandings of aniconic art towards a process of decolonization suitable for our planetary times. Sven Vabar takes the concept ‘any-spaces-whatever’ to find and explore the thickets in Valdur Mikita’s literary realities where objects are fluid and spaces are liquid. Emerging from this literary wilderness, we find ourselves in the middle of three articles grappling with semiosis in music. Firstly, Iain Campbell starts out from the degradation of the object in the semiotic analysis of music in order to outline a diagrammatic musical semiotics. Secondly,

Martin Švantner and Vojtěch Volák explore intentionality and repetition between Peircean and Deleuzian approaches to musical signs. And thirdly, Karl Joosep Pihel proposes a trajectory towards a minor musical semiotics with the help of the concepts 'refrain' and 'musical topic'. Having paid close attention to sonorous signs, we next move on to Simon Levesque who suggests that the incessant motion of semiosis needs to be virtually suspended, so that the details of sign formation and operation could be analysed. This suspension that he calls 'stasiosemiotics' has consequences for the consciousness of habit and implications for radical politics. Fabien Richert outlines a comparison between Deleuze and Guattari on the one hand, and Theodor Adorno on the other hand, focusing on their semiotics of the non-identical. The special issue closes with Martin Charvát's investigation into a concept that, for Deleuze, necessitates thought and triggers semiosis, namely that of shock.

Thus it appears that our contributors are all, in one way or another, concerned with the ways of conceptualizing the action of signs beyond, or rather before, representation and signification. They are engaged in following these asignifying signs and in mapping a non-representational territory for semiotics.

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