

The world, the body and the sign: Group μ at the sources of meaning

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Review of *Principia Semiotica: Aux sources du sens* by Group μ . Brussels: Les impressions nouvelles, 2015, 581 pp.

Principia Semiotica: Aux sources du sens [*Principia Semiotica: At the sources of meaning*], published in 2015, is the sixth and probably penultimate book written by the Belgian Group μ . This imposing French-language volume of almost six hundred pages that has never been translated consists of eight chapters plus an introduction and an epilogue.

The stated goal of this book is to study in detail the process of meaning-making where it is still poorly studied: the very moment when an exterior stimulus is caught and “loaded” with meaning by a living organism. To do so, the book walks hand-in-hand with other disciplines such as neurobiology, biochemistry, ethology, but also physics and psychology. The book also aims to be a summary of the current state of semiotics regarding the question of meaning-making, the ways in which different schools or currents are treating – or avoiding – this question, and the importance of this concept in the more global relationship semiotics can have today with other academic fields.

The authors are introduced as Group μ , even if today the group has been reduced to only two members: Francis Édeline and Jean-Marie Klinkenberg. Both have belonged to the group since its very beginning and are known for their work in visual semiotics and general semiotics. Group μ is known to be very critical and groundbreaking in its approach. Thus it comes as no surprise that this book is also a critique of current academic positions in semiotics, as well as a proposal for a new theoretical frame of the process of meaning-making.

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A mind-twisting and merciless new theoretical approach

An important part of the book is dedicated to the description of different semiotic theories regarding meaning-making, and how all of these are, in the opinion of the authors, incomplete or inaccurate. The authors and theories discussed are mostly francophone ones (Saussure, Greimas, Fontanille...), the main exception being Peirce. Shortcomings and incongruences in the theories and models by all of them are mercilessly exposed (only Eco seems to escape too harsh criticism), and nobody can accuse the group of theoretical favouritism.

In a mind-twisting approach, the authors explain that all previous theories have started to study the sign from the moment when it has already been loaded with sense by the interpretant. They argue that it is essential to start earlier, at the moment when a sign is still an empty stimulus caught by a living body, and learn how, by the complex mechanism of perceptive cells, neural transmitters and cognitive abilities, the sign is transformed into meaning inside an individual. This (very naturalistic) approach is directly linked to a concept developed below, called ‘*anasémiosis*’ (*anasémiose*).

The book also prescribes that a complete semiotic theory must be applicable to visual, musical or kinesthetic productions, not only textual and oral ones. This opinion is entwined with a merciless critique of what the authors call ‘the textualist approach’, principally linked to the Paris School. If this position is so strong, it is so because they explain on multiple occasions how strongly they believe in a semiotic that could be, and should be, a “link discipline”, an interface between life sciences and the humanities. For them, the textualist approach and the disregard for the naturalistic approach are obstacles in the way of this agenda.

Agenda, interests and issues

The book does have an agenda and is very transparent about it: making semiotics a bridge discipline between the humanities and life sciences. For the authors, only semiotics has the tools, the concepts and the models to be the “translator” between these two areas. As I personally strongly agree with this objective, I also think that this position explains quite a few of the elements pointed out above. Many authors, currents or schools are criticized as they are in the book because they fail to propose consistent models or tools meeting this agenda. Consequently, it appears that some of this criticism should not be taken to heart, because it is mainly a consequence of this agenda, and not necessarily criticism of the relevance of these authors, currents or schools *per se*.

That being said, the main interest of the book lies in introducing a complete and consistent model of meaning-making so that semiotics could be this bridge between fields that the authors wish it should become. The book is original indeed in the sense that it does not concern purely semiotics, but introduces, and strongly links together, semiotic concepts with neurobiological facts, biological events or even biochemical mechanisms. The whole is consistent and appears to be really innovative, especially in the French-speaking world. What is likely to evoke the strongest interest among semioticians is probably the way in which this new model is in its entirety articulated around two major concepts – anasemiosis and catasemiosis.

Yet the book also has its flaws caused by its strengths. Firstly, as ground-breaking as it may be in francophone countries, it appears to be disconnected from the rest of worldwide academia. There are very few references to works in English, and very few authors mentioned – with the notable exception of Peirce – who are not francophones. Also, the book's mention of biosemiotics is anecdotal – and the case is even worse with zoosemiotics. This is probably the strongest criticism that can be directed at this work that otherwise displays an explicit intention of linking biology and the humanities: more references to other fields in semiotics that have already tried to address the biological aspect of meaning-making should have been employed. This issue is quite common in French academia, where many scholars are writing and reading mainly, if not exclusively, in French, creating a *de facto* “references bubble”.

The book also suffers from less problematic issues that still manage to contribute to making it difficult to understand. The first one among these concerns the footnotes. The book is full of massive footnotes, which sometimes take up more space on the page than the actual text, and thus prove a nuisance as they obstruct the fluency of reading. The second one has to do with specialist statements. The book also contains many references to works from a wide variety of academic fields. As no one can be a specialist in all of them, it can sometimes be difficult to follow the logic of a proposition, as some premises – in chemistry or neurobiology for example – are not explained explicitly. The third one, directly linked with the second one, is about the non-specialist statements. As said above, it is impossible to be a specialist in all the fields mentioned in the book, and this is not possible for the authors either. Sometimes, a specialist in one of these fields may come across a claim regarding their own speciality and will find it fragile, incomplete or obsolete. In my field of speciality (zoosemiotics), for example, some statements about the chimpanzee Washoe are misleading, but they are not accompanied by references, so it is difficult to tell if the authors have misunderstood something in a paper, or if they have used material that is already misleading as to this aspect. The last problem is the absence of an index of names (of persons, animals or species), which would have been helpful in navigating through a book of this size.

Two main innovative concepts: anasemiosis and catasemiosis

It is not possible to understand the originality of this book without taking a close look at the two main concepts it introduces: *anasemiosis* and *catasemiosis* (in an analogy with the biological concepts of anabolism and catabolism).

Anasemiosis is described as a “*potentialisation du travail*” (potentiation of work). That means that anasemiosis is the process by which an organism, after perceiving signs – which are described as containers without content – loads them with sense, mainly by categorization, or “discretization of the world”. Anasemiosis occurs where, in the continuum of the world, our biological sensors are able to detect different discrete units. These units are the signs, but for the authors, they are empty of any meaning and acquire one only through anasemiosis. This process is the main object of more than a hundred-pages-long discussion in Chapter 2, which actually remains difficult to grasp.

Catasemiosis is the opposite of anasemiosis, being described as the “*effectuation de ce travail*” [the performance of (the previously named) work]. That means that catasemiosis is the process by which an organism injects new signs into the world, loaded with meaning, but with no certainty that this meaning can be grasped by anyone else than the organism itself. There is no catasemiosis without anasemiosis, but there would be no use for anasemiosis if catasemiosis did not exist. One can be seen as the movement of meaning-making from empty signs, and the other as the production of signs from the meaning we made.

Unfortunately, there is no way to explain these concepts briefly and satisfactorily, described as they are along hundreds of pages, without resorting to making significant omissions, so the international community should probably have to wait for a proper translation to be able to understand them. This is a fragile hope, however, since no book by Group μ has been translated into English since 1981 (Groupe μ 1970; 1981).

Who is the target audience?

Unfortunately, due to the unavailability of any translation, the target audience of this book will remain francophone only. This is a shame given how much the authors advocate for interdisciplinarity, bridges between fields and better academic communication throughout the volume.

For those who can read it, this book should become an important event, especially as concerns students and young scholars, who will be able to organize

their own work and methodology differently, but also heads of departments who would like to propose the most up-to-date curricula to their students. As in many countries, especially francophone ones, semiotics is still mainly text-oriented, this book will without doubt prove a pioneering work. One can only hope that its influence will allow the emergence of more interdisciplinary works and curricula in these areas. It is possible that biosemioticians may be less deeply impressed than others by the book's content which is consistent with much of their work, methods and interests in the last few years. Still, besides semioticians, this book is a wonderful introduction to semiotics for any specialist in the field of life sciences, chemistry or even physics, who would like to work with semioticians and use semiotic tools.

References

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