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Cobley, Paul (ed.): *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*. London: Routledge, 2010, ISBN 0-415-44073-4, 424 pp.

In his introduction to *The Routledge Companion of Semiotics* its editor, Paul Cobley, anticipates the concerns of the book's second and third chapters, on the role of semiotics in nature, as opposed to the hitherto more Saussurean inspired focus on language and discourse, by observing that: "What contemporary semiotics demonstrates, bluntly, is that interventions for change at the level of discourse alone are the equivalent of a gnat biting an elephant" (10).

While not exactly an elephant, as an inhabitant of southern Moravia, I have learnt to develop a healthy respect, for gnats, ticks (an iconic life-form for biosemioticians), and other apparently insignificant forms of life. One wonders if bluntness is the appropriate mode of expression for an area of research which would appear, from some of the views expressed in this volume, to consider itself cutting-edge. Thomas Sebeok, Charles Sanders Peirce and Jakob von Uexkull emerge as the major influential figures in the updated version of semiotics provided in this companion. The book is dedicated to Sebeok's memory, with a prefatory quotation provided by him: "FACTS DO NOT CONVINCE ME, THEORIES DO" and he is further, indirectly quoted by Cobley in his introduction: "When speaking to the media or lay persons he stated simply that semiotics is the study of the difference between illusion and reality. As with so many things he was right" (3).

The introduction to the book, like the book in general, provides a reasonably competent overview of the history of semiotics and recent developments in the field, with the various terms of its technical jargon succinctly glossed and helpfully contextualized. In the first chapter Giovanni Manetti provides us with a compact survey of its apparent origins in classical Greek philosophy, after a brief discussion of the use of signs in Mesopotamian divinatory tablets, and takes the reader as far as another thinker very much concerned with the difference between illusion and reality, St Augustine. What happened to the study of signs between the time of Augustine and the twentieth century we are more less left to guess. No explanation seems to be provided, in this or ensuing chapters as to why the history of Renaissance thinking, or, for that matter, the Baroque, the Enlightenment, and beyond, apparently has no relevance to twentieth and twenty-first century semiotics.

Twentieth century developments begin with two chapters which both take the work of von Uexkull as their primary starting point. Jesper Hoffmeyer, a molecular biologist, introduces us to the semiotics of nature, or biosemiosis, whose concern is with signs of life apparently motivated by a Darwinian "striving" (or, in 'layman's' terms, perhaps a Spinozian *conatus*). Hoffmeyer's chapter takes us through developments in molecular biology and its problems in both identifying and naming the processes which made it one of the most significant aspects of scientific discovery in the twentieth century as well as covering the apparent nature of what is termed "semethic interaction" between different life forms (37). The chapter ends with a brief reference to the work of Gregory Bateson, which is in a sense taken further in the succeeding chapter by Kalevi Kull.

Kull looks more closely at the development of von Uexkull's notion of the *Umwelt*, the surrounding and implicating environment in which the *Innenwelt* of any organism is involved. As Kull points out, Sebeok had already observed that the closest equivalent in English to *Umwelt*, in his view, was "model" and this aspect of the term has been taken up by the Tartu-Moscow school in its approach to semiotics. The term also indicates a close relation with systems theory and the work of thinkers such as Bateson. Kull develops his own, and his school's, reading of subsequent developments in semiotics in relation to Uexkull's founding notions, and though he has little to say about thinkers such as René Thom, focusing more on figures, such as Lotman, from his own school, he does indicate an awareness of how Bergsonian philosophers like Gilles Deleuze developed the

basic notion of an organism or cell grasping the significance of an element in their *Umwelt* to the human level of such grasping, to the extent that: "What we will see with the appearance of language is the 'creation' of time" (53).

From the biological we move to the psychological, in a chapter on 'Logic and Cognition' by Peer Bundgaard and Frederik Sternfelt. In their discussion of morphodynamic semiotics they move directly to Thom's conceptualization of schemas, which, as with Bergson, ties the creation of "meaning" more directly to perception. As with Pierce, they develop this basic notion in relation to Peircean semiotics but via consideration of ways in which developments in cognitive linguistics can provide tools for a more precise consideration of the manner in which humans process information in their environment. In the chapter which follows, John Deely, like Paul Cobley in his introduction to the book, invokes Sebeok's emphasis on distinguishing between reality and illusion. There is a little too much initial emphasis here, both by Sebeok and Deely, on semiosis as *the* path to understanding what is real and what is illusion. Anyone who insists on any way being *the* only way is already embarked, it might be argued (see Adorno) upon *a* path of delusion. Again using Pierce, Deely traces a course which involves questioning some of the traditional distinctions made between epistemology and ontology in the name of the recovery of aspects of Scholastic thinking which might vindicate developing forms of contemporary semiotic realism in terms of their ability to decisively encompass not only "…such 'hardcore realities' as the movement of the earth around the sun […] but also to construct such social realities as the border between Texas and Oklahoma […]" (87).

Nathan Houser's chapter looks at Pierce's development of his semiotics in relation to the distinction he made between phenomenology, normative science and metaphysics, attempting to illustrate how Pierce is coming to be accepted, as: "…the second great phenomenologist of the early twentieth century"– Husserl, of course, being the first. Peirce's notions of firstness, secondness and thirdness, and the related interplay between his phenomenology, his semiotics and his pragmatism as well as his focus on the significance of text are all brought into play in Houser's discussion. From here we move to Anne Hénault's discussion of 'The Saussurean Heritage' from which many of the authors in the book appear resolved to liberate their interdisciplinary discipline. Hénault insists on a sharp distinction between the approach of Saussure's contemporary, Peirce. Peirce's "philosophical" approach demands that the notions he posits: "…receive an 'ontological' definition; they exist and they are. In contrast Saussure's problematics display a total rational schematism with no ontology, a formal thinking that is neither nominal nor realist" (104). This break, which includes the insistence that universal negativity is the founding operation of language, is seen as radical and positive, but is it really such a decisive break as she seems to think? Spinoza was already in trouble in the seventeenth century for apparently proposing this approach to the movement of thought and being, and the earlier, less sentimental Bergson, as well as Deleuze, or Andrew Bowie in his recent book on the philosophical significance of music, have already articulated more finely-tuned approaches to that which cannot be captured in verbal expression or forms of determinate reason as well as, in the case of Bowie, noting the potentially problematic implications for the maintenance of coherent forms of human subjectivity and communication.

The final essays in the book focus on the sphere of the sociosemiotic. These are, frankly, rather disappointing and superficial. They do a reasonable job of relating obvious trends in the relevant areas of thinking to sociological concerns, cultural anthropology, discourse analysis, pragmatics, and the like, but do not even attempt to seriously include approaches to characterizing the nature and implications of that vast new *Umwelt* that Manuel Castells has termed 'The Information Age', (whose driving semiotic force is provided by what is usually termed 'the Internet'), in his wide-ranging and thoughtfully speculative trilogy published some ten years ago, one which includes numerous references to the relevant sociological investigation and analysis conducted in relation to the developments he explores. The perspectives offered in the sociological chapters of this book amount to little more than a very superficial guide to thinkers such as Bakhtin, Barthes, or Baudrillard, who are important in their own right but often reduced, as here, to familiar fashion figures in the world of the worst kind of cultural studies, and provide a good indication of the relative paucity of imagination and serious thinking in much sociology of the current era (like Castells, Habermas

doesn't even get a mention). Perhaps this can be attributed to the influence of "the media" to which so many present day sociologists pay such unlimited, insufficiently critical attention, though even some of these twitterers have managed to notice that developments in information technology over the last thirty years or so have had a radical and ambiguous impact on the way we live and communicate – or imagine that we communicate, to return to Sebeok's claim regarding the distinction between illusion and reality.

The second part of the book provides a very helpful glossary of terms and significant figures. It is not, of course, complete but then nothing ever is. An obvious omission from my, very limited, perspective, as already intimated, is an entry for Gilles Deleuze whose work covers almost all of the areas dealt with in this book as well as others that it doesn't. From his *Proust and Signs,* through *The Logic of Sense*, to his collaboration with Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, which is at least positively acknowledged by Kull, Deleuze has provided a substantial contribution to the analysis of text and world from perspectives within, or closely related to the programme intimated in the present volume. The title of the first of the books by Deleuze I have mentioned indicates another area to which the guide provided here pays no serious attention – literature, or for that matter, the arts in general. Back in 1971, the British scholar poet J. H. Prynne was already skillfully analyzing and dramatizing the complex dialogue between developments in molecular biology and the history of language, with all that the latter entails, (including the thinking of the Renaissance) in a volume of poems called *Brass* and has continued to tread an ever more demanding path in the forty years that have passed since then, including a serious engagement with the implications of digital technology.

The present book does an extremely competent job of providing a beginner to the subject with some of the relevant background knowledge and arguments but needs to be wary of pressing overly enthusiastic elements of positivism into its determination to be a "science". Semiotics is surely the study of signs, in nature, in science and in the arts. The *Routledge Companion to Semiotics* covers some of this ground very ably, some of it less ably, and quite a lot of it not at all. It is a useful, enthusiastic and often enlightening piece of work but its understanding of relations between the arts, science and the natural world is, in some respects, inadequate. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in contemporary semiotics. While an upbeat introduction to one's subject is admirable, the authors perhaps need to be a little more wary of the negative aspects of Sebeok's equally admirable commitment to attempting to distinguish between illusion and reality. This might include an awareness that no "science" is capable of providing all of the possible questions, let alone the answers, involved in making that endlessly perilous distinction.

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