from *A Theory of Semiotics*

UMBERTO ECO

A well-known academic semiotician in the 1970s, Umberto Eco, later achieved a degree of popular fame with his novel *In the Name of the Rose,*, a remarkable commercial exploitation of esoteric critical theories. Here, he outlines his basic approach to semiotics. His interest in forms of human communication is broad: this selection includes an annotated list of the possible subjects of semiotic study. Eco's writing is only indirectly applicable to film, but his influence on other semioticians writing about film has been great. See Metz, Bazin, Kracauer, and Wollen.

Introduction: Towards a Logic of Culture

0.1. Design for a semiotic theory

0.1.1. Aims of the research

The aim of this book is to explore the theoretical possibility and the social function of a unified approach to every phenomenon of signification and/or communication. Such an approach should take the form of a *general semiotic theory,* able to explain every case of sign-function in terms of underlying systems of elements mutually correlated by one or more codes.

A design for a general semiotics[1] should consider: (a) a *theory of codes* and (b) a *theory of sign production*—the latter taking into account a large range of phenomena such as the common use of languages, the evolution of codes, aesthetic communication, different types of interactional communicative behavior, the use of signs in order to mention things or states of the world and so on.

Since this book represents only a preliminary exploration of such a theoretical possibility, its first chapters are necessarily conditioned by the present state of the art, and cannot evade some questions that—in a further perspective—will definitely be left aside. In particular one must first take into account the all-purpose notion of 'sign' and the problem of a typology of signs (along with the apparently irreducible forms of semiotic enquiry they presuppose) in order to arrive at a more rigorous definition of sign-function and at a typology of modes of sign-production.

Therefore a first chapter will be devoted to the analysis of the notion of 'sign' in order to distinguish signs from non-signs and to translate the notion of 'sign' into the more flexible one of *sign-function* (which can be explained within the framework of a theory of codes). This discussion will allow me to posit a distinction between 'signification' and 'communication': in principle, a semiotics of signification entails a theory of codes, while a semiotics of communication entails a theory of sign production.

The distinction between a theory of codes and a theory of sign production does not correspond to the ones between *'langue'* and *'parole',* competence and performance, syntactics (and semantics) and pragmatics. One of the claims of the present book is to overcome these distinctions and to outline a theory of codes which takes into account even rules of discoursive competence, text formation, contextual and circumstantial (or situational) disambiguation, therefore proposing a semantics which solves within its own framework many problems of the so-called pragmatics.

It is not by chance that the discriminating categories are the ones of signification and communication. As will be seen in chapters 1 and 2, there is a signification system (and therefore a code) when there is the socially conventionalized possibility of generating sign-

functions, whether the functives of such functions are discrete units called signs or vast portions of discourse, provided that the correlation has been previously posited by a social convention. There is on the contrary a communication process when the possibilities provided by a signification system are exploited in order to physically produce expressions for many practical purposes. Thus the difference between the two theoretical approaches outlined in chapters 2 and 3 concerns the difference between rules and processes (or, in Aristotelian terms, metaphorically used, power and act). But when the requirements for performing a process are socially recognized and precede the process itself, then these requirements are to be listed among the rules (they become rules of discoursive competence, or rules of *'parole'* foreseen by the *'langue'*) and can be taken into account by a theory of physical production of signs only insofar as they have been already coded. Even if the theory of codes and the theory of sign production succeed in eliminating the naive and non-relational notion of 'sign', this notion appears to be so suitable in ordinary language and in colloquial semiotic discussions that it should not be completely abandoned. It would be uselessly oversophisticated to get rid of it. An atomic scientist knows very well that so-called 'things' are the results of a complex interplay of microphysical correlations, and nevertheless he can quite happily continue to speak about 'things' when it is convenient to do so. In the same way I shall continue to use the word /sign/ every time the correlational nature of the sign-function may be presupposed. Nevertheless the fourth chapter of the book will be devoted to a discussion of the very notion of the 'typology of signs': starting from Peirce's trichotomy (symbols, indices and icons), I shall show to what degree these categories cover both a more segmentable field of sign-functions and an articulated range

of 'sign producing' operations, giving rise to a more comprehensive *n*-chotomy of various modes of sign production.

A general semiotic theory will be considered powerful according to its capacity for offering an appropriate formal definition for every sort of sign-function, whether it has already been described and coded or not. So the typology of modes of sign-production aims at proposing categories able to describe even those as yet uncoded sign-functions conventionally posited in the very moment in which they appear for the first time.

0.1.2. Boundaries of the research

Dealing as it does with all these subjects, a project for a general semiotics will encounter some boundaries or thresholds. Some of these must be posited by a purely transitory agreement, others are determined by the very object of the discipline. The former will be called 'political boundaries', the latter 'natural boundaries'; (it will be shown in 0.9 that there also exists a third form of threshold, of an epistemological nature).

A general introduction to semiotics has either to recognize or to posit, to respect or to trespass on all these thresholds. The *political boundaries* are of three types:

(i) There are 'academic' limits in the sense that many disciplines other than semiotics have already undertaken or are at present undertaking research on subjects that a semiotician cannot but recognize as his own concern; for instance formal logic, philosophical semantics and the logic of natural languages deal with the problem of the truth value of a sentence and with the various sorts of so-called 'speech acts', while many currents in cultural anthropology (for instance 'ethnomethodology') are concerned with the same problems seen from a different angle; the semiotician may express

the wish that one of these days there will be a general semiotic discipline of which all these researches and sciences can be recognized as particular branches; in the meantime a tentative semiotic approach may try to incorporate the results of these disciplines and to redefine them within its own theoretical framework.

(ii) There are 'co-operative' limits in the sense that various disciplines have elaborated theories or descriptions that everybody recognizes as having semiotic relevance (for instance both linguistics and information theory have done important work on the notion of code; kinesics and proxemics are richly exploring non-verbal modes of communication, and so on): in this case a general semiotic approach should only propose a unified set of categories in order to make this collaboration more and more fruitful; at the same time it can eliminate the naive habit of translating (by dangerous metaphorical substitutions) the categories of linguistics into different frameworks.

(iii) There are 'empirical' limits beyond which stand a whole group of phenomena which unquestionably have a semiotic relevance even though the various semiotic approaches have not yet completely succeeded in giving them a satisfactory theoretical definition: such as paintings and many types of complex architectural and urban objects; these empirical boundaries are rather imprecise and are shifting step by step as new researches come into being (for instance the problem of a semiotics of architecture from 1964 to 1974, see Eco 1973 e).

By natural boundaries I *mean prin*cipally those beyond which a semiotic approach cannot go; for there is non-semiotic territory since there are phenomena that cannot be taken as sign-functions. But by the same term I also mean a vast range of phenomena prematurely assumed not to have a semiotic relevance. These are the

cultural territories in which people do not recognize the underlying existence of codes or, if they do, do not recognize the semiotic nature of those codes, i.e., their ability to generate a continuous production of signs. Since I shall be proposing a very broad and comprehensive definition of sign-function—therefore challenging the above refusals—this book is also concerned with such phenomena. These will be directly dealt with in this Introduction: they happen to be co-extensive with the whole range of cultural phenomena, however pretentious that approach may at first seem.

0.1.3. A theory of the lie

This project for semiotics, to study the whole of culture, and thus to view an immense range of objects and events as signs, may give the impression of an arrogant 'imperialism' on the part of semioticians. When a discipline defines 'everything' as its proper object, and therefore declares itself as concerned with the entire universe (and nothing else) it's playing a risky game. The common objection to the 'imperialist' semiotician is: well, if you define a peanut as a sign, obviously semiotics is then concerned with peanut butter as well—but isn't this procedure a little unfair? What I shall try to demonstrate in this book, basing myself on a highly reliable philosophical and semiotical tradition, is that—semiotically speaking—there is not a substantial difference between peanuts and peanut butter, on the one hand, and the words /peanuts/ and /peanut butter/ on the other. Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be *taken* as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands in for it. Thus *semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be*

used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all. I think that the definition of a 'theory of the lie' should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for a general semiotics.

0.2. 'Semiotics': field or discipline?

Any study of the limits and laws of semiotics must begin by determining whether (a) one means by the term 'semiotics' a *specific discipline* with its own method and a precise object; or whether (b) semiotics is a *field of studies* and thus a repertoire of interests that is not as yet completely unified. If semiotics is a field then the various semiotic studies would be justified by their very existence: it should be possible to define semiotics inductively by extrapolating from the field of studies a series of constant tendencies and therefore a unified model. If semiotics is a discipline, then the researcher ought to propose a semiotic model deductively which would serve as a parameter on which to base the inclusion or exclusion of the various studies from the field of semiotics.

One cannot do theoretical research without having the courage to put forward a theory, and, therefore, an elementary model as a guide for subsequent discourse; all theoretical research must however have the courage to specify its own contradictions, and should make them obvious where they are not apparent.

As a result, we must, above all, keep in mind the *semiotic field* as it appears today, in all its many and varied forms and in all its disorder. We must then propose an apparently simplified *research model.* Finally we must constantly contradict this model, isolating all the phenomena which do not fit in with it and which force it to restructure itself and to broaden its range. In this way we shall per-

haps succeed in tracing (however provisionally) the limits of future semiotic research and of suggesting a unified method of approach to phenomena which apparently are very different from each other, and as yet irreducible.

0.3. Communication and/or signification

At first glance this survey will appear as a list of *communicative* behaviors, thus suggesting *one* of the hypotheses governing my research: semiotics studies all cultural processes as *processes of communication.* Therefore each of these processes would seem to be permitted by an underlying *system of significations.* It is very important to make this distinction clear in order to avoid either dangerous misunderstandings or a sort of compulsory choice imposed by some contemporary semioticians: it is absolutely true that there are some important differences between a semiotics of communication and a semiotics of signification; this distinction does not, however, set two mutually exclusive approaches in opposition.

So let us define a communicative process as the passage of a signal (not necessarily a sign) from a source (through a transmitter, along a channel) to a destination. In a machine-to-machine process the signal has no power to signify in so far as it may determine the destination *sub specie stimuli.* In this case we have no signification, but we do have the passage of some information.

When the destination is a human being, or 'addressee' (it is not necessary that the source or the transmitter be human, provided that they emit the signal following a system of rules known by the human addressee), we are on the contrary witnessing a process of signification—provided that the signal is not merely a stimulus but arouses an interpretive response in the addressee. This process is made possible by the existence of a code.

A code is a system of signification, insofar as it couples present entities with absent units. When—on the basis of an underlying rule—something actually presented to the perception of the addressee *stands for* something else, there is *signification.* In this sense the addressee's actual perception and interpretive behavior are not necessary for the definition of a significant relationship as such: it is enough that the code should foresee an established correspondence between that which *'stands for'* and its correlate, valid for every possible addressee even if no addressee exists or ever will exist.

A signification system is an autonomous semiotic construct that has an abstract mode of existence independent of any possible communicative act it makes possible. On the contrary (except for stimulation processes) *every act of communication to or between human beings*—or any other intelligent biological or mechanical apparatus—*presupposes a signification system as its necessary condition.*

It is possible, if not perhaps particularly desirable, to establish a semiotics of signification independently of a semiotics of communication: but it is impossible to establish a semiotics of communication without a semiotics of signification.

Once we admit that the two approaches must follow different methodological paths and require different sets of categories, it is methodologically necessary to recognize that, in cultural processes, they are strictly intertwined. This is the reason why the following directory of problems and research techniques mixes together both aspects of the semiotic phenomenon.

0.4. Political boundaries: the field

Granted this much, the following areas of contemporary research—starting from the apparently more 'natural' and 'spontaneous' communicative processes and going on to more complex 'cultural' systems—may be considered to belong to the semiotic field.

Zoosemiotics: it represents the lower limit of semiotics because it concerns itself with the communicative behavior of non-human (and therefore non-cultural) communities. But through the study of animal communication we can achieve a definition of what the biological components of human communication are: or else a recognition that even on the animal level there exist patterns of signification which can, to a certain degree, be defined as cultural and social. Therefore the semantic area of these terms is broadened and, consequently, also our notion of culture and society (Sebeok, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1973).

Olfactory signs: Romantic poetry (Baudelaire) has already singled out the existence of a 'code of scents'. If there are scents with a connotative value in an emotive sense, then there are also odors with precise referential values. These can be studied as indices (Peirce, 1931) as proxemic indicators (Hall, 1966) as chemical qualifiers, etc.

Tactile communication: studied by psychology, present and recognized in communication among the blind and in proxemic behavior (Hall, 1966), it is amplified to include clearly codified social behavior such as the kiss, the embrace, the smack, the slap on the shoulder, etc. (Frank, 1957; Efron, 1941).

Codes of taste: present in culinary practice, studied by cultural anthropology, they have found a clearly 'semiotic' systematization in Lévi-Strauss (1964).

Paralinguistics: studies the so-called suprasegmental features and the free variants which corroborate linguistic communication and which increasingly appear as institutionalized and systematized. See the studies of Fonagy (1964), Stankiewicz (1964), Mahl and Schulze (1964, with a bibliography of 274 titles). Trager (1964) subdivides all the sounds without linguistic structure into (a) "voice sets", connected with sex, age, state of health, etc.; (b) paralanguage, divided into (i) "voice qualities" (pitch range, vocal lip control, glottis control, articulatory control, etc.); (ii) "vocalizations", in turn divided into (ii-1) "vocal characterizers" (laughing, crying, whimpering, sobbing, whining, whispering, yawning, belching, etc.), (ii-2) "vocal qualifiers" (intensity, pitch height, extent), (ii-3) "vocal segregates" (noises of the tongue and lips which accompany interjections, nasalizations, breathing, interlocutory grunts, etc.). Another object of paralinguistics is the study of the language of drums and whistles (La Barre, 1964).

Medical semiotics: until a short time ago this was the only type of research which might be termed 'semiotics' or 'semiology' (so that even today there is still some misunderstanding). In any case it belongs to general semiotics (as treated in this book), and in two senses. As a study of the connection between certain signs or symptoms and the illness that they indicate, this is a study and a classification of indices in Peirce's sense (Ostwald, 1964). As a study of the way in which the patient verbalizes his own internal symptoms, this extends on its most complex level to psychoanalysis, which, apart from being a general theory of neuroses and a therapy, is a systematic codification of the meaning of certain symbols furnished by the patient (Morris, 1946; Lacan, 1966; Piro, 1967; Maccagnani 1967; Szasz, 1961; Barison, 1961).

Kinesics and proxemics: the idea that gesturing depends on cultural codes is now an acquired notion of cultural anthropology. As to pioneer studies in this field see De Jorio (1832), Mallery (1881), Kleinpaul (1888), Efron (1941), Mauss (1950); as to contemporary developments see Birdwhistell (1952, 1960, 1963, 1965, 1966, 1970), Guilhot (1962), LaBarre (1964), Hall (1959,1966), Greimas (1968), Ekman and Friesen (1969) Argyle (1972) and others. Ritualized gesture, from etiquette to liturgy and pantomime, is studied by Civ'ian (1962, 1965).

Musical codes: the whole of musical science since the Pythagoreans has been an attempt to describe the field of musical communication as a rigorously structured system. We note that until a few years ago contemporary musicology had scarcely been influenced by the current structuralist studies, which are concerned with methods and themes that it had absorbed centuries ago. Nevertheless in the last two or three years musical semiotics has been definitely established as a discipline aiming to find its 'pedigree' and developing new perspectives. Among the pioneer works let us quote the bibliography elaborated by J.J. Nattiez in *Musique en jeu,* 5, *197*1. As for the relationship between music and linguistics, and betwee*n* music *and cu*ltural anthropology, see Jakobson (1964, 1967), Ruwet (1959, 1973) and Lévi-Strauss (1965, in the preface to *The Raw and the Co*oked). Outlines of new trends are to be found in Nattiez (1971, 1972, 1973), Osmond-Smith (1972, 1973), Stefani (1973), Pousseur (1972) and others. As a matter of fact music presents, on the one hand, the problem of a semiotic system without a semantic level (or a content plane): on the other hand, however, there are musical 'signs' (or syntagms) with an explicit denotative value (trumpet signals in the army) and there are syntagms or entire 'texts' possessing pre-culturalized connota-

tive value ('pastoral' or 'thrilling' music, etc.). In some historical eras music was conceived as conveying precise emotional and conceptual meanings, established by codes, or, at least, 'repertoires' (see, for the Baroque era, Stefani, 1973, and Pagnini, 1974).

Formalized languages: from algebra to chemistry there can be no doubt that the study of these languages lies within the scope of semiotics. Of relevance to these researches are the studies of mathematical structures (Vailati, 1909; Barbut, 1966; Prieto, 1966; Gross and Lentin, 1967; Bertin, 1967), not to forget the ancient stu*dies of* árs combinatoria*' fr*om Raimundo Lullo to Leibniz (see Mall, 1968; Kristeva, 1968 as well as Rossi, 1960). Also included under this heading are the attempts to find a cosmic and interplanetary language (Freudentahl, 1960),[2] the structures of systems such as Morse code or Boole's algebra as well as the formalized languages for electronic computers (see *Linguaggi nella societá e nella tecnica,* 1970). Here there appears the problem of a "meta-semiology".[3]

Written languages, unknown alphabets, secret codes: whereas the study of ancient alphabets and secret codes has famous precedents in archeology and cryptography, the attention paid to writing, as distinct from the laws of language which writing transcribes, is relatively new (for a survey on classical bibliography see Gelb, 1952 and Trager, 1972). We call to mind either studies such as that of McLuhan (1962) on the *Weltanschauung* determined by printing techniques, and the anthropological revolution of the "Gutenberg Galaxy" or the "grammatology" of Derrida (1967b). Bridging the gap between classic semantics and cryptography are studies such as that of Greimas (1970) on *"écriture cruciverbiste"* and all the studies on the topic of riddles and puzzles (e.g. Krzyzanowski, 1960).

Natural languages: every bibliographical reference in this area should refer back to the general bibliography of linguistics, logic,

philosophy of language, cultural anthropology, psychology etc. We should only add that semiotic interests, though arising on the one hand from studies in logic and the philosophy of language (Locke, Peirce, and so on), on the other hand assume their most complete form in studies on *structural* linguistics (Saussure, Jakobson, Hjelmslev).

Visual communication: there is no need for bibliographical reference because this item is dealt with explicitly in this book (in ch. 3). But we must remember that studies of this kind cover an area extending from systems possessing the highest degree of formalization (Prieto, 1966), through graphic systems (Bertin, 1967), color systems (Itten, 1961), to the study of iconic signs (Peirce, 1931; Morris, 1946, etc.).

This last notion has been particularly questioned in the recent years by Eco (1968, 1971, 1973), Metz (1970, 1971), Veron (1971, 1973), Krampen (1973), Volli (1973) and others. The latest developments begin to recognize beneath the rather vague category of 'iconism' a more complex series of signs, thus moving beyond Peirce's tripartition of signs into *Symbols, Icons* and *Indices.* Finally at the highest levels we have the study of large iconographic units (Panofsky and Schapiro in general), visual phenomena in mass communication, from advertisements to comic strips, from paper money system to playing-cards and fortune-telling cards (Lekomceva, 1962; Egorov, 1965), rebuses, clothes (Barthes, 1967) until finally we come to the visual study of architecture (see Eco, 1973e), *ch*oreographical notation, geographic and topographic maps (Bertin, 1967), and film (Metz, 1970c, 1974; Bettetini, 1968, 1971, 1973; and others).

Systems of objects: objects as communicative devices come within the realm of semiotics, ranging from architecture to objects in gen-

eral (see Baudrillard, 1968, and the issue of "Communications" 13, 1969 *Les* Objets). *On* architecture see Eco, 1968; Koenig, 1970; Garroni, 1973; De Fusco, 1973.

Plot structure: ranging from the studies of Propp (1928) to more recent European contributions (Bremond, 1964, 1966, 1973; Greimas, 1966, 1970; Metz, 1968; Barthes, 1966; Todorov, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1970; Genette, 1966; V. Morin, 1966; Gritti, 1966, 1968). Worthy of emphasis are the studies of the Soviets (Sceglov, 1962; Zolkovskij, 1962, 1967; Karpinskaja-Revzin, 1966; as well as the classic Russian formalists). The study of plot has found its most important development in the study of primitive mythology (Lévi-Strauss, 1958a, 1958c, 1964; Greimas, 1966; Maranda, 1968) and of games and tales belonging to folklore (Dundes, 1964; Beaujour, 1968 Greimas-Rastier, 1968; Maranda, E.K. & P., 1962). But it also reaches to studies on mass communication, from comic strips (Eco, 1964) to the detective story (Sceglov, 1962 a) and the popular nineteenth-century romance (Eco, 1965, 1967).

Text theory: the exigencies of a 'transphrastic' linguistic and developments in plot analysis (as well as the poetic language analysis) have led semiotics to recognize the notion of *text* as a macrounit, ruled by particular generative rules, in which sometimes the very notion of 'sign'—as an elementary semiotic unit—is practically annihilated (Barthes 1971, 1973 Kristeva, 1969). As for a generative text grammar see van Dijk (1970) and Petöfi (1972).

Cultural codes: semiotic research finally shifts its attention to phenomena which it would be difficult to term sign systems in a strict sense, nor even communicative systems, but which are rather behavior and value systems. I refer to systems of etiquette, hierarchies and the so-called 'modelling secondary systems'—under which heading the Soviets bring in myths, legends, primitive theol-

ogies which present in an organized way the world vision of a certain society (see Ivanov and Toporov, 1962; Todorov 1966) and finally the typology of cultures (Lotman, 1964, 1967 a), which study the codes which define a given cultural model (for example the code of the mentality of medieval chivalry); finally models of social organization such as family systems (Lévi-Strauss, 1947) or the organized communicative network of more advanced groups and societies (Moles, 1967).

Aesthetic texts: the semiotic field also spills over into the area traditionally belonging to aesthetics. Certainly aesthetics is also concerned with non-semiotic aspects of art (such as the psychology of artistic creation, the relations between artistic form and natural form, the physical-psychological definition of aesthetic enjoyment, the analysis of the relations between art and society, etc.). But clearly all these problems could be dealt with from a semiotic point of view as soon as it is recognized (see 3.7) that every code allows for an *aesthetic use* of its elements.

Mass communication: as with aesthetics, this is a field which concerns many disciplines, from psychology to sociology and pedagogy (see Eco, 1964). But in most recent years the tendency has been to see the problem of mass communication in a semiotic perspective, while semiotic methods have been found useful in the explanation of numerous phenomena of mass communication.

The study of mass communication exists as a discipline not when it examines the technique or effects of a particular genre (detective story or comic strip, song or film) by means of a particular method of study, but when it establishes that all these genres, within an industrial society, have a characteristic in common.

The theories and analyses of mass communication are in fact applied to various genres, granted: 1) an industrial society which

seems to be comparatively homogeneous but is in reality full of differences and contrasts; 2) channels of communication which make it possible to reach not determined groups but an indefinite circle of receivers in various sociological situations; 3) productive groups which work out and send out given messages by industrial means.

When these three conditions exist the differences in nature and effect between the various means of communication (movie, newspaper, television or comic strips) fade into the background compared with the emergence of common structures and effects.

The study of mass communication proposes a unitary object inasmuch as it claims that the industrialization of communications changes not only the conditions for receiving and sending out messages but (and it is with this apparent paradox that the methodology of these studies is concerned) the very meaning of the message (which is to say that block of meanings which was thought to be an unchangeable part of the message as devised by the author irrespective of its means of diffusion). In order to study mass communication one can and should resort to disparate methods ranging from psychology to sociology and stylistics; but one can plan a unitary study of such phenomena only if the theories and analyses of mass communication are considered as one sector of a general semiotics (see Fabbri, 1973).

Rhetoric: the revival in studies of rhetoric is currently converging on the study of mass communication (and therefore of communication with the intention of persuasion). A rereading of traditional studies in the light of semiotics produces a great many new suggestions. From Aristotle to Quintilian through the medieval and Renaissance theoreticians up to Perelman, rhetoric appears as a second chapter in the general study of semiotics (following linguistics) elaborated centuries ago, and now providing tools for a discipline

which encompasses it. Therefore a bibliography of the semiotic aspects of rhetoric seems identical with a bibliography of rhetoric (for a preliminary orientation see Lausberg, 1960; Groupe μ, 1970; Chatman, 1974).

0.5. NATURAL BOUNDARIES: TWO DEFINITIONS OF SEMIOTICS

. . .

I propose to define as a sign *everything* that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else.* In other terms I would like to accept the definition proposed by Morris (1938) according to which "something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by some interpreter … .Semiotics, then, is not concerned with the study of a particular kind of objects, but with ordinary objects insofar (and only insofar) as they participate in semiosis". I suppose it is in this sense that one must take Peirce's definition of the 'standing-for' power of the sign "in some respect or capacity". The only modification that I would introduce into Morris's definition is that the interpretation by an interpreter, which would seem to characterize a sign, must be understood as the *possible* interpretation by a *possible* interpreter. But this point will be made clearer in chapter 2. Here it suffices to say that the human addressee is the methodological (and not the empirical) guarantee of the existence of a signification, that is of a sign-function established by a code. But on the other hand the supposed presence of a human sender is not the guarantee of the sign-nature of a supposed sign. Only under this condition is it possible to understand symptom and indices as signs (as Peirce does).

. . .

0.8. Natural boundaries: the upper threshold

0.8.1. Two hypotheses on culture

If the term 'culture' is accepted in its correct anthropological sense, then we are immediately confronted with three elementary cultural phenomena which can apparently be denied the characteristic of being communicative phenomena: (a) the production and employment of objects used for transforming the relationship between man and nature; (b) kinship relations as the primary nucleus of institutionalized social relations; (c) the economic exchange of goods.

We did not choose these three phenomena by accident: not only are they the constituent phenomena of every culture (along with the birth of articulated language) but they have been singled out as the objects of various semio-anthropological studies in order to show that the whole of culture is signification and communication and that humanity and society exist only when communicative and significative relationships are established.

One must be careful to note that this type of research can be articulated through two hypotheses, of which one is comparatively 'radical'—a kind of 'unnegotiable demand on the part of semiotics'—and the other appears to be comparatively 'moderate'.

The two hypotheses are: (i) the whole of culture *must* be studied as a semiotic phenomenon; (ii) all aspects of a culture *can* be studied as the contents of a semiotic activity. The radical hypothesis usually circulated in two extreme forms: "culture is *only* communication" and "culture is *no more* than a system of structured significations". These formulas hint dangerously at idealism and should be changed to: "the whole of culture *should* be studied as a communicative phenomenon based on signification systems". This means

that not only *can* culture be studied in this way but—as will be seen—only by studying it in this way can certain of its fundamental mechanisms be clarified.

The difference between saying culture 'should be studied as' and 'culture is', is immediately apparent. In fact it is one thing to say that an object is *essentialiter* something and another to say that it can be seen *sub ratione* of that something.

. . .

0.8.5. Culture as a semiotic phenomenon

So it is clear how my first hypothesis makes a general theory of culture out of semiotics and in the final analysis makes semiotics a substitute for cultural anthropology. But to reduce the whole of culture to semiotics does not mean that one has to reduce the whole of material life to pure mental events. To look at the whole of culture sub specie semiotica is *not to say that culture* is only communication and signification but that it can be understood more thoroughly if it is seen from the semiotic point of view. And that objects, behavior and relationships of production and value function as such socially precisely because they obey semiotic laws. As for the *moderate hypothesis,* it simply means that every aspect of culture becomes a semantic unit.

To say that a class of objects (for example <<automobile>>) becomes a semantic entity insofar as it is signified by means of the sign=vehicle /automobile/ will not get us very far. It is obvious that semiotics is also concerned with sodium chloride (which is not a cultural but a natural entity) the moment it is seen as the meaning of the sign-vehicle /salt/ (and vice versa).

But our second hypothesis implicitly suggests something more, i.e., that the systems of meanings (understood as systems of cul-

tural units) are organized as structures (semantic fields and axes) which follow the same semiotic rules as were set out for the structures of the sign-vehicle. In other words, <<automobile>> is not only a semantic entity once it is correlated with the sign-vehicle / automobile/. It is a semantic unit as soon as it is arranged in an axis of oppositions and relationships with other semantic units such as <<carriage>>, <<bicycle>> or <<feet>> (in the opposition "by car" vs. "on foot"). In this sense there is *at least one way* of considering all cultural phenomena on the semiotic level: everything which cannot be studied any other way in semiotics is studied at the level of structural semantics. But the problem is not that simple. An automobile can be considered on different levels (from different points of view): (a) the *physical level* (it has a weight, is made of a certain metal and other materials); (b) the *mechanical level* (it functions and fulfills a certain function on the basis of certain laws); (c) the *economic level* (it has an exchange value, a set price); (d) the *social level* (it indicates a certain social status); (e) the *semantic level* (it is not only an object as such but a cultural unit inserted into a system of cultural units with which it enters into certain relationships which are studied by structural semantics, relationships which remain the same even if the sign-vehicles with which we indicate them are changed; even—that is—if instead of /automobile/ we were to say /car*/ or* /coche/)-

Let us now return to level (d), i.e. to the social level. If an automobile (as an individual concrete object) indicates a certain social status, it has then acquired a symbolic value, not only when it is an abstract class signified as the content of a verbal or iconic communication (that is when the semantic unit <<automobile>> is indicated by means of the sign-vehicle /car*/ or* /voiture/ *or* /bagnole/). It also has symbolic value when it is used an *object*. In other words,

the object *//automobile//* becomes the sign-vehicle of a semantic unit which is not only <<automobile>> but, for example, <<speed>> or <<convenience>> or <<wealth>>. The object *//automobile//* also becomes the sign-vehicle for its possible use. On the social level the object, *as object*, already has its own sign function, and therefore a semiotic nature. Thus the second hypothesis, according to which cultural phenomena are the contents of a possible signification, already refers back to the first hypothesis, according to which cultural phenomena must be seen as significant devices.

Now let us examine level (c)—the economic level. We have seen that an object, on the basis of its exchange value, can become the sign-vehicle of other objects. It is only because all goods acquire a position in the system, by means of which they are in opposition to other goods, that it is possible to establish a *code of goods* in which one semantic axis is made to correspond to another semantic axis, and the goods of the first axis become the sign-vehicles for the goods of the second axis, which in turn become their meaning. Similarly even in verbal language a sign-vehicle (/automobile/) can become the meaning of another sign-vehicle (/car/) within a metalinguistic discussion such as we have been pursuing in the preceding pages. The second hypothesis refers therefore to the first hypothesis. In culture every entity can become a semiotic phenomenon. The laws of signification are the laws of culture. For this reason culture allows a continuous process of communicative exchanges, in so far as it subsists as a system of systems of signification. *Culture can be studied completely under a semiotic profile.*

0.9. Epistemological boundaries

But there is a third sort of threshold, an epistemological one, which does not depend on the definition of the semiotic object but rather on the definition of the theoretical 'purity' of the discipline itself. In other words the semiotician should always question both his object and his categories in order to decide whether he is dealing with the abstract theory of the pure competence of an ideal sign-producer (a competence which can be posited in an axiomatic and highly formalized way) or whether he is concerned with a social phenomenon subject to changes and restructuring, resembling a network of intertwined partial and transitory competences rather than a crystal-like and unchanging model. I would put the matter this way: the object of semiotics may somewhat resemble (i) either the surface of the sea, where, independently of the continuous movement of water molecules and the interplay of submarine streams, there is a sort of average resulting form which is called the Sea, (ii) or a carefully ordered landscape, where human intervention continuously changes the form of settlements, dwellings, plantations, canals and so on. If one accepts the second hypothesis, which constitutes the epistemological assumption underlying this book, one must also accept another condition of the semiotic approach which will not be like exploring the sea, where a ship's wake disappears as soon as it has passed, but more like exploring a forest where cart-trails or footprints do modify the explored landscape, so that the description the explorer gives of it must also take into account the ecological variations that he has produced.

According to the theory of codes and sign production that I intend to propose, it will be clear that the semiotic approach is ruled by a sort of *indeterminacy principle:* in so far as signifying and communicating are social functions that determine both social

organization and social evolution, to 'speak' about 'speaking', to signify signification or to communicate about communication cannot but influence the universe of speaking, signifying and communicating.

The semiotic approach to the phenomenon of 'semiosis' must be characterized by this kind of awareness of its own limits. Frequently to be really 'scientific' means not pretending to be more 'scientific' than the situation allows. In the 'human' sciences one often finds an 'ideological fallacy' common to many scientific approaches, which consists in believing that one's own approach is not ideological because it succeeds in being 'objective' and 'neutral'. For my own part, I share the same skeptical opinion that all enquiry is 'motivated'. Theoretical research is a form of social practice. Everybody who wants to know something wants to know it in order to do something. If he claims that he wants to know it only in order 'to know' and not in order 'to do' it means that he wants to know it in order to do nothing, which is in fact a surreptitious way of doing something, i.e. leaving the world just as it is (or as his approach assumes that it ought to be).

Ceteris paribus, I think that it is more 'scientific' not to conceal my own motivations, so as to spare my readers any 'scientific' delusions. If semiotics is a theory, then it should be a theory that permits a continuous critical intervention in semiotic phenomena. Since people speak, to explain why and how they speak cannot help but determine their future way of speaking. At any rate, I can hardly deny that it determines my own way of speaking.

Note on Graphic Conventions

Single slashes indicate something intended as an expression or a sign-vehicle, while guillemets indicate something intended as con-

tent. Therefore /xxxx/ means, expresses or refers to <<xxxx>>. When there is no question of phonology, verbal expressions will be written in there alphabetic form. However, since this book is concerned not only with verbal signs but also with objects, images or behavior intended as signs, these phenomena must be expressed through verbal expressions: in order to distinguish, for instance, the object automobile from the word automobile, the former is written between double slashes and in italic. Therefore //*automobile*// is the object corresponding to the verbal expression /automobile/, and both refer to the content unit <<automobile>>. Single quotation marks serve to emphasize a certain word; double marks are used for quotations. *Italic* denotes terms used in a technical sense.

NOTES

1. There is some discussion as to whether the discipline should be called Semiotics or Semiology. 'Semiology' with reference to Saussure's definition 'Semiotics' or 'semiotic' with reference to those of Peirce's and Morris'. Furthermore one could presumably speak of semiology with reference to a general discipline which studies signs, and regards linguistic signs as no more than a special area; but Barthes (1964a) has turned Saussure's definition upside down by viewing semiology as a translinguistics which examines all sign systems with reference to linguistic laws.

So it would seem that anyone inclining toward a study of sign systems that has no necessary dependence on linguistics must speak of semiotics. On the other hand the fact that Barthes has interpreted Saussure's suggestion in the way he has does not prevent us from going back to the original meaning. However, here I have decided to adopt the formula 'semiotics' once and for all, without paying attention to arguments about the philosophical and methodological implications of the two terms, thus complying with the decision taken in January 1969 in Paris by an international committee which brought into existence the International Association for Semiotic Studies Sticking to Ockham's razor, some other important distinctions are not taken into account in this book. Hjelmslev (1943), for

instance, proposes to divide semiotics into (a) scientific semiotic and (b) non-scientific semiotic, both studied by (c) metasemiotic. A metasemiotic studying a non-scientific semiotic is a semiology, whose terminology is studied by a metasemiology. Insofar as there also exists a connotative semiotic, there will likewise be a meta-(connotative) semiotic. This division, however, does not take into account (for historical reasons) many new approaches to significant and communicative phenomena. For instance, Hjelmslev called 'connotators' such phenomena as tones, registers, gestures which, not being at that time the object of a scientific semiotics, should have been studied by a metasemiology, while today the same phenomena fall within the domain of paralinguistics, which would seem to be a 'scientific semiotic'. Hjelmslev's great credit was that of having emphasized that there is no object which is not illuminated by linguistic (and semiotic) theory. Even if his semiotic hierarchy could be reformulated, his proposals must be constantly kept in mind. Following Hjelmslev, Metz (1966b) had proposed calling all the formalizations of the natural sciences 'semiotics' and those of the human sciences 'semiology'. Greimas (1970) suggests applying the term 'semiotics' to the sciences of expression and the term 'semiology' to the sciences of content. Various other classifications have been proposed, such as those of Peirce and Morris, or the distinction proposed by the Soviet school of Tartu between 'primary modelling systems' (the proper object of linguistics) and 'secondary modelling systems'. Some other classifications can be found in the discussion published in Approaches to Semiotics (Sebeok, Bateson, Hayes, 1964) such as the one by Goffman: (a) detective models (indices); (b) semantic codes; (c) communicative systems in the strict sense; (d) social relations; (e) phenomena of interaction between speakers. See also Sebeok (1973) and Garroni (1973).

2. But see the objections raised to this book by Robert M.W. Dixon in his review in Linguistics, 5, where he observes that even mathematical formulae, considered 'universal' by the author, are abstractions from Indo-European syntactical models, and that they can therefore be understood only by someone who already knows the codes of certain natural languages.

3. This concerns the need for a hyperformalized language, formed by empty signs, and adapted to the description of all semiotic possibilities. As for this project, proposed by modern semiologists, see Julia Kristeva, 'L'expansion de la sémiotique' (1967). She refers to the research of the Russian

Linzbach and predicts an axiomatics through which "semiotics will be built up on the corpse of linguistics, a death already predicted by Linzbach, and one to which linguistics will become resigned after having prepared the ground for semiotics, demonstrating the isomorphism of semiotic practices with the other complexes of our universe." Semiotics will therefore be presented as the axiomatic meeting-place of all possible knowledge, including arts and sciences. This proposal is developed by Kristeva in "Pour une sémiologie des paragrammes" (1967) and in "Distance et anti-representation" (1968), where she introduces Linnart Mall, "Une approche possible du Sunyayada", whose study of the "zero-logical subject' and of the notion of 'emptiness' in ancient Buddhist texts is curiously reminiscent of Lacan's 'vide'. But it must be pointed out that the whole of this axiomatic program refers semiotics back to the characteristica universalis of Leibniz, and from Leibniz back to the late medieval artes combinatoriae, and to Lullo.