

SEMIOTICS

FALL 2002



Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas. *Untitled*. Oil on canvas (about 1895).

Center for Semiotics
UNIVERSITY OF AARHUS

Introduction: *Semiotics or The Art of Waking Up*

by Per Aage Brandt

In a sense, semiotics is practically present in every instant of human life. We are spontaneously analyzing and theorizing about meaning whenever our consciousness is awake and aware of who and where we are; we then immediately let it go from *space* to *time* and try to identify the present moment, and the day, reconsidering what we know about the past of this present, what we believe about its future, and what we think we should do ‘now’, given who else is here and what is generally going on. To ‘wake up’ is to try to recall all this and make sense of it. Making sense of the perceived means transducing it into something realistic and then extracting something personal from this result. — Example: You wake up on a Monday morning and your watch tells you that you have overslept, so you jump to your feet and rush through your morning routines, eating your tie with your toast, etc. ... — We let our consciousness go from sensorial feelings of self and space to time and situation; then it tells us to readjust our doings. We pass from (primary) subjectivity through an instance of objectivity and back to (secondary) subjectivity. The former passage is *integration*; the latter is, I propose to say, *orientation*. Integration is a prerequisite of orientation. But orientation, including attention and volition, is a highly complex semiotic operation. It may also be one of the basic forms of human ‘semiosis’, so let us first take a look at its phenomenology.

Primarily, the spatial coordination of figurative

gestalts fed by multi-modal perception, including proprioception, creates a ‘me-here’ semantic bubble (technically: a mental space), then it activates a ‘something-somewhere-now’ bubble where a wider narrative and factual version of things is offered to our attention. We are attentive to two bubbles, one self-centered and purely spatial, the other centered on our others and their activities without us, that is, impersonally imagined and more fully spatio-temporal. The first bubble is a rudimentary Presentation space, and the second is a rudimentary Reference space — forming the basic inputs of a mental space network. This network will allow us both 1) to think in terms of imagery and nevertheless 2) to think predicatively. What happens is that the Presentational content becomes a predicate of the Referential content — in a blending bubble showing us our ‘me-here’ integrated in the ‘something-somewhere-now’, either in the past (what did you do last night?) or in the immediate future (what are you supposed to do this morning?), or else in some other temporal whole connected to the spatial present; in this blend, the subject can connect to things outside the field of perception, and can establish the basic integrative conceptualization of himself as being part of an objective activity; a phone call could go: “I am on my way now, you will see me in 10 minutes...”, where the *now* refers to a shared concept of time (your time is my time). In French, the expression *tout à l’heure* refers to the immediate past or to the immediate future (‘soon’),

depending on the addressee's temporal attention. The blend of personal-space and impersonal-space-time imagery is a very important aspect of mental imagery, because it constitutes the processual grounding of conscious orientation. But we know that it is a precarious phenomenon; we often feel involuntarily estranged from a situation we are taking part in, and more often than assumed we momentarily experience 'out-of-the-body'-instants in which either the Presentation space or the Reference seems to fade (in states of fatigue, or nausea) and we feel our body-space as detached from this waning real-space, or inversely, the real-space as detached from our waning body-space, so that we can only follow our own movements from outside. When the blend is stable, it gives the subject both a 'spiritual' presence in the impersonal space formation and a proprioceptive-bodily presence in the personal space formation, without any feeling of a gap between the two. When this mental event happens, and a double-space obtains, *then the subjective aspect is experienced as a predicate of the objective aspect of the same situation* — and this is, I think, what we imply when we speak of situations as such. The subject is a potential agent in that situation and could therefore change it in some direction by doing something appropriate. He feels responsible for it, since he is in it without doing much to change it ... (this is the — slightly absurd — origin of ethics).

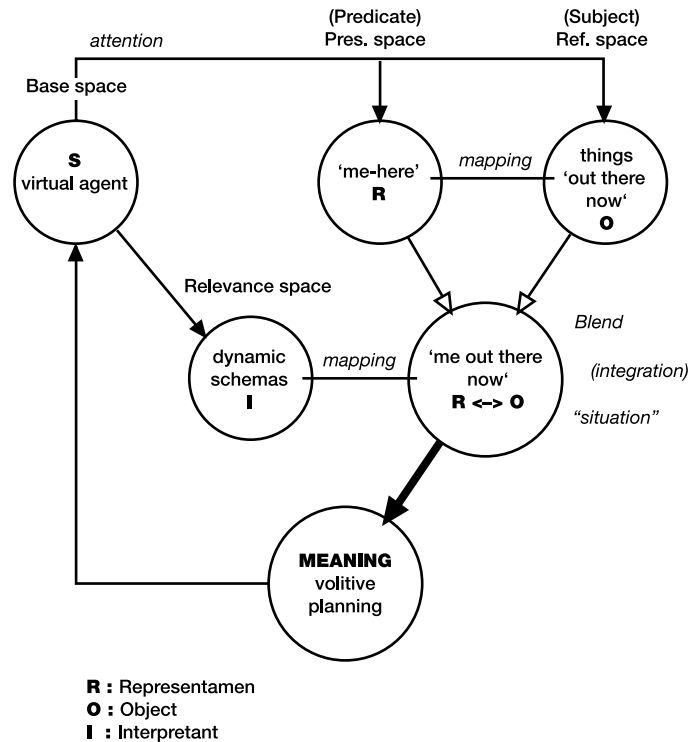
When such a conceptualization begins to make sense, the imaginary embodiment produces a schematic interpretation of this existential blend. We grasp the dynamics of the conflicts of the tendencies striving to grow within the situation, to the extent that we manage to map it onto a collection of schemas of causation or

condition or comparison or other similar 'morphemes' of natural logic, and correspondingly achieve a perspective of possible intervention. The possibilistic 'cognizing' of the situation is likely to be a necessary condition of its mental stabilization; if 'nothing can be done', even in terms of some appropriate gesture, then nothing can be thought, and the blending bubble will burst.

Orientation occurs when the schematic and possibilistic scanning of the situation shows its critical localities (where conflicts are unstable and change is possible) and attracts the subject's attention to them, thereby generating a sort of volitive imperative: 'I must want to do X', where X will modify the situation. Notice that experienced situations are never ideal. Therefore, modification is universally the subject's preference. This is an essential semiotic element in the making-sense process we are considering.

Instead of binary signs (signifiant//signifié, signifier over signified) or ternary sign models (sign//code//meaning), we need to develop the natural, cognitive grounding of meaning-making in terms of something at least as comprehensive as the phenomenological account given above.

Here is a simple summary of such a model, a hypothetically efficient six-part (thus: hexametric) base of cognitive semiotics:



In this diagram, **R**, **O**, **I** refer to C. S. Peirce's triad, less language-bound than F. de Saussure's binary model. Cognitive models like this extended semiotic version can be shown to form a generalized mental format for meaning in communicative semantics as well as in pure, silent, introvert imagination. Cognition and communication seem to use the same network design, and therefore to allow for the shared, distributed, cultural development of thought-and-volition, namely, the explosively differential semiotic phenomenon of historical cultures. When we begin to substitute for each other in

the position of **R** ('you here' instead of 'me-here': empathy), we develop 'representativity', including politics, and when 'representants' of 'representants' are figured by nominal graphics, *symbolization* is achieved, and the world is apparently bewitched, for the worst (mystified, sometimes by religion (or science)) and for the best (enchanted, sometimes by science (or religion)). Now it may seem more difficult to 'wake up', in the primordial sense, but there are still mornings, and our symbolic minds are still pristinely imaginary, at least once a day.

Dynamicity and Viewpoint

Svend Østergaard | **Wednesdays in seminar weeks, 10:00 - 12:00. Auditorium 221.**

This is an elementary introduction to cognitive linguistics for beginners. In the first part of the course we will see how language represents causality and dynamic relations, and as an aspect of this we will discuss what is known as modality. Rather than being strictly linguistic, the approach will include general philosophical questions; for instance, the way language treats causality seems to be at variance with how this concept is understood in the natural sciences. We will discuss this and other related problems on the basis of appropriate literature.

It is an assumption in cognitive linguistics that language is not a separate module that works independently of other cognitive systems. When we move around in the world we are carrying a viewpoint, we

pay attention to one object at a time and leave the rest in the background, we interact with surfaces and containers, etc. In the second half of the course we will examine how these general features of human cognition are reflected in language. We will read literature that especially treats this question. For this reason the course in cognitive linguistics is connected to the course in mind and cognition.

The literature will include writings by Talmy and Langacker; a precise list of literature will be presented on the first day. The students are expected to participate actively in the course, i.e. to present short articles or excerpts from longer articles for the course group.

SEMINAR ON COGNITIVE AESTHETICS

Neurons in Love

Per Aage Brandt | **Thursdays in seminar weeks, 12:15 - 14:00. Auditorium 221.**

In its eight sessions, this seminar will present the 'neuro-esthetic' project and a corresponding series of analyses of works of art in the double framework of cognitive esthetics and neuroscience. V. Ramachandran's and S. Zeki's foundational texts will be discussed, as well as the involved problems of integration or conflict, across the levels of conceptualization, and thus of understanding the antagonisms of *perception versus interpretation*, *form versus meaning*, or *beauty versus*

structure, and *affect versus concept* in art as experienced.

We will consider a selection of 19th and 20th century paintings, some examples of modern architecture, an example of musical meaning, and we will analyze some poems.

I would like to illustrate the kind of thinking we will develop in this seminar by attaching two short (but long) notes relevant to this problematic.

See notes on pp. 10-11.



Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas: *The Morning Bath*. Pastel (1890).

What is a Mind?

Svend Østergaard | **Fridays in seminar weeks, 10:00 - 12:00. Auditorium 221.**

This is an elementary course in general cognition. The first part of the course consists of a survey of cognitive science and makes use of H. Gardner: *The Mind's New Science* as background literature. We will briefly review how the mind has been conceived in philosophy from Descartes' mind-body problem to William James's notion of *stream of consciousness*.

In the second part of the course we will look into more specialized cognitive functions such as *attention, imagery and spatial representation, perception, and reasoning*. We will see how cognitive scientists have treated these subjects and what kind of experiments have been

set up to confirm the theoretical models. We will then examine what is known in brain science about these topics.

This course should be considered as complementary to the course in cognitive linguistics in the sense that we are interested in understanding the relation between language and cognition. Reading material will be available at the first meeting. The course will include lectures and student presentations, and the students are expected to write short essays based on the material presented.



Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas: *Woman Drying herself*. Pastel (1886).

A Homage to Consciousness

Per Aage Brandt | **Wednesdays in seminar weeks, 13:15 - 16:00. Auditorium 221.**

This seminar will discuss topics of general interest to the project of establishing a framework for a coherent philosophical and scientific study of meaning. During the eight sessions it will focus on current topics in the following areas:

CONSCIOUSNESS THEORY

— using texts from the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, texts by Posner, W. Singer, P. Llinás, G. M. Edelman et al. from *Cajal and Consciousness. Scientific Approaches to Consciousness...*, Ed. P. C. Marijuán, New York Academy of Sciences, Annals, Vol. 929; G. M. Edelman & G. Tononi, *A Universe of Consciousness. How Matter becomes Imagination*, Basic Books 2000; from M. Donald, *A Mind So Rare. The Evolution of Human Consciousness*, W.W. Norton 2001 —

STANDARD COGNITIVE SEMANTICS

— using texts from M. Turner & G. Fauconnier, *The Way We Think*, Basic Books 2002; Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor. A Practical*

Introduction, Oxford University Press 2002; some recent critical articles like "More Better Blends" by myself —

and finally, but simultaneously,

GENERAL SEMIOTICS

— using texts from *Almen Semiotik*, from the new Danish anthology *Kognitiv Semiotik*, Ed. Haase 2002, and other Danish sources, including my own new essays *Det menneskeligt virkelige*, Ed. Politisk Revy 2002; the language will of course still be English (to assure the vast international attendance).

The aim of the seminar is to update, or accelerate (or, when needed, initiate) the critical debate on the human sciences and the ideas required by an explicitly meaning-based (not chronologically based) approach to the humanities.

Research Meetings

Center for Semiotics has regular research meetings in which invited guests give a paper relevant for the work at the center. The idea is to have an open discussion on the background of the presented paper. The programme for the fall semester is the following:

October 24, 15:15 - 18:00. Auditorium 221

Jesper Mogensen, University of Copenhagen: *Localization and posttraumatic recovery of cognitive functions. Apparent but resolvable contradictions in the study of the neural substrate of cognitive functions*

November 21, 15:15 - 18:00. Auditorium 221

Anders Hougaard, University of Southern Denmark: *Blending in Interaction*

December 19, 15:15 - 18:00. Auditorium 221

Thomas Ramsøy, University of Copenhagen: *Neural correlates to phantom limb sensations*

Two Neuro-esthetical Reflections

1.

In neuro-esthetics as in cognitive research more generally, we have to work out and coordinate three parallel accounts¹ in order to obtain a genuine understanding; in short, we have to answer three questions: *what* are we talking about, *how* does it function, and *why* is it there? Although we seldom know enough to accomplish this triple task in a definitive way, it is a reasonable regulatory idea (as Kant said) that these three ontological dimensions are in the reality we wish to explore, and therefore we can expect to obtain three epistemological dimensions in the knowledge of it. I would like to elaborate on this particular triad.

The English philosopher Barry Smith finds it interesting to say that humans live in a ‘mesoscopic’ spatial world, the one that language is ‘made’ for, but above which there is a ‘macroscopic’ world and below which we find a ‘microscopic’ world. The two latter worlds are only accessible to us through special symbolic devices, observational prostheses, and notional hypotheses. In contrast, the ‘mesoscopic’ world is our life world, our natural phenomenology. The other two are ‘constructed’ worlds referred to by our abstract and occasionally scientific knowledge, and things going on there are understood to cause and influence most of what is going on in the mesoscopic realm.

We may then find it equally interesting to say that we live in a ‘mesoscopic’ time, in which narrative structures are inherently relevant and crucial to experiential reality.

The ‘historical’ time scale is mesoscopic. Art *history* is a huge narrative account of art, artists, institutions, conflicts, debates, markets, dramas and intrigues running through centuries and perhaps sometimes millennia. Historical art is our ‘what’. But above historical time there is a macroscopic time, namely, *evolutionary* time, which we can only access indirectly by using prostheses and hypotheses. This is the ‘why’ of the ‘what’. And below it there is a microscopic time scale, corresponding to the neural perception and mental conception of art (as of everything else). This is the ‘how’ of the ‘what’. The art *critique* that elaborates analyses of single works of art—i. e. examines the particular micro-compositional relations of form and meaning in the works of art as objects perceived and conceived, in short: experienced—operates in this microscopic time scale, as does the neuro-esthetic analysis of the involved processes of perceptual and mental structuring. But, as before, we may assume that the macro-facts of evolution and the micro-facts of neural processing may explain most of what is going on in the historical ‘mesoscopy’ of art.

For instance, the evolution of neural capacities for intense ‘hyper-perception’ or for hesitant, inconclusive² ‘hypo-perception’, or for conceiving objects, especially artefacts, both as things and as signs, may be the over- and underlying condition that makes the interpretation and social appreciation of works of art possible.

2.

Hyper- and hypo-perception: the difference between physical input and intentional information is that although both are basically processed by the same sensory neurons, the latter is pre-categorized as being expressive: it produces in the experiencer a preparation for *redundant* and *elliptic* patterns for which the perceiver will have to compensate by re-equilibrating: reduction and completion. The cognizer will thus have to collaborate intentionally with the source, in this respect if the information is expressive (intentional). Esthetic 'communication' in a broad sense is based on such a collaboration, in which the sender (the 'maker', the 'crafter') is deliberately both redundant and elliptic, and the receiver (the experiencer, the interpreter) is therefore exposed to both hyper- and hypo-perception. But in the genre of communication we call art, the exposure to redundancy and

ellipsis is *maximized* and impossible to neutralize through re-equilibration. This condition creates in the perceiver the affective state from which art derives its status, namely, during the experience the feeling of being momentarily in contact with things outside the triviality of mesoscopy. Accounts of the meaning of works of art universally refer to such 'transcendent' perspectives.

Notes

- 1 This is, as I understand it, V. Ramachandran's 'neuro-epistemological' claim.
- 2 Jf. Semir Zeki's emphasis on ambivalence and inconclusiveness in art.



Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas: *Before the Mirror*. Pastel (1885-86).

S E M I N A R C A L E N D A R

SEPTEMBER

Wednesday 11	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-16: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 12		12-14: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 13	10-12: Mind and Cognition	
Wednesday 25	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-16: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 26		12-14: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 27	10-12: Mind and Cognition	

OCTOBER

Wednesday 9	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-16: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 10		12-14: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 11	10-12: Mind and Cognition	
Wednesday 23	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-16: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 24		12-14: Cognitive Aesthetics 15-18: Research Meeting
Friday 25	10-12: Mind and Cognition	

NOVEMBER

Wednesday 6	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-16: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 7		12-14: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 8	10-12: Mind and Cognition	
Wednesday 20	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-16: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 21		12-14: Cognitive Aesthetics 15-18: Research Meeting
Friday 22	10-12: Mind and Cognition	

DECEMBER

Wednesday 4	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-16: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 5		12-14: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 6	10-12: Mind and Cognition	
Wednesday 18	10-12: Cognitive Linguistics	13-16: Cognition and Semiotics
Thursday 19		12-14: Cognitive Aesthetics 15-18: Research Meeting
Friday 20	10-12: Mind and Cognition	

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