

# SEMIOTICS

S P R I N G 2 0 0 2



Jasper Johns (b. 1930): *White Flag*, 1950. Encaustic, oil, newsprint, and charcoal on canvas; 6,9 x 3,1 m.

Center for Semiotics  
UNIVERSITY OF AARHUS

# Introduction

by Peer F. Bundgård

At the Center for Semiotics, we study meaning, both in general and in particular. Cognitive semiotics is concerned with “what-makes-sense”. This involves a lot of things that could be reduced to two major domains of interests:

(1) The *things that make sense*. These are often called signs, but should not be construed solely as linguistic signs (traffic-signs are to no one surprise also ... signs). Our task in the business of signs is to understand what types of signs exist, how they combine, how they yield simple or complex significations, and, eventually, how they refer to an object or to a thought.

(2) Signs are used by *human beings*, either to interpret the parts of the world that they give us access to, or to express our understanding of things. Human beings are very similar in spite of cultural differences; it seems quite reasonable to suppose that just as human beings behave much like each other when they move through the world (mainly because we all, in principle, have the same kind of articulated body), human beings also behave much like each other when they are engaged in perception, understanding and expression (mainly because we have the same kind of brain, the same perceptual system, and the same capacities for language production as well as for general modes of reasoning). This is the reason why we are explicit about doing *cognitive* semiotics. We believe—and certainly try to provide evidence for this fact—that it is possible to characterize the general features of human reasoning,

sign-interpretation, perception, and meaning construction. And we believe that it is possible to do this across all the differences in the domains in which human reasoning and intelligent behaviour are engaged: plain perception, communication or language, aesthetics, and the construction of intersubjective values articulated in general social or religious systems.

To cut a long story very short: meaning exists before it is realized in a particular domain; say, a novel, a work of art, a linguistic expression of a thought or of a perceptual expression. We pretend that it is the overarching stability of “what-makes-sense” and man's general capacity of coping intelligently with “what-makes-sense” through the immense variety of its manifestations that explains how it is that we so smoothly navigate through the landscape of significant things, other beings, and cultures. And we believe, finally, that these overarching traits can be characterized.

Obviously, all things do not mean in the same way or the same thing. Evidently, all expressions of nature and human life should not be reduced to one and the same general “meaning”. Differences exist, and this may be the reason why universities exist as they do: to satisfy man's urge to acquire profound knowledge in specific parts of its universe. Yet, to gain insight into general features, similarities, analogies across disciplinary differences—our purpose—may very well imply deeper insight in the particular. A special aim is to understand which properties of human cognition and

meaning production make this amazing variability and differentiation possible. This implies the use of a wide range of scientific inspirations: structuralism, linguistics, phenomenology, cognitive sciences (especially cognitive semantics), neuro-cognition etc.

This is why we make a special effort to maintain contact with a wide range of national and international research centers. For the same reason we welcome students from all areas of the humanities as well as from certain fields of the social and natural sciences.

## SEMINAR ON SEMIOTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

# Constructing Semiotic Anthropology A series of four seminars

Lars Kjærholm | **Tuesdays, February 19, March 19, April 16, and May 14. 13:15 - 15:00. Auditorium 221.**

This series of four seminars will have as its topic the construction of semiotic anthropology, and the various attempts made so far will be reviewed. However, a viable semiotic anthropology has not yet come into existence, although statements made by many anthropologists show their hope to see this happen. The point of departure for these seminars will be C. S. Peirce's semiotic writings, and it would be a good idea to prepare for the seminars by reading them. A collection of key texts will be made available at the Center for Semiotics.

### PROGRAMME

#### I. From Cognitive Anthropology to Semiotic Anthropology. From Franz Boas to Milton Singer.

The historical development of anthropological theory from the focus on external conditions to 'understanding' of other peoples and cultures.

#### II. With Peirce in India.

This is both an introduction to Peirce's semiotics, and some examples of current analyses of certain cultural features in India. This seminar will demonstrate how semiotic analysis can be linked with cultural and social analysis.

#### III. Social Regimentation. Richard Parmentier and the cultural regimentation of cultural institutions.

Examples from the USA (Colonial Williamsburg), and India (Indian Museum in Calcutta).

#### IV. Personhood, 'New Age', and Cosmological Schema. Cultural convergence between India and the West illustrated with an example: the Indian lore of Vastu Shastra.

This seminar will further demonstrate possible linkages between semiotic analysis and cultural and social analysis, showing the political implications of the seemingly harmless and neutral interest in traditional Indian cosmology, which has been the subject of a remarkable new interest in India during the last ten years. Vastu Shastra is the teaching of correlations between man, house/home and cosmos, based on an Indian ontology of micro- and macrocosmic relations.

# Fluid Concepts

Svend Østergaard | **Wednesdays in seminar weeks, 10:15 - 12:00. Auditorium 221.**

This seminar continues the discussion of the topics from the fall. We will treat three important principles of human cognition in particular: 1) pattern recognition, 2) variations on a given pattern, and 3) the extension of a pattern from one domain to another. These principles are important for how humans produce meaning; for instance, *in language*, a metaphor might be based on the recognition of a pattern of bodily activity which is extended to the mental or the social domains; *in science*, a model is a pattern which often—maybe always—originates elsewhere; *in art*, a painting is a variation of an already recognized pattern; *in translation*, the translator extends a pattern from one language to another etc. These problems will be treated by reading selected parts of Douglas R. Hofstadter: *Fluid Concepts* (3 sessions) and *Le ton beau de Marot* (1 ses-

sion). Despite the French title, the latter volume is in English, and treats the problem of translating. Both titles deal with the principles mentioned above in relation to the following question: *what is an analogy?* In one session we will find links to classical semiotics by discussing C. S. Peirce's notion of a *diagram*, which comes close to the notion of a schema in cognitive science. The text, *Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmatism* will be available. Two sessions will be devoted to G. Fauconnier and M. Turner: *The Way We Think*, which treats analogy from the point of view of blending. In the final session we will take up the notion of symmetry, a pattern that plays an important role in art as well as science; reference text is M. Turner: *Reading Minds*, especially chapter 4: *The Body of Our Thought*.

# Percepts, Perceptual Judgements and Meaning

Peer F. Bundgård | **Wednesdays in seminar weeks, 13:15 - 15:00. Auditorium 221.**

In this seminar, we wish to get directly to grips with the problem of perception in cognitive semiotics. A well-known claim in both phenomenology and cognitive semiotics reads that linguistic meaning is founded on pre-linguistic, perceptual, meaning. We shall explore—and hopefully provide some evidence for—this claim. This will be done through a three-fold approach: from a semiotic, an ontological, and a phenomenological point of view. The first two sessions will be devoted to what might be considered the “realistic turn” in Umberto Eco’s semiotics, which involves accrued attention to standard topics in cognitive linguistics, such as basic domains concepts, prototype-categorization and image schemata as well as a reconsideration of the “iconic” (perceptual) basis of experience and knowledge. The following two sessions will reframe Eco’s theory with respect to one of its main sources of inspiration: Peircean semiotics, in particular the aspect of it that retraces the process of meaning construal from “percept” to “perceptual judgement”. The next two sessions will address the following issue: if linguistic meaning (or “propositional” meaning) is constrained by “experienced” meaning (as cognitive semiotics would have it), is “experienced” meaning then itself constrained by properties and structures of the experienced object? In these two sessions, we will try to develop a theory of “common-sense realism”, in Peirce’s vein, by the way, but with reference to the English philosopher Barry Smith and the

French scientist Jean Petitot. The last two sessions will introduce E. Husserl’s theory of perception as it is outlined in his *Ding und Raum* (“Thing and Space”).

## PROGRAMME

- Feb 6:** Umberto Eco: “Kant, Peirce, and the Platypus” (chapter 2 in *Kant and the Platypus*).
- Feb 20:** Umberto Eco: “Cognitive Types and Nuclear Content” (chapter 3 in *Kant and the Platypus*).
- March 6:** C.S. Peirce on “Percept”, “Perceptual Judgement”, and “Inference” (texts to be determined).
- March 20:** C.S. Peirce on “Percept”, “Perceptual Judgement”, and “Inference” (texts to be determined).
- April 3:** Barry Smith: “On the Theory of Gestalt” (from *Austrian Philosophy*, pp. 243-280) and “Truth and the Visual Field” (from Petitot et al. (eds), *Naturalizing Phenomenology*, pp. 317-329).
- April 17:** Barry Smith: “The Structures of the Common-Sense World” and Barry Smith & Jean Petitot “Physics and the Phenomenal World”.
- May 1 & 15:** E. Husserl: from *Ding und Raum* and K. Mulligan “Perception” (from B. Smith & D.W. Smith (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, pp. 168-238).

*A master copy of all texts will be available at the Center.*

## INTRODUCTION TO SEMIOTICS

# Introduction to Semiotics

Varii | **Thursdays in seminar weeks, 10:15 - 12:00. Auditorium 221.**

Senior students (junior researchers) will give a series of lectures on selected themes and issues covering an important part of the semiotic and cognitive landscape as it appears today, as well as the elementary notions, models, and problems that newcomers will need to understand.

### PROGRAMME

Feb. 7: Evolution Theory

Feb. 21: *Brain and Cognition. International Workshop*

March 7: Visual Cognition

March 21: Neuro-Anatomy for Beginners

April 4: Valence-Grammar

April 18: Modality

May 2: Aspect and Tense

May 16: Analytic Philosophy

## SEMINAR ON COGNITIVE AESTHETICS

# Form, Color, Symmetry

Svend Østergaard & Peer F. Bundgård | **Thursdays in seminar weeks, 13:15 - 15:00. Auditorium 221.**

This seminar deals with aesthetics on a cognitive basis. That is, we are interested in how the working of the human visual system influences our conception of art. Therefore we want to include basic knowledge about vision, and since the artist seems to play with the attention of the perceiver, we also want to include knowledge about how the attentional system works in relation to vision.

Background literature is: R. Arnheim: *Visual Thinking*, R. Arnheim: *Art and Visual Perception*, and D. D. Hoffman: *Visual Intelligence*. In the first two sessions we intend to discuss form and figure in view of E. H.

Gombrich: *Art and Illusion*, especially the chapters *From Light into Paint and Truth* and *The Stereotype* (available in the reader). In addition, we may take up the issues in D. D. Hoffman: *Salience of visual parts* and see how they are reflected in art.

In the next two sessions we treat *color*. The main literature will be Semir Zeki: *Inner Vision*; chapters 18 – 21 are available in the reader.

Two sessions are devoted to *symmetry*. The treatment of this basic notion is based on chapter 8 in M. Leyton: *Symmetry, Causality, Mind* (available in the reader) and on W. Wildgen: *Geometry and Dynamics in the Art of*

*Leonardo Da Vinci* (available at the center).

In the final two sessions we will discuss *presentation* and *representation*. If *representation* is a term for the top-down processing that takes place on viewing a painting, then *presentation* is a term for the elements in the painting that are processed by the primary visual system in

conflict with the representation. The elements of form, color, and symmetry that have been treated in the previous sessions will be included in the discussion of presentation/representation. Suitable texts will be available at the center.

## SEMINAR ON MIND & COGNITION

# The Cognitive Unconscious

Svend Østergaard & Peer F. Bundgård | **Fridays in seminar weeks, 10:15 - 12:00. Auditorium 221.**

Cognitive Science is a designation for a considerable variety of disciplines working in different fields with the same aim: to characterize man's "mental life", i.e., the way we think, how we think, and why we think as we do. One of the crucial issues addressed by Cognitive Sciences, at all levels, concerns the existence, nature, and function of unconscious processes in the brain.

This problem is in a sense contemporary to Cognitive Science as such: one of its founding fathers, the German mathematician, philosopher and neurophysiologist Herman von Helmholtz (1821-1894), based his theory on perceptual categorization, his famous *unbewusste Schlüsse*, on such unconscious processes.

In our time, we can find several different, and sometimes mutually exclusive, conceptions of the uncon-

scious, such as, say, Gilles Fauconnier's notion of "background cognition" and Jerry Fodor's "language of thought." The general question we will deal with in the seminar is: Do higher-order structures or information-processing routines exist (1) to which we have no immediate access; (2) which are not exhaustively characterizable in terms of their neural basis; and (3) which play a fundamental role in perception, categorization and meaning construal?

The issue will be addressed in the domains of categorization (G. Fauconnier, J. Petitot), *perception* (E. Thompson, D. Dennett, and R. Thom), *emotion* (J. Ledoux), and in more general terms through B. Baars' works on the subject.

# 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 spring semester is the following:

**MARCH 7:**

Michael May, Dansk Maritim Institut:  
*Diagrammatical Reasoning*

**APRIL 4:**

Professor Frieder Nake, University of Bremen:  
*Semiotics at the Interface*

**MAY 2:**

Dan Zahavi, University of Copenhagen:  
*Can Phenomenology be Naturalized?*

## *International Workshop: Brain and Cognition*

**February 21-22, Brain and Cognition, International Workshop**

The 1990's, the 'Decade of the Brain', saw the advent and the refinement of a number of techniques, PET, fMRI, MEG etc., that allowed for measuring and visualizing physiological processes related to neuronal activity in the brain. This has opened up the field of cognitive neuroscience as a potential meeting point between a number of disciplines from psychology, linguistics and philosophy on to neurology, biology and computer science. Relating in a highly controlled experimental paradigm detailed objective measures of brain activity to subjective, experiential aspects of cognition and consciousness represents, however, a challenge to all the

disciplines involved. The workshop examines these challenges across the disciplines by presenting state-of-the-art research with implications for the putative meeting between cognitive studies and brain research.

**FURTHER INFORMATION AND REGISTRATION**

Please visit [www.brain-cog.au.dk](http://www.brain-cog.au.dk). Due to a limited number of participants, early registration is highly recommended.

**PRESENTERS**

Rodney Cotterill, Chris Frith, Uta Frith, Shaun Gallagher, Tony Jack, Knut Kampe, David Rubin, Chris Sinha, Maxim Stamenov a.o.

*The Center for Semiotics, University of Aarhus,  
cordially invites you to participate in a Winter Symposium on*

# Narratology

**JANUARY 31 – FEBRUARY 2, 2002**

Narratology has been a main topic in structural semiotics; cf. A. J. Greimas and C. Bremond. In this tradition, meaning is based on logical relations existing independently of human cognition. Conversely, in cognitive linguistics, meaning is essentially based on human experience as it unfolds in the social as well as the physical domain. Central to this research is the tenet that our conceptual understanding of the world is built upon image schemas, which exist as a consequence of how our bodies and the neural structure react to the spatial and dynamic properties of the environment. This approach has been fruitful in linguistics in the semantic analysis of sentence structure, but has only to a lesser degree been applied to text analysis. We find an attempt to connect cognition with narratology in M. Turner: *The Literary Mind*, and L. Talmy: *Cognitive Framework for Narrative Structure*. The purpose of the seminar is to present different approaches to the narrative text and especially to examine the extent to which the ideas presented in the references above can be applied to narration. For instance, one has to examine whether the schemas which seem to underlie sentence meaning are also valid for narrative formations. Thus, we intend to revive narratology as a science.

In extensive sessions, papers will be given by *Michael Chandler, Wolfgang Wildgen, Jacques Fontanille, Chris Sinha, Frederik Stjernfelt, Helle Munkholm Davidsen, Jesper Sørensen, Svend Østergaard, Kristian Tylén, and Per Aage Brandt.*

## **PRACTICAL INFORMATION**

**Address:** The Symposium will take place at the Center for Semiotics, Finlandsgade 28, DK-8200 Aarhus N

**Phone:** (+45) 89 42 44 99    **Fax:** (+45) 86 10 82 28

**E-mail:** [semtina@hum.au.dk](mailto:semtina@hum.au.dk)

## **FEE**

Non-speakers DKK 400,00. Students DKK 300,00.  
The fee includes lunch, coffee, materials etc.

## **TRAVEL EXPENSES**

If your travel expenses are covered by the Center for Semiotics, please remember to keep all tickets etc. and send them to the Center after the Symposium.

Please register at the Secretariat not later than *January 23, 2002* ([semtina@hum.au.dk](mailto:semtina@hum.au.dk)).

If you need advice concerning housing, please contact us by e-mail.

For more information <http://www.hum.au.dk/semiotics/>

## *On Human Identity, What Semiotics Is About, and the Meaning of Life*

The French call a faculty like ours (*la faculté des sciences humaines*, Human Sciences). The Sciences of the Human. In many universities, the humanities are instead thought of as scholarly curricula dedicated to the particularities of infinitely differentiated, radically specific, item-by-item absolutely unique human cultural expressions found in our historical past and present. The task is to record, recollect, reassemble, reconstruct, and then venerate and abhor — but not to project the result onto a trans-historic, trans-millennial, trans-continental, trans-ethnic category called the *Human*. These Humanities would indeed be Human Sciences, if they did project their empirical knowledge onto the Human and let it be an infinitely complex set of predicates applied to that subject. Why is the scientific second step rejected?

A classic answer is that if the step were taken, we would feel determined by the immense predicate, and we do not wish to feel the weight of any such predicate—our privilege is instead to be indeterminate. This is a form of humanism: the –ism that holds humans free of knowledge in order to protect the idea of their freedom.

So humans have no properties. They are of course free to invent some conventional characteristics, as if they were characters playing in some improvisational drama, but none of these characteristics will belong to them. What happens and has happened to historical humanity is arbitrary. Why study it? Because we want to know where *specifically* we belong, to what culture,

to what ethnic group, within what local history... We want to know whom we should hate, and what to praise and believe, like (which of?) our ancestors ... Wishes like these express an ethnocentric search for collective identity.

But such an identity is precisely the opposite of freedom. It might be affectively satisfactory, just as it can feel good to say "I am a young female homosexual buddhist viking", but it is not the same as saying "I am a free person". It is the opposite. Subjects change their status, age, beliefs, nationality, and so on, but they stay themselves: their individual, numerical identities are independent of belonging and affiliation of any kind, and are best rendered by a tautological utterance like "I am (just) 'me', but I will stay 'me' all the time".

Freedom is individual (in a non-trivial sense that I am trying to explain here), and the individual subject is of course part of a great number of independently changing communitary entities at the same time, fortunately without having to identify psychologically with them all or even with any one of them. The deeper and often life-long identifications that we do create and uphold are made of a different material, namely our empathic experience of other free subjects and minds. The other's freedom—as we sometimes experience it—is his capacity to *cognize* despite the pressure of intellectual affiliation; it is the 'sovereignty' (G. Bataille's expression) of his mind, manifest when it follows paths of feeling and thinking that are imposed only by what human hearts and brains do in this world, not by what

they are forced to do by local affiliations to particular hearts and brains. Mental creations of that kind are found in art, in intimate or public behavior, in theoretical activity, and they communicate, are surprisingly well understood, and give rise to what we call ideals and idealizations. (Consider the well-motivated idealization of the artist as a free spirit.) They are understood because they are creations of human cognition, which is a part of the nature of our species. We share constitutive forms of feeling and perceiving the world and each other, and these forms underly our history and cultural differentiations.

The Humanities would be the Human Sciences if they could apply this insight to their factual archives and develop the noble art of comparison of their material far enough to grasp the differences as variations of the underlying human constant.

This is what linguistics is already doing, as a theoretical and comparative discipline, and what literary studies are occasionally doing, when they manage to

silence the savage cry for tribal identity (religious, ethno-national, gender, political). *Some* scholars of most disciplines in faculties that study properties of the Cro-Magnon at large—from biology to computer science, from psychiatry to mass communication—*sometimes* see that the cry for tribal identity is not the demand whose fulfillment is the meaning of life. When this occurs to them, they experience moments of semiotic enlightenment. Human sovereignty. And this is when the study of human cognition suddenly appears as a reasonable way to conceive of their work, whatever their discipline.

Such moments have given rise to interdisciplinary centers at many universities worldwide, dedicated to the Human Sciences in this sense, and to the development of a Cognitive Semiotics that technically sharpens the tools needed for such analyses.

As for the meaning of life, it can be and has been argued that it has to do with freedom ...

## *Guest professor:* Terence Deacon

The author of *The Symbolic Species*, Terence W. Deacon gives a colloquium around *the coevolution of language and the brain* at the Center of Semiotics in the end of May. The exact date will be announced later.

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

## FEBRUARY

Wednesday 6	10-12: Cognition and Semiotics	13-15: General Semiotics
Thursday 7	10-12: Introduction to Semiotics	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 8	10-12: Mind and Cognition	
Tuesday 19		13-15: Constructing Semiotic Anthropology
Wednesday 20	10-12: Cognition and Semiotics	13-15: General Semiotics
Thursday 21	10-12: Introduction to Semiotics	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 22	10-12: Mind and Cognition	

## MARCH

Wednesday 6	10-12: Cognition and Semiotics	13-15: General Semiotics
Thursday 7	10-12: Introduction to Semiotics	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 8	10-12: Mind and Cognition	
Tuesday 19		13-15: Constructing Semiotic Anthropology
Wednesday 20	10-12: Cognition and Semiotics	13-15: General Semiotics
Thursday 21	10-12: Introduction to Semiotics	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 22	10-12: Mind and Cognition	

## APRIL

Wednesday 3	10-12: Cognition and Semiotics	13-15: General Semiotics
Thursday 4	10-12: Introduction to Semiotics	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 5	10-12: Mind and Cognition	
Tuesday 16		13-15: Constructing Semiotic Anthropology
Wednesday 17	10-12: Cognition and Semiotics	13-15: General Semiotics
Thursday 18	10-12: Introduction to Semiotics	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 19	10-12: Mind and Cognition	

## MAY

Wednesday 1	10-12: Cognition and Semiotics	13-15: General Semiotics
Thursday 2	10-12: Introduction to Semiotics	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 3	10-12: Mind and Cognition	
Tuesday 14		13-15: Constructing Semiotic Anthropology
Wednesday 15	10-12: Cognition and Semiotics	13-15: General Semiotics
Thursday 16	10-12: Introduction to Semiotics	13-15: Cognitive Aesthetics
Friday 17	10-12: Mind and Cognition	

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