

THE WAY OF THE SIGN

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Cultural Text Theory in Two Steps

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The Way of the Sign:
Cultural Text Theory in Two Steps

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I Trionfi.

(Members of the Visconti-Sforza family playing Tarot cards,
mid 15th century fresco in Palazzo Borromeo, Milan)

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For Colette Silvestre-Haeberlé

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INTRODUCTION

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

*Everything should be made as simple as possible,
but not any simpler.*

– Albert Einstein

Any act of interpretation is a way of permuting life with story. We create stories about ourselves when we imitate others, when we identify ourselves in other people's stories, and when we visualize ourselves in other contexts. By permuting the various structural elements that go into a story, we are able to experience different facets of the story simultaneously. This means that, in principle, we should be able to get a more nuanced sense of this simple and linear existential narrative: we get born, we live, and then we die. While each of these three elements and life stages can be interpreted individually, and in this interpretation each element can acquire individual meanings, the three elements can also form the backbone of a synthesis, as in the situation when we might conclude the following: life sucks, it is useless to be born, and everything passes. The way in which we arrive, either at one of these concluding points to life, or to all of them at once, is through permuting the elements in the story according to two essential moves: one of recognition and one of response.

WHAT IS THIS TEXT ABOUT AND HOW DO I RESPOND TO IT?

Any narrative is anchored in (1) a structural line, inviting us to consider the question of what is happening, and (2) a responsive line, inviting us to consider the question of how we feel about it. Picture this:

What is happening?

We get born, we live, and we die.

How do we feel about it?

We feel kind of sad.

Here, we can get more sophisticated and begin to argue, evaluate, and offer solutions. We can say the following:

Yes, we get born, we live, and die, but we also experience things, like getting an education, or getting married, or growing old and having grandkids to tell our stories to. Therefore we can rejoice in life, and forget about death.

Or:

No, there's no way we can get excited about this life narrative. For no matter what we do, how many achievements we may make, we're still going to end up there, dead and buried.

Or:

It is very certain that we're going to die, but probably there's more between heaven and earth, so we can concentrate on connections, cosmic or otherwise.

Or:

It is very certain that we're going to die, and probably there's no life after death, but while we're at it we can enjoy having it both ways: thinking about our existence and pondering about our absence. In other words, enjoy the *memento mori* moment.

The point of this exercise is to stress that no matter how high or low the question about the significance of a text may aim, or how many theories we may formulate about texts, the method of going about it remains the same. Here, it is my contention that any analytical approach to texts follows these two essential steps: identifying the elements in the text in terms of structure and trajectory and then assessing how we respond to what we see. Depending on context, this latter step usually calls for some action, such as the action that we find associated with culturally oriented theories. For instance, if the story of the feminist movement begins with the question of oppression, the fact that a lot of women didn't feel so good about it ended in the raising of the collective consciousness against oppression. When more women got together and started saying *no* to injustices against them, this had consequences on a larger scale, resulting in laws being passed against discrimination based on gender differences.

TEXT AND THEORY

In this book then, I aim at introducing readers to several types of approaches to textual and visual theories through following, tightly and literally, the two essential questions that we all pose of texts: what do we 'see' in a text, and how do we relate to what we see? There is a point to the implication of seeing here. As all texts are made up of signs, whether alphabetical or symbolic – as in math or the plastic arts – we come to texts through seeing. If we also experience an instant recognition, then it is because we have seen it all before. The visual aspect of the text thus goes hand in hand with the experience of memory. Furthermore, this experience is also linked to not only what we have seen before, in some representational way or other, but also to what we have heard before. All successful narratives exploit these dimensions. However, there are also texts that exploit equally successfully an ambiguous dimension, or else they operate with the illusion of something new and original. Here, it is

the task of the analyst, or the interpreter, to assess to what extent what we are dealing with is poetry (which has a high level of ambiguity) or ideology (which will hide its mechanism of domination by default).

AIMS

The Way of the Sign is a book about extraction, about reducing methods of inquiry to the bare bones. In a clear, concise, and dialogic style, I intend to guide students through 10 schools of theory and criticism. The focus is on 'asking' each theory to give its best in the simplest way, by making us see what is at stake in a text and how we might respond to it.

The theories introduced here are of two kinds: some that are more textual-based, such as the school of structuralism and psychoanalysis, and some others that are more contextual-based, such as Marxism and feminism. In other words, while some schools emphasize the text and nothing but the text, thus looking at the internal structure of the text, others emphasize text-production, and thus look at the history of the text. Among these schools some are more theoretically oriented, such as the school of deconstruction, while others are more practically oriented, such as postcolonialism.

Each chapter aims at distinguishing between the schools that propose theoretical approaches to decoding texts and the schools that engage with a critical practice of decoding a text. There will thus be a focus on the interplay between theory (hypothesis, speculation, guessing) and criticism (the practice of theory). In general, we can say that theory appeals to the receptive mind, not the active one, thus generating pleasure at a meta-level of conceptualizing 'practicing' life. For learning 'how to' live, one looks at others, one imitates others, one studies anthropology, one goes to a shrink, or a Tarot reader.

WHOSE SIGN?

Many introductions to theories about the conflation of the idea of a text with the idea of a sign will not tell the story of how both, text and sign, used to be thought of as one unifying communicative element whose whole purpose was to disclose what the meaning of life is, how we get to know it, and by what means. Here, we are talking about going all the way back to the creation of cultures. When the first societal structures were constructed, those in power used to legitimate their ruling over the powerless by making recourse to some divine revelation. Prophets, dream interpreters, and diviners would be called in to interpret the signs, and life would go according to these interpretations. Interpreting a text is thus a cultural practice that entangles the production of the text with various representational models. In other words, a sign as a text and a text as a sign can be thought of in terms of its power to produce a *vision* (what do we see, how are the signs arranged in a structure?) and a *force* (how hard does it hit us?)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

What is important to know about texts and signs is the fact that they are subject to a mode of interpretation which itself also relies on other texts and signs. While the act of interpretation is never an objective activity, the method of going about figuring out what the whole fuss is all about in a text can take various forms. We have systems of thought, each with more or less elaborate forms and strategies for reading protocols. It is also for this reason that, given a specific context, we can talk about when an interpretation seems or is right or wrong. In other words, we activate our subjective sense about a text in the appropriate context.

Thus while texts and signs have arbitrary meanings – they all mean what we all agree that they should all mean – these meanings follow a

context of appropriateness. For example, while in some parts of the world the V sign can mean victory, in some other context it can mean peace. In a third context V can mean both, and much more, and in a fourth context it can mean nothing at all. Thus if we assign meaning to the sign V as Victory, it is simply because we recognize that that is an appropriate thing to do in our own cultural context and from our own specific and perspectival dimension.

Theorists talk about the referentiality of the sign, which means that a sign only has value as long as it refers to some concept or thing. We assign meaning to signs according to cognition – again, based on our ability to recognize what is happening in a situation – and affect – in terms of how it makes us feel. If we recognize the V sign as standing for victory, it makes us kind of happy. For instance, Walter Benn Michaels's book, *The Shape of the Signifier* (2006) tackles the function of the materiality of the sign for reference, precisely as it relates to the distinction between affect and cognition. In other words, as he says: "to understand a text is one thing, to feel its force is another" (Michaels, 2006: 9). Often, it helps little to know how language works formally when the cultural meaning ascribed to objects signify different things for different people. The philosopher Richard Rorty formulates a similar, yet simplified version of the implication of agency for the production of texts. Texts have the power to turn us on (when we get their message) or turn us off (when we don't get the point): "The world does not speak. Only we do" (Rorty, 1989: 6). By the same token, language does not speak itself, only we do.

For instance, we can pronounce the following, allowing ourselves to permute a few signs that make up our worlds: The sign V for Victory will henceforth be replaced by the sign A for Arbitrary. And if we want to make it even more interesting and perhaps even convincing, especially if we seek the approval of a community for changing the meaning of a word at random, then, we could argue that the sign A, being made up of an inverted V and crossed by the first letter following V, namely the small

i, we can create the idea of Victory as Actory, thus emphasizing the playful nature of the sign. Extrapolating from this we could then theorize that all signs act out what we make of them. This exercise illustrates what we can do with signs, both locally, that is, in a textual environment in which we use as tools nothing other than two oblique black lines on white paper, and contextually. By literally placing the V sign on its head, we reverse its meaning thus rendering it more unstable. Victory turned into Actory can thus mean several things: that there is no such thing as victory, it's all matter of attitude, or that meanings are all an act, so there is no truth to anything whatsoever, or that Victory is always Actory and thus never to be trusted, or that Victory is really nothing. What we believe about V comes down to how V makes us feel about it.

If we return to Michaels, what is at stake in following the consequences of replacing ideological difference (based on belief in different things) with identitarian difference (based on our speaking different languages) is a process of ontologizing the argument (as I have done here). As it is a common given that, to begin with, professors and students speak different languages – and that in spite of their beliefs, referentiality works performatively only as a means of indulging, or as Rorty has it, as “redescription.” In other words, diving into what we see happening in a text, and then into searching our own emotions about it, is another way of saying that, while we may think of ourselves as interpreters with poor interpretative skills, no one is really above us, and who can tell us better than ourselves what we see and what we don't.

HALL OF MIRRORS

This introductory book aims at teaching students how to better see what they already sense is there. As a method of teaching, the idea is also to encourage students to pair their readings of literary texts with visual texts. Looking at how some gestures in a picture might enhance the truth

in fiction opens for a tridimensional way of reading, in which all our cognitive capacities are activated on a multi-level plan. If texts are mirrors of our experiences, and images are mirrors of what the eye captures, then, we can talk about hermeneutic processes that take care of themselves.

As texts are made up signs, and as signs act as reflecting tools of representation, then we might as well infer that signs also have the capacity to reflect perfect mirror images of what they create already. Signs have a playful quality, they are never fixed, they can be permuted, and they can be made to change the meanings of many a world. Shakespeare used to say that the purpose of playing is "to hold the mirror up to nature." This means that by juxtaposing text and sign in a mirror image we can also train ourselves to become more aware of relations that appear reversed. Literary texts are made up of the images that an author is able to conjure in our heads. To these images we add our own images, and to these images again we may add images that come from an unrelated context.

Reading is always entering a hall of mirrors. An added image to a verbal text can reflect the message of that text on its head, as it were. In other words, images enhance what we might make of the reversed worldview that a literary text presents us with in its 'upright position.' One can think of theory being this image. Theory is the mirror image of the world-text. More concretely, if we also apply this tridimensional reading to the basic four levels of interpretation that ancient Jewish scholars have developed, and which go through the movement from *pshat* (the simple or literal meaning of the text) to *remez* (the allusive meaning) through *drash* (the solicited or exegetical meaning) and finally to *sod* (the hidden or secret meaning), we might arrive at some interesting conclusions where meaning is concerned. We might see it not only situated in a graspable context, but perhaps, also in a form of transcendence.

This book, then, offers an introduction to how we can think of theory when we hold a mirror up to it. This means that each chapter will end with a relatively short reading of a few canonical texts and films. These texts create and exploit images on all levels: iconic (when the sign has a semblance to that which is signified), indexical (when the sign points to something), symbolic (when the sign represents a concept but does not necessarily look like the concept), and contextual (when the sign maps the territory – for instance, a graveyard sign indicates that here lie the dead). The purpose of the short readings is to suggest that the act of interpretation can offer a synthetic message that operates with the playful duality between holistic (the total) and atomistic (the fragmentary) elements in the text under scrutiny. A pluralistic approach to interpretation can highlight the dynamics between what we make of a text and what the text makes of us.

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