

SEMIOTICS, AESTHETICS AND ARCHITECTURE

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IF ASKED to state in a word or two the essential difference between a semiotic and an aesthetic view of an object, we might say that the first takes the object as a sign of something else while the second takes it as pleasurable in itself. How far does such a preliminary stab take us? Suppose for example that we are looking at a painted number. In the first case we note just enough about it to distinguish it from other signs in the same code, and think only of the quantitative significance its position in that code confers on it; in the second, we ignore this meaning and look only at the shapes that compose it, the colour, texture, handling of the paint and so on, with a view to enjoying what we see. But already we find that what we see has led us beyond the mere object. Even if we suppose that the numerical meaning is irrelevant to our aesthetic enjoyment, and moreover that we can succeed in ignoring this meaning, other referrals are involved. The number will possess a certain typographical style; this style may have meaning for us by virtue of its position in a set of such styles; or, in regard to the style itself, the way in which this particular figure stretches the canons of the style may affect us by its position on a 'scale of variations', ranging from slight to extreme; and all of these factors may be quite critical with respect to our enjoyment. We need only refer to these sets of relationships as 'codes' to feel that we are here involved with semiotics rather than with aesthetics.

These observations should not be interpreted to mean that the two disciplines may be resolved into one. The perception which is respectively the object of analysis of each, 'apprehension of meaning' and 'pleasure in the perception of form', keeps them distinct, even though they have many methods of analysis in common. But the more complex the object—and works of art are among the most culturally complex objects we observe—the more certainly the function of signifying, of referring to a discourse of relationships beyond itself, gains in importance, and the more our simple account of aesthetic perception seems to be engulfed by the notion of semiosis. For the time being, however, semiology has not effectively taken possession of many of the territories on which it has begun to encroach. And although in this study we shall be examining some of the interesting reformulations that occur 'when the semiotic field spills over into the area traditionally belonging to aesthetics',¹ we shall do so on the basis that we are dealing with two distinguishable objectives and two distinct discourses which support them.

Certain of the arts have appeared more promising to semioticians as fields for the application of semiotic analysis, or as systems which could be demonstrated to be semiotic in nature or equivalent in some way to language. One of these is architecture. The case for taking architecture as a semiological system might just be regarded as still in session. However, the negative evidence has been overwhelmingly strong, the case for the defence appears to rest more and more on technicalities, and the audience in the courtroom has diminished to a few staunch specialists. On the other hand, the study of architecture from a semiological *viewpoint* still bears fruit, and its potential for delivering new insights appears to be far from exhausted.

In this paper, although it will lead us to no more positive a conclusion, we shall reconsider certain aspects of this case, since it still in fact embodies one of the central problems of semiotics. This discussion will take us back to aesthetics, in particular to some interactions between aesthetics and semiotics and the implications of these interactions for the aesthetics of architecture. Our source of theory will be two works of Umberto Eco, his book *A Theory of Semiotics* and his article 'Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture'.² We begin with a critical discussion of several points of his general theory.

The task of establishing whether architecture is in itself a semiological system is complicated in no small degree by semiology's own identity problem, and the case appears now strong now weak according to which of the provisional definitions is being used to pull it through. Eco begins³ by reviewing the possibilities offered by the two major definitional modes currently prevailing. These stem from the approaches of the two founding fathers of the science, Saussure and Peirce.

In his prefiguration of the new science of semiology Saussure lists a number of examples of sign systems—forms of politeness, the deaf and dumb alphabet, military signals, and so on—among which *language* appears as just one such system, although it happens to be the most important. Eco observes—and this is crucial to Saussure's definition—that all the systems he mentions are strictly conventionalized systems of *artificial* signs which serve the purposes of human communication. As instruments of communication they are intentional and must be differentiated from groups of natural and unintentional signs, which obviously fail to display the systematic, rule-governed coherence which constitutes *la langue*.

For Eco, the admission to the semiological field of no systems other than communication systems unnecessarily restricts its scope. He perceives the same limitation in the *concept* of the sign proposed by Saussure, who implicitly regards it only as a communication device linking two human beings. Eco considers that the domain of semiotics should also encompass non-intentional signs, symptoms, and signals; and he is unhappy with the restrictions imposed by the Saussurean sign, which can be regarded as binary in two senses: as human

communication device and as the now well-known structural concept of *signifier/signified*.

To escape these limitations Eco turns to Peirce's definition of the sign, which he finds 'semiotically more fruitful'. Semiotics, according to Peirce, involves 'a co-operation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant'. The interpretant can be taken to be a psychological event in the mind of an interpreter (which is how Peirce understood it), but need not be read in this anthropomorphic way. In its most general sense it is another sign translating the first one, a process which may be continued *ad infinitum*. Eco admits that Saussure's definition of the sign may also be interpreted non-anthropomorphically, but claims, apparently in spite of this admission, that it *implicitly* contains the ideas of intentionality and artificiality. The freedom of Peirce's definition from any necessary reference to human communication makes it, in Eco's view, superior to that of Saussure.

A degree of confusion attends Eco's formulation of his own definition of the sign. He states: '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 according to which "something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign by some interpreter"'.⁴ It must be pointed out here that the phrase, 'on the grounds of a previously established social convention', gives the first definition a very different emphasis from that of the second, and one that seems scarcely to line with Eco's stated aim of eliminating, in the interests of greater generality, the tie with artificiality and intentionality. What this aim amounts to is a proposed dehumanization of *both* the emitter of the sign and its interpreter, a course that seems productive of this end in the case of the emitter (in that it allows the inclusion of natural signs and symptoms), but pure sophistry in the case of the interpreter. In order to accomplish this, Eco amends Morris's definition of the sign, which becomes the 'object of a *possible* interpretation by a *possible* interpreter'. But what does the introduction of the word 'possible' achieve here? In order to learn of these possibilities we cannot dispense with actual interpreters actually interpreting, and without this human intervention 'possible interpretation' remains an empty generality.

The proposal to classify natural indices and unintentional human symptoms as 'signs' in a universal semiotic theory seems open to question—at least on the grounds offered by Eco. He gives as an example the connection of red spots on a patient's face with the disease of measles.⁵ The spots, he claims, can legitimately be called a *sign* of measles, not because of the invariability of their occurrence with the condition, but because the 'relationship has been made conventional and has been registered as such in medical treatises as a *semiotic convention*'.

But the mere registration of an observation does not make it a convention in the full sense of the term. People have indeed agreed that this particular disease always displays this visible feature, but the link is not wholly a product of their

agreement. We are not surprised to find that in other cultures the disease bears names very different from 'measles'; this is purely a matter of convention. We would be very surprised, however, to learn of cultures that had agreed to identify it by blue or green spots. Agreement that something *is* the case is not the same as agreement to *make* something the case, and a science which succeeds in uncovering the distinctions which are obscured by the looseness of everyday language is more valuable than one that does not.

There is lack of rigour in Eco's analysis of stimuli.⁶ At the sound of a bell the Pavlovian dog salivates. In Eco's view, although the bell is not a sign of salivation to the dog, it is a sign of the dog's salivation to the doctor conducting the experiment. This is a loose sense of the word sign and only admissible on Eco's definition if the 'agreed social convention' is taken to be an agreement between the doctor and himself (a 'decision' in other words) to use a bell as the stimulus. It is to be noted that Eco is speaking of the sign-value of the bell within the particular experiment, and not of some agreed use of a bell by all Pavlovian experimenters.

After the doctor has successfully conditioned the dog's behaviour and on a subsequent occasion rings the bell, would we say that his ringing of the bell was a sign to himself of the dog's salivation? We need to assure ourselves that the doctor cannot observe the dog, since signification means 'reading' a sign and not simply seeing that one event has caused another. Given this condition then, do we still find this way of speaking acceptable? Consider the case of an external switch to a light in a closed room. Someone turns on the switch. Is this action a sign to him that the light is on? Since this 'reading' of his action in a sense precedes the action, it seems wrong to make the actor take his own action as the *sign* of his reason for performing it. The case is quite different where someone approaches the switch, sees its position and, according to switching conventions, takes it as a sign that the light in the room is on. This is equivalent to someone hearing a bell in a Pavlov institute and taking it as a sign that somewhere a dog is salivating.

The most illuminating aspect of this example is not fully probed by Eco. This concerns why we find it more appropriate to use the word sign in relation to the man's behaviour than in relation to the dog's. We do not say that the ringing of the bell is a sign of salivation to the dog or that it is a sign to the dog to salivate. The first suggests that the dog has humanly organized intelligence, the second that it has choice in the matter.

Even in the case of dog behaviour which is less obviously reflexive than this, we are apt to feel that the word 'sign' is devalued by such a context, or is at best a metaphor. The inescapable implication of the word sign is the existence of the thinking subject with the usual attributes of free will, reflection, and interpretative power.

Any purely causal theory of knowledge and behaviour ultimately eliminates the thinking subject, doctor as well as dog. It consequently eliminates the sign.

The bell rings and because of a previous storage of this event in a memory system named 'doctor', together with a stored trace of the dog's response and a stored correlation between these two traces, there occurs the event that we represent in subjective terms as 'thought of the dog's salvation'. We do not say that the first event is a sign because of the last, any more than we say of a particle set in motion by the impact of another moving particle that the movement of the second makes the movement of the first into a sign. Until the doctor, not as a mechanism of particles but as an interpreting intelligence, is restored to the end of the line, no sequence of automatic transformations no matter how complex, attains what we call 'signification'. The words, 'can be taken as', in Eco's definition, though in the passive, do not emancipate it from 'the taker', who is equivalent to 'the interpreter' in the definition of Morris.

This appears to be leading us towards what Derrida has called 'logocentrism', the idea, false for Derrida, although inescapably embedded in our language, that there is an end point to signification, a 'pure meaning' unmediated by a sign and requiring no further 'interpretant'. But although it bears some connection with this, it is not quite the same. What we have claimed is that the notion of signification has as its foundation the idea of human intelligence, of the human subject. Remove the attribute of freedom that this implies, and the human subject, along with the possibility of the sign, disappears. There remains only a universal mechanism and the transfer of signals.

Eco is aware of this, as his deliberations over the determination of what he calls the lower threshold of semiosis clearly show.⁷ This is the region of impersonal and mechanical transmission of stimuli, the point at which semiotics gives way to information theory, or perhaps just physics. What seems to trouble Eco is whether what lies below this threshold should be included in the domain of semiotics or not. It should not trouble him, but it does so precisely because his own semiotic model tends in the direction of mechanism and impersonality, and this gives him no real criterion by which he can determine this lower cut-off point. His indecision springs from a persistent duality of aim which, it is to be hoped, the above discussion has begun to uncover. It is a duality which infects a great deal of contemporary semiotic theorizing.

The main features of Eco's programme and the contradictions they reveal can thus be set out as follows.

He wishes to construct a Global Semantic Space⁸ on a purely rational, scientific basis. This entails elimination of the subject, or at least the retention of the human emitter and the human receiver of the sign as only 'methodological end-points' of the process. This removes obstacles to the inclusion of signals and symptoms within a general theory. But signs have to do with 'previously agreed social conventions'. And this re-introduces the human subject. Eco is obliged to alternate between attempting to excise the human interpreter by terminological evasions and compromising the concept of convention.

These difficulties manifest themselves again in a somewhat more latent form

in Eco's attempt to apply semiotics to architecture. Let us now review some salient points of this attempt, including the obstructions to an actual reduction of architecture to a semiotic system, and then turn briefly to aesthetics considered from the standpoint of semiotics.

Eco begins his analysis of the architectural sign⁹ by examining the difficulties of applying the theories of the sign developed by Morris and Koenig, judging inapplicable the behaviourist approach which takes the sign as stimulus to a certain response or as something whose meaning has to be verified on the basis of objects that can be observed. Instead, he characterizes it, as we have seen, as a meaning which is codified by a given cultural context. For architecture this meaning (called by Eco the *denoted* meaning) becomes the *function* of the given element. An architectural sign is defined then as 'a sign-vehicle whose denoted meaning is the function it makes possible'. In the example he gives, that of a stair, there is a basic form which can be shown to fall within certain geometric limits. This is the sign-vehicle which, taken as a datum of culture, independently of behaviour ('even if no one is going up that stair at present and . . . even if stairs are never used again by anyone'), and independently of a presumed mental reaction, denotes 'the possibility of going up'.

Resembling in some ways the example of measles, this example invites the criticism that the stair is a 'datum of culture' not because of *convention*, but because it is the form that happens to work. When we cross for instance from England to France and find that 'the possibility of going up' is signified by the same architectural sign-vehicle, we do not attribute this to some happy cultural chance that somehow failed to operate in the case of the verbal sign vehicles 'stair' and 'escalier'. However, there is no doubt that we recognize a stair when we see one, and that we know how to use it.

Beyond its 'denotation' the architectural element has 'connotations'. Eco gives a throne as illustration. As a seat it tells me that I can sit down on it, but as a throne it does more than this. It incorporates signs of its regality, perhaps even to the detriment of its primary function. With this kind of architectural signification Eco is on relatively unproblematic ground. However, he attempts a differentiation of denotation and connotation which excludes all reference to qualitative differences between the ideas signified and depends only on code structure.¹⁰ If a sign is taken to be the union of signifier/signified(1), the denotation is the signified(1). If this union itself forms the signifier of another union, signifier/signified(2), then this second 'signified' is a connotation. In the case of the throne, the physical object with its denotation, 'to be sat on', becomes the signifier of 'royalty', which is thus a connotation. Now although this is an ingenious method of distinction, it does not, as a little reflection will show, achieve the result which Eco requires, that of making it wholly a matter of system rather than of how the addressee chooses to combine and hierarchize his ideas.

The conservative reply to the semiological approach to architecture is to be

found in Scruton's *The Aesthetics of Architecture*.¹¹ A Saussurean framework is assumed, that is to say, a distinction of natural meaning (one event being the sign of another) from non-natural or conventional meaning (language), intentionality and grammar being taken as language's two most important determinants.

Scruton allows that architecture, like language, is intentional, although this appears to involve a departure from the meaning attached to intentional in the linguistic theories whose terms he borrows. Intention there refers to 'intention to communicate'. All Scruton seems to be saying is that architectural forms are deliberate or non-natural. He also allows that architecture is 'grammatical', in the sense that it shows a tendency to govern itself by rules.

But the case can be carried no further, the decisive point against the assimilation to language being the absence of a genuine semantics. Grammar for Scruton (and in this he follows Frege) is not mere autonomous structure; it is ultimately referable to the truth-conditions of the utterances it informs.

Words gain meaning within the predicative context of the sentences which grammar makes possible. If, however, we take an architectural 'word', let us say an arch, and set it in an architectural 'sentence', which might for example be an arcade, the whole does not appear to say anything about the part; no utterance occurs. Architecture, lacking any semantics in this sense, is thus shown to be not a language.

In accord with Eco in relation to causal or behaviourist versions of architectural semiotics, Scruton regards the fact that buildings are natural signs of their function as trivial and obvious, but he also believes that Eco's application of the term 'denotation' amounts to much the same idea. His conclusion is that the *analogy* of language may be used to explain the relationship between the detail (ornament, etc.) of a building and the *compositional* whole in which that detail gains 'significance'. In other words the only legitimate application of language to architecture which he will allow consists in the idea of the language of style.¹²

It is sometimes assumed, since architecture displays syntactical, grammatical, or more generally structural (in the linguistic rather than the engineering sense) characteristics, that these can to some extent be isolated from the more exclusively semantic aspects and more readily analysed. It is of course the overt orderliness of architecture by contrast with some other arts which makes it such an inviting field to the semiologist in the first place. That this side of things presents problems that are as subtly difficult as any of a more semantic nature may be seen by asking the question which directly challenges the possibility of a language/architecture identity: Can we dissect architecture into elements resembling words? The key term is 'resembling', and it is evidently resemblance of function that is demanded.

Buildings may be dissected into constituent elements of many different kinds, from basic constructional segments such as bricks or pre-cast lintels to visually

distinct but composite units such as windows, entrances, or balconies. Language does not at first view seem to show the same flexibility of division. The contrast has been stated in terms of the 'continuity of non-verbal languages and the discreteness of verbal languages'. Garroni¹³ points out, however, that 'even verbal language, for instance in its concrete phonic manifestation, is evidently continuous and not discrete'.

Our initial objection to this might be that the continuity of sound does not override the qualitative differences within it, and that it is in these differences that resides the inherent structure with its capacity to signify. On the other hand it is the semantic 'pre-forming' of our own mentality by our own language that enables us to hear both phonemes and sememes within the sound-stream which to a foreigner is indeed more or less continuous. In other words it is as much the signifying face of the 'indissoluble unity' of signifier/signified as it is the *structure* of signifiers that governs the discreteness of language.

The point that emerges therefore is that a similar semiotic understanding must 'precede' or be presupposed by any attempt to resolve architectural 'language' into words. Any undirected material dissection of the apparently continuous architectural object will not yield this result. We must also bear in mind (and it is a point that Garroni apparently overlooks) that whereas with speech there is unavoidable intention to utter words, whatever the effect of continuity the speaker may produce on those who do not understand him, no such inevitable course appears to lie before the architect when he makes an architectural 'statement'.

These considerations raise what appear to be an intrinsic obstacle, in the form of an analytical circularity, to approaching architecture purely from the 'side of the signifier' and revealing a semiotic system in any simple sense. It seems also to make ends in themselves those characteristics of architecture which can be described as grammatical or syntactical. Evidence of the grammatical nature of architecture, it might incidentally be noted, is usually drawn from the highly rule-governed systems of ornamentation such as classical orders. Linguistic transformations such as the substitution of syntagms within a sentence structure in some ways parallel the variations of such systems. But these parallels become strained and unconvincing or simply cannot be made to work at all outside of these conservative traditions, for example for most of the architecture of the twentieth century.

At this point we might pause to consider whether we are being led into difficulties in regard to the *concept* of architectural semantics by losing sight of the programme of Saussure, which was to treat all social practices, of which language is only one, as semiotic systems. We should not expect architecture, if it is such a system, to resemble language, a different system, in all respects. We should perhaps try to see architecture as making its own 'statement', in its own terms, a statement that we may only with difficulty translate into another semiological system, such as cookery, or clothing, or even language. This has

the air of a salvage operation. The intimate relationship between language and understanding gives it a central and referential place in any family of systems, and this is not easily rationalized away.

There is one word, which has become an indispensable and favoured item in the semiotician's tool-kit, whose neutral, hyper-linguistic air, gives immediate promise of supplying just the concept to deliver us from many of these difficulties. This is the word 'code'. Given that the term is of such central importance to semiotics, it is difficult to explain Eco's apparent reluctance either to define it or to set out the details of any of the vast multitude of codes to which he continually refers. One suspects that a code is in the end too simple a concept and that he has an interest in making it as mysterious and as complex as possible. Thus a code is not just a set of things signifying another set, it is something so elusive that it defies representation. '[T]he system of semantic fields, involved as it is in multiple shiftings, becomes crossed (along another dimension which no graph will succeed in homogenizing with the previous one) by various paths from each sememe.'¹⁴ Far from making more and more codes available to us as a store of interpretative material for future use the semiotician must begin anew with each example, invoking each time the hidden network of the unmanifestable codes, '[I]n almost all cases, the description of fields and semantic branches can only be achieved *when studying the conditions of signification of a given message*.'¹⁵ Nevertheless, Eco urges, 'semiotics must proceed to isolate structures *as if a definitive general structure existed*', but the global structure is doomed to remain simply a 'regulative hypothesis', because 'every time a structure is described something occurs within the universe of signification which no longer makes it completely reliable'.¹⁶ It seems then that, far from being a simplifying instrument, a code may be more complicated and mysterious than language itself. Semiotics in this light begins to look like a style of discussion rather than a science, a style that depends upon sustaining a mythology of underlying codes and global structurality.

In applying these considerations to architecture we feel that, if it is to be treated semiotically, both the nature of its 'statement' and the process of its decoding should differ in some radical way from the results and methods of interpretation and criticism that are already used. The term 'continuity', already cited as an attribute tending to negate true semiosis, perhaps fails to emphasize the qualities which lie at the heart of the problem. What is in question is not so much the continuity of the work of architecture as its non-temporal wholeness, which, unlike intentional communication systems, dictates no order for the reading of its parts. We may seek for some linguistic reflection of this wholeness in say Ricoeur's contrast between the *semiotics of the sign* and the *semantics of the sentence*, which because of its predicative nature enters a realm of meaning which transcends the effects of its constituent signifiers, or in the totality of the *text* which forms a structured whole irreducible to the sentences of which it is composed. Such literary analogies are suggestive, but they remain metaphors

and do not lead us to anything that can directly be taken as semiosis; beyond a certain point we must resort to the hermeneutic methods which are special to architecture. The architectural work seems stubbornly to remain an aesthetic object, a work of art (some only of whose features may be said to relate to communication) which calls for assessment and interpretation within the engendering cultural context by critical rather than scientific means, by aesthetic analysis rather than semiotic.

A sociological explanation of the current widespread appropriation of semiology by architectural theorists is that it is an attempt to offset the 'loss of meaning' brought about by Modernism's jettisoning of history and its adoption of a cold Cartesianism of form which was uncommunicative both of function and of tradition. Modernism has been represented as giving priority to aesthetic value, taken as the formal qualities of the work, and neglecting meaning and legibility. Aesthetics itself, which has never quite broken with its Kantian origins, and viewed as a product of the Enlightenment that went hand in hand with the institutionalizing of art, has been portrayed as an *ideology* whose underlying aim was to transform certain sociologically determined preferences into eternal truths by means of a theory of universal aesthetic judgement which postulated the identity of the cognitive make-up of all human beings.

To defend an aesthetics of architecture as providing a more valid theoretical instrument than semiotics for the elucidation of its productions, and a sounder basis for the practice of the art, might therefore be taken as a reversion to some deserted position of Modernism. But this is to take too narrow a view of aesthetics, to confuse a discipline, which in principle aims at the detached view, with an architectural movement whose inherent imbalance just happened to be more easily diagnosable in its terms. However, we shall not for the moment discuss the aesthetics of architecture as an independent discipline, but take a view of it as it appears to its semiotic colonizers. We shall do this by selecting a few key concepts which demonstrate the interaction. The claimed degree of interaction is interesting.

Although Eco appears to allow that aesthetics is also concerned with non-semiotic aspects of art such as the psychology of artistic creation, the physical-psychological definition of aesthetic enjoyment, and the relationship between art and society, he immediately re-claims these areas for semiology by maintaining that 'all these problems could be dealt with from a semiotic point of view as soon as it is recognized that every code allows for an *aesthetic use* of its elements'.¹⁷ Borrowing from Jakobson, he states that a message assumes an aesthetic function when it is *ambiguous* and *self-focusing*. It is not difficult to see why these two properties should be thrown into prominence when 'the aesthetic' is viewed from the standpoint of semiotics.

The purpose of a sign is to convey a meaning. One might say therefore that it is being most itself as a semiotic device when it does this least ambiguously and with the greatest self-effacement. Since the aesthetic has traditionally been

contrasted with the cognitive, we might try to find the properties of the former by standing the sign with its cognitive properties on its head.

Semiotics defines ambiguity as a mode of violating the rules of the code. Not all ambiguity, however, produces an aesthetic effect. Its result may be pure disorder. But when it focuses attention upon an unexpected flexibility in the language of the text and urges to an interpretative effort, it acts as an introduction to an aesthetic experience. Ambiguity on the expression plane thus forces one, according to Eco, to re-consider the organization of the content. This idea resembles what the Russian formalists called the 'device of making it strange'. Through a 'violation of norms on both the expression and the content plane', the 'text becomes self-focusing;—it directs the attention of the addressee primarily to *its own shape*'.¹⁸

Eco uses the term 'continuum' for the undifferentiated matter from which the signifying units are formed and the term 'expression plane' to cover this whole 'vehicular' side of the model, of which the 'content plane' (also divided into continuum and units) forms the other. In the 'aesthetic text' the attention of the addressee is directed to the *lower levels* of the expression plane. In a building these might be the pattern of the brickwork, its colour and texture, and the microstructures of the material of the bricks and the mortar. It is not altogether clear whether it is partly the social convention of the aesthetic attitude or wholly the self-focusing devices of the aesthetic sign-vehicle which makes the addressee consider these things. Eco would no doubt make it largely the latter. These lower aspects are in decreasing degrees 'coded'. But it is wrong to assume that the levels that we at present consider to be completely uncoded (aspects that we might relegate to the hedonistic or the emotional) will not become so in future as semiotics investigates them. Eco pursues his speculations on the 'culturalization' of matter to some paradoxical conclusions. The new knowledge, he claims, will remove 'many phenomena from the realm of individual "creativity" and "inspiration" and restore them to that of social convention' (an idea which depends upon a distortion of the concept of social convention) but 'it is only when all that can be coded has been coded that actual innovation and real insight into the expressive possibilities of a given communicative medium can occur.'¹⁹ There is here an unconscious allegiance to an old idea that Eco has elsewhere repudiated: that 'true expression' lies in some uncodable realm beyond the boundaries of semiosis.

But semiological aesthetics abounds in old ideas which have been not so much absorbed and reborn as merely re-painted, a change which, in Eco's terms, affects only the lower levels of the expression plane, a metaphor that we will now put to critical use in reference to Modern architecture. This style (we now know it to be such) frequently employed pure, undecorated cubic forms and plane surfaces of large scale which threw into prominence, by their very bareness, the materials of which they were made. We can say that the lower levels of the expression plane of this architecture were of paramount

importance. By contrast, the historical styles displayed more strongly modelled surfaces whose structure of decoration gave the building an imaginative identity (= undercoded significant whole?) which made it less dependent on its materials, just as a stone figure seems independent of its matter to a degree that a cube of stone does not. The traditional building could be said to have a stronger connotative hypersystem than the modern. The result is that the aesthetic enjoyment that we derive from a modern building often seems to perish with the lustre of its surfaces, whereas that derived from a traditional style survives substantial losses of these lower levels of the expression plane.

Eco's programmatic dilemma earlier described re-emerges clearly within this new context of aesthetics. On the one hand he wishes to retain the uniqueness and traditional mystery of the work of art and on the other to assure us of its decodability down to the last particle. He finds it difficult to avoid the conclusion that art communicates too much and therefore does not communicate at all, that it projects a kind of magic spell. As semiotician he manages to resist its spell, seeing through it to the 'semiotic design which cunningly gives the impression of non-semiosis'.

Although codes have something to do with agreed social conventions, there exist, according to Eco, private codes spoken by only one speaker. These are the private idiolects of artists. If a critic isolates the idiolect of a particular work this formula could give rise to 'another work that was absolutely identical with the first', but, however carefully the idiolect is isolated, 'it will never take into full account the form of the work's lower levels'.²⁰ The uniqueness of the work of art has therefore narrowly been preserved. But is this not only a temporary lease of life? When semiotics applies itself to the last of these microstructures there will exist no 'je ne sais quoi' which escapes rational explanation.

Numerous architectural examples of the 'post-modern' employ devices which are analysable by means of the concepts of 'ambiguity', 'self-focusing', and so on, as discussed above. This is less a tribute to the insights of semiotics than an indication of the alertness of architects to the climate of contemporary discourse. A recent work of *The Architecture Studio* in Paris is an apartment block the façade of which is structured (in two senses) by a concrete frame whose rectangular openings may either be panel infill or window. This underlying matrix or 'code' is violated in a number of disturbing ways. Real windows are displaced from the grid so that they are intersected by frame members; rectangles of applied surface colour visually confuse some of these window placements; other surface 'window' shapes with arched heads also slip out of the matrix in various ways, and the same shapes reappear as arch-headed metal grilles which also break rhythm by scale change and by crossing open sections of the frame. A whole upper section of the frame tilts backwards with a feeling of precarious instability. One might say that not only does the building employ a mixture of real and false elements which playfully disrupt our normal architectural expectations, but it also effects a self-parodying cancellation of the

illusion which its own regularities, like those of any building, succeed in projecting. By its 'self-focusing' it makes us aware of its own form and at the same time of the limits of that form.

With such a building we have perhaps moved from structuralism into the self-deconstructing playfulness of post-structuralism, whose mention may allow us to draw together several strands in a final critique of semiotics.

Semiotics is primarily a structuralism which rests upon the binary opposition of form and content. Post-structuralist critics such as Derrida have drawn our attention to the way in which such oppositions ultimately dismantle the logic which they set up; how one term of such an antithesis often covertly inheres in the other. Certain forms of art in this respect challenge the very premises on which semiotics would begin to examine them.

Where form appears to be paramount, and it does so in music, abstract visual art, and architecture, the analysis into content and form, message and expression, when it attempts to isolate 'content' discovers something that begins again to resemble form. The analysis threatens to collapse in upon itself. Such arts ultimately find their appropriate discourse in an aesthetics of form rather than a semiotics.

The aesthetic concepts that we have considered here are, as Eco would readily admit, not new. By fitting them into the fabric of semiotics they have merely been given a superficial renovation of terminology, although their re-location may have forced us to look at them in a fresh way. Beyond this the benefit of the change is hard to assess. The enormous, loosely sketched ground-plan of semiology still requires much laborious building work before we can estimate its worth. And unless we are shown its application in detail to many of the fields which it has imperiously claimed as its own, its promises of explanation, brilliant though the language is in which they are delivered, will cease to command attention.

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- ² Eco, op cit and 'Function and Sign. The Semiotics of Architecture' in *Signs, Symbols, and Architecture* ed Broadbent, Bunt and Jencks (John Wiley and Sons, 1980).
- ³ *A Theory of Semiotics*, p 14
- ⁴ *Ibid*, p. 16 Eco is referring to the definition given by Charles W Morris in his *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (*International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, vol 1 no 2, University of Chicago Press, 1938)
- ⁵ *Ibid*, p 17
- ⁶ *Ibid*, pp 20-1
- ⁷ *Ibid*
- ⁸ *Ibid*, p 316
- ⁹ 'Function and Sign The Semiotics of Architecture'.
- ¹⁰ *A Theory of Semiotics*, pp 54-7
- ¹¹ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*

- (London Methuen & Co, 1979), Ch 7, 'The language of architecture'
- ¹² Ibid , pp 174-8
- ¹³ Emilio Garroni, 'The "Language" of Architecture', in Broadbent, Bunt and Jencks (eds), op cit , p 380
- ¹⁴ *A Theory of Semiotics*, p 125
- ¹⁵ Ibid , p 128
- ¹⁶ Ibid , p 129.
- ¹⁷ Ibid , p 13
- ¹⁸ Ibid , p 264.
- ¹⁹ Ibid , p 269.
- ²⁰ Ibid , p 273.