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Communication and the Semiotics of Space

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The purpose of this article is to explicate some common situations relevant to communication and the semiotics of space. Semiotics provides a systemic way to analyse and understand the characteristics of signs expressing meaning. In everyday life space is rarely considered for its independent qualities, but is more generally taken as a category of conceptions that act as a background, or a context for the meaning of other objects. The study of space as a semiotic phenomenon suggests that the meaning of space, as a sign, is generally understood in relation to other concerns. Communication draws attention to the content of messages while space contributes to the meanings of those messages without being obvious about its role in constructing meaning.

THE SEMIOTICS OF SPACE

Space is a term used to describe dimensional aspects existing between other, significant phenomena. The semiotics of space is a descriptive process enquiring into the relevant significance of the relationships between objects and their spatial contexts. Since semiotics is the disciplined study of the life of *signs* that 'stand for or represent' something, space is generally overlooked as the background to other objects of attention. Space is the paper on which I write my words, the silence that makes musical sounds have meaning in relation to other sounds, and the distance between objects whose meanings are dependent on spatial relations. Space is the background to a priori perception of the world.

The study of space as a semiotic phenomenon suggests that the meaning of space, as a sign, is generally understood in relation to other concerns. In everyday life space is rarely considered for its independent qualities, but is more generally taken as a *category* of conceptions that act as background to other objects and relationships. The foundations of such categorical thinking are shared by many of the greatest systematic thinkers including Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Charles Sanders Peirce (Houser 1992). Peirce, the founder of pragmatism and a systematic theory of semiotics, introduced many categories, including three essential descriptive categories of signs that are best explained by Houser: firstness is that which is as it is independently of anything else. Secondness is that which is as it is relative to something else.

Thirdness is that which is as it is as mediate between two others (ibid.). These categories help describe the meanings of space.

When we speak about the specific qualities of space, we are considering its *firstness*. However, if we consider the quality of space in a room, for example, we are already conceptualizing our enquiry in terms 'relative to something else'. Firstness has been lost to *secondness* because the meaning of the space in a room is necessarily dependent upon the relevance of other objects within that space. Finally, the *thirdness* of space is mediated by a third party such as a person in a particular space; meanings are interpreted from a specific point of view, indicating the practical consequences of the qualities and relationships within a spatial sign system such as a room.

EINSTEIN'S GENERAL THEORY OF RELATIVITY

According to the general theory of relativity, the geometric properties of space are not independent, but are determined by matter (Einstein 1961: 113). How do we even consider the properties of space without objects? Space, in and of itself, does not evoke a reaction until it becomes the background to something perceived as consequential. Time is the expansion of space (ibid.: 134). Space is assumed to be static if it is observed only according to matter or objects that infer some relationship to other objects or matter. Meanings emerge when distinctions are recognized as qualities of space that are independent of objects or matter. That is how we begin to discover space as a sign.

PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION

The frontiers of space begin with the body of an individual subject. The physical limits of the body and its means of conscious perception, through sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and the reasoning mind, all engage in identifying the meanings the things in the world of experience. All of science has been a progression of enhanced abilities to perceive and discover new facts and details that inspire new levels of understanding. For example, human eyes can see a certain range of things, but a microscope extends human vision to reveal a whole level of previously invisible phenomena; similarly, the telescope brings distant objects into view.

Knowledge develops when things are considered at new levels that reveal differences that have meanings. The processes for understanding meanings require the mind to organize information, establish relationships, and make connections between objects, ideas, events and relationships. Perceptual experiences, and 'organization of these experiences into causal relations' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 97) are the processes by which conscious beings establish a

semiotic view of the world. When distinctions are recognized, meanings are based on perceived consequences because understanding is based on one's relationship with the phenomenon in question. The effect of this kind of experience has the potential for accumulating knowledge at various levels.

In contrast, communication requires the representation of human experience, knowledge and understanding that are already mediated in the mind of a communicator. Perception is the capacity to apprehend and interpret the meanings of things both internal and especially external to the self, whereas communication involves a capacity to interpret and represent ideas and information to be shared among other conscious beings. 'Thus perception and thought have this much in common—that both of them have a future horizon and a past horizon and they appear to themselves as temporal, even though they do not move at the same speed or at the same time' (ibid.: 21). Time and space are indistinguishable at this level because communication is the representation of objects and ideas originally perceived in a spatial relationship with the world, but remembered or identified with a particular time when something became meaningful. But spatial relationships inevitably establish the context of perceived causality and meaningfulness, and thus conflate the significance and potency of space and time.

Space plays a less obvious part in constructing meaning than other, more active modes of communication. Communication draws attention to the content of messages, while space contributes to the meanings of those messages without being obvious about its role in constructing meaning.

For Hall (1966: 1), language is more than a 'medium of expression' in that languages represent a 'major element in the formation of thought'. Languages represent different 'culturally patterned sensory screens' (ibid.: 2). For example, he observes, 'Americans and Arabs live in different sensory worlds much of the time and do not use the same senses even to establish most of the distances maintained during conversations' (ibid.: 3). In the same fashion that McLuhan (1965) speaks about technology as extensions of human capacities, Hall recognizes the significance of media and technology developed to improve and specialize particular limits imposed by the nature of the body and its functions. The computer is an enhanced brain, the wheel is better suited for travel than the foot, and the telephone extends the range and distance of the voice (Hall 1966: 3). 'Language extends experience in time and space while writing extends language [thus] ... man has shifted evolution from his body to his extensions', which has accelerated the evolutionary process (ibid.). Therefore, as language and objects that extend perceptual capacities of the body become normal within a given culture, they are integrated into relationships and influence the meaning of space. In the case of communication, media determine a radical departure from the isolating capacities of time and space. Speaking of the television as an 'electronic hearth', Tichi (1991: 42–61) argues that in the late 1940s American families were sold the idea of television through a spatial metaphor suggesting that TV continued the traditional role of the family hearth as a space to

gather and exchange stories. At the same time, media represent reality to such a great extent that audiences believe in the immediate presence of the 'message' while generally ignoring the messenger, such as television technology. The technology of television literally brings distant places close while emulating a *cultural space* from another time and place. What is critical about TV is that the technology obfuscates the remote locations of events because viewers experience television programmes in their homes, so meanings are interpreted locally.

We define space according to its practical consequences in every situation. Imagine a child with a dollhouse and some tiny objects used for furniture. Starting with all the little objects piled randomly in the middle of a model room, the child will begin to arrange them according to a conventional sense of how they would be used. Joseph Brent (personal interview, 28 March 2001) explains that as those objects are arranged within the space, the nature of the objects and their spatial distribution will begin to define the meaning of the space in a room according to the potential uses of the objects and their relationships with people. For example, the meanings produced by a space designated as a classroom can be radically altered; placing seats in a circle avoids the power structure imposed by traditional rows of seats in opposition to a formal speaker's lectern. Thus, the organization of space can be used as an extension of power in human relations. According to Foucault:

> Architecture … is only taken as an element of support, to endure a certain allocation of people in space, a *canalization* of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations. So it is not only considered an element of space, but it especially thought of as a plunge into a field of social relations in which it brings about some specific effects (1993: 169; emphasis original).

Thus, the semiotics of interior space is a symbolic representation created to maintain an established social distribution of power.

PERFORMANCE SPACE

> The performance space—whether it is the stage of the live theatre or the cinema and television screen … transforms the most ordinary and everyday trivia of existence into carriers of significance. Hang an empty picture frame on the wall—and suddenly the texture of the wall makes anything within it significant (Esslin 1987: 38).

All media establish a space for recontextualizing the meanings of things that have different meanings in other contexts. 'When Marcel Duchamp put a urinal onto a pedestal and exhibited

it in an art gallery, he made use of this magical quality of the stage [that] ... proclaims itself of being on exhibition, being pregnant with significance' (Esslin 1987).

The semiotics of mass media are complex spaces insofar as images and stories in a newspaper, TV show or film are already mediated by the producers and production processes before they reach an audience. If the story is fiction, the verisimilitude of the image and the narrative content are intended as poetic and symbolic references to real spaces. If a story is intended as non-fiction, the nature of spatial realities determines that media events represent remote locations. The nature of the media, and the value added by the authoritative voice anchoring elite perceptions, suggest that events are interpreted wherever the audience is.

A camera image defines space through objects, depth of field and inference of what is not in the frame, but is presumably part of the field vision of the camera operator, and assumed to be understood by the audience. The intended meaning of representations of space of a TV image is revealed in the language of the narrator defining the representation of space. The camera (technology) and the operator establish 'semantic categories which a particular language provides for the representation of space' (Nøth 1990: 414). When the audiences watch real or fictitious events occurring in remote locations, the meaning has already been determined for them by professionals using the grammar of representation that attempts to limit the range of interpretations. Thus, the culture of broadcasting, being endowed with control over powerful technology and access to mass audiences, tends to communicate the dominant interpretation of events.

Television has a capacity to communicate and entertain with messages that rely on a shift of time and space. The multiple levels of perspective represented by such programmes demonstrate the post-modern condition of the media. News programmes, for example, report stories that necessarily interpret events that took place in remote locations at an earlier time. Audiences receive narratives that necessarily include the interpretive perspective of those retelling the stories. Finally, the identity and perspective of an individual in the audience will affect the final interpretation of the meaning.

On Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Job Stewart*, comedians imitate news reporters. With Stewart as host and anchorman in New York, fake reporters appear to be speaking to him from remote locations like England or Iraq. But after the report, the camera pulls out to reveal the comedic reporter standing in front of a chroma-key screen used to create a visual illusion so the reporter can appear to be anywhere in the world while actually on stage in New York with Stewart. Thus, the *Daily Show* uses media already represented as news reports, adding another layer of interpretation to stories about real events that have already been told by someone else, and finally re-represented with comic interpretations of a Comedy Central television programme.

One of the *Daily Show* regular features is called, 'Great Moments in Punditry as Read by Children'. Children are presented on stage reading transcripts of discussions between rival

political commentators appearing on the Fox News Channel. The context of the discourse appears ridiculous with children speaking the words of serious adults who are pathetically arguing and speculating about the meanings of recent events. The original context of the text relies upon the assumption that meaning is relevant until it is re-presented by children in an altered context of space and time.

Stewart often depends on archive recordings of news reports to make fun of a political official. Using recent footage of Senator Arlen Spector stating that President Bush had made specific statements that were 'factually incorrect', Stewart followed up with multiple examples of Bush telling blatant lies illustrated by archive footage of earlier news broadcasts (*Daily Show*, 1 July 2005). In another example (broadcast on the *Daily Show*, 7 June 2005), Stewart played footage (from Fox News, 6 February 2005) of Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld defending the notion that the 'insurgency' in Iraq could continue for another 12 years, and then compared these statements with archive footage (from 7 February 2003) when Rumsfeld stated that the war in Iraq 'could last six days, six weeks, but I doubt six months'. In the case of such ironic representations, the manipulation of time and space reveals meanings generated by real narrative continuity, but the truth clearly has no consequences other than audience laughter.

The visual component of TV or film asks the audience to suspend disbelief and ignore its own point of view. In the film *Fargo*, Steve Buscemi plays a violent criminal who buries a suitcase full of ransom money in the snow on the side of a straight, flat, visually endless road. As he digs a hole in the snow, Buscemi looks at a redundantly straight fence line beside the road. With no distinguishing features to define space, Buscemi sticks a plastic window scraper in the snow to mark the location, but the viewer knows he will not be able to find the money later. Again, space appears redundant without objects.

The spatial origins of mediated images happen as chance events, but storytellers define interpretations that fit random events into a context that portends meaning. The semiotics of chance events that may have no meaning in and of themselves evoke a generalizing tendency to ascribe meaning from a given point of view based upon past knowledge and experience (Sheriff 1994: 9).

DEFINING SPATIAL PARADIGMS

The original *Star Trek* TV series used an opening sequence announcing that space was the final frontier. While they were referring to the cosmos outside the earth's atmosphere, the English word 'space' has many possible meanings that all stand for locations or relationships defined in terms of what separates objects or events. Space is paradigmatic; space defines categories of distinctions, and all meanings are based upon distinctions. Meanings established

through spatial relationships are always possible at many levels and from different points of view; but without a fixed point of view there is no hierarchy among possible interpretations. Identities are defined by shared perspectives and by asserting value judgements about *the correct* interpretation of objects or events that actually have no meaning in and of themselves. A tree does not necessarily exist to provide lumber, shade or to be appreciated for its beauty, but all may occur, interpreted as such within a given spatial context. When rain falls, by definition, water drops through space to the ground. If you have planned a picnic, the rain might disrupt your plans. But on a farm with young plants withering in dry ground, the rain may be a positive sign meaning that crops will grow. In other words, language lets us describe information, ideas and experiences, but our words and manner of representation also demonstrate a point of view, a context, a set of conditions, and motives that may limit or extend the meanings of perception grounded in space.

Ultimately, spatial aspects of things in the world have a profound impact on the way we interpret things in our everyday lives. The term *proxemics*, coined by Edward T. Hall, refers to the 'interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture' (1966: 1). For example, space provides a meaningful dimension contributing to the non-verbal aspects of communication based upon cultural norms that dictate appropriate distances for people to stand from each other in specific situations. We individually adjust to many proxemic considerations established by cultural aspects of non-verbal communication. Buildings are designed for people to live and conduct social affairs in. Within these spaces, meaningful settings are constructed in order to carry out social processes according to established notions of how people and objects are organized in space. Consider the differences expressed by spatial relationships in a person's home as opposed to a restaurant, a sales counter in a store, the structural divider between a client and a bank teller, a courtroom, a prison, a playground or a classroom. As mentioned earlier, alternative organizations of a classroom environment can restructure power and relationships between people and objects, and thus affect learning.

NEGOTIATING THE SEMIOTICS OF SPACE

Although we are not always aware of space and its capacity to alter the meanings of things, in some situations such as architecture, humans intentionally construct and control some aspects of space. Kostogriz (2002: 13) uses the term *thirdspace* to describe a learning environment privileging multicultural human perspectives where individuals take up different points of view without a preconceived hierarchy of a dominant ideology. Rather than a geometric conception of objects located in space, thirdspace describes a cognitive space allowing

competition and negotiation of interpretive meanings. In calling attention to a literacy of multiple perspectives, Kostogriz calls for a

> dialectic of multicultural spaces in which we live and learn in order to reveal contradictions between the global and the local, between centres and peripheries, between the individual and the social, between the politics of universal knowledge and situated knowing in everyday practices. In a word, we need a theory (a knowledge) of the production of cultural-semiotic and intellectual spheres in multicultural conditions; one that injects a third dimension into thinking about the possibility of crossing, erasure and 'translation' of the boundaries in the cultural production of identities and textual meanings (ibid.).

Space is generally taken as an area between objects, but thirdspace refers to a cognitive space where the meaning of a sign is negotiable.

The purpose of this paper has been to explicate some common issues of the semiotics of space. There are many other dimensions of space provoked by concepts such as quantum physics and string theory that would require study beyond the scope of this project. Semiotics provides a system to organize and understand the characteristics according to similarity and differences of signs expressing meaning. When we observe space as a sign, new ways of understanding are possible, and the meanings of things can be discussed as they pertain to our everyday lives. Immediate experiences in space tend to appear uniform because of a habit of seeing things from a limited perspective. Mediated space must be understood in consideration of multiple levels of representation. The *secondness* of space as background to other signs needs to be considered in the process of logical, semiotic analysis intended to reveal or clarify the nature of meaning.

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