Interpreting George W. Bush:
A Socio-Semiotic Illustration and a Performative Extension

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In this article I analyze the official portrait of U.S. President George W. Bush to exemplify my previous theoretical elaboration of an interpretive analytics of the sign based on socio-semiotics and symbolic interactionism. President Bush’s official portrait is analyzed paradigmatically and syntagmatically as a complex multimodal text. I examine this sign diachronically by reflecting on the processes of production, distribution, and especially consumption of the portrait occurring throughout his tenure and within the exo-semiotic context of the American and World society at the turn of the millennium. In particular, I focus on the socio-semiotic process of interpretation by building upon Start Hall’s coding/decoding model. Thus, I offer an overview of how hegemonic, oppositional, and negotiated codes are constituted by and in turn constitute discourses about the objects represented in this picture. In conclusion, I examine how social semiotics can be used to view semiosis as an everyday socio-political performance.

As I argued elsewhere (see Vannini this volume) following Denzin (1987, 1992) and Gottdiener (1995), symbolic interactionism is in dire need of a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the sign that builds upon recent developments within ‘moderate’ versions of cultural studies, post-structuralism, and postmodern theory (Rosenau 1986; also see Best and Kellner 1991) without negating the philosophical foundations of pragmatism. My attempt to work toward an interpretive analytics of the sign building upon my reading of Peircean semiotics, contemporary social semiotics, and critical discourse theory is, I hope, a step in the direction suggested by Denzin (1987, 1992, 2003). Nevertheless, many questions have been left unanswered in my admittedly abstract theoretical exploration. To begin with, we need to develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of codes and better elucidate the relation between codes and ideological discourse formations need to be elucidated. Secondly, we need to give due consideration to theoretically guided research methodologies. Thirdly, the polemical potential of a socio-semiotic symbolic interactionism needs to be emphasized through an empirical illustration. And fourthly, the relation
between socio-semiotics and performance (Denzin 2003) needs to be given proper attention if we are to move toward a study of cultural practices as performances rather than text. The purpose of this briefer article, then, is to address each of these four objectives [1].

The object of the present illustration will be the official portrait of U.S. President George W. Bush. The reason for choosing this sign over others is twofold. First, the object portrayed in such photograph is one familiar to all readers. The vast amount of discourses readily available for the semiotician interested in the study of this sign makes the job easier. Furthermore, the political diversity and intensity of these discourses highlights the ideological rootedness of semiotic codes. Secondly, President Bush is undoubtedly a controversial figure of our difficult historical times. A socio-semiotic study of how his image could be interpreted emphasizes the political and polemical relevance of this approach. Clearly, the breadth of my illustration is limited by the space allotted here. My principal argument, however, is that despite the limitless amount of available codes, we can group the potential whole of them in three categories – what Stuart Hall (1980) has named hegemonic, oppositional, and negotiated codes. Therefore, I divide the main body of this paper into three sections corresponding to these three codes. In closing, I briefly discuss how social semiotics can be combined with performative cultural studies.

**George W. Bush: A Uniter and a Divider**

George W. Bush, son of former President George H. W. Bush, is the 43rd President of the United States of America. Currently serving his first term at the time of writing, he was sworn into office on January 20, 2001. The official portrait of the US President, reproduced here courtesy of The White House [2], is found in all federal governmental offices throughout a President’s entire period of tenure. This portrait
of George W. Bush is a sign [3] and as such it can be analyzed syntagmatically and paradigmatically. As I do so in what follows, I refer the reader to the triangular model of the sign depicted in Figure 1 in my preceding article. Before I begin discussing hegemonic, oppositional, and negotiated codes, I briefly summarize here below what a socio-semiotic and symbolic interactionist study ought to encompass and how.

The human shape (R [representamen]) shown above represents George W. Bush (O [object]) and gives rise to a number of possible interpretants (I) in the minds of its viewers. The picture was produced sometime in late 2000 and despite the fact that it represents the same object now in May 2003 as it did then, it has been giving rise to different interpretants throughout this time. As argued, social semiotics is a diachronic enterprise. A *diachronic* socio-semiotic analytics must take into consideration the (recent) history of present semiotic relations and examine the genealogy (Foucault 1980) of signs and their exo-semiotic context. Longitudinal studies are therefore particularly illuminating, but even studies conducted at one point in time are important as long as consideration is given to diachrony.

Socio-semiotic analytics must take into consideration the process of *production, distribution, and consumption of signs*. Unfortunately, however, the disciplines of sociology, communication, and cultural studies blatantly neglect the study of distribution practices (Kellner 1995) and traditionally privileged the decontextualized positivistic study of media effects (Carey 1989). Furthermore, much too often empirical studies tend to isolate production, distribution, or consumption from one another, consequently more or less explicitly supporting deterministic views oblivious of the holism of the communication process. An example of this is the production of culture approach in mainstream sociology (Hirsch 1972), but even cultural studies informed by historical materialism is not exempt from similar criticism (Kellner 1995). Other traditions, instead, are guilty of romanticizing either cultural products or their audiences, while isolating one from the other, without
offering any form of informed criticism (Kellner 1995). Consequently, a socio-semiotic symbolic interactionism must be mindful of the dynamics of a comprehensive approach to semiosis (Denzin 1992).

Methodologically, it is never enough for a socio-semiotic writer alone to offer his/her own interpretation either. This is a common mistake in structural semiology, but even poststructuralists and deconstructionists are guilty of narcissistic self-indulgence and of neglecting the study of social agents’ practices. For this purpose, socio-semiotic investigation should be conducted in combination with a variety of other methodologies including critical discourse analysis, focus group interviewing, various ethnographic methods, and historical comparative methods.

Maximum attention should be given to how various ideological discourse formations enter the semiotic process, and especially to connotation. The study of connotation, however, should be grounded in a pragmatic understanding of the multiple functions of a sign (Eco 1976). As Gottdiener (1985) remarks, attention should be given to the use-value, exchange-value, and symbolic value of a sign. This is especially important in social semiotics – which, as a pragmatic enterprise, refuses the idealism of those who proclaim the death of meaning and the primacy of signifiers (e.g. Baudrillard 1983).

Socio-semiotic analytics should also be multi-modal and intertextual, as communication often occurs through a variety of genres, modes, and media whose messages can only be understood in relation to one another (Van Dijk 1997a, 1997b). Finally, socio-semiotic analytics should operate at both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic level of signification. Syntagmatic analysis, preferred by structural semiologists, looks at the spatial, sequential, and conceptual relation among the parts of a text. Paradigmatic analysis, which socio-semiotics has ‘rediscovered,’ instead:

seeks to identify the various paradigms (or pre-existing sets of signifiers) which underlie the manifest content of texts. This […] involves a consideration of the positive or negative
connotations of each signifier (revealed through the use of one signifier rather than another),
and the existence of ‘underlying’ thematic paradigms (e.g. binary oppositions such as
*public/private*). ‘Paradigmatic relations’ are the oppositions and contrasts between the
signifiers that belong to the same set from which those used in the text were drawn
(Chandler 2002 [4]).

There are different ways of reporting results of socio-semiotic interpretive analytic studies,
and even if the research focus is directed only to one aspect of semiotic interaction, it is important
to keep in mind the greater theoretical basis of socio-semiotics. As stated above, in what follows I
focus my attention especially on Stuart Hall’s (1980) theoretical treatment of codes and the socio-
semiotic model of the sign presented here. In doing so, I also discuss within each section other
important concepts.

*Hegemonic Readings*

Semiosic processes of production (or construction), distribution (or exchange), and
consumption (or use/interpretation) of this photograph do not occur in isolation from the
exosemiotic context and the larger system of signs about the Presidency in which they are
embedded. Hardly anyone in North America has seen and heard of George W. Bush only through
the photograph reproduced above. Even for a member of our society who is not interested in
politics it is virtually impossible to escape all the discourses about our nation’s President. The vast
number of discourses and ideological discourse formations about our President that are available to
social agents gives rise to a large number of possible interpretants. That is, the photograph denotes
an object, George W. Bush, who has a univocal corporeal existence. But the photograph also
connotes a number of meanings to which various evaluations are attached by social agents and
interpretive communities. There are certain connotations of this photograph which can be said to
favor its producers by serving their political interests. This is an important point that needs to be
made by a socio-semiotician: the producers of this sign had a clear agenda in producing this picture and in distributing it free of charge. Let us examine how the production of this photograph is linked to the interpretation preferred by its producers.

The photograph was taken by Eric Draper for the White House and was titled “Official Portrait of President George W. Bush” to convey the idea that this is our country’s President. A syntagmatic analysis of the portrait reveals a number of props that are strategically used to manage a certain impression, or in other words, to connote certain meanings. The President is portrayed smiling, as an approachable and friendly server of the citizens of his country. In his background stands an American flag which confers the idea that he is a patriotic American citizen. This is an impression also reinforced by the suddenly popular flag-shaped pin he wears on his lapel. The conservative-patterned business necktie and suit connote the idea that his role of administering the country is a formal, official, and important one.

A paradigmatic analysis helps us reflect on how these ‘props’ relate to other absent elements. Some European heads of state have their official portrait taken while standing before a national flag and the European Union flag, for instance. But there is only one flag here; absent are flags of other countries and even coalitions of which the USA is a member (NATO, UN, etc.). Think of the possible ideas that the display of the American and the UN flag together, for example, would convey: ‘is he the leader of the United Nations as well?’, ‘is he a proud server of the United Nations as well,’ etc. The choice to display the American flag exclusively connotes a nationalistic pride in America’s independence from other nations and coalitions of nations. Similar things could be said for other props. The US President is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and often wears military uniforms at certain functions. Yet the business attire is chosen over the army suit for the official portrait to connote the idea that our country is a capitalist democracy and not a militaristic regime. Other dresses could have been chosen. Certain countries portray their leaders in
traditional garment, but such choice would be inappropriate in the American case because of the multitude of ethnic traditions he means to represent. The background chosen is that of an office, possibly to connote the idea that our President is ‘working’ for us. This is not an inane point. Think of what a picture of the President playing golf would connote. And yet, during times of crises the President is often portrayed in photographs relaxing: playing golf, petting his dog, or working outdoors at his ranch to connote the idea that ‘everything is under control’ as the President clearly has the peace of mind necessary to relax.

What then is the reading preferred by the producers of this sign? Arguably what is being conveyed here is that President George W. Bush is a patriot, a democratic leader and servant of the people, and a businessman. To validate this impression let us take a look at the impression-management practices of the White House. In order to do so we may investigate a number of different discourses which can help us decode the meaning of a sign. Discourses, as I explained in my previous article, are the logonomic systems which make interpretation possible. In any socio-semiotic analysis of interpretive practices it is important to reproduce the text of these discourses at least in part.

A quick look at the White House Internet website confirms the impression I mentioned above. The photograph is here accompanied by written text, namely by what can be taken as an official biography of George W. Bush. These brief biographical notes are produced by the White House, and it is clear that the intention of the producers of this text is to offer legitimation for the President. George W. Bush is described as a “compassionate conservative who shaped public policy based on the principles of limited government, personal responsibilities, strong families, and local control.” The text continues by asserting that George W. Bush graduated from Yale University and then served as an F-102 fighter pilot in the Texas Air National Guard. He also received an MBA from Harvard, “began a career in the energy business,” worked “on his father’s successful 1988
presidential campaign” and then “assembled the group of partners that purchased the Texas Rangers baseball franchise in 1989.” He was then elected Governor of Texas and “became the first Governor of Texas to be elected to consecutive four-year terms.” President George W. Bush, the biography continues:

- has signed into law bold initiatives to improve public schools by raising standards, requiring accountability, and strengthening local control. He has signed tax relief that provided rebate checks and lower tax rates for everyone who pays income taxes in America. He has increased pay and benefits for America's military and is working to save and strengthen Social Security and Medicare. He is also committed to ushering in a responsibility era in America, and has called on all Americans to be “citizens, not spectators; citizens, not subjects; responsible citizens building communities of service and a Nation of character [5].

After the attacks of September 11, 2001 George W. Bush “declared war against terror and has made victory in the war on terrorism and the advance of human freedom the priorities of his Administration.” He has led “a great coalition of nations” to the liberation of the people of Afghanistan “from the brutal Taliban regime and denied Al Qaeda its safe haven of operations.” The flag standing in the background of the official portrait of President Bush stands for a nation and a people that, in his words “will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We [the American people] will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.”

Of course the biography of President George W. Bush I just reported is a text that is different from the official portrait, but I chose to discuss it because it provides insight into how the producers of the photograph intend the object of this representation to be interpreted. Perhaps, borrowing from a presidential campaign slogan, he is strategically managing the impression of being “a uniter, not a divider.” Incidentally, this look into the White House’s biography of our President
also provides a glance into the political, economic, and historical exosemiotic context of the sign under scrutiny here [6]. As suggested, a socio-semiotic investigation should take place against the background of a specific exo-semiotic context. More on the exo-semiotic context of our times will be said later.

The symbolic value of the official portrait of President Bush lies in his being a ‘uniter, not a divider.’ This is basically how the producers of this sign prefer consumers to interpret the meanings of the photograph. The use value of this photograph, for its producers, lies in the positive impression it tries to make, since this positive impression can obviously benefit the Bush team greatly in terms of approval ratings, political and diplomatic support, and so forth. For this reason, this sign is distributed gratis (its exchange value) to all governmental offices in this country and to all American diplomatic missions across the world with the goal of widening the recognition and legitimacy of our President.

Obviously, if this is the reading preferred by the producers of this image, these connotations are but highly ideological. An institutional ideological discursive formation (the White House’s) is in other words stipulating a production, distribution, and consumption regime for this photograph. This process is not occurring exclusively within the structures of signification, but is in actuality a motivated interactive act in which a group of people have agentically engaged with a clear purpose in mind. If there were no possibility for interpretation, meaning would arise from the structural relation between O and R, and the producers of this sign (or text) would easily communicate their preferred meanings with no possibility for interpretive interaction. But following Peircean semiotics we know that this is not the case. Of course some social agents will interpret the sign very much like the White House prefers. Stuart Hall (1980) calls such a mode of interpretation hegemonic or dominant. At this level interpretations “appear coterminous with what is given, what is ‘natural’, or ‘inevitable’, ‘taken for granted about the social order’” (Hall 1980, p. 137).
If we were to represent this on a figure we would draw an arrow that starts somewhat high on the O-R axis (higher points indicate higher ideological density) and connects with the I-R axis at a point that is relatively close to the R apex. This is to indicate that there is little separation between the preferred reading of the representamen and the interpretant. If the relation between O and R were low in ideological density the arrow would instead start somewhat low on the O-R axis, that is, somewhere close to the (ideal) ‘pure materiality’ of the object. But what if the interpretation of the photograph differs sharply from the reading preferred by the producers of this sign? This is the case of oppositional readings, to which I now turn.

*The Oppositional Code*

Going back to Stuart Hall’s framework, we find another code: the oppositional code, where “the message is retotalized within some alternative framework” (Hall 1980, p. 138). At this level events “which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here ‘the politics of signification’ – the struggle in discourse – is joined” (Hall 1980, p. 138). *Oppositional readings are possible because alternative ideological discourse formations always exist.* Hegemonies are partial and unstable alliances of institutionalized ideological discourse formations and as such they are never ‘all there is’ (Gramsci 1971; Hodge and Kress 1988). Interpretive communities in fact may share oppositional codes through which social agents interpret and resist the meanings of signs as intended by their producers. Of course, these oppositional readings struggle against the legitimacy of the power of the dominant groups (Hodge and Kress 1988). In a democratic society, for example, it is difficult but still possible to contest institutional discourses (Gramsci 1971). Let us then take a look at a number of different possible interpretants that the image of George W. Bush may give rise to in the minds of members of our society. Whereas I relied on Bush’s biography published on the White House website to discuss preferred readings of the object under scrutiny (the image of George W. Bush), here I rely on a set of oppositional readings
contained in Douglas Kellner’s recent books *Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and a Stolen Election* (Kellner 2001), and *From 9/11 and Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy* (Kellner 2003a). In these excellent works Kellner has collected a large amount of discourses of and about the President from which I draw here.

As Kellner points out, the sources of information through which Americans acquire knowledge about President Bush are highly responsible for solidifying or dismantling the basis of his authority. Mostly, American citizens care about politics only peripherally and their interest peaks only during national or international crises when fear raises interest (see Altheide 2002). Television networks in particular are aware of the comparatively low political involvement of most of their viewers, and for this reason engaging political programming is now quite scarce. Because the bottom-line goal of commercial mass media is to sell viewers to advertising companies in order to maximize profits, the goal of programming is to increase audience numbers rather than providing sound information. This has over the years translated in the spectacularization of the political scene (Kellner 2003b). The political spectacle is meant to entertain and never bore viewers. Scandals (especially character flaws and sexual escapades), drama, personal stories, sensationalism, sound-bites, photo-op images, and staged media events are quicker, easier, and more captivating for the average viewer than the typical intricacies of the political process. The superficial knowledge that the majority of viewers have translates into indirect, unintentional support for existing hegemonies. In other words, if citizens/viewers lack the knowledge that is necessary to question the official and ideological versions of political truths (such as the image of the President), oppositional readings will be rare. Hence the production and distribution of knowledge, like knowledge about the presidency will support the existing ideological discursive order and facilitate the legitimation of its preferred readings at the level of sign consumption. However, alternative media perhaps less obsessed with sensationalistic spectacle and more interested in political insight do exist. Kellner (2001, 2003a)
mentions in particular ‘left-bank books’ and Internet websites from which alternative interpretations of the President’s image and oppositional discourse can be gathered. In what follows I list a few possible interpretants that the image of the President as represented in the official portrait could give rise, based on the discourses collected from Kellner (2001, 2003a) [7].

As Blumer has taught us, we act toward things on the basis of what these things mean for us. For some President Bush is a uniter, not a divider. For these social agents the sight of his official portrait could give rise to sentiments of pride in our nation, in our flag, and in the democratic ideals for which the institution of the Presidency stands. But for others things might be radically different. The image of George W. Bush, for example, could connote corporate favoritism disguised in his image of alleged successful entrepreneurial skills. This interpretant could be given rise by the negotiation of meaning through oppositional ideological discourse formations. Let us look at some of these briefly. For example, information exists on how George W. Bush, both as Texas Governor and as President, heavily pandered to the corporate interests of the groups who financed his electoral campaigns (Kellner, 2003a). Knowledge of the consequences of deregulation, relaxation of environmental standards, and de-taxation practices in which Bush engaged especially after 9/11 would work as an oppositional ideological discursive formation through which his image can be interpreted. Of course, the preferred reading of the White House is that the President is a shrewd laissez-faire economist and businessman, while being a ‘compassionate conservative.’ During the presidential campaign the Bush-Cheney team, for example, made numerous references to the fact that the duo were two successful businessmen. But an alternative interpretation would point out to the following: the role played by the Bush family in the Silverado S&L scandal; the financial failure of George W. Bush’s Arbusto oil company; his alleged insider trading activities behind the Arbusto takeover by Harken Energy Corporation; his investment on the Texas Rangers baseball franchise made from the alleged Harken insider trading gains and his consequent stock sellout after the
franchise gained value from a new stadium for which he pushed (see Kellner 2003a). Accurate knowledge of our current economic scenario, namely of our once again ballooning federal budget deficit, the loss of 1,800,000 jobs, of the class-based inequalities of his tax cuts, and of a financial recession that has cost Wall Street stocks to lose approximately a third of their 1999 value might also lead one to question President Bush’s entrepreneur image.

It is extremely interesting to think in diachronic terms about the meanings connoted by the image of George W. Bush in relation to his alleged patriotism and about the exo-semiotic context of our times. Whereas the White House biography examined above points to the President’s continuous hard stance and success against terrorism, yet another alternative ideological discourse formation might lead someone to think of President Bush himself as a terrorist. Certainly a few million people across the globe might have felt that way if the war in Iraq had been shown on network TV as a violent carnival of blood rather than an orgiastic spectacle of dominating bodies, speed, and technology. And a few people might even suggest that possible future terrorist acts against America might be chalked up to American Armed Forces basically acting alone under the President’s pressure without the support of the international community, but this interpretant of his anti-patriotism could also be given rise by reflecting on his personal past.

Indeed, few on 10/11/2001 remembered how George Junior shirked the Vietnam War draft, and how he went AWOL from the Texas Air National Guard for about a year and was later basically removed from duty. And even fewer people back then were in possession of the knowledge that the Osama Bin Laden family had a partnership in George W. Bush’s Arbusto oil company. Yet, at the time the nation saw the President as a leader as it was in desperate need of one: as the Armed Forces were gaining some ground in Afghanistan his mass media-manufactured leadership image helped him secure unprecedented approval ratings and the power to push small-scale agendas outside the mass media’s attention radar almost autocratically. But more change was
underway. His image of a successful economic leader had started to decrease as the economy worsened and his military skills were beginning to be questioned as Osama Bin Laden was and still is nowhere to be found. The war on Iraq, functioning as a diversion strategy and as an attempt to gain control of oil reserves and reward friendly supporters through lucrative contracts, was however to stir up extensive anti-President and anti-war protests. As people everywhere in the world were taking to the streets to protest the war, in France the timely publication of *Ben Laden: La Verité Interdite* (Brisard and Dasquie 2001) told a story of how the Bush administration blocked ongoing anti-terrorism investigations under the pressure of oil companies while reaching deals with the Taliban regime over oil and pipeline deals and even over not surrendering Osama Bin Laden.

Today, with the military operation in Iraq oriented toward the rebuilding of an America-friendly regime, President Bush’s image is once again a favorable one for a vast majority of Americans. Certainly this image has undergone much change from the time of the frequent accusations of cocaine abuse abundant during the 2000 campaign, and from the seemingly distant time of the Florida fiasco, and then on through the post 9/11 epic charisma he exuded, and finally to our post-war days.

As said, these alternative ideological discursive formations through which oppositional interpretants may rise are far from being commonly shared. Meaning arises out of the interaction that we have with our fellows (Blumer 1969), but most of our fellows seem to pay little attention to counter-hegemonic ideologies. In part it is because the most commonly frequented mass media hardly ever distribute knowledge that would disempower the Presidency – especially at a time when most citizens seem to be blindly in need of leadership and vendetta rather than reasoned long-term strategy. In part it may also be because of the concerted efforts of those in power to legitimize their own reality construction (Herman and Chomsky 1988). The reasons abound and this is not the place to discern and weigh all of these.
The point here is that oppositional readings are possible: the O-R relation may give rise to interpretants which ideologically clash with the preferred readings of sign producers whenever interpreters make sense of objects and their representations through alternative ideological discourse formations. Hence the symbolic value of the flags, the President’s trustworthy smile, and his business attire may not be patriotism, democracy, and prosperity but Machiavellian connivance, autocratic subterfuge, and inequality. Hence the official portrait’s use value may not be that of fostering legitimacy but rather than of sanctifying domination through propaganda. Such interpretants ‘deconstruct’ the ideological results intended by producers of the O-R semiotic relation. If we were to represent this on a figure which shows the sign model like in figure 1 we would draw the arrow as falling from its high location on the O-R axis down toward a point close to O on the O-I axis. Such profound oppositional readings, that is, almost see the ‘materiality’ of the object (George W. Bush as an object in semiosis).

Let me be clear, I do not mean to suggest that oppositional readings are true readings. Of course the alternative reading is also an ideological reading, and there is no such thing as the ‘true’ reading, but simply a counter-hegemonic response to the producers of the sign. We must keep in mind that what makes an interpretation counter-hegemonic is not its social class foundation, but the fact that it contradicts a preferred reading. For instance, when revolutionary countercultural signs and texts are co-opted by mainstream market and incorporated into popular culture the same oppositional reading process occurs. For example, Gottdiener (1985) examines how anarchist punk music and style is used by large music corporations in opposition to what its producers intended it in order to commodify it and sell it to larger audiences. The original groups of punk musicians and fans constituted a hegemonic alliance (hence they had power over the production of meaning of punk) which had to deal with the force of pop music marketers. In short, we should never believe that power is always in the hands of the same usual suspects, or that it works always in the same direction unchallenged. Power is not an
essence but rather a relation of forces (Foucault 1980). As long as there is semiotic interaction, at any level and in any context, there is a power relation.

_The Negotiated Code_

Stuart Hall (1980) explains that yet another code exists: the negotiated code. The negotiated code is full of contradictions as bits of information are always dialectically contrasted with one another. At this level alternative readings clash with the socially preferred reading of the text. To simplify, we can think of the negotiated code as a more moderate position that is distinct from the extremes of the dominant and the oppositional codes. These three codes are ‘ideal types’ in the Weberian sense. Hardly ever can a reading be fully oppositional or fully dominant or fully negotiated. This shows once again why it is accurate to represent the semiotic process on a triangular area and why arrows representing codes never intersect with apexes of the triangle. When interpretation exists at the negotiated code arrows may inch closer toward the I apex, falling or rising (depending on their ideological density) on the R-I axis or O-I axis. _In a sense there is in practice some level of negotiation for all three codes._ Because there are virtually infinite ways to negotiate among contrasting ideological discourse formations there are virtually infinite codes and thus these three codes function mostly as ideal types. Because ideology enters the O-R axis but also the I-R and the I-O axis the transcendental signified object, the hyperreal (or immaterial) representamen, and the pure and omniscient interpretant are but logical impossibilities. Then, because semiosis is never pure and exclusive materiality, pure or exclusive signification, or free interpretation, it is imperative to study semiosis as interaction: the interaction between things, their meanings, and their users; the interaction between producers, distributors, and consumers of signs; the interaction between past, present, and future semiotic processes; the interaction between materiality, symbolism, and meaning; and between signs, discursive practices, and exosemiotic conditions.
The Socio-Semiotics of Performance

Social semiotics is a pragmatic and progressive theoretical enterprise meant to constitute emancipatory discourses leading to cultural justice. In this sense, social semiotics differs radically from structural semiology, a discipline marked ever since Saussure’s time by a not-so-thin veneer of objectivism. But, as I argue, social semiotics also differs from deconstruction insofar as the latter much too often risks being paralyzed by its implicit political nihilism. Because social semiotics directly points its attention to semiosis and the power relations existing throughout this communicative process, I believe that the marriage between symbolic interactionism and socio-semiotics is a natural one. This socio-semiotic interactionism sees everyday life as performance, that is, “as struggle, as an intervention, as breaking and remaking, as kinesis, as a sociopolitical act” (Conquergood 1998, p. 32 cited in Denzin 2003, p. 188). Furthermore, this socio-semiotic interactionism not only performs culture as it writes it, but it also negates the possibility that culture can be written as a text, by emphasizing the multimodality of semiosis. Whereas Saussurean semiology reduced semiosis to grammar, social semiotics views semiotic interaction as a performance and an interpretive event by studying actors, props, stages, scripts, stories, and goals. In this sense I believe that a socio-semiotic interactionism functions very much as a sympathetic response to Norman Denzin’s (2003) ‘call to performance.’

My illustration of how a socio-semiotic study of the official portrait of President Bush could be conducted is clearly embedded in language, but it does not reduce other modes and genres of communication to linguistic grammar. Indeed, the argument could be made that my illustration shares much with the analytic methods used in visual sociology, discourse analysis, and Goffmanian dramaturgy. However, more than a bricolage of existing methods and approaches to the study of conduct, discourse, and material culture, we ought to see social semiotics and socio-semiotic interactionism as a holistic approach to understanding performativity and performance, in other
words, to the doing and the done, to interaction, discourse, and material culture (Denzin 2003, p. 190).

As Denzin (2003) argues, in its seventh moment symbolic interactionism ought to be transcending earlier understandings of culture as text and should posit symbolic interaction as construction (poiesis), imitation (mimesis), and movement (kinesis) (also see Conquergood 1998), or more simply as performance. Following Denzin’s rethinking of the relationship between performance and cultural processes, performance and ethnographic praxis, performance and hermeneutics, performance and scholarly representation, and performance and cultural politics, I argue that socio-semiotic interactionism “energizes a radical participatory democratic vision for this new century” (Denzin 2003, p. 193). Indeed, socio-semiotic interactionism sees the production of culture as a process, with its close attention to diachronic semiosis. Secondly, a socio-semiotic interactionism ought to study semiosis as praxis (Thibault 1991). In this sense, there exist two types of socio-semioticians: the scholarly writer and the social agents whose semiosic processes are studied through various combinations of qualitative methodology. The scholarly socio-semiotician’s work is thus necessarily a form of collaboration, or coperformance (see Conquergood 1991), with those who are being studied. Their collaborative product ought not to be judged along the positivistic canons of validity and reliability, but rather along the more pragmatic and emancipatory dimension of its value in bringing about knowledge and critical awareness (Giroux 2001). Thirdly, and this should be clear by now, a socio-semiotic interactionism is always a method of critical hermeneutic interpretation and understanding. Fourthly, just as social semiotics believes that there ought not to be privileged modes or genres of communication in everyday semiosis interaction, there should not be preferred modes of emancipatory discourse and practice. For example, Hodge and Kress (1988) reported on the rebellious practices of culture jammers [8] engaged on modifying and mutilating messages contained on street advertising banners and billboards. These activities are quintessentially
socio-semiotic in nature as much as they are performative acts of open rebellion to cultural hegemonies. This leads us to the final point brought up by Denzin (2003): the role of a seventh-moment interactionism in which performance works as cultural struggle. Socio-semiotic interactionism’s emancipatory potential lies precisely in its interpretive analytics of power relations (see Foucault 1980) and in its treatment of the cultural as the site of political action. The strength of such a socio-semiotic interactionism is thus to be found in its existential rediscovery of the meaning of signifieds and in the condemnation of the imperialistic commodification of everyday life (Mills 1963).

Endnotes

[1] The present article is then meant to be read in conjunction with my previous paper (see Vannini this volume). Therefore, I abstain from repeating the meaning of concepts already explained and I take for granted that the reader already understands the fundamental dynamics of a socio-semiotic and symbolic interactionist interpretive analytics of the sign. The nature of this article, therefore, is fully pedagogic.

[2] The picture reported here is taken from the White House official website at:

http://www.whitehouse.gov/president/gwbbio.html All rights reserved.

[3] More accurately, it is a text as it is composed by a number of related signs (e.g. the flags in the background, the pin, the President’s attire, etc.).

[4] Reproduced from the Internet version available at:

http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/

All rights reserved.

[6] Of course, this representation of the exosemiotic context is highly ideological.
[7] All the following interpretants therefore are not simple conjectures of this semiotician, but rather actual oppositional readings of social agents. Of course these social agents are not exclusively reacting to the official portrait under study here but more in general to the image of the President as distributed across various modes and media. It is reasonable, however, to assume that these interpretants would also arise in people’s minds when sighting the mentioned photograph. Once again, I am doing this to explain the working of the socio-semiotic model of the sign, and I am not here implying to report an actual empirical study of social agents reacting to the official portrait. For this reason I use the conditional tense in my discussion. A future study could address this more directly, perhaps by asking selected research subjects to comment on the official portrait or a similar artifact.


Works Cited


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