A Slession 'In Search of Semiotics': David Sless

Reviewed by Keyan G Tomaselli

In Search of Semiotics is an important book. It is a controversial book. It may even interrupt some of the more impenetrable forms of semiotics which terrify students and academics alike. Basically, the book is a semio-biography as Sless charts his own discovery of the field, how he came to terms with it, tamed it and made it accessible to the uninitiated.

Sless arrests the field and re-examines the basic concepts of semiotics. This, he feels, is a necessary activity; a return to roots. However, unlike so many other theories in a variety of disciplines which have long forgotten their derivations, and which fall like a pack of cards on re-examination, Sless reaffirms a form of semiotics which continues its original intention to free analysis from a textual hegemony.

Sless spares no-one. Numerous sacred theoretical cows are tumbled one after the other: the transmission model of communication because it incorrectly assumes 'sharing' and 'exchange'; structuralism because it ignores projected readers who play a role in the structure of texts; Roland Barthes and discourse analysis because these assume 'sharing' and homogeneous readers; discourse analysis and 'imperialist' semiotics eliminate authors and distance the reader from the object of study; others like Herbert Read over-

emphasize the author. Among the luminaries challenged are Judith Williamson, Umberto Eco, Michael Foucault, Brunsden and Morely, Jaques Derrida and Frederick Jameson, Terrence Hawkes, John Fiske and Stuart Hall. One wonders why Sless left out Pierre Giraud's Semiology which in English translation is peppered with errors, contradictions and obfuscations. Giraud even starts his book with the simplest of simple metaphors of the basic transmission model. None of these approaches, says Sless, account for lying or misunderstanding or even the process of communication itself.

Where de Saussure foregrounds the code, and CS Peirce the sign, Sless privileges semiosis - the process of signification. The other foundation he uses is the 'stand for' relation. Right from the start Sless implies a triadic relationship connected by what he calls 'the user'. He introduces the question of 'authority' and queries the assumption that 'the authority which controls the use of the sign controls the referent' (p. 8). This corresponds to Volosinov's argument that the sign becomes the arena of class struggle. Unlike Volosinov, however, Sless does not develop this class thesis.

In Chapters 2 and 3 Sless debunks once and for all the electronic model of communication as a suitable metaphor for the study of human communication. He replaces the scientistic perspective of the observer being outside the diagram with a researcher who is 'in' the diagramme. He argues that the idea of 'sharing' information in the concept of communication belies the evidence and that a proper theory of communication must encompass both lies and truth.

Chapter 4 on 'Reading Positions' is not a reinterpretation of the Kama Sutra. Rather it is an attack on Barthes for assuming the transmission model in his analysis of myth. Barthes is argued to position himself outside the people and processes he is studying. Sless thus accuses Barthes of imperialism by imposing interpretation of texts in a speculative manner.

In Chapter 6 Sless identifies four kinds of projected authors: individual, social, collective and authors constituted by culture. He tries to demolish both structuralist and post-structuralist conceptions of an entirely decentered author. His example of Screen's contradictions of providing a decentered discourse while simultaneously privileging its own authors is masterful. In this way he shows up the 'imperialism' and contradictions of certain strands of semiotic inquiry, particularly when used by radical dissenters.

Using the tool of quantum mechanics, Sless critiques the notion

of semiotics as a science and shows how meaning changes in terms of participation, arguing that no-one can be an observer, outside of the object of study (Chapter 8). This brings into question the 'stand for' relation -- participation in the production of meaning results in different meanings.

Sless is critical of Marxist class analysis. He is, for example, doubtful of the appropriateness of the classic Marxist notions of class or class consciousness to contemporary capitalist societies. He argues that the Birmingham Contemporary Cultural Studies Centre, although positioning the researcher within class and ideology, nevertheless tend to adopt positions as outsiders to the texts because they do not locate themselves or account for their own positions. More to the point, feminism, argues Sless 'is first and foremost, by definition, a recognition of 'position' from which struggle can be engaged' (p. 110).

Sless saves the penultimate chapter for an attack on de Saussure. He demolishes the idea that de Saussure had anything significant to do with establishing the field of semiotics and claims that his langue- parole concept is misleading.

CS Peirce is much more kindly treated by Sless even though his own treatise is far removed from Peirce's pragmatics. While Sless' two key concepts -- 'stand for' and 'semiosis' -- are referred to all through the book, he never defines 'semiosis' or develops it. Semiosis is a finely tuned Peircian concept which has had rather a crude ride by communication semioticians who have ignored the conceptual complexity of this concept. Sless, like those whom he attacks, leaves this term 'untheorised' (a term deplored by Sless) and vague in his own schema.

Sless also tends to be somewhat ahistorical (and unfair) in his accusations of others' ideas. The John Fiske of the Methuen New Accents series is working at a different level to the Fiske who is editor of Cultural Studies. Barthes offers more sophisticated arguments in his later writing, and far more sophisticated concepts about communication as the (class) struggle for meaning are ignored. The brief attack on Marxist class analysis ignores second and third generation work done by Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Antonio Gramsci and Carchedi who are not unaware of the problems identified by Sless. The Bibliography lists most of Sless' own work on semiotics. His major emphasis seems to be on practical application in the use of signs and graphics in industrial, office and road situations. Certainly one can identify with Sless's frustration

at the abstract developments of semiotics which have removed it from a wider currency. One revels in his boldness; Sless is 'not given to trembling caution' (Preface). But, at the same time, the broad and sweeping scythe with which he perfunctorily decapitates the pre-eminent scholars in the field leaves a sense of an unfinished task. In Search of Semiotics is only the first salvo. A counter-attack will no doubt occur. When it does, Sless will, I think, find himself having to respond in terms of the complexity and history of the theories he critiques and so easily disparages. This will inevitably lift the debate out of the realm of the introductory and into the 'tortured prose' he is trying to escape. Nevertheless, I think the ensuing debate will have a positive and sobering effect on the more extreme forms of semiotic application.

The book is informatively repetitive, repeating and reinforcing concepts from chapter to chapter. The concepts are developed at a reasonable pace, but the book will mainly be of value to those whom have a good knowledge of semiology, semiotics and communication theory. Gone are the days at the turn of the decade when lecturers had to intervene directly on behalf of undergraduate students to make the primary writings of Peirce (extremely difficult) and de Saussure (not so difficult) accessible. Sless offers a discursive analysis which should be read in conjunction with the flurry of introductory texts which have flooded the bookshelves since 1982.

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