

CULTURAL AND SEMIOTIC STUDIES CENTER



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WHAT IS SEMIOTICS
according to

WINFRIED NÖTH. HANDBOOK OF SEMIOTICS

Cultural and Semiotic Studies Center

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What is Semiotics? - 1

- Whatever the answer may be, it is evident that Semiotics is no longer the *terra incognita* which Saussure characterized it as toward the beginning of this century, when he postulated it as a “science that studies the life of signs within society”.
- Today, there are many schools and branches of both theoretical and applied semiotics.
- There are no fewer than sixteen different definitions given to semiotics by the diverse school of this discipline and five major current meanings of the notion of semiotics.
- Implicitly semiotic research covers the many semioticians *avant la terre* who have contributed to the theory of signs since Plato and Aristotle but also includes semiotically relevant current studies in the many neighboring fields of semiotics. However, since, in Peirce’s words, “the entire universe is perfused with signs”, it is impossible to give a comprehensive survey of all implicitly semiotic research.

What is Semiotics? - 2

Science or Movement?

- According to Morris, “It is doubtful if signs have ever before been so vigorously studied by so many persons and from so many points of view. The army of investigators includes linguists, logicians, philosophers, psychologists, biologist, anthropologists, psychopathologists, aestheticians, and sociologists”.
- This characterization of interdisciplinary research activities in the field of semiotics is today even more valid than it was in the days of Morris. However, the scientific status of semiotics is still a topic of debate.
- Assessments of the state of the art in research within the Sebeok’s *Semiotic Sphere* range from “activity”, “movement”, and “project” to “field”, “approach”, “method”, “discipline”, “doctrine”, “metadiscipline”, “theory”, and “science”. According to Tzvetan Todorov, semiotics is still more a project than an established science”.

What is Semiotics? - 3

Theoretical and Applied Semiotics

- There have been many proposals for a systematic subdivision of semiotics. Morris proposed the subdivision into **pure**, **descriptive**, and **applied** semiotics. Carnap added the branches of **general** and **special** semiotics. Hjelmslev distinguished between semiology and metasemiology.
- The distinction between the two levels of **theory** and **application** (or **analysis**) in semiotic research is generally acknowledged. However, these are not two separate branches of semiotics. Morris described semiotics as being both a science and an instrument of the science, a metascience and a “science coordinate with the other sciences”. Kristeva describes semiotics as being both a metalanguage (being a “science of the text”) and an object language (being a “signifying practice” like other languages).

What is Semiotics? - 4

The Semiotic Field

- The field of research in theoretical and applied semiotics includes several main areas:
 - Semiotics of Culture
 - Semiotics of Multimedia Communication
 - Semiotics and Anthropology
 - Philosophy and Logic in relation to Semiotics
 - Psychosemiotics
 - Medical Semiotics
 - Sociosemiotics and Semiotic Socioligy
 - Semiotics and Economics (Mathematics, Law, History etc.)
 - Semiotics of Folklore (Myth, etc.)
 - Semiotics of Opera and Ballet
 - Semiotics of Theater (Film, Literature, Art, etc.)
 - Semiotics of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, psychotherapy, etc.

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