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Mobile Signs: Matter, Medium, and Generation

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Mobile Signs and Immutable Mobiles: Bergson and Latour

In a discussion of the intellect in his 1911 work *Creative Evolution*, Henri

Bergson refers fleetingly to mobility and semiosis:

There must be a language whose signs – which cannot be infinite in number – are extensible to an infinity of things. This tendency of the sign to transfer itself from one object to another is characteristic of human language. It is observable in the little child as soon as he begins to speak. Immediately and naturally he extends the meaning of the word he learns, availing himself of the most accidental connection or the most distant analogy to detach and transfer elsewhere the sign that had been associated in his hearing with a particular object. “Anything can designate anything;” such is the latent principle of infantine language. (Bergson, 1911/1968: 158)

Bergson makes this observation about human language in the context of thinking about the intellect and human social life and in contrast to the social life and language of insects. Signs are central to Bergson’s understanding of community as a common social life (‘By language community of action is made possible’ (157)), but there are striking differences between a colony of ants and human society. Insects are dependent on instinct and the form of their organs. The number of signs in their language is very limited and each sign ‘must remain invariably attached to a certain object or a certain operation’ (158). For humans, there is no preordination of person to structure and no necessary attachment of sign to object or operation. It is the finiteness of the number of signs and also the ubiquity of their use that, according to Bergson, makes possible the ‘liberation’ of the intellect from the material object: ‘[t]he word, made to pass from one thing to another, is, in fact, by nature transferable and free. It can therefore be extended, not only from one perceived thing to another, but even from a perceived thing to a recollection of that thing, from the precise recollection to a more fleeting image, and finally

from an image fleeting, though still pictured, that is to say, to the idea' (159). Thus, Bergson declares that '[t]he *instinctive sign* is adherent, the *intelligent sign* is mobile' (158). That said, Bergson offers no further insight as to how a sign might be both intelligent and mobile.

Nearly three quarters of a century later, Bruno Latour, in his *Science in Action* (1987), talks about the formation of new centres of calculation (of knowledge and authority) that embody what is commonly known as the Copernican revolution. He talks about how print technology makes possible the amassing of documents in one central place and their distribution to the peripheries. He refers to these documents – these things that make possible 'a virtuous cumulative circle' – as 'immutable and combinable mobiles' (1987: 227). For our purpose, John Law provides a useful and more provocative definition:

[Latour] talks of objects such as vessels (though the description applies equally well to electronic messages passing round the globe, or travellers, or letters in the postal service) as *immutable mobiles*. Mobile, yes, because they move around, from Lisbon to Calicut, or New York to Sydney. And immutable because they hold their form, their structure. They hold together as a network. Here, then, the networkness of the metaphor works in two ways... The immutable mobiles are *themselves* a network, an array. They *are* objects. But they also pass down or through a network, held in an array of secure and stable surroundings as they move around. If the circuit is broken – if there is interference – then the packet, the array, the signal, the ship, the letter starts to degrade. It loses its form. It turns into something else. (Law, 2000: 3)

For Law immutable mobiles provide a way of understanding objects in the context of a field, or network, of relationality: 'an object is an effect of an array of relations' (1). Law, moreover, couches his argument in terms of understanding such relationality as both material and semiotic. He says in an earlier piece: '[A]ctor-network theory may be understood as a *semiotics of*

materiality. It takes the semiotic insight, that of the relationality of entities, the notion that they are produced in relations, and applies this ruthlessly to all materials – and not simply to those that are linguistic’ (Latour, 1999: 4). Such a conception of semiosis does not so much question a post-Saussurian understanding of the sign, but applies such a semiotics to different (i.e. not simply linguistic) domains: a sign is defined through its negativity and any movement (deferred or difference) is only in the context of the system. The ANT version of the object-sign (as immutable mobile) is able to move from A to B while maintaining its identity inasmuch as it is supported by a stable network. But if the identity of the object-sign is stable and the network is stable, and identity and movement are only understood through relationality, then we might wonder in what sense the object-sign is mobile at all. Zeno had a point here.

In both these, and other, pieces Law and his colleagues have rightly stressed the need to move beyond a Cartesian conception of space (beyond the frame of mathematical geometry) and to think of topology, complexity, and fluidity. And yet Law, and co, make no attempt to question the fundamental conception of relationality and signification that they have inherited from Saussure. This gives rise to the question – one that is pertinent to Bergson as well – namely, can motility (not simply movement or mobility) be thought as internal to the concept of the sign? The question can be subdivided into: what is the relation between semiosis and materiality in the material-semiotic; and to what extent does an uneven distribution of agency across the two lead to an inability to conceive of the intelligent and/or mobile sign? In the remaining few minutes I will tentatively map out a very cursory response to this

question, one that is staged across a series of formulations about matter and solidarity, creative medium, and the notion of a living sign.

Matter and Solidarity

Of the three major models of semiotics and semiology of the 20th century (Saussurian – systemic, Voloshinovian – dialogic, Peircean – associative/pragmatic), material-semiotics (whether from Latour, Callon, and Law or from Haraway) draws on the resource of the post-Saussurian tradition. Again, Law is clear on this when he frames ANT's semiotics as a post-structural advance on post-Saussurian linguistics (2000 and 2003). As is made perfectly clear in Derrida's deconstruction of Saussure, a Saussurian conception of semiology is predicated on the notion of system and on the sign as a de-substantialised form. It is only because of these that signification can be produced through differentiation. Moreover, close to ANT's heart, Greimas' understanding of narrative in terms of actantial functions rests on a notion of the actant as a structural, de-substantialised form; actantial structures are actualised within particular stories.

And yet contra to the many explicit claims of ANT, any understanding of the contiguous and contingent mobilisation of complex and heterogeneous ontologies (i.e. as actor-networks) relies, I would argue, not on any application of a linguistic model of the sign, but on a fundamental rethinking of semiosis itself. Notably, translation must be understood not as representation (namely as the hierarchical substitution of one sign for another sign or thing), but as holding two or more things together in media res, such that there is an

association and reliance on one thing, or sign, and another, but such that the one neither controls nor subsumes the other (i.e. if I tread on a pin and consequently feel pain, then the pain I feel does not take the form of the pin or the wound; the one doesn't dominate the other). Translation is in this sense about the relation of irreducibles; translation is an irredution (cf. Latour, 1988; Stengers, 2001). Translation, then, - inasmuch as it holds two or more singularities together, such that their relationality is in the first instance a multiplicity (i.e. a complex collectivity that has no single measure) - is in essence about substance and not simply form. Thus, contra Saussure, translation only works (whatever that might mean) because the sign is thoroughly substantialised.

Of course, ANT, against some of its explicit claims, offers the possibility of thinking about semiosis, not on the basis of an a priori linguistic model – whether system or dialogue – but on the basis of association: namely, solidarity as mobilisation. In such a model, because of the explicit methodological confusion between sign and object in ANT and material-semiotics generally, force relations are conceptualised as internal to the formation of sign relations. Crudely, signification and force are not external to one another.

Creative Medium

Donna Haraway considers how materiality and semiosis are always figured simultaneously as the 'material-semiotic' (1997 and 2000). But if the material-semiotic is figured or shaped, it is not on the basis that either the material or the semiotic is active and the other is passive. For Haraway, matter is not

passive and inert; it is active, mobilising and meaning-generating. In her analyses of the cultural studies of science and technology, she doesn't construe scientific knowledge as active and constructive and matter as that which is constituted within the cultural practices of science. For Haraway, the object of knowledge is also an actor. Haraway moves away from a logic of representation. Witnessing is never naked, always materially constructed, situated and articulated. Haraway deconstructs and situates the modest witness. The notion of the material-semiotic thus presents a problem with regard to some traditional understandings of epistemology and ontology. Instead of assuming that the subject of knowledge is an active subject and the object of knowledge is a passive entity waiting to be known, Haraway – in making matter an active matter – does not allow matter to just sit there under the microscope, as it were. In Haraway's account the microbe, the cell structure, the metal and so on, jump back and catch the observer within a more complex kind of 'cat's cradle' (to use one of Haraway's metaphors). In this sense, epistemology and ontology are intimately related and often blur. And this is nowhere more apparent than in relation to the kind of organic-technological hybrids that Haraway investigates. Cyborg bio-technological fusions deliver entities that make us question our often taken-for-granted categories and divisions between the human and non-human or the organic and machine. In typically hyperbolic rhetoric, Haraway declares: 'The biological body – and its mirror twin, the informational body – is the wormhole through which explorers will be hurtled into unexplored territories in the New World Order.' (1997: 117)

Biology - as the cutting edge of contemporary technoscience – is, as cyberfeminist Sarah Kember has argued, ‘*the* hegemonic discourse of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries’ (2003: 178). As another commentator on Haraway’s work has stated: ‘[b]iology, woven in and through information technologies and systems, along with information technology, is one of the great “representing machines” of the late twentieth century’ (cf. Goodeve, 2000: 26). In this sense, ‘new media technologies’ refer to the way in which new genetic technoscience construes the body as ‘coded’ and ‘codeable’. Not film nor television nor literature, but ‘life itself’ is the leading-edge representing machine of contemporary society. What was the ‘content’ of earlier representing machines, such as film, print and television, has now become a medium itself. Biology now represents and carries representations. Biology is understood, not just as knowledge, but as code and codeable bodies: DNA is seen as the quintessential late modern medium of communication. Haraway says: ‘[t]he genome is a historically specific collective construct, built by and from humans and nonhumans. To be “made” is not to be “made up”... The reality and materiality of the genome is simultaneously semiotic, institutional, machinic, organic, and biotechnical’ (1997: 99).

Such analytic descriptions of the high-tech world of bio-science also can come to bear analytically on more mundane social worlds. At stake is an understanding of different mediums through which ‘codification’ and ‘communication’ occurs, but also an understanding that the mediums are themselves media: namely, the medium of communication is itself agentic and creative. In this sense, if there is no clear alignment across agents as media, then the channel is not of communication, but noise. As Serres makes clear,

noise, multiplicity, and genesis have a particular affinity (Serres, 1996). If the material-semiotic, then, neither subjugates the material to the semiotic (as in forms of social constructionist) nor the semiotic to the material (as in forms of realism), then questions arise as to the precise nature of the relation between semiosis and materiality, or to put it another way, what's the status of the hyphen? On the one hand, if the material-semiotic designates an equivalence between sign and object, then are both seen to have agency? If so, can we ever witness these agencies as divergent or disjunctive, i.e. sign agency independent of object agency, such that some materialities don't have signification (a-signifying semiotics, such as phonemes) ? On the other hand, if both sign and object don't have distinct agentic powers, then what's the relation between them? Is the relation one of form and substance, such that the sign constitutes the form of matter? If so, then we return to some of the classic problems that we see in Saussure and others that ANT and Haraway appear to be moving away from. I should note here that I talk of objects as shorthand for varying types of materiality, not simply that which takes the form of an 'object' as such.

Concluding Thoughts on Generation

To talk of signs as motile – conceived within the substantial relationality of mobilisation and translation, rather than system, community of sign users, or face-to-face speech – is to suggest an analogy, at least, between the sign and a form of life: namely, to conceive of the sign as vital, not in the sense of it being a sign of life, such that the sign is necessarily constituted as the death of soma (cf. Kristeva), but as a living sign, such that semiosis is conceived as a part of life (cf. Canguilhem, Foucault). It is Aristotle who most notably talks about life

in terms of motive principle. Bodies that move on their own accord are referred to as souls. Are signs soul-like?

ANT doesn't venture into discussion about vitalism, but there may be some mileage in reading the one through the other. Unlike Aristotle who conceives of the soul as the form of matter, and as the organisation of the organs, ANT starts in reverse. A primordial world of action and part-objects become ordered and organised through association and translation: namely, any series of parts do not become organised until after mobilisation, not before. Nevertheless, in Aristotelian terms this organisation – the resultant of mobilisation – can be seen in terms of the informing of matter or its actualisation through form. If sign-objects are in the first instance motile, then the mobilisation of these 'actors' into a 'network' implies not simply actualisation of inert matter into form, but the actualisation of similarly agentic being. We might properly refer to this as generation, to the generation of social life, to semiotic life by virtue of its collectivity.