

Information and Assignification

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Assignifying semiotics, understood in its most general sense as any system of signification that dissociates itself in some manner from a meaning component, or considers meaning as an irritant, has an approximate birthdate in the late 1940s. The moment when information theorist Claude Shannon contrasted an everyday definition of information based on semantic content with a technical one based on uncertainty, the 'irrelevance' of meaning for communication understood as an engineering problem was born.¹ [fig. 1] This gesture towards pure destratification did not hold for very long. Shannon's colleague, Cold War bureaucrat of big science Warren Weaver, worked the 'semantic problem' back into his popular explanation of Shannon's communication model shortly thereafter. Once out of the bottle, however, the genie of meaning has had to run an obstacle course against the forces and factors displacing it; that is to say, recourse to what could be communicated, defined logarithmically in bits, the probabilistics of choice, and the redundancies that shape it, all of which determine the relative entropy of theoretical information systems. Shannon's interests in both abstract and concrete mathematical machines, especially relay circuitry and secrecy systems, but also chess-playing computers and electromechanical maze-solving mice, offer a proto-machinic perspective of strata-crossing, apparently in the spirit of Guattarian thought.

But not so fast. While it seems obvious to index an 'origin tale' on post-war information theory since it provides an influential example of expunging

meaning from the foundational model of communication – or what I call the model 'to-', the index of all such modelling² – Guattari would have seen this as merely a 'skirmish' with meaning. After all, Weaver justified consideration of the semantic problem of communication only to the extent that the theory of the technical problem, namely accuracy, 'overlaps' it.³ Weaver was focused on understanding the receiver of messages and his/her behaviours. The real issue remained, quite clearly, the extent to which primary, technical, assignifying messaging overlapped and subsumed analytic, secondary and tertiary levels of meaning and effectiveness (those affecting conduct).

Guattari regarded information theory's 'skirmish' with meaning as a 'rearguard semiological conflict' – without mentioning Weaver specifically.⁴ What Weaver does is add new stations to the communication model, even if, at the same time, these stations capture and arrest destratifying tendencies from Shannon's initial eschewing of meaning. [fig. 2] Weaver increases the number of boxes within the model of communication by interpolating a semantic receiver between the engineering receiver and the destination. As he explains, 'this semantic receiver subjects the message to a second decoding, the demand on this one being that it must match the statistical semantic characteristics of the message to the statistical semantic capacities of the totality of receivers, or of that subset of receivers which constitute the audience one wishes to affect'.⁵

Further, Weaver then introduces a new kind of noise – ‘semantic’ – which he inserts in between the information source and the transmitter: ‘the box previously labelled as simply “noise” now being labelled “engineering noise”. From this source is [sic] imposed into the signal the perturbations or distortions of meaning which are not intended by the source, but which inescapably affect the destination. And the problem of semantic decoding must take this semantic noise into account.’⁶ In short, with Shannon and Weaver we never entirely get beyond signification and remain trapped in an intermediate phase where machinic potential is constrained by the vagaries of what Guattari dubs ‘human “understanding”’,⁷ which slows down an otherwise accelerating de-stratification of meaning. Guattari remarks on information theory that it ‘attempted to salvage something from the semiologies of signification in defining the significative redundancies as being in inverse proportion to the quantity of information’.⁸ An increase in redundancy can help clean up errors, but it slows down processing time, decreasing the amount of information, whereas a decrease in redundancy gains in efficiency and evenness, but this increases the amount of information since unexpectedness contains more of it.

What Guattari would have us grasp is that ‘the remainders of a signifying process accumulate in the same manner as other strata of encoding. Lines of interpretance with their hierarchies of content, and lines of significance, with their controlled proliferation, become a kind of raw material for the construction of a-signifying sign machines.’⁹ Enhancements of the strata within the point-to-point model, which became a speciality of sorts for Weaver, increase the representational redundancy of the model and limit its lines of proliferation, or at least slow them down by the process of assimilating semantics to technical issues. So, the very factors that produce slowness also point forward towards intensive machinic productivity. To add a point of clarification: by ‘inhabiting’ a redundant molar model,

asignifying semiotic figures are not themselves molarised, burdened with redundancy, or prevented from undertaking phagocytic or parasitic activities.¹⁰ Moreover, the cyberneticisation of the model by Shannon meant that the point-to-point sender-receiver could perhaps be automatically monitored and noisy messages ‘corrected’. Shannon imagines an observer (‘auxiliary device’) with the ability to parse capacity and micromanage the balance between time, bandwidth and signal power, in this way the ambiguities of semantics need to be translated into statistical trends in messaging and audience absorption levels. [fig. 3] This fuzzy remodelling¹¹ was handcuffed by the addition of more and more components (doubling) whose machinic potential was not fully realised since the ‘subjective’ observer is never fully automated except in the simplest cybernetic systems. The fuzzy line of escape ran straight into two constraining layers of personified components: senders, receivers, and the one ‘above’ them both – the observer.

In the maieutics of Shannon and Weaver, information theory is an obvious yet ambivalent point of departure for a theorisation of the adventure of asignification. However, it is also a quite useful one since it underlines some of the tensions in its theorisation. And it is to these constructive tensions and instructive entanglements that I want to turn in more detail as I lay bare the finer points of Guattari’s development, conceptualisation, and descriptive deployment of asignifying semiotics within the development of his nascent theory of semiocapitalism.

In three books published originally in 1977 and 1978, in the two editions of *Molecular Revolution*, and in *The Machinic Unconscious* from 1979, Guattari elaborated a typology of semiotic systems framed in a Peirce-Hjelmslev hybrid conceptual vocabulary. Asignifying semiotics are defined relationally by Guattari against signifying semiologies, beyond which are asemiotic encodings. In spatial terms, then, asignifying semiotics and signifying

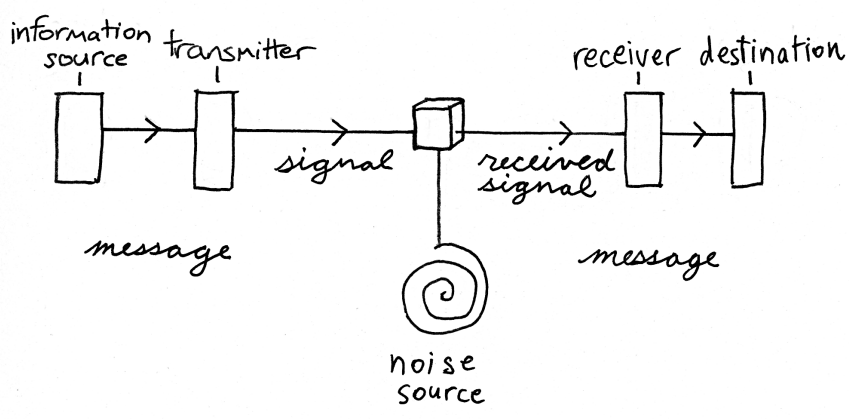


Fig. 1

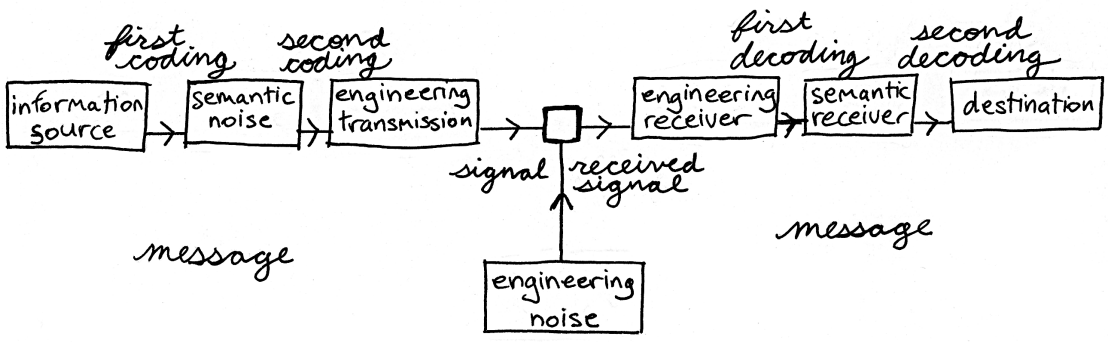


Fig. 2

Fig. 1: Shannon and Weaver Model of Communication
Fig. 2: Weaver's Fuzzy Semantics

semiotics are located on the semiotic strata, and these strata are not isolated from one another. [fig. 4] Like the Shannon-Weaver models introduced above, Guattari's line diagram features boxes and arrows, but without separations, and, importantly, without a temporal dimension, which can be added to indicate the processuality of destratification. Indeed, what is instructive about Guattari's diagram is that its adumbration shows how strata accumulate like 'humus' in compost and break down over time.¹² This language suggests there is something quasi-organic about asignification or, put otherwise, that it is not only artificial. Put differently again, the machinic is irreducible to the mechanical. It is what the organic and inorganic examples share by exclusion that interests Guattari. More on this shortly.

Signifying semiotics concern well-formed substances situated on the stratified planes of expression and content, with the proviso that the transits among these strata are linguistic. Symbolic semiotics are a species of signifying semiotics and concern substances of expression that are neither completely translatable into linguistic terms, nor are they able to be overcoded by any one substance of expression among them. This rule of non-translatability and non-linearity keeps at bay linguistic imperialism: 'the semiological linearity of the structural signifier which imposes itself despotically over all other [non-linguistic] modes of semiotisation'.¹³

Guattari is never done with signifying semiotics; one never really abandons them altogether. They are 'raw material'.¹⁴ Asignifying semiotics puts signifying semiotics into play in some manner; in this way, asignifying semiotics are not infected with semiological well-formedness, but it is something to which they may have recourse if communicating in the way that dominant significations require. But, Guattari boldly stated, asignifying semiotics 'can do without this kind of crutch'.¹⁵ Conversely, signifying semiotics are also capable of leaning on and

'deriving their efficacy from the fact that they rely upon a certain asignifying machine'.¹⁶ That is, they may find the deterritorialising tendencies of asignifying semiotics helpful in blurring the territories of the body or certain institutional spaces. But in the very crossing between the systems and generation of significations, new territories are breached and powers engaged, perhaps leading to the imposition of a more rigid definition, or conversely, to claims of incoherence. As the information model suggests, the intermediate position reveals that there is too much raw material to process, that the transformations of raw organic matter into humus have ceased, or that the further decomposition of humus has stalled as its stability has peaked.

Guattari's conceptual language sometimes includes examples from soil science, such as we find in *The Machinic Unconscious*: 'a-signifying components develop to some extent on the manure of signifying components; they proliferate like microscopic parasites on modes of subjectification and consensualization'.¹⁷ Taken together with the automation of signifying semiotics by asignifying semiotics, the growth of asignification, like mushrooms on the manure of signification, recommends the use of humification as a complementary term, and of the mixity of the semiotic processes that Guattari identifies.

The absence of a meaning dimension is less pertinent for Guattari than what is caught in the removal process: both representational and mental dimensions. Guattari has us think of the 'coefficient of deterritorialization'¹⁸ as a constant quantity that modifies variable sign machines, often by allowing them to act by duplication at places outside human perception. Hence, his penchant for soil examples. Guattari actively decentres enunciation from the human subject to machinic, non-human assemblages of proto-enunciation. Decentring human subjectivity for the sake of machinic proto-subjectifications is one of the broad theoretical goals of

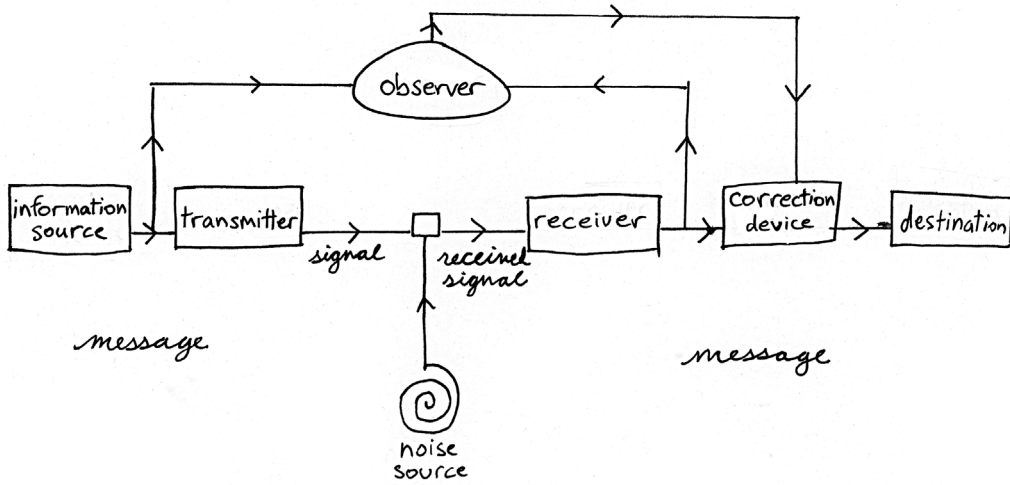


Fig. 3

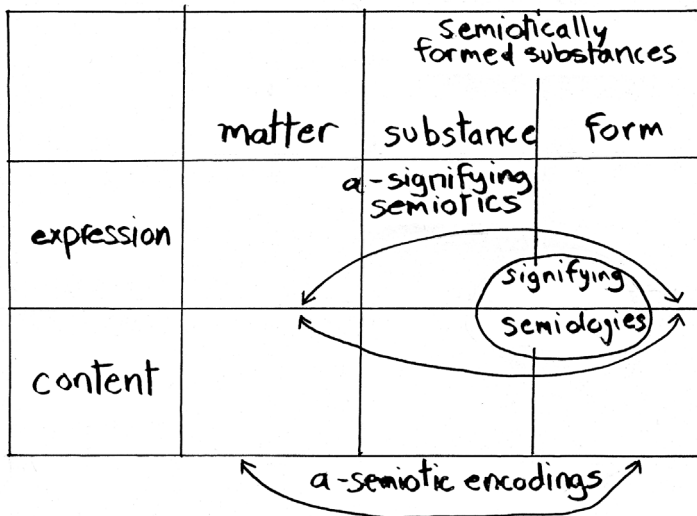


Fig. 4

Fig. 3: Shannon's Observer

Fig. 4: Guattari's Semiotic Strata

Guattari's philosophy. The field of asignification becomes for Guattari that of non-human enunciation in and among machinic systems: strictly speaking, 'equations and plans which enunciate the machine and make it act in a diagrammatic capacity on technical and experimental apparatuses'.¹⁹ This vast region includes everything from machine language 'fetch and execute' routines, to system interoperability at different levels of exchange, or to multi-levelled cybernetic loops. These are scientifically formed by computer scientists and systems engineers. The convergence of asignification and a-subjectification is achieved most clearly in the critique of anthropocentrism through technology, but also through ethology (i.e., the Brown Stagemaker Bowerbird).

Asignifying semiotics must also define itself against signalling, since the non-necessity of semantic content in non-human communication is not negatively construed as denying something to someone (i.e., to signal using animals, from birds to primates, and how these are redeployed across species, as opposed to the ability of immune cells to multiply protectively against an invading microbe), and does not entail some variant of behaviorism. However, this is a complex issue because Guattari's preference for ethological, not to mention microbial examples, is itself a deterritorialising move that is supposed to evacuate any residual 'mind' from asignification (of the sort that clings to senders, receivers, deceivers, and observers). This brings Guattari into the orbit of analytic philosophers of the signalling evolution, such as Brian Skyrms, who, in claiming that signals transmit information but lack intrinsic meaning, retains plasticity of signalling without recourse to a mental element.²⁰ This evacuation of philosophy of mind has a parallel in the evacuation of the individuated subject's fateful bond with the effects of the signifier.

By the time he wrote *Chaosmosis*, however, Guattari had become much more focused on

info-networks and the devices used to engage with them, namely bank and debit cards. Asignification is essentially informatic. Guattari consistently describes the assembling of particle-sign components as a-subjective and machinic; in other words, as taking place without the mediation of subjectification at all. Guattari did not reduce his machines to technical devices, yet his repeated description of how asignifying semiotics trigger processes within informatic networks highlights the interactions initiated with a plastic card bearing a magnetic stripe in activating access to a bank or credit account and engaging in an elaborate authorisation process, which makes it clear that we are dealing with a complex, info-technological network. Guattari clarifies that this has a direct purchase on material machinic processes like 'a credit card number which triggers the operation of a bank auto-teller', activates accounts, and opens access to resources.²¹

Triggering is the key action of particle-signs – signs that are partial, particle-like, and destratifying. This is Guattari's sense of the passage of molecular signs: machinic superempowerment and diagrammatisation. Guattari extricates himself from the Peircean trap of subsuming diagrams under Icons (within Peirce's Logic, diagrams are graphic representations – sketches, graphs, drawings, skeletons – in mathematics) and then gains the positive implications of losing 'aboutness' as a criterion, bringing him into constructive coherence with a critique of representation. He splits the image and diagram: the former belongs to symbolic semiologies and the latter to asignifying semiotics. In shifting into a molecular-machinic modality of explication, Guattari highlights a tightly controlled repetition, whose deployment is open-ended, but whose operations are not.

Particle-signs molecularise semiosis and are effectively blind to representation. They de-substantialise by emptying semiological and semiotic triangles, both representamen-interpretant-object

or form-substance-matter types. This hole digging is constructive. Diagrammatic particle-signs are dynamic and productive (capable of multiple articulations) but rigorously constrained – meaning is not essential in this activity, but specific codes, algorithms, materials and standards are. Meaning is a kind of bug. Particle-signs work at the technomaterial level regardless of whether they signify something for someone or not. Of course they do signify, since most of us users rely on some sort of mnemonic device to remember our passcodes. As Guattari specifies, particle-signs do not ‘secrete significations’ – whether these are ‘thoughts’, ‘psychical’ entities, or ‘mental’ representations: ‘Signs “work” things prior to representation. Signs (form) and things (matter) combine with one another independently of the subjective “hold” that the agents of individuated enunciation (substance) claim to have over them.’²² However, having incapacitated a disempowering representation and brought signs and things – the material and the semiotic – closer together, Guattari then muses on sign-particle ‘dust’ that emanates from the emptied triangles of meaning: ‘a thousand sharp points of deterritorialising particle-signs’ pricking the spaces of abstract potentiality.²³ This centrifugal force of particle-signs is described by Guattari as bearing a ‘quantum of absolute deterritorialisation’ and is a ‘machinic superpower’ that ordinary, individuated subjects cannot interrupt or tame, though they will try. Shannon’s introduction of an ‘observer’ who would feedforward corrections is a good example of what Guattari envisaged as the erection of an ‘ideal point’ upon which communication is concentrated and controlled.²⁴

Guattari’s asignifying particle-signs ‘give out start and stop orders’.²⁵ It is easy to think of such particle-signs as the actual iron oxide particles on the tracks of the magnetic stripes of credit cards that are decoded – their polarities are immediately converted into binary digits when ‘swiped’ by a reader with the appropriate software. As everyone

knows, there is normally more to the operation than the gestural act; today, we are more likely to ‘tap’ our contactless access cards on ‘terminals’. Of course, Guattari’s use of particles tells us that the signs of asignifying semiotics are just as much virtual, ‘elementary’ entities which are generated by machinic interactions like acceleration and mathematical prediction, and whose existence is verifiable theoretically. Indeed, particle-signs are the bearers of potentiality ‘beyond’ the material fluxes and concrete machines that manifest them.²⁶

On the level of technomateriality, anyone who has received an error message during the process of inputting a PIN/password while undertaking a debit transaction or login operation understands the overt syntagmatic sensitivity of such signs (and in most cases the syntactical features – how many digits, upper and lower case sensitivity – of a password or PIN). Indeed, anyone who has ever had their card ‘eaten’ by a machine knows the vicissitudes of asignification – it may be just a jammed trigger, but it might also be a security countermeasure prompted by the card’s use in a certain place, or for a certain purpose, inconsistent with an extrapolated pattern of usage. Moreover, when a card is, as one says, ‘all swiped out’ by intense usage after a shopping spree, the kind of interaction between the oxide particles on its magnetic stripe and the card reader head that converts the encoding into binary digits goes awry because the magstripe is scratched or erased or demagnetised, thus introducing imbalance into the signal/noise ratio. Likewise, contactless smart cards conform to a number of international standards and protocols, operate within a fixed frequency in the case of radio frequency signal interfaces, and obey various wireless protocols, all the while transferring energy and data across a fixed amount of space. Asignifying part-signs do not slide; conversely, if they experience significant drift, they cease working, or show signs of having been hacked.

Whether they are randomly generated or carefully selected on the basis of paradigmatic clusters of birthdates, children's ages, former addresses, initials, nicknames, etc., PINS/passwords, like the magstripe-reader encoding-decoding relation, can do without mental representations, which may of course exist, but they are not essential and no longer centre signification. Passwords just allow one to pass through the strata.

There is a tendency in the information age for asignifying semiotics to maximise its machinic force – to rapidly evolve, speed up, acquire greater mobility, miniaturise and proliferate. In asignifying semiotics, particle-signs work 'flush' (*travaillent à même*) with the 'real'; or more precisely, with material fluxes. Guattari does not, however, uncritically valorise flushness as directness. At the same level as and in parallel with is perhaps better. Borrowing a notion from Peirce, even flushness does not require physical contact, just an indexical contiguity that is not limited to proximity but has connectivity. This underlines the networked nature of asignification with select matters: it could be mycellium or silicon.

Diagrammatism, in Guattari's hands, blazes a trail beyond the human and individuated subject (of the statement) into the collective machinic dimension, escapes from the prison house of meaning: 'We leave the terrain of signification,' Guattari wrote, 'for that of the plane of machinic consistency';²⁷ that is, the continuum of interactions on which any machine is reducible to an individual only arbitrarily, and where hierarchies like those of 'reifying denotation and imaginary connotation are blurred'.²⁸ With asignifying semiotics one enters the plane of the post-human, 'more and more artificial'.²⁹ Guattari didn't shed any 'humanist tears' over those ill-adapted to such change, rejecting anti-modern and anti-machine recapitulations of humanism.

Machinic liberation

Meaning may not be essential, but politics is. For

Guattari, all molecular phenomena display a politics in lieu of a signified. The particle-signs are no different in this respect, though on the face of it, the move to quantity and machinic interactions (automated triggers) belies it. Let's return to the magstripe. On the stripe, which is located in a certain position on the plastic card, there are several tracks. These are not neutral tracks upon which the particles are lined up. Rather, of the three tracks available, the first was developed for use by the airline industry, whereas the second is used by financial institutions. Each track's format was developed by and for specific interests. The cards meet a variety of international standards and function by means of specific algorithms. Recall the phrase quoted above: asignifying machines may be used to 'automate' the messages of the signifying semiologies that, in a capitalist system, begin stirring at a young age, especially around basic training in capitalist behaviours, namely credit, into which one is socialised. One could argue that the very agreements that permit these cards to work, namely standards, are a good example of what it means for any kind of sign to be flush with the world, but in virtue of international protocols and accreditations, quantified by ISO designations.³⁰

Asignifying diagrammatic semiotics describes for Guattari:

[...] the very texture of the capitalist world [...]. A-signifying machines recognize neither subjects, nor persons, nor roles, and not even delimited objects. That is precisely what confers upon them a kind of omnipotence; they pass through signifying systems within which individuated subjects find themselves lost and alienated. One never knows when or where capitalism ends.³¹

Asignifying semiotics is perfectly adapted to the networked banking systems we use on a regular basis. Their diagrammaticity will mobilise the next extensions, not yet actualised, of cash networks

and placements of automated transaction terminals, and new radio frequencies colonised by the next corporate players, and the coordinated triggers that open pathways through the network. Guattari explicitly turned to historical examples of banking systems (i.e., the Venice-Genoa-Pisa triangle in the Renaissance) in order to explain how the diagrammatic potential of this 'liberation' of asignifying machines was successively limited throughout the history of banking by serving the principles of oligarchy, or debt, or centralisation.³²

Today, the neologism 'semiocapitalism' combines a general semiotic and a contemporary formula of capitalism – which may or may not be the highest – and also participates in a periodisation of sorts, since the concept references the flexibilities of post-Fordism, evoking mobile productive spaces (post-factory), the rise of a precarious labour force for whom life is indistinguishable from work, and the financialisation of the economy. 'Capitalism,' as Guattari states, 'seizes individuals from the inside.'³³ Labour is a kind of machinic enslavement; in other words, it is integrated as a component part of a machinic process and functions as a relay for fluxes. Machinic enslavement works with asignifying particle-signs. Guattari observes that: 'Automatized and computerized production no longer draws its consistency from a basic human factor, but from a machinic phylum which traverses, bypasses, disperses, miniaturizes, and co-opts all human activities.'³⁴ Labour involves the on-demand matching (re/combination) of semiotic fragments towards the composition of a semio-commodity within an integrative digital network in which labour time bleeds into life time.

Simply put, an info-commodity under semiocapitalism consists in a non-exclusive way of asignifying particle-signs whose production and passage through digital networks contribute to the development of the machinic phylum, which is, for Guattari, the creative historical force of 'selection, elimination

and generation of machines by machines'.³⁵

The immaterial labour hypothesis picks up the Guattarian emphasis on the abstract machinic character of particle-signs, which is evident in Franco Bifo Berardi's observation that 'semio-capital is capital-flux that coagulates in semiotic artefacts without materialising itself'.³⁶ Coagulation without immediate materialisation is the condition of the semiotic fluxes.

Conclusion

Why does what Guattari calls the 'liberation' of an asignifying semiotic machine seem to result in another species of capitalism? In the late 1970s, Guattari developed a distinction between signifying semiologies and asignifying semiotics in a manner that 'remained very schematic'; in other words, insufficiently mixed: 'a signifying semiology is always haunted by a sign machine and, conversely, an a-signifying sign machine is always in the process of being recuperated by a signifying semiology'.³⁷ Of course, he identifies polarities – paranoid/fascist vs. schizo-nomadic – and specifies the apparatuses of capture in double articulation, how a language should be spoken, and the overcoding and axiomatisation of intensive deterritorialisations. The creative freedoms of a machinic diagram may be stratified and rendered impotent, yet the repeated assertion of such freedoms is in no way precluded. Guattari repeatedly asserted that there was no 'dialectical synthesis', no *Aufhebung*.³⁸ Because asignifying semiotics connects with 'traits' – the particle-signs that are unformed both semiologically and physically – in which a distinction between expression and content is not yet definitively operative,³⁹ it may push through the holes in the net and experiment with how particles connect and enunciate beyond the human, as it were, before becoming tangled in the binding mesh of representation, repression, organising and transformative subjectifications of pronominal voice (the splitting and de-diagrammatising of 'it' by the 'I-ego').⁴⁰ In Figure 4, Guattari

shows how asignification cuts across the strata, swerving around substance, from which it makes its escape by forging machinic connections. This diagram has many iterations; for instance, in *The Machinic Unconscious* and later in *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, the swerve is the main focus [figs. 5 and 6] and the background is absent. In Figures 1-3, we saw how Shannon and Weaver's additions to the transmission model – the qualified relabelling of existing, and the introduction of new, semantic components – compromised the machinic logic of the original, generating what Guattari would describe as a black hole effect: the implosiveness of a modelisation that attempts to deepen and justify the irrelevance of meaning for transmission by absorbing 'meaning' components into it, dampening its own growth by recourse to personalisation. We also saw Weaver's slipping of residual 'minds'⁴¹ into machinic communication, not to mention Shannon's all-seeing observer.

Yet this gerrymandering nevertheless spreads the elementary 'dust' of particle-signs, which stick to the components and have the power to scramble them, to disaggregate assemblages by decentering mental representation and to disindividuate desire.⁴² As Guattari put it, 'In diagrammatism, substantial semantic or signifying residues of the object [denoted or represented] and of the means of expression are always superfluous. Semanticism or signifiante are only tolerated in a provisional way, and the expectation is always that they will be reduced at the next stage of technical and scientific progress.'⁴³

Guattari imagined the existence of elementary particle-signs which carried 'quanta of deterritorialization' in order to find an escape from the strata and provide an energy source for his asignifying semiotics.⁴⁴ In not offering a neat solution to the capture of and release from the strata, he indicated that he was committed to a progressive view of the deterritorialisation of collective enunciative power beyond

the individual, person, or even human subject. Guattari moved in this regard towards the horizon of one planetary machine, but it would be a mixed machine with a unique consciousness: the observer who was once a human subject will have become an automated algorithm. As foreboding as this may sound, Guattari was convinced that it presented an opportunity rather than a perilous outcome. Taken together, Guattari and Deleuze's remarks on control societies contribute to a critical understanding of what it means to enter a world where passwords – access and denial – form a high stakes technopolitics which the cypherpunks phrase in a somewhat outmoded language of individual versus mass surveillance – the interception and storage of telecommunications data – but which, nevertheless, awaits the creation of the analytic tools that can trigger specific actions to exploit the situation.⁴⁵ Can asignifying semiosis vouchsafe a revolutionary role in popularising cryptography? Following Guattari, the sharp-edged particle-signs radiated in the process of emptying the semiological strata, and emitted from the black holes of impotence and disempowerment, remain liberatory in their promise of creative transformation towards the autonomy of personal information.

Once upon a time we were all groupuscules. Perhaps now we are all cypherpunks in training, and our politics is a struggle over asignification.

Postscript

The difference between asignifying semiotics and signifying semiologies is established by a shared set of categories of classification; indeed, they occupy a common strata. However, asignifying particle-signs utilise signifying semiologies as tools for deterritorialisation and for making novel connections between semiotic machines and material fluxes otherwise held apart within signifying semiologies (an individuated subject detached from the real and bewitched by representative images). Guattari's conceptual language extends to activity 'triggers' (start, stop),

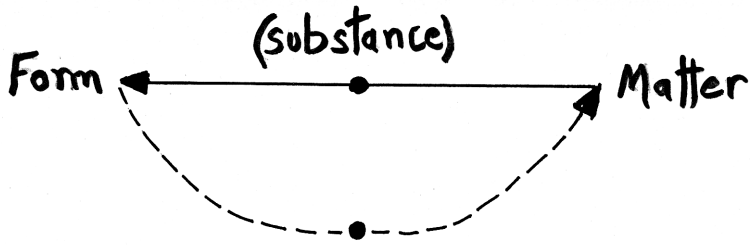


Fig. 5

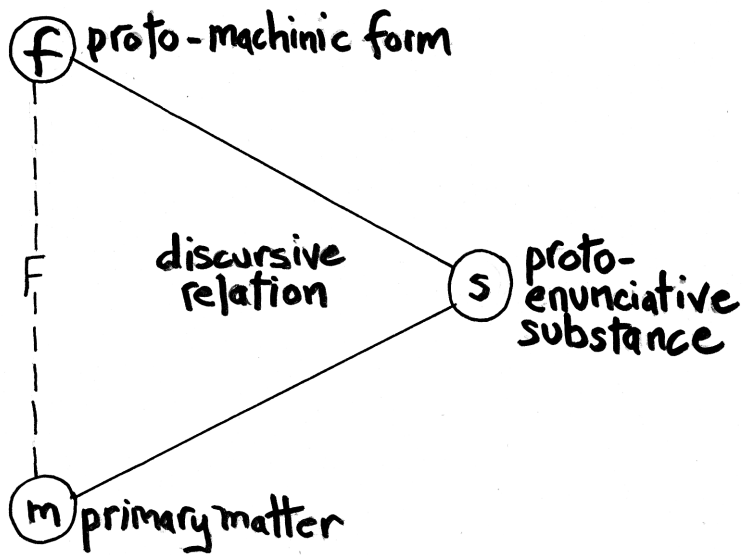


Fig. 6

Fig. 5: Guattari's Form/Substance/Matter Relations

Fig. 6: Guattari's Form/Substance/Matter Relations

sentinels on magnetic stripe cards, the devices that read them, and the networks that circulate the decoded data. However, as we have seen, the example of asignifying mycellium feeding on nutrients – a rich semiological humus – before fruiting is equally relevant for Guattari.

The first question raised with regard to the relationship between these two kinds of semiosis is this: how do they relate to Roland Barthes' model of semiological accumulation in the stacked and staggered systems of meaning? There is a second question. Does Barthes, with the concept of a signifier's obtuse meaning, achieve an insight into asignification comparable to Guattari's?

In his study of myth, Barthes describes how a first-order linguistic semiological system is built upon by a second-order mythological system by means of converting the unity of the first signifier and signified as sign (final) into a new signifier (first) for a second signified and unified sign. This is an operation of 'construction', Barthes says;⁴⁶ it is the conception of final as first. Myth capitalises on semiological patterns and uses them as 'raw materials'⁴⁷ to erect a politics marked by a sly disavowal of ideology – what Barthes called 'de-politicized speech'.

By contrast, Guattari assigned to asignifying semiotics a disruptive and difficult micropolitical task of 'eating into the semiology of the dominant order'.⁴⁸ In order to accomplish this task, it 'will retain a certain partial use'⁴⁹ of signifying semiologies, which will always have a supportive but not central role to play in asignifying proliferation. With asignifying semiotics, Guattari specifies: 'The dregs of the signifier, figures of expression and pre-diagrammatic assemblages, are essential elements for the engineering of accelerators of particle-signs, the derritorialising power of which will be capable of smashing the strata of encoding.'⁵⁰ Residues of signification accumulate in the collapse of signifying

redundancies, implosions of separated strata, collectivisation of individuated human consciousness, and multiplication of double articulation (stalling this colonising machine). As destratification picks up speed and frees up more intensive processes, raw material for asignifying semiotics is generated. This raw material, once assembled (self-organised and/or machined), is none other than the particle-signs that asignifying machinic processes make use of. Guattari writes: 'Consequently, these territorial residues reorganize themselves into a-signifying particles; they will provide raw material for a-signifying semiotic machines beyond the reach of the impotentizing advances of reflexive consciousness.'⁵¹

Asignifying semiotics is not a meta-code or modelling in the sense that myth is a metalanguage – Barthes's so-called 'second language'. A meta-model for Guattari is critical of the model at which it points. The model in this case is signifying semiology, which has a 'limitless hegemonic claim'⁵² on signification. This very ambition is displayed by Barthes in his understanding of the 'language-object' or linguistic sign in its globality (qua sign which 'lends itself' to myth): it does not require a distinction between writing and pictures as they are not simply signs. However, myth is also a colonising force of language and it works by any number of tactics: parasitism, amplification, insinuation, conjuration... Ultimately, myth remains a signifying semiology. On this point, then, Barthes and Guattari diverge, despite the superficial structural similarity their thought displays in the categories of analysis and how they relate (though Guattari's is more diverse and shows greater resistance to semiological ambition).

Barthes's traits of the obtuse function at the level of the signifier are akin to Guattari's particles, but the latter are not creatures of the signifier. Rather, they are framed in terms of fluxes articulated by expression and relational (and reversible) content

planes, and subsequently smoothed machinically (energised) as they are deterritorialised: 'passive figures of expression are transformed into active particle-signs'.⁵³ In short, traits from signaletic fluxes are extracted into particle-signs and put into play in combination with fluxes of energy. Having broken from the linguistic signifier, Guattari's "'basic" entities'⁵⁴ pass from extensive (space-time location and sensible traits) to intensive states (full with potential and multilocational) by means of the expression-content function and not the signifier-signified relation between psychical entities (sound-image and concept). Still, Barthes is not content with a simple definition of obtuse meaning as a signifier without a signified because it cannot be named, is non-representational, and eludes the language of criticism: 'we do without language yet never cease to understand one another'.⁵⁵ Guattari takes much the same attitude: 'It [a-signifying semiotics] can do without this kind of crutch (signifying language) [...]'.⁵⁶ Barthes and Guattari are close to agreeing that the obtuse/asignificational is non-representational, and that these figures are not easily absorbed into criticism, but with an important qualification. For Guattari, meta-modelling is a critical essay launched not from above but from among many models.

It is productive to tarry a bit longer with Barthes as he has also proposed what appears to be an asignifying semiotic element in the concept of obtuse meaning. Recapitulating his stacked systems, Barthes proposes a three-tier system of meaning in his analysis of stills from Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible*: the first is information or communication – 'what I can learn from the setting, the costumes, the characters, their relations';⁵⁷ a second is a signficational or stratified symbolic level consisting of various symbolisms – referential, diegetic, Eisensteinian, historical; and a third level of significance consists in signifying traits that do not yield a signified. Obtuse meaning is 'excessive'.⁵⁸ Whereas obtuse meaning is, as Barthes remarks, 'persistent and fleeting',⁵⁹ Guattari's particle-signs

are reticent about signifying anything to anyone. Yet Barthes, too, enlists 'indifferen[ce] to the story'⁶⁰ as a feature of obtuse meaning. But there is more. Barthes insists on the 'im-pertinence of the signifier'⁶¹ as a robust feature of indifference to the obvious meaning of a story. He describes it as a 'de-naturing' effect, a 'distancing' from the referent by means of intense sounds and colours without 'natural' reference points. These remain 'depleted' and are not filled by signifiers.

On this medium Barthes and Guattari converge: film is a prime site for asignifying semiosis. In discussing *Badlands* (T. Malick, 1973), Guattari insists on what the critics missed: the agonising blue of the enormous skies of the location; the *amour fou* of the young couple; the asignifying connections that go nowhere (father's murder – retrieval of a toaster from the scene and its relocation to an encampment without electricity).⁶² Rather than drawing upon Barthes, Guattari draws upon Christian Metz for his explanation of the asignifying fabrics (sonorous and visual) of cinema that resist signifying semiologies. This is what Barthes called the filmic as such, irreducible to the film: 'The filmic [...] lies precisely [...] in that region where articulated language is no longer more than approximative and where another language begins (whose science, therefore, cannot be linguistics, soon discarded like a booster rocket)'.⁶³ Guattari finds in Metz the importance of film's images that are 'matters of content' which remain undefined, and 'matters of expression' that are unfixed.⁶⁴ But Barthes never really discards linguistics, building a vast semio-linguistic universe of interpretation. At the same time, Barthes isolated certain outer limits in his own practice while retaining – and this is an obvious point – obtuse *meaning* (extra-structural) beyond linguistically articulable and structuralisable meaning-effects. He reached the margins by focusing, self-consciously and paradoxically, on film stills, in order to grasp the processes of cinema.

The crossing points between Barthes' obtuse meaning and Guattari's asignifying semiotics are sufficiently dense as to warrant close consideration. Just as I showed with regard to the remodellings of Shannon and Weaver, the invention of asignification with Barthes in the equation remains stuck in an intermediary state of advances and rearguard actions in the name of meaning. The eclipse of meaning, as Guattari reminds us, is never accomplished once and for all. It is not so much a temporary obscuration as a counter-hegemonic destabilisation and decentring of signification that opens up hitherto closed routes of escape, but is not itself immune to cycles of liberation and recapture.

Notes

1. Claude Shannon, 'A Mathematical Theory of Communication', *Bell System Technical Journal*, 27 (July and October 1948), p. 379.
2. Gary Genosko, *Remodelling Communication: From WWII to the WWW* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 115.
3. Warren Weaver, 'Recent Contributions to the Mathematical Theory of Communication', *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), p. 3.
4. Félix Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire* (Fontenay-sous-Bois: Encres/Recherches, 1977), p. 335.
5. Weaver, 'Recent Contributions', p. 11.
6. Ibid.
7. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, p. 336.
8. Ibid., p. 335.
9. Ibid., p. 336.
10. Guattari, *The Machinic Unconscious*, trans. by T. Adkins (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), p. 220.
11. On the fuzzification of communication, see Rudolf Seising, '60 years "A Mathematical Theory of Communication" – Towards a "Fuzzy Information Theory"', *IFSA-EUSFLAT* (2009), pp. 1332-37.
12. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, p. 332.
13. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, trans. by P. Bains and J. Pefanis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 49.
14. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, p. 243.
15. Ibid., p. 281.
16. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire* (Paris: Editions 10/18, 1978), p. 236.
17. Guattari, *The Machinic Unconscious*, p. 51.
18. Ibid., p. 59.
19. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 36. Today we call this computer code. It is firstly machinic (proto-enunciative) and secondly linguistic; that is, signifying. On this point see A. R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 71.
20. Brian Skyrms, *Signals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 7 and 32.
21. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 49.
22. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, p. 282.
23. Ibid., p. 344.
24. Ibid., p. 345.
25. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 49.
26. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, p. 344.
27. Ibid., p. 260.
28. Ibid., p. 259.
29. Ibid., p. 264.
30. Lawrence Busch, *Standards* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), p. 3.
31. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, p. 237.
32. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, pp. 345-46.
33. Guattari, 'Capital as an Integral of Power Formations', trans. by C. Wolfe and S. Cohen, *Soft Subversions* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), p. 220.
34. Ibid., p. 207.
35. Guattari, 'So What?' trans. by C. Wiener, *Chaosophy* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1995), p. 18; and 'Institutional Practice and Politics', trans. by L. Baker, *The Guattari Reader*, ed. by G. Genosko (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 126.
36. Franco Berardi, 'Schizo-Economy', trans. by M. Goddard, *SubStance*, 36, 1 (2007), p. 76.
37. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, p. 346.
38. Ibid., p. 356.
39. This point is made by Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 347.

40. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, p. 347.
41. Dirk Baecker, 'Systemic Theories of Communication', in *Theories and Models of Communication*, ed. by P. Cobley and P.J. Schulz (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), p. 87.
42. 'Particle-signs associate the smallest degree of actual consistency with the greatest degree of potential consistency'. Guattari, *The Machinic Unconscious*, p. 219.
43. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, p. 336.
44. Félix Guattari, *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, trans. by A. Goffey (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 74; and Guattari, *The Machinic Unconscious*, p. 221.
45. Julian Assange et al., *Cypherpunks: Freedom and the Future of the Internet* (New York: OR Books, 2012), pp. 37-40.
46. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by A. Lavers (London: HarperCollins, 1973), p. 123.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
48. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, p. 245.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 336.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 341.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 341.
53. Guattari, *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, trans. by A. Goffey (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 88.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
55. Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', in *Image/Music/Text*, trans. by S. Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 61.
56. Guattari, 'The Place of the Signifier in the Institution', trans. by G. Genosko, *The Guattari Reader*, p. 151.
57. Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', p. 52.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
62. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, p. 206-ff.
63. Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', p. 65.
64. Guattari, *La révolution moléculaire*, pp. 222-23.

Biography

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