Mid-America College Art Association Conference
2012 Digital Publications

Mid-America College Art Association Conference

10-1-2012

Show me the Semiosis: Grounding Post Structural Theory in Physiological Experience

Michael T. Arrigo

Bowling Green State University, marrigo@bgsu.edu

Show Me the Semiosis: Grounding Post-Structural Theory in Physiological Experience
Michael Arrigo
Bowling Green State University

I am a studio artist, originally trained as a painter who has in the last seven years or so transitioned into a more expanded studio practice that focuses on video installation and ongoing conceptual projects with no singular end product. I head up the First Year Program at Bowling Green State University in Northwest Ohio. We are a large professional school with about 800 undergraduate art majors the majority of which are BFA studio majors. In the main, I can state with all sincerity that we have a good bunch of students, but despite our size and good reputation the School of Art is no intellectual powerhouse. We are a non-flagship, state school, which simply means that most of our students are from the region, many are first generation college students, and their SAT scores make full use of the range. We tend to attract students who are drawn to the visual arts by its tradition, physicality and focus on technique. They are largely unaware of contemporary art and of the challenges that it poses to them and to mainstream culture. For them art is about objects, images and processes, not ideas and theories.

There is a reason that among these talented and intelligent Midwestern art students that images and sculptural artifacts are largely under-theorized: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." It is an attitude as pervasive as it is eminently practical. The overwhelming majority of my incoming freshmen experience a very untroubled epistemological relationship to the world and to images in particular. For them, images and objects appear self-evident. There is what there is. Yes, most do admit when pressed, to the simultaneous and somewhat paradoxical realization that images seem to defy, or at least elude language. But this too poses little difficulty for most of them. They are essentialists, operating with an unacknowledged understanding that there is a strict ontological schism between linguistic and visual objects. Quite understandable, really, given that Middle America is a land of dualisms: nature/nurture, matter and spirit, mind and body, good and evil. In this uncluttered black and white world, post-structural theory has seemingly little to offer but a range of unnecessary and unattractive grays.

If my students are exceedingly practical, so too is my mandate as the head of the First Year Program. Because we are a professional school populated overwhelmingly by studio and design majors, my task is to equip students to be successful makers. Theory as practiced by critics and historians is a tool to produce meaning and context for the things we make and do. Our students need to make and do. If there is a tension between "theory and practice," I have little doubt where my allegiance is expected to lie. In the School of Art, understanding is measured in deeds not thoughts. However, it is just this "perfect storm" of student, faculty and institutional preoccupation with vocational achievement that led us, somewhat paradoxically, to revamp our program to introduce theory sooner rather than later into the curriculum.

Usually program revision and curriculum development are guided by learning outcomes, specific technical skills and knowledge domains that students should master. Here is a typical list of them absent the "actionable phrases" such as "students will demonstrate…" that are customary for learning outcomes:

> Visual problem solving
> Elements and principles of design
> Disciplinary studio skills (fluency with specific media and techniques)
> Creativity

Critical self-reflection
Work ethic
Perception/acuity
Art historical context
Communication skills
Aesthetics/theory
Studio citizenship (studio maintenance, equipment care, safety)
Social Production/collaboration

It's quite a lengthy and inclusive list that offers no real surprises, but when the time came to rethink our First Year curriculum in this current climate of "hyper-practicality" and focus on vocational success, we opted instead to base the curriculum on something more basic: What do our students actually need to succeed in their upper level coursework and as practicing artist/designers? This impelled us to sidestep the traditional learning outcomes and develop instead a more focused set of goals, the "Predictors of Student Success," as the basis of our revisions. Predictors of Student Success are key attributes or competencies that our most academically gifted and professionally successful students have in common. This, it turns out, is a considerably shorter list:

Curiosity
Creativity
Work ethic
Critical self-reflection

In other words, student behaviors and attitudes such as curiosity, work ethic, creativity, and critical self-reflection were identified as being strongly correlated to student achievement and therefore identified as crucial elements of the curriculum, beating out traditional learning outcomes such as disciplinary studio skills and the elements and principles of design, knowledge domains usually thought of as the core of a foundations curriculum. These four predictors of student success can quite fairly be characterized as mental traits, psychological attitudes or behavioral habits, and their adoption as the goals of our foundations curriculum was not without controversy. Some colleagues even debated whether things as curiosity, work ethic, creativity and critical self-reflection can actually be taught, and frankly, they have a point. Facts, skills, and techniques are the easiest part of what we do as teachers, (which, by the way, is not to say they are easy!) It is much more difficult to directly intervene in the way students think and behave, but if we accept that these are the kinds of student outcomes that are the most likely to lead to academic achievement in their upper level courses and to professional success after graduation, then it seems to me to be well worth the attempt.

So just how does a renewed emphasis on theory, often considered somewhat pedantic, even esoteric, square with this realignment of curricular mission focused on such a worldly goal as student success? Quite simply this new mission means that our jobs as instructors shift from teaching specific skills, facts and processes to concentrate instead on attempting to shape student thought and behavior. This is an approach that I have come to call "cognition in action". As stated earlier, theory is a tool whose primary purpose is to provide insight, meaning and context. Theory as practiced provides frameworks that help to illuminate, take control and liberate one's thinking, often guiding thought in directions it might not otherwise go. Many of principles and practices of continental philosophy are ideally suited to help nudge student thinking and behavior into patterns that are more perceptive, creative and productive. In order to achieve these stated

goals, our approach to theory is somewhat idiosyncratic. Theory is deployed rather than taught and utilized according to the following criteria:

1. Theory should begin and end with the students.
It should be rooted in their experiences of the world and in an investigation of themselves, their perceptual responses, emotional reactions and cognitive functions. It should help to facilitate changes in their thinking and behavior.

2. Theory should be perceived by the students as practical and useful.
All those learning outcomes listed above did not just go away. They are important even if they are no longer the primary objectives of our First Year courses. With media skills, design elements and principles and the rest, students have a lot to absorb. Theory should make them feel expanded and empowered or challenged in a productive way. They should experience results.

3. Keep it manageable.
Although continental theories such as structuralism, deconstruction, and French feminism are important and worthwhile subjects of study in their own right, in the First Year Program, theory is not taught as an end in itself, nor even presented as a means to enrich our students' understanding of art, per say. Some if its core principles and methods are deployed to facilitate cognitive and behavioral changes. Historians and critics will likely be disappointed. There are few names provided, little nuance, no works cited and no footnotes. Reading Barthes, knowing Kant's distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions, or exploring the intricacies of Derrida's différance will not in all likelihood make any of our beginning students better designers or more thoughtful and inventive artists.

Now you have the rationale and strategic overview for how we deploy theory in our First Year Program courses. So just what does this look like at ground level? What follows are a few specific examples of how structural and post-structural theory are used to achieve our goals of making our freshmen more curious, reflective, creative and productive.

Curiosity
The lexicographer and literary critic Samuel Johnson described curiosity as, "one of the most permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous intellect." Curiosity is evidenced by most higher mammals and most likely has a biological origin, but is usually categorized as an emotion or psychological drive rather than an instinct because of individual variability in responses. William James posited two different kinds of curiosity, an instinctual inquisitiveness that is related to survival, and another meta-cognitive type (not his term!) that responds to inconsistencies or gaps in its knowledge. I tend to think of curiosity as a willingness or urge to invest one's attention and mental resources as a response to novel external stimuli, or internal incongruities, a view that synthesizes James' two conceptions and directly relates curiosity to perception and self-reflection.

In our First Year program we repeatedly introduce material specifically designed to de-center students and problematize their assumptions about thinking, language and art. Curiosity is not the natural state of someone who thinks they have it all figured out. This "de-centering" has proven to be such an effective strategy of softening hardened attitudes and piquing student interest that I often refer to it as "tenderizing" students. Tenderizing takes many forms in the three courses so I will limit myself to a single example that lays the groundwork for a number of key concepts we cover over the course of a month. One of the central tenets of post-

structuralism is that the concept of the singular, coherent self is a convenient, even necessary, fiction-- that "I" is always plural. On the first day of Art Methods and Practices (AMP) I challenge students' self-conceptions as single and unitary. I begin the discussion with a few mundane questions. "Are you the same person that you were at age six? At age two? What does 'same' mean? Same thoughts? Same personality?" Initially some students answer, "yes", but after pressing, and challenging their counterexamples, "No". "Okay. Same body then?" Reasonable estimates based on recent research, (Frisén, 2009), find that over ninety percent of your living tissue has been replaced every seven years. "Only ten percent the same body. Then which ten percent is you?" Granted, up to this point we are more pre-Socratic than post-structural, but then we switch to context. "Are you the same person with your parents? With your Friends or your significant other? Waiting at the BMV?" After more discussion and debate I introduce them to the deconstructive concept of destabilization of how we have destabilized the notion of "same" and challenged the concept of identity. I end the discussion with a final thought experiment. I ask the students to close their eyes and visualize themselves swimming or playing basketball. After about 20 seconds I have them open their eyes and ask, "How many of you saw your own armpits or the bottom of the pool? How many saw the back of your hand or the basketball hoop from a first person P.O.V?" The majority of students answer no and admit to watching themselves swim or shoot from somewhere outside of themselves, a viewpoint that most of them have never witnessed (unless they have seen themselves on video). "So, where were *you*?" We discuss a few possibilities to account for this oddity: "Out of body experience? A trick of memory?" I leave the question open, but offer a final possibility based on an observation. "Is the you currently thinking about this dilemma the same you who is right this minute tapping your foot, or experiencing the pressure of the chair pressing up on your bum?" These are activities and perceptions of which the students were completely unaware and that present themselves to consciousness only after my comment. "So if you were completely clueless who was doing the tapping? Who was doing the sensing? Of course, it was you-- but not you!" I present the class with the observation that extremely complex activities like driving are done largely without the intervention of consciousness. How often do find yourself at your destination without remembering how you got there, or find your finger in your ear or your hand at the glass before you even realize you have an itch or are thirsty? There are multiple me-s working together, but often in conflict, vying for primacy, to scramble to the top of awareness and attention and become You, if even for an instant. Marvin Minsky, founder of MIT's Artificial Intelligence Lab, calls this principle of intelligence a "society of mind," (Minski, 1988). I conclude our first lecture:

> If I had surreptitiously put a tack on your chair before class, the "you" that quietly processes posterior pressure in the background would spontaneously become You, if only for an instant. So there are three important principles here for us to keep track of here: 1. Problems, even simple ones like a tack, make us aware. A great research/creativity strategy is to problematize or deconstruct the thing you are interested in. Remember how we got into this interesting mess by questioning the notion of "same"? 2. The self is a construct, not a unitary being. It is a productive diversity. We can understand this many-as-one as Minski does, in a structural sense, as a society of mental "agents" competing for control of consciousness, or we can understand identity in a deconstructive/philosophical sense as this thing that you experience as "me" is actually a narrative constantly negotiated from a host of context determined "me"s. 3. The concept of multiplicity is much more powerful

than the illusion of clarity. We will see this in semiotics, any sign system such language, in visual communication, and we will embrace multiplicity when we study creative methodologies for generating and interpreting artworks. "What magical trick makes us intelligent? The trick is that there is no trick. The power of intelligence stems from our vast diversity, not from any single, perfect principle," (Minsky, 1988, p. 308).

The First Year faculty employs the same basic format used in this opening day lecture to introduce all of the themes and projects in our FYP courses. By deploying continental theory in a chatty and conversational way, we model curiosity and attempt to de-center students in order to induce a more receptive and curious attitude toward our coursework and to the world in general.

Critical Self-Reflection
On day two of the AMP course we introduce the basic principles of classic Saussurean linguistics as an entry to semiotics and examining cliché. We emphasize that semiotics is concerned with intentional and unintentional communication. We introduce visual clichés as signifiers that appear to function as a sign for a complex signified. A cliché is merely a placeholder that no longer evokes the feeling, richness or complexity of the signified. Instead, it simply evokes another signifier. A heart typically conjures the word "love" in our mind without calling forth the rich, complicated emotions or elaborate social relationships that "love" stands for. I show them the images of a heart, a skull and a cross and ask the class if they do anything more than evoke the words "love", "death", "evil", "religion" or "god" in their minds : "Do you *feel* love or loved, or mortal, or ecstatic? Butterflies? Dread? Peacefulness? Gnawing anxiety? Largeness of spirit? Do they make you ponder any of the strangeness, wonderfulness, complexities or contradictions of the signifieds that they purport to represent?" I then present the students with an image where I have combined the *signs* heart, skull and cross to create a strange and ambiguous *symbolic* image. We discuss that from the individual signs to the combined symbol the semantics of the heart, skull and cross remain largely unchanged, while the syntax has been radically altered, which drastically affects the pragmatics. Building upon this demonstration we move on to talk about overt meanings and covert meanings. Students are then presented with three critical frameworks, structuralism, feminism and deconstruction, and introduced to "stripped-down" versions of each analytical method.[*]

The first assignment is called "Semiotic Shift". Its main goals are to have students engage in meta-cognition, using the various critical frameworks to examine *how* as well as what they are thinking, and to experience the principles of semiotics- how representational, syntactic and contextual changes alter meaning. The assignment consists of two "fieldworks" one where students cut and paste photocopies of hearts, skulls and crosses to quickly rehearse the exercise we did in the lecture, creating two unique symbols. In the second fieldwork students select a print ad and analyze the image using the three critical frameworks. Their analyses must be a minimum of three

---

[*] As introduced in the FYP continental theory is reduced to its essentials.   Structural Analysis- focuses on formal relationships: visual elements and principles of design: or systemic relationships such as economies and flows rather than the semantic meanings of the objects in themselves. Feminist analysis- focuses on questions of power (P.O.V. and "the gaze", encoded social norms); audience/artwork/artist relationships; psychology and motivation; "pleasure in genre". Deconstructive Analysis- focuses on associations & metaphors and indeterminacy; following webs of meaning. Deconstructive frameworks encourage us to keep thinking, to not let ourselves "off the hook" with quick or easy answers.

typed pages.   Finally as an application of this research, students create a new image by changing the scale, placement, style of representation, and compositional arrangement of the signifiers in their original print ad. Students are evaluated on the thoroughness of their fieldwork, the craft and level of investigation evidenced by their image, and how much they have transformed the meanings of the original advertisement.

During the class final critique of "Semiotic Shift" we start with initial affective responses and precocious associations. How does the work make you feel? What do you think of, no matter how seemingly unrelated? The vital questions I keep pressing is "Why?" and, "Where do you think that comes from?" As the students offer suggestions, we attempt to determine if their thoughts and feelings are produced by structural relationships; feminist assumptions about the artist's motivation, the intended audience, P.O.V. or deconstructive associations. In essence we work in the reverse of the "classic " critique form, which starts by looking at the artwork and works towards its effects. We begin with the effects and work towards their causes in the artwork as a reflection of the fact that viewer responses are nearly immediate, visceral and largely precocious. "Out in the wild" conscious meaning comes to the party late, if at all. In critique we try to mirror this reality but make sure that it arrives.

This approach to critique grounds analysis in self-awareness and, I believe, more clearly models the way in which viewers respond to artworks. Semiotic Shift introduces students to continental theory as analytical tools to expand their own thinking, but even more importantly, it is designed to force meta-cognition, paying attention to not just what they think but to how. Critical self-reflection is vital to analysis, but as we will see, it is also a skill that can greatly improve creativity.

Creativity
In the visual arts a common pedagogical strategy used to encourage student creativity is to assign projects that force students grapple with a theme or a larger concept. These types of assignments can be valuable problem solving challenges for beginning students, but in far too many cases students get little ideational guidance other than "fill ten sketchbook pages for next class", or "brainstorm six solutions..." or "go do visual research." I believe that these kinds of suggestions just push back the problem. Fill ten notebook pages with what? Asking students to brainstorm is especially odd. Brainstorming was not developed as an individual activity, it is a group creativity exercise, and one that research has shown to be of very limited value unless specific criteria are met, (Runco, 2008). But never mind, instructors don't usually mean brainstorm in the technical sense anyway. They use it in a general sense, you know, brainstorm-- think outside the box. Be creative! So in essence the wisdom that is imparted when instructors tell students to brainstorm is, "Be creative by being creative." Helpful. In the visual arts there is an almost universal expectation that students be creative, the strange irony is that in far too many cases we don't actually teach them how, assuming that art students are, by definition, already creative or trusting that students will pick it up through modeling or osmosis, or simply through intellectual maturation. Many will. But many others, maybe even the majority, will not.

Within the First Year Program we certainly still make use of traditional studio approaches to creativity such as establishing an intellectually safe and permissive environment and modeling creative behavior. The fieldwork that accompanies every assignment is meant to model visual research and creative strategies. The difference is that the fieldworks give more specific guidance on how to do active visual research and presents a methodology, a strategy for what to do with the material to arrive at the finished work. The other difference to note is that we ask our

students to not focus on the end product, the artwork, in the early stages. We expressly require them to "think with process" stressing the reactive/responsive nature of creativity and the value of investigation. I will discuss more fully the impact that post-structural theory has on shaping this approach to modeling creativity and its influence on students' work ethic. For now I want to concentrate on how we draw upon theory to not only model, but to expressly teach creativity in the Art Methods and Practices course.

The keystone of the AMP course is the unit on creativity. In it we present, discuss, and actively explore specific techniques, strategies and tactics that can be employed to arrive at creative solutions to specific problems. Additionally we provide guidance on developing mental habits and behaviors that can induce a more mindful and inventive orientation to the world. We cover a lot of territory in the Creativity unit so I will limit myself to discussing two creative strategies in which continental theory is most evident, "Shift Paradigms" and "Develop X-Ray Vision". Both of these strategies are dependant upon the critical self-reflection practices that the class has been developing since day one and require students to pay close attention to how they are thinking in order to change what they are thinking.

"Develop X-Ray Vision" is a creativity strategy specifically designed to help students make creative use of source material and visual research rather than slavishly copying images or simply arranging them. As presented, x-ray vision is the awareness of seeing into or trough something. It is different from transparency in that it lacks clarity. As with a conventional x-ray, there is a certain amount of opacity because we are presented with the surface and the depth simultaneously. X-ray vision refers to the ability to hold two frames of reference simultaneously and thereby reveal new aspects and relationships that were previously "hidden below the surface." X-ray vision is Derrida's différence rendered as a visual metaphor. The opacity problematizes identity, the play of depth and surface render the image multiple, and students are asked to defer resolution of the multiplicity, holding identity and meaning in abeyance. Just re-read that last sentence and you will understand why I use the x-ray metaphor rather than appealing to Derrida and deconstruction directly! The x-ray metaphor also allows the class to discuss how imagination & expectation play a big role in vision. The mundane fact that we seem to see things when we can physically only see light hints at how much imagination is already involved in "normal" seeing. By presenting "Develop X-ray Vision" as a creativity strategy I encourage students to have a more transformative relationship to their source material. We explore common examples of projective vision (what I call x-ray vision) including Rorschach tests, Kuleshov effects in film, star constellations, the use of anatomy and bony landmarks in life drawing and, of course, "undressing with the eyes." We practice using our x-ray vision on various images to provide students with the means to take many of the projective activities in which our precocious brain already engages and begin to put them under conscious control.

We present students with another creativity strategy "Shift Paradigms" that is heavily indebted to continental theory. It has students re-imagine the whole project of art making and the roles of artists by presenting them with alternative models to the communication paradigm that is hegemonic among beginning students and non-professionals. We begin by examining the deficits of the standard communication model, and offer two additional variants "corrected" by feminist and deconstructive discourse to better account for the complexity of visual experiences. We move on to six other paradigms and examine how they radically re-conceive art/design practice and the viewing experience. In addition to the three communication models, students are presented with the Machine Model, Mapping Model, Catalyst Model, Force/Field Model,

Diagnostic Model and the Pointing Model. These models use their titular metaphors to quickly encapsulate many principles of continental theory in familiar, operational terms. The Machine Model, Mapping Model and the weak Force/Field model are structural approaches. The Catalyst and strong Force/Field models rely on feminist analysis. The Diagnostic Model is primarily psychoanalytic. The outlier is the Pointing Model, which is largely based on the non-reductionism and intentionality of phenomenology. Each of these models present different perspectives on what artists and artworks do and therefore offer different prescriptions for research, media, processes, modes of representation and presentation.

Work Ethic

There is an ancient Chinese proverb that translates as, "I hear, I forget. I see, I remember, I do, I understand." Doing, in a physical sense, is not exactly theory's strong suit. One might expect that something as cerebral as continental theory might have little impact on something as menial as work ethic. One of the overarching themes of all the First Year Program courses is "think with process," thinking as an active engagement with materials, processes and people. The emphasis is on doing; on planning a strategy that acknowledges that rich, high bandwidth processing is reactive and largely preconscious. Activities such as perception & creativity are never fully under conscious control. We encourage and teach them to put consciousness in charge of planning the strategy and to allow the preconscious to discover new relationships, evaluate progress and readjust tactics. Tor Nørretranders' *The User Illusion* (1999), and Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink (*2005), both in their own way make this case for "thinking without thinking," citing numerous studies and examples that reveal how subconscious processes that Gladwell calls "thin slicing" allow us to make better decisions and more accurate predictions for complex problems involving several variables or multiple dimensions with little conscious decision making.

For most students, thinking with process is a huge departure for from their accustomed approach to problem solving. We are at pains to keep emphasizing that we are not telling them to stop thinking; we are giving them the tools and encouraging them to think differently. We remind students that post-structuralism's most consistent preoccupations are the limits of knowledge, that context is key, and that multiplicity rules. Sitting with pencil in hand, trying to be clever and waiting for the "lightning to strike" is, at best, inefficient. They need to get up and do. Pay attention, discover, get confused or surprised, rethink and do again. They need to internalize and experience the brave new world that theory has to offer.

These examples provide a glimpse of how we use theory in a studio context to shape student thinking and behavior by grounding our investigation of art and meaning in a physiological investigation of our students, their bodies, their perceptual responses, emotional reactions and cognitive functions. Rather than present them with seemingly abstract continental theories and critical authorities, faculty attempt to meet students where they are and lead them on a journey that begins by debunking many of their common sense notions, proceeds to reflective analysis of their own art making and viewing experiences, and ends by shifting student thought and behavior. Instead of presenting theory as a way of explaining art and ourselves, our program focuses on the students, their individual and collective responses to art in order to "discover" post-structural theory- polysemia, semiotics, deconstruction, pleasure in genre, the gaze, the over-estimation of consciousness and the myth of authorial intent. This physiological, "show me the semiosis" approach provides students with a set of critical frameworks that can help to shape their thinking and their behavior. However it also highlights the point where many post structural theories fall flat, namely their inability to cope with the presentational-- the stubborn, inscrutable "there-ness"

of being in the world. Before objects or images are about, they simply are. Before they referentially point in the direction of meaning or enter into a chain of semiosis, they point to themselves as "bracketed existence", as a physical event and our physiological encounter with it. My students often feel they've come full circle. Before and despite all of the decoding, associating, analyzing, referring, inferring and evoking, it all comes back to a simple, irreducible relationship. There's me and that thing in front of me. For artists doesn't get much more down to earth then that.

References:

Frisén, J. (2008). "Dynamics of Fat Cell Turnover in Humans", Spalding, K. L., Arner, E., Westermark, P. O., Bernard, S., Buchholz, B .A., Bergmann , O., Blomqvist L, Hoffstedt, J., Näslund, E., Britton, T., Concha, H., Hassan, M., Rydén, M., Frisén, J., Arner, P., Nature. (2008), Jun 5; 453 (7196): 783-7

Minsky, Marvin. (1988). *The Society of Mind*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Runco, M. A., (2006). *Creativity: Theories and Themes: Research, Development, and Practice*. New York, NY: Academic Press.