

Critics, Cross-Dressers and Outlaws: Men in Feminism

**Alice Jardine; Paul Smith (eds.) 1987.
London: Methuen**

Are men in feminism potentially, essentially wolves in sheep's clothing? That is one of the questions a collection of MLA papers, essays, interviews and dialogues entitled *Men in Feminism* tries to address. Its scope is narrower than its title suggests: more correctly, the collection could have been called *A Number of Male Academics in French Feminist Theory*. So what are these British and American men doing in the borrowed garments of feminist theory?

According to Paul Smith, co-editor and contributor, they are not doing anything very different from what they have always done:

Men, some men, now . . . are entering feminism, actively penetrating it That penetration is often looked upon with suspicion: it can be understood as yet another interruption, a more or less illegal act of breaking and entering, entering and breaking, for which these men must finally be held to account. (1987: 33)

In other words, boys are just being boys. The laboured innuendo of Smith's opening makes it difficult to take his conclusion seriously: he ends by suggesting that men in feminism

can be there to help subvert, unsettle and undermine the (seemingly fast to settle) laws of the discourse. Not, of course, to undermine feminism itself, but only a process of settling, solidifying. This they might do purely by virtue of existing in it as a difference. (1987: 39)

Yet, in the terms Smith lays down at the beginning of his paper, men cannot be in feminism as a difference, but only as a "way of repeating an age-old habit" (1987: 33), as a repetition of the same activities of appropriation. So men in feminism, *Men in Feminism*, cannot really do anything different, let alone "subvert, unsettle and undermine". (Fourteen of the twenty four contributors reach more or less this conclusion.)

It is a symptom of this inability to do anything that so many of the papers in *Men in Feminism* should be selfdeprecating and half-hearted. The editors themselves see the topic as "a relatively unpromising one . . . in a very real sense élitist and narrow, of interest only within the often somewhat insulated corridors of academia" (1987: vii); Alice Jardine admits that the "general title . . . sent [her] scurrying for cover . . ." (1987: 55); Elizabeth Weed feels that the other contributors have "raised issues that [she considers] rather tired and from which [she could not] take much pleasure" (1987: 77); Cary Nelson begins "by trying to say why [he finds] the topic of this book, men in feminism, to be such a wretched and intractable one" (1987: 153); Richard Ohmann

is made “a bit uneasy” (1987: 182) by the very phrase; Rosi Braidotti is “viscerally opposed to the whole idea: men aren’t and shouldn’t be IN feminism; the feminist space is not theirs and not for them to see” (1987: 233). (Just how tentative the tone of many of the contributions to *Men in Feminism* is, can be gleaned from the fact that Braidotti makes an appearance in Jardine’s paper to say that the topic makes her “hesitate”, 1987: 56; almost two hundred pages later, Braidotti’s own essay begins with the phrase; “I hesitate”, 1987: 233.)

Why bother, under these circumstances, with *Men in Feminism*, men in feminism, at all? Meaghan Morris neatly encapsulates the impression the book makes:

Men in Feminism . . . is just that – the name of a topic. It’s a composition topic, and it does define a space – a commodified space, a space for publication, this book. And it’s a space that can only emerge in this form, from precisely those processes of “institutionalisation of feminism” that Paul Smith suggests (in suggesting the topic) that male “entry” might help to forestall! (1987: 179)

And that is exactly what is wrong with *Men in Feminism*: it is dictated more by the exigencies of academic publication than by a need to say anything. No one really likes the topic, but everyone has contributed to say so. Tellingly, a few contributors hint that men may be in feminism for no other reason than academic self-advancement, as women’s studies becomes more and more entrenched: “They [the eponymous ‘men’] play the academic career game with great finesse, knowing the rule about feminist separatism and yet ignoring it”, writes Braidotti (1987: 236).

It is the sense of inbred institutionalisation that is perhaps most distressing about *Men in Feminism*. The contributors make the obligatory “deconstructive” play with the pronoun “in” (Heath, 1987: 43, Andrew Ross, 1987: 47, Judith Mayne, 1987: 69 and 70, Peggy Kamuf, 1987: 95, Cary Nelson, 1987: 159, Ohmann and Morris incorporate it into the titles of their pieces, 1987: 182 and 173). They all refer to one another, or even to themselves, and while that may be an understandable effect of the MLA forum where a number of the papers were presented, one is left with a sense, not so much of a dialogue, as of a closed discourse that spirals in on itself. They refer to the same critical sources, and, more dizzyingly, to each other’s reference to those sources. Here one approaches an academic discourse that is almost perfectly self-generating and self-sustaining. (See Heath, 1987: 2, Mayne, 1987: 64, or Smith, 1987: 33, Weed, 1987: 73 and then Derrida, 1987: 189.)

The seminar with Jacques Derrida, “Women in the Beehive”, is one of the more interesting texts included in *Men in Feminism*, largely because Derrida speculates on the effects of the institutionalisation of women’s studies in America, instead of simply being a symptom of that process. Derrida writes:

One can only wonder: what are the risks and the stakes of the institution of women’s studies? Do the women who manage these programs, do they not become, in turn, the guardians of the Law, and do they not risk constructing an institution similar to the institution against which they are fighting? (1987: 190)

He asks: “if [the] future [of women’s studies] is of the same type as that of all other departments, of all other university institutions, is this not a sign of failure of the principle of women’s studies?” (1987: 190). Derrida asserts that as “much as women’s studies has not put back into question the very principles of the structure of the former model of the university, it risks to be just another cell in the university beehive” (1987: 191).

He adumbrates two possible responses to this situation. The first is a “positive deconstruction”, which entails “[pushing] to the end of the radical question concerning the university Law, and [doing] more than simply [instituting] a department of Women’s Studies” (1987: 192). It is “optimistic” (1987: 192) because it assumes that the Law can finally be overcome. But there exists also a “negative deconstruction”, which accepts that any subversion, any questioning, is only the “law of the Law” (1987: 192). Even “if one were to radically deconstruct the old model of the university in the name of women’s studies, it would not be to open a territory without Law . . .” (1987: 192). Any attempt to challenge the Law only ends up affirming the Law by inversion. Derrida concludes that if one does establish a department of Women’s Studies which is exactly like any other – always already – institutionalised university departments, one will only come face to face with the Law again: “one would have rediscovered the Law, but at least one would not be bored any longer” (1987: 192). The best one can do is to hope that one will not be bored. Is Derrida being too frivolous here? Still, much of the polemic of *Men in Feminism* is just that: boring.

A more intriguing aspect of the collection is the persistent association of the topic with the motif of cross-dressing. Indeed, cross-dressing as activity, as metaphor, and as question, pervades *Men in Feminism*. In the first essay, Heath asks worriedly: “what exactly is happening when Derrida proclaims his wish to write ‘as (a) woman’?” (1987: 4), and his question sets the tone for most of the text. Mayne’s paper, “Walking the *Tightrope* of Feminism and Male Desire”, uncovers a subtext of “gay sexuality” (1987: 65) in various Clint Eastwood films, notably in *Dirty Harry* (1971), where it is manifested by “a come-on by a gay man named ‘Alice’” (1987: 64). Naomi Schor focuses her reading of Barthes and Foucault largely on the former’s *S/Z* and the latter’s *Herculine Barbin*. In Balzac’s novella *Sarrasine*, as everyone now knows, the hero falls in love, unwittingly, with La Zambinella, a castrato dressed as a woman, while Foucault’s *Herculine Barbin* was a hermaphrodite who began life as a woman but at twenty two was reclassified as a man. Schor also quotes a section called “Femininity” from Barthes’s *The Fashion System* in which he asserts that a degree of cross-dressing is socially acceptable only for women: “there is a social prohibition against the feminisation of men, there is almost none against the masculinisation of women” (Barthes, 1983: 257 in Schor, 1987: 104).

The association of male feminists with transvestism reaches its apogee in Elaine Showalter’s “Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year”, which, the editors of *Men in Feminism* explain, “was perhaps the first to try to take stock of a certain brand of ‘male feminism’” (1987: 116). (Heath admits that Showalter’s essay is “very much part” of his own paper,

1987: 266.) Showalter uses sub-headings such as “Acting as a Woman: Dustin Hoffman and Making *Tootsie*” (1987: 120), “Reading as a Woman: Jonathan Culler and the Deconstruction of Feminist criticism” (1987: 123) and “Writing as a Woman: Terry Eagleton and the Rape of Feminist Theory” (1987: 127). No wonder that Showalter finds herself looking for the woman in the last section of her essay, “Looking for the Woman: Demons, Diacritics, and the Woman of the Year” (1987: 130). She ends with what is a dystopian fantasy for her: at a “feminist literary conference of the future” a panelist “rises swiftly and commands the podium. He is forceful; he is articulate; he is talking about Heidegger or Derrida or Lévi-Strauss or Brecht. He is wearing a dress” (1987: 132). Her associative cluster links male feminism, structuralist and poststructuralist theory and an unwarranted discursive masquerade: to react against critical cross-dressing is also to react against theory. That association and that reaction characterise quite a few of the contributions to *Men in Feminism*.

When Jardine writes: “What strikes me most generally is how complex the question of untangling the *éconciation* from the *énoncé* becomes when it is a question of our male allies . . .” (1987: 56), she seems to be speaking for most of the contributors. She adds that it may well be a “question of untangling the dancer from the dance” (1987: 56). What is to be done in the case of discursive transvestism, with someone who looks like a man, but writes like a woman? Although Jardine concedes that the issue is complex, she leaves little doubt that it must be pursued and sorted out. Consider Robert Scholes’s contribution which is unambiguously entitled “Reading like a Man” (a “real” man?), and which reaches a position similar to that of Schor, Showalter, Braidotti and Jardine. Scholes takes issue with deconstruction, more specifically with Jonathan Culler’s *On Deconstruction*. Scholes is irked by Culler’s notion that a woman does not read as a woman on the basis of some unproblematically given experience, but because she “[plays] a role she constructs with reference to her identity as a woman which is also a construct” (Culler, 1982: 63 in Scholes, 1987: 213). Culler implies that identity itself is a role, a construct, a costume. Even reading as oneself can then be a potentially transvestite activity which may blur sexual differentiation, as Scholes is quick to point out with some impatience: “If neither John nor Mary can really read as a woman, and either one can read *like* a woman, then what’s the difference between John and Mary?” (1987: 217). Scholes promptly reintroduces the difference: “My own feeling is that until no one notices or cares about the difference we had better not pretend it isn’t there” (1987: 217). Scholes is perfectly right to point out that society still polices its single and unbridgeable difference between “Mary” and “John”, so much so that any hope of plural (in)differentiation appears wildly utopian. But this is not an adequate reason for reinstating that difference into the area where it has been challenged. Moreover, Scholes’s language betrays him: reading like a man, but *feeling* like a woman? His facetious distinction between a cardboard John and a cardboard Mary is not reassuring; it sounds too much like conservative support for the great divide between the sexes.

Even Naomi Schor, hardly a conservative, playfully casts herself in a

reactionary role: she writes that she is willing to run “the risk of being a wallflower at the carnival of plural sexualities” (1987: 109). This risk involves nothing other than her readiness to defend “a feminine specificity, an *irreducible difference*” (1987: 109, my emphasis).

Yet, for some participants in *Men in Feminism* it is less imperative to tell dancer from dance, dress from drag, enunciation from enounced. Cary Nelson wisely cautions against the presumption that a discourse must be read against its origins rather than its effects: “Writing is words on a page; a political movement is better off assuming no more than that zero level of discursive meaning” (1987: 158). Peggy Kamuf refuses to let the feminine proper name authorise her paper, and signs her first contribution simply “P. Kamuf”. She asks: “if we’re still asking whether the authorising signature will itself be masculine or feminine, male or female, can we ever expect to be surprised again by the advent of what counts differently?” (1987: 84). As far as Kamuf is concerned, a signature is only another sign: there are only, as Nelson notes, words on a page.

By now it should be very clear that what is taking place under all these discursive fripperies is yet another re-enactment of the essentialism versus anti-essentialism debate. More than half the contributors to *Men in Feminism* support some version of essentialism. Both Schor and Jardine, for example, cite Stephen Heath’s dictum: “. . . the risk of essence may have to be taken” (Jardine, 1987: 58, Schor, 1987: 98).

Kamuf interprets the widespread return to essence as a symptom of an “impatience with deconstructive practices” (1987: 96). She responds as follows to exhortations to take the risk of essence:

How is one supposed to understand essence as a risk to be run when it is by definition the nonaccidental and therefore hardly the apt term to represent danger or risk? Only over against and in impatient reaction to the deconstruction of the subject can “essence” be made to seem to offer such an appealing invitation to anyone who, similarly impatient, nevertheless doesn’t like to think that there may be something cringing in the attitude. “Go for it”, the phrase incites. “If you fall into ‘essence’, you can always say it was an accident”. (1987: 96)

If feminism has come all this way only to take the risk of essence, then Derrida’s remarks on the law of the Law, on rediscovering the Law on the other side of subversion, are particularly trenchant.

How different, for example, from the almost unanimously hostile treatment of cross-dressing in *Men in Feminism* is Kate Millet’s account of the same theme in *Sexual Politics* (written almost twenty years ago). Millet’s text concludes with an analysis and appreciation of Jean Genet’s writing *precisely because* transvestism and homosexuality in his work reveal the “utterly arbitrary” (Millet, 1977: 343) character of gender. “Divorced from their usual justification in an assumed biological congruity” (Millet, 1977: 343), masculinity and femininity are exposed by Genet as roles, and not essences. Critics like Showalter and Schor react against cross-dressing *precisely because* they are reinstating essence in feminist discourse, re-establishing the Law, although in a different place.

In his seminar Derrida lets slip that “it has been written somewhere that deconstruction in the United States was successful among feminists and homosexuals” (1987: 196). While an alliance of feminism and male homosexuality was possible for Millet, it seems a great deal more problematic for the writers of *Men in Feminism*. Kamuf sees the return to essence as a rejection of deconstruction; given Derrida’s pronouncement, it is not surprising that that return should also involve a rejection of male homosexuality.

Derrida says that “there is always something sexual at stake in the resistance to deconstruction” (1987: 196); in *Men in Feminism* that “something sexual” is a reluctance to recognise the validity, and sometimes even the existence of male homosexuality. What is one to make of Weed’s claim: “The utopian vision . . . is . . . the realising of real difference, of real heterosexuality . . .” (1987: 75), or of Heath’s decision to “take seriously at last the ‘hetero’ in heterosexuality”? (1987: 22). Are these innocent rhetorical flourishes or something more serious? The only paper to deal seriously with the presentation of male homosexuality in feminism is Craig Owens’s “Outlaws: Gay Men in Feminism”; it is also the only genuinely provocative paper in the collection, a text which feminist criticism in future will have to consider.

Owens asks: “why is it presupposed that the male feminist is a heterosexual man?” (1987: 221). Elizabeth Weed, for example, asserts quite simply that “the male – or at least the white Western male – as things stand now, cannot be excessive and cannot occupy the margins” (1987: 73), but surely she has conveniently forgotten the existence of homosexual men. Clearly, the bogey of “those white, middle-class male intellectuals” (1987: 235), as Braidotti calls them, is so powerful that it erases any distinctions, making “men” a monolithic adversary against which a feminism, now equally monolithic, can defend itself.

Owens is the sole writer in *Men in Feminism* to examine the effects of Showalter’s caricature of male feminists as cross-dressers. That her caricature is more than an innocuous academic joke is evidenced by her appeal to conventional psychology to “prove” that transvestism necessarily entails misogyny. Owens rightly contests her “proof” by pointing to its complicity in homophobic practice. Owens also challenges the by now almost obligatory notion that patriarchy is a “homosexual monopoly” – the phrase is Luce Irigaray’s, from *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Irigaray, 1985: 192-193 in Owens, 1987: 223). He quotes alarmingly far fetched assertions by various feminists that a homosexual bonding lies behind fascism, phallogocentric philosophy, and capitalism (Owens, 1987: 223). These variants of the same conspiracy theory would have been funny if they did not mesh so frighteningly with the discourses of power and control of the late eighties.

But Owens’s essay is not without problems of its own. Once he has exposed the homophobia at work in much current feminist writing, he traces it to the “ideological biases” (1987: 220) embedded in the anthropological models some feminists have taken over from Lévi-Strauss and Freud. This has the effect of exculpating those particular feminists: it reduces Owens’s argument to a quarrel between male writers (Owens versus Lévi-Strauss and Freud) and it makes feminists the gullible, passive and uncritical victims of inherited

homophobia. Unfortunately, however well-intentioned a discourse may be, one still has to consider its material effects, and wittingly or unwittingly, feminists may become agents and authors of oppression.

Alice Jardine gives “the inscription of a struggle – even of pain” as the “necessary” mark of a “feminist text” (Jardine, 1987: 58). Owens’s painful eloquence unequivocally meets Jardine’s criterion. For a text like *Men in Feminism*, which is so concerned with sexual essence and sexual disguise, a not inappropriate irony is that its most “feminist” text should be written by a man.

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Book Review / Boekresensie

Semiotik des Theaters. Eine Einführung

Erika Fischer-Lichte 1983

Tübingen: Gunther Narr

In many universities, drama and performance theory still leads the existence of a step-child, of a Cinderella, in spite of the active local theatre production in revamped warehouses or palatial state theatres. Keir Elam's *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* is accepted as the useful introduction to the field. It is indeed fortunate, for the English-speaking researcher, that an English lecturer at Florence university, assistant to Alessandro Serpieri, should have had the courage to condense into a relatively small book some basic considerations of drama and performance theory. Although Keir Elam's book has its merits, it is not very successful in its attempt to systematize theatrical codes in the finest possible detail. There are more convincing introductions available, but they are mostly written in languages other than English. It so happens that the major contributors to the field are Polish (Honzl, Kowsan), French (Rastier, Uebersfeld, Pavis, Corvin), Russian (Veltrúsky) or Italian (Serpieri, Pagnini, Ruffini, Marco de Marinis). Because of the different cultural and literary backgrounds from which these researchers are bound to draw their examples, the dangers of terminological confusion, dry polemics and over-theorizing are ever-present. The translations of theoretical works, which often appear some years after the original texts, seem to create additional problems. For many people, theatre semiotics is something like a jungle. The true introduction to drama and performance theory has remained a *desideratum* for many years. At last, the gap has been filled. Fischer-Lichte's three volumes leave very little to be desired, for the semiologist who reads German, that is.

In German fashion, this "Einführung" (Introduction) is lengthy, but easily readable, and well organized. As a good semiotician, the author follows, basically, the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*, as modified by Eugenio Coseriu's famous article, *Sistema, norma y habla* (Montevideo, 1952). The latter subdivides the Saussurean concept of *langue* into "system" (i.e. language as "invisible" availability of rules and constraints) and "norm" (i.e. the social conventions and prejudices, which limit the free choice of language items available). Coseriu, however, keeps the Saussurean *parole* unchanged (Sp. *habla*). Fischer-Lichte follows Coseriu's three aspects and embodies each of them in one of her books. The first volume, *Das System der theatralischen Zeichen*, describes cultural systems such as proxemics, clothing and architecture and then analyzes these systems according to their capacity of creating meaning within the theatrical space. She thereby stresses the difference between proxemics in true life (as valid in various cultures) and stage proxemics; she shows that clothing is not equal to costumes, and that

architecture is no more than the real-life relative of stage construction. She then discusses fundamental problems of theatrical semiotics, such as the mobility and polyfunctionality of the theatrical sign, the combination of heterogeneous signs into homogeneous theatrical sign systems and the essence of theatrical communication. Theatricality (*Theatralität*, French *théâtralité*), as a specific mode of aesthetic expression, is given its due. Fischer-Lichte's first volume is therefore theoretical in outlook.

The second volume examines "norm" as an historical phenomenon, as an ensemble of rules and constraints, which regulates theatrical performances of a given time. The theatrical code of Greek tragedy, of the *commedia dell'arte*, the Elizabethan theatre and of the Baroque theatre in Germany are some examples of period-bound norms. Furthermore, the author illuminates the transition from the German baroque theatre, heavily indebted to the all-powerful French theatre norm, to the "natural" theatre as advocated in the German *Sturm und Drang* and by G.E. Lessing, dramatist and critic known for his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1785). Aptly sub-titled *Vom "Künstlichen" zum "natürlichen" Zeichen. Theater des Barock und der Aufklärung*, the second volume defines Baroque theatre as a clearly delimited "artificial" system for generating aesthetic meaning within the governing social and aesthetic principles of the era.

This synchronic view of the interaction of social norms and aesthetic product is followed by a diachronic look at the "birth" of the "natural" stage style of the *Aufklärung* (Age of Enlightenment), a style which, taken over and refined by the bourgeois theatre of illusion, was to remain valid well into the first twenty years of our century.

The third volume, *Die Aufführung als Text*, brings to light *all* the necessary arguments and concepts which allow a performance to be seen as the only meaningful artefact of theatrical activity, and defines principles and methods of performance analysis. The latest results of text research are applied to explain the performance as a text constituted by theatrical signs, a text of which the actual play is no more than an ingredient, albeit a very important one. The transcodification of a dramatic script into a performance text and the hermeneutics of the performance text are convincingly illustrated by a detailed analysis of a performance, in Frankfurt, of Pirandello's text, with extensive descriptions of non-verbal signs and numerous photographs of stage configurations, i.e., the significant proxemic relationships brought about during the performance.

The three volumes never sacrifice concrete detail to gratuitous theorizing. Aware of the fact that theatre is rooted in general cultural patterns, knowing that both in real life and in theatre human beings use their external appearance and act in specific spaces, describing with great care the social codes of dress, hairstyles and gestures – her bibliography of anthropological studies on facial expressions alone covers 33 lines (vol. 1, 211) – Fischer-Lichte is able to pinpoint the significant shift from "real" social codes to theatrical codes. Almost always neglected, if not ignored, by theatrical semioticians, music is given the treatment this important carrier of meaning deserves. Quite correctly, although perhaps surprisingly for the music lover, the author states

that music as an autonomous art form, as an aesthetic object, is semiotically irrelevant. As an actor-oriented carrier of meaning, however, music occupies an important place in the author's semiotic argumentation (vol. 1, 169–179). In contrast with opera, where it is no more than a distinctive trait of the genre, singing is examined as an important signifier in plays, because the actor's singing combines linguistic signs (the sung text) with paralinguistic signs (melodic lines, intensity of voice and often a change of timbre), and creates a high-density segment of the performance text, which seldom fails to intensify the attention of the receiver of the theatrical message. Stage music (*Bühnenmusik*) is not neglected: the stage music of the Frankfurt Pirandello production is characterized as a theatrical sign with a symbolic function: the performance text authors had chosen voiceless segments of Verdi's *Requiem*, an excellent and significant choice, for the play is a sort of funeral chant for the nameless protagonist in a private clinic disguised as a mediaeval castle. When, later, the same music is played backwards, it changes into a noise sign, a *bruitage*, aptly referring to the "reawakening madness", in which the protagonist hides to escape punishment for the murder of his life-long rival Count Belcredi.

Fischer-Lichte cannot evade the question whether there really is a theatrical communication. She does not look back with Romantic regret to those eras where audiences were more homogeneous than today's audiences, but suggests that one has to come to terms with modern heterogeneous audiences. Theatrical communication with those new audiences requires more than ever, the establishment of a code common to both sender and receiver of the theatrical message, i.e., of a code which takes into account the cultural reality familiar to the modern public. Fischer-Lichte respects the endeavour of many contemporary German stage directors, who often use as theatrical signs reference to comic strips, mass literature and popular TV shows.

Far from being normative, Fischer-Lichte's three volumes are an all-embracing, excellently referenced synthesis of the fundamental concepts and problems of theatre semiotics. They constantly remind the reader of the various degrees of interrelation between culture and theatre. This interrelation is formulated, right at the end of the first volume, as follows (pp. 195–196 – my translation):

Theatre not only interprets the signs generated by culture, but re-uses those very signs as its own signs, as theatrical signs of signs [. . .] and regroups the meanings created by the cultural sign systems into a new meaningful materiality.

Erika Fischer-Lichte, who is professor of semiotics at Frankfurt University, shows a well-lit path through the jungle of theatre semiotics.

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On Signs: A Semiotics Reader

M. Blonsky (ed.) 1985

London: Basil Blackwell

Blonsky's aims in this collection are nothing if not ambitious. Indeed, it appears from the preface that it is meant to be all things to all people, with such modest statements as: "This collection will therefore aid the student, provoke the scholar, be of value to the businessman or woman, be of interest to people in politics, educate those in the media and please and amuse the general reader" (vii). Perhaps the most daunting aspect of the collection is that it does succeed, at least partially, if only by the divergence of articles included and their juxtaposition. There is something here for everyone; the only thing that appears to be lost along the way is any clear understanding of what semiotics, as a field of study, comprises. What is its methodology, if it has one at all? What is its object, what is this thing called "sign"? Going by the first section "Seeing Signs", the semiotic activity can be likened to a "semiotic 'head', or eye, [which] sees the world as an immense message, replete with signs that can and do deceive us and lie about the world's condition" (vii), referring obviously to Eco's definition of the sign as everything that can be used to lie. Blonsky does then go on to explain, in an extremely cursory way, certain aspects of the sign, such as its arbitrariness. However, even in these passages, he attempts to blend a layman's explanation, an "historical" account of the beginnings of semiotics, and a criticism and development of the theory in terms designed to bore neither the "amateur" nor the "professional". One can only admire the deftness with which this is achieved; and though not in fact saying anything new, the introductory sections are certainly very readable.

Part of this readability lies in the re-discovering of the excitement that must have been in the air at the first international conference on semiotics held in Milan in 1974, the exhilaration of the debates surrounding this brave new science, the polemics, the resistance even, since semiotics was not, and is still not, accepted by many traditionalists. This reinforced one's feeling of being amongst an informed elite, who could always be one up on the sceptics, safe (and perhaps a little giddy) in the knowledge that there was potentially no place from which to speak which could not in turn be spoken by semiotics. No way of halting the discourse of the semiotician, no place to hide, as is shown in this collection, by its seemingly megalomaniac desire to cover everything, to make everything, from pornographic cartoons, to royal weddings, the organisation of space in cities, Castro's beard, and even cowboy boots, a possible object of study. Herein lies both the limitation and the promise of this collection, however. To the layman, it will be extremely difficult to glean any clear knowledge of semiotics, either as a field of study or as a methodology, or for that matter anything else that resembles a coherent ensemble of knowledge. Although each article is interesting on its own, there is no par-

ticular reason why many of the approaches should necessarily be labelled “semiotics”, drawn as they are from linguistics, rhetorics, structuralism, thermodynamics, sociology, psychoanalysis and so on. On the one hand there appears to have been an over-extension of the term “semiotics” to include anything that resembles a critical, demystifying and demythifying discourse, which would of course, include most of twentieth-century knowledge. On the other hand, one cannot deny that this is indeed a true reflection of semiotics, which is characterised far more by a somewhat eclectic borrowing than by anything that is specifically semiotic. This comes across particularly in the first and second sections, where one can accept, for example, Foucault’s and Derrida’s inclusion under the rubric of semiotics only with the broadest possible definition of the signifying unit in mind.

This eclecticism can however easily be forgiven in view of the very real problems that Blonsky points out in his introduction. While using Barthes’ work, and in fact his very being as a subject, as a metaphor for the emergence and development of semiotics, and linking its decline to his death, surely lends it a certain pathos (indeed, there are few writers who can claim a more complete mythification of the very substance of their lives, just as there are few theories with which one can become more intimately entangled), it also provides an entrance to the limitations that now beset semiotics, no longer at the height of intellectual fashion, but still with the potential of asking uncomfortable questions. There is a sense that semiotics must now move in another direction, start exploring new territories, if it is to remain at all relevant, and not simply join the catalogue of now defunct knowledges. Semiotics is at a crisis; what will initiate its “vita nuova”, according to Blonsky, is its application to “the world today”: in “Signs of Life”, the third section of the collection “the authors attempt to bring the discipline to life, carrying its clean theory into turbulent application” (viii).

The ambivalence one feels towards the book as a semiotics reader results then not only from a problem of inclusions and exclusions, but more significantly from the type of changes that must occur when a theory strives for relevance, and therefore popularisation. What is lost in theoretical exactitude is made up for by the feeling that there is, after all, something at stake. The revelation of impositions, all the more effective because so banal, is part of the inherently critical nature of semiotics: Blonsky’s claim is that in order to extend criticism to where it will make a difference, “Hands have to get soiled” (L); he goes on to add: “It is not a corruption of the semiotic enterprise to use it politically, or commercially. Quite the contrary: isolation will be the destruction of semiotics”. Blonsky brings a fresh sense of urgency to semiotics, even though in many of the “applications”, to advertisements, or other such commercial items, it appears more as a vague type of culture criticism, than anything specifically semiotic. This is due to an overly flexible usage of the terms “code” and “myth”, but it is at the same time just the type of thing that will interest the very large audience at which the collection is aimed.

Despite some misgivings, then, there are several highpoints that make the collection worthwhile: Jakobson’s “Dear Claude, Cher Maitre” is one of those touches that invite intimacy with the masters; Michel de Certeau’s

articles are gems of cultural analysis; Julia Kristeva's "The Speaking Subject" provides the basis for the entire problematic of the collection in a theoretically coherent nutshell (indeed it was she who perceived the need to modify semiotics long before any of the "patriarchs" Blonsky now wants to exceed); and Wlad Godzich's "The Semiotics of Semiotics" is not to be missed for exactitude in a "formal" semiotics, providing one of the most novel approaches and conclusions to be found in the book, if not in any recent developments in semiotics in the strict sense.

It is however Susan Meiselas' "A Portfolio on Central America", relentless photographs of dead bodies in Nicaragua, and Edmundo Desnoes' commentary, casually thrown in amongst the proliferation of other cultural tidbits in the first section, that ultimately give one the dizzying sense of what it is all about, in the debris of all this language. The photographs, with no titles, no captions, are a point of silence in the collection – at once a challenge to and a mockery of the semiotic project, and any other theory with claims to a social conscience. Desnoes drives the point home:

"I do not wish to proceed any further. My words cannot add anything to these bodies, cannot give meaning to the Central American war photos of Susan Meiselas. You can, **hypocrite lecteur! mon semblable – mon frere!** It is too trite, too trivial, to continue decoding these bodies thrown at us by Susan. And it is also too easy to feel guilty for being alive, for surviving, for looking and writing about **mis hermanos muertos** in relative safety." (42)

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