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Semiotics, tourism

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Semiotics is the study of signs. This research field is also called semiology or, where the focus is on meaning, semantics. The prefix "sem-" is derived from Greek *semeion* = "sign." Signs occur throughout living nature, in plants, animals, and humans. As a sociocultural phenomenon, they characterize ▶ language, gesture, imagery, music, clothing, ▶ architecture, and so on and constitute formal languages such as software. A ▶ sign is something that "stands for" something other than itself. It contains information about this "other" and so allows an exchange of information. There is no communication without signs. But only in a given context does a sign gain "meaning" or "sense." The fact that in the social world a sign usually carries more than one meaning becomes a key issue of semiotics.

Roots and usages of the term semiotics

Medical diagnosis of ancient times comprised a theoretical and an empirical division; the latter, *semeiotikon meros*, dealt with the observable signs of diseases. Under the name of "semeiotics" (today better known as symptomatology), it reemerged in the seventeenth-century medical discourse, namely, as an empirical counterweight to speculative theories of the body. At the same time, the term found its way into the humanities. In 1632 John Poinsot published a detailed *Tractatus de Signis*, and in 1690 John Locke proposed a "branch" of science that "may be called Semeiotike, or the doctrine of signs" (but did not develop this "doctrine").

Research in semiotics has taken two directions. First, semiotics stands for a limited empirical "branch" of various disciplines. After its introduction in medicine, ▶ history followed the suit around 1800. Today it is also found in linguistics, ▶ marketing, media research, jurisprudence, and tourism research. As the suffix "-tics" (from Greek *techne* = "skill") indicates, semiotics here refers to a set of topics and methods. In addition, but sometimes avoiding the label of semiotics, a handful of smaller disciplines have also developed tools to analyze signs (iconography, information theory, visual studies, and more).

Second, in the age of constructivism, semiotics stands for a virtually unlimited approach based on an epistemological core assumption. Here, semiotics has an intrinsic tendency toward academic imperialism. Once there is agreement that the social world (if not life in general) consists in communication and that communication consists in the making, interpreting, and connecting of signs, all research on humans (if not on all animate beings) can be reassembled

under the heading of semiotics – more of a philosophical *passe-partout* than a concrete science. Umberto Eco, a protagonist of this approach, remarked that nearly all major thinkers were implicitly semioticians. Such claims to hegemony are not very popular with scholars. No wonder, the far-reaching pretension contrasts with the small number of research institutions. After its heyday in the 1960–1980s, the semiotics' star was waning. Nonetheless, with a growing awareness of ▶ globalization and the need for intercultural communication since the millennium, it has regained momentum.

The notion of a "sign" as principally different from the "object" is alien to the "wild thinking" of simple societies. It is a feature of complex societies. The nature of signs had already been discussed in antiquity. However, not until the scholastic "dispute over universals" during the Middle Ages did a highly sophisticated ▶ discourse set in. The exponents of (traditional) realism stated that the general terms represented "ideas" which were *ante rem* (before the thing); they were of a timeless existence independent of human beings. The advocates of the (novel) nominalism argued that general terms were "names" which originated *post rem* (after the thing); they were the result of abstraction or even mere convention. In this connection, William of Ockham, who in his *Summa Logicae* (circa 1323) declared that universals were just "signs of signs," became a founding father both of constructivism and semiotics.

Modern semiotics

What is now called semiotics dates from around the 1900s. One pillar is the "semeiotic" of American philosopher Charles Pierce (1839–1914). Although an admirer of Ockham's rigorous thinking, his writings form anything but a consistent ▶ theory (logicians detected 88 different definitions of the sign). Nonetheless, they contain useful assumptions, mainly the distinction of signs into "icon" (likeliness of sign and object – the pictogram of a dog warns visitors of a savage dog), "index" (indirect hint – a ringing

of a doorbell announces a ▶ visitor), and "symbol" (denotation by convention – the word "bell" denotes a class of sound-producing devices). Furthermore, Pierce introduced a triadic model of mutual relations among object, sign, and "interpretant," the meaning affected by the sign. Nowadays, such "semiotic triangles" mostly consist of object, sign, and mind (as Aristotle had already suggested). Unlike Ockham, Pierce stuck to realism and combined his semiotics with the attempt to prove the "reality of God." Perhaps this is why until the late twentieth century, Pierce was little known outside America albeit Popper counted him among the "greatest philosophers."

Meanwhile, over in ▶ Europe, it was Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) who made semiotics popular. His *sémiologie* deals solely with ▶ language. Comparable to Poinsot and Ockham, he regards language as a self-referential system (to use the Luhmannian term). The hidden ▶ system of rules, meanings, and relations (*langue* or competence) becomes manifest in the act of speaking (*parole* or ▶ performance). Together, both levels form language (*langage*) and both operate with signs. There is no bond between the sign and the *chose réelle* (real thing). The only exception to this "arbitrariness" is the "symbol," the onomatopoetic sign (such as interjections) which has a "natural relation" to the object. Saussure's definition is thus the very opposite of the Peircean. A sign – usually a word – consists of two elements: the *signifié* or mental *concept* (signified) and the *significant* or acoustic *image* (signifier). However, this notion often (even in encyclopedias) is misinterpreted as a dyadic model that simply relates sign and object.

In the course of the twentieth century, these two starting points of semiotics were modified and amended. Influenced by George Herbert Mead's ▶ symbolic interactionism and the Vienna Circle, Charles Morris (1901–1979) developed a "theory of signs" (Morris and Neurath 1938). To the Peircean triangle, he added a fourth factor: the human "interpreter." Together, they constitute the process of "semiosis" in which something functions as a sign (which he also called symbol). For Morris, there are three sorts

of relations signs can have: to objects, to interpreters, and to other signs. Accordingly, semiotics consists of three dimensions: semantics, pragmatics, and syntactics. Despite its obsolete behaviorist and pragmatist foundations, this theory can still serve as a guideline for (tourism) studies in semiotics.

On European thought, the impact of Saussure was immense. Above all, his view on language as a well-ordered "synchronic" totality distinct from the "real" world led to structuralism. Its exponents, like Lévi-Strauss and (the early) Foucault, stated that thinking and acting are structured by symbolic "orders" which unconsciously follow an inner logic. The challenge is to reveal that logic. In this connection, Roland Barthes (1915–1980), half structuralist scientist, half Marxist essayist, had the strongest inclinations to semiotics. For example, in 1957, he applied it to the "myth" of Spain as produced by guidebooks: a country reduced by the "culture industry" to a "collection of monuments."

Far from such cultural criticism, but also deciphering myths, is the "philosophy of symbolic forms" by Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945): human's world is a world of signs (*animal symbolicum*). Later Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) made the same core assumption the foundation of his "symbolical anthropology." These theories offer further pillars to semiotics. However, they have little bearing on that field. Instead Cassirer influenced Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998) whose systems theory analyzes the reduction of complexity via symbolically mediated communication in sense-producing systems.

Semiotics in the sociology and anthropology of tourism

It is difficult *not* to speak of signs when speaking of social phenomena. This is of course also true of tourism. Thus, when Hans-Joachim Knebel in 1958 published the world's first sociological dissertation on tourism, he asserted (like Barthes) that tourism reduces "reality" to "symbols" and "stereotypes." They prepare the "stage" for tourists, "relieve" them from "uncertainty," and trigger predictable "sequences of action" – in other words they reduce complexity.

Admittedly, it took two decades until semiotics was seriously introduced into tourism research. In 1978 José Febas Borra, originally a theologian, published the first thorough study of the "semiology of the ► tourist language." Based on structuralist theories, he developed a scheme of communicational triangles in order to analyze the promotional material of the Spanish Tourist Board. His findings reinforced the (already well-known) fact that the advertised "image" of Spain turned a blind eye to the "real" industrialization and urbanization experienced by the people. In doing so, it aimed at the traditional sightseeing tourism; the brochures of the ► tour operators, by contrast, targeted the new ► mass tourism on the beaches. Yet, outside of ► Spain, Febas' pioneering work received scant attention.

But as far back as 1976, in his seminal work, *The Tourist*, sociologist Dean MacCannell also had made use of semiotics. Tourist attractions were signs (be they icons, indices, or symbols) affecting "staged authenticity" and channeling tourist behavior. This was not far from the positions of Barthes and especially Knebel. MacCannell, too, drew a cultural critical conclusion when he maintained that modern individuals have lost the unity and the solid ground of reality in which ► knowledge and ► identity were once rooted – and tourism is part and parcel of this loss of certainty. Similarly, in 1981 the literary scholar, Jonathan Culler, deplored the taming of "Otherness" through stereotyped symbols and called tourists semioticians "fanning out in search of signs." Yet, this critical master narrative is based upon a transfigured picture of the past. People, not only today's tourists, always communicate via signs (as already Ockham knew), and the warmth and security of the good old days is a romantic projection. In any case, it was in particular MacCannell (1989) who rendered outstanding services to popularize semiotics in tourism research.

Meanwhile numerous studies, varying in range and theoretical background, have appeared. They extend from english sociologist Graham Dann who rediscovered Febas' work and

included sociolinguistics in his anatomy of *The Language of Tourism* (1996) to german geographer Marlen Schlaffke who in 2007 drew on Cassirer when she analyzed the invention of the "imaginary Black Forest." A good overview of Anglophone tourism research is provided by Richard Tresidder (2011). All in all, these studies enrich tourism social science with fresh (empirical) insights. However, they prefer "sights" – which so apparently function as signs – as their object and hence suffer from the general "ocularcentric" bias of tourism studies. Accordingly, the "de-located" beach holiday and other "common" tourist practices are underrepresented. Another pitfall lies in the universalism of the semiotic paradigm. Applied without caution, the specifics of the ► tourist semiosis must remain opaque. Findings, then, are read as traits of tourism which in actual fact are of a universal nature (such as the reduction of complexity).

The future of semiotics in tourism studies

The character and function of semiotics in the social sciences remain ambivalent, last but not least in tourism research. On the one hand, it is an analytical tool, a method. Here, it serves well in studies of a short or medium range. On the other hand, it claims to be a grand theory. Here, it is potentially a "theory of everything" and thus – unlike the grand theories of Marx, Parsons, and so on – an empty theory. As a sort of logic, its benefit for syntheses of a wider range in tourism research therefore is doubtful, unless they are of a highly universal, abstract kind. Unfortunately, the borders between the two levels of semiotics are blurred. There is the danger that semiotic tourism studies are taking a theoretical sledgehammer to crush an empirical nut. But instead of trying to retrace the ramifications of the Saussurean or Peircean heritage, often a simple methodic flowchart is sufficient to analyze the signs hidden in a given source. ► Future semiotic research should, as a rule, avoid theoretical overload and treat semiotics simply as one useful approach of many. Then it helps – preferably together with hermeneutic intuition – to clarify numerous concrete empirical questions, in particular about the modes of constructing and commodifying tourist spaces, perceptions, and practices.

See also ► Language, ► marker, ► sign, ► sociology of tourism, ► symbolism.

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