CHAPTER 9

Gilles Deleuze’s Theory of Sign and Its Reflection of Peircean Semiotics

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Everything I’ve written is vitalistic, at least I hope it is, and amounts to a theory of signs and events.

DELEUZE 1995a, 143

Despite the statement quoted above, few studies exist concerning his concept of sign and these try mainly to classify his position together with Saussure and semiology, which was largely despised by Deleuze. Relations with Peirce are discussed mainly based on Deleuze’s works on film. These are the positions we would like to dismiss and show to be inadequate. Our argument is to show that Deleuze has a theory of signs of his own and that it should be read carefully along with the works of C.S. Peirce and thus considered as semiotics rather than semiology.

1 Psychoanalysis as a Paranoid Regime of Signs

“A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 2) is what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari wrote in their book Anti-Oedipus. Why are they so dismissive of psychoanalysis? There are several reasons which we will present briefly (see Massumi 1992). For Deleuze and Guattari, psychoanalysis is a repressive practice in which the unconscious is defined as the enemy. Although Freud discovered the productive potential of the unconscious, he personified it as a structure (Ego, Superego, Id). Thus, the whole productive force of the unconscious is transformed into the field of the nuclear family where it is subjected to the Oedipus complex. This does not mean that psychoanalysis has “invented Oedipus”; it is much more accurate to say that psychoanalysis itself comes into existence already “Oedipalized”. Deleuze and Guattari state that Freud’s biggest
mistake was (among others) being sure that the Oedipus complex is a timeless structure operating throughout the history of mankind. As Deleuze and Guattari say:

Oedipus-as-universal recommences the old metaphysical operation that consists in interpreting negation as a deprivation, as a lack: the symbolic lack of the dead father, or the Great Signifier.

**DELEUZE and GUATTARI 1983, 171**

In another chapter, they accentuate: “The three errors concerning desire are called lack, law, and signifier.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 111) For them, psychoanalysis is a “despotic regime of signs” because it is based solely on the interpretation wherein one sign leads to another and thus creates a multiplicity of circles of signs which lead to the point which we can call “lack”; to the starting point which makes this regime of sign possible but is missing in its “position”. From these remarks it is quite clear why Freud is compared to a modern priest. Freud, much like a priest, interprets everything:

> Interpretation is carried to infinity and never encounters anything to interpret that is not already itself an interpretation. The signified constantly reimparts signifier, recharges it or produces more of it. The form always comes from the signifier.

**DELEUZE and GUATTARI 1987, 114**

This is what lies at the heart of their stand-offish attitude towards psychoanalysis. Another aspect depends on the fact, as it has been quoted, that the Oedipus complex is not something like a timeless structure, but comes from within capitalism. For Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism is deterritorialized, it means that capitalism consist of a multiplicity of flows:

> Flows of property that is sold, flows of money that circulates, flows of production and means of production making ready in the shadows, flows of workers becoming deterritorialized.

**DELEUZE and GUATTARI 1983, 223**

Psychoanalysis then, in its conception of Oedipus complex, castration, and lack, reterritorializes these deterritorialized flows, but in a repressive manner, (artificially) turning people into neurotics.

Against psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari formulate the so-called “schizoanalysis”. A schizophrenic (or “schizo”) is someone who escaped the “Oedipalization of the world”. As we have said: capitalism is “constituted” by