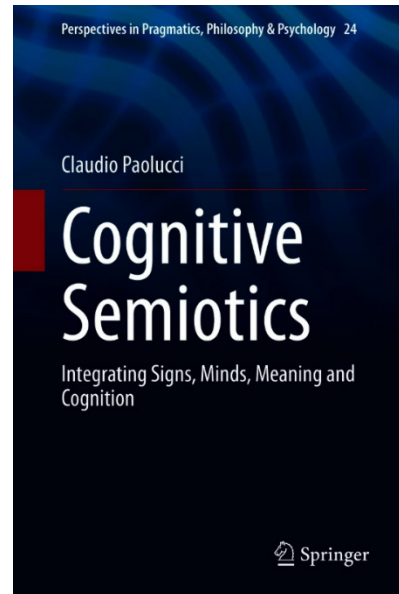


Book Review

Claudio Paolucci, *Cognitive Semiotics. Integrating Signs, Minds, Meaning and Cognition* (Springer, 2021)

Claudio Paolucci's *Cognitive Semiotics* is an ambitious and original contribution to contemporary semiotics, particularly within the realm of cognitive semiotics, where he puts forth a bold thesis: cognitive semiotics should not be seen as a subfield or applied domain of semiotic research, but rather as the core vocation of semiotics itself. Adequately understood, semiotics is an inquiry into how human beings come to know, act within, and transform their world through sign systems. The book builds on the legacy of Umberto Eco and Peircean pragmatism while placing semiotics into direct conversation with three major currents in contemporary cognitive theory: Radical Enactivism, Pragmatism, and Material Engagement Theory (MET). The result is a theoretical synthesis that is both conceptually robust and surprisingly unified, especially given the diversity of traditions it brings together.



The book consists of five chapters, beginning with a substantial *Preface* in which Paolucci places his work within Eco's semiotic tradition. The *Preface* is particularly noteworthy, articulating Eco's core question—how we come to understand the world—as a fundamental issue for any semiotics that seeks not



simply to explain how signs mirror our understanding but to address how signs actively create and shape it. In this context, Paolucci's formulation - "the object of cognitive semiotics is the way in which semiotic systems represent the background of our perception of the world and define the conditions under which cognition and knowledge are possible" (p.VI, Preface) serves as a pivotal entry point for the argument that semiotics should be considered not as a passive reflection of reality but as an active constructor of cognitive possibilities. This perspective enables a nuanced dialogue with contemporary cognitive theories, emphasizing how semiotic scaffolding not only facilitates cultural distinctions but also enhances our capacity to interact with and transform the world we live in. In fact, this is a recurring theme throughout the book and involves rejecting the long-standing dichotomy between nature and culture that has structured semiotic investigation. This rejection of the classical threshold between nature and culture represents one of Paolucci's most significant theoretical commitments and marks a major shift from the semiotic tradition. He associates semiotics not only with cultural systems (as in Eco's earlier "logic of culture") but with any system capable of enabling cognition. This perspective allows for Paolucci to unify continental semiotics—particularly the structuralist and Gremasian traditions—with the pragmatism of Charles S. Peirce, biosemiotics, and contemporary theories of embodied and distributed cognition.

The book is the result of that effort and illustrates how semiotics can enhance current discussions about cognition, which in Paolucci's view is conceptualized as: (1) an enactive approach to sense-making that involves engagement with the external environment; (2) an action-oriented process mediated by meaning, wherein meanings function not as representations or truth conditions but as interpretive habits and activities for generating understanding; (3) an understanding of texts, languages, and semiotic systems not as an articulation of pre-existing ideas but also as something that shapes our thoughts and comprehension of reality, an understanding that ultimately acts as a cognitive scaffolding that sustain our perception of the world.

One of the book's notable achievements is its redefinition of Eco's well-known paradoxical concept of semiotics as a "theory of the lie." Eco's concept of a "theory of lie" doesn't refer to someone intentionally deceiving others, but rather to the existence of a system that enables deception to occur. A system is considered semiotic if it "allows for the construction of significant surfaces capable of lying, if it allows for the deceiving of the other, by hiding the object for effective action" (p. 4). Paolucci offers an anti-representational interpretation of this idea: rather than focusing on deception as a matter of subjective intention, it is more important to recognize that semiotic systems create possible worlds. In doing so, they establish the meaningful contexts through which organisms engage with their environment.

From this perspective, semiotic systems do not merely depict the world; they enact it by highlighting specific features, making them thinkable and actionable.

Paolucci discusses this topic in the opening chapter of his book, where he also presents the integrative framework for his approach. He posits that enactivism – especially in its radical form – pragmatism, and material engagement theory (MET) share a fundamental insight: cognition does not rely on representation but emerges from embodied action, habitual interpretation, and material mediation. This position is strongly informed by Eco's concept of semiosis as an infinite process of attributing meaning and serves as the foundation for cognitive semiotics. Instead of viewing cognition as an internal mental process, Paolucci—drawing on radical enactivism articulated by Hutto and Myin (2013) — presents a perspective on cognition that emphasizes the importance of active engagement with the environment, rather than perceiving it solely as an internal mental process. In this framework, knowing, in essence, becomes synonymous with doing. However, although enactivism sheds light on the dynamic exchanges through which organisms make sense of their surroundings, it says much less about how richer, more organized meanings develop. Paolucci argues that this is precisely where semiotics becomes essential. Semiotics provides the necessary scaffolding to account for the emergence of structured systems of meaning—such as language, narrative, and other symbolic forms. In short, enactivism provides insights into how cognition is embodied, whereas semiotics offers a framework for understanding how meaning is structured, or as Paolucci put it, “that is why cognitive semiotics is radically enactivist; languages do not represent the world, instead they build categorizations (forms of content) that install habits” (p.7).

Continuing his argument, Paolucci provides evidence of the deep connection between cognitive semiotics and pragmatism, mediated by the philosophy of Ch. S. Peirce, who is recognized as both the father of cognitive semiotics and the founder of pragmatism. This fundamental connection emphasizes that meaning arises from habits and the process of making sense of things. In Peirce's words, the meaning of any concept or object is determined by the habits it involves—essentially, the regularities or patterns of action that it generates. The identity of a habit is based on how it might lead us to act, not only under circumstances that are likely to occur but also in situations that are merely possible, no matter how improbable they may be. In other words, the meaning of a concept is inseparable from its practical implications and the potential differences it could make in practice. It should also be noted that Peirce's semiotics—and in particular his definition of meaning as a triadic relationship between sign (representamen), object, and interpretant—plays a fundamental role throughout the entire work. Paolucci shows that, for cognitive

semiotics, this triadic relationship is not an abstract concept but a living process that ultimately shows that thinking is not a mental event but an action based on relation, where every cognition is a “doing”, not in the form of behavior, but as a habit or a predisposition to act in certain future situations.

Moreover, as Paolucci points out, habits, as understood in cognitive semiotics, are not limited to human beings; since they involve “regularity”, “continuity”, and “patterns of action” (p. 7) that repeat and iterate over time, any material system can incorporate habits. This perspective leads to the Material Engagement Theory (MET) proposed by L. Malafouris, which Paolucci believes can be seen as a comprehensive semiotic theory of cognition, not only through its most apparent notion—the concept of the “enactive sign”—but also through two additional foundational dimensions: the *extended mind* and *material agency*. Together, these dimensions reveal how cognition is fundamentally distributed, enacted, and situated within the interplay of signs, embodied practices, and the material world. Overall, the first chapter presents strong theoretical arguments and focuses on meaning as the result of ongoing engagement rather than a fixed representation, thereby allowing Paolucci to unify enactivist and material engagement theories and to show that our cognitive realities result from interactions among signs, embodied practices, and the material world. Paolucci demonstrates his strength most effectively by using Peirce to bridge enactivism and MET, showing that semiotic scaffolds not only illustrate the material-dispositional structures that these theories address, but underscore the necessity of a semiotic perspective for a comprehensive understanding.

Chapter 2 offers a strikingly original account of subjectivity based on “an enactivist explanation, founded on a semiotic theory of effective actions grounded on pragmatism” (p. 26). Paolucci moves away from Benveniste’s theory of enunciation, which originates the concept of the subject from the linguistic “I” and asserts that subjectivity is developed through the act of speaking. He also moves away from the Aristotelian view that places the subject at the center. For Paolucci, the self is not an inner essence or a purely phenomenological form; it emerges as a semiotic capacity shaped by reflexive and impersonal structures of enunciation. He draws from his earlier work on *Persona*¹ to argue that subjectivity emerges from *illeity*—the third-person, structural dimension of signs that makes self-reference possible. Contrary to first-person approaches in philosophy of mind, Paolucci insists that the self becomes an object for itself only through semiotic mediation: “This duplication of the subject himself for the purposes of effective action, whether we call it *self-consciousness* or the *I*, exists only to the extent that a semiotic capacity to make

¹ Paolucci, C. (2020). *Persona. Soggettività nel linguaggio e semiotica dell'enunciazione*. Milano: Bompiani. French translation 2020. Liège: Puliège.

oneself object of one's own reflections exists, representing the foundation of subjectivity". (p. 36). In short, the second chapter of the book provides a semiotic alternative to both analytic and phenomenological theories of subjectivity. One limitation of Paolucci's argument is that he relies primarily on a strong linguistic model of enunciation that shapes how a person thinks and perceives the world; the role of gesture and non-linguistic embodiment could be further developed.

Paolucci further explores Peirce's influence on his own perspective in the following chapter, where he describes the **semiotic mind** as composed of habits and beliefs that are fundamentally public, social, and extended. The chapter begins by emphasizing the anti-mentalist tradition of semiotics. In Peirce's conception, beliefs are not internal mental attitudes but represent dispositional habits that guide our actions. These habits help us remove doubt and are consolidated through the scientific method and through signs. In particular, Peirce's definition of the mind as an "**external sign**" proves to be important for Paolucci's approach, which continues this perspective, arguing that all cognition is extended, as beliefs and habits depend on semiotic networks that extend beyond the mind. If the mind is seen as extended and enacted, and if semiotic representations are not internal at all and content isn't defined solely by truth conditions, then adopting an "anti-mentalist" or anti-cognitive position becomes unnecessary. This idea aligns with Material Engagement Theory, which argues that the mind is shaped by semiotic processes — "Signs, texts and languages were not, in Peirce's theory, the external expression of a preformed mind localized inside the brain and the body, but were rather thought of instead as something that shapes the mind" (p. 64). In summary, semiotic structures function as cognitive architectures in the sense that diagrams and gestures serve not only as external tools we use, but also as integral components of cognition. Overall, this third chapter provides a rigorous and convincing analysis of how semiotics can address the challenges and limitations of both classical cognitivist theories and externalist theories of the mind.

The title of the fourth chapter, "Social Cognition and Autism Spectrum Disorders: From Mindreading to Narratives," announces the most interdisciplinary chapter of the book, bridging semiotics, psychology, and cognitive anthropology. With a clearly defined objective from the outset — to highlight the significant role of semiotic narratives in social cognition — Paolucci begins by criticizing the "mind reading" paradigm, also known as Theory of Mind (ToM) — dominant in developmental psychology and the philosophy of mind — which holds that social cognition involves attributing mental states to others. The aim is to emphasize how a semiotic theory of narrativity can occupy a key position in explaining our ability to attribute meaning to others' actions and to understand, through the analysis of semiotic interactions, impairments in social cognition, such as Autism Spectrum Disorders,

in infants. Paolucci develops a semiotic approach to Shaun Gallagher and Daniel Hutto's **Narrative Practice Hypothesis (NPH)** from 2008, which he calls the **Narrative Practice Semiotic Hypothesis (NPSH)**. While Gallagher and Hutto (2019) understand narratives as "representational artifacts," Paolucci points out the importance of distinguishing between narratives and narrativity, since semiotic narrativity is neither an artefact nor a representational one. This approach requires, as Paolucci states, "a radical enactivist account of social cognition, according to which narrative competence is not always connected to narratives thought as representational artefacts" (p. 103). This chapter proves to be truly innovative because it attempts to redefine research in the field of autism, which is no longer viewed in terms of an inferential or representational deficit, but as a difference (not a lack) in narrative semiotic attunement.

The book concludes with a semiotic theory of perception, drawing on predictive processing, Eco's semiotics of perception, and Koenderink's work on perceptual imaging. Paolucci adopts the increasingly influential idea that perception is "controlled hallucination"—a constructive process guided by predictive structures—but insists that these predictive structures are semiotic. He argues that "a semiotic theory of perception must deal with the phenomenological account of the percept as an effect of a diagrammatic process of emerging. This is done through imagination, through 'controlled hallucination'" (p. 147). Here, perception is seen as an active process that involves ongoing inference, guided by habits, patterns of meaning, and material scaffolds that shape what we perceive. Therefore, Paolucci concludes that there is no raw perception, but only semiotic mediated perception. This final chapter of the book is an excellent illustration of how semiotics can contribute to contemporary debates in the cognitive sciences, and Paolucci's intervention is subtle, advocating for a semiotic enrichment of predictive processing. Consequently, in Paolucci's account, semiotics is not an optional addition to cognitive science but a necessary lens for understanding mind and world. His arguments encourage us to recognize how deeply sign systems inform our thought and the very texture of our lived reality.

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