Tyler James Bennett

University of Tartu

Anti-humanist semiotics and the role of the humanities

It is fashionable to lay blame for the decline of the humanities on the influence of postmodern relativism in its various guises of post-structuralism, the Frankfurt school, and cultural Marxism so-called. Theoretical anti-humanism composes a part of these latter strains of the humanities now labeled pejoratively as postmodernism relativism.

One common response to the decline of the humanities has been to mitigate the influence of these once prominent schools of thought, and to replace them with the tools of the hard sciences, sometimes toward the quantification of humanities research results to more monetizable ends.

This instrumentalization of the aims of inquiry in the humanities is deadly to its autonomy and should be resisted, however this does not preclude the complementarity of, for example, cognitive science, with humanities research. In recent decades semiotics has incorporated the tools of cognitive science and experimental biology to a discipline formerly classed strictly as part of the humanities.

This turn has led to notable advances in the field (e.g. Stjernfelt 2007, 2014; Deacon 1997; 2012), however some of its proponents also characterize the turn as a hard one away from postmodern relativism (Sebeok and Danesi 2000; Deely 2005). For those applications of semiotics, the tools of anti-humanism and structural semiology are all but forgotten, and some of the most important targets of semiotic analysis – such as ideology critique – abandoned.

Paths of integration between anti-humanism and structural semiology have been charted by Daniele Monticelli for instance (2008, 2012, 2016), but these at the exclusion of the Charles Peirce-inspired cognitive turn in semiotics. Anti-humanist semiotic ideology critique is bolstered against naïve relativism by the Peircean cognitive approach, but only so long as it retains its roots in theoretical anti-humanism and structural semiology.

The complementarity of the two divergent branches of semiotics (Peircean cognitive and structural semiological anti-humanist) entails some involved revisions that cut both ways, in the process of the immanent critical metatheoretic synthesis.

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