

# Embodiment and Disembodiment in General Semiotics<sup>1</sup>

*[Note: This article includes some publicly accessible websites as examples. Examples provided as URLs can be directly accessed via links from the single page: <https://davidlidov.com/illustrations-lidov-disembodiment/>]*

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## *Abstract*

Embodiment studies, strong after decades, remain a fount of vitality for semiotics. We connect sophisticated representations to prior experiences of sensing and manipulating our physical bodies, but we sometimes neglect the complementary moment of letting the body go. General semiotics (and/or general semiology), the encompassing framework such as Saussure imagined or Peirce proposed, has not yet theorized embodiment and disembodiment as universal and reciprocal. Semiotics needs to rediscover corporeality only because semiosis accomplished so much by disengaging from and erasing the body, often via play, games and abstraction, an advancement quintessentially human though perhaps not uniquely so.

*Keywords: general semiotics, embodiment theory, play, abstraction*

The particular topics of play and abstraction, captioned here as “Embodiment” and “Disembodiment” are framed in two broader contexts in this article, one historical and one theoretical. The context for the theoretical argument is general semiotics; the context for the historical argument is North American, English language semiotics. Our path will meander. I begin by sketching these two broader contexts and will return to the first of them at the end.

Although the focus of my efforts in semiotics has been to develop unified and coherent theory, in this article I am primarily interested to draw attention to what I believe is a gap, a neglected issue in semiotic theory. My argument is sometimes loose,

fragmentary and exploratory; however, my manner of exposition may cause it to appear more informal than I think it really is. That is because I take advantage of the system of concepts of my *Elements of Semiotics* (1999/2017). Having spelled out much of my position in that book, I simply ignore or bypass some foundational questions and distinctions here. In particular—when it makes no important difference to the matter *immediately* at hand, I mix terminologies associated with European structuralism or post-structuralism (signifier, signified, etc) and terminology linked to American pragmatism (representamen, objects, interpretant, etc) without regard to their different epistemological and ontological entailments. I also omit or abbreviate discussions of some topics (gesture, articulation, the relation of semiosis to consciousness, hypothesis, play, etc) that are treated more expansively in the book. With my book now easily available online (Lidov, 2017) any interested reader who would like a more detailed and logical account of my standpoint can consult it. At the same time, I am quite sure no one needs to study that book first in order to follow the main ideas discussed here. What I say about embodiment is better prepared by the 2017 edition of *Elements* than by the 1999 edition; however, neither offers a unified treatment of this aspect of semiotic theory.<sup>2</sup> This article presents initial steps in that direction.

### **Context: General Semiotics**

The notion of “general semiotics” is less widely invoked than it should be. General semiotics constructs a comparative perspective on all signs and sign media with respect to their capacities for structure and representation. An immediate precedent is the “general linguistics” of Saussure’s course as we know it according to the summary of his theory from students’ notes published after his death by three of his colleagues. The point of “general” for Saussure was to mark a contrast between the study of individual languages and the study of language in general, language *as such*, and we note that “general” and “comparative” march hand-in-hand, for to compare particular languages we need a perspective that includes both. How far can we go in making universal generalizations about language? Saussure did not need to confront skepticism about his proposal beyond his own critical self doubts (see Bouissac, 2010); his enquiry was a new, fresh enterprise. Half a century later, when Noam Chomsky developed much more aggressive notions about language in general, skepticism was inevitable. Skepticism and controversy do not erase an idea, and the concept of a theory of language-in-general remains inspiring for development, criticism and debate. We must insist on the same for general semiotics: the specialized semiotics “of” this or “of” that needs the counterweight of general semiotics that constructs a universal and comparative perspective on signs and sign systems. General semiotics has a long history in philosophy insofar as philosophers have, since ancient times, developed abstract ideas about signs and language, but in consequence of the breakthroughs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in structuralism, logic and cultural analysis, semiotics has new tools very much of its own. The development of these tools carries

us away from philosophy into a territory where relevant detail can be explored without continuous reference to fundamental issues of philosophy. Thus “general semiotics”, which makes a home for these details, is not the same as philosophical semiotics, just as psychology is not the same as the philosophy of mind.

Saussure’s notion of “semiologie”, although very limited in relation to the ideas it soon stimulated, was also clearly intended by him to be general. Generalization was his principal point, his notion that all social systems of signs could be addressed from a single point of view and with a single arrangement of concepts. When my participation in semiotics began, in the 1970s, the quest for the best general theory of semiotics was a burning question for many leading scholars. (This quest had some special characteristics for North American scholars writing in English, which I will discuss further below.) Today, however, a much stronger locus of interest would seem to be sub-specialties: the “semiotics of videos” or the “semiotics of cooking” or “of law” or “of Z” or “of Y” or, as we find it, literally, in the title of a very recent and very important book that I will say more about later on, *The Semiotics of X*, a book which actually has much to say to general semiotics even if it presents itself, at first, as more specialized in its orientation.

I believe that the historical shift of attention from general to specialized semiotics has brought valuable advances and dangerous losses. The advances lie in the vastly wider range of sign manifestations brought to our attention for analysis—advertising, music, social customs (like smoking, etc), animal behavior (especially courtship), internet discourses, and others. The losses lie in the diminished intellectual force of semiotics when it abandons the goal of constructing a disciplined and unified perspective that would permit the analytical comparison of these various media, all these different modes of sign manifestations. Without continually renewing the search for a unified perspective, the idea of semiotics remains vague. In current scholarship we find a confusion between *semiotic* studies—studies that seek (successfully or not) to exploit a unified doctrine that does permit the comparison of all sign media—and *interpretive* studies—that is, studies that exploit more narrow and exclusive methodologies to attribute meanings to individual signs or types of signs within a particular context. To fully appreciate the difference, it is instructive to keep in mind Charles Peirce’s term, *semiosis*, the production and interpretation of signs, which is what all people do all the time, in contrast to *semiotics*, an analytic contemplation of semiosis which demands a degree of distance, ideally, an equal interest in right interpretations and wrong interpretations.<sup>3</sup>

## **Context: North American English Semiotics**

Let me acknowledge that I am not by training or profession a historian, and the historical observations I put on the table here have no source or authority beyond my casual (and somewhat inconsistent) participation in semiotic scholarship over four and a half decades. The same caveat as regards of history is also relevant regarding my observation of differences in semiotics reflecting linguistic and geographical alignment. In the 1970’s

in North America, academic attention to semiotics was in its infancy. I report what I experienced, acknowledging the risk that I may have misinterpreted what I witnessed. The Semiotics Society of America (SSA) held its first conference in 1975, a few years after the founding of the International Association for Semiotics. I joined the annual conferences of the SSA in 1976. As I mentioned above, in the 1970's and 1980's many outstanding scholars believed we could and should find a unified general theory of semiotics. We argued about what it should be. That was the decade of Umberto Eco's *Theory of Semiotics* (1976) and he visited us to share it. A general theory was a widely shared aspiration when he, and John Deeley and I taught at the IISSS, The International Institute for Studies in Structuralism and Semiotics, led by Paul Bouissac in Toronto in 1980, and when the work of John Deeley, Thomas Sebeok (founder of the graduate institute for semiotics at Indiana University) and others continuously enlarged our sense of historical precedents for our work in Classical, Medieval and Renaissance European and North American philosophy. The pivotal issue in our controversies was what did seem at that time if not now, the incompatibility of the structuralism of the followers Ferdinand Saussure and the "pragmaticism" of the aficionados of the American philosopher and scientist, Charles Peirce, who was at that time still a very shadowy figure for most of us. My own *Elements of Semiotics* (1999, 2017) had emerged from an ambition to reconcile those perspectives and differentiate their problematics.

My simple historical question is, what happened next in English language North American semiotics? An obvious answer, which I think is the wrong answer, is post-structuralism and post-modernism. It is true that these movements were gaining in attention and did inspire many writers, but knowledge of them in English Canada and in the USA was usually very fragmentary and sometimes misrepresented by caricature. For example, Jacques Derrida had a reputation with us for some very dramatic and perhaps revolutionary ideas, but the continuity of his work with earlier investigations was lost to sight as was his appreciation of that previous work with which his essays argued. Outside of French Canada, only a few semioticians on the western side of the Atlantic Ocean were sufficiently fluent in French to soberly absorb and develop the currents of thought emerging at that time from the European continent. We had other tasks.

Looking back at these 45 years, the two most important developments our semiotics participated in were our recovery of Charles Peirce—very much less appreciated and less well understood fifty years ago—and, not unrelated to that, the emergence of embodiment theories.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914) is now, finally, globally admired for his work in philosophy, logic, mathematics, physical science and, what I believe he regarded as the most central and distinctive of his efforts, semiotics. It is easy to understand why his reputation was slow to grow. His difficult character strained all his personal relationships; it resulted in a career external to academia after a few years teaching. His method of production by continuous writing and revision never produced a book (excepting one short, technical treatise on optics), but he left volumes and volumes of papers, some

polished, some fragmentary, many of which are still difficult to access. His intellectual style is not easy, and when he popularizes his expositions, contradictions accumulate. And most important of all, his ideas were novel and remain difficult.

As I see it, our assimilation of Peirce, still in progress, shifts semiotics as a whole from a Cartesian orientation, reflected in the symmetries and binary oppositions of structuralism, towards a Kantian tradition. I don't mean that Peirce accepts Kant's premises or conclusions, but rather that much in his construal of problems seems to originate in his passionate study of Kant as a youth and his need to respond. I believe the philosophical problem most crucial for him was Kant's argument that we could have no direct knowledge of the external world but are confined to an environment of our own judgments (that is, our interpretations and signs.)

Peirce's approach to this and other philosophical issues reflects his professional engagement with practical scientific work, for that is how he earned his daily bread, as an experimental researcher for the USA Federal Government. For Peirce, all knowledge advances as it does in the experimental sciences, by continual approximations of the truth, each criticized and then surpassed but without any *a priori* limitation to how close to the truth we can come. This response to Kant, in addition to its scientific model, also draws on his involvements in mathematics, logic and phenomenology.

In English Canada and the USA, Peirce studies may have absorbed much of the energy that colleagues elsewhere devoted to post-modern interests, but that was possible in part because one finds in Peirce versions of many of the semiotic insights that were formulated later and independently by Derrida and others. What Peirce called the interpretant offers an understanding of the supplement to (and deficiency of) reference that we encounter as "différance" in post-modern theory and named in other ways in Frege, and so on.

I mention the emergence of embodiment theory as the second dominating development of the last half century of American semiotics, but whereas Peircean studies are unified—if in no other way—by their reference to Peirce, the network of ideas I can refer to retrospectively as embodiment theory had no unity whatsoever as they were emerging. In some measure, we should give partial credit for these ideas to Peirce, who formulated semiotic relationships in such a way that they could be understood as including physical relationships. He does this by conceiving of different types of "interpretants" so as to include emotional and energetic responses among these. Peirce takes immediate physical reactions to signs, including reactions of the nervous system in the case of higher animals, to be a category of sign interpretations. These are his "energetic interpretants". Furthermore, he is never out of touch with an awareness that thoughts happen in brains. Noam Chomsky, in a reflection that I can not presently locate and cite, gives Peirce credit for stimulating his own insistence that any universal characteristics and limitations of language must reflect the character of the brain as a physical and physiological and genetically determined organ. This view, foundational for cognitive semiotics, should be seen as one starting point for embodiment theory in semiotics.

I am not convinced that Peirce's readiness to consider a mechanical process like

the nervous reaction of an amputated frog leg as semiosis was more than a “thought experiment”, though the issue is complicated. On the other hand, I am firmly convinced that this widely known “thought experiment” had a harmful influence, albeit accidentally. Charles Morris, who more than anyone else kept Peirce’s work alive early in the twentieth century, drew on the empiricist aspect Peirce’s thought to align it with positivism, losing sight of Peirce’s more adventurous effort to build a bold theory of mind. I believe Morris also encouraged Thomas Sebeok, who became extremely influential in American semiotics, to make this same mistake of developing a semiotics without an adequate notion of mind.

In minimizing the conjunction of physical reaction and mental semiosis, I made the opposite and serious mistake of missing a major entrance to embodiment theory. Embodiment theory—though I did not know the word—started for me in music. I have a long standing interest, expressed in various of my publications (see especially Lidov, 2004) in building a semiotic theory about the representation of emotions in music. This work takes as its starting point the neuro-psychological investigations of Manfred Clynes, which admit no separation of mind and body. For a long time, I failed to appreciate what Peirce’s concept of the energetic or emotional interpretants might add to my perspective on Clynes’s work and to my notions of mind. (See note 2 above.)

There is no consensus what embodiment theory is or even that there exists a distinct body of theory that merits such a name. For a first approximation only, I suggest we take this term to designate theories which understand semiosis to emerge from our perceptions of and interactions with our own physical bodies. From our beginning, from before our birth, we deal with a body. Our first intellectual tasks are to learn about our body and control it and distinguish it from its environment. To do so we must imagine it and represent it; these are semiotic tasks. Recent decades of research on infant development make it clear that while still in the womb we are registering voices around us; therefore, even before birth, we have bodily experiences influenced by culture that enter into semiosis.

I do not mean to suggest that North American scholarship took the lead internationally in the development of notions of embodiment within semiotics. My point is the converse, that a range of notions of embodiment were highly influential here and may have encountered less resistance. European structuralist and post-structuralist semiotics, by reifying structure even when criticizing it, perpetuated a Cartesian mind/body duality that was less comfortable for American traditions of scholarship. Once some notions were available that facilitated writing about signs without separating mental and non-mental relationships, embodiment semiotics—for better or worse—could proceed with less restraint. Thus, it became easy to see spontaneous, expressive actions of the body as signs and to consider them as signs whether they arise from nature or nurture. While I personally remain unpersuaded, it is easy to understand the attraction that Sebeok’s students and colleagues felt to his principle that life implies semiosis.<sup>4</sup>

I think of Mark Johnson’s *The Body in the Mind* (1987) as a turning point. Johnson argued, most persuasively with regard to prepositions, that the semantic contents of many words are modeled on bodily activities. Think of *eating* and taking *in*. As mentioned

above, embodiment for me started with music, with considerations of Manfred Clynes's proposal. In music, embodiment theory has a long historical lineage stretching from notions of "melody" in classical Greek philosophy that combine dance and music, through enlightenment criticism that acknowledges gesture in music, to John Paul Ito's embodied construal of musical meter (Ito, *forthcoming*), Alexandra Pierce's development (with significant precedents) of movement practice as a tool of musical interpretation (Peirce, 2010) and ongoing studies in popular music, but the word "embodiment" does not appear in all these contexts and I was not quick to build connections. Today, there are more connections to discover than I am equipped to inventory. Pelkey, for example, draws on the philosophers William James and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the philosophically alert dance theorist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone.

### **Aspects of Embodiment and Disembodiment in Language, Visual Images, Music and Gesture**

I will develop an understanding of "disembodiment" that is very close to "abstraction". Abstraction appears as such a significant concomitant of semiosis, that it seems puzzling not to find the relationship of semiosis and abstraction more widely theorized. A recent article by Javier Terrado-Pablo (2017), Chair of Diachronic Linguistics at the University of Lleid in Catalonia shared this concern. He, too, identifies abstraction *terra incognita* from a historical or developmental angle.

As we can see with Terrado-Pablo, embodiment and its contrary, disembodiment or abstraction, turns us toward diachrony. In offering new grounds for semantics, embodiment theory adds an arrow of time to semiotics—not clock time—but developmental or evolutionary priority. Initially, for structuralism, history was arbitrary and merely offered demonstrations how systems could be preserved despite changes of their materials. Embodiment theories imply a timeline from proposed origin of a sign to its later offspring.

Such a non-chronological but developmental timeline underlies the important, very recent book, mentioned above. Jamin Pelkey's *Semiotics of X* is a major advance in embodiment theory (Lidov, 2017b ).

Pelkey's X is a posture or the full-bodied gesture that arrives to the X-posture: arms and legs spread apart to diagonals so that the right arm and left leg together approximate a straight line, making with the opposite pair the figure of an "X", a position that might be combined with a leap. Beginning with anthropological evidence that the posture is an expression of aggression or triumph with some claim to universality, Pelkey traces a broad repertoire of sign types that exploit the X figure, maintaining its power to suggest extreme tension and a quasi-logical feeling of dominance or authority. These include signs manifested in sports, in torture, in religion, in classical rhetoric, in a multitude of advertising and, at the peak of abstraction, in the Greimassian square of oppositions. Thus, for the significations of "X", no border separates mind and body or separates abstract thought from feeling.

Pelkey characterizes the body-concept relationship as metaphorical, and we can't disagree. But what does that mean? Semiotics does not yet have a clear and consensual analysis of metaphor though much has been written about that complex problem. To call a sign a metaphor says something about where the sign comes from but does not provide a clear account of how we moved from the origin and what we retain of it. There must be a role for forgetting or erasure, for generalizing, for abstracting, processes that metaphor theory doesn't describe or account for.

We don't need to keep the X-posture in mind consciously and yet the metaphor is not dead. If Pelkey is correct, as I think he is, that the persuasive force of Greimas's square, derives from a bodily excitement, an energetic interpretant—like a melody that lingers after the song has ended<sup>5</sup>—then this excitement continues to fuel our involvement with symmetry and opposition. Also, even though the Square with its X of diagonals is energized by bodily memory, it is also purified and purged of its corporality, disembodied, and the purity of abstraction, the transcendence, is further source of energy and persuasiveness.

Once somebody rubs your nose in it, it seems totally obvious that our experience, even before birth, of owning, perceiving, manipulating and identifying with our own bodies is a fundamental source of conceptual schemes and referents. But we did need to have our noses rubbed. Why and how did we forget?

Terrado-Pablo considers a number of visual images, not emphasizing bodies (literally), and notes that the suppression of individualizing features yields abstract signs with the capacity of generalizing an idea. Obviously, there is a close connection between the human capacity for semiosis and our powerful capacities for generalizing and abstracting, or to what Peirce refers to so frequently as “prescinding”. The nature of that connection is not as clear as we might wish. If a sign entails an abstraction, is the sign the chicken and the egg the abstraction, or *vice versa*?

I take the term *disembodiment* sometimes literally and sometimes as a synecdoche and sometimes as metaphor. Embodiment provides a ground for schemas of representation and disembodiment takes grounds away. Play, somber or entertaining, can be an effect or a means of erasure and abstraction.

Play is much appreciated in semiotic theory. We encounter ideas of play in Godamer, Levi-Strauss, Schiller, Peirce, and elsewhere, and I will discuss two of these and articulate a third, even risking at times to mix them playfully. Hans George Godamer, in *Truth and Method* (1960/1975), takes pains to emphasize that play is not a subjective condition so much as the property of a situation. Play is movement without strain, “The to-and-fro movement which is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end” (p. 93, thus differentiating play and game). This notion of play includes some nuance. First, insistence on the absence of a grand agenda (like winning the game) is a fine insight, but small agendas, like throwing a ball as high as you can or throwing it into a basket seem to me quite compatible with the sense of play Godamer wanted to evoke, as long as the stakes are low enough, that is, no “goal that would bring it to an end”. Second, to base the definition on a situation rather than a subjective state is also insightful, but we ought

not to ignore the subjective states that induce or result from a playful situation, and these states can be quite varied.

Derrida offers a fragmentary but suggestive development of concepts of “play” and “free-play” in his appreciative essay on Claude Levy Strauss (1966). Typically, with a playful technique recalling Wittgenstein’s “language games”, (Wittgenstein’s usage does not fit Godamer’s separation of play and game) Derrida offers no definition, but with the concept of “free-play”, he confines his attention to the exchanges of elements within structured systems. Free-play does not decenter the systems which make it possible and, at the same time, limit the scope of free-play. As that essay is concerned with his and Levy-Strauss’s recognition that structures are myths that cannot encompass all the empirical data relative to them, there is something of a straw-man argument, something perhaps redundant, in the corollary that free-play is not fundamentally decentering. On the other hand, “play” not compounded with an adjective (“jeu” rather than “jeu-libre”) becomes his topic in the second half of the essay where Derrida is focused on Levi-Strauss’s interpretation of the word. This latter species of play, for example the play of absence and presence which is prior to structure and which can create or displace structure, is more consequential.

Thirdly, there is a sense of play less often noted in semiotic theory that comes easily to a carpenter or engineer. If a joint, a handle, a valve does not fit tightly, we say there is some play in it. This kind of play is not necessarily a fault. For example, a thermostat is engineered to leave some “play” between the temperature where the heat goes on and the temperature where the cooling system turns on, an acceptable range. The difference between this play, involving a continuous range of value and the play or free-play of Derrida, involving substitutions of units in a structure is principally (for semiotics) a difference of the articulatory characters of the media, in one case a continuum, in the other case a vocabulary of discrete units. In both cases the fit of signifier to signified is loose enough for play and may be loosened further by play.

I mention these three points of view simply to point out the wide range of the idea of play. For our purposes, we need not insist on these difference but we do need to be aware of the breadth of the notion of play.

While play may begin without an agenda, it may also develop an agenda. New born infants play with their unfolding muscular capabilities, perhaps randomly at first, but useful patterns emerge and accumulate, as if a purposeful mind kept the playful mind under scrutiny, picking the winners and building a team. Where play has the consequence of developing abstraction and developing the powerful signs that support abstraction, we might find a strong motivation for forgetting. Erasing the extra baggage that does not contribute to generalization is a rewarding strategy in the development of semiosis both personally and socially. My hypothesis is that our obliviousness to soma in semantics is supported by our capacity to *detach* signifiers from signifieds, a capacity greatly enlarged by play. But before going further with this theme, let us consider a few examples of such disconnections or disembodiments. Erasure may be evident in the sign itself or its object or its interpretant.

The erasure in a sign or its object, useful as it may be, is not merely utilitarian; it is

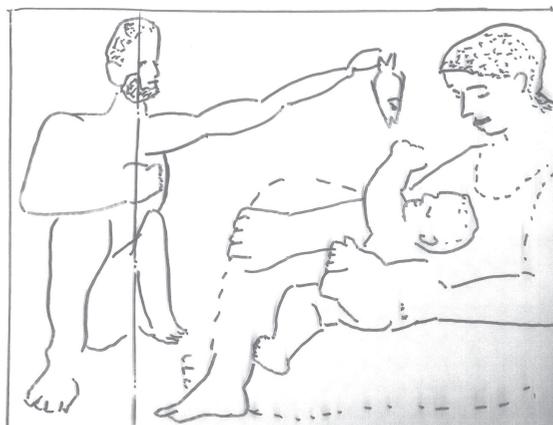
important that it can be transcendental. The following instance, considering a painting by Picasso, appears in *Elements*, but it is revised here. When I recalled it recently in the paper from which this article is developed, Dr. Gila Safran Naveh (Head of Jewish Studies at the University of Cincinnati) pointed out to me that my description was superficial in omitting reference to the traditional Catholic iconography that was clearly well known to Picasso. At first I thought her intervention invalidated my analysis; I now think it clarifies it.

In 1913, Picasso had painted a family group. On our right, a mother with her child in her lap. On our left, the father holding a fish in his outstretched hand just above the child's reach. The child was grasping for the fish. In this unpretentious representation of the Holy Family, on a beach and with Mary barefoot, a traditional symbol of her humility, the implication of the child Jesus' reach is explicit; in reaching for the fish as a traditional symbol of his own life, he expresses a consciousness of his destiny. Would Picasso have come to feel that the reference was too explicit? Too much confined by a traditional symbolism with its meaning too pre-arranged? Whatever his motive if there was one besides his sense of play, he took a knife or scissors to the canvas in 1921 and revised the painting by cutting it. The cut eliminated the father, and by painting over it, Picasso erased the fish as well. Both the final version and the strip of painted canvas Picasso excised are now in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. (The fish is visible in an X-ray image.) In the final version with the fish absent, the child's gesture has no *explicit* object and a less *explicit* meaning; the import of the painting is transformed. We may feel its spirituality but only as a more abstract emotion, for the painting addresses the ineffable.

Example 1A. Pablo Picasso, 1921, Mother and Child, Art Institute of Chicago: [http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/citi/images/standard/WebLarge/WebImg\\_000357/184368\\_4240918.jpg](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/citi/images/standard/WebLarge/WebImg_000357/184368_4240918.jpg)

Example 1B. Pablo Picasso, 1913, fragment of family group. The figure of the father excised from the painting: <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/28884>

Example 2. Author's sketch reconstructing the composition of Picasso's 1913 family group. The vertical line towards the left shows the cut. Dotted lines are clothing.



Though it may not immediately seem similar, we find a related transformation by erasure at the heart of the 19th Century German musical aesthetic of absolute music. At least since the Renaissance in Europe and also in China, and elsewhere, visual images and narratives were often associated with purely instrumental music (wordless music) providing a context or pretext, a guide to interpretation. One current of thought in Europe in the Nineteenth Century forcefully rejected such efforts to govern and explicate musical meaning in favor of cultivating a sensibility for the power of music to express a spirituality (not specifically religious or doctrinal) that was transcendental and (in verbal language) ineffable. Karl Dahlhaus (1978) traces this movement. As theory describes this aesthetic position, it is the object that is erased in this case (the object that might be specified by a verbal sign) and not, as is the case with Picasso's painted fish, the signifier. However, moving beyond the aesthetic theory that was contemporary with that music and instead regarding the music itself with semiotic tools—in particular, the study of comparative articulation<sup>6</sup>—we find that the ideal of absolute music is strongly associated with a style of musical composition in which discrete segmental articulation, so strongly emphasized in the musical compositions of the preceding era, is frequently repressed in favor of continuity. In that regard, we do have erasure, the erasure of boundaries, within the signifier.

The preceding examples relate to individual signs or texts. In briefly changing the focus to sign *systems*, I draw on a source that might be dismissed at first as trivial or silly, but I think it can put us in touch with some fundamentals. Raymond Moody's *Making Sense of Nonsense* (2017) is, so far as I know, the first book to attempt a typology and structural analysis of nonsense. This recent book, written in English, has been published in French translation, but not yet published in English. The book is not explicitly aligned with semiotics, but it is valuable and immediately suggestive for semiotics (Lidov, 2017b). Semiotics without a theory of nonsense is like physiology without pathology or engineering with no concept of stress. Moody's typology of nonsense includes special linguistic idioms, sub-systems within the system of verbal language that can generate expressions which have no predictable meaning, idioms such as formulas for recipes, for stories, for calendar dates, and so on, these yielding, for example, nonsense recipes, nonsensical stories, etc. There are voluminous instances of these in literature that appear in a range of contexts ranging from humorous entertainment to religious ritual. Making the point that a facility to invent and use nonsense appears very early in life, Moody quotes examples from children:

Preschoolers talk various forms of numerative nonsense as part of the process of learning numbers. For example, I once saw two kindergartners fighting over a swing at a playground. One yelled, "I'm telling you for the fifty-eleventh time, get off my swing!" (p. 100)

These instances could not be more bare or more simple; they arise by freely extending the combinatorial system of the signifier so that it is no longer exhausted by the system

of signifieds. This does not mean that the new signifiers are not interpretable. We might interpret fifty-eleven as sixty-one, following a pattern that actually occurs in French but not English. No such interpretation is predicated in the child's invention of the signifier. Both the inflation of the signifying system and the uncontrolled development of its interpretation exhibit *free-play*. In a context far more complicated metaphysically than Moody's examples, Derrida develops this concept in the essay mentioned above. The notion of free-play developed there arises in Levi-Strauss' adaptation of principles he has drawn from Marcel Mauss. What my childish example has to do with disembodiment becomes clear when we recall that in English, historically, a "body" is any delimited physical mass, i.e. "bodies of water", "heavenly bodies" and extended to abstractions like "body of works". Numbers arise in the fully embodied act of counting and become disembodied as our attention shifts from objects counted to the relations of numbers to each other. The unruly extension of the *names* of numbers to include "fifty-eleven", so that the name loses its object is—at least figuratively—a further disembodiment.

The Mauss—Levi-Strauss—Derrida chain of derivation may not prepare us to understand that the sign, voided of its inherited signification is now free to become the vehicle of a significance that its system did not allow for. In the case of this child's expression, the vehicle becomes a sign of vehemence and insistence. The emotional load that the child's nonsense carries is no doubt largely due to other signs like the tone and rhythm of the voice. Nevertheless, however explicable, it is an import fused with the numeric nonsense that we can regard as momentarily decentering the system of number names with which the child plays.

The figure of disembodiment, extended metaphorically in this instance, is literally appropriate to Moody's study of nonsense in his larger context. His ulterior motive is to domesticate the nonsense of the nominally self-contradictory idea of life after death; the ultimate disembodiment. Moody would set up a face-off between René Descartes and David Hume, suggesting that nonsense provides the "new species of logic" that Hume sarcastically demanded for the separation of soul and body to make sense. Moody wants to show that self-contradictory mystical language is structurally comparable to entertaining nonsense and to the language in reports of persons who have experienced "near death," this latter meaning an unexpected recovery from diagnosed clinical death. Indeed, the fluctuating presence of bodily experience in semiosis is fraught.

I have mentioned disembodiment in relation to representations that belong to verbal language, visual art and music. My next few examples return to expressive gesture which was also, as noted, Pelkey's initial focus. Expressive gesture, when intended or received as communication, is a representation by the body of its own emotional state and would thus seem to be a sign fully embodied. Still, (this is no contradiction) gesture mixes culture and nature. To emphasize that gesture is a domain where we find a regular, shared and dependable medium of semiosis, let us, just for a moment, forget about disembodiment and abstraction to appreciate a usage in Thomas Mann's novelette, *Tonio Kröger* (1903), which testifies in a surprising manner to our common "language of gesture"—if I may

use the phrase very informally—as a representation so firmly established in our minds that Mann can evoke expressive gesture without any description whatsoever. Here, Toni is taking interest for the first time in a young woman he has known for a while and who, without looking at him, may nevertheless be flirting with him, just a bit.

One evening he saw her in a certain new light, saw her in conversation with a friend ... How smiling, she tossed her head sideways in a certain saucy way, throwing her hand behind her head a certain way ...<sup>7</sup> (Thomas Mann, *Tonio Kröger*, author's translation)

Mann merely writes “in a certain way”, but the gesture comes to life in our imaginations because we already have mastered a vocabulary of gesture and can find one that fits.

How ironic then, that gesture, a fully embodied sign, can retain its expressive intention when the gesturing body is removed. A well-known image of gesture disembodied—one Moody does not miss—is Lewis Carroll's version of the Cheshire cat. The Cheshire cat is a traditional motif in British folklore that Carroll incorporated in his masterpiece of nonsense, *Alice in Wonderland*. The cat, perched on a tree-branch disappears, leaving behind his mischievous grin, still visible to us. The grin, now prescinded from the cat and thus disembodied, remains meaningful in the way that gestures and postures do, though we may not be able to verbalize its precise meaning. The disembodied grin also takes a step toward representing a type instead of a token: It is more abstract. (Perhaps it even leads us toward the abstract concept of “zero”—a signified absence, that Lewis Carroll, a mathematician, may well have enjoyed.) That a *type* represented by the cat's grin, can be evoked but not specified reflects the simple fact that this grin is constructed verbally.

A visual interpretation of the grin provided by an illustrator will be much more specific in conveying a feeling or an attitude, as we can see in Examples 3A, B and C. If Clynes's theory, cited earlier (Clynes, 1969, 1977) is correct, the visual sign gains emotional plentitude and identity by presenting a precise curvature as the signifying feature even in the absence of the body which generated it. We can regard Clynes's construal of an abstract shape genetically ‘coded’ in the nervous system as pointing out the bi-directionality of the relations examined here. The abstraction is given in advance but in normal emotional communication, it will be embodied in the physical behavior of an expressive animate agent and again abstracted (disembodied) in the perception and interpretation of the receiving agent.

Example 3A. John Tenniel's illustration of the Cheshire Cat: <https://prints.bl.uk/products/cheshire-cat-a80108-46>

Example 3B. Arthur Rackham's illustration of the Cheshire Cat: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arthur\\_Rackham\\_Cheshire\\_Cat.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arthur_Rackham_Cheshire_Cat.jpeg)

Example 3C. The disembodied grin from Disney's animated film, *Alice in Wonderland*: <http://4>.

bp.blogspot.com/-Ag\_tNulssDc/UPjaGbYyORI/AAAAAAAK0w/-MYZG1-SLyA/s1600/alicecheshirecat.jpg

In the case of the Cheshire cat's grin, we know precisely which body the grin comes *from*. A similarity of semiotic logic links this image to the depiction of clocks in Salvador Dali's, "*Persistence of Memory*". His clocks melting in the desert heat are not simply warping, as hot metals might. They are drooping, as living bodies do. In Dali's more abstract image, the clocks replace organic bodies. No less than the Cheshire cat's grin, their precise inflections index emotions as they might be expressed by organic postures or gestures, but in the absence of living bodies, we can speak of the gestural curvatures as disembodied. Both the grinning and the drooping mark pathways toward abstracted concepts of sentiments.

Example 4. Salvador Dali, "Persistence of Memory" (1931): <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79018>

Music is powerfully capable of representing bodily motion. Expression grounded in gesture is readily manifest in sound, a natural basis of musical expression. Music spontaneously invokes a sense of a virtual person, a virtual agential body that performs the musical gesture, a body invisible for our eyes but audible for our ears. Music that represents bodily motion fantastically, can instantiate a further level of partial disembodiment. Robert Schumann's little piano piece called "Soaring" in his suite, *Fantasiestücke*, really does feel like flying. (Example 5 provides both a performance and notation beginning at about three minutes and 40 seconds.) This composition is the second in the suite of the eight *Fantasy Pieces*. The German title is "*Aufschwung*". "Soaring" might be a debatable translation of "*Aufschwung*" were the dictionary our only source, but the music itself readily lends us confidence. Although we do not really have any veridical experience with flight (never mind airplanes, I speak of autonomous flight), we concoct a kinesthetic image of our own flight, as we may also do in dreams. So abstractly represented, it is reasonable to consider the image of flying a partial disembodiment.

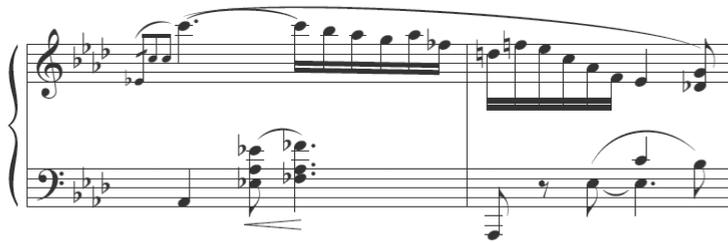
Example 5. Robert Schumann, 1837, "Soaring", No. 2 of *Fantasiestücke* (Fantasy pieces) Op. 12. Martha Argerich, piano: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TF280ui9m4s>

A similar fantasy may be heard in Chopin's *Third Ballade*, where a wood sprite is represented by means of a waltz deprived of many of its bass notes. We hear a body, this time not our own, with no weight or without legs (Example 6A). The example from Schumann is a complete piece; this, from Chopin is a short fragment (as shown in Example 6B) and is best studied in context. The passage in question begins 3 minutes and 40 seconds after the start of the recording. Alfred Cortot's extraordinarily insightful and imaginative interpretation, provided as the example, does not foreground the waltz

character of the passage. Because the *Ballades* of Chopin have been criticized as “merely” strings of waltzes, it is easy to imagine that he did not want to emphasize that character here. I hoped the reader might not need such an emphasis, for the waltz can not be erased. Of course it is easy to find other performances on the internet of this very popular composition. (An extended analysis of gestural representations in the *Ballade*, including this passage, appears in Lidov, 2004, Part III.)

Example 6A. Frédéric Chopin, 1841, Ballade No. 3 A flat major, Op. 47: Alfred Cortot (piano). Recorded 1929: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lb45wt8RXco>

Example 6B. Frédéric Chopin, 1841, Ballade No. 3 A flat major, Op. 47. mm. 116-17.



The representation of gesture is natural to music but not necessary. Musical notation makes abstract geometrical play possible in musical composition, for example, by the inversion or reversal of melodies. Again, the systematic free-play of the signifier does not predict its signification. Turning a melody upside-down or backwards, possible because of notation and recording, may or may not have the effect of turning upside-down the expressive gestures and movements it references, if any, and if it does, that does not mean that the feelings attached to those movements are turned upside down or backwards. This is a situation where the acoustic signifier can be deprived of its somatic object. What happens often with this play of rotational symmetries is that music composed to exploit symmetries sounds more abstract and more distant from the body. The performer of the music, making sound to embody a score, may decide to enforce a more embodied or a more abstract interpretation, the former likely to rely on emphasizing images of gesture and meter in the music through strong nuances of timing and loudness while the latter preference might be realized by the pure beauty of evenness of tone. Of course, it is the navigation of the space between these extremes that is most likely to retain our attention and loyalty.

The body as representamen is not concerned only with gesture. Erasure (as a partial disembodiment) is manifested whenever spontaneity is inhibited. From the Renaissance on, European ballet followed European painting and sculpture in imposing Euclidean lines and planes and orthogonal relations on posture and movement. Limiting the body as a representamen by confining it to a play of pure geometrical forms is an amputation, albeit an amputation of movement, not of limbs. Similar forms arise in the opposite direction.

I understand that historically, the geometrically controlled portrait sculpture of Classical Egypt and Greece begins not in constraining the body but in ornamenting the architectural pillar. Bi-directionality, a matter to which I will return, is instanced here, body to form, form to body.

A very different example of restraint on spontaneous bodily impulse hints that a kind of partial disembodiment might be attributed to higher primates. A remarkable observation in Sue Savage-Rumbaugh's first book about her work with the bonobo chimpanzee called Kanzi opens this possibility. She writes that Kanzi's sister, "Panbanisha...liked to pretend that she was taking bites out of pictures of food she saw in magazines" (Savage-Rumbaugh & Lewin, 1994, p. 277). The ape recognizes a picture of fruit and shares her amusement. Here, a sense of play seems substituted for—and to erase—a more full-bodied, energetic interpretant like rage or boredom or annoyance. Skipping over the striking information that this animal could read pictures, it is fascinating that there is no report of frustration or anger on the part of a particular primate, who, as we know from other anecdotes, is always eager for food and quick to show irritation. She transcends such bodily impulses and her interpretation of the picture as play even suggests an awareness that signs are signs.

My final example is Margaret Atwood's novel, *Alias Grace*. This very popular novel, recently adapted as a television drama series retells and elaborates a historical Canadian crime story that was extensively publicized in its own time. Grace Marks, a sixteen-year-old servant girl, was convicted in 1843 as a participant in a double murder of a co-worker (Nancy) and the man they both worked for. There was always considerable controversy regarding her guilt, and thirty years after her conviction, without any new evidence, Grace was pardoned and released from jail. Did Grace murder Nancy? In structure, the novel has much in common with detective fiction.

Atwood fused painstakingly researched history with an ample portion of fantasy. She portrays Grace without taking sides regarding her guilt or innocence. Although the dominant medium of narration is Grace's own monologue, interior and exterior, Grace doesn't deny her culpability or confess it. For the reader, the final *interpretant* of the novel as a sign would be either Grace as guilty or Grace as not guilty. As for the author, her final interpretant, if she had one, is as firmly erased as were the fish and the father in Picasso's painting.

Disembodiment in *Alias Grace*, as a full or partial separation of mind and body, approaches the status of a narrative figure, a *topoi*. Grace's disembodiment is ingeniously exploited to sustain suspense and ambiguity as it recurrently prevents the information related to us to signify guilt or innocence decisively. The play of disembodiment thus places the story out of reach of those interpretants. Grace has lost nearly all her memories of the criminal event, and she must also confront evidence of her own sleepwalking. In a surprisingly persuasive episode, the ghost of the murdered Nancy takes possession of Grace's voice, speaking through Grace's body. Each of these turns of narrative realizes a type of disembodiment, her amnesias (holes in memory), her fantastic dreams

(disconnection from physical reality), her somnambulism (holes in consciousness) and, finally, spiritual possession (full separation of body and spirit). Any history is a construction abstracted from events which we can not know fully and directly. Atwood's history of Grace Marks is one which never lets us rest our eyes from *différance*.

## Theoretical Options

How might a general theory of semiotics best take account of both embodiment and disembodiment? We note the prevalence on the one hand, of the living body as a source of meaning and a spontaneous instrument of representation and, on the other hand, our readiness to erase or obscure or forget the role of the body in shaping our signs.

With the background of the examples considered, we have a basis for understanding disembodiment in terms of a wider definition than the one I suggested before as a "first approximation". I propose that embodiment in semiosis encompass the sensorial aspects in any or all of the three items that establish a sign relation. (*Elements*, Chapter 11, defines a sign as an irreducible three-part relation of representamen, object and interpretant—like Peirce—but different from him in that all three are taken to be items available to consciousness and thus eliminating much that he includes.)

Am I too reliant on definitions? Having noted Derrida's independence from them, any semiotician might want to query my old-school Aristotelianism here. For those who ask then, I do appreciate the inadequacy of definitions if we imagine them to establish stable philosophical foundations, but definitions have another virtue. Definitions provide anchorage for dialogue. The warmth of an invitation to participate in a language game for which no one has laid down the rules may be seductive but also deceptive. Young folks who pick up a ball to improvise a game in the street or an empty lot are quick to adopt rules. When rules and definitions are laid out, issues of authority and responsibility are not hidden. A conversation between strangers can get a good start and provide for respectful interchange with definitions and disagreements about definitions.

Continuing the search for coherent definitions and system, let us note that the English words like "embodiment" and "disembodiment" can refer to conditions or processes. I suggest that the process of embodiment occurs when we interpret an abstract concept by means of more concrete images or actions, or, as we often say in a common figure of English, when we "flesh it out". The process of disembodiment occurs when a sign is replaced by another or by a variant which is less grounded in our bodily and sensory experience. Our fragments of analysis allow us to point out particular pathways for further development.

1. Embodiment as an origin: I suggest first of all, that we may have made a mistake in our conception of fully embodied signs. (Or at least that I may have, if no one else did.) Embodiment theory tempts us forcefully to think of the lived experience of the body as an absolute origin, as if our own bodies were both a dynamic and an immediate object; both an intuition and a *Ding-an-sich*. Of course that can not be. Certainly, the

infant reaching eagerly for its toes is testing representations that seem at first glance more natural, more basic, and more universal than 20th century novels or Newton's infinite differential calculus, but when as infants we reached for our toes, how well did we know them? Any temptation to imagine our earliest self-representation as immune from the split of the intelligible from the sensible must be resisted. And whether our representation was a feeling, an image, a symbol or a mixture of all these does not repair an absence of integrity in the sign situation. From the beginning, even from before our birth, we deal with a body we imagine and represent. These earliest signs are at least as deficient in their grasp of reality as those that come later.

Note that knowledge of our own bodies develops only with practice, advancing as we learn to control them, from the earliest recognition that we can move our limbs and digits intentionally right through to advanced bodily skills in sports and arts. Adults who takes up the practice of yoga or tai-qi learn to perceive muscles they never perceived before. The learning of coordination of parts of our bodies is concomitant with growing awareness and analysis of bodily experience via our limited representation. Parts of our bodies and bodily actions remain invisible. Any time we move with intention, which is to say with prior knowledge of the action, a representation is involved but necessarily an imperfect one: Well practiced as we may be, the ball we throw may miss the basket. The primordial status of embodied signs does not exempt them from *différance* or perfect their interpretants. Spontaneous (or not entirely spontaneous) shows of emotion in infants have no exemption from these principles.

The first rule of a doctrine of embodiment must be not to overestimate the status of an embodied sign as an origin and to understand that embodied cognition, if available to consciousness, is not prior to nor exempt from a full sign character; that it is at once deficient and excessive.

2. Play: The word has, as noted, several interpretations, but I am not sure we have an urgent reason to tease them apart. I am inclined to accord priority to a different question about play. I have dealt with play largely as a loosening of the connection between sign and object, but have talked in a very similar way about a loosening of the connection between intention and action. There is a parallel between the relations of Action to Intention and of Signifier to Sign-Object. I took advantage of the parallel without clearly acknowledging it where I discussed Picasso's deletion of the fish from his family group. If the child's hand is indicating the fish in the original version, than the fish is a sign-object with the hand-sign as its index. But if the hand is grasping for the fish, we must acknowledge that grasping-for is not the same as pointing-at, and, in this interpretation, the fish is an object of action not of signification. But are these two readings entirely separable?

I don't think the parallel relations between sign to object and action to object is simply an accident of homonymity in English, and it may even be that the first is an abstraction of or disembodiment of the second. If I understand correctly, some philosophies use the word "intention" for both. Does the parallelism of these two senses of object find its

grounds in an understanding of sign-making as primarily an effort to influence how the sign receiver will act or understand? The matters at stake here include the role of play in sign genesis (Peirce, following Schiller, refers to this play as “musement”) and the issue encompassed in pragmatics: the relation of semiosis other kinds of interactions. Influencing is an action. A full theory of play may need to clarify this matter. Frivolity of signification and of intention are both encompassed in play. We might call both frivolity of purpose. The loosening of connections that bind signifier and signified is a major contribution of play and would seem to be a precondition of disembodiment.

3. Forgetting and erasure: Still, loosening is less than disconnecting and forgetting. Generalization is one advantage that flows from reducing reference from a full-bodied signifier or to a full-bodied signified to reference from and to particular features of the object. Terrado-Pablo’s study of abstraction considers abstraction as the elimination of irrelevant features. The rewards in semiotic capacity that accrue from this development include everything we accomplish by virtue of abstraction. This logic, in isolation, does not explain the depth of our forgetting, but perhaps it becomes sufficient if we supplement it with a hypothesis that forgetting and repressing are due to a distinct capacity, a kind of intellectual servo-mechanism that operates at its own speed, contributing to sign production but not always exactly in step with it. Could that explain why we are quick to forget the body? In this perspective, disembodiment in semiosis arises in a feed-back loop that supports the development of the sign’s power to represent abstractions but as a secondary effect, sometimes overstepping our evident needs.

Although we have glimpsed a certain symmetry in the bi-directionality of embodiment and disembodiment, this symmetry does not amount to reversibility. A given sign may support a new or variant sign that is more concrete or more abstract, but it would be unusual, a special case, if a given sign would regenerate its prior form. This negative propensity correlates well with erasure.

I have not presented a coherent theory of embodiment and disembodiment in these pages, but I hope my fragments of a survey can help bring into focus the possibility that the systematic study of this axis of semiosis could contribute to a perspective on the diachronic development of signs.

## Notes

- 1 A preliminary version of this essay was read to the 42nd meeting of the Semiotic Society of America in Puebla, Mexico, October, 2017.
- 2 I am grateful for the very suggestive hint how to understand embodiment (not then so named) that I received when my *Elements* was published in 1999 though I didn’t follow up on it. It was my good fortune that Robert Innes published a detailed and very supportive critique (Innes, 1999). He gently chided me for neglecting Peirce’s construal of an “energetic interpretant”, a bridge, as Innes made clear in just a phrase of two, between body and mind. His quick reference to preconscious impulse and energy responds to my argument that it is difficult to demonstrate the sign character of an item which is not available to consciousness.

- 3 Though I refer frequently to the work of Charles S Peirce in this article, I do not cite it in any particulars. The reader who has not studied his writing can find many resources online. I believe my introduction (Chapter 9, 1999/2017) is also useful.
- 4 This is not the place to pursue that quarrel, but in brief, for Peirce, a semiotic relationship must be an irreducible triadic relationship. I do not think Sebeok's examples which meant to show that life entails semiosis pass this test. For Peirce's interpretation of sunflower reproduction and the reflex of the frog's leg as semiosis and for Sebeok's semiotic interpretations of animal behaviors, the triadic relationship is intrinsic to the description but not established for the phenomena.
- 5 "The Song Is Ended (but the Melody Lingers On)" is a popular song composed by Irving Berlin, with lyrics written by Beda Loehner in 1927.
- 6 Chapter 13 of my *Elements* (Lidov, 1999/2017) develops comparative articulation.
- 7 ... an einem Abend jedoch sah er sie in einer gewissen Beleuchtung, sah, wie sie im Gespräch mit einer Freundin auf eine gewisse übermütige Art lachend den Kopf zur Seite warf, auf eine gewisse Art ihre Hand, ... zum Hinterkopfe führte ...

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David Lidov (lidov@yorku.ca) (Portland, OR, USA, 1941) is a music theorist, pianist, and composer. He studied at Columbia University in New York City (MA in Music, 1965 with Otto Luening) and the Aspen School (with Beveridge Webster). Most of his compositions are for small ensembles or voice. His music has been performed in North and South America and in Europe. Except for short stints in Mexico, Brazil and Germany, where he was visiting professor at the Institute for Languages of Emotion in 2008, he taught in the York University Department of Music, as a founding member, since 1970. His theoretical writings, an early and influential source for musical semiotics include his general theory, *Elements of Semiotics* (1999) and a collection of essays, *Is Language a Music?* (2004). Following his retirement from York University in 2006 he provided annual recitals of his music in Toronto as well as presenting work in Berlin, St. John's, Jalapo, Mexico City, Houston, Eastern Cyprus, and Pittsburgh. He is a director for Arraymusic. A major emerging project is his full length music theatre work, *The Drought in Eden*, workshopped in August, 2014, which offers an ecological perspective of the tale of the Garden in Genesis.