



Code and Context: A Commentary on Roeder's Article

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[1] Did a deconstruction, not destruction (!), of the sign never take place? Is the resurrection of a certain (French) semiology inevitable? Is the tension between a Saussurean-Hjelmslevian-linguistic conception of semiosis and that of a Peircean-phenomenological conception anywhere more evident than in Roeder's text? Do *sign-functions* (ex)communicate? Is the appeal to self-awareness blind on purpose or by accident? Do *code* and *context* arise at one and the same time, and if so, how and why? A first reading or "skimming" of Roeder's text might prompt these and related questions, which we shall try to answer. I encourage the reader, now predisposed to ask these questions, to (re)read Roeder's article, "Toward a Semiotic Evaluation of Music Analyses." This reading will both refresh your memory of his text and permit me to avoid a too-lengthy summary of his article. My comments will however entail a *slow* summary cum analysis, one that brings Nattiez, Eco, and Roeder into dialogue with each other, in order to call attention constantly to the rabbit-like—darting by and ever-populating—nature of signs, codes, and contexts throughout Roeder's article. I focus mainly on theoretical matters, though his article certainly deserves equal attention to its practical applications. My interpolations mean to highlight certain cuttings and delimitations that appear in concert, but not always on the same stage, with an unsettled conception of *code* and accompanied, *sotto voce*, by *context*.

[2] A brief sketch of the Roeder would include at least the following: He pursues "an agenda, suggested by Nattiez: to 'interrogate the different methodologies practiced in music analysis'" (Nattiez 1990, 238; Roeder, note 1). This is a meta-theoretical enterprise for which semiotics, and specifically Eco's theory of codes, offers a "well-developed [notice: not necessarily an unwavering] foundation for discussing some important problems of specifically musical [one must draw a line, and not the last] philosophy and aesthetics" (Roeder, paragraph 1). Another line quickly appears: Roeder is not concerned with "how meaning varies from one analysis to another," nor with Nattiez's (1990) latest reworking of the poietic-neutral-esthetic model (note 1). Roeder's text struggles to remain on what Nattiez would call the neutral level, which purportedly has nothing to do with value-free analysis but is that level at which technical analysis proper can be carried out and which deals with specifically-musical stuff (motives, rhythms, etc.), a place that has been axiologically neutered, excised of values. Roeder has more "modest goals" (note 1): the refinement [the winnowing away of the dross or the non-pertinent] of the meanings of theoretical concepts, recognition of how some types of musical discourse are "indeed analytical" (he will demonstrate this with a decoding/encoding of Schumann's literary-critical rendering of Schubert's Opus 33), recognition of "similarities and contrasts among different modes of analysis," and, last but for us in no way least, defining [circumscribing, putting into

place] “more precisely the limits [more lines drawn] of any particular [the limits make it particular, its very own] analytical approach” (paragraph 4). Responsible, diligent analysts, theorists, and theoreticians should ask, “‘What do the signs we use to analyze music mean?’; . . . for it seems essential that as professional interpreters of music we should constantly evaluate the accuracy and efficacy of the discourse we use’ (paragraph 2). A current mood of self-consciousness in music analysis, to which I and others have tried to add, welcomes such constant evaluations (see Littlefield 1991, Littlefield and Neumeier 1992, and). To help us better understand “why evaluating music analysis is important, and how semiotics can help (paragraph 3),” Roeder explains those bits of Eco’s theory of semiotics (Eco 1976) that will be of use in this project. I reproduce these bits, and their necessary equivocations, for their own sake and because we shall reconsider (rewrite) them near the close of my comments.

[3] Eco’s codes, which will provide “the basis for analyzing the structure of meaning” in certain types of music-analytical representation (Roeder, abstract), form part of a more general theory of *semiotics*. Roeder defines semiotics as the activity that “describes the structure of meaning” (paragraph 1). This delimitation of semiotics is not the classical definition (from Aristotle to Aquinas to Locke to Saussure and even to Eco, with many others in between), which has semiotics as the study of signs. In what seems to be a counter-productive move, Roeder’s definition of semiotics leans toward the structure of meaning; and meaning, a little later, will be viewed implicitly as meaning that arises in communication—that is, meaning exchanged between “real” and/or theoretical consciousnesses (one could say “interpretants” if this concept of Peirce, available on Nattiez’s esthetic level, were allowed to enter the scene). Nor does semiotics necessarily entail the study of communication, which is Roeder’s/Eco’s synonym for “signification” (see paragraph 3), nor the study of the structure of meaning. Meaning, as studied by semantics, necessarily involves the action of signs; but the action of signs need not involve communication. This latter takes us into a semiotics of communication first and most explicitly rendered by Roman Jakobson and others of the Prague Circle, certainly not Saussure, who would have viewed this as “mentalism,” and only in some ways by Charles Sanders Peirce’s category of the interpretant (interpreting sign in the receiver’s mind)—a crucial aspect of Eco’s theory but a shadowy one in Roeder’s. Despite disagreements in what constitutes semiosis, the action of signs, semiotics has a common preoccupation: the *sign*—something that stands for something else, in the classical formulation by Thomas Aquinas—is the proper object of any activity calling itself semiotics. Roeder quotes Eco on the sign: “A *sign* (or, more properly, a *sign-function*) arises every time an ‘element of an expression plane [is] conventionally correlated to one (or several) elements of a content plane’ ” (paragraph 3). *Signification* (action of signs in communication—Roeder’s necessary circumscription of semiosis, by means of whatever unargued code) comes about from the “correlation of two distinct [again, no leakage, clearly defined limits] formal systems.” These are the *syntactic* and the *semantic* systems: the former is the *expression* or *signifier* plane or space; the latter is the *content* or *signified*. The syntactic system is an “interplay of empty positions and mutual oppositions”; the semantic system is “a set of possible communicative contents” (paragraph 3, quoting Eco). These contents are usually a “culturally-determined set [culture plays the context-maker here] of notions about the continuum of experience” (ibid.). And what correlates the two systems such that signification will “arise” (a word apt for a resurrection of 60s semiology and which saturates Roeder via Eco)?—the *codes*, with which this paragraph began, and which now get two paragraphs of their own.

[4] What are the codes? “A *code* is a collection of sign-functions linking a syntactic system with a semantic system” (paragraph 3). But, then, is not the code a sign? For a little earlier in the same paragraph we read: “A *sign* (or, more properly, a *sign-function*) arises [comes to our attention, raises itself up] every time ‘an element of an expression plane [is] conventionally correlated to one (or several) elements of a content plane’ ” (Roeder quoting Eco, paragraph 3). Where this sign arises, of course, is the province of the esthetic level and the “reader,” which Eco will acknowledge in a later study and which Roeder’s text takes for granted. For our purposes, we merely note the (undelimitable) conflation of the terms sign, sign-function, and code: the code (a sign or, “more properly,” a sign-function) is a collection of sign-functions linking a syntactic system (comprised of “markers” and “elements” which are taken to be self-evident in Roeder’s text) with a semantic system (unequivocally musical “events” and “psychophysical properties” [paragraph 4]). Once these elements are linked, and signification “arises,” a sign-function exists, though not the same sign-function that brought the sign-function into existence. (The linkage of the two systems *conventionally*, by rule or pact, also slips a little in the course of the text. In paragraph 16, on correlations between prose and music, linkage is established by *likenesses*—the banished Peirce would say, by iconic relations— between signifier and signified. But I limit myself to the codes for now.) Though in his note 1 Roeder gives a pertinent distillation of Nattiez’s objection to Eco’s notion of codes, let us read Nattiez’s own words, with which he points out the double bind in Eco: “. . . meaning cannot simultaneously be both the relation between signifier and signified . . . and a

fixed, stable position within a system” (Nattiez 1990, 23). In other words, if you define meaning—the aroused sign-function stimulated by a codifying sign-function whose own arousal is caused by something in the shadows, perhaps another, more promiscuous code, since an interpreting subject has been disallowed—as a relation, how can you invoke a space of *fixed*, univocal markers and events that communicate among themselves by means of a code which is itself a relation or function? You cannot. If every relation is unique, among markers-in-themselves, events, elements, components, and so on, then the codes must be “multiplied endlessly” in order to describe the signifier- signified couplings (Nattiez 1990, 23). A practical example, from Roeder’s description of pitch-integer semiosis (paragraph 5): “The code correlates the two systems so that each integer [unit of the syntactic system] conventionally denotes a distinct pitch [unit of the semantic system].” Not “the” code, but “this particular code in this particular instance,” on Nattiez’s view. It seems to me Nattiez is correct in concluding that Eco could have found his way out of this impasse if he had acknowledged the esthetic (reception, perception, apperception, dwelling of the interpretant) and poietic (compositional, circumstances of creation, production) levels. For in so doing, one could point with some justification to these, more permeable (an earlier semiology would say attuned to diachrony), positions of the tripartition, allowing them to resolve any inconsistencies that arise on the neutral level (Nattiez, in his latest work, renames the neutral level the *trace*, in recognition of its tenuous ontological status). Acknowledgement of the poietic and esthetic levels need not result in their objectification and systematizing into something like a neutral level, for the “*circumstances of communication* are as infinite in number as those of the interpretant [the interpreting sign that arises in the mind when the latter receives signals; the moment of decoding]” (Nattiez 1990, 25).

[5] Nevertheless, the code, however illogical or plurivocal, is essential to Roeder’s/Eco’s project, for it alone “establishes [marks off territory for] the correlation of an expression plane . . . with a content plane” and thus determines (lays down the law, a Napoleonic code) that “a given array of syntactic signals refers back . . . to a given ‘pertinent’ segmentation of the semantic system” (Eco in Roeder, paragraph 3). The code “apportions” (paragraph 8), divides up the lots; it “correlates” concepts, weds opposing oppositions, puts them into contact with each other. It draws up the prenuptial agreement by setting limits, it *confines as it defines*. Far too briefly put, the code makes possible the *context*, the little-sung hero of Roeder’s text, whom we shall hear from shortly. In Eco/Roeder the code, that informative if slippery match-maker, reports back to us, with data that will help us keep our discourse honest, our representational language more transparent, our models more distinct, efficacious, and accurate, and thus more attractive.

[6] We have, as early as the second paragraph of the present commentary, seen (always necessary) lines of demarcation appear in Roeder’s text— semiotics is this not that; talk of specifically musical in contradistinction to not specifically musical discourse; the deepest cut, the placing of the theory itself on the neutral level; “refinements” of meanings; and so on. Are these delineations theorized in the text, and what have they to do with the codes, who apparently will associate (anyone) with anyone? Tucked away at the end of the theoretical exposition (of semiotics, of bits of Eco’s theory, of the ways a revenant semiology, like Scrooge’s spectre, can help fine tune discourse about music) we find: “The particular contexts or circumstances [which Nattiez points out are infinite in number] in which the sign-function arises *also* [my emphasis] affect its meaning” (paragraph 3). Also? Not crucially? As if context were so manifestly “there”! But let us proceed. Eco states, and my interpolations are carefully weighed: “a sign-function is established by the code [another, linking kind of sign-function] between [and the code makes possible this ‘between’ by establishing, separating yet conjoining] a given set [the code giveth and the code taketh away] of syntactic markers, *both taken as a whole*” (Eco in Roeder, paragraph 3; my emphasis). The content plane must be cut off clearly from the syntactic plan; the two planes must wed and become one (taken as a whole); and the code performs the ceremony (correlates the two systems; paragraph 5).

[7] If I have any one “point” to make in this commentary, it is that “context” is not just one condition among many that affect the meaning of the sign, however construed (as position, as marker, as code, as sign- function). Context does not merely “also,” in the adding-to sense, affect the meaning of the sign; it “also” makes possible the sign. Context defines by confining. We can hear the voice of context, soft yet authoritative, throughout Roeder’s text: “restricting [confining, contextualizing] and schematizing images curtails [limits, sets boundaries on] their ambiguity and thereby enhances [highlights the borders of] their denotative clarity as sign-vehicles [signifiers],” because “sign-functions arise [again, of their own volition] to the extent that the sign-vehicles are arranged [marked-off, take their place] in clear patterns [clear to whom? and in what context?]” (paragraph 10). Example 2a “shows some musical dimensions [contexts, spaces] in which oppositions can be defined [no defining without confining].” Into this latter creeps a certain circularity: how can you *not* find pairings, matches arranged by the codes, between the syntactic and semantic “dimensions” or contexts, after you have decided in

advance that there *will be* a context of oppositions, that there will be two systems, each calling out to the other, like Fetis's *appellant* tones, each confined and defined, at one and the same time, by a code. The two systems, so often seen together in public as it were, are bound to be linked in the public imagination, if the code has its way (and it always does, if the message of Gestalt psychology and aesthetics via Gombrich and others has validity). Further on, and skipping many interim examples, we read that using verbal images to signify music works best when the images are "constrained by the overall scene [context]" (paragraph 18). Here Schumann is describing some Schubert waltzes in terms of characters and setting at a masked ball (a highly constrained social context), and where Roeder is describing the waltzes as a highly constrained (codified) musical genre. Otherwise connotations would run rampant; the possible correspondences (or correlations) between signifier and signified would exceed our ability to keep track of them; the codes would get out of hand. There follows an excursus, welcome but shocking in the context of a presentation fixed so rigidly on the neutral level, into the poietic level: intriguing speculations on possible motivations for Schumann's choice of images in his literary rendering of the Schubert (pars. 17–20). A final exhortation asks us to "continue to identify [by means of codes, one presumes] the limitations [we should delimit the borders of the borders] of analytical paradigms that are [and they all are] accepted by tradition, convention, or default" (par. 22). I would second this motion, adding that what is left out or suppressed, excommunicated, during this communication between the signifier and signified, that which makes possible that strange and violent linkage, should receive equal attention (see [Littlefield 1993](#)).

[8] Let me hasten to point out that the question-issue-problem of context returns to life here in tandem with and inseparable from the signifier-signified team that one had thought forever dislocated by deconstruction, "New" historicism, feminist critiques and many other 'isms. I had forgotten the urgency with which Derrida and others encouraged vigilance against the resurgence of "logocentrism," appeals to *presence*, in all its guises; here, a certain structuralism, the signifier/signified pairing, the sign as a "whole," stable markers and components in clearly-defined systems, and so forth. In their assault on the concept of the sign, Derrida's texts have time and again pointed out the "supplemental logic" of seemingly incidental terms, such as "context" in the context of the Roeder, being called in both to add-to and to constitute, be contingent and necessary, at one and the same time (see, for example, [Derrida 1967](#) and [1987](#)). In the Roeder: no code, no context; no context, no code; no code, no sign; no sign, no semiotics; no semiotics, fuzzy interpretation. What fascinates me is the surface simplicity, the apparent cogency, the matter-of-factness with which Roeder's text offers us a "tool" for getting straight our representations of musical structure. A music theorist somewhere said that the business of theory was not to be true, only useful (or words to that effect). And "dependability" has certainly replaced "verifiability" or truth value in some areas of psychological testing. Perhaps this blindness, purposeful or accidental, is the price one pays for insight, as Paul de Man has told us. I would like to see many more practical examples, analytic applications, clearly laid out as in Roeder's essay, of the codes used to make clear the terms of our music-analytic representations. "Interpretation," says Geoffrey Hartman, "is like football: you spot a hole and you go through." One should take the ball and run with it.

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