The Discourse of Conflict

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

This dissertation deals with two problems central to contemporary philosophy: the unacknowledged bias of structuralist theory towards linguistic signs and the lack of a coherent theorisation of social conflict. In order to address these conundrums, I reconcile Saussurean and Peircean semiotics and then use Ruthrof’s corporeal pragmatics to break from the verbocentric idea of language as a closed system, showing instead that verbal meanings originate from the body, its senses and its imagination, as informed by the deixis of individual communities. With the transformation of linguistic semiotics into corporeality, Foucault’s notion of discourse and the neglected category of discursive practice are then reworked to show how statements based on nonverbal signs might function discursively.

The culmination of the 1970s Northern Irish prison war in the events of the 1981 hunger strikes offers a study that unites the focus upon nonverbal discourses with the examination of conflict. In exploring the ways in which republican hunger strikers struggled for legitimacy with the prison authorities, I am able to show how previous notions of conflict, especially Lyotard’s différend, are thrown into disrepute by a corporeal perspective recognising the intersemiotic and heterosemiotic character of communication. The availability of diverse semiotic media such as the visual, the haptic, the proximic, etc., offers positions in which conflicts may be regulated without ending in the stalemate that Lyotard describes. The division of semio-discursive phenomena into verbal and nonverbal
elements, and the tracing of the effects that these elements have upon ideational and pragmatic planes of action, also reveal a variety of strategies related to conflict that are superposable upon other instances. As a result, the thesis suggests that the role of political violence in politics and the meanings associated with the taking of life can be approached from a new angle.
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Sin é.

South Fremantle, Western Australia,
**Table of Contents**

Abstract  iii  

Acknowledgements  v  

Table of Contents  vi  

Introduction  1  

1. Previous Approaches  23  

2. Verbocentrism  65  

3. The Semiotic Subject  105  

4. Corporeal Pragmatics and the Nonverbal Subject  144  

5. Discourse as Practice  219  

6. Death Sentences  276  

Conclusion – The Discourse of Conflict  336  

Bibliography  377