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## Coding as a problem of reception

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Maryla Hopfinger

## Coding as a Problem of Reception

In the tradition of our culture the relationship between man and the world is looked upon in two different ways: either from the point of view of the individual or from the point of view of some broader system which has been singled out in one way or another. The opposition between man and culture, between that which is individual and that which has a cultural or social character, between the subjective and the objective—this opposition is an unquestionable one in our tradition.

Coding—understood as using acquired codes—is an important aspect of introducing some kind of order in our perception of the world. It is linked with the possibility and methods of orientation, with the way the participants of culture understand the world and translate it into words.<sup>1</sup> As I see it, coding is a problem of reception involving various operations in meaning which consist in linking material with meaning. I believe coding to be the elementary way of partaking in culture.

Considerations on the subject of coding demand that one should alternate the subjective and objective points of view, in order to avoid solutions which might be too one-sided. It is therefore necessary to study the process of reception in two separate dimensions, to consider both its individual and its cultural aspects. This, however, requires two different levels of analysis: one should concern the participants of a given culture, the other—their culture. In both

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<sup>1</sup> See G. Bateson, "Information, Codification, Metacommunication," [in:] *Communication and Culture*, ed. by A. G. Smith, New York 1966, p. 412–426; K. Obuchowski, *Kody orientacji i struktura procesów emocjonalnych (Orientation Codes and the Structure of Emotional Processes)*, Warszawa 1970.

cases different questions must be answered, using different categories, though it should perhaps be stated that each viewpoint may throw light on the other.

In this way that level of investigation which is exterior in relation to the participants of culture will cover such issues as: the repertoire of codes of a given culture, the question how this repertoire is formed and how it functions, its dynamic development and transformations; the relationship between the repertoire of codes and the semiotic systems of a given culture, including the way the category of code is understood in relation to the concept of system; the problem of codes and practices; the influence of the type and style of culture on models of arranging codes in some kind of order and on ways of coding.

Any other problems of coding will be studied on the level where we take into consideration the point of view of the participants of culture. One of the more important questions to be answered here is what factors shape the individual's selective attitude towards the environment in a broad sense, what features and circumstances play a vital part in these mechanisms; and further, what forms the basis for the selection of meanings by individuals, what decides about the aims and ways in which they code. It is important to note that individuals select only certain codes from the full repertoire, and disregard the rest; that they have preferences for certain selections of codes and well-established ideas as to their grading.

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I have chosen to study acquired codes, which we assimilate in different ways as we become members of a group. This approach excludes all natural codes. Acquired codes have a social character. By this I mean that they are interpersonally formed ways of bringing order to the world, to one of its fragments, dimensions or aspects—they are ways of giving the surrounding world a meaning. Coding operations cannot be carried out at will, in an arbitrary way. When coding, individuals perform a selection from the repertoire of codes of their community, this repertoire having been determined by the broader social and cultural context, and they follow the models of selection and grading which have also been shaped by external factors.

All these codes are directed at the values of a given culture. This means that they will be used to put order into those dimensions and aspects of the world which are considered important in that particular culture. We might say that culture marks out the general region and prepares the "material" for coding operations.

Before proceeding further we have to look for an answer to the question concerning the way we should understand the category of culture, and in particular we should decide how important a role it plays. The answers to these questions will determine my approach to coding, for I have assumed that anything included in culture is by definition subject to coding.

I propose to look at the category of culture in a broad sense, from a neutral rather than evaluating point of view, and to encompass the whole rather than to study only a selected part of culture, in the spirit of the early, classic anthropology. Every item included in culture functions in it as a value, and the act of assigning it some meaning is done through various coding operations.

I should like to refer to Stefan Żółkiewski's hypothesis which states that all elements in culture combine material and semiotic functions.<sup>2</sup> Various components of culture—called semiotic or cultural objects—have both semiotic and material functions. A cultural object is the result of the implementation of a model of some social practice (not necessarily a communication practice), a result which has been registered in a closed process or in time and space. It is constituted by a carrier of the text which is connected with the material aspect, and its material function consists in causing anthropological effects in individuals and communities. The cultural object in its semiotic aspect forms the text, and its semiotic function resides in the meanings which the text has for a given community. There is a close connection between the material and the semiotic functions of a cultural object. The ever-present material functions exert their influence on the participants of social practices, particularly communication practices, and bring about modifications of the semiotic functions of their products.

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<sup>2</sup> S. Żółkiewski, "Pomysły do teorii odbioru dzieł literackich" (Ideas on the Theory of Reception of Literary Works), [in:] *Kultura – socjologia – semiotyka literacka (Culture – Sociology – Literary Semiotics)*, Warszawa 1979, pp. 511–550.

Żółkiewski in his concept assumes that a fuller and better understanding of cultural facts becomes possible if we consider the interaction of both these aspects.

This way of understanding the category of cultural objects—which takes into account the criterion of belonging to culture and refers to the basic, substantial components of culture—allows me to point to two types of codes: one connected with the material aspect of cultural objects, the other with their semiotic aspect. The first would then be called material codes, the second—semiotic codes.

The codes we learn differ from one another and concern diverse aspects of communication and culture. However, every code combines material carriers and meanings, as it is registered in a definite material, though this material is not always the same. For instance intonational codes concern only auditory matter, whereas fabulous codes are used to put order into picture stories as well as oral accounts, into written texts and theatrical performances or television shows. In a similar way architectural codes are associated with a definite kind of carrier, though the Renaissance or Secession styles encompass ways of assigning meaning to facts outside the field of architecture. Thus intonational, fabulous and architectural codes can serve quite different practices.

All these codes need to be classified according to some chosen criteria. I should like to propose at this initial stage only one division, a very general one, which ought to simplify matters a good deal. It consists in distinguishing between two types of codes: those which are associated with particular carriers, which I have chosen to call material codes, and those which have meaning as the common denominator, and which I have called semiotic codes. The essential difference between these types of codes can be formulated as follows: material codes introduce order to a given number of carriers according to their rules of selection and combination, and link them up with meanings inherent in the material; as for semiotic codes, they set apart and bring order to a certain set of meanings (in a given cultural situation), and connect them with various carriers. Material codes are directly linked with systems of *signifiants*, whereas semiotic codes are connected with coding the universe, and concern the sphere of *signifiés*.

Codes should be associated above all with the category of social

practice, understood in a general sense as a sphere of human activity which constitutes the link between the production and the utilization of a given type of cultural product. This assumption requires that we should distinguish between the categories of system and code.

The notion of "semiotic system" can be defined as a set of all the potential elements of one type in a given culture, and the collection of potential rules of combination of those elements. Now the notion of "code" would involve selecting from that system, would refer to one of its parts, and not to the system as a whole. A code would be the result of a selection of only some of the elements from the full range of possibilities within the system and only certain rules of combination. These would in fact be the elements and rules which are indispensable to the social practice in question in a given time and place. More than one code can come into being within the one system, and each of them may be formed by various combinations of elements and rules of this system for some chosen practice; each may have its individual order required by that practice. So on the one hand a code is simpler in comparison with the system, and on the other hand it reflects the type of choice which is useful to a given practice.

Those codes which I have called material codes are most directly linked with the category of social practice. This can be shown by using the three-level structure which I have suggested elsewhere for a similar problem.<sup>3</sup> These levels concern a) the material, b) material and meaning, c) meaning and culture.

The material level is composed of meaningful elements which determine the material individuality of a cultural object or of a group of such objects. This level creates a set of possibilities in communication. The second level covers the meaning delivered by the material, being an integral part of its specific features, and characterizing objects which function in a particular practice; it allows the implementation of some of the possibilities created by the material level.

As for the third level, it concerns that aspect of meaning which

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<sup>3</sup> M. Hopfinger, *Adaptacje filmowe utworów literackich. Problemy teorii i interpretacji (Film Adaptations of Literary Works. Problems of Theory and Interpretation)*, Wrocław 1974, esp. pp. 69–88.

is only indirectly linked with the material, but is open to meanings which are shared by various cultural objects functioning in a given place at a given time. It might be said that this level determines social reception.

The first two of the above levels are associated with the category of material codes. From the point of view of the cultural object, these levels relate to the carrier, which by definition is linked with the material function. The material aspect is in fact essential here, however it does not exhaust the whole issue.

The material, its ordered structure, is the basis for the formation of all meanings, both as concerns the intention of the author of a text and the possibility of interpretation for its recipients. It assures and at the same time conditions the commencement of the process of communication, and further it guarantees the material and formal identity of a given cultural object in its many instances of reception. It is precisely the shape of the material which determines the initial situation necessary for the interpretation of meaning.

There are, of course, various ways of organizing the material. They may be more or less open to different interpretations, some straightforward, others intricate. However, meanings which are specific to objects in a given practice are present in the very structure of the material. These meanings are an inseparable aspect of the carrier. They make us aware of the close connection between the material and semiotic aspects. It seems necessary to consider the inner, species-specific meanings of cultural objects, for this ensures us against unifying procedures and guarantees variety of all that takes place in the world of culture. The meanings implied by the material are the domain of material codes.

The range of interpretations for these meanings corresponds with changes taking place within a given practice, particularly within the codes, including material codes, used by that practice.

The character and shape of material codes are also defined by mechanisms which go beyond the boundaries of individual practices. It seems, however, that the practice is the category with which these types of codes are most strongly associated.

The distinction made between material codes and other codes implies that the material plays an active role in shaping the meanings of cultural objects in the process of communication. I should like

to emphasize this fact, for it is often thought that meaning is a common and comparable dimension of various elements of culture. This semiotic approach to culture was particularly popular in the sixties and seventies. As D. Jean Umiker-Sebeok writes in his well-documented article, semiotics has been transferred from the peripheries of anthropological research towards the very centre of that field.<sup>4</sup> This outlook is of course very important and has proved fruitful in research on culture, however it seems an exaggeration to say (usually for the sake of a strong argument) that meaning is independent of the material used.<sup>5</sup> I think it impossible to ignore the fact that the material plays an important role in creating meanings, especially if we take a closer look at the variety of the material which has not been diversified for use in semiotic analyses. My intention is not to claim the aesthetic peculiarity of this material, but to draw attention to the built-in meanings which are inseparable from the material.

As for the third level pertaining to the cultural object—that level which concerns meaning and culture—it must be seen as closely related to the text, which by definition is linked with the function of meaning. The connection between this level and the material organization of the object is only very indirect. Its meanings are of course based on the meanings inherent in and specific to the given object and communication practice, but at the same time they transcend that sphere, being open to meanings which are present in a given culture and ready to take in changing outside circumstances. And so this level encompasses the meanings common to all the elements of a given culture.

The third level is related to those codes which I have previously associated with meaning. The connection between codes of meaning and the category of practice is much weaker than in the case of material codes and in fact consists in an interdependence which is only indirect.

Codes of meaning delimitate and arrange in order the collective meanings in a culture quite independently of any material in which

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<sup>4</sup> D. J. Umiker-Sebeok, "Semiotics of Culture," *Great Britain and North America, Annual Reviews Inc.*, ed. by W. Kaufmann.

<sup>5</sup> A. J. Greimas, *Sémantique structurale. Recherche de méthode*, Paris 1966, p. 59.



they might be contained. The social functioning of codes of this type forges a common meaning for various occurrences in culture, though these may differ considerably because of their subject, type, and because of the differences between various cultural objects and practices. I believe that this sphere of meanings connected with the category of semiotic codes is most suited for considerations on the subject of translatability, on intersemiotic translation.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that semiotic codes are formed and function is governed by the occurrences which take place in a certain limited period, depends on the style of a given culture and above all on the model of its particular situation.

The category of cultural situation will be used here to introduce the set of elements and rules of social and cultural life which determines the selection and grading of social values and roles. There are many different kinds of cultural situations. From a theoretical point of view, however, we may speak of three main models: the single-style model, the multi-style model, and the multi-style model with a dominating style or styles.

In the first of these models, any choice in its various aspects is subordinated to one criterion or one set of criteria. The latter determine the role of social communication as a whole, as well as the place and functions assigned to particular practices, especially in the sphere of communication. In the process of social communication the method of generating cultural objects is already determined at the initial stage ("preventive stimulation"), but this does not eliminate complementary or corrective operations performed on objects which have already begun to circulate. The structure of social and cultural life is such that it welcomes desired objects and disregards others, or else the new objects are adapted to those which already exist. This implies a strict selection both of values and of social roles. Those who produce texts as well as their recipients have clearly defined roles, their repertoire is limited and has a fixed hierarchy.

The multi-style situation model is characterized by a variety of possible selections (of values and roles), combined with many different criteria of selection. Social communication as a whole as well

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<sup>6</sup> Hopfinger, *op. cit.*

as particular practices are said to have different functions, including autotelic functions. The process of social communication may be generated in various ways. The structure of social and cultural life is complicated, it has its own inner configurations, oppositions, tensions and conflicts. There are various repertoires of values and roles, and various hierarchies. The selection of values and roles is performed in spite of competing models, or at least this may be so.

Finally the "mixed" model also allows different selections of values and roles, nevertheless it shows a preference for one type in particular. This may be due to the structure of social and cultural life or to the driving force of the needs of the participants of culture. The process of social communication is centred on the reception of the cultural objects already in circulation ("preferential stimulation").

The methods of bringing order to common meanings in culture are therefore closely linked with codes of meaning, which in turn are activated and stimulated by a cultural situation. To give an example—if the single-style model produces a code of political pragmatics, then this accepted code of meaning will shift out of sight or subordinate other codes of meaning. On the other hand in the multi-style model there is an unceasing rivalry between various choices of codes, depending on a person's hierarchy of values, life style, etc., or connected with the fact that he may play many different roles which cannot always coexist in harmony.

The codes of a community have various functions, and may be superior, inferior or equal in relation to one another. The functioning of semiotic codes, their rules of formation and selection, are to a great extent determined by the situation of a given culture, and in a broad sense by its style.

As for the cultural grading of material codes connected with practices, this depends on the repertoire of material semiotic systems and the repertoire of social practices.

The material systems which are a source for the practices have their individual order in every culture. This fact can be described with the aid of the category of intersemiotic configuration, which is a hierarchy of various material systems connected with different spheres of human activity, and different aspects of a situation. In this way certain systems are privileged. To quote an example: the in-

tersemiotic configuration of the verbal type gave preference to verbal systems — i.e. to natural language, especially in its written form, and to literature.

I likewise assume that in a given place and time the set of social practices possesses its own structure so that these practices are interrelated. In order to see this quite clearly I shall refer to the category of the range of practices. It usually happens that this kind of system favours some practices and assigns less importance to others, and it may allow some practices to change their place and function within culture as a whole. For instance different practices assume a privileged position in the cultures of the 19th and 20th centuries. The role of direct interpersonal communication was altered with the invention of print, and as for modern audio-visual practices based on advanced technology, they produce different effects than those caused by the domination of writing techniques.

Every culture has at its disposal a certain set of interrelated codes, and these codes constitute a framework within which the participants of that culture can express themselves using the instruments which it provides.

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From the point of view of the participants of culture, coding embraces every sphere of man's activity. The ability to use different codes is developed in the process of socialization as a result of cultural education.

The possibilities of coding determine the specific features of *homo sapiens*. They are also defined by the repertoire of models and ways of using the codes which function in a given community. In other words man's biological structure excludes some possibilities but it also creates an opportunity for other receptive possibilities depending on the individual structure and functioning of a person's organism. As for culture in this context, it imposes or perhaps rather suggests the fields which are subject to coding and supplies the tools which are necessary in order to carry out coding operations.

This issue is in fact a very complicated one: it calls for an investigation into the relationship between nature and culture, and especially the particular type of relationship which exists within a person. Biological factors are the basic source for research into

the universal qualities of human nature. Yet since there are so many different cultures, it seems only right to ask if man's biological constitution allows the interference of culture, whether or not it can be changed under its influence and to what extent. Till now we have no clear answers to these questions.

The coding process is a complex operation involving the mechanisms of reception, perception and interpretation. According to modern psychology, the passive registration of stimuli only takes place at the level of reception. Receptors, unlike analyzers, or even the organism as a whole, are considered to be devoid of motivation or any kind of expectations. But even receptors are able to behave in various ways, as their reaction to a stimulus may be positive or negative. The mechanisms of reception appear to be most deeply rooted in biology.

Cultural factors undoubtedly interfere in the process of perception, only it is not clear how and to what extent many researchers who follow the line of experimental psychology advocate an active approach to perception. This approach takes into consideration the effect of stimuli on the organism as well as a person's active attitude towards his environment, which triggers off the processes of abstraction and generalization, and which involves expectations, motivation and selection within reception.<sup>7</sup>

Now the mechanisms of interpretation connected with the sphere of attitudes and actions have usually been located within culture and treated as the proper domain of the choice of values and judgments.

Reception, perception and interpretation are all interconnected. I believe that these dependences work in both directions.

Our way of looking at the problem of coding as the basic form of participation in culture must be influenced by the adopted idea of the participant of that culture. The participant is either passive or active in relation to culture, or he may combine both features.

Let us try to illustrate the passive attitude by using an example taken from research into the effects of the mass media on the population, carried out in the 40's and 50's. These experiments were

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See R. L. Gregory, *Eye and Brain. The Psychology of Seeing*, London 1966; R. Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception. A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, Berkeley—Los Angeles 1974.

centred upon the aims of those in control of the mass media, and on the functions consciously instilled into a text. Communication was considered a one-way process in which these aims were directly transformed into definite effects on the receivers. Trends of this kind were later on severely criticized. Andrew Tudor translated them into an asymmetric model of communication.<sup>8</sup>

It may easily be noticed that this approach to communication results from a general vision of society as a whole along with its culture, but also concerning individual persons as participants of that culture. In the receptive model individuals are taken out of their social and cultural context, deprived of their personal experiences and beliefs, and attributed the status of uncomplicated machines which must absorb information precisely in the form in which it was emitted or else they may be accused of misunderstanding. Receivers of course have the right to a negative reaction, i. e. to rejection (compare the functioning of receptors). However, individual refusals are considered to be deviations from the norm, and a collective, mass refusal is analyzed in terms of market mechanisms which themselves have to be interpreted first. The lack of desired effects is not the result of a wrong selection. The coding done by the receivers is looked upon as a mechanical, passive operation, which relies on copying (active coding being carried out by those in control of the media).

The theoretical basis for this approach may be found in certain conceptions of mass culture, which maintain that an individual may only react to a stimulus. This of course implies that his participation in culture must be of a receptive kind.

Most often the individual's participation in culture is considered to be both passive and active. At the stage of perception a person's attitude is totally receptive, but once we enter the sphere of actions and beliefs, he becomes capable of selection and evaluation.

According to the above, perception depends on biophysical features which are specific to the coding apparatus. These features are more or less common to all people, and thus guarantee the ability to take in information in an objective way. People's actions and

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<sup>8</sup> A. Tudor, *Image and Influence. Studies in the Sociology of Film*, London 1974, p. 29 and fol.

beliefs, on the other hand, are dependent on their cultural and linguistic background, and constitute a sphere of subjective, spontaneous acts of choice which involve evaluation and operations in meaning. Coding operations may therefore be divided into: objective/passive (perception) and subjective/active (actions and beliefs).

Now this approach stems from what I call *élitist* conceptions of culture (eg. from expressive theories), in which traditional axiology takes in the mechanisms of selection only, and deems itself opposed to all other spheres. The difference is perceived in the fact that evaluation is understood as selective reception, as a choice of values. There is a clear dividing line between passiveness and activeness, neutral registration and selection involving evaluation, description and interpretation. This dividing line also pertains to coding operations.

There still remains the third approach, the one which I favour, which may be described as a totally active and selective attitude. It involves the rejection of an energy-orientated understanding of the mechanisms which regulate behaviour. Although it is true that the human organism needs a certain amount of stimulation and energy to change the state of his receptors, a person's behaviour is not solely determined by the electrical charge of the stimulus. The deciding factor is the meaning the stimulus has for the receiver in a given situation and in relation to his aims. The receiver is therefore the one to fix the final meaning. His preferences are influenced by: his position in society and the social roles he plays, the values and attitudes he has adopted, his personality, and the extent to which he has mastered the codes functioning in the culture of his community. A person will adopt an attitude towards the stimuli which are directed at him not in a mechanical or a neutral way, but his choice will be governed by the aims he has set for himself. The aims of individual persons—which form a part of the aims of their culture—strongly determine code selection and influence the way of coding.

As I see it, coding is a sphere of human activity in which stimuli are not accepted in a passive way, but where the information received from the outside world is put into some kind of order and is given a meaning. Coding is therefore active by definition, even though in many cases it may have become automatic

or stereotype. The important thing is that the active attitude concerns both registration and interpretation, both perception and evaluation. This model of participation in culture may be called an interpretative model. In it, all coding operations at every level have a selective character, and are the result of a voluntarily active attitude of the individual. Coding is a means of receiving outside information in an active way through selection.

The model I have chosen permits an all-embracing outlook on man. Various complex coding operations are linked with the functioning of dynamic systems, and these coding operations influence one another at various levels. It is important to consider different aspects of human behaviour, such as the intellectual or emotional aspects, and to investigate the specific character of cognitive processes in relation to other spheres of human activity.

In this context it seems necessary to reconsider the question of emotions. In the past emotions were seen as something mysterious and unfathomable, nowadays they are subjected to research, but they still pose a problem. Emotional processes are formed in social situations under the influence of cultural models; their close connection with other aspects of life has to be explored and formulated.

David O. Hebb's theory of emotions may serve as an example. It stated that emotions are a signal of the agreement or the non-agreement of a situation with the expectations formed on the basis of past experiences. A similar line was adopted by Leon Festinger in his dissonance theory.<sup>9</sup> Concepts which assigned to emotions a selective function and the function of organizing cognitive processes went even further. Up till now the most that has been achieved is Kazimierz Obuchowski's hypothesis presented in his book *Kody orientacji i struktura procesów emocjonalnych*. It is based on the psychological theory of orientation and performance. Obuchowski believes that under the influence of emotions the orientation of man in his environment becomes altered. Emotional processes, or more precisely: their various aspects, influence the processes of cognition

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<sup>9</sup> D. O. Hebb, *The Organization of Behavior. A Neuro-psychological Theory*, New York 1949; L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Evanston, Ill., 1957; J. Reykowski, *Eksperymentalna psychologia emocji (An Experimental Psychology of Emotions)*, Warszawa 1968.

by modifying their course and they act as a selecting agent. They also control the inflow of information and determine its level of organization. Emotions are one of the factors which influence man's orientation structure and play an important role in directing his actions. Obuchowski refers to many experiments carried out in this field and discusses in detail the influence of various aspects of the emotional process on perception and action; he puts forward numerous arguments in support of the connection between coding and emotional processes. I am inclined to agree with this in a general sense, I should refrain however from defining the nature of that connection.

The interpretative model of participation in culture should always be combined with a broad, classic anthropological approach to the category of culture. A neutral attitude should be adopted at the start, when delimiting the cultural zone. The active approach concerns orientation within this zone. It is important to avoid considering only chosen phenomena as belonging to culture or only certain coding operations as involving evaluation. Culture should be perceived as a whole, as should be seen man's functioning within culture.

The cultural zone contains cultural objects which constitute the values of that culture and which may undergo coding operations. In other words, the fact that an object belongs to a culture gives it the status of a value, and the cultural zone creates a potential sphere for various coding operations.

Coding, as the basic form of participation in culture, is very closely related to the problem of values. If coding is an active operation involving selection and grading, this implies that a hierarchy of values is formed.

Coding seems to be the basic medium for evaluation. Through deliberate selection it brings into existence potential values.

Finally, coding operations are the basis for formulating judgments, which, combined with the aims of those who code, will in turn determine future coding.

The problem of coding seen from the two points of view which have been discussed here calls for a moment of reflection on the issue of "free choice" and constraint: on the one hand we can select freely from among the codes we have learnt, but on the



other hand our choices, for which we like to think we are fully responsible, are exposed to pressure from the outside, to patterns imposed by society and by the system. Choice is not free, but it must be responsible.

Transl. by *Agnieszka Kukulska*