

## REVIEWS

**Irene Portis-Winner.** *Semiotics of Peasants in Transition: Slovene Villagers and Their Ethnic Relatives in America.* Durham, North Carolina: Duke UP. 2002. I–XI, 188 pp, \$64.95 (cloth), \$21.95 (paperback). ISBN: 0822328275 0822328410

For more than thirty years beginning in the 1960s, Irene Portis-Winner has been the anthropological chronicler of Žerovnica, “a traditional and ancient Slovene village” (4). Since publishing in 1970 her ethnography, *A Slovene Village: Žerovnica*, she has returned to this site five times for further study. On these visits and even earlier when doing her original research, she was struck by the symbolic presence in Žerovnica of expatriate American relatives: “The evidence of relations to Cleveland was prominently displayed everywhere in the village houses. Calendar pictures, gifts and letters told tales of continuous contact with overseas relatives” (5). This observation led her to do research among Žerovnica’s emigrants who settled in the early part of the last century on St. Clair Avenue in Cleveland, Ohio, and in Hibbing, Minnesota.

In contrast to her first book, the present volume is not an ethnographic account. Searching for an alternative to the method of descriptive ethnography, she examines what she calls the interpretive anthropology of such anthropologists and historians as Eric Wolf, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, Raul Rabinow, George De Vos, and Michael Fischer on their uses of the terms nationalism, ethnic identity, and transnationalism. She finds their work to represent

The old dichotomies (synchrony/dichotomy, relativism/universalism) in a new form: Since in post-modern relativization we have the loss of all stable values, universalism is sterile scientism and history is rewritten. Unless these trends can be re-worked into a broader framework that attempts to understand the preservation of past values as not entirely lost to the global phenomena, a fruitful study of culture that encompasses its many dynamic and often ambiguous meanings is in danger (42).

For Portis-Winner it is lamentable that such approaches as found, for example, in Benedict Anderson’s conception of imagined communities, the complexities and intricacies inherent in a study of traditional cultures is overlooked.

Other anthropologists whose method she terms “performance anthropology” have thought to capture cultural values by seeking to find the native’s inner point of view. This is the old conundrum of discovering a way to present the other’s image of the world from the perspective of the other. She finds that both Clifford Geertz’s solution (analysis of one key performance, the cockfight) and Victor Turner’s performances which he calls social dramas and likens to the carnival atmosphere in complex

societies are only a partial solution to the problem of the preservation of past cultural values.

The real problem is “how to determine the communicative object, the significant unit for which the analysis of culture and cultures, from which we can try to construct the inner point of view” (43). It is Portis-Winner’s contention that we can learn from the semioticians “that communication implies a minimum of two interacting units, but that messages do not exclude autocommunication” (46). This is a way of saying that information can also be “deduced from indirect and non-verbal signals such as intonation, facial expression, and general bodily language” (45). She chooses the interpretation of signs as her method of investigation by which she means “semiotic theories of meaning and communication of information and culture” (5). Hence, the title of her book,

### **The Semiotics of Peasants in Transition.**

The book’s pivotal chapter (IV) is called “Semiotics of Culture.” In it she examines the works of a selection of “semiotically oriented scholars” (50) including Charles Sanders Peirce, M.M. Bakhtin, Roman Jakobson<sup>1</sup> and others derived from or related to them including Ferdinand de. Saussure, Petr Borgatyrev, Jon Mukařavský, Yury Lotman, B.A. Upensky, Pierre Bourdieu, Claud Levi-Strauss, Vincent Crapanzano, Gerald Holton, and Hilary Putnam. The condensation into twenty-three pages of these author’s seminal works gave me a bit of indigestion, but in this discussion two key dimensions of the semiotic method are explained.

In the first she “see[s] the search for proof of the semiotics of culture as grounded in a compromising solution that combines Peirce, Jacobson, Holton and Putnam... [who]... would agree... that abduction or a similar method saves us from the unbridgeable chasm between fact and theory” (72). (How we are saved from this unbridgeable chasm if in fact it exists is not elucidated.) Abduction, she continues, in Peirce’s terms “is an act of insight, although an extremely fallible insight... the abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash... all the ideas of science come to us by the ways of abduction” (71).

I interpret abduction to mean that research is a creative process, one that evokes a reality heretofore unseen by other investigators. Charles Sanders Peirce notwithstanding, I’m not sure this is how science and particularly social science proceeds, but it is Portis-Winner’s formulation of a method for anthropological research that, she claims, does not deny the critical relationship between the creativity of the investigator and the investigator’s research findings.

In the second she says that “A world of signs has constantly imbedded within it potential power functions, implicit or explicit, subtle

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<sup>1</sup> That the volume is primarily intended as a study in semiotics is indicated by its publication in Duke University Press’s series, “Sound and Meaning: The Roman Jakobson series in Linguistics and Poetics.”

or obvious. But we must avoid the trap of reducing signs to one function... It is high time, then, for an investigation of how ideas, ideology, and power intermesh, and of how the many codes signify multiple messages, implied or clear” (73). This focus on the meaning of signs leaves to the semiotic investigator the task determining the function or functions of a given sign and, more than that, to interpret them in relation to the intermeshing of ideas, ideology and power, within the larger social structure.

As an ideal, these methodological structures are well taken even if Portis-Winner is not always able to abide by them in the interpretation of data she has collected. Practically, the richness of her substantive data contains an unimaginably large number of potential signs embedded in fables, narratives, autobiographies, laws, politics, etc., that she has collected across two continents over a period of thirty years. For purposes of this book she reduces the scope of her attention to Žerovnica’s peasant culture and traditions.

In three chapters (5, “Žerovnica: Its Past and the Question of Its Future,” 6, “The Story of the Ethnic Community in Cleveland,” 7, “Semiotic Portraits in Culture Context”), Portis-Winner interweaves historically factual data and tales with informant’s memories collected by her in interviews. To show how she uses her semiotic method, I have chosen examples from her discussion of narratives about the ancient past as remembered by living informants.

In one example she focuses on the origin of the Karstic formed seasonally drying-and-filling Lake Cerknica, a geological oddity peculiar to this area of Slovenia. Its origin is “attributed to the miraculous action of a young prince of Šteberk” (81) who lived in the ancient castle. In a long narrative (81–82) involving the prince and a girl, their story is interpreted as a folk version of the Romeo and Juliet myth. Similar observations are made about the symbolic meaning of tales about Žerovnica’s twelve founding families as well as other incidents pertaining to the ancient past.

In a synopsis of Žerovnica’s history from 1848 to the communist period, World War II and the communist decades, the post-communist village, and its economy and the future of tourism, the reader is given an overview of the village’s recent past. The overall story is one of the accretions of new life styles and economic values which have emerged as a result of organizational, political and demographic changes over that period of time. From this past, the semiotician selects for analysis and interpretation tales, fables, myths, recollections, historical materials and informant’s memories. Here she focuses her interpretations on such peasant cultural values as the meaning of forest land as a gold reserve, smuggling, fairs, gambling, feasting, carnivals, religious ceremonies, and the loss of these values over time.

Now in the present and in the face of the decline of its agricultural economy, Žerovnica is left with only the potential for developing a tourist industry. Under the Law for the Protection of

National Monuments, no new structures can be built in Žerovnica: Families who own old structures that lend themselves to tourism become a new local elite. Owners of what are called tourist farms “must pass a cooking examination in the preparation of typical peasant food” (97): The lake and the village have now become a tourist attraction. Advertising for this tourist attraction includes an elderly peasant riding on a typical horse-drawn peasant cart. From the vantage point of semiotics, Portis-Winner asks “is this village becoming an open air museum?” (105). Significant signs of the past are mummified in a present in which such signs of the past have acquired a new capital value. In her terms, the village “is a living example of Mukarovsky’s self-focusing view of the aesthetic function as a preservative element and of Jakobson’s artistic and meta-function that focuses on itself...” (104). The data in this case serve as an illustration to substantiate the theory.

Slovene immigrants to America and their descendants numbered some 300,000 in 1980. Portis-Winner studied a group of families in Cleveland and Hibbing who have relatives in Žerovnica. She notes how Žerovnica culture has been preserved in the New World long after such cultural forms disappeared in the home villages. She enumerates new world cultural inventions like the Slovene Cooperatives and the retention of old world religions, societies, newspapers, and tells the story of poverty and eventual success in succeeding generations. However, these American Žerovnica descendants have abandoned the old Slovene ghettos and moved to the suburbs in a way not too dissimilar from how Žerovnica youth have moved to Ljubljana, leaving the old areas of settlement to the remembered past. For the Americans, the Žerovnica past is remembered with nostalgia as signified by the symbol of the traditional hayrack (kozolec) now appearing as nick-nacks in the form of living room ornaments. Her story about these immigrants is an informative ethnography that stresses their economic success and mummification of traditional peasant cultural signs into a new American ethnic life style which places a premium on nostalgia for times past.

In a lengthy case study (117–23) of documents produced by Mary Molek and her husband Ivan,<sup>2</sup> Portis-Winner illustrates most clearly the method of semiotic analysis. The Molek’s “narratives, which are first of all self-referential, juxtapose the two cultural traditions in ethnic culture, the traditional culture and the host culture. As Peierce wrote, theirs is a double consciousness in all perception, a consciousness of the ego and a consciousness of the non-ego, acting directly each upon the other... But they simply form the basis for a more complex referral to outside reality and other voices” (118). It is this segment of the book that the reader will encounter a full scale treatment of substantive data from the perspective of a semiotic analysis of signs.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Molek’s *Immigrant Women* (Dover, DE: Molek, 1976); Ivan Molek’s *Two Worlds=Dva svetova*, Mary Molek, trans. (Dover: Molek, 1978); *Slovene Immigrant History, 1900-1950: Autobiographical Sketches*, Mary Molek, trans. (Dover: Molek, 1979).

Throughout the book the reader will find narratives and “semiotic portraits” collected by the author. These include thirteen short autobiographies of Žerovnica school children and young adults, interviews with Matija Rok, the former village headman and his relatives in Cleveland, whose narratives exemplify “the effect of point of view on the perceptions of boundaries and highlights the polysemy and polyfunctionality of objects” (136). The life story of Anton Debevc and his family in Cleveland and Žerovnica are a narrative of “an intercommunicating network... and the many meaningful objects and memories that circulated between them” (142). The relationships between Anna Jakšič, her children, a close companion and her parents “compose an extended human sign text, their actions composing a plot-like narrative” (151).

Portis-Winner has undertaken the challenging task of bridging semiotic theory and conventional explanations of the mundane world of peasants and their relatives in the new world. Despite not entirely succeeding in accomplishing her theoretical goal, her book is a tribute to her creativity and contains a valuable body of data relevant to Slovene ethnic history.

*Arthur J. Vidich, New School University*