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SEMIOTICS IN THE NEXT MILLENNIUM ¹

When I proposed the title of my address I certainly knew that it was rather provocative, first of all because we are not sure that our species will survive the Millennium Bug. However my title didn't intend to be a mere joke. Every discipline is subject to historical changes, and the paths it takes are always motivated by the will (I would say, the duty) to react to some phenomena typical of a given cultural moment.

As far as semiotics is concerned its first problem was, with Parmenides, to distinguish between the reliability of *semata*, or natural signs, and the unreliability of *onomata*, that is, words. Aristotle approached the semiotic phenomena by distinguishing between sounds, things and *pathemata tes psyches*, that is, the mental image or the idea that verbal sounds activate in our mind. This also happened because Greek culture was ascertaining the existence of Barbarians, of people who at first glance had no language at all, but in fact were able to designate things by different words. The same idea was worked out more finely by the Stoics and it is not by chance that they were originally Phoenicians, that is, bilingual thinkers, perfectly aware of the fact that, in different countries, the same thoughts are conveyed by different words.

Romans were so steadily convinced that their Latin was the only viable language that did not elaborate a semiotics of their own, except for a theory of translation (since they had to absorb and emulate the Greek heritage) and a rhetoric, indispensable for their legal and political purposes.

Medieval Schoolmen were not concerned with languages other than Latin. Before them Augustine had started a very complex theory and practice of biblical hermeneutics without knowing Hebrew and with a vague, if not null, knowledge of Greek. Their semiotic contribution mostly concerned two items which were crucial for their cultural purposes, namely, textual interpretation and the relationship between words and universals. Only from Roger Bacon to Ockham, in a new cultural climate, becoming very sensitive to natural experiences, they switched to the study of the

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relationship between *signa* and *res*, and between true proposition and what was the case.

In the 17th century the word semiotics reappeared (centuries after Galen, and not only in Locke) to designate a doctrine of signs also because only at that moment the European culture became fully aware of the existence of other cultures and other forms of writing, from the Chinese ideograms to the Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Neglecting Peirce, who was in his time an isolated *vox clamantis in deserto*, semiotics has become a more and more central topic in our century, from Saussure to Morris, until the “semiotic boom” of the sixties (the decade in which our association was finally established) because it was in our century that communication became a heavy industry. Semiotics started recognizing itself as an unavoidable endeavor at the moment in which, at least in the developed countries, it was clear that one can take the power not by putting his tanks on the streets but by seizing radio and TV. During the Spanish *golpe* of 1981 the rebels occupied the Parliament but King Juan Carlos was able to control TV and spoke to the people: thus the rebels were defeated by a simple broadcast.

Semiotics has become a sort of moral critical duty when it was clear that mass media were the new sacred texts which produced ideology and changed our perception of the real world (if any).

Which phenomena will the semiotics of tomorrow face? In an era of globalisation in which different societies will have the same technology and the same habits, in which Chinese will eat pizza and strudel as well as we are eating rice noodles since a long time, probably the aims and methods of cultural anthropology will change. When every poem will be written with a computer, philological studies will find new and perhaps easier ways to establish a critical edition of that text, not by erudite conjectures but by recovering the archetypal version on some magnetic support.

In the same vein the organizers of this congress thought that one of the basic issues of our era is the existence of complex systems and have reacted accordingly.

Thus, if we cannot say what will happen in the semiotic field in the next one thousand years we can certainly make some remarks on what it is happening now and some prudent forecasts about the next few years.

As far as I am concerned I started this game five years ago when I went to California for the Fifth Congress of the IASS (Berkeley, 1994). If you go to consult the proceedings of the First Congress 1974 you will see that they include 13 sections. After a general section opened by the seminal "Coup d'oeil sur le développement de la sémiotique" by Roman Jakobson, there was a philosophical section devoted to Foundations, one on the relationships between Linguistics and Semiotics, and then the sections on Formalized Languages, Semantics and Pragmatics, the Semiotics of Literature, Visual Arts, Theater, Cinema, Architecture, Television and Music, a section devoted to the Semiotics of Culture, one on the Non-verbal Behavior, and one on Psychology and Psychiatry. At that time it was prudent to choose names of pre-existing disciplines or research fields in which there already existed satisfactory studies. Our hope was to find out at least some common methodological principles and maybe a unified technical jargon for people coming from so many different scientific backgrounds.

Let me now recall what happened in 1994 at the Fifth congress. The Berkeley program announced (to quote only few items) different sessions in Metatheory, Artificial Intelligence, Cognitive Sciences, Analysis of Political Discourses, Temporality, Japanese Pragmatics, Semiotics of Silence, Semiotics of Death, Cyberspace, Legal Semiotics, Media, Body, Religion, Marketing, Calligraphy, Humor, Education, Sign Processes in Human-Computer Interaction, Post Modern, Library and Information Science, Other Sexuality, Analysis of the Cold War, Medical Semiotics, and even Symmetry in Crystallography.

It is clear this program didn't follow the map of pre-established academic departments, but rather it mirrored the coexistence of a plurality of interests on the most diverse topics. Having not followed all the meetings I cannot say if there were common criteria for investigating both Semiotics of Death and Symmetry in Crystallography, and I don't know if Borges and Foucault would have hailed a new taxonomy which listed together Japanese Pragmatics, Other Sexuality and Silence (I wonder whether a Japanese vocal Lesbian has a pragmatics which is different from that of a Silent western Gay). I think that the purpose of the organizer was not to provide (and to impose) a unified theoretical framework but rather to witness a variety of subject matters and theoretical approaches - under the unprejudiced standards of the *politically correct*. I

also think that the choice of the topics was due to geographical accidents and I suspect that there was Japanese Pragmatics and not Arctic Semantics because the congress took place on the Pacific Coast and not in Greenland.

However all these scholars were certainly believing that there were *family resemblances* between so many disconnected interests and methods, as if they were applying for the edition of a new Diderot's *Encyclopedie*, in which, as it happened in the 17th century, were considered together the Gobelin tapestry and God, Egyptian hieroglyphs and windmills, aiming at designing not a system but rather an inventory of the world according to the *Zeitgeist*. Can still we speak, at this point, of a discipline or should we accept the idea that we are not interested in finding out a unified semiotic approach but in browsing through the Semiotic Web?

If you ask me for a personal answer I cannot but repeat what I have held in many circumstances. There are many disciplines - such as linguistics or iconography or musicology - that are concerned with different semiotic systems, of which they represent the rules of functioning. I propose to call these disciplines *grammars*. In this sense Italian linguistics is a grammar, as it is the grammar of American Sign Language, or of traffic lights. Hjelmslev would have called these grammars *semiotics*, in the plural. They would be able to exist - and sometimes have in fact developed - outside of the general semiotic picture. But naturally they are more interesting when they take this picture into account. When it is well-constructed, a specific semiotics attains a scientific status, or close to it - as far as this is possible for human sciences. These grammars are descriptive, frequently they also have prescriptive and to some extent they can be predictive, at least in a statistical sense, in so far as they can successfully predict how a user of a given sign system, under normal circumstances, will generate or interpret messages produced according to that system's rules.

As a theoretical approach to all to these specific semiotics there is a *general semiotics*. Whereas the specific semiotics find their objects as already given (ways of using sounds, gestures, lights and so on), general semiotics *posits* its own theoretical object as a philosophical category. In this sense, the concept of *sign* - or of *semiosis* - which should account for the various kinds of signs used by the specific semiotics - is a philosophical concept, a theoretical construct.

The philosophical nature of general semiotics explains the resistance which it encounters from time to time. For the layman it often seems incongruous that scholars who discuss the syntactical structure of Swahili are grouped under the same aegis as those who analyze the direction of the gaze in a Renaissance painting; not to mention still others who investigate the inferential mechanisms which guide a doctor when diagnosing pneumonia or systems of communication among lymphocytes.

We usually feel fairly self-confident about telling people that it is only because of their insufficiencies that they cannot see the relationship between the word *smoke* and a puff of smoke, between the German language and traffic signals, between the production of a linguistic act and the waving of a flag. Moreover, we no longer think that semiotics should be concerned exclusively with sign systems, because we know that it is possible to study also the cases in which communication takes place without, beyond, before and against any system. We know that semiotics can study rules as well as processes - including those processes which don't follow the rules. Nevertheless, if a general semiotics has some right to exist, it has it inasmuch as it is able to unify, to subsume under a single set of categories of all the particular cases in which human beings (and even animals) use sounds, gestures, and natural or artificial objects in order to refer to other phenomena (objects, classes of objects or states of affairs) that are not perceivable during certain interactions, and which often do not exist, or exist only in a non-physical form.

Certainly it is easier to recognize the empirical existence of texts written in German (studied by literary history or the history of the German language) or of species of animals, than recognize semiotic processes. It is for this reason that semiotics works harder to gain recognition than does literary history or zoology; but it took just as much effort to construct a general concept of the atom - and this concept attained the status of a philosophical principle long before any empirical verification was possible.

In this sense a general semiotics is a branch of philosophy, or better still, it is the way in which philosophy reflects on the problem of semiosis.

Being a philosophical enterprise a general semiotics is however different from the traditional philosophies of language because it tends to make its categories so general as to include and define not only natural or formalized languages, but also every form of expression (even those which seems alien to any grammatical organization), as

well as the processes for generating grammars that do not yet exist - the operations by means of which one can break the rules of a given grammar (as it happens in poetry) - and also those phenomena that do not seem to be produced with the aim of expressing something, but which can be nevertheless seen at the starting point of an interpretive inference. Moreover a general semiotics tends to draw its generalizations from its experience with grammars, to the point that philosophical reflection becomes heavily enmeshed in grammatical description. In this sense semiotics was more voracious than the traditional philosophy of language (be it analytical or hermeneutic), which usually take grammars for granted and speaks about meaning taking lexicography for granted.

The Semiotic Landscape (please remember that this was the title of the proceedings of the First Congress) is however more rich and complicated than that. Along with specific semiotics and general semiotics there is also what I called *applied semiotics*, that is, many inquiries in which scholars are analyzing several cultural phenomena outside the framework of a rigorous semiotic theory and nevertheless are applying certain semiotic tools in order to explain the semiotic aspect of their own object of research - as it can happen to a historian considering the perlocutory force of a given political discourse. I think that even these research belong to the semiotic landscape.

In undertaking its enterprise, semiotics ran certain risks. Twenty years ago, under the entry "Semiotics" which appeared in the 1970's edition of the Garzanti *Enciclopedia Europea*, Raffaele Simone - after correctly reconstructing the history and problems of the discipline - went on to cite the enlargement of the semiotic field from Saussure up to the seventies, extending from literature and logic to animal communication and concluded: "in this excessive amplification of its horizon lie the reasons for [semiotics'] diffusion but also the germ of its eventual defeat: if all of culture is a sign, a single science that studies everything with the same concepts and the same methods is perhaps both too little and too much. It would be more useful to look to a variety of independent disciplines, each of which could cover an area of inquiry, even if this area was to be imbued with an awareness of the semiotic nature of the object of study."

I think Simone was right as far as grammars were conceived, but I would still stick to the idea of a general semiotics offering common instrument to all these

grammars. Unfortunately I told that a general semiotics is a philosophical approach and from more than two thousand years we know that there is not a unique philosophy but many philosophical theories only united by the common wish to conflict each other. Thus even in terms of general semiotics we can only think of the peaceful coexistence of many world views, each of them offering a unified approach to the plurality of grammars. Notwithstanding this, in such a continual confrontation each of us will find a lot not only of common topics but also of common terms and methods.

Thus, should we simply speak, as Simone suggested, of “a variety of independent disciplines” or should we recognize that “the awareness of the semiotic nature of their object” is enough to design a network of *family resemblances*, sufficient to speak of a unified disciplinary field?

I am more and more convinced that Semiotics is not the name of a single science, but rather that of a department or a school - just as there is no single science called Medicine but instead schools of medicine, in the academic sense of the expression. In a school of medicine we have surgery, biochemistry, dietetics, immunology, psychiatry and so on. In such a school more and more the experts of a given branch don't understand the purposes and the language of other specialists but, in spite of those discrepancies all of them can work together because they have a common object, the human body (or mind) and a common purpose, human body's health.

Can we think of semiotics as a field in which different approaches have, at the higher level of generality, a common object, Semiosis - which can be identified in the most different domains, from Japanese language to the pragmatics of silence? Thus the aim of a general semiotics remains, in spite of the philosophical differences, the one of circumscribing this common object, semiosis, and to provide criteria for identifying it every time it shows up.

One of my amusements is to visit every year the American bookstores to see how they change the classification of the semiotic stuff. In the Sixties the books on semiotics appeared in the shelves devoted to Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology, in the Seventies I found them under Structuralism, along with Marxism, Cinema and Feminism, later they traveled from Post-Structuralism to Post-Modern and Cultural Studies - and I am expecting the moment in which they will be shelved in the New Age department. In the course of my explorations I was delighted to

discover that, since at least fifteen years, the Harvard Bookstore set up a big and special room which includes Artificial Intelligence, Brain Sciences, Logic and Analytical Philosophy, Psychology of Perception, Linguistics and Semiotics, all together under the headings of Cognitive Sciences

No one in the United States has ever claimed that the cognitive sciences are a single science, and everyone is in agreement about maintaining them as a sort of interdisciplinary aggregate with a common nucleus. And it does not displease me that semiotics has come to be included in this confederation, independently of the question (still debated) whether semiotics is a cognitive science or cognitive sciences are a branch of semiotics. Semiosis has become a central concept for our contemporary scientific paradigm - as the opposition between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* in the 17th century - and it is certain that many disciplines can derive inspiration from semiotic concepts, without necessarily being *a* semiotics.

I have stressed the link between semiotics and cognitive sciences and someone can object that there are many semiotic researches which are not strictly connected with cognition, such as, let me say, analysis of literary texts or researches on the effect of mass media. I would like now to return to the title of my lecture in order to suggest that - as far as I can make a prudent projection about the most urgent duties for a semiotic research - its cognitive orientation should always be taken in serious consideration.

I shall propose only two examples. In so far as it was concerned with a civilization in which communication became a heavy industry, the semiotics of the Sixties started to stress not a sort of natural relationship between signs and things but rather to study the systems of cultural conventions which lead us to see reality as a cultural construct. To summarize my personal experience, let me remember that I was not the only one to criticize a naive distinction between symbols and icons, according to which symbols were fully conventional and icons worked by a sort of natural similarity with the things or situations they represented. Thus our theoretical effort consisted in showing all the elements of cultural convention on which the iconic effects were based. By the way, a proto-semotician as Wittgenstein reminded us that "one thinks that one is tracing the outline of the things's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it." (*Philosophical investigations* 114).

Thirty years later, in my last book, *Kant and the platypus* (and after having reflected for twenty years or so on the objection of my critics) I have returned to the idea that, even though a visual image can be interpreted on the grounds of several cultural conventions, there are at least some phenomena between sensation and perception which work independently of any convention and that an iconic sign also work by surrogate stimuli which produce a sort of perceptual *Ersatz*.

Simply, I want to say that it is not by convention that the most abstract icon of the sun in a diagram represents it by a circle and not by a square. It is still possible to adopt a conventional system of representation by which every item of the physical world is represented only by straight lines and squares, but if I trace a straight line to represent the ground and I put on the line a square representing a house, then the square representing the sun must be upon and not under the straight line. If I want to represent by these element a sunset, therefore putting the sun just on the straight-line, I must at least distinguish it from the house by painting it red and leaving the house white, perhaps coloring in green the space under the line. I mean that I must respect some natural perceptual experiences, either in terms of spatial orientation or in terms of chromatic differences.

A cognitive semiotics ought to consider again the role of nature in culture, at least as much as it advocated the role of culture in nature.

As a second example let me remember how much the semiotics of the mid century (I think for instance of the French structuralism) insisted in demonstrating that our experience of the world is mediated by texts and texts are not a mirror-like representation of the world but an interpretation of it, at its turn to be interpreted by their addressees. In this “textual turn” it was rediscovered Peirce’s notion of *unlimited semiosis*. I want to make clear that I consider such an endeavor extremely fruitful. It helped us to recognize how much our allegedly naive experience was determined by discursive strategies, and I don’t want to repudiate all the semiotic contributions to the study of ideology, of cultural identity and of world views. It was in such a perspective that we insisted so much on the duty of studying not the referential relationship between signs and things but rather (or, at least, first of all) the semantic relationships between signs and meaning, or between signs and their interpretants..

But we cannot deny that those approaches also produced the illusion that there was no more world at all, but only texts and that semiosis was a continual and infinite *deferral* from sign to sign, and from text to text. I am thinking not so much of Derrida as of a sort of savage version of the Derridian deconstructive approach, and I want to staunchly remember that there is a radical difference between the deconstructive drift and the Peircean notion of unlimited semiosis.

According to Derrida, a written text is a machine that produces an indefinite deferral. Being by nature of a "testamentary essence" a text enjoys, or suffers of, the absence of the subject of writing and of the designated thing or the referent (*Of Grammatology*, English tr., p.69). Any sign is "readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say at the moment he wrote it, i.e. abandoned it to its essential drift." ("Signature, Event, Context", *Glyph* 1, 1977, p. 182).

In the second chapter of his *Grammatology* Derrida looks for authorities able to legitimize his attempt to outline a semiosis of infinite play, of difference, and of the infinite whirl of interpretation. Among the authors he quotes after Saussure and Jakobson, there is also Peirce:

Peirce goes very far in the direction that I have called the de-construction of the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign. I have identified logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for such a signified. Now Peirce considers the indefiniteness of reference as the criterion that allows us to recognize that we are indeed dealing with a system of signs. What broaches the movement of signification is what makes its interruption impossible. The thing itself is a sign. (...) The so-called "thing itself" is always already a *representamen* shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. The *representamen* functions only by giving rise to an *interpretant* that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity. The self-identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move. (...) The *represented* is always already a *representamen*.... From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs." (pp. 49-50)

The limits of this reading of Peirce is that Derrida didn't take into account the fact that Peirce doesn't stop there.

It is true that Peirce speaks of a possible infinite interpretation. But for Peirce "the idea of meaning is such as to involve some reference to a purpose" (*CP*, 5.166). A

purpose is, without any shade of doubt, and at least in the Peircean framework, connected with something which lies outside semiosis. Maybe it has nothing to do with a transcendental subject but it has to do with referents. When Peirce provides its famous definition of lithium as a packet of instructions aimed at permitting not only the identification but also the *production* of a specimen of lithium, he remarks: "The peculiarity of this definition is that it tells you what the word *lithium* denotes by prescribing what you are to *do* in order to gain a perceptive acquaintance with the object of the word" (*CP*, 2.330).

Semiosis is unlimited and, through the series of interpretants, explains itself by itself, but there are at least two cases in which semiosis is confronted with something external to it. The first case is the one of indices. I have elsewhere challenged Peirce's idea that indices, in order to be understood as signs, must necessarily be connected to the object they designate or pretend to designate, but in the great majority of our acts of indication (both by genuine indices and by the so-called degenerate indices, as when one says *this* and points his fingers toward a given object), indices are in some way linked (or pretend to be linked) to an item of the extrasemiotic world.

The second case is due to the fact that every semiotic act is determined by a Dynamical Object which "is the Reality which by some means contrives to determine the sign to its Representamen" (*CP*, 4.536). We produce representamens because we are compelled by something external to the circle of semiosis.

It is true that for Peirce that Dynamical Object can never be attained in its actual individual identity but is known only through the Immediate Object, and it is the Immediate Object which becomes the starting point for further interpretations. If perception is - as it is for Peirce - semiosis, then even at the original moment of our perceptive acquaintance with the external world, the external world becomes understandable to us only under the form of an Immediate Object. For Peirce, when the sign is produced, the Dynamical Object is no more *there* (and before the sign were produced it was not an object at all). But the presence of the Representamen as well as the presence (in the Mind or elsewhere) of the Immediate Object, means that in some way the Dynamical Object, which is not there, *was* somewhere. Being no present, or not-being-there, the Object of an act of interpretation *has been*.

Moreover, that Dynamical Object that *was*, and which is absent in the ghost of the Immediate One, to be translated into the potentially infinite chain of its interpretants, *will be* or *ought to be*. "An endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it, may be conceived to have an absolute object as its limit." (CP, 1.339). Here it appears something that cannot find a place within the deconstructive framework: outside the immediate interpretant, the emotional, the energetic and the logical one - all internal to the course of semiosis - there is the final logical interpretant, that is, the Habit.

The Habit is a disposition to act upon the world and this possibility to act, as well as the recognition of this possibility as a Law, requests something which is very close to a transcendental instance: a community as an intersubjective guarantee of a non intuitive, non naively realistic, but rather conjectural notion of truth.

There is a real perfection of knowledge by which "reality is constituted" (CP, 5.356). If for the pragmatic maxim (CP, 5.462) the meaning of any proposition is nothing more than the conceivable practical effects which the assertion would imply if the proposition were true, then the process of interpretation must stop - at least for some time - out of language - at least in the sense in which not every practical effect is a semiotic one. It is true that even the practical effect must then to be spelled out by and through interpretants, and that the very agreement among the members of the community cannot but take the form of a new chain of signs: nevertheless the agreement concerns something - be it a practical effect or the possibility of a practical effect - that is produced outside semiosis.

There is something for Peirce that transcends the individual intention of the interpreter, and it is the transcendental idea of a community, or the idea of a community as a transcendental principle. This principle is not transcendental in the Kantian sense, because it does not come before but *after* the semiotic process; it is not the structure of human mind that produces the interpretation but the reality that the semiosis builds up. Anyway, from the moment in which the community is pulled to agree with a given interpretation, there is, if not an objective at least a *intersubjective* meaning, which acquires a privilege over any other possible interpretation spelled out without the agreement of the community. Peirce once said that there is a true conclusion of semiosis and it is Reality (CP, 5.384). "The real, then, is what, sooner or later, information and

reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you." (*CP*, 5.311).

Let me conclude by speculating about the destiny of reality in a virtual world. If not for the whole of the next millennium, at least now and for the following years, we will face the World Wide Web. Few evenings ago I had to check a certain quotation (I don't tell you which one, and you will see why). Thus I asked for something in Altavista. I found a site but - while exploring it - an appealing link sent me to the Council of Calcedonia and I discovered that the Net was offering me all the proceedings or *Acta* of all the councils of the first Christian centuries. By the way, they were all in English and I am afraid that many surfer will ignore forever that they were in Greek - and this is both a historical and physical fact that should not be underestimated. From Calcedonia I was sent, I don't remember by what a series of other fascinating links, to the first English translation of the Rosicrucian *Fama*, 1652. A link in the commentary sent me to innumerable sites on the realm of Prester John and from there I surfed until an impressive series of documents on the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. I frantically saved and printed a lot of curious documents but, more or less at two 'o clock in the morning, I felt stoned and I switched my computer off. At that moment I realized that I had forgot my original purpose in starting the research. In a continual deferral from text to text I had lost the opportunity to produce the habit which would have allowed me to pick up what I originally wanted.

This is a nice parable, I think, which tells us two important things. First of all, that in the semiotic virtuality of the Web (a very deconstructive creature, indeed) we risk to loose every idea of purpose and of action. Secondly, that one of the duties of semiotics, in the next millennium, will probably be to teach people not only how to use signs to surf in the infinite Ocean of semiosis, but also how to return, not forever, but always at every stage of our semiotic interrogation, to Dynamical Objects.

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