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From Analysis to Theory: Afterthoughts on the Semiotics of Culture
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Federico Montanari[1]

Actants, Actors, and Combat Units.
The problem of conflict revisited: a semio-cultural viewpoint.

Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss the question of conflict and war from a semio-cultural point of view. Starting from a tentative definition of war and conflict as the"borders" of a culture (even if in a paradoxical way), I shall discuss the specific links between war, conflict and narrative models. Secondly, the paper discusses diverse positions on the "polemogenic" mechanisms operating within cultures, along with their conflictual processes, such as the escalades. Starting from the work of Lotman, and intertwining his thought with concepts deriving from social systems theories, I shall discuss some hypothesis about "symmetry" and "asymmetry" inside cultures, and related questions concerning the growing of conflictual identities as perceived by the involved actors. This last point is tackled through case-studies from recent wars (such as civil and ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia) and the examination of their discursive devices.

Keywords

Socio-semiotics; conflict; war studies; narration; cultural systems

This paper would like to reopen the discussion regarding conflict from a semiotic perspective. In the first place, we will attempt to clarify which instruments, categories, and concepts of cultural semiotics could be useful in an analysis of socio-cultural phenomena related to conflict. How, and in what way, has semiotics looked at conflict in connection with the wider field of social sciences and cultural studies? Has this discussion been useful, adequate and satisfying for scholars interested in both the disciplines of cultural and socio-semiotics, and in the "nature" of cultural phenomena related to conflict? Secondly, beginning with the concept of conflict, we will consider the *problematic status* of cultural semiotics, a key theme in this special issue of *Versus* on semiotics of culture. Thirdly, we would like to "test" the efficacy of these semiotic categories and tools by looking at some examples of conflict as a cultural phenomenon.

We are interested in an apparently "unique" (nevertheless, universally recognized as dramatic) kind of conflict: war. Nowadays war is a very unpredictable matter, as pointed out by many researchers of conflict studies, a difficult to define object, and as such, rather unclear. For this reason, at first glance, war may seem like the "wrong object" for this type of examination. Nonetheless, war (and wars) represents the extreme example of what conflict and conflicts are (we must remember the multiple and

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"plural" state of this object we are dealing with). All in all, war must be considered as a place, however terrible, of cultural and social experimentation. From antiquity to our controversial modern times, through different cultures and narratives, war enacts the "border" of what constitutes culture, society and sociability. War touches cultural metaphors and categories such as "nature", "horror", "death", "savage", "primitive" and "brutality" (although in a paradoxical, and sometimes commonplace, way, because of the fact that war is also "pure drama"[2]), as well as breaking ties and rebuilding social values. War is the situation through which this cultural frontier is reached, while reaching this frontier can at times provoke new kinds of cultural and societal re-configurations.

In this manner, we could reverse the issue by anticipating our hypothesis: war, being the "limit"[3], the horizon or border of social and cultural dimension (and consequently of conflict) is virtually "everywhere". This particular and paradoxical character of war can be concretely observed in recent years, within phenomena related to new forms of war.[4] War could be considered to be the general semiotic dimension in which conflicts live and evolve.

1. "Outside" cultural boundaries and internal processes of "asymmetrization": looking for polemogenic processes

"The fundamental question", as Lotman writes (1992, en. tr.: 1), "relating to the description of any semiotic system are, firstly, its relation to the extra-system, to the world which lies beyond its borders, and, secondly, its static and dynamic relations. The latter question may be formulated thus: How can a system develop and yet remain true to itself?" Lotman believes every cultural system is a macro-semiotic system. According to

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[2] "The soldier is absorbing because all the circumstances surrounding him have a kind of charged intensity. For all its horror, war is pure drama, probably because it is one of the few remaining situations where men stand up for and speak up for what they believe to be their principles." (Stanley Kubrick's interview, 1958, to Joanne Stang, *The New York Times Magazine*).

[3] Here we use the concept of "limit" in a similar way to the mathematical one (or in a metaphorical way): limit is the value that a function "approaches", an extreme trend of a given phenomenon.

[4] For an analysis and an overview concerning definition of new forms of war – even in their different shapes, from new "ethnic-civil wars", to "humanitarian wars" to "expeditions for democracy" and wars "against terrorism" – cf., Joxe (2002); Kaldor (2007). Regarding changing definitions of war from a cultural-semiotic point of view, see Fabbri, Montanari (2004; 2008) and Montanari (2004; 2006). This idea of generalization of war is not far from, and perhaps inspired by, the Foucaultian concept "reversing Clausewitz's maxim": from "war is nothing but a continuation of politics by other means" to "politics is the continuation of war by other means". For a discussion on Foucault's idea see Montanari (2004: 302-305); Dal Lago, Palidda, (eds., 2010: 24, 70), concerning also the idea of war and its capacity of "reshaping" society.

Lotman's definition of a cultural system, systemic borders and their functions in connecting system and non-system, represent the basic mechanism of every culture. Lotman continues, affirming the importance of the relationship between system and external reality: "Their mutual inter-penetrability has, since Kant, been examined many times. From the semiotic point of view they represent the antinomy between language and the world beyond the borders of language. That space, lying outside of language, enters the sphere of language and is transformed into "content" only as a constituent element of the dichotomy content/expression. To speak of unexpressed content is non-sensical" (ib.).

This position is very similar to what has been expressed by west European structural semiotics: from Hjelmslev to, above all, Greimas' theory and its rereading of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology (see Greimas 1970; Fontanille 1999). It is well known that one of the central points of this concept is the idea of "natural world". The latter can be understood as a macro-semiotic system, that is, a semiotic system that could "provide", from its expressive level, new elements for the content aspect of other macro-semiotics, such as the semiotics of natural languages. However, in this perspective, the production of significance is supposed to be "an act that unites these two macro-semiotics" (Fontanille 1999, en. tr.: 13) through the mediation of the "body proper", which is, a sort of "interface" (with its perceptual activity) between these two macro-semiotics.

In any case, the interesting point of convergence of these research perspectives is the concept of a continuous and "osmotic" activity of interchange between external and internal environments, or between different semiotic systems.

However, what happens then? Which types of processes are involved? Perhaps Lotman's view is still partly connected to an "old style", a traditional concept of the general systems theory. This was typical of the first cybernetic "wave" (in the 1950s and early 1960s). Recent theories suggest systems, particularly complex, cognitive, cultural and social systems, are "self producing", or "autopoietic" machines.[5] In any case, Lotman's theory is insightful and anticipatory of this conception of cultural systems. Thinking about cultural systems in a dynamic way,[6] considering

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[5] For a wide and updated evaluation of this view coming from the "second wave" of general systems theory and cybernetics, see Clarke, Hansen (2009), including a discussion of the concept of "autopoietic systems" from Varela and Maturana. See Luhmann (1984), concerning use and development of these ideas in the field of social systems theory. For Luhmann, the main activity of autopoietic social systems is regarding the structuring of temporality and, particularly, concerns the building up of continuous expectations that determine different observers activities. "Autopoiesis is the source of complexity that the system cannot determine" (Luhmann 1984: 219). And, quoting Maturana, "An Autopoietic system is a system with a changing structure that follows a course of change that is continually being selected through its interaction [...]" (ib.: 220).

[6] Lotman (1984) states, regarding the transformation of irreversible processes inside systems: "Prigogine and Stengers in observing irreversible processes have identified various

the categorical couple of content/expression as the "kernel" of systemic processes, appears to be full of possible applications and links between recent system theories and cultural semiotics.

What about conflict? According to Lotman, conflict is not just the tension between the two main mechanisms operating inside cultural systems. These are represented by moments of "explosion" and moments of "continuity", but may also be a "simultaneous presence" (see Lotman 1992, en. tr.: 12) at different cultural stages and layers.

What we discover in many examples concerning "conflict-in-cultures" (and, according to Lotman, chiefly regarding extreme conflicts), are unexpected violations of rules, and unpredictable actions. Lotman uses many examples taken from the world of folklore, myths, and fairy tales in many varied cultural traditions, which present a highly prototypical situation in relation to conflict: "The victory of the weak (ideally – the child) over the strong." Or "the 'dwarf-like' stature of Ulysses and his warriors [...]" (ib.: 39). Lotman indicates, if we look at cultural traditions we find something which is quite familiar: "The use of folly as an effective type of combat behavior is well-known to a wide circle of peoples and is based on the general psychological rule of creating a situation in which the enemy loses its orientation"(ib.). A general evaluation of such cultural examples provides us a first possible definition of conflict processes.

Dumezil cites the interesting example (from Scandinavian folklore) of the "foolish hero in combat". He indicates this case as one of transformation of the "second function" (Warrior), in relation to his main hypothesis about the structuration of Indo-European mythology, in which a warrior could transform himself into either a sacred animal (like the *berserkir*, "bear skins" in ancient Norse religions), a semi-human, or a fool. The transformation was endowed with a special character, passion and force, the "*furor*" in Latin tradition, thereby escaping from cultural and social rules (cf. Dumezil 1973). [7]

different forms of dynamism. Distinguishing between balanced and unbalanced structures, they point out that dynamic processes behave differently in different areas: 'The laws of equilibrium are universal, Matter near equilibrium behaves in a 'repetitive way'. Dynamic processes occurring in conditions of equilibrium follow predetermined curves. But the further they move from the entropic points of equilibrium the closer the movement comes to those critical points at which the predictable course of the processes breaks off' (Prigogine and Stengers call them bifurcation points). At these points the process reaches a point when clear predictability of the future is no longer possible. The next stage comes by the realization of one of several equally probable alternatives" (Lotman 1984; en. tr.: 231). For an interesting outlook on this issue, the relationship between theory of dynamical systems and Lotman's research, and the limits of classical structuralism in relation to the models of complex and dynamical systems, see Lampis (2011).

[7] For a very important and influential interpretation of the link between animal metamorphosis, figures such as mythical warriors, and the hypothesis of a deep and ancient cultural layer concerning beliefs about "night battles" against witches (interpreted also as traces of resistance by subaltern, minorities and marginal cultures and in relationship with the marking and the persecution of "Others", such as Jews, heretics, lepers, operated by

We find a first, important characteristic of conflict situations: a perceived, emerging, new *asymmetry*; the breaking up, not just of social order but of symmetric structures which generally rule a culture in situations of normalcy. Lotman and Dumezil seem to stress this same point. Conflict could represent not only the breaking up of social, cultural and semiotic order, but also its "asymmetrization".[8]

Precisely what does this mean from a semiotic point of view? We will return to this question later. Here we would like to reiterate that "asymmetry" is one of the key concepts in the Lotmanian position.[9] As we have seen in the above mentioned folkloric examples, conflicts spreading from these asymmetries concern either macro or micro dimensions of cultural systems dealing with the concept of what systemic boundaries are. Again, quoting Lotman:

The notion of boundary separating the internal space of the semiosphere from the external is just a rough primary distinction. In fact, the entire space of the semiosphere is transected by boundaries of different levels, boundaries of different languages and even of texts, and the internal space of each of these sub-semiospheres has its own semiotic 'I' which is realized as the relationship of any language, group of texts, separate text to a metastructural space which describes them, always bearing in mind that languages and texts are hierarchically disposed on different levels. These sectional boundaries which run through the semiosphere create a multi-level system [...] (1984, en. tr.: 138).

Here Lotman stresses the importance of the concept of "personality". The "I" of each level may be seen at the same time, in terms of both semiotic analysis of the enunciation processes and of system theory, as an "observer" and, in the Greimasian narratological model, a narrative "actantial role". That is, a "role player", endowed with various competences: charged, on the discursive level, by figurativizations and thematic contents.

Lotman writes: "The notion of 'personality' is only identified with a

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religious and political powers) – see Ginzburg (1989). Here, again, the issue is about "asymmetry" and conflict.

[8] Dal Lago (in Dal Lago, Palidda 2010: 30) also uses the term "asymmetry" in an anthropological sense, but perhaps in a different way: regarding the "form of Western fight". Here we are thinking about deeper processes inside cultures as the basic mechanism of conflictual relationships.

[9] Concerning asymmetry, dynamical systems and creative processes, Lotman writes (1984, en. tr.: 101): "In the examples we have discussed we have seen how the symbol serves as a condensed programme for the creative process. The subsequent development of a plot is merely the unfolding of a symbol's hidden possibilities. A symbol is a profound coding mechanism, a special kind of 'textual gene'. But the fact that one and the same primary symbol can be developed into different plots, and the actual process of this development is irreversible and unpredictable, proves that the creative process is asymmetrical. Using Prigogine's terminology we can define the moment of creative inspiration as a situation of extreme far-from equilibrium which precludes any simple predictable development".

physical individual in certain cultural and semiotic conditions. Otherwise it may be a group, it may or may not include property, it may be associated with a certain social, religious or moral positions." Therefore Lotman states that "the boundary of the personality is a semiotic boundary. For instance, a wife, children, slaves, vassals may in some systems be included in the personality of the master, patriarch, husband, patron, suzerain, and not possess any individual status of their own; whereas in other systems they are treated as separated individuals." (ib.: 138) And here, according to Lotman, conflict arises: "Disturbances and rebellion arise when two methods of encoding are in conflict: for instance when the socio-semiotic structure describes an individual as a *part*, but that person feels him or herself to be an autonomous unit, a semiotic subject not an object."

Hence, cultural frontiers, infra-semiotic boundaries and personality structures at different system layers, are strictly connected to conflicts and, by this way, to the building up of cultural "external frontiers" (ib.). Macro and micro dimensions are not just "quantitative" parts of cultural systems, but they represent trajectories and processes that link together and transforming those systems. They depend on the ability conflictual processes possess to diffuse and reach the external system boundaries.

Geopolitics touches on the social semiotics of cultural forces. For instance, Lotman states: "On the frontiers of China, of the Roman Empire, of Byzantium, we see the same thing: the technical achievements of the settled civilization pass into the hands of the nomads who turn them against their inventors. But these conflicts inevitably lead to cultural equalization and to the creation of a new semiosphere of more elevated order in which both parties can be included as equals." (ib.: 142). Deleuze and Guattari (1980), with their theory of nomadism, perhaps would have disagreed with this idea of "technical achievements" passing from "settled civilization" to "nomads". To the contrary, their hypothesis (supported by a certain number of historical and anthropological sources) maintains that nomads bestowed many innovations upon the sedentary populations. Many technical innovations joined together, can build up (according to Deleuze and Guattari's theory) "war machines" capable of attacking, invading, or even of being incorporated into settled civilizations.

In any case, besides this specific point, the basic mechanism of Lotman's concept seems to work. Deleuze and Guattari's notions could be helpful in extending, generalizing and radicalizing the Lotman's view. War may spread either from the transformation and "encoding" of internal boundaries, or from the inclusion and encapsulation of external events. But, even in that case, there must be a "minimum sharing" of events. Cultural worlds are never bordered by others which are in total opposition to them, there is always a minimum of trade, a minimum of interchange between them: "[...] rusant avec nos conflit pour que notre ir-remplaçable ennemi soit aussi notre irremplaçable complice" (Le Moigne 1997: 6).

2. Cultural semiotic systems and conflicts: some definitions

Let us now attempt to find some supporting points for our position concerning the definition of conflict and war, in a broader research area such as the social sciences, although still relating to semiotics. For a sociologist interested in semiotics such as Luhmann (who we have already mentioned because of his work on social and cultural general systems theory) conflict is not just "a problem" to be solved, or a "pathology" of cultures or societies. Moreover, in opposition to the older social studies position, he indicates conflict cannot be seen solely as "self-evident". Yet we cannot define conflict by simply "attesting to an opposition" of values, points of view or different perspectives. As stated by Luhmann (whose theoretical position is similar to semiotics) "we will therefore speak of conflict when a communication is contradicted, or when a contradiction is communicated. A conflict is the operative autonomization of a contradiction through communication. Thus a conflict exists when expectations are communicated and the non acceptance of the communication is communicated in return" (Luhmann 1984, en. tr.: 388). Conflicts are social systems whose participants are closely linked with, and defined by, each other.[10]

Luhmann draws our attention to an important fact, "the expectation does not need to refer to the behavior of the person who does the rejecting; it can also concern third parties or describe a state of affairs in which the person to whom it is told does not believe – *insofar as he says it*" (ib.) And further, "the concept of conflict is thereby related to a precise and empirically comprehensible communicative occurrence: to a communicated "no" which answers the previous communication". Luhmann points out another issue, that is the capacity of conflicts in social (and cultural) systems, "to take over autopoiesis". That is to say, conflicts take over the self-producing and self-maintaining capacity of these systems: maintaining (even if in an apparently paradoxical way) the continuity of communicative exchanges. Moreover, Luhmann states that it is not possible to reduce conflict to a "failure of communication": "conflicts serve to continue communication by using one of the possibilities that communication holds open, by saying no" (ib.).

Here are two points that are of paramount importance to the semio-cultural definition of conflict. The first is regarding contradiction; contra-

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[10] As Luhmann states: "Conflicts are social systems that work precisely with the model of double contingency – the main model of producing order in social systems, according to Luhmann, in which two actors refer each other in situations where "everything is neither mandatory nor impossible" – and they are "highly integrated social systems because there is a tendency to bring all action into the context of an opposition within the perspective of opposition" (Luhmann 1984, en. tr.: 388.). For a discussion of the concept of "the theorem of double contingency" (from Parsons traditional consensual concept , to Goffman's conflictual and negotiable, face-to-face concept), according to which in a "ego/alter" social interaction, "both know that both know that one could also act differently" in a circular way, see Vanderstraeten (2002).

dictions deal with value systems and semantic paradigms within a culture. The second concerns "expectations"; they are strictly connected to what, in semiotic analysis, is a matter of the observers' points of view within enunciation: the building up of glances and their superposing inside discursive chaining and enunciative process. These observers may either be active actors, participants in conflictual action (engaged, "*embrayés*") or "third parties" (disengaged, "*débrayés*").

But, first, it is important to underline a general principle: the reciprocity of the link between participants and a conflictual interaction. "This interpretive model engages expectations in reference to an alter ego; ego assumes that alter (as alter ego) already employs the conflict model (with whatever care, concealment, or limitation) and draws for himself consequences from this. Alter observes this and draws the opposite consequences. Therefore a conflict may arise with hardly any objective." (Luhmann, 1984, en. tr.: 389). Conflict may arise either without an explicit or declared objective or with an intended objective which could not be the "real" one.

We must emphasize this fact, because it is here we find another important convergence between semiotics and sociological theory: Goffman's concept of strategic interaction (1969). The ideas expressed by Goffman concerning contingent effects of "coordination games" (even if they occur in a "socially tacit" or a non-cognizant dimension) between participants, related to semiotic research, are akin to Luhmann's vision of self-emerging meanings in the practices of social systems.

Thus, according to Goffman, conflict strategy concerns not only to "planning actions" but also relates to the conflict's capacity to produce coordinating effects and the emergence of a "new" general "social order" (at the same time, even this "new order" could become chaotic, cruel and bloody). Generally, conflict does not only produce new links and new relationships (between enemies, allies, and more or less neutral bystanders). Conflict also contributes to creating new systemic conditions of situated "observations", shared by participants, with the possibility that the whole system could be invaded and "contaminated" by those changes produced by conflict.

Luhmann here states:

Once one enters into a conflict, there are almost no constraints on the system's undertow toward integration – except those of the environment, civilized behavior, or law [...] Opposition [...] draws together actions, however heterogeneous their content may be [...] and includes them in the system: *everyone* can actualize *all* possibilities that disadvantage others, and the more this happens the more plausible it becomes. The system attains too great an interdependence: one word leads to another; every activity must and can be answered by another one. The destructive power of conflict does not lie in itself, still less in the damage to reputation, potential for action, affluence or life that it inflicts on participants; it lies in a relationship with the system in which the conflict found an occasion and an outlet a neighbor, in a marriage or family, in a political party, at work, in international relations and so forth. To this extent the metaphor of the parasitical existence of

conflict is accurate; but the parasitism is typically not designed for symbiosis but tends to draw the host system into conflict to the extent that all attention and all resources are claimed for the conflict (ib., en. tr.: 390).

Another important concept is linked to this idea, according to which conflicts can "take over" cultural processes: conflicts are "parasitical" both in attitude and in existence. Luhmann states that, due to their tendency to proliferate and their auto-emerging capacity, conflicts tend to spread and invade parts of socio-cultural systems unable to reject or to block conflicts for various reasons. This is especially the case when there are no "protections" such as international laws, rights and rules, or social environments, i.e. ongoing cultural and economic crisis etc. Therefore, conflict is neither "positive" nor "negative" *per se.*

3. Conflict, narratives and discursive devices

In summary, conflict may be seen primarily as a form of relationship or interaction between subjects (whether individual actors, collective or groups) characterized by a divergence or incompatibility of purpose (from perspective and perception of the actors involved). However, when dealing with a specific case, one may speak of an "interference" (an interactive connection) between two adverse programs of action (goal incompatibility) desired by the various players in the field.

We can draw this general hypothesis from social science's consideration of conflict (see Bartos, Wehr 2002). Beginning with George Simmel[11] we can consider conflict as a social process that is not created by "instinctual appetites" or "natural passions". This thought continues with Goffman, according to whom social situations and interactions are based on strategic "coordination" between participants in a mixture of both conflicts and partnerships. It finds its conclusion in Luhmann and his systemic idea of conflict .

Semiotics has taken the idea of the *planning of action* in connection with conflict into account chiefly through its narrative model describing the building up of cultural processes of meaning. It is important to remember what Greimas and Courtés write in their definition of "Narrative Schema" (1979, en. tr.: 169):

With this rereading of the Proppian schema, the decisive step was taken in recognizing the polemical structure underlying it. The folktale is not only the story of the hero/ine and his/her quest, it is in a more or less hidden way the story of the

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[11] According to Bartos and Wehr (2002: 13), a tentative definition of conflict is: "as a situation in which actors use conflict behavior against each other to attain incompatible goals and/or to express their hostility". It is clear that this definition refers to a very long philosophical and sociological tradition, and "other resources will be the works of Marx, Dahrendorf, Durkheim and Weber" (ib.: 11).

villain as well. Two narrative trajectories, of the subject and of the anti-subject, unfold in two opposite directions, characterized however by the fact that both subjects seek one and the same object of value. Thus an elementary narrative schema becomes apparent, grounded upon a polemical structure. On closer inspection this conflictual structure is, in the last analysis, one of the opposing poles – the other being the contractual structure – of the confrontation, which characterizes all human communication. Even the most peaceful exchange implies the confrontation of two contrary wantings and the conflict is inscribed within the framework of a network of tacit conventions. Narrative discourse appears then to be a locus of the figurative representations of the different forms of human communication, produced from tension, and of returns to equilibrium.

It is worthwhile to once more emphasize this "classical point " of narrative semiotics. What is particularly important is, first of all, the idea of "narrative trajectories". These can go in opposite directions, for subjects interested in the same object[12], either in "pacific exchange" or in confrontation. And, secondly, the figurative dimension situated at the discursive level, according to Greimas' general schema and hypothesis of "generative pathway". This is a more specific level, compared to the general and "quasi-universalistic" narrative layer.

Starting from this narrative hypothesis, conflict, in the form of "polemical" conflictual schemas, could describe a deeper layer in relation to both narrative schemas and cultural relationships. At the very least it could represent a general schema capable of deciphering cultural and narrative phenomena regarding interchanges and communication between social and cultural actors. Similarly, following research concerning broader cognitive topological schemas beginning with the Greimasian narrative analysis, Thom and Petitot have insisted on this very general character of conflictual relationship. Petitot states:

Le conflit, c'est-à-dire la compétition dynamique, est un universel et un principe morphogène. Il est tout à fait courant dans les systèmes macroscopiques complexes, et représente même une propriété essentielle de ces systèmes. [...] C'est un élément essentiel des sciences naturelles élargies que sont la théorie des systèmes complexes et les sciences (Petitot 1999: 53).

Beyond this idea of the "universality" of conflict (and beyond its "natural-

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[12] For a discussion about Greimasian narrative schema and the development and legacy of Proppian analysis, see Pisanty, Galofaro, Proni (2010). Yet, in this discussion the issue regarding morphogenesis of narrative forms and their ancient origin is stressed more, according to the Proppian view, as coming from old cultural rituals (see also note 5), and less from the problem of conflict, even if Proni reminds us that standard narrative mechanism concern the opposition between subject/anti-subject and helper/opponent. What about the role of conflict in traditional fairy tales? If, in every traditional narration, the "breaking up" of social order (or its re-establishing) is important (also in connection to supposed "old rituals"), they may also regard the origins of conflict.

istic" implications, of interest to the social sciences, which would require a more in-depth discussion) we must stress the possibility that conflict can be seen as a sense-making and structure-producing process in cultural and social systems. It is therefore helpful to use the semiotic cultural systems analysis.[13] But which are the "micro-components" of these conflictual processes? And what types of links may we find with the macro-configurations of a conflict?

In this manner Fabbri and Landowski, and later Fontanille, continue to develop Greimas' concept, generalizing these narrative conflictual schemas. Hence, conflict could be a basic moment of discursive syntactical organization within a chain of other possible moments, including micro and macro discursive events, in relation to either cognitive or pragmatic-rhetorical activity. According to Fontanille (1999, en. tr.: 91) "we may distinguish the two" classical "types of connections, according to whether the connection functions by hierarchy (such as synecdoche) or by system (such as metonymy or chiasmus)". A "[...] metaphor is a figure of *conflict* between semantic domains, which is resolved by analogy. Metonymy is a figure of *displacement*, which is resolved by a systemic connection between actantial roles. Chiasmus is a figure of (weakened) semantic *conflict*, which is resolved by a *systemic connection* [...]" (ib.) Here Fontanille shows us a general model of discourse functioning, summarized in this schema (ib.: 92), based on rhetorical tradition:

	Intensive Mode	Extensive Mode
Confrontation Phase	**Conflict**	**Displacement**
	Semantic conflicts, contradictions, etc.	Displacements or exchanges of roles, Syntactic alterations, etc.
Control Phase	**Assumption**	**Configuration**
	Intensity, Modulations of presence and belief	Repetition, Distribution, Composition
Resolution Phase	**Similitude**	**Connection**
	Equivalence and Analogy	System and Hierarchy

(Figure 1, Source: Fontanille 1999, en. tr.: 92).

[13] Following, on this way, Monroy and Fournier (1997: 10): "Notre approche nous interdit d'accepter l'idée d'un primum movens universel des conflits, qu'il s'agisse d'agressivité, de facteurs affectifs, économiques, culturels, politiques ou autres. Ce refus a priori nous a permis d'apercevoir des redondances et des analogies dans les situations apparemment peu comparables. Le conflit est sans doute la plus banale des activités humaines et peut être la plus complexe. Chacun le connaît pour en avoir été l'acteur et la victime."

Chilton (2004) approaches the subject from another, more direct angle, attempting to analyze political discourse forms by using comparable categories, particularly regarding verbal (as opposed to non verbal) texts and speeches from either domestic or international political arenas. He considers political discursive devices (from President Clinton's speech regarding "America's going at war", in occasion of the Kosovo conflict in 1999 to Bin Laden and Bush's declarations in the aftermath of September 11) as being basically made of a game of rhetorical argumentative figures and modal structures (such as "My fellow Americans, today our armed forces...", "in air strikes against Serbian forces responsible for the brutality in Kosovo"), expressing also "presumed knowledge" through "warfare scripts", "geographical" and "moral frames" and containing "antithetical values" (Chilton 2004: 138-39).[14] But this does not suffice. This first discursive level activates and influences a second level made of spatiality and topological categories, starting from deixis and space/time categories (such as "from our country" going "there", as in president Clinton's speech, "Kosovo is a small place, but it sits in a major fault line between Asia, Europe and the Middle East..."; or "Sarajevo, the capital of neighboring Bosnia, is where World War 1 began"; and again "new ethnic wars" have "taken place" "there" but "we learned some of the same lessons in Bosnia just a few years ago", etc.). Once again, we find by examining this analysis of political discourse (political discourse is, obviously, the typical "environment" of conflictual processes), that they possess a capacity of re-organizing narratives and displacing either values or discursive forces, through levels and locating events on "spatial, temporal and modal axes" (Chilton 2004: 144). Political discourse "at war" concerns the capacity of not only "representing" war and conflict through discursive means, but also connecting those representations in a form of "incitement", literally "disposing" participants and manipulating actors towards conflict.

Yet, what is most important at this point is the emergence of a new "topological arena", in which actors interact with the main figurative elements. This is not just a matter of "realistic representation" or "realistic effect" regarding "what happens there", but concerns a theatrical "mise en scène" in which we can spatially perceive our relationships within "the situation" and the "issues" involved. It is an imaginative reasoning concerning our link, proximity, or distance, with reasons, values, narrations; in other words, with conflict. This mechanism is relevant for both political discourse engaged in conflict, and for the media that usually provides a more or less coherent account of what is happening. But it is also important for the organization of conflict as a cultural action and process.

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[14] For a semiotic analysis of Kosovo's war, but from the point the view of media analysis and italian journalistic discourse and communication, see also Montanari 2003, and Pozzato (eds., 2000).

What is crucial here is the capacity of narrative schemas to manage spatial and temporal information regarding location, thereby manipulating and "facilitating cognitive mapping of the story world and, in particular, enabling the reader to chart the spatial trajectories along which the narrated events unfold." (Herman 2002: 279).

Here Herman analyzes a specific example taken from the footage of the Kosovo war, in which there is a description of a NATO plane striking a convoy of refugees (the "infamous" collateral damage, a dismal category conceived during this war): starting with the announcement "Airstrikes across Yugoslavia Friday" and "A refugee who arrived in Kukes, Albania, said a plane passed over his convoy, dropped a bomb, then returned and dropped another. He said he and his son hid beneath their tractor. His wife was killed." (ib.) As Herman states, "This report exhibits enough narrative structure to cue readers to form a mental representation of a series of events occurring in parallel but rooted in a single conflict between opposing groups of participants. Further, given the military conflict ramifies unexpectedly and beyond anyone's control, with terrible human consequences, the report displays the sort of tellability often taken as criterion for narrative [...]. Landmarks, regions and paths all play an important role in the report, facilitating cognitive mapping of the story-world and, in particular, enabling the reader to chart the spatial trajectories which the narrated events unfold." (ib.). Here we find the idea that narrative is capable of providing a possible coherence and "tellability" even regarding the unpredictability ("ramification") of war,[15] as well as proposing a form of figurativization of the same narrated events. This happens both from a topological point of view, and from "projective locations" (ib: 280), it provides perspectives and points of view on these mappings.

Even if this link between narration and spatialization (anticipated by the Greimasian analysis as stressed by Herman), is an important turning point in semiotic, linguistic and cognitive studies, we also believe there is an important and specific issue in the connection between image, the figurativization processes and war. Again, it is not "just" a problem of representation: it is a problem of cultural-semiotic world construction concerning war and conflict; in the capacity of building up *discursive ontologies*, or better yet, in the case of war, "world destruction".

4. Semiotic intensification and conflict escalades: a model and some examples

We can propose another generalization, starting from these rhetorical tropes, thematic frames, and topological schemas and maps. If we go

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[15] This particular character of war, and particularly of Kosovo war and its narration on Media, has been observed also by Pozzato, Montanari, in Pozzato (ed. 2000).

back to the three discursive phases, proposed by Fontanille (see fig. 1), we can see they are quite similar to the three moments of "basic narrative schema" (Greimas, Courtés 1979) conceived as a general schema of action. Therefore, it is possible to view conflicts as semiotically "stratified" phenomena constituted by "discursive configurations" which connect the different strata of semiotic phenomena, either as narrative or discursive. At the same time, those three general phases appear as typical moments of many conflict configurations. Therefore we can consider conflict as not just a "single" moment but, within the entire macro war-conflict process, as able to produce and cause the following phases: a sort of semiotic cascade effect.

Here we reach yet another critical point. We could take Fontanille's schema and generalize it to analyze "situated" conflicts (with examples from social, cultural and violent conflicts). Even if this schema contains the important "intensive" dimensions regarding phenomena such as gradual and continuous transformation of values and, chiefly, their "marking up" (cf. Fontanille 1999), it lacks description of what happens during the shift from one conflictual phase and another.

We are referring to the typical, and extremely important, question concerning every conflict: the problem of escalation. From the Cold War, to Vietnam (situations in which this phenomenon has been either concretely experimented or theoretically codified and studied) escalation is not just *a* problem regarding the passage from one "phase" to another, but it deals with global transformation. Throughout those phases of conflictual process escalation is *the* problem of the conflict. However, it can also be a process laden with different values and points of view, at times becoming a "conflictual issue", or a risk in itself. For instance, during the Cold War "the key objective was not to fight but to deter" (Freedman 2005: 427). We find this in everyday life as well as during international political crisis: from "wife-and-husband" quarrels, to traffic incidents, collective bargaining, and peacekeeping military interventions (Bartos, Wehr 2002.). Escalation concerns the "irreversibility" of the conflict: it is a issue of timing, of processual and temporal thresholds, as well as a problem of the perception of the conflictual process itself. In semiotic terms, escalation deals with the question of perspective: by what means is an observational point of view connected to discourses and discursive scenes? And how does it work, provoking perspective shifts regarding which part of a process is "seen" and perceived? Yet escalation, entailing all these aspectual elements, deals with the issue of narrative organization: its *acceptance*, its *credibility*, expectations and *belief in,* during the buildup of conflictual processes by the participants themselves.

One must remember that, according to conflict analysis (Monroy, Fournier 1997: 26-29) there are at least two kinds of escalation models. The first is the "traditional" one: from stage a) "The origin of the conflict" (clash of values, ideological incompatibilities, rivalries, etc.), to stage

b) "Triggering" (aggression, provocation, offense, law infringement), to stage c) "Reaction" (reaction, confrontation, legitimate response), to stage d) "Installation", set up (power relations in the foreground, victory or defeat is expected); e) "Cessation" of the conflict (obtaining an objective, admission, or sharing of fraud).

But a second model highlights the afore-mentioned systemic effects, regarding the problem of complex social systems. It is symbolized by a increasing spiral cycle, with possible feedback paths. The stages may be identified as follows: a) Interactive Plays between actors (with possible conflict emergence); b) Actors Exploring and testing their own opportunities; c) "Conflictual Consensus" (actors build up tools for participating and, reciprocally, nourishing conflict); d) Autonomization of conflict (conflictual dynamics may overflow); e) possible Self-Evolving conflict (with the chance of returning to initial interactive play, resolving, or becoming chronic).

What may be of particular interest in the cultural semiotic of conflict, is the idea of a "double translation", and the synthesis between these two models and the previous discursive, semiotic one. We may then synthesize this tentative model: a) a first stage composed not just of "preparation" but also of a "gesticulative" interaction between actors (in which actors either interact or manipulate values and/or sources of conflict, as well as observing, exploring, testing, provoking, other actors and the situation). This may produce new actantial roles. This is important, because the actors' changing roles (as stressed by Monroy and Fournier 1997) is one of the important characteristics of conflict cycles. For instance, the transformation of the actor himself into a "victim" (self-victimization), or of an actor into a "helper", before or during the same conflict escalation. This first phase could be a partial match to the "displacement" and "configuration" phases proposed by Fontanille. b) A second conflictual moment in which there is a real activation of conflicts (assumption and conflict, in figure 1) through different phases and actions. Here confrontation and intensification could lead to escalation and de-escalation phases, and, simultaneously to conflict agreement between actors. c) A third moment of control and possible conflict resolution, but during which, as anticipated, conflict may auto-evolve by either stopping or persisting and self-perpetuating.

Let us examine the appalling case of the wars in former Yugoslavia. Due to the great complexity and the articulation of their different phases, we will look at just a few examples (see Bartos, Wehr 2002: 123-139). From the "semiotic cascade" regarding that conflict, we find a superposition of inter-actorial relationships. They reciprocally transform, justify, and increase their values and identity: for instance, "Slovenian and Croatian nationalism had confirmed and stimulated greater Serbian nationalism" (ib.: 123). Consequently, during the first phases of that multilevel conflict, we find the emergence and "reactivation" of an actor, the "Greater

Serbs", and to a lesser extensive dimension, the "Greater Croats", due to a semiotic patchwork. This heterogeneous mixture, the reinvention of an old tradition, together with the composition of values and anti-values (such as hatred and anger, as well as self-victimization regarding other nationalities) acts in a way that "the Serbs throughout Yugoslavia envisioned themselves increasingly at risk of being overwhelmed by other ethnic nationalities" (ib.; see also Sotiropoulu 2004). A lesser-known, yet equally relevant and important aspect from a semio-cultural point of view,[16] is the fact that the process of reactivation of tradition resulted either from a temporal dimension, or from a "location" of this temporality inside spaces of Yugoslavia's topology. This narrated history of a "perceived risk" results from the recollection of the terrible events of the World War II (the Nazi and Fascist occupation, their accomplices the Ustascias, Croatian nationalists, and the independent state of Croatia, the massacres, the concentration camps and deportations) including the memory and the narrative of the murders committed by the Chetniks in the name of the Greater Serbian fatherland.

These narratives also refer to the ancient myths of Serbian history, namely the epics concerning the great battle of 1389 between the Serbs and the Turks. "The Serbian epics hold that the Ottoman Sultan Murad summoned the Serbian Prince Lazar at Kosovo Polje – the Field of Blackbirds – because Lazar would not agree to submit and become his vassal. As the poem points out, with a certain chilling contemporary echo, 'there never can be / one territory under two masters.'" (Judah 2000: 4). The Kosovo Polje field, considered the "heart" of ancient Serbia, is located near the Gazimenstan monument commemorating that battle. Here Milosevic gave his famous 1989 speech, considered the "semiotic" starting point of the war, on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the battle. That mythical temporal dimension has been "re-located" in the modern spaces of Yugoslavia. "In Kosovo, history is war by other means" (ib.). Or, according to one of Churchill's cynical, ethnocentric, yet oddly appropriate aphorisms: "The Balkans produce more history than they can consume".

These wars evolve from a primary phase of mythical narration (blending, creating and sustaining the actor's identities through the media and public opinions, both internal and international) and the manipulation of an growing socio-economic crisis. The latter, as well as ethno-nationalistic discourses, cannot be considered as "the cause", but rather "cultural-semiotic arrays": languages and syntaxes through which those wars were

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[16] For some examples of semiotic analysis concerning the cultural implications and consequences of those wars, see Mazzucchelli (2010), regarding monument construction (and destruction), urban transformations and collective memory; concerning Yugoslavian nationalist's systems of values, narrations and ideology, see Albertini (2009); see also Giostrella 2011.

expressed and communicated, and thereby paralleled each other. The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina represents a point of maximum intensification of the conflict and, at the same time, of its self-evolving[17] and resuming stage. The war in Kosovo is "only" the resuming point and the final moment of that macro-narration: a war of revenge (see Judah 2000) conducted by the Serbs against their presumed "oppressors". Starting a cycle of revenge by the Albanians against the Serbs and the Romas, concluding in a sort of counter-vengeance by the USA, NATO, the EU and western countries against the atrocities committed by the "Greater Serbs" during the Bosnia conflict.

5. Conflicts and warfare in a semio-cultural perspective

For each issue we have brought up it is important to backtrack and find different definitions of war that are relevant to semiotic cultural studies. For scholars such as Joxe (1991) and Charnay (1992), who have studied extensively in the research field of war studies, in a way related to semiotics, the analysis of wars and of strategic forms is, above all, a "theory of culture" embedded within the history of the civilization of forms of violence. A cultural history of violence and disorder is a history that looks at the different ways of encoding (within a given culture and society or within intercultural relations) ways of "bringing death". At the same time, however, it concerns dynamical transitions between order and disorder: between disorder, conflict and reduction of the disorder. One should therefore consider the link between encoding "life" in culture (the forms of cultural production) and war and polemogenic processes: encoding forms of "destruction" inside cultures.

A history of long-term forms of warfare and strategic cultures (Charnay 1992) consists of great oppositions, variables and loops in slow transfor-

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[17] According to Kaldor (2007: 37-40): "There is an alternative view which holds that nationalism has been reconstructed for political purposes. This view corresponds more closely to the 'instrumentalist' conception of nationalism, according to which nationalist movements reinvent particular versions of history and memory to construct new cultural forms that can be used for political mobilization. What happened in Yugoslavia was the disintegration of the state both at a federal level and, in the case of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, at a republican level. If we define the state in the Weberian sense as the organization which 'successfully upholds the monopoly of legitimate organized violence', then it is possible to trace first the collapse of legitimacy and, second, the collapse of organized violence. The emergence of virulent nationalism [...] has to be understood in terms of struggle, on the part of increasingly desperate (and corrupt) elites, to control the remnant of the state. [...] Nationalist arguments were a way of coping with economic discontent, appealing to the victims of economic insecurity and concealing the growing *nomenklatura*-mafia alliance. [...] The emergence of a new form of nationalism paralleled the disintegration of Yugoslavia. It was new in the sense that it was associated with the disintegration of the state, in contrast to earlier 'modern' nationalism which aimed at state-building, and that, unlike earlier nationalisms, it lacked a modernizing ideology."

mation: for instance, the relationship between nomadic-sedentary civilizations; or between various forms of combat and battle.[18]

According to Joxe (1991), the issue has a specific bearing on forms of "strategization" of human action. War is considered either the moment of confrontation, or the constraint, the circumscription of the "cultural circuit" of infra- and inter-societal violence within a given conflict. Tactical and strategic devices are closely related to this definition of war, intended here as ways of managing, directing, anticipating, interpreting the acts of the "Other", the opponent. These devices can be seen either from a directly interactional point of view (as different forms of those relationships), or through their expressions in technologies: weapons and combat systems.

It is not possible to address the enormous, and clearly fundamental, problem of "arms and men" here. However, it is very important to remember the semio-cultural position according to which arms and weapons are seen as "delegates" in a general sense (according to the line of thought which runs from Leroi-Gourhan to Bruno Latour) that work as "mediators" through processes of "disengagement" or "*debrayages*", operated by combatants on the scene of combat, a disengagement that produces different types of "helpers". The last most extreme and technologically sophisticated example of this is the combatant use of "Drones" (or UAV, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) such as the "*Predator*", with all the inherent risks, human (as well as political) dangers and ethical questions involving those technologies (cf. Mayer 2009; Singer 2009). In this case as well, we can identify a tension in warfare's cultural tendency: "Individualized combat also persists. Yet chance and faceless agents of death would more and more come to rule the battlefield." (O'Connell 1989).

Weapons are, at the same time, both mediators and delegates. Yet they also embody "self-fulfilling prophecies" (ib.). Arms and technologies help to kill but they autonomize themselves as well, directing the future organization of battle and combat, occasionally reshaping cultures and societies (Dal Lago, Palidda 2010). The forms of antagonistic action are accumulated over time in a cultural history, and thus build models of action that produce cultural memory. But these models are equally made of spatial and space-time links: formed by battle sites with their geometry and fighting topology (the construction of roads, walls, fortresses); the routes of conquest; the development of geopolitical lines of power; as well as places of mourning and monuments.

Maintaining meaningful social and cultural networks, which fill spaces and moments of everyday life, is important during conflicts and warfare.

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[18] One may think, as an example, about the idea of the "decisive" battle of "annihilation", typical of main western strategic thought against, conversely, the concept of "indirect strategy", or indirect "approach" to strategy (with the idea of breaking enemy's equilibrium, while avoiding frontal battle, with its excessive costs in casualties).

Waves of violence, revenge and reciprocal hate are nurtured by these networks whose paths often span time and generations. For instance, some wars, such the wars in former Yugoslavia or in some central Africa civil wars, have been "cross-generational wars". War, violence and revenge are exercised by sons but propagated through fathers' and grandfathers' narratives.

I must highlight one final point. Joxe's studies affirm that the true criterion of war is the building up of "military units", not necessarily related to a State. If a State collapses or disappears, emerging military castes take control, often leading to mass massacre, as in the cases of genocide in Rwanda or in Bosnia. These military castes, as we have seen, often transform themselves into "war-lords" linked with local mafia bosses or dealers. According to this historical, political and anthropological evidence, the actors of war seem to be primarily combat units, and not States or Nations. One could argue that this phenomenon is mostly typical of civil wars (even when masked by the deadly colors of race, ethnicity and nationalism). Nevertheless, it could also represent the extreme of more general cultural processes regarding the emergence of warrior groups (as stressed also by Dumezil 1973). War and conflict also spread through collective actors, binding their own links, fighting "against" a society and a culture, even if they are a part of it.

Conflict is not solely a matter of "an incompatibility of goals". Collective struggles sometimes break out because of mutual recognition. Yet, what type of recognition? Perhaps a recognition of identification with a reciprocal, yet leaning towards asymmetrical, relationship. The perception of this complementary interference thus appears to be the keyword of the conflict relationship, as well as the shadow of human cultures.

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