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# ***The Subjects of Semiotics***

**Giuseppe Mininni**

Review-article on *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*, edited with introductions by Robert E. Innis. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985.

Every anthology ought to try to get rid of (or at least try to minimize) the museum-effect, which is inevitably engraved in the frame of its literary genre; only in this case can we accept its declared purposes. The museum-effect springs from the break in the "chronotopos" necessary in the production of any given work. If many masterpieces are forced to share the *space*, it is a sign that their authors have passed the test of *time*, so that Giotto and Renoir, Piero della Francesca and Dalí can be found together only in a museum. This effect has been wholly eliminated in this introductory anthology of semiotics edited by Robert E. Innis. This fact is due not only to the commentary pages that present every single contribution of the fifteen selected scholars (although certainly these pages help the reader to gradually build up an idea of how the various questions are linked), but mostly to the work's unfailing up-to-dateness and the unity of the object investigated in a semiotic perspective—i.e., the conditions of sense production—which allow Susanne Langer to hold a dialogue effectively with Schapiro, Thom with Sebeok, and so on.

*Il y a du sens: how is it possible and what are its relationships with man?* Nowadays the number of scholars who focus their critical

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reflections round this Gordian knot is growing and certainly they will acknowledge they can draw inspiration from the works of Peirce and Vološinov, from Morris and Bühler, from Saussure and Bateson, from Barthes, Benveniste, and Jakobson, just to mention the names which have already passed into history via the death of the body, that—as “extrasign residual”—is ruled by the logics of need and desire. This topic of the “extrasign residual” has nourished some of the research of another great Italian scholar who deserves to be remembered here: Ferruccio Rossi-Landi. Innis too mentions him among the great students who have been sacrificed for editorial reasons, but there is no doubt that the interest in Rossi-Landi’s “philosophical methodics,”<sup>1</sup> which penetrates the sign plot of ideologies and the homology between “semiotics” and “economics,” goes beyond the simple motive of personal gratitude.

This reference to Rossi-Landi’s work has a wider methodological value. Semiotics can also be approached in other ways, as indeed other similar books demonstrate, but the approach specified by Innis touches on some really unrenounceable stages, since it lets what Sebeok<sup>2</sup> calls the “main tradition” stand out. The unexceptionable principles which Innis (xii) asserts he followed in designing his anthology are: “(1) historical importance, (2) heuristic fertility, (3) exemplification of semiotic analysis, and (4) present relevance.”

The first idea, it should be emphasized, shapes the existence of quite a definite and steady frame of reference, within which different plans of research are developed. These plans have not always given rise to mutually interlacing theories, for they aim also at sounding distant spheres of problems such as the logical form of knowledge and communicative dialogism (Peirce and Vološinov), the rhetorical (i.e., postlinguistic) techniques that rule the production of (verbal and nonverbal) images (Barthes) and the prelinguistic features of human interactions (Bateson, Sebeok).

The unifying point of view, firmly exhibited by Innis in his Introductions, focuses the analysis on the semiotic peculiarity, though not exclusivity, of verbal language among other sign systems, as he is conscious that it may be able to light up what Eco<sup>3</sup> labels as “the last threshold of semiotics.” In fact, to understand the relationship between sign and subject has a threshold value, for it justifies comprehensive interpretations of the cultural structure that defines the nature of man and his existence in the world. In effect, both alternatives—pointed out also by other historical and theoretical monographs<sup>4</sup>—either between a “semiotics of significance” and a “semiotics of communication” or between a



"semiotics of code" and a "semiotics of interpretations," confirm the central position of research into the logical operativity of sign occurrence (or "semiosis").

The hidden kernel of this twofold option hints at that "last threshold" of the relationship between sign and subject. The chaotic flow of the status of things is lit up by the appearance of a novelty: *aliquid stat pro aliquo* (cf. selections from Peirce and Bühler). Probably every living being, but certainly the animal world, is governed by this general mechanism of semiosis (cf. Bateson, Thom, Sebeok). However, when objects (or their properties) are placed in substituting relationships, with a wealth of "renvois" or reminders, they undergo a more radical transformation, setting off ever more complex processes of "representational logic" in a spiral of unlimited semiosis. When this process is modelled according to the specific articulations of verbal thought, it has been argued, all formations of the cultural universe may be outlined. Thus, an affinity, both generic and specific, exists between the being of man and that of semiosis, for which reason every radical transformation of the communicative processes induces a reordering of those connections that, in a way which is still largely a mystery, bind the evolving of higher species to the creation and internalization of more complex sign systems (see selections of Eco and Thom).

The "main tradition" of semiotics leads man to think of himself as a "symbolic animal"; his adaptation to the natural and social world in forms of cognition takes place in the labyrinth of an unlimited semiosis, in which each movement is a tentative systematizing "interpretative route,"<sup>5</sup> sketching images (selections from Langer, Barthes, and Schapiro), relying on inferences, elaborating rules, establishing conventions, continually setting up myths and rites. In any case, in order that man should become aware of all this, an adequate development of logical philosophical thought (with Peirce) was necessary, together with a scientific view of the sign system par excellence of man (with Saussure), and greater attention given to the communicative processes activated on a large scale in socio-cultural organization by the violent explosion of the mass media (see Vološinov and Barthes especially).

The two highest levels at which this series of questions can be examined are the inner *logic* of a sign operation (Peirce, Saussure, Bühler, Morris) and the *dialogics* which it sets off (Vološinov, Bühler, Bateson, Sebeok). It is worth keeping in mind the distinction between these two levels when dealing with certain aspects of semiosis, since many scholars have found it helpful in making

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more accurate definitions and more subtle classifications. On the other hand, when dealing with certain other aspects, as has been revealed more than once in the history of the human sciences, if the study of the systematic structure of human phenomena is too far detached from the study of their historical dynamics and the way in which they are processed culturally, then the results of such studies will be epistemologically groundless and heuristically sterile. The "main tradition" of semiotics notes the need to *grasp the being of sign operations at the moments of their becoming such for the communicative needs of man*, thematized in this volume especially by Bühler and Bateson.

Semiotic knowledge challenges the trap of tautological thought by showing that a sign is anything that functions (or can function) as a sign. Instead of getting us stuck in the mire of infinite "regression," such a formulation can project us into the spiral of unlimited progress (Peirce and Eco). This can provide the field of reference necessary to anthropological knowledge: man is what he is capable of becoming, because signs—to the internalization of which he owes the genesis of himself as subject (see introductions to Peirce and Vološinov selections)—arise and live in an array of deferments, i.e., in the interpreter's productive hypotheses (or "interpretants"). What a sign is depends on the operation (or series of operations) which it sparks off outside itself, in its interpreters: it is what the interpreters make of it. This sliding from one ontological plane to another postulated by semiotics, according to which the explanation of "be" is referred back to the illustration of "can do," has repercussions on the representational schemes of anthropology. These schemes attempt to explain the nature of man's condition in the world, which is at once creative and precarious, open to innovation and exposed to failure. Man owes all the potential of his social and historical existence to the ever-more-complex apparatus of reciprocal reference between "be" and "can do." Within this general profile, the laws governing the production of signs reflect and at the same time determine the modality of man's social (re)production,<sup>6</sup> specified in different ways by the selections from Bühler and Vološinov.

In the present volume there are frequent allusions to this idea, although often masked by the treatment of specific questions such as the semiotic primacy of verbal language (Bühler, Benveniste, Langer), the plurifunctionality of iconic images in cognitive and communicative processes (Langer, Barthes, Schapiro, Thom), the relationships between systems and within systems which can be identified in (the type of) semiotic events (see espe-



cially selection from Benveniste). What I wish particularly to stress here is that the main principles which inspired this anthological introduction to semiotics refer clearly to questions raised about whether it is possible or not to axiomatize human sciences, questions which are more relevant than ever today. In Italy this debate is strictly linked to the fortune of semiotic knowledge which puts forward some general hypotheses about what is, or is not, knowable and sayable (as a specific form of the communicable), a problem directly thematized by the Langer selection from *Philosophy in a New Key*.

The models of a semiotic event represented in this volume vary, ranging from those of Peirce and Bühler, which, though both trivalent, are not the same, to those of Morris and Jakobson, respectively pentavalent and hexavalent; or from Langer's argument in favor of the opposition of "discursive" and "presentational" forms to Thom's intuition about the "catastrophic" genesis of cognitive and communicative maps and to the exhibition of the switching link between "figure" and "background" which guides not only the reflections of Barthes and Schapiro on nonverbal images, but also those of Eco on verbal images (or "metaphors"). All these models owe their heuristic capacity to the possibility they give of putting forward new hypotheses about the nature of a "cognizing being." Semiotics provides a new key to a correct approach to the question of the nature of knowledge. The old gnoseological solutions of subjectivism and objectivism, able to legitimize metaphysical, political, moral and pedagogical theories in their more general philosophical aspects, refer respectively to idealism and materialism. These solutions can be replaced by a concept of signs capable of comprehending the active dynamism between "knowing subject" and "known object."

Since a "sign is what always allows us to know something more,"<sup>7</sup> it can function as an explicative model of the nature of knowledge itself, because *Knowledge is also a form of communication* (as the selection from Bühler shows) which, through the medium of the institution of interpreting signs, attempts to bridge the gap which has arisen between "subject" and "object." Turning once more to Peirce's reflections on the transformation by semiosis of the "dynamic object" into the "immediate object," it can be shown how the relationship of man with the world is not determined by the (presumed) existence of "primary data" or "bare facts," but by a continual process of semiosization, recognized clearly by Bühler and Eco, among many others, of course. This process sets in motion a series of circles in which the continued change of

position between "signifier," "referent," and "interpretant" gives rise to the productivity (or creativity, or openness) of the system (see Eco selection on "Semantics of Metaphors"). Reality is captured by and through signs, and it is this which determines the strength or weakness of human thought; yet philosophy continues, unjustifiably, to consider itself either direct intuition or else a rigid categorization, a position opposed by all the texts in this book.

However, this apophantic capacity of signs cannot legitimize the temptation of subjectivism or, worse still, of solipsism, not only because the pertinent criteria which guide the generation of the "interpretant" depend on practice<sup>8</sup> (see Vološinov selection) and undergo intersubjective control in the socially established forms (from tribal dance to television debate), but also because the operation of semiosis postulates in the referent a "renvoi" to a cognitive substratum external to the "possible world" which is semiosized every time. If the "referent" is considered as a pole of semiosis (or even as "implicit interpretant"<sup>9</sup>), then studies on man (from psychology to sociology, linguistics to anthropology) are thus freed of the temptation inherent in idealism to identify *intentionality* as the fundamental human feature.

The *intentio* which characterizes a cognitive event is the mental "transparency" of the relationship, already at work in semiosis, of reference (or "renvoi") to something other than itself (see especially the Peirce and Bühler selections). When the fact that man owes his being to his cognitive hypotheses about the world, to his own beliefs, to the values which he instituted, to the agreement reached between himself and others, to the rules implicit in shared knowledge, is placed on the "threshold of intentionality,"<sup>10</sup> it should not be overlooked that such an "intentional world" reveals the referential dimension at work in the activation of (a series of) processes of semiosization.

This "intentional world" becomes a "purposeful world" due to the semiotic specification of verbal language, which binds man to the "ethics of discourse" through its universal pragmatic postulates,<sup>11</sup> so that he attempts to reach, in his communicative acts, various degrees of consent. *In verbal language the sign becomes aware of itself*, directing part of its potential to the metacommunicative plane in order to allow its users to observe themselves and find their own role as sense-attributing subjects. The evolution of characteristics intrinsic to the operation of semiosis is not independent of the conditions in which a certain ecosystem organizes its life. The activity productive of instruments (or "prostheses") with which man has amplified and refined his possibilities of interaction



with the natural and social world, not to mention the activity of "symbolic play" with which man pursues the phantasms of what he can do in the *Lustfunktion* of speaking, together have brought about the development of verbal language. So high is the level of semiotic specification thus realized that we may postulate the autonomy of a "primary modelling system."

In certain of its aspects verbal language can be seen as a sign system similar to others. However, in certain other aspects it gathers and fuses characteristics from other systems, while in yet further aspects it demands specific explicative principles. Like all sign systems, verbal language requires, for example, that in practice interpretation follows instituted rules. These rules, however, are not generated from a single matrix (as happens in sign systems formed solely by "indexes," "icons" or "symbols") but accept (almost) every possible reformulation in order to adapt to the expressive and communicative needs of man. This means that language is not simply a system of signs, since the form (and the "format") of "representation" interlaces with that of "transfiguration."<sup>12</sup>

1. See Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Metodica filosofica e scienza dei segni. Nuovi saggi sul linguaggio e l'ideologia* (Milano 1985: Bompiani) [reviewed in this issue].

2. Thomas A. Sebeok recalls it in his answers to Gianfranco Marrone (ed.), *Dove va la semiotica?* (Palermo 1986: Quaderni del Circolo Semiologico Siciliano), p. 150.

3. Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale* (Milano 1975: Bompiani), pp. 370-79.

4. See, for example, Augusto Ponzio, *La semiotica in Italia* (Bari 1976: Dedalo); Massimo A. Bonfantini, *La semiosi e l'abduzione* (Milano 1987: Bompiani).

5. Augusto Ponzio, "Signs to Talk about Signs," in: A. Ponzio, M.A. Bonfantini, G. Mininni, *Talking about Signs* (Bari 1985: Adriatica) p. 79

6. Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Linguistics and Economics* (The Hague 1975: Mouton).

7. Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (London 1984: Macmillan Press), p. xv.

8. As it is clearly argued by Luis Prieto, *Pertinence et pratique. Essai de sémiologie* (Paris 1975: Minuit).

9. Augusto Ponzio, "Signs to Talk," pp. 105-11.

10. See Sergio Moravia, *L'enigma della mente, Il "Mind-Body Problem" nel pensiero contemporaneo* (Bari 1986: Laterza), pp. 215-19 [reviewed in this issue].

11. See Jurgen Habermas, *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln* (Frankfurt am Main 1983: Suhrkamp Verlag).

12. See Giuseppe Mininni, *Il linguaggio trasfigurato. Per una psicosemiotica della metafora* (Bari 1986: Adriatica).