

Differentia: Review of Italian Thought

Number 2 *Spring*

Article 29

1988

Metodica filosofica e scienza dei segni by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi

Susan Petrilli

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia>

Recommended Citation

Petrilli, Susan (1988) "Metodica filosofica e scienza dei segni by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*: Vol. 2 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol2/iss1/29>

This document is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* by an authorized editor of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu, hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu.

**Metodica filosofica e scienza
dei segni**

By Ferruccio Rossi-Landi

Milano: Bompiani, 1985

This book appeared three months before the premature death of Ferruccio Rossi-Landi in Trieste, May 1985. It is the third in a series which our author liked to call his Bompiani trilogy and which included *Il linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato* (1968; 3d ed. 1983), translated into English with the title *Language as Work and Trade* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1983), and *Semiotica e Ideologia* (Semiotics and Ideology) (1972; 2d ed. 1979). *Metodica filosofica* reassembles and re-elaborates eight previously published papers, reorganizing them into twelve chapters for presentation in book form. These papers were all written between 1971 and 1979 and are the result of a unified research program which goes back, as the author himself informs us, to 1965, but which has its theoretical and methodological roots in his 1961 book *Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune* (SCPC) (Meaning, Communication and Common Speech) (Marsilio, 1961; 2d ed. 1980). The latter, in its turn, may be placed in the same line of research begun in 1953 with the appearance of the monograph on Charles Morris (*Charles Morris e la semiotica novecentesca* [Charles Morris and Twentieth-Century Semiotics], Feltrinelli-Bocca, 2d ed. 1975).

Metodica filosofica may be viewed as the product of a semiotical, philosophical-linguistic, and anthropological approach to the analysis of the sign and semiosis. As the title itself suggests, in this book Rossi-Landi conducts a philosophical investigation of the categories, foundations, and conditions underlying the science of signs. In less broad terms, he focuses his attention upon the question of what

makes any form of communication possible in the signifying universe. This approach had already been adopted in SCPC in which Rossi-Landi elaborates his "methodics of common speech." The latter points to the necessity of researching into the structures, general or universal, forming the common basis of all natural languages beyond the differences which characterize each single language. In this sense the notion of *common speech* distinguishes itself from both Saussure's *parole* and the notion of *ordinary language* as proposed by English analytical philosophy, which did not look into the fundamental underlying conditions of linguistic use.

As for the second part of the title of the book under review, it is well worth noting immediately that the science of signs, as referred to by Rossi-Landi, is of Peircean rather than of Saussurean matrix. In other words, the sign and its functionings are analyzed through a process of abstraction, according to the theories and methods of what today is widely known as the semiotics of interpretation, by contrast to the analytical apparatus traditionally employed by linguistic structuralism.

Chapter 8 of *Metodica filosofica*, entitled "Criteri per lo studio ideologico di un autore" (Criteria for the Ideological Study of an Author), is of central importance to the whole book owing to both the novelty of the subject with respect to our author's previous production, as well as to its theoretical-pragmatic density. In fact, in this chapter Rossi-Landi pools together his theories concerning the life of signs and attempts a practical application of them to the Author of both literary and nonliterary texts, whom he considers as "an individual immersed in society, but with a few extra complications" as compared to the ordinary man on the street. Thus, as the application at a more complex level of sign communication, this particular chapter might be

considered as a test of the validity of Rossi-Landi's theories at large.

The indications offered by Rossi-Landi for a correct and exhaustive approach to the ideological study of an author and his written texts may be used as a guideline for a better understanding, on our part, of Rossi-Landi himself and of his own theoretical production. Rossi-Landi points to the need of viewing the author in the light of the historico-social context to which he belongs, considering him as the interpreter and representative of the process of social reproduction of which he is a product: "it is a question of the ideological choices and of the various other intellectual and moral operations that the author accomplished when he began writing" (186). It is Rossi-Landi's conviction that the reconstruction of such choices and operations will produce the most suitable criterion for the ideological interpretation of an author's works (indeed, in Rossi-Landi's opinion, there is nothing human which is not ideological—not even the way an onlooker views a tree. "Hard dry facts" do not exist but are always the representation of a mediated sign and thus of an ideological reality.)

The categories underlying Rossi-Landi's own theories and methodology are those of historical materialism as applied to the science of signs. In contrast to the idealistic, innatistic, and biological-naturalistic orientations dominating in the intellectual world (his criticism is also directed against Noam Chomsky's generative transformational grammar), Rossi-Landi theorizes on the dialectical approach of historical materialism, applying it to his studies of the various forms of human communication.

It is in this light that we are able to fully appreciate the value of our author's use, in a semiotic-anthropological context, of such notions as social reproduction, production-exchange-consumption, sign mediation, sign res-

idue, linguistic money, linguistic work, etc. So it is also with the help of his studies of the Marxian criticism of political economy as applied to linguistics that Rossi-Landi overcomes structural linguistics when the latter was still strongly dominant in Italy (see, for example, Rossi-Landi's 1961 book). Saussure offers a static conception of sign value, analyzed in terms of equal exchange between the *signifiant* and *signifié*, according to the categories of the marginalistic economical theories of the school of Lausanne (Walras and Pareto). An approach which such authors as Bahktin, Rossi-Landi and Peirce overcome with their respective theories of the centrifugal forces of sign-ideological life (as against the centripetal forces which freeze language between the two poles of *langue* and *parole*), the theory of language as work and an integral part of social reproduction, and the theory of sign interpretation analyzed in terms of the unending deferral of one sign to the next in the context of unlimited semiosis.

In *Metodica filosofica* Rossi-Landi claims that "social reproduction is the beginning of all things." In fact, the concept of social reproduction together with that of sign residue represent two pivotal aspects of our author's lifelong research. Social reproduction refers to the process through which every human society develops and reproduces itself on the basis of human work. Man's relations with nature are sign-mediated relations and involve relations between men, that is, among other things, a continuous exchange of messages. Rossi-Landi identifies the three constitutive and interrelated aspects of social reproduction—that is, production, exchange, and consumption in semiosis—as the production, exchange, and consumption of verbal and nonverbal signs. "Our central hypothesis," says Rossi-Landi connecting the two key concepts of sign and social reproduction,

is that exchange itself includes, at a higher dialectical level, a tripartition into production, exchange and consumption. This triad internal to exchange does not, however, concern material objects which have already been produced and are destined for consumption. Rather it concerns those signs which come into play so as to allow the insertion precisely of exchange between production and consumption. We have a sign production, a sign exchange in a strict and specific sense (exchange of messages), and a sign consumption. . . . Exchange is inserted between external material production and consumption as a unitary and, at the same time, twofold process: there is the exchange of external material objects which are not signs, and furthermore of messages, that is to say, there is communication. It is as though two processes take place simultaneously. (34)

Rossi-Landi isolates the sign through a process of abstraction legitimate only for the sake of analysis, with the intention of describing its physiognomy and of evidencing its constitutive semiotic materiality. He breaks down the sign totality or "cell" into the *signans* and *signatum* (using these Augustinian terms so as to avoid the mentalistic ambiguity of the Saussurean *signifié*) and discovers what he calls *material, corporal, and social residues* both on the part of the *signans* as well as of the *signatum*. On the side of the *signans* we have bodies—either natural or artificial (and in any case they are social) which act as sign vehicles; on the side of the *signatum*, we have *social residues*, which may be viewed both as interpretant in Peirce's sense, as intention, sense, *lekton*, and also as extension, referent or *designatum*. In other words, the sign is characterized by a double materiality, both physical and socio-historical, and it is this which determines the specificity of semiotic materiality. The latter concept, as theorized by Rossi-Landi,

is further developed by Augusto Ponzio in his bilingual text *Per parlare dei segni/Talking about Signs* (Bari: Adriatica, 1985). The sign residue, that is, the uninterpreted residue of the interpreted-sign in relation to a specific interpretant-sign, accounts for the polylogic and plurivocal nature of the sign, whether it be verbal or nonverbal, enabling it to become the object of more than one interpretation.

Metodica filosofica covers various disciplines including semiotics, the philosophy of language, political economy, sociology, cultural anthropology, and psychology. It enlarges upon themes, theories, categories, and analytical proposals already present in the first two volumes of his trilogy and which include, for example, the homology between linguistic production and material production, the schema concerning social reproduction, the plural articulations of linguistic and nonlinguistic artifacts, the complex notion of linguistic money, etc. Other chapters, as we have mentioned in relation to the chapter dedicated to the ideological study of an author, attempt new applications of the categories and notions proposed by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi. Still other chapters, such as "Ontologia sociale della proprietà e primo articolarsi della falsa coscienza" (Social Ontology of Property and the Initial Articulation of False Consciousness), form part of research carried on beyond the Bompiani trilogy, especially in *Linguistics and Economics* (Mouton, 1974; 2d ed. 1977), originally published in English and never translated into Italian, and in *Ideologia* (Mandadori, 1978; 2d ed. 1982).

SUSAN PETRILLI
Università di Bari