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Colloquy with Gianfranco Bettetini in Milan: reality and values at the heart of audiovisual semiotics and my reflections on the media

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Gianfranco Bettetini is the father of Italian audiovisual semiotics and one of the key figures in the history of contemporary semiotics, contributing to the development of fundamental theories including text conversation, and audiovisual temporality.

His academic research was undertaken mainly at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan, where he was full professor of the theory and techniques of social communication, and then Director at the Postgraduate School in Communication (2002–present, Alta Scuola in Media, Comunicazione e Spettacolo, or ALMED: Graduate School of Media Communication and Performing Arts).

From the onset, Bettetini's research went hand in hand with his work as a director and prominent television writer for Italian public television (RAI), directing productions that have remained in the public imagination (entertainment programs such as *Campanile Sera* and *L'amico del giaguaro* (The Friend of the Jaguar); advertising campaigns such as *Carosello*).

His directorial efforts have also included sports broadcasts, documentaries, news programs, and theatre on television. From 1969, he focused on writing and directing films produced by RAI, most notably, *Stregone di città* (The City Sorcerer, 1973), *Semmelweiss* (1980), *L'ultima Mazurka* (The Last Mazurka, 1986). He is also a writer, and has authored six novels. His ample bibliography will be retraced – at least partially – throughout the interview.

Suffice to say that at the Università Cattolica, where Bettetini formed the research community of the Milan School (Giaccardi 2003), many important exponents of the communication sciences were formed, some of whom are still present, such as Piermarco Aroldi, Francesco Casetti, Fausto Colombo, Ruggero Eugeni, Chiara Giaccardi, Aldo Grasso, Giorgio Simonelli, Marina Villa, Nicoletta Vittadini and both authors of this interview.

In this interview, Bettetini answers questions of semiotician Armando Fumagalli (his pupil with whom he co-wrote several works on media theory, in particular *Quel che resta dei media* (The remains of the media), 1998, revised edition 2010) and the younger Paolo Braga, who – among many other works – collaborated in the

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coordination of the collective volume *Le Logiche della Television* (The logic of television, 2004).

This interview follows key moments that have marked the evolution of Bettetini's thought, and highlights his most characteristic concepts. The second part will depart from a strictly semiotic perspective, as Bettetini is invited to conceive broader considerations regarding the current media system and its social importance.

The interview was carried out through different meetings between July and September 2016. Its transcription was read and approved word-by-word in the Italian version by Gianfranco Bettetini. We were reviewing the English translation when Gianfranco Bettetini died on 12 January 2017, a few days before his 84th birthday.

The question of 'realism' has always occupied a central position in your semiotics. How does this interest fit within the context of semiotics that emerged as a discipline between the 1960s and 70s?

Interest in the representative possibilities and for the truth-revealing qualities of signs – the issue of the relationship between signs and reality, the possibility of the 'reference', that is of the object, to be appropriately represented by the signs, by language – is at the root of linguistic sciences, and, as we know, it has breathed life into contemporary semiotics from the time it emerged and was established.

During this early period of the discipline, the coordinates of the debate focused on structuralism¹ and everyone moved within that framework, albeit each from their own perspectives – and perhaps even – as in my case – not marrying into that theoretical paradigm.

The central idea was that of the 'code', that of the different types of signs and how each one of them form a system with its own specific rules. The question, therefore, was if and how the signs of different language systems could refer to reality.

The direction, dictated by a structuralist sensibility, was to consider language and the different language systems as inevitably transforming the real from the moment in which they were used to represent it, say it, or understand it. What is certainly true, even if its importance at that time was somewhat ignored by everyone, is that language also has a considerable dimension for truth. An aspect that I – together with you who ask me these questions – later concentrated on. Within that context, my position at the time was characterised by certain elements, first of all a focus on audiovisual language. At the centre was an interest in the issue of cinema language, of its laws and its 'codifiability', based on the verbal language model. Here, however, my feeling, and my professional experience led me to reflect not only on code – the system of signs – as a mechanism for transforming the world and life to be represented, but in it and with it, that of the presence of the authors and their transformative choices. Here, structuralism said: language stands between reality and us, giving form to reality, and we are directed by the rules of the code. I said – with regards to cinema – there is cinema language that serves to capture and give form to reality, and there is the subject that does this – the creator, the director. I did not remove the author from the process. It was within these terms that I crafted my emphasis on the inevitably transformative valence on the reality of every representation, and my objection to the possibility of absolute realism. I did not come from linguistic relativism assumptions, more or less consciously present in structuralist semiotics. Rather, I said

that the negotiations, the choices and the production work of the author were so important, that inevitably the result was something other than reality. I developed – in particular within the book *L'indice del realismo* – this idea in almost a provocative manner, adopting the categories of Peirce, saying that the real *object* in cinematographic signs is the camera, its use, its movements (Giaccardi 2003). Cinematographic signs are footprints, traces – to use the Peircian² category: indices – not contradictable, much more referring to the choices of staging than of the reality represented.

I then developed the same concept considering the iconic characteristic of the medium, to affirm that in respect to the subject matter, film signs are, more than indexes, icons, the type of signs that in Peircian categories do not guarantee the existence of their subject. That is the type of sign that is based on its relationship with an object upon a relation of similarity, and not on an immediate and evident causality/effectivity. Contrarily to Peirce, I said that photographs for me were not mainly indices – accurate traces of existence – but rather icons, arising from how they have been framed, positioned, the lighting, etc. – the presence of the object is mediated by these elements.

It seems clear that these reflections arose from your professional experience as a director ...

In effect, on the one hand, there was the fact that I knew from personal experience what it meant to stage a production, how much work was required for such a seemingly simple activity. On the other hand, there was the fact that the language that was my object of concern, the audiovisual one, was the language that had in itself a claim, a vocation, an aura of realism. And the act of directing and staging everytime went along with this, hiding its tracks, to give the impression of transparency and of the direct and immediate, unmediated, presence of what had been captured.

It is no coincidence that – first for cinema and then for television – the most commonly used metaphor was that of a ‘window to the world’.

But there is ‘simulation’ even in the most realistic forms of discourse. It could even be said that under the cloak of realism the simulating apparatus finds greater space to act and be a more efficient veil. On the other hand, as I have already said, it is one thing to use language to construct something, for example a poem, loaded with symbolic value. It is another thing to do it using a textuality generally considered realistic – like in television or cinema.

So, like, for example, the early semiotics of Roland Barthes³ – your semiotics also had a critical objective, the purpose of demystification.

Exactly – although unlike Barthes, I did not reason within a broadly Marxist logic. I did not critique the bourgeois system, of ‘the myth’, nor of how circulating connotations in the boom of mass communication were functional to the bourgeois system.

What was interesting to me, as a scholar and author, was and is how and how much language can respect its recipient, and how and how much the capacity of judgement is exposed to the risk of blindly trusting ‘mass communication’. To what extent ‘realism’ may encourage abandonment of critical judgement to naive trusting.

Because – and this is the point – realism is inevitably an effect of meaning. So much so, that we cannot speak of realism, but of realisms – because each realism

has its own style. It is a reflection of an epoch, a culture, of the history of the medium.

For example, at the beginning of colour television, black and white film gave a sense of realism – although colour films already existed, the audience was used to black and white film. The fact that black and white was widely thought of as being more realistic is not nonsense – because at that time, the colors were not very realistic, and even tones in the first colour televisions were very caramellised, almost cartoonish.

In fact, realism is a persistent myth ...

It remains dominant in the context of criticism and culture beyond semiotics as a discipline. A recent example is a film like *Boyhood*, which follows through the years the growth of its protagonist, played by the same actor starting from childhood to when he is a young adult, spreading across an extremely long period of production: it has been widely praised for a supposed ‘realism’ that is, in truth, extremely limited – given that the film in question is completely made up, it is the result of a script.

In Italy at least, the birth of this myth has been encouraged by Neorealism and its roots within our intellectual circles. But also in these cases, realism was an effect of devices, a specific interpretation of reality. Neorealism was not merely just a sticking to the truth, but primarily answered a theoretical viewpoint, choosing to oppose the artificial conventions of a particular type of cinema, and at the same time opposing the ideologies of a particular society – that of the ‘Ventennio’ (NT: Twenty years of Italian fascist regime). It was the advancement of an alternative vision of social reality.

As I wrote in the long essay that closed *Produzione del senso e messa in scena* (Bettetini 1975), even within neorealism there was a strong cultural filter. So much so, that the most strictly neorealist films were cultured and elitist affairs.

La terra trema (*The Earth Trembles*) by Visconti is composed completely against the artificiality of art – but, as observed Jurij Lotman,⁴ to understand and appreciate this ‘... is required high culture’. Not to mention that Neorealism was not a single, compact entity. There were different strands: the immediatism of Zavattini,⁵ the historicism of Visconti⁶ ...

How should the realism myth be then considered?

It can be said that the worthwhile view is that which I called ‘unveiling of the *Mise-en-scene*’, the ‘self-revelation of the *Mise-en-scène*’. In the early years of television, there were different methods in this regard. A simple method was to show camera and microphones, but often – like today – it was used as an additional method of spectacularization to increase the scenographic dimension. The unveiling of writing was a device; a style that encouraged in the audience awareness that what was being seen and heard was the product of a cultural project; an ideological, communicative, linguistic project. It had to draw attention to the production work of those signs that had a realistic force.

This also applies to the cinema. The work of Jean-Luc Godard⁷ was for some years a good example. In *Pierrot le Fou*, in *Made in the USA* and in *Weekend*, Godard had developed an inside discussion of cinema history, with a critical purpose regarding violence in American action films and the way it was presented. Those three films are

littered with corpses, with 'battle' injuries, with killings and plenty of blood. But, it is vermilion-toned red blood, totally unrealistic in its abundance and lively colour, gushing with extraordinary ease. It is bright paint, highlighting the falsity of the mise-en-scene.

With this choice, Godard revealed and made an issue of two deceptions: violence in films and the fictionality of cinema.

It is a stylistic approach that, with sensitivity and cultural assumptions very different from those of Godard, I tried to bring into some of my own productions. For example, with the telefilm *Ambrogio da Milano*, a historical biographical drama dedicated to Saint Ambrose, broadcasted on the first Rai channel in 1976. In this, I used the device of distancing, exposing the mechanism by declaring the historical intent of the work, showing, for example, the actor becoming a character. The drama, in fact, begins with the actor Giulio Brogi, who has been called to Milan to play Bishop Ambrogio, arriving in the city by train with the script and several books on the Saint that he has used for research; he reads a few passages ...

For the same motives, as a director, I distanced myself from certain psychologistic writings and performances. The presence in films of characters that yell or respond with gestures annoyed me a lot. Certainly, even gestures have their importance, but the soundtrack has priority as the main linguistic form designed to promote the audience's understanding of the visual and dramatic text.

Let's move forward some years in the evolution of your semiotic thought. You, along with Umberto Eco, were a protagonist of the so-called *pragmatic turn* within the discipline. The notion that a text is made to be used, and that the text should bear this in mind and account for it, relying on the interpretive work of its user. What characterised your approach with respect to that of your friend and colleague Eco?

His turning point was powerfully concentrated within the innovative watershed text, *Lector in Fabula* (Eco 1979). My turning point – my contribution to the turning point of the discipline – occurred in two stages – with two books spaced a few years apart: *Tempo del senso* (Time of the sense, 1979), and *La conversazione audiovisiva* (The audiovisual conversation, 1984).

I believe – aside from the fact that Umberto was concerned with literary text, while I was with film – that an initial difference between our two approaches is Eco's continuation of his previous semiotic considerations with the idea of the encyclopedia: the text relies on the encyclopedic knowledge of the viewer to make sense. Whereas in my case, I realise that the initial spark of my approach came from the actual work of a person who created audiovisual productions. Faced daily with decisions such as the length of time to hold a frame from a certain angle, a scene, the close-up on an actor ... The notion that the audiovisual text defines its use to the viewer, offering a specific time experience, a concrete duration, a time of production/consumption, is at its foundation.

Then, certainly, at the origin of these reflections there was undoubtedly the theoretical work of Wolfgang Iser.⁸ But there was also in some degree the influence of changes in society, the emergence of a desire to be involved, to not just accept the works of the media establishment, of the apparatus and powerful institutions that

were around. From here also came the push to further involve the reader-audience within the text, within its structure.

A central point is time. Many consider *Tempo del Senso* your finest work, and it is certainly one of the finest essays on semiotics of the cinema. Although differing greatly in method, the essence is very close to that of *Sculpting in Time* developed a few years later by Tarkovsky (1986) in his most famous book.⁹

Meaning is not created only by the images, the content, the sounds, the words, but also by the time in which the audiovisual offering occurs. The basic concept of this work is that there is a time of reality, a time of the representation in cinema discourse, and a time of the viewer. Of great significance is the interaction between the time of reality represented and that of the *mise-en-scene* that represents it, providing it with certain rhythms, durations, pauses, immediate or deferred combination shots. Also important, obviously, is how the performance time fits into social time, the existential, in the life and the rhythms of life of the spectator.

To stay on the question, the relationship between time and pragmatism ... Here, facing pragmatism by concentrating on audiovisual time allowed me to slip into an organic discussion on enunciations, on the dimension of the comment as opposed to the story, which were conducted within the field of linguistics and began to be addressed also in cinema studies. Think, for example, of Christian Metz.¹⁰

And it brought with it the opportunity to investigate further what was specific to the audiovisual with respect to other languages, above all verbal language.

With this in mind, one of the strongest ideas in my book is the emphasis on how, in an audiovisual and in a verbal work, the textual devices to signal the relationship between the recipient and the creator of the work are very different ...

Linguistics had identified a clear distinction between the tenses used in the text to indicate the commentative attitude, that is to signal the presence of the author and his intention to engage the reader by offering a point of view on the events. As for film and television, where there are no available tenses as in the case of spoken or written language, the comment is expressed mainly through the technical traces left by the compositional work of the so-called 'subject of the enunciation': the angles of the shots, the framing, the camera movements, the editing ...

On the other hand, precisely in the organization of the timeframe of the filmic discourse, of its duration, which is 'fixed', and cannot be determined by the viewer as vice versa a reader with the time taken to read, the presence is required in the text of a subject who designed this communication, who designed the timeframe, hoping and expecting that they are experienced and participated in the right way by the viewer – even if only by stimulating the memory to create links of the past, or to infer the reason for the temporal juxtaposition of different scenes such as in parallel editing ... So here I came too, like Eco, to consider the subject of enunciation as inherent in the text: for him the 'model author' and the 'model reader', for me the 'subject enunciator' and the 'subject enunciatee'.

At this point, you developed what you referred to as 'the second step', in the book *La conversazione audiovisiva* (The Audiovisual Conversation). Were there differences between your semiotics?

I would say that there was a different and complementary interest. Together with that of ‘the lazy machine’, the other metaphorical cornerstone of Eco, used to frame the question of pragmatic text, was that of a journey, of a passage along the ‘inferential walk’.

Eco was interested in how the text stimulated the connections within knowledge, developed culture, strengthened cognitive links, produced new meanings and interpretations, to the point of new interpretations of a text without violating it.

The text as a device constructed to resonate with, and stimulate, culture ...

My feeling has led me to consider a bit more the kind of relationship that the text can establish with its user; the quality of that communication. For this reason, my key concept was that of the ‘conversation’. The conversational situation, in fact, is no doubt the one in which better emerge, with more evidence, the characteristics of an act of communication. When two people converse, what is said in turn affects their state and that of the relationship that binds them. Within a conversation there are words, phrases, gestures, looks, silences, rites ... each of which is important for the exchange to be successful.

Within conversation, language – any kind of language – not only obeys the rules that govern the proper way to say something, but it produces concrete actions, generates reactions in the listener. It is clear that the relationship with the other party is central: my communication is different when I speak with someone that I fear, with a friend or with a stranger. It is different if there are others present and they can intervene, pushing me several times to return to the speech on the topic that interests me, to exploit the communicative standstill.

For this, it is useful to use the conversational model to analyse what the text is and what it asks the recipient for; towards what actions it leads or requires from the recipient.

In the first place, it is divided into a sequence of questions and answers. Which questions? Which interests? How does the text direct the desire of the enunciatee to know and follow the issues it addresses?

How can we gauge that which was just called the ‘quality’ of this symbolic exchange ‘inherently designed’ into the text?

It is actually an issue of responsibility, and thus of ethics: this perspective, within a pragmatic context, was directly consequential to the adoption of the conversation model, with some points of reference already present within the philosophy of language.

I refer to the conversational maxims of Grice.¹¹ In particular, in the book *L’occhio in vendita* (The Eye for Sale, 1985), I imported and applied it to the analysis of audio-visual conversation, highlighting the possibility for an assessment of the ethics of textual communication. But also, of course, since my work was directed at schooling communication professionals, in terms of operative advice with an ethical focus and interest.

Above all, I considered it in light of a regulative idea of fairness: one founded on a joint relationship between enunciator and enunciatee, a relationship in which the first does not subtly engulf the other, pushing him/her to adhere to his own view of things, but leaves space for consideration and reason, respects the other ...

This brings to mind an adverb, frequent in your books, used to indicate an incorrect manner of textual communication: ‘deceptively’, in Italian ‘artatamente’. It had an impact on us and on many students... We grew fond of it. It boiled down to the importance of a critical attitude in reception.

I didn’t discuss the authors’ right to present their worldview. A point of view is inevitable and necessary. The problem is if it is done with cards covered, if the real goal of the conversation is hidden.

If we take the example of a narrative text, the conversation that is designed may – ‘deceptively’ – oppress the enunciatee and prevent the questioning and critical evaluation of the moral vision of the protagonist when it is shared by the author.

The text may only stimulate questions on the plot developments and the events, and not foster in the recipient questions about the motivations of the protagonist. How? One way is to develop a bad guy, unable to challenge the protagonist’s ideas.

To change area, moving to the news, I have often pointed out that many news shows or talk shows superficially imply an abundance of points of view, with questions asked by the public and then answered, but in reality they structure a conversation in which the viewer is not put in the position to think, to be confronted with the right questions. A veiled monologue from its creator.

This is the case when talk show guests seem to express different points of view, but in fact nobody ever truly speaks out of the chorus, or offers a truly alternative vision ... Or, when allowed to do so, they are shown in an eccentric or negative light.

It is the same thing when a news program shows a montage of street interviews with people giving their opinion about some event: even here the voices create a suggestion of openness and plurality, of a text that is open to a real conversation, while in hindsight those voices are chosen to fit the message that the authors have already selected to frame the situation.

Again, a newspaper can encourage the public to ask the wrong questions, avoiding those which are important. There is a large amount of crime news: crimes that become soap opera news, taking and occupying the space that should be dedicated to other more important matters and events that impact most people. There is so much emphasis today on the issue of the recognition of so called-marriage for homosexual couples that we forget that Italy has an enormous demographic crisis and a complete absence of tax policies that favor families. These are all cases in which the textual conversation is not properly conducted.

There are some suggestions in your answers – for example this last point on family – suggesting that the forms and the relational structure of the text, – let’s say in technical terms the pragmatic dimension – becomes at the end an issue regarding contents, and not only the point of views or the cognitive work asked to the recipient ...

This is the direction in which my semiotics has developed. First it was focused on how the audiovisual language and how the communicative relationship assume the thing that is signified, then it gave more attention to the meanings of what was represented.

It is a development that integrates the first steps of my studies. In fact, it validates the notion of the unveiling of writing.

For example, in terms of audiovisual conversation, this means that it is good that the enunciator states his/her axiological vision.

All the more so in the context of information/the media/news: a case in point is that of science reporting, where an in-depth program, a documentary for example, should clarify the theoretical paradigm of those involved in its writing and production, and their position in relation to other existing paradigms. It is also the case in works of journalism, where it would be correct that the writer's axiological point of view is made evident.

From here, we should open the question of the value and appropriateness of the axiological point of view on the subject matter we are dealing with. Is the content highlighted by that point of view the most important? For example, were I reporting a car accident with casualties, it would not be a good point of view for me to discuss the beauty and cost of the vehicles involved. It is not just a matter of explicitness of the selective work, it is also a matter of human truth and of which values are placed at the center of the discourse.

But, to go into the matter of the content, there must be judgement, the taking into account of judgment-based parameters, of priorities formed in re, i.e. from the knowledge of reality itself, to be able to say whether or not the signs are adequate. Semiotics must admit that signs have dimensions of a truthful connection with reality and that reality has written in itself priorities, order, lines of rationality and meaning ...

This is the key idea in the second and most recent part of my semiotic studies, from the 1990s to the 2000s. Not that it wasn't present in my earlier work. For example, in *L'occhio in vendita* (The Eye for Sale), when speaking of pragmatic truth, of how a text builds its veridicality devices, I observed the need to incorporate a philosophical and evaluative paradigm which was able to read reality and the truth of action: a *logica maior* that could be a basis for an ethics of purposes.

On the other hand, looking at the issue from a complementary point of view, dealing with audiovisual and its pragmatic force, I could not fail to consider that the contents are full of pragmatic force. What I show has an effect. If there is a kiss in one scene, the effect would not be the same as that of a punch.

For the second part of your semiotic journey, we'll ask the same question we asked at the start, given that we are discussing the question of reality, of axiological realism, of the value of what is spoken.

Could you put into a semiotic context this more explicit direction taken by your thought, the entering into the question of the content? The worth of what is represented?

I would say it distances me from structuralism in its most contemporary versions. With Eco, the later Eco at least, halfway between me and those positions.

Of the more recent and successful line of structuralism, that of Greimas,¹² beyond the generativistic option that has always been stranger to me, I did not share, in particular, the gnoseological presuppositions of that theory, not least to say its

ontological ones. I refer to the idea that reality is unstructured and it is the culture, the language, that gives it the order it appears to have in our eyes.

For me, reality can be known and spoken of. In the last decades, the semiotics of Umberto Eco once again highlighted this too. I am referring to his notion of ‘primary iconism’, discussed in *Kant and the Platypus (Kant e l’ornitorinco, 1997)*. The signs have potential for truth, which for Umberto passed on the perceptual level in a matching core between stimuli coming from the object and the first mental processing made by the subject. But, then, Umberto emphasized still very strongly the process of ‘cultural negotiation’ in the definition of semantics. He continued to emphasize this.

I – indeed, we, as the essay *Quel che resta dei media* (The Remains of the Media) has been written with you, Armando – preferred to stress the complementary side: reality has a structure of meaning inherent in itself. Reality can be known and represented, and we can even say with solid reasons that, when we do that, we are representing reality (Bettetini and Fumagalli 1998).

Did these statements position you more explicitly as a Catholic semiotician?

I believe that in the first instance I should simply consider myself as a semiotician who reasoned on signs and has rediscovered certain elements of the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition. A set of elements and concepts which, first of all, are rational; but they are also elements with which the Catholic thought is at home.

And when we deal with semantics, with the construction of meanings within a text, the articulation of its possible world – in the case of narrative texts – the central questions are value, axiologies, contents that determine worldview and behavior. Now, then, the central issue is that of the existence and knowability of a ‘natural law’, a better and a worse in human behavior, a reliable anthropological paradigm.

One of the areas where the question comes to mind is, following your earlier reference, narrative textuality. Running through your reflections over the years on this subject, the new perspective appears quite clearly. What we mean to say is that in many of your earlier essays you spoke about narrative reflecting on its doxastic dimensions ...

Because, for sure, I do not deny the fact that the narratives express worldviews and are conditioned by the cultures that inspire them, strengths and weaknesses of these cultures are assumed in the telling of man. The point is, again, the thread along which my interests have gradually evolved. At the outset, the desire to ‘demistify’, to use your term, is in tune with the prevailing disciplinary debate, but saying things that, at least as far as I’m concerned, I think still have some validity.

I’ll make an example related to news. Here, a troubling factor is that almost all news is presented within a narrative framework, that is, as if they were stories, and this applies to television and newspapers alike. What does that mean? It means that you are referring to a model that has some specific characteristics. Features that (a) don’t guarantee that they are the most suited to represent the facts and (b) can be manipulated to fit certain agendas. A protagonist, an antagonist, a series of actions, each action caused by the previous one and causing the next ...

When, as a journalist, I am shaping reality by applying this narrative model, it may happen that reality is altered: namely, that in reality there are many more characters,

more antagonists, and above all there are a number of other contributing factors than those that I included in a piece of news, whether printed or broadcasted.

This doesn't take away the fact that the narrative textuality, of film and fiction, is also a way to present objective 'priorities of behavior', that is, some actions shown as better and fairer than others.

Inasmuch as a story cannot be without a rhetoric dimension, it still has a dimension of truth, and there is an expectation of truth from those who consume it. Our thesis in *Quel che resta dei media* was, no doubt, this: the confrontation with reality and the expectation of truth is the profound basis of why some contents are considered plausible or verisimilar while others are rejected despite all the weight of rhetoric that the narrative may deploy in their favor.

We have rediscovered the Aristotelian notion of *eikòs* – a universally probable proposition, the 'verisimilar' – to describe, say, that normativity tendency inherent in human nature, that is knowable, and upon which stories are drawn. The stories are convincing not only because they respond to prevailing cultural conventions, a kind of established rule for recurrence of texts of the same type, but also because (and when) they adjust to a certain *eikòs*. It is hard to accept, for example, a story in which a mother hates her son and at the same time is happy, not because it is against cultural conventions, but because it violates a core anthropological principle that we know is true.

Is this still semiotics? Is it not perhaps the application of philosophical anthropology to the media?

Quel che resta dei media presents itself as a text of the ethics of communications. I also like to think of it as a text of sociosemiotics, in the sense that it reflects upon the impact that the actions, the contents, offered by the media have on the public imagination (social imagination), and then yes, it considers them in the light of an anthropological paradigm.

If, for example, there is an exaggerated representation of love-as-passion in the media, this affects how society perceives male–female relationships within the family sphere, diminishing the link between love and family, which is eclipsed by an overvaluation of passionate love, which is a factor relatively independent from the perspective of building and sustaining a family. And this can have anthropological side effects/drawbacks

I realize that the proposal, as part of the semiotics discipline, can be, and was, even by some of my collaborators, considered provocative, hard to accept. Yet, it is not necessary to make a semiotic practice bracketing the question of truth; there is no need to say that everything is culture. Rather, this is a typical position of French structuralism.

Moreover, I believe, we must not confuse two aspects. One thing is paying attention to the work of the interpretation of the viewer, or the reader, on the basis of the text itself. There, the effects that a text may have are different and diversified depending upon the skills of the user, of his/her ability to move with ease, or even also of the ability to resist the textual conversation on offer.

But, when the media becomes a system and focuses all together on the representation of some values, certain formulas, certain patterns of action . . . , it seems

inevitable to use a paradigm of strong effects, a receptive liability by the audience as a whole.

This becomes the mediological perspective in which to insert the textual analysis of semiotics ... ?

Yes. Despite the number of attempts of counter-information, of alternative news, the media continue to enjoy a high social legitimacy, also because our economic and political systems rely on the media as part of their power. 'Television said it', 'we saw it on television'. The media give importance to the things they are talking about; and make people forget those not spoken about.

The media have been tacitly granted the task of determining what is important and what is not. There is a legitimization of this function. Despite everything, the general audience gives instinctive confidence to the media, which in their eyes provide credibility and have an aura of integrity.

But this confidence and trust given to the media is of a different type to that given in real life, because it is not based on interpersonal relationships, for reasons experienced. Rather, it arises from two factors.

The first, as I said, is the importance that the media have created for themselves, their legitimacy: they rely on their self-promotion, their entertainment value, and their big relevance both in politics and economy. The other is the space they have earned in everyone's daily lives: the proportion of reality that comes to us through the media is always greater than what we experience directly. It is our first window to the world, and then a world in itself, an alternate reality. Think of Facebook.

All this can naturally become even more problematic when you consider that every culture, every country, has its own media, its narratives, and that different cultures, with globalization, are confronted with the challenge of dialogue, of understanding.

Here again, the issue we were tackling becomes relevant: the option for an axiological realism.

If the media express different cultural positions because they operate in different cultural areas or they mirror them, the revaluation of a strong value-oriented realism within the semiotic discourse and mediology seems to me quite necessary; particularly, if we want to address the discourse of multiculturalism and formulate hypotheses for solutions against a semiotics setting that is secretly skeptic. I said this in my essay, *Capirsi e sentirsi uguali* (Bettetini 2003).

The recovery of the Aristotelian category of *eikòs* was followed by me in a renewed interest of the philosophy of common sense, which many authors have variously contributed, and that can be traced back to Vico.

The fact that there are certainties that go hand in hand with human intelligence, that arise from experience and have the strength of evidence, which is why they belong to all, are universal, in time and space, can become the basis for the 'translation' of speeches, texts, narrative genres, and for the laying of common ground amid different axiological systems.

It is not far from that idea expressed by Benedict XVI on the issue of dialogue between cultures: the idea that, on the one hand, no culture is perfect in itself; on the other hand, that all are motivated and driven by a search of truth, by a need

for truth ... A meeting, the interaction between different cultures – that you, in the wake of the Constance school,¹³ called ‘transduction’ of cultures, the ability to understand the other’s values enjoying the literary products and the fiction of its culture – something that can be mutually beneficial to approach the truth. Provided that we admit the existence of truth ...

Yes, absolutely. Even the construction of identity, of belonging and sharing in dialogue requires an anthropological foundation; otherwise, the debate leads inevitably to unstable results, to relationships that are emotional and contingent.

Without the sharing of values (of any kind), how can diverse cultures understand each other and integrate except on a superficial level of friendliness, consideration, affection? These elements are very volatile.

Besides Benedict XVI, we may also refer to Zygmunt Bauman,¹⁴ when he observes that pluralism must be anchored to a basis that is universally common to create integration and mutual exchanges. This applies even to the level of individual subjects.

Moreover, I will add my own thoughts. I believe it is exactly this lack of acknowledgement of the importance of trustworthy epistemology that has caused the fragmented and slightly disorientated landscape of recent semiotics. It is epistemological fatigue.

We are broadly in touch with different specialized semiotics (as far as I’m concerned, audiovisual, theater, gesture, mime, cultural postures, music, painting and the visual arts ...), but it seems to me that efforts to arrive at a general semiotics have never been convincing or useful, and have created yet more confusion and problems than any sort of foundations.

The possibilities and risks of mass media on culture and values

You have already widened the discussion, with some ideas surpassing a purely semiotic perspective, and wrapped it in broader mediology. In your opinion, what are the major aspects of today’s media?

Indulging a bit into an apocalyptic mood, I agree with a clever observation made by Susan Sontag.¹⁵ We live under continual threat of two equally fearful destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror.

The audiovisual is exposed, subject to forces that trivialize, unify everything, mix and equalize, and thus anesthetize.

The nonchalant switching from gory crime report to gossip, from advertisements eroticized with flirtatious models on the same page of a newspaper where unemployment is discussed ... The media have, then, always been pervaded by a tendency to ‘mirror multiplication’. The new media, social networks, have increased this. There is an overabundance of information, images of the world, of the events, the facts, which are refracted one onto the other.

This may be regarded as a realization of Peirce’s Infinite Semiosis. The hard fact is sucked into the nebula of images and opinions, or atomized, followed at every moment of its development and in every moment generating news, information, images and criticisms.

In addition, the Internet has been important here, for whatever enters this mass media galaxy is accumulated, is kept in existence.

There is a hypertrophic memory that causes disorientation because the reference points to choose what to focus on, and out of which to gain an idea of the bigger picture, are missing, are harder to find.

To appreciate this situation, I always think the delightful story by Borges¹⁶ is appropriate. There were some cartographers who wanted to please the Emperor, and produce an exact, very detailed map of the Empire. They applied themselves enough to scale it 1:1, so that the whole empire was covered by this map. They were convinced that they had made a great invention. In fact, the map was of no use to anyone because it allowed no knowledge of the world.

The overdose of information, that today with Facebook, extends to the private dimension, for which we have an excess of representations of the world and an excess of the life of the individual representations, drives us to the impossibility of building a cognitive picture of the world, both for those who make messages and for those who use them. It ends up being immersed in a world crossed by echoes, full of mirrors.

How to operate in this context? Faced with these tensions almost inherent in the mediatization of reality, are there positive and constructive paths that can be followed in the study of media – in the production and fruition of its contents?

I think there is a ‘North Star’, an ideal model to aim for. And it is the model of television in which I was trained for, and within which I worked as a director, as an author, as an executive: the Italian public television before the advent of commercial networks. For an era up until the mid-seventies, when for decades the public was offered just one program, the first channel of RAI. My thoughts here are not nostalgic, animated by memories. I fully realize that this model cannot be reproduced in today’s changed, complex, and hypercompetitive landscape, focused entirely on the economic concerns of advertising revenues.

Of course, in what Eco has called ‘paleotelevisione’, the audience was not a problem, and advertising was concentrated into a single 10-minute slot once in an evening, *Carosello* ... Another world, one might say. True, but to dismiss the model in this way would be superficial, because it embodied instances and – I would say in a better way – awarenesses that are still valid.

In the first instance, there was the awareness that the medium could do good, could help the general audience to grow and to develop its culture at a time of extremely low levels of schooling.

There was a ‘pedagogical’ desire to produce dramas drawn from the great classics of literature; making content available to a very wide audience that otherwise and in other contexts outside that of television and, would have remained inaccessible (see, e.g. the first chapter in the book *Le logiche della televisione*).

The key point, however, was not only the willingness to do things in such a way, but, upstream of it, the awareness of the ‘pedagogical’ effects of the medium: while showing, it directs and affects our feelings, our soul, our mind. There was, then, a sense of social responsibility by those who produced the content, as well as a consciousness of exerting that power. Quite simply, the power to impose their own tastes,

to give prominence to their worldview; the consciousness of being a ‘media élite’: a very few who could choose what to offer to the many.

This also applies today, not only to television, but also to the cinema, and to the press ...

That the development of content that shapes culture can be traced back to the work of an elite, to small groups of people, still applies today.

At least for that kind of content that really shapes/molds culture, which imposes models, behavioral archetypes that are emotionally charged and powerful: movies, TV shows, big TV formats sold worldwide ...

Then, yes, there is a proliferation of content generated from the ‘grass roots’ on the Internet, the social media world... but this universe revolves around human models produced by traditional media... They discuss, copy, comment and rework concepts and ideas that for the most part are originated from there ...

Now, the fact is that those media élites, those of the ‘paleotelevisione’, posed themselves the question of *what* type of culture was to be produced, since the media in any case always produce some culture. Yes, even pretending to be aseptic, neutral so to say, culture is also the most trivial commercial or soap opera or ‘trash-tv’.

The option, then, was culture as a reservoir of representations and narratives that have delved deeper within the human experience, offering a creativity and aesthetic widely recognized as superior.

In short, culture as ‘canon’: the great theater, the Russian novels ... Here, I believe that, if not totally, at least at times, and under certain circumstances, this vision can be recovered. And in fact, there are examples in which it happens; successfully and indeed within commercial TV. In my view, for example, the series *Downton Abbey*, an international success, revived the richness of the British literary and film tradition, and did so on a commercial network, not on the BBC.

This goes against the anxiety of the ratings, the downward race of content to trigger emotions and capture an audience; but also against a misunderstanding, at least in Italy, of what culture means in the truest sense. Unfortunately, an often misleading thought is found where people think that, something, to be an instance of ‘high culture’, has to be exclusive, something that ‘must’ be sophisticated and difficult. In this sense, culture is regarded as something on the sideline of, if not completely outside, the mass media. Mass media are considered by that token as something that regards ‘popular culture’, often thought of in the pejorative connotation as ‘mass culture’.

But, the point is that you can make high culture become popular with the right promotion. On the other hand, even popular culture can and must defend certain values, bring out the best. In fact, it is essential to put the question of values at the center of discourse on culture. With respect to these, even the aesthetic dimension, the beauty achieved is inherently secondary. Otherwise, you will never really have reason to say that there is no quality when there is mere spectacle, the elimination of intimacy, intolerance ...

For today, what other solutions can be seen in that exemplar?

I’m not sure if they are solutions, but points for discussion at least, which could be developed. One of these is the distinction of genres that ruled the programming of that old era.

With hybridization came formats that didn't previously exist. There was not even infotainment. There were events dedicated to forms of textuality that were clearly defined: drama, televised theatre (which has now almost vanished), news, film and children's television.

Today the trend is to mix genres and registers in the same package. News and current affairs are often presented as an entertainment show, creating interaction between people of the two different worlds, dealing with any kind of topic.

Reality television blew away and muddled the markers that distinguished fiction from reality. Before, viewers were predisposed to think, attention was required, even collaboration, and effort was needed to interpret the subject matter. Today, on average, the required level is lower and more generic. And people are more passive.

As is the case of reality TV just mentioned, and also certain factual television, the writing dimension itself is very present, although exposing it (the competition, the dynamic between the studio and the competitive arena), is elusive and uses a rhetoric of apparent realism that is false (in fact, there are elements of heavy writing in the choice of contestants with certain characteristics rather than others, the creation of certain types of relationships between them during the challenges, the great selection and editing work on material recorded to show the backstage). This heightened passivity, combined with the hyper-offering (both on and off television) that we have already spoken about, causes problems.

A large obstacle in contemporary society, in fact, is that of choice. There is an avalanche of information available on all news channels and on the Internet: how do we choose the right pieces of the puzzle and how do we build an overall view that can actually be called knowledge, that remains in the consciousness and provides structure?

Also in terms of narrative content, the problem is the same: it is the newly coined American phrase *peaktime television*.

More than four hundred television series are produced within the industry. In practice, choosing which series to watch has become a bit like going into a library. How do you pick a worthwhile (from a cultural point of view) one?

What is the answer? How can the habit for active thought be encouraged, as well as the capacity of the audience to choose?

I believe one possible way – not an easy one, and one which will take time to take roots, a road rarely travelled – is that of media education.

Where changes to the established industrial order are difficult, and in some ways are also dependent on technological evolution (e.g. new viewing platforms, Netflix, Hulu), which is difficult to predict, one needs to move beyond the media, to educating the user.

How the media industry works needs to be taught in schools, highlighting the big issues we're discussing here. The tools necessary to develop the power of choice need to be given to those who are being educated, in order to identify the right content. Essentially, we need to educate to the use of the media and educate through the media. Of course, the other way is that of institutes of higher learning, such as the one I headed in Milan to educate operators on an awareness of the crucial cultural nature of their work. They can't be provided with ready-made ethical precepts, but

with the criteria for evaluating and choosing responsibly in the everyday challenges of their work.

A classic example, that you are aware of from your own teaching experience in Milan, is that people who are trained to produce content (journalists, publicists, writers) are surprised to discover that shocking content (such as the No Anorexia campaign by Toscani for Benetton of some years ago, or similar advertising campaigns) soon loses its impact, causing people to become indifferent, even resigned. An awareness of such dynamics is what makes a competent media professional.

Do you believe media regulation is possible?

Let's stay on the subject of television. The loss of a distinction between genres has gone hand in hand with the loss of another distinction that was strong, not only within the media but also within society during the early years of television; that of the distinction between the weekend and workday. Of course, this gradual blurring did not depend only on the media but also on broader socio-economic developments. However, the media played their part. It is funny, but still important, the fact that, during the 1960s, Italian public television was devoted to entertainment (specifically live entertainment musical shows) only on Saturday evenings.

In contrast, an 'always everything' model has now been established: the serialization of the fíest and the transformation into a fíest of every work day. Everything possible, all the time. It's another long-running tension within the media. The cinema, for example, inherited from the theater its place-based festive vibe. This waned as cinema became absorbed by TV scheduling. The library providing the consumption of online demand has completely killed this dimension.

The point is that the media, television above all, potentially have a big role in social cohesion. For a long time they have offered content and points of reference because the viewers perceived and understood themselves as a society, people who lived in the same time and rhythms, with shared values. This, given the dramatic increase in options, is occurring less and less. For thousands of channels, pay TV, Internet; the possibilities for content consumption are becoming more individualized, targeted. Instead, I believe that the possibility of greatly shared appointments, generalists, accessible to all, in tune with popular culture in the highest sense, should be defended. In this sense, I believe that the regulation of the media should defend the space of a public television capable of aggregating attention and a sense of belonging, while also taking into account that today's audience is more diverse from an ethnic point of view. We have already touched on the sensitive issue of multiculturalism.

To conclude the interview, one final question. Although the answer has to some degree been given within the interview. Each of us knows why, in life, we have chosen to dedicate ourselves to a particular field of work. We know what in the subject and the areas we dedicated ourselves to, has conquered us, what we enjoyed and what gave us reasons to devote ourselves to that field. So, in your case, why signs – semiotics – why the audiovisual sector, why media?

Because signs, audiovisuals and the media enable sharing. They are tools that create commonalities. And creating, as a movie director, as a writer, is also sharing. Communicating is sharing, and sharing is wonderful.

Notes

1. A theoretical paradigm that studies cultural phenomena within the scope of a broader theoretical regulatory system, independent from human intentionality and intersubjectively shared. This system of rules may account for the human condition – including language – far more than the reference to free creative action of the players in their interaction with the world. The Genevan linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) laid the foundations of structuralist thought, which was later developed in other fields of inquiry, such as the cultural anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss (1908–2009), the semiotics of Roland Barthes (1915–1980), and in the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan (1901–1981).
2. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), American philosopher and scientist, is considered the father of pragmatism. This is the paradigm of the study of signs and language that, unlike structuralism, identifies within the subject, and within its interpretative role, a key transit point for understanding how language works and facilitates communication. In his research, disseminated in numerous articles and essays which were not collected into a systematic work, his semiotics were based on the idea that a sign, in referring to its object, generates in the minds of those who receive it, an ‘interpretant’ (i.e. a further sign) a further developed knowledge of the object.
3. Roland Barthes (1915–1980) is the French structuralist semiotician to whom the discipline of signs owes its first successes within the contemporary cultural debate, starting from the 1960s. Initially, for example in the essays *Elements of Semiotics* (1964) and *The Fashion System* (1967), his thinking has built structuralist categories on the basis of an ideological critique of the bourgeois system. Barthes identifies the ways in which it exercises its cultural hegemony, hiding, in an apparent naturality, its meanings in mass communication products. The last part of his thought – present in *From Opera to the Text* (1971), *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) and *The Rustle of Language* (1984) – was inspired by the lack of confidence in the potential of semiotics and, more generally, in the possibility that language may be used to communicate outside structures of power and domination.
4. Historian of literature and culture, and one of the leading exponents of the ‘Tartu School’ and Soviet semiotics. In particular, Lotman studied the manner in which culture is organized as a whole in a systematic way, articulated in subsystems of greater or lesser dimensions – the most extensive and comprehensive system being natural language – the definitions of which contribute specific text types. In particular, Lotman’s passion was how an artistic text, reflecting the cultural world from which it was born, can at the same time contribute to and change it, establishing within it new systematic relationships and new links between its different areas. A framework of his thought can be found in J. M. Lotman, *Text and Context. Semiotics of art and culture*, edited by Simonetta Salvestroni, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1980.
5. Cesare Zavattini, screenwriter of many films of Neorealism (among many, *Shoeshine*, 1946, and *The Bicycle Thief*, 1948) often directed by Vittorio De Sica, was also a substantial contributor to the movement. His poetics theorized the ‘shadowing of everyday reality’, of cinema as an open window to the world, in order to reproduce without artifice the most minute problems and contradictions.
6. Luchino Visconti, was a precursory director of Italian Neorealism with *Obsession* (1943), and became a pioneering exponent of it with *The Earth Trembles* (1948). In this film, his original approach to the neorealist poetic took the form of documentaristic essentialization of the *mise en scene*, with the characters and action becoming symbols of the socio-historical factors that produced their downtrodden status. His cinema, while maintaining its social flavor, moved into the path of melodrama and aesthetic refinement with its representation of the protagonist of the films and the epoch, for example in *The Leopard* (1963).
7. With Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Godard is one of the leaders and authors of the Nouvelle Vague, as well as a legend in European

research cinema. His directorial work moves from a counter and provocative approach to the seventh art. Through unsettling representation schemes, the Godard films – the most famous *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, 1960) and *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, 1967) – aimed not only to produce a suspension of disbelief and the emotional involvement of the viewer, but also to produce reflections on the viewing conventions to which the public has been educated by commercial cinema and within the capitalist ideology.

8. Wolfgang Iser (1926–2007), German theorist of literature, is best known for his phenomenological analysis of the reading of a text. Iser shows that it consists of creative and imaginative practices essential to the meaning that the text wants to convey. In this sense, the work of Iser – think in particular to the essay *The Act of Reading* (1976) – is completely in tune with that developed in the field of pragmatic text, for example, by Eco and Bettiini.
9. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sapetschatljonnoje Wremja*, 1986; it. transl. *Scolpire il tempo* (edited by Vittorio Nadi), Ubulibri, Milan 1982. Russian director, among the greatest in the history of cinema. His work combines the highest in a rare autobiographical and existential dimension, the historical belonging to the deepest traditions of his homeland, the spiritual constant tension towards the invisible and transcendent. A shining example of this is *Nostalghia* (1983).
10. Christian Metz is one of the pioneers and leaders of the semiotics of the cinema. His intellectual journey was born in the structuralist climate of the 1960s. Metz aimed – for example, with the essay *Cinéma, langue ou language?* (1964) – to verify the hypothesis that cinematographic signification could be accounted for based on an articulated code, as stable and standard as of the natural languages. He focused on identifying within cinema the equivalent of linguistic signs, intended as a minimal unit of signification given by the connection between a signifier and meaning. In the following decades, Metz's thinking will find itself in a dialectically critical position to that of the pragmatics of cinema. Metz does not share the view 'anthropoid' given utterance to which the filmic text is equipped with a system of references to those involved in the communicative exchange in which the film is to be used. Metz instead opts for a conception of 'reflective' enunciation: the filmic text refers mainly to itself. This belief is displayed in his last essay, 1991, *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film*.
11. Paul Grice (1913–1988), English analytical philosopher of language whose theory is based on a pragmatic conception of the meaning. He conceived this as essentially linked to the utterer's intent and the context in which a sentence is spoken. For Grice, what is communicated in the exchange between two parties largely consists of what each of them 'implies' with what is said explicitly. That is, as one can infer going beyond the literal meaning of the words. As Grice argues in *Logic and Conversation* (1975), that a meaningful conversation depends on the respect of the principle of cooperation in a series of maxims (quantity, quality, relevance and manner) that guides speakers to grasp the implicit meanings activated throughout the exchange.
12. Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917–1992), French–Lithuanian semiotician animator of the 'Paris School', combined the categories of structuralism with those of generative linguistics within an ambitious theoretical model – the generative semiotics model – aimed at explaining the backbone logic of the text. This was conceived as an overlapping of progressive levels of articulated meaning. For Greimas, narrative configuration (actantial roles and polemical interaction patterns), does not necessarily explicit its content. In particular, two collections of essays established his thought: *On Meaning* (1970) and *Du sense 2* (1983).
13. The Constance School is a research team that stands out in the study of reception aesthetics. It belongs, along with the already cited Hans Robert Jauss, to the aforementioned Iser. The influence of the latter on Bettiini's thought is linked to the reflection conducted by the scholar in the second phase of its research activities, with *Prospecting. From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (1989), dedicated to the

- fascinating problem of how those who consume a text are inevitably asked to suspend their axiologies, their value systems and judgments, in order to lose themselves in the work. This process occurs not only during the journey, but upon the return, given that, in the 'as if' story of fiction, the reader also experiences axiological ways that may encourage them to reconfigure themselves and that of their relationship with the world.
14. Sociologist of postmodernism who reads the complexity of contemporary society in the light of the idea of 'liquidity' (The essay *Liquid Modernity*, 2000): i.e. of variable instability due to the lack of a solid referential framework (communicative, relational and emotional, value-driven and institutional) of a prior era. A paradoxical condition of emancipated freedom from constraints, but marked by uncertainty, uneasiness, anxiety, a lack of clear objectives to be achieved and of a shared sense of existence.
 15. The ruminations of Susan Sontag (1933–2004), a writer, critic and American philosopher, cross the debate especially with her provocative conception of the interpretation and the textual analysis of the artistic work. In *Against Interpretation* (1966), Sontag argues the existence of oppressive hermeneutics in the understanding of art due to its interpretation by macrotheories (Marxism, psychoanalysis, etc.), The author opposes the need for an interpretation that focuses on form and content. Hence her famous call to abandon hermeneutics in favor of 'an erotics of art'. While not insertable into codified academic ranks of the semiotics discipline, Sontag's focus on the products of the culture industry and media have a sensitivity close to that of Roland Barthes, which was taken up and developed specifically with regards to photographic image.
 16. Bettetini refers to the apologue in the piece *Del rigore della scienza*, the final piece in *Universal History of Infamy* (1935). The fable expresses the taste of the great Argentine writer and poet for the fantastic and the paradoxical, and his ability to question the automatisms by which man, taking them for granted, understands himself and his relationship with reality.

Disclosure statement

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