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A Semiotic Analysis of the Expression of Antithetical Emotional States

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Abstract

Our aim in the present analysis is to interpret gestures, facial expressions, micro expressions, behaviors that accompany a particular speech / message that appear in a moment of extreme emotional tension. We are interested in contradictory emotional tension, one that occurs concurrently crying and laughing on the background of two trends of schizoid behavior. The support of this analysis is given of the many interpretations of the aria Vesti la giubba in the opera Pagliacci by Leoncavallo. We start this analysis with the following problems: how to achieve conscious control paraverbal language in situations of emotional tension? How do we obtain the empathy of the recipient with the affective tension that is passed to him by the game of gestures conscious / unconscious? Is this emotional tension a paradoxical state that we associate with the category of the sublime? The problem is approached from the perspective of semiotics and psychoanalytic; we try to identify the foundation of psycho-affective paraverbal sign. Thus, the findings converge to the emotional contradictory energy association with the aesthetic intellectualization of this event.

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The problem: overlapping discourses

In this article, we intend to analyze in terms of semiotics some behavioural manifestations occurring in certain

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situations that we call *emotional crisis*. What we are primarily interested in are the ways of communication and expression that are associated with this crisis. Therefore, we position ourselves in a semiotics of passions, in the sense of Greimas & Fontanille (1997). The main passion we will talk about is jealousy. We'll analyze this element as it appears transposed in Leoncavallo's work, *Pagliacci*. We chose this work to analyze jealousy because here we find it in a less common form than in other works - literary or musical -, being associated with affective structures or devices that apparently have nothing to do with jealousy, as it is currently understood.

Therefore, the main idea that we have in mind concerns the construction of the signs structure that a passion - jealousy - can generate and which determines radical changes in the subject that interprets/construes and lives in the world under the influence of this passion. In the usual circuit of the life of signs, these often refer to a cognitive interpretative resort. A consequence of this is that the interpretant subject adopts an attitude of opponent, isolated from the object - sign that he interprets/construes. The meaning of a sign or of a group of signs is *decrypted* and *understood* by this subject, according to certain mechanisms. This is usually where the descriptive semiotic mechanism stops. When, however, we encounter a situation where the production of signs overlap with emotional symptoms that occur as a result of *affectation* of the subject by the external objects-signs together with interior passions-signs, then we will find ourselves in another interpretive grid from the semiotic point of view. Rational understanding of the signification is closely related to, or in some cases even eclipsed by a specific *behaviour* that *manifests* by possible significations that this semiotic complex can induce the subject. Therefore, we talk about a self-affectation in the moment that the subject becomes his own producer of signs. A schizoid phenomenon occurs in which a part of the subject produces these signs - usually unconsciously - that address to the same subject that receives and interprets them with his second part, conscious and passionate (who fully lives suffering, joy or other emotions)¹. We therefore talk of two *states*: one of the things and one of the mind. A state can be defined as the result of a transformation of an actant. A state defines therefore either the beginning or the end of an action. When the action is directed towards the world, we talk about a state of objects - that addresses mostly to cognition, the world being now *understood* and *decrypted* by a logic of interpretation. Usually, in this case we talk about an understanding of the signs using a *more geometric* method. When the action is focused on the inside, on the emotional life and inner transformation, we talk about emotional states, which mostly are *experienced* first, and only after described. To understand them we need the external experience. A state - the overall transformation of an actant - connects or mediates, allowing homogenisation of the state of affairs and the soul. In the abstract of Leoncavallo's opera we witness a blend of these two types of states, which, according to the logic of passion, make the worlds overlap. Imaginary overlaps reality and viceversa. Therefore, a *tensivity* appears, in the terms of Greimas & Fontanille, which belongs to a discursive and phrastic level. The term defines the effect a speech has on the subject. Any system of signs - especially those included in a speech - creates in the subject a certain a tensive imaginary, meaning a projection of the inner space through which the subject reduces the external to the inner world to generate a personal manner of existence or a semiotical understanding. This tensivity belongs mainly to the discourse! Sensitivity is the result of this understanding/experience of the subject in relation to the speech.

What Leoncavallo's opera brings to our attention is a compound of factors that can be analyzed on several levels. A first important element in terms of semiotics is the very idea of discourse. We're talking about three overlapping discourses. First, we have the opera as a discourse which is addressed to an audience. The entire string of events is interpreted as discourse - and ultimately as music -, which creates a certain tensivity in the audience that triggers a pathemic response, in its original meaning: *pathe*=passion, affection. The effects of a system of interpretable signs can be classified in two categories: the signs of a cognitive nature that lead to an understanding - if they lead to the probable and the plausible, an argumentative framework is needed - and/or the ones that produce a pathemic content, mainly in the form of the *obviousness/evidence*, which is also borrowed by the cognition, but being an intermediate structure that triggers adhesion and a certain emotional response. The second discourse is present in the opera itself and belongs to the central subject: the character Canio, the jealous. He expresses his entire inner tension in a discourse which is included in another discourse. It is known that this opera is one of the symbols of the *mise en*

¹ We believe that U. Eco uses this metaphor of the double nature of the subject, which itself can be split into two completely separate forms, when he "sickens" the main character of *The Cemetery of Prague*, giving him a split personality.

abîme process. The third discourse is the one that describes the external facts in the opera: the series of events, the interaction between characters etc. The fact that deepens Canio's pain, as we shall see, is related precisely to this overlap and even to the confusion that arises from the relationship between the three types of discourses. Please note that the first discourse – the one addressed to the audience – should not be interpreted as a discourse from the character's point of view. He "doesn't know" that he is on a stage, that his life is a subject of a certain metadiscourse. But there is, in psychological terms, the possibility for any subject, being in a string of events, to manifest this attitude towards these events: he can feel detached and be able to see himself from the outside. So we can talk about a discourse in this case, too, which speaks about the attitude towards the sequence of events that affect a subject. The second discourse, which belongs to the character's inner self, is the central one, describing and underlining the dynamics of a passion that builds up inside him and triggers the whole system; this is jealousy. The third discourse, which should not be immediately considered a discourse from the character's point of view, talks about the "life" situations or the world in which the character is thrown. With Canio in mind, this is not a discourse as a sequence of linguistic signs, but it's exactly the life he lives. We tend to consider this third discourse as the one of the character because it is often confused with the second discourse, which belongs to the character's inner self. Jealousy is omnipresent both in the real-imaginary situation of the opera and in the imaginary-real interpretation inside the opera – the theatre within the theatre. In any case, the opera draws our attention to this subject: life as a discourse!

The semiotics of passions

Probably *À la recherche du temps perdu* is the most representative work that illustrates the life of the inner signs, the way they blend and trigger passion into a subject (Deleuze, 1970). Proust is like the first semiotician who studied the inner feelings in their finest details. Greimas & Fontanille "formalize" this semiotics and include it in a method to examine the amount of conditions/prerequisites which gives us an idea of the meaning that results from analyzing a specific "ontic horizon". Semiotics doesn't seek an ontic foundation, but this image/meaning which is associated with the ontic. In this way, both Proust and Greimas do a dissection, or, using a term acceptable to Greimas (1970), *disengage* the ontic, leaving it in the form of the significations associated with their signs. The passions of the soul become structures that are part of certain "anatomical" constructs of the ontic and their meaning appears as a "physiology" which is coherent only after the analysis which disengages the ontic from the discourse. Thus, we can say that semiotics of passions disengage or detach itself from the distinction between the subject's inner and outer world. Both worlds must be dealt with the same method, and passions become objects in the same sense in which the objects of the world are considered objects. Here we talk about bijective associations between two homogeneous classes. If we don't introduce this principle, semiotics will lose itself in a pure ontological analysis, becoming a philosophy. A passion-internal object is defined as a more or less complex structure which naturally acquires its meaning only as an element that is part of a network.

Hence, Greimas identifies jealousy as a knot in a larger network, being situated between attachment and rivalry. And these have different shapes, causing, depending on the angle of the approach, changes in jealousy. For example, the rivalry may have at least two forms: emulation and hatred. A jealousy which is influenced by emulation (by competition, by overcoming the opponent at any cost) becomes superior, but the other one characterizes small spirits and it will inevitably lead to almost animalistic manifestations in conflict resolutions – violence. In the first case, jealousy engages envy, transforming the jealous subject into an emulator, but in the second, jealousy engages hate, which makes the jealous subject a warrior. However, when we talk about passions, we must follow a semiotic schema which takes the form of the pathemic square (Greimas & Fontanille:1991). Here we have the four thymic categories: euphoric-dysphoric (positive-negative, pleasure-pain, attractive-repulsive), phoric-aphoric (a plurality of pathemic devices, the subject suddenly feels many passions, like jealousy, and its opposite, the total lack of passion, with no emotional movement, a state associated with sheer indifference). These thymic categories, which are the framework in which the emotional dynamics takes place, represent also the material or the vehicle that triggers thymic analysis; the relationships between people are established depending on these poles of attraction or rejection and on the intensity or the power of living these emotions. Thus, Greimas & Fontanille speak, in case of jealousy, about three main poles: the subject (the jealous one), the object (the person towards the attachment behaviour is directed) and the rival (the element that triggers the appearance of the pathemic device). Around these poles,

different dynamics develop: the main thymic modality – euphoric, phoric, dysphoric –, the intensity of the modality, which can either melt into aphoria or have various degrees; factors that can trigger other pathemic forms which fit perfectly into this structure. At this point we need to distinguish between the *pathemic structure* and the *pathemic device*. The first one designates a microsystem, an isolated, well defined passion, which has a certain autonomy in comparison to other structures. We say that it is highly individualized. For example, anger is a structure like this. It has a clearly defined point in time when it starts and a certain intensity and form that can be identified immediately, either by the pathemic subject or by another person. A pathemic device is a pathemic complex that appears at the intersection of several microsystems. The pathemic device has complex shapes; the same device may appear from the intersection, at different times, of different pathemic structures. In the case of jealousy, we talk about a pathemic device, not a pathemic structure. First of all, jealousy can develop from the passion for an object (greed) to an intersubjective passion (subject-object-rival). Then the dispositional complex forms after the combination of pathemic structures: suffering, despair, fear, anxiety etc. We can talk here about the jealousy that deals with a situation in which events that triggered it happened before or after the emotional crisis; the jealousy of the subject who *suspects*, but has no proof that his rival truly exists, will take different forms than the jealousy of the subject who, after *the moment of surprise*, after a particular event, clearly identifies the "betrayal" of the object of his passion: a relationship with the rival. So, the configuration of jealousy generally situates it between attachment and rivalry.

The shape of jealousy in *Pagliacci*, Leoncavallo's opera

So far we have established the theoretical framework in which jealousy is situated. Next, we are interested to see how jealousy is presented in semiotic terms, in a concrete example. We chose this example because it illustrates a certain transformation "process" of the subject, under the influence of this pathemic device. In most works where jealousy is present, it triggers actions, often tragic, and brings into light the pain of the three people involved in the relationship. We believe that Leoncavallo's opera draws our attention to a phenomenology of the subject who feels intensely the jealousy, showing, in fact, the consequences the subject has to deal with and focusing less on the subject-object-rival triad. The author, therefore, sends us to an inner semiotics, the one of introversion, trying to focus on the formation of signs in an interior discourse. Jealousy is a passion that reveals itself, which exposes itself in relationships with others. The actions of a subject guided by this passion have their own logic, explained by an "audience" in terms of this passion effects. Instead, what this passion triggers in the subject, that is the attempt to create an interior discourse, one which is addressed to the very subject, who is in dialogue with his own experience, is less analyzed in detail. Shakespeare's *Othello* shows us rather how passion itself is built under the influence of a rival who produces signs in order to notice what emotional reactions they generate. Iago "guides the eyes" of Othello from the outside, leading him as much as jealousy can. At Racine and Flaubert we find the same phenomenology of jealousy, which is based on the interpretation of the external signs of jealousy manifestations.

In Leoncavallo, the focus is on a strong relationship between jealousy and the *perception of reality* by the subject. In fact, through *mise en abîme*, the author sets the interior effect which immediately accompanies jealousy; real life is the same in the imaginary projection, and the imagery expands in the real life until it leads to confusion.

But let's resume the story. The characters are five in number. All these are in relation to or have a significant role in the interpretive schema of the subject. So, we talk about: Canio the Pagliacci, the subject who feels jealousy in all its intensity; Nedda-Colombina, Canio's wife and the object of passion; Silvio, the rival and Colombina's secret lover; Taddeo-Tonio, an ugly circus performer who is in love with Nedda, but she doesn't return his affection, on the contrary, she rejects it; Beppe the Harlequin, who plays the lover's role in the play Canio's theatre group must interpret. The events in the play take place on a certain August 15. It is said that Leoncavallo was inspired by a real event when he created this opera: the story of a trial his father presided, that of an actor who had killed his wife on stage, driven by jealousy, under the eyes of the audience, who hadn't had any reaction because they all thought it was part of the show. Nowadays, there are many famous theatrical productions of this opera. In our analysis we used the one made by Franco Zeffirelli in 1982. The opera begins with a prologue which asks for permission to speak about humanity, about the struggles of those who could be considered superior, those who have the advantage to live in several worlds, such as actors. They are, too, overcome by feelings which can take control over them. There is even a passion that produces confusion, or, in other words, that *gives the illusion* that it is well known: love, "In

reality, love is a play." In the prologue, the focus is on *the flesh and bones* of human reality and *love as an imaginary world*. From the encounter of these two ways of looking at the world and living conflicts that annihilate or heighten humanity may arise. In the first scene, in a big market city (Milan), a great artistic event is announced to start at 11 p.m. It's interesting how the author announces when the events occur, on a certain day (15), and how the character, the clown, specifies the time when the show begins, at 11 p.m. There is a character, the clown, who relates to other five characters – considering himself to be one of them, looking at himself from the outside. On the other hand, it is reaffirmed the idea of *the fateful moment, the evil hour*, the one in which, at a specific moment in time, the inner structure explodes because the inner transformations require immediate solutions; jealousy needs to externalize the long elaborated dynamics. In Leoncavallo's opera, or in the case of Othello, the solution is to annihilate the object and/or the rival, meaning to break the subject-object-rival chain. When love doesn't necessarily embrace this form of jealousy, but keeps the triadic form of the subject-object-environment, we find the suicide solution, the self-annihilation, when the chain is broken starting with the self, as it is in *Romeo and Juliet*. This fateful moment, announced twice in the opera, predicts the resolution of the conflict between the two spouses who are forced to enter an unacceptable "equation", the triad (2-3). The world and the actors retire, called by the church bells who announce the evening service (the vespers), which ends with a wedding. The market tumult melts in a general song and from the clown's jokes on the expense of the potential rivals who might try to seduce his wife the story moves to something more serious and solemn – the evening service, with songs dedicated to light and faith. This is the first schism: the super-reality of transcendence opposes the social reality. Vespers, with its ritual, seems to be a drama play, but an oversized one due to its seriousness and impact. The wedding of some strangers under the church blessing blends this fiction with reality – love, as a play, becomes pure reality in this form. The next two scenes introduce the relationships of Nedda-Colombina with the two suitors: Tonio-Taddeo and Silvio. Disgusted, she first rejects the man who loves her, because he has "a soul as repulsive as the body". Then she runs into the arms of Silvio, the one she truly loves. The two are caught by Canio, who can't put his hands on his rival because he runs away on time. It is interesting that all the characters have two names. Each of them lives, in fact, in two worlds: in the theatre (be it an inner imaginary world, as in the case of Tonio-Taddeo) and in reality. But this is not the case of the rival, who has only one name: Silvio. The next scene introduces the very famous aria *Vesti la giuba*, which marks the moment of maximum intensity of pain experienced by the clown². It is the moment when the character identifies himself with the clown: "Are you a man? You are a clown!" In the next scene, Zeffirelli presents Colombina preparing for the show, but only accompanied by orchestra. Her gestures show an overwhelming indifference. The last scene of the opera presents the show – the theatre within the theatre/opera. Now the life of the two is under the spotlights again, but with the character who plays Silvio, Beppe-the Harlequin, Colombina's lover in the play. The tension increases again and produces a new transformation in Canio-Pagliacci, who plays the role of the betrayed spouse once more. In this imaginary world, he arrives to the opposite conclusion than in the aria *Vesti la giubba*, when he identified himself with the clown and doubted his humanity. Now he says: "I'm not a clown! (...) I believed in you more than in God!" Then we have the consummation of the tension built up by jealousy and the killing of the two, Colombina and Silvio. *La commedia è finita!*

Conclusions

Let's go back to the Greimas & Fontanille's structure. We consider that the two semioticians' schema is built around two poles: the pathemic device (jealousy) and the extroverse relationships of the characters. The jealousy is the result of the motion between different passions – being situated between attachment and rivalry –, generating a sequence of thymic complexes with which it is associated to: suffering, emulation, desire, fear, despair, anguish etc. But it also presents itself as a manifestation necessary dependent on external relationships between individuals. The

² The lyrics are: *Act! While in delirium, / I no longer know what I say, / or what I do! / And yet it's necessary... / make an effort! / Bah! Are you not a man? / You are a clown! / Put on your costume and powder your face. / The people pay to be here, and they want to laugh. / And if Harlequin shall steal your Colombina, / laugh, clown, so the crowd will cheer! / Turn your distress and tears into jest, / your pain and sobbing into a funny face – Ah! / Laugh, clown, at your broken love! / Laugh at the grief that poisons your heart!*

basic schema that triggers jealousy is triadic. This model of interpretation is strictly extrovert. To define this term we start from what Jung (1997) meant by it: the individual's psychological tendency to find energy and satisfy the needs of his libidinal energy in taking part in actions and external events of a social nature. The extrovert, from the semiotic point of view, is the one who finds the source of signs life, of the possible interpretations and of the creation of new signs only in the situation of a close relation to the environment. In our interpretation, based on the example of Leoncavallo's opera, we tend towards the opposite direction of analysis, which is the one provided by introversion. Also in Jungian terms, introversion is the psychological tendency to favour and value the internal feelings of the subject. Or, in semiotic terms, introversion is the privileged space that offers the individual the condition of forming, understanding and building signs. The filter through which the world is explained is not represented by the external relationships between individuals, but the internal dynamics rendered by his feelings. Thus, we come to the orientation of the model around two poles, but with different importance. We do not talk about equal and parallel poles, as we are tempted to speak from Greimas & Fontanille's point of view, when the two poles overlap, but we talk about causal poles. The effect of the inner life, of the pathemic device of jealousy, is the positioning in a complex of relational situations with other characters – who are exactly real or imaginary projections of the subject. We saw that they are five in number in our situation. This is the second pole: the effect. The first pole, the causal one, is given by the structure in which the pathemic device develops, a structure that triggers the development of the main manifestation forms at the subject's understanding and experience levels. At the experience level, we have the structures and devices described above, from the Greimas & Fontanille's point of view. Love or, better said, the subject's imaginary related to it, is the main source of energy that triggers all the other feelings associated with it. Jealousy causes instead introverted associations that go far beyond the position between attachment and rivalry. We talk about far more complex constructions: a system is engaged, one which situates the subject between what he understands to be the real and the imaginary world. The tension built up by jealousy finds a solution in this scheme in which the events and the subject's understanding are projected in an either real or imaginary world. Jealousy engages the contact between reality and imaginary, which causes, of course, an antithetic that has certain consequences. The result of the tension created by the understanding of the two ultimately leads to a rupture which can be translated as *a loss of identity*. Canio, under the tension built up by jealousy, being carried away in his imaginary that overlaps reality, then becomes again imaginary, comes to a point where he loses his identity, wondering if he is a man or not. What is he? A clown? A man? Both of them? Neither one, nor the other? The solution is choosing the most irrational actions: murder, the breaking of the relationships chain in reality and the extreme suffering caused by the loss of the loved one. Jealousy, which is only a factor that puts the personality in a paradoxical situation, placing it between two worlds, demands this solution. But, because this situation is not accepted, it demands a much more understandable solution, the retreat to a safe structure, even if it is suffering.

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