

Phenomenology and Semiotic: Crossing Perspectives

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1. Introduction: bodies and signs in search of the meaning.

In recent years the study of relationships between semiotics and phenomenology seems to be entering a period of renewed vitality and creativity (CADIOT & VISETTI 2001; ROSENTHAL & VISETTI 2008; 2010; PIOTROWSKI 2009; FONTANILLE 2008; BONDÌ 2012). For a variety of theoretical and historical reasons, there has been a constant osmosis between phenomenological and semiotic methods. In short, on one side, the works and investigations of phenomenologists have provided essential tools to semiotics. To give just an example: the greimasian semiotics theory refers to the process of meaning formation in terms of perceptual apprehension thanks to his original recovery of Merleau-Ponty's perception theory. On the other, and at the same time, phenomenology is engaged in describing the activity of language and, in particular, the speaking activity (*prise de la parole*) of a subject which is a "being-in-the-world" (*être-au-monde*) and a "being-in-the-language" (*être-au-langage*): this is the paradigmatic case of Merleau-ponty and of his own model of linguistic gesture as emblem of expression. Furthermore, and more deeply, phenomenology and semiotics are methods rather than disciplines (BORDRON 2011). By means of the *epoché*, phenomenology has tried to return the articulation of the sensible and of the intelligible, and, on the other, the connections between subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Similarly, semiotics has proposed methods of analysis that are applicable to a wide range of domains:

from narrative values to social identities, from textual traces to cultural practices with particular reference to their conditions of emergence.

In this simultaneously *archaeological* and *constructive* orientation, phenomenology and semiotics have brought new challenges concerning the description of the phases of the meaning constitution. The interplay between semiotic reflexions and phenomenological investigations has allowed to deepen a wide range of problematic issues: the variety of semiotic experiences (perceptive, imaginative and linguistic) and the hybridization of semiotic systems related with the study of these experiences. Several authors are engaged in analyzing these issues and examining complementary thematic options:

- i) the role of the body (and *bodily imagination*) in the *semiogenesis*, i.e., in the conditions of construction, articulation and/or differentiation of the expression and content planes;
- ii) the *chiasma* (or “imbrication”) between perception and language;
- iii) the relationships between *sensible experiences* or *esthésie* (as open synthesis of physiological, pulsional and imaginative aspects) and “*enunciative praxis*”;
- iv) the nature of the *speaking subject* (*sujet parlant*);
- v) the *semiotic institutions* between nature and culture and the relations of temporal proximity between textual forms and process of subjectivation.

In this issue we tried to give voice this heterogeneity of perspectives and problematic aspects. The essays collected here reflect, in a peculiar manner, this type of theoretical concerns. We try to give a quick description about them.

The essay of JACQUES FONTANILLE is centered on the analysis of the concept of “form-of-life”. The Author, after having examined the wittgensteinian background of this concept, tries to specify it in terms of “significant sets” of “texts”, “signs”, “objects” and “practices” which determine the meaning (or *sens*) of the lives that human beings lead. In this regard, the essay is oriented toward identifying the phenomenological, sensibles and cultural aspects of such particular sets.

GÖRAN SONNESSON tries to demonstrate that Semiotics and Phenomenology, although «spurred by different interests and preoccupations», are concerned «with the same fundament of experience: meaning». In order to justify this working hypothesis, the Author focuses on the similarities between Husserlean and Peircean tradition with particular reference to the nature of proposition. In addition, He observes that the peircean and saussurean uses of the term “sign”

are sufficiently broad to capture the uses of “meaning” promoted by some exponents of phenomenological tradition.

The essay of DAVID PIOTROWSKI and YVES-MARIE VISETTI is centered on the project of developing a “phenomenological linguistics” devoted to investigate the “perceptive unity” of the form and of the meaning and to interpret this unity as a result of dynamical regimes of semiotic constitution (or *sémiogènese*). From here, a detailed discussion of some theoretical instances of merleau-pontian phenomenology with particular reference to the notions of “gesture” and “parole” – and, finally, “verbal gesture”. The meaning, for the authors, “ seen first as the unfolding of a figural field induced by an essentially ‘incomplete’ linguistic apparatus”.

The essay of PIERLUIGI BASSO is a articulated analysis of some theoretical instances of Semiotics with particular reference to the “permeability of semiotic forms of life”. By means of a detailed examination of this crucial theoretical point, the Author focuses on the statute of artwork and stresses the necessity of interconnecting “perception”, “use”, “interpretation” and analysis of this particular “human construction” with its spatial determinations.

SEBASTIANO VECCHIO promotes an original analysis of the semiological background of Pierpaolo Pasolini’s work with particular reference to some articles of *Empirismo eretico* and *Lettere Luterane*. By means of a detailed examination of some theoretical instances of Pasolini’s work, the Author shows the presence of significant points of contact with Charles Sanders Peirce’s work and Paul Ricoeur’s work.

The essay of DOMINIQUE DUCARD is centered on the analysis of some theoretical aspects of Maldiney’s phenomenological work with particular reference to the notions of “pathic” (or *pathique*) and “rythm” (or *rythme*). The Author, after having examined the “echoes” of these and other maldineyan notions in some contributions of french semiotics – with particular regard to so-called “École de Paris”, advances the project of a “morphogenetic semiotics” aiming to analyze the significant forms as “traces” (or *markers*) of processus which are not directly observable and which are simultaneously linked to the spheres of “sensory-motor” and “imaginary”.

The essay of WALDIR BEVIDAS proposes a motivated defense of the hjelmeslevian notion of immanence and introduces the concept of “semioception” (or *acte sémiologique*). By means of this concept, the Author promotes the constitution of a “discursive epistemology” aiming «to compete with transcendental reflection of phenomenological philosophy, as well as scientific epistemology of the hard sciences». In this regard, He presents “semioception” as a «competitor» of the concepts of “enaction” and

“perception”.

The essay of VALERIA DE LUCA is centered on the analysis of the notion of “figural” understood in the first instance as «activity which dislocates [...] the differences and antagonisms of semiotic values». By means of a detailed analysis of some of most significant scholars which have examined this subject (from Greimas to Parret, from Lyotard to Castoriadis), the Author promotes a conception of the “figural” as «device able to move the boundaries between speech and desire» and between many other aspects of human semiotic activity.

GARNET BUTCHART focuses the analysis of Jean Luc Nancy’s semiotic phenomenology of community with particular reference to the concept of “being-with”. According to the “communicological” model of R. Lanigan, the Author promotes a tripartite analysis of this notion, i.e. an analysis centered on “description”, “reduction” and “interpretation” of *being-with*.

The essay of SARA DE CARLO promotes some theoretical instances of Michel de Certeau’s historiographical method with particular reference to the idea that every historiography involves a specific philosophy of history. By means a detailed analysis of the principal sources of de Certeau’s method, the Author gives us the portrait of a work of great relevance for the humanities and social sciences.

The essay of FRANCO LO PIPARO is centered on the analysis of the nexus between *sóma* and *psyché* in the context of Aristotle’s philosophy with particular reference to the biology of human and nonhuman animals. The Author promotes an original conception of the phenomenology’s body.

Finally, in the section of “The Paths of Metodo”, the essay of RICHARD LANIGAN is centered on the constitution of a “semiotic phenomenology” (or *communicology*), i.e. a research program which is articulated in almost three fundamental points: a) *Description* of our embodiment which is “preconsciousness” and which accounts for the human condition of *Subjectivity*; b) *Reduction* of our embodiment which is “consciousness” and which accounts for the human condition of *Intersubjectivity*; c) *Interpretation* of our embodiment which is “experience” and which accounts for the human condition that *Subjectivity is Intersubjectivity*.

2. Expression, Semiosis and “milieu”: toward to a phenomenological turn of sciences of culture.

For the Husserl's phenomenology, it remains difficult to treat language, culture and sociality, so as constituting a native consciences, bodies, intersubjectivity which are yet its material, and its first objective. The anthropologist sciences and semiotic approaches to cultures and texts, identified these dimensions in terms of structures, practices, roles and institutions. In Husserl's approach, these dimensions are sent to a second stage of theoretical construction, which can only come from elsewhere (as in the case of cognitive science). From this point of view, semiotic and phenomenology do not seem destined to meet and their relations seems forever compromised.

But, it is necessary to recognize that subjectivities, human behavior and experience, even the most intimate, only form from *expression plans*, expressive registers and technology.

The semiotic phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty has once proposed a different path: to recognize immediately the *expressive dimension of any perceptive awareness*, which emerge from the constantly co-articulation between body and field. It is important to rework the notion of consciousness in a world made not only of things or body, but crossed by current or imminent *sémiogénèses* involving institution, history, heritage. This relationship between expression and subjectivity is a fundamental aspect of Merleau-Ponty reflection. Victor Rosenthal and Yves-Marie Visetti demonstrated the centrality of the relationship between native expression, intersubjectivity of the constitution of the forms and their institutionalization in Merleau-Ponty's theory, that can help in the construction of a research program that could be described as a true "semiotic phenomenology":

Il s'agit en particulier de frayer un meilleur passage entre une phénoménologie herméneutique de l'expérience (centrée sur le sensible et l'intersubjectivité), et les herméneutiques (ou pragmatiques) publiques propres aux sciences des textes, de la culture, de la société. Traduit dans les termes d'une interdiscipline scientifique, cela revient peu ou prou à partir du principe (i) que l'être-au-monde est d'emblée être-au-monde social et être-au-langage, (ii) que cette structure herméneutique s'incarne directement dans celle de la perception, en tant qu'expressive, et travaillée par une perspective sémiogénétique débordant la simple réanimation de systèmes de signes ou traces delà individuées, (iii) que les sémiogénèses constituent une médiation essentielle de la conscience, et le principale étayage des intentionnalités, (iv) qu'elle reposent sur la reprise de formes instituées et héritées, impliquant des formes à la fois malléables, partiellement mémorisées,

et collectivement prolongées (ROSENTHAL, VISETTI 2010, 26).

The project of a semiotic phenomenology of cultures has become increasingly essential in today's scientific context in which cognitive paradigms deprived of any semiotic dimension tend to prevail. On the contrary, we aim at showing that the cultural dimension is a fundamental one in the cognitive and experiential processes itself. Based upon an ecological anthropology as well as the embodiment thesis, a truly semiotic phenomenology and anthropology will avoid the pitfalls of the "externalist" and "internalist" viewpoints that are most commonly defended in contemporary cognitive science. As is well known, the cognitive system of the externalist tends to functionally represent the external world whereas the internalist claims that the brain is a necessary and sufficient cause for cognitive activities in general.

Semiotic phenomenology is different from these viewpoints as it takes cognition as a structural coupling between body and environment that enacts a proper world for the development of its organization. More recently, the embodied paradigm has been connected to philosophical and scientific currents in phenomenology. From a phenomenological perspective, cognition is rooted in a body. For example, only a body having an existence in space can build a general framework that allows for spatial perception. But a body endowed with will and desire, with instinctual, emotional and affective dimensions is necessary to account for spatial location and to constantly evaluate its relevance (ROSENTHAL & VISETTI 2010). Yet phenomenology does not hold that body, because in this perspective cognition is also inseparable from language and social history.

Once this "organic dimension of the body" is fully integrated into the very process of perception, how does one account for culture as part and parcel of cognitive processes without splitting them up from the inner world of subjective experience? Following the philosopher Merleau-Ponty, we will argue that semiotic phenomenology allows another form of crossover between the natural sciences and cultural studies. In this context, phenomenology takes the primacy of perception as expressive, semiotic and linguistic. A Phenomenology where the hermeneutic structure, which immediately implies a social-being-in-the-world and being-language, is embodied in a perceptual structure which has the particularity of being both expressive and semiogenetic. In the sense that all that is seen is not the only manifestation of a style to be. Semiotic phenomenology takes seriously the idea that cultural perception implies that any perceived form is constrained in its terms of apprehension: what is perceived is always as an expression of some practical layout and an

assessment makes sense.

The interdisciplinary work and methods we present here is part of a problematic and theoretical field which aims allows the relationship between individual cognition and social phenomena to be thought of in a new way. This approach is based on both Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms and on a semiotic phenomenology similar to that of Merleau-Ponty, as well as a critique of neodarwinian models of social cognition and language, which are considered inadequate in the context of semiotic anthropology. Building on Cassirer's work, we propose the model of a *symbolic economy* that integrates practices and fictional dimensions of social interactions within a framework of assumptions. The *tour de force* that this epistemological construction represents by securing these anthropological dimensions in a single research framework is decisive for us. It is the step forward that allows for the continuation of a project of semiotics and anthropology as well as a phenomenology of the imagination.

Here we will reach the authors' main postulates to show the congruence and interest they assume since semiotic anthropology can extend its applications to various anthropological objects. We will outline a semiotic anthropology defined as a field of study forms and symbolic activities, language, practices or techniques, modeled as a symbolic economy of complex systems, including agents and assign transactions and convey roles and values which determine the interactions. This means that human social phenomena do not emerge from the interaction of individuals whose goals and interaction would be preprogrammed, nor does the symbolic dimension fall within individual skill (LASSÈGUE, ROSENTHAL, VISETTI 2009).

On the contrary, in the critical legacy of anthropology and structural linguistics, it is suggested that we assume the fate of a sign playing in "registers both fictional and practical, while its meaning is determined in an association different to others, and the "translation" to other sets of signs." For semiotic anthropology, the statement "it is the semiotic practices that generate and organize experience" is to enter, based on three assumptions: i) any subjective experience, any perception is immediately semiotic; ii) this semiotic mediation of experience and perception is inseparable from forms and values of which they are the object; iii) these forms and values can be conceived only within the social transactions that lead to existence.

With the outset of social cognition and questioning of referentialism in theories of language, semiotic anthropology offers an alternative route to the dominant cognitive models, through which it becomes possible to envision continuity between biological and socio-cultural phenomenology, specifically

to find new explanations for phenomena that overlap the body, subjective experience, and social discourse. Theories of self-organization and emergence in complex systems, which allow for the consideration of how the brain works from massive and distributed connections, have been an alternative to orthodox cognitive theories for quite some time.

The aim of these researchs which opens a semiotic phenomenology is to move the place of the field of meaning of the intentional aim of a subject without only relocating it in a physical or biological world. With the themes of expression and semiogenesis, semiotic anthropology is able to dialectically establish various epistemological contradictions within the humanities and social sciences. In this sense:

le thème sémiogénétique écarte les interprétations idéalistes et intentionnalistes de la phénoménologie, et l'idée d'une intentionnalité qui serait constituante de son objet, sans avoir à se découvrir dans l'expression, à chercher et adresser ses mots. Soit en effet que l'on majore la dimension de l'institution, vue comme une passivation des sujets ; soit que l'on souligne le rôle ontogonique de l'expression, qui fait exister ce qu'elle profère – non à la façon d'un acte achevé, mais d'abord dans l'attente de la réponse de l'autre. La perspective sémiogénétique engage la transition à la parole suivante, et fait de toute chose, ou de tout autre, un destinataire et un propos, c'est-à-dire le lieu d'un écart, à déterminer, à ce qui vient d'être dit, ou pourrait l'être. En même temps le thème expressiviste engage une variété fluctuante de niveaux de formes-sens et vient assouplir les rigidités du thème sémiotique, si celui-ci était conçu de façon strictement systémique et normative. Ce ne sont donc plus les concepts d'intentionnalité, ou de volonté, qui sont recteurs dans cette animation conjointe de la phénoménologie post-husserlienne et des sciences humaines et sociales, mais d'abord ceux d'expression, de « jeu » et de participation, de modalisation (désir, réquisition, évaluation, normativité), à partir desquels se mettent en place la socialisation et conjointement la subjectivation des protagonistes (jusque dans leurs voix intérieures). Le sujet n'est pas fondateur, mais requis, entraîné, par les réquisits de l'institution. Cela va naturellement à l'encontre de toute théorie expérientialiste du sens, sans remettre en cause la nécessité d'une articulation à un sujet susceptible de valoir comme foyer du désir, du sentir, de la responsabilité – et ayant par là statut de répondant de l'expression et de la destination (ROSENTHAL, VISETTI 2010, 55).

So it is in a spirit of interdisciplinarity that semiotic anthropology operates. It is notable for its ability to integrate different dimensions of the human, aiming at biological continuity - social without denying the uniqueness of man. It is no exaggeration to say that the main feature of semiotic anthropology is precisely

its emphasis on phenomenology. For phenomenologists, the human being has the specific responsibility to put himself in history, in a dialogue of self to self as to others. This basic historicity of the human being is unmatched in semiotic anthropology, where the experience of the human being is valued in its singularity while remaining in the field of historical and socio-cultural structures. The phenomenological perspective in which semiotic anthropology is inscribed provides a framework for thinking in anthropological terms of the meeting between subjects making use of those to which the plot of the senses is linked. Any meeting can be seen as a socio-semiotic game that involves institutions (knowledge, transmission, norms, values and practices) and distributions of roles where the individual understands himself first as a semiotic perception, joint attention, participation in an intersubjectivity with a ritualized interactions directory.

The phenomenological contribution of semiotic anthropology avoids deadlocks of the individual as the sole measure of its goals and actions as well as those of the overhanging social reality or autonomous symbolic order. In reference to a semiotic phenomenology similar to that of Merleau-Ponty, semiotic anthropology offers *epistemological tools to envision body / mind / social continuity* without flatly falling into purely logical bio-psycho-social determinants.

Immediately considering perception as semiotics, and cognition as immediately social, and respecting the character which is both public and embodied with expression, semiotic anthropology proposes an epistemological framework that can be transposed within the humanities and social sciences in terms of genetic theories of fields and forms.

This continuity which is essential for the hope of tying the humanities and social sciences to natural sciences opens new interdisciplinary dialogues in the field of semiotics.

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ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R n. 445 del 28 dicembre 2000

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che nell'articolo «Phenomenology and Semiotics. Crossing Perspectives» il paragrafo 1 è stato scritto da Francesco La Mantia e il paragrafo 2 dello stesso articolo è stato scritto da Antonino Bondi.

Data

29/03/2018

Francesco La Mantia

DICHIARAZIONE SOSTITUTIVA DI CERTIFICAZIONE e/o NOTORIETÀ ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. n. 445 del 28 dicembre 2000

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Palermo, li, 4/11/2020

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