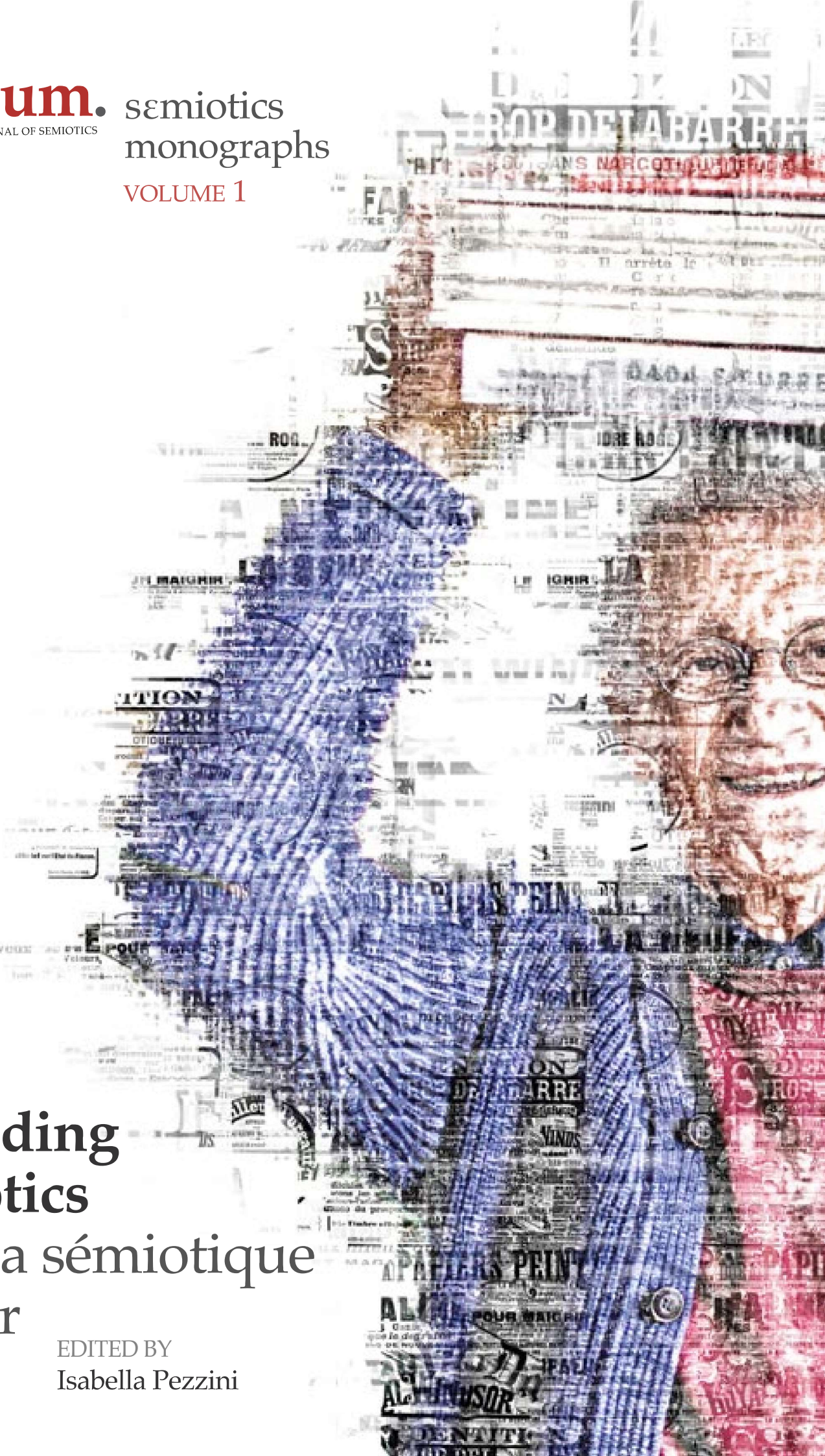


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PAOLO FABBRI

Unfolding
semiotics
Pour la sémiotique
à venir

EDITED BY
Isabella Pezzini





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Marked Semiotics: Tactics and Strategies

BY: Gianfranco Marrone

1. A Form of Life

One of Paolo Fabbri's most recent papers, his plenary speech at the XIV Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, held in Buenos Aires on 9th-13th September 2019, was entitled, 'Para una semiótica marcada.' What does this refer to? We might say that it refers to knowledge concerned with *intensity*. First, for its technical meaning: a term from semiotic metalanguage is used to define semiotics itself. Secondly, for its emotional and psychological meaning: practicing the science of signification as a constitutionally passionate form of life. A knowledge that is in no way ascetic or loftily detached from existence; a knowledge that holds tightly to life as it finds research into meaning conceived as both signified and direction, perception and corporeity. But why play with Jakobson's famous, not to mention highly delicate terminology, by proposing a 'marked semiotics'? And how should we understand this particular expression?

The idea of marked semiotics has a primarily *tactical* value but is also, in other senses, more broadly *strategic*. It is tactical when it comes to other semiotic theories, or those presumed as such, which constitute a field of studies as vast and varied as it is (precisely because of this fact) epistemologically imprecise. It is strategic with regards to the project for a semiotics 'with a scientific vocation,' that hailing from the best structuralist traditions (linguistic, anthropological, philosophical, sociological) and leads to the science of signification elaborated by Algirdas J. Greimas and his school, of which Fabbri has long been an eminent exponent and roaming scholar.

2. A Tactic

The tactical value of Fabbri's gesture lies in the fact that, by occupying the position of the marked term, it pushes any other supposedly semiotic theory into a non-marked position. Undoubtedly, this is quite extensive, probably imperialistic, certainly invasive, and yet, at the same time, vague, imprecise, and ambiguous. In the notes from the Buenos Aires conference, we find a long list of unrelated themes and problems that, as far as Fabbri was concerned, constituted non-marked semiotics: pop-philosophy, cultural studies, ideological criticism of the media, information and communication theory, philosophy of language, cognitivism, recurring referentialism, a reaffirmation of naturalism and ontology, a return to the question of the origins of languages, the philology of Peirce's texts, etc. What is striking here is not the list's items (in themselves potentially noteworthy) but how dizzying it is.

We still read how non-marked semiotics consists of "taking concepts or citations without worrying ourselves about the theoretical system into which they are inserted." This leads semiotics to a kind of "planned obsolescence" caused by an "evident eclecticism [...] comparable to the pre-Saussurian heterocclisis of language." It ends up accepting everything that claims the label of semiotics, a practice not tolerated by any serious discipline, which demands, as it should, a "common epistemological minimum" and "some kind of internal articulation of its concepts." This phenomenon, as Fabbri observes, explains the paradox that in a period "of extremely high signicity and virtualization" (like the one we currently live in), semiotics – in its non-marked version – is unable to claim its place "among the knowledge capable of providing interesting analysis and effective answers."

Marked semiotics aspires to establish itself as a competitive brand (no wordplay intended) in the scientific arena, both in the varied field of *semiotic studies* – as a specific, epistemologically founded, and structured knowledge – and the broader territory (to use another of Fabbri's expressions) of the human and non-human, natural and non-natural sciences.

3. A Strategy

The idea of marked semiotics has also a broader strategic value, aiming at clearly defining the internal physiognomy of the research on signification. Over the years, Paolo Fabbri attempted several times to take stock of this. For example, in the opposition between the "semiotic gaze" and the "evil eye of sociology" proposed in a lengthy article written in 1973 (Fabbri 2017). Perhaps, however, his idea of semiotics is best illustrated in *La svolta semiotica* ([*The Semiotic Turn*], Fabbri 1998). The image of semiotics provided

here is particularly enlightening, especially (given what is relevant to us here) in the first chapter of the book, where he talks about “semiotic levels and missing links.” This issue is crucial for gaining an in-depth understanding of the pertinence and boundaries of the science of signification and is almost entirely missing from both previous and later semiotic debates.

Fabbri identifies four different levels in signification research. The basic idea is that semiotics is configured like a research project on meaning (as the slogan goes: *making meaning capable of signifying*), which, while favoring neither pure philosophical theory nor the simple application of pre-established models to any odd object, involves four different, yet closely interconnected research levels.

3.1. Empirical level

On the first of these levels, the semiologist’s work is above all the *empirical analysis* of signifying wholes, a tangible encounter with meaning-rich data which must take place. No science would be possible without direct contact with the significant world. Even before configuring itself as a general hypothesis on the function of languages, communication, and cultures, semiotics makes a fundamental claim for describing these languages, communication, and cultures and, therefore, emphasizes the pragmatic value of its intellectual labor. A theory that does not provide an empirical case study is, according to Fabbri (1987), a scholastic one.

The human and social sciences’ established praxis has a structural orientation and includes semiotics thanks to its empirical basis. However, the empirical terrain we propose to analyze is not merely a collection of data, comprising pre-existing positive entities readily available to the observer’s gaze. Instead, data are constructed and reconstructed by analyzing the underlying systems of meaning. In other words, data are configured as *texts*, in a broad sense. By studying their internal and external dependencies (on other texts, on discursive categories, contextual situations, and culture in general), its implicit theories are dis-implied through its particular descriptive project. As Fabbri writes (1998: 26-27), “If semiotics has [...] a scientific vocation [...], it is the obligation to engage [...] with all those complex practices of signification from which it is possible to dis-imply mechanisms of meaning.” Similarly, “if semiotics is a philosophical discipline, it is not because it investigates what philosophers say about signs, but because it works on the texts’ underlying *images of thought* that it wants and knows how to analyze.” Therefore, naturalism or positivism cannot possibly be employed by the science of signification without getting out of the paradigm.

3.2. Methodological level

Given its constructivist nature, for empirical analysis to be effective, we require a *method* that enables us to focus on the collections of signifiers. Directing our gaze in this manner, we can find the pre-established pertinences that transform the primary perception of any presence of meaning into an actual *text*. A signifying machine that, by mixing with multiple other texts, constitutes the dynamics of cultures, which Lotman (1990, 2008) calls the semiosphere. From this perspective, semiotic analysis is textual analysis as it reconfigures sensitive data in terms of precise forms - processes and systems of signification. Textual analysis works, as Fabbri states, in the same way as a *Gedankenexperiment*, a thought experiment that, as Kuhn (1977) teaches us, has the same explanatory value in science as experiments carried out in a lab. Not, however, as often happens in philosophy, by working on *exempla ficta*, but working on cultural texts constantly translated by one another. In this sense, the semiotic method avoids both the procedural rigidity of specific logics and the siren calls of *anything goes*. Fabbri does not presume a *canon* in the Kantian sense, i.e., using a set of *a priori* principles to regulate the legitimate use of the cognitive faculties. Instead, he draws on Latour (1996: 84) to talk about a semiotic *organon*, “a kind of rational, non-universal art that provides models and principles for the function of local cognitive and discursive knowledge” (Fabbri 1998: 71). Furthermore, says Fabbri (2000: 53-67), the application of models does not rely on any automatism, instead requiring specific feasibility or application theory principles.

3.3. Theoretical level

From here, we pass to the third level, that of *theory*, in which the analytical method's categories (such as actant, actor, competence, performance, discourse, space, time, etc.) become concepts that are inter-defined among themselves. Not all methods work equally well in textual analysis. It is not enough to invoke the rationality of an organon; it is also necessary to measure its reach and efficacy in terms of theoretical reflection. Rather than approaching the text using incompatible methods or heterogenous interpretative categories, the semiotic organon must be scrutinized by a theory that ensures the interaction of models and categories by inter-defining them – e.g., what is the relation between actant and actor, competence and performance, enunciation and discourse, etc. In this way, analytical categories become concepts, reorganized within an all-encompassing framework that controls not only their explanatory value regarding textual and cultural dynamics but also theoretical rigor. If the analysis is to be productive, it must be founded on a theory; a theory not presumed *a priori* but based on the outcome of previous analysis. A virtuous circularity is required to prevent any distinction between a presumably pure theoretical moment and a subsequent interpretative moment. The semiotic analysis of texts, Fabbri often states, is not the use of an elaborate

method in advance but indicates the direction of a theory to come. Hence the famous comparison: just as the ethnologist, when faced with other cultures, is led to question themselves and their interpretative categories, in the same way, the semiologist, when faced with a text, must be able to abandon pre-established models in the name of the more effective tools of description and comprehension (Greimas 1976). The text is the semiologists' area of investigation; the resistance they encounter transforms into a stimulus for further research.

3.4. Epistemological level

Finally, once the concepts have been theoretically inter-defined, they must be scrutinized by a broader *epistemological reflection* to evaluate their philosophical and theoretical consequences. Thus, if, in theory, concepts such as *to be* and *to do*, *subject* and *object*, *difference*, *relation*, and so on, are inter-defined elements, functioning on that level as 'primaries,' on an epistemological level, they become the object of philosophical investigation and must be discussed in depth. This opens a dialogue with forms of philosophical reflection operating in the same fields of inquiry, for instance, hermeneutics, logic, phenomenology, or the analytical philosophy of language. Therefore, it is necessary, at this level, to clarify apparently self-evident notions, such as the oppositions nature/culture, animal/human, and even life/death, interrogating ourselves more generally not only on the issue of the nexus between deduction and induction, as predicted by Greimas (1966) in *Structural Semantics*, but above all between forms of scientific research. Just as Saussure (2002) stated in his famous essay on the 'double essence of language,' and Fabbri himself (2014) remarked, we must not place linguistics with either the natural sciences or the human sciences, but in a third sphere, that of semiology. This argument recurs in Cassirer's final work (1947), devoted to the foundations of structuralist epistemology; and again in Greimas (1970), who states that semiotics is located in the "exceptionally narrow gap between logic and metaphysics," adhering to neither the rigors of the first nor the reflections of the second.

4. The Missing Links

Though different, these four levels of semiotics are inseparable parts of the same research project. Their hierarchy is logical, not evaluative, and does not exclude any bidirectionality. Whereas empirical analysis requires adequate methods and theoretical notions justified by those methods, epistemological reflection presupposes a theory, a method, and the textual support anchoring it to empiricism. Epistemology, theory, methodology, and empirical analysis must not proceed autonomously. If we do this, there is the risk of explanatory fallacy and the inability to understand the phenomena

studied by semiotics. Just as, for example, the semiotic analysis of passions is entirely useless without considering the nexus between reason, passion, and action, so a reflection on sensoriality will be misleading if we do not clarify the kind of perceptual experience we refer to, the body image we presuppose, or the idea of cognition we derive from it. Therefore, Fabbri concludes that semiotic research aims to search for the *missing links* that unite and organize these four fundamental levels, occupy the interstitial spaces, and construct bridges between research instances often considered in a dangerously autonomous manner.

It sometimes happens that a philosophical hypothesis is directly linked to a textual description, without any theory or method connecting them, or that a methodology is adopted in empirical analysis without theoretically inter-defining its categories. Or even that a method refers directly to an epistemological basis bypassing theory altogether. Also, as Fabbri states, it can often happen that semiotic theory is developed without any epistemological basis. The missing links are not pieces to be inserted into the mechanism, like the missing pieces of a mosaic under restoration. They are not pertinent notions to be brought into play, nor models to place in the cracks between one level and another, much less textual objects or things of the world. Instead, the missing links are the relations to be built between levels, passages between different instances - separate yet inter-related - of the phases of semiotic work, of happy fertilization throughout the meta-linguistic hierarchy. The result is this: "So, in conclusion, these are the missing links: that which connects epistemology to theory, that which connects theory to a method, that which connects method to empirical description. Unfortunately, inside the black box of semiotic research, the absence of these links allows us to identify a typology of different kinds of semiotic currents: those that push philosophy to the analysis of elementary signs, those that put the texts in direct contact with the theories, using them as illustrations, and those that use entirely blind and irresponsible methods" (Fabbri 1998: 29). We might add that all these are forms of research that, by avoiding the links required to connect the levels, remain in that vague field of non-marked semiotics.

5. A Disciplinary Project

According to Paolo Fabbri, this is the strategy of marked semiotics or, if you prefer, the image of the science of signification. Marked semiotics is not just a sectarian and, according to some, provocative slogan. It is a disciplinary project that, taking stock of the recent past (the structural perspective of the human and social sciences), aims to consolidate contemporary developments and open up further research prospects into the formal articulations of the different human and social sciences languages. Provided, of course, we are clear about the meaning and value of the semiotic levels and their inter-

linking. For this reason, we will, in conclusion, attempt to further clarify some fundamental points while also attempting to understand (as far as is possible) what exactly is next at stake.

5.1. A Collective Dimension

First and foremost, we must bear in mind that all the themes and problems the four levels bring together can make semiotic research appear as a fearsome, if not hopeless, task. How to conduct a textual analysis and simultaneously elaborate a method, construct a theory that reconsiders the method, and an epistemology that interrogates the theory?

The response, implicit in Fabbri's working method (and the essays collected here), is simple. On the one hand, we must remain alert as we continually jump from one level to the next; on the other, we must open up the research to a collective and well-organized dimension. As Fabbri loved to say, it is a case of a dialogue among equals since only group work can produce significant results. From this point of view, the long-time research into passions (more than twenty years of shared work and not yet finished) is exemplary. Only in this way what is left unthought on one level can become the object of study in the next one. This is where the idea of the scientific community makes perfect sense.

5.2. Filiations and Alliances

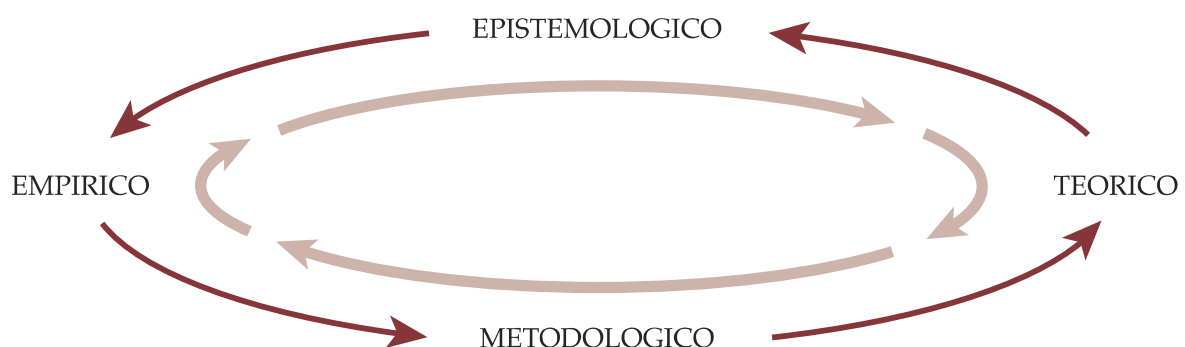
Research into signification, rooted in a structured community of actors, is delineated by its filiations and alliances, but most of all, its internal organization. Fabbri could barely stand the expression (and the idea of) a 'standard semiotics' (coined, he said, by Jean Petitot as a calque of the 'standard models' of physics) as an established set of categories and concepts to be embalmed before effectively seeping out into a phantom *post-*, as fashionable as it is suicidal. Advancing research, a fundamental imperative, does not necessarily demand an abdication (exhibited as euphoric, but in reality, rather painful) of the results acquired in terms of models for analysis, investigation methods, inter-definition of concepts, etc. Instead, it would be the classic (and this is not his expression) throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The progression of semiotic work must occur in multiple directions and on various levels and always part of a community of intentions and projects. Fabbri deduces that marked semiotics, rather than following the siren calls of novelty and proposing a new theoretical model at every opportunity, has ample room for maneuver both when it builds on solid foundations and when it rethinks, in terms of signification, the methodological and theoretical elaborations derived from similar, parallel or adjacent research in anthropology, linguistics, sociolinguistics, media sociology, sociology of science, philosophy, literary and art criticism, etc.

5.3. Pertinence and Presupposition

We must not confuse the four levels of semiotic research with the model of the generative path of meaning. Using the term 'level' in both cases could give rise to this confusion, leading us to search for improbable analogies between, for example, discursivity and theory, narrativity and methodology, and so on. However, this would be utter nonsense. These two schemas share the principle of pertinence and the logic of presupposition and, thus, a particular idea of hierarchy. But these are very different things. The four levels we have examined organize the tracks and the stakes of research, whilst the generative path orders a supposed (non genetic!) generation of meaning into stages by progressive concreteness and complexity (or, if we look at it from the opposite angle, by gradual abstractness and simplification). Perhaps what does need to be said about this powerful schematization is that it deals simultaneously with a model of description (which distinguishes and organises the questions that, over the course of the analysis, are asked of the text) and a general form of the semiotic theory (which arranges the semiotic conditions of every text). From this perspective, the generative path perfectly represents the link between the methodological and the theoretical level of semiotics, categories of analysis reconsidered as inter-defined concepts (the reason why, if needed, the path should be revisited but maintaining the non-missing conjunctive role). It is no coincidence that semiotics has worked so much on the connecting link between method and theory.

5.4. A Circularity

Another link that is not entirely missing, though it still needs to be strengthened, is between the epistemological and empirical levels. The hierarchy between the levels, and the logic of presupposition, do not exclude a circularity between them. We should not envisage the levels in terms of ascending or descending verticality, with the empirical sitting on the lowest step and the epistemological at the top. These two levels often come into contact with one another and must do so, so the four levels are organized in a circular way:



Why? Certainly not to re-propose the praxis (rightly criticized by Fabbri, as we have seen) according to which every philosophical hypothesis can find a text (literary or otherwise) to lean on, skipping the contact between method and theory. In other words, not all links work. As we have seen, the empirical and epistemological levels meet on a different terrain, which defines and clarifies the constructivist character (and therefore contrary to any positivism) of semiotics regarding its objects of analysis. Even within semiotic studies, we often think in terms of an opposition between world and language, reality and representation, society and discourses, immediacy and mediation, field and desk, practices and texts, etc. But these oppositions are not pertinent from the perspective of a marked theory of signification.

This is because every presumed reality always exists within some system of meaning, making the world (as Fabbri often reminds us) a reservoir of other languages, beyond the so-called 'natural' (verbal) languages, by utilizing different substances of expression but the same forms. The relationship between the world and language is not, therefore, one of representation but of translation. The language re-says what is already signified, and vice versa. The idea of translation, of transduction between different languages, of trans-codification (on which Fabbri worked extensively) is one of the few points shared by the various semiotic perspectives, from Peirce to Jakobson, from Greimas and Lotman to Paolo Fabbri. As Greimas (1970) insisted, in opposition to existentialism, meaning is already there; it just needs to be made to signify, to be articulated through signification. This is something that the social actors, individuals or collectives, do in their daily life, in their social rituals, in their linguistic and semiotic expressions, long before the arrival of the semiologist. We live in a continual flux of texts, and it is the task of semiotics to re-invent them (from the meaning of the Latin term *inventio*). This is why any empirical object studied by semiotics already exists in a network of meaning; whatever is present in cultural dynamics is already a signifying object filled with value. Textual analysis cannot help but re-direct its meaning because of its descriptive aims, which are to be made explicit.

5.5. Nature and Culture

Finally, let's consider some current stakes, those involving the link that is still often missing between the theoretical and epistemological levels. A lack that causes a fair number of misinterpretations and, as we have seen, several escapes from the semiotic paradigm and its necessary markedness. Indeed, it would seem that much research into human and social sciences exists within a profound contradiction, and not just in semiotics. But let's limit ourselves to the latter. On the one hand, resurgences of positivist objectivism return to the surface. In its attempt to couple signification with, for example, biology or neuronal mechanisms, research effectively naturalizes signification, releasing it from its constitutive socio-cultural differences and thus universalizing it.

On the other hand, semiotic studies are beginning to digest and modify some of their foundations. For instance, the idea that the famous opposition between nature and culture (which Greimas posited as the basis of every collective axiology) has nothing universal or necessary about it, is very recent. We know how anthropologists (Descola, Viveiros de Castro, Ingold, etc.) and the sociologist-philosophers of the sciences (Latour, Callon, Stengers, etc.) have powerfully recalibrated its reach. So, not only is there not a single nature from which multiple cultures constitute themselves through differentiation, but many ethnicities across the planet do not even understand what nature separated from culture is, or vice versa. The regularly reappearing in public discussion concept of the Anthropocene offers nothing new from this perspective. And animist beliefs do not belong only to distant and indiscernible cultures but circulate freely within our own.

Fabbri insisted that semiotics has a secret weapon, a unique ability in dealing with such urgent and highly delicate questions: that of being a science of discourses, of possessing excellent tools (distributed throughout its various levels) for analyzing and, therefore, deconstructing and de-potentializing social discourses, dis-implicating them from their implicit theories. The same goes for the discourse of sciences, both human and non-human, natural and non-natural, and semiotics discourse itself, which must also be articulated in a semiotic way. Like all kinds of content, the sciences' contents exist according to their form. Sciences create complex and elaborate discourses about them. Through equally apposite forms of expression, these discourses speak to us more effectively than any conceptualization that tends to sideline them, overlooking their particular meaning.

6. Diplomacy

Semiotics must not take the content of the sciences as it is, as the sciences themselves (or their mythologization) presume, behaving as if it is not semiotically, discursively formed. Something like that would be naïve and amounts to an abandonment of its specific scientific objective. The dialogue with other sciences, be it collaborative or conflictual, passes through a double binary. To discuss as equals means reciprocity and provisionality, by definition. But to reconstruct their content forms and compare them demands taking as a starting point their intrinsically semiotic pertinence. Imperialism, arrogance, haughtiness? Not at all, Fabbri insists. It is quite the opposite: servility, placing tools at the service of others to suggest constant translations between languages and between discourses, including those of all the sciences. In all this, the semiologist takes the role, handed to him by a specific philosophy, to mediate between human and social discourses (Deleuze and Guattari 1991) to make possible their encounter and conflict while navigating through it all the necessary 'diplomacy' (Stengers 1997).

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