

PART 2 (Susan Petrilli)

Identity, Freedom and Answerability in the Global World

1. *Premise*

Metasemiosis is understood as the capacity to reflect on signs, semiosis is connected with responsibility. The human individual, the only semiotic animal existing, is subject *to* and subject *of* responsibility. To the extent that the semiotician practices *metasemiotics*, that is, reflects on semiosis and metasemiosis, s/he is doubly responsible: the semiotician must account for him/herself and for others, and as a *global semiotician* (according to Sebeok) s/he must account for life over the entire globe. Responsibility and freedom are connected: unjustified freedom is the absurd, the irrational, as in Heidegger, or an arbitrariness which the gaze of another freedom threatens and defeats, as in Sartre. Says Levinas, the other questions the naïve legitimacy of freedom, that is, freedom unjustified and reduced to itself, freedom as usurpation. The very existence of the other implies a conception of freedom freed from the logic of identity, a form of humanism different from humanism and identity, what with Levinas, we may call *humanism of alterity*.

2. *Identity and alterity in semiotic perspective*

The categories of “identity” and “subjectivity” are intimately interrelated and play a central role in today’s global communication society, whether a question of identity of the individual subject or the collective subject—social class, ethnic group, nation, European Union, “Western world”, etc.

We propose to analyze identity, freedom and answerability in a semiotic key, that is, from the perspective of the science of signs. Individual and community identity alike may be governed by a mono-logic or by a dia-logic. The difference is profound and pervasive. *Global semiotics* in particular (a trend that in modern times extends from such thinkers as Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Welby to Charles Morris and Thomas A. Sebeok) may contribute to a critique of monologism. However, the assumptions and implications of this new approach to semiotics are external to traditional philosophy. This leads to the need for a new philosophical founding of semiotics. From this point of view a contribution may come from those contemporary French authors who have contributed to a critique of Western thought such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas. The focus of the present chapter

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will be on Levinas (1906-1995),¹ in the semiotic perspective delineated and with developments in the direction of the problem of identity, freedom and answerability.

Charles S. Peirce’s (1839-1914) semiotic reflections have significantly contributed to a redefinition of the subject (cf. Peirce 1931-1958; Sebeok, Petrilli, Ponzio 2001). The human being, the I, is a sign of an extraordinarily complex order, made of verbal and nonverbal language. Says Peirce: It is that the word or sign which man uses *is* the man himself [...] the

man and the external sign are identical, in the same sense in which the words *homo* and *man* are identical. (CP 5.314)

The subject may be described as a semiotic process; indeed thanks to its interpretive-propositional commitment, the subject consists of a potentially infinite number of signifying trajectories. As a developing sign, the subject is a dialogical and relational entity, an *open* subject emerging in the intrapersonal and interpersonal interrelationship with other subjects. Therefore, the boundaries of the subject are not defined once and for all, but can only be defined through dialogical encounters with other subjects.

The human person develops in sociality, relatedly to the experiences of others and never in isolation. The self is a community of dialogically interrelated selves, and is subject to the logic of alterity. The subject's identity is multiplex, plurifaceted and plurivocal, it is delineated and modeled in the dialogical relation among its various parts. If we interpret the word "in-dividual" literally as meaning "non divided, non divisible", with Peirce, who rejected the "illusory phenomenon" of a finite self or self-sufficient self, we may claim that "a person is not absolutely an individual" (Ibid.).

The social and communal character of self does not contrast with its singularity, uniqueness or otherness with respect to any signifying process that may interpret it. The self is ineffable (cf. CP 1. 357), saying beyond the said; self's utterances convey significance beyond words. On the other hand, ineffability and uniqueness of self do not imply incommunicability.

Victoria Welby (1837-1912) analyses the problem of subjectivity in terms of the relationship between what she calls "I" or, introducing a
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1 Levinas's independent philosophical position was established with the publication of his main book *Totalité et Infini* in 1961. His second major book *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* appeared in 1974. Since then more than a dozen books have appeared. Almost all his works have been translated into English. A number of anthologies in English translation have also been published, see Levinas 1997, cf. also Levinas 1994 for his Talmudic readings. On Levinas, cf. Derrida 1999 and Ponzio 1996.

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neologism, *Ident*, and "self" or, with another neologism, *ephemeron*.² Self is mortal, ephemeral like the body. By contrast, I tends towards immortality beyond the mortality of body and self. Thus articulated, the subject is not unitary or compact, but presents a surplus, something more with respect to identity itself, which is constructed in the dialogical relationship between self and I. I or Ident is not the "individual", but the "unique". Says Welby, "It is precisely our di-viduality that forms the wealth of our gifts".

That the subject is an incarnate subject, intercorporeal being, a body connected to other bodies, expression of the condition of intercorporeity synchronically and diachronically, that the subject is incarnated in a body that is not isolated from other bodies is essential to our conception of subjectivity. The subject is an incarnate entity from the viewpoint of biological evolution, of the species, as well as in terms of sociality and cultural history. The body plays an essential role in the development of

consciousness, which is incarnate consciousness, indeed the body is a condition for the full development of consciousness, therefore of the human being as a “semiotic animal” (cf. Petrilli 1998b, Petrilli and Ponzio 2003). Self develops interconnectedly with other bodies through which it extends its boundaries, which are the boundaries of the world it experiences. The word is an extension of the body. Echoing the Russian philosopher Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975), the word forms a bridge joining one’s own body to the body of others (cf. Bakhtin 1990). The dialogical relation between self and other (other *from* self and other *of* self) emerges as one of the most important conditions for continuity in the creative process. A driving force in this creative process is love, the forces of *agape*. In the architecture of Peirce’s thought system, the most advanced developments in reason and knowledge are based on the creative power of *reasonableness* and the transformative suasions of *agape*.

Global semiotics must keep account of and account for the “reason of things”. However, the *reason* of things, the philosophical certainty of being right, *avoir raison*, to echo Levinas, cannot be separated from the capacity for *reasonableness*, which is founded in the logic of otherness. Therefore, the reason of things cannot be separated from the capacity for detotalisation as the condition for the constitution of a critical and dialogical globality. The issue at stake may be stated in the following terms: given the risks inherent for life in today’s global communication society which is regulated by the logic of identity and excludes the

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2Victoria Welby’s unpublished manuscripts are available in the Welby Collection, York University Archives, Toronto. A file entitled *Subjectivity* includes texts written between 1903 and 1910, see in particular the manuscripts of 1907-10. For a description of the Welby Collection, cf. Petrilli 1998.
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other, *human beings, at their very earliest, must change from rational animals into reasonable animals.*

Reasonableness is endowed with the power of transforming horror of the stranger, the alien, fear of the other, understood as fear of the other foreign to self, into sympathy for the other become lovely. Reading Peirce in the light of Levinas’s philosophy of subjectivity: under the hardened crust of identity, through love the subject rediscovers its fear *for* and not *of* the other, for the other’s well-being, which renders self incessantly restless and preoccupied for the other. Love, reasonableness, creativity are all grounded in the logic of otherness and dialogism, and together move the evolutionary dynamics of human semiosis globally. Welby, Peirce and Bakhtin have contributed to the development of a global sign science able to account for signifying processes in their complexity and articulation, to consider meaning not only in terms of signification, but also of sense and significance. Neither the life of signs nor the signs of life are adequately studied in merely descriptive terms, that is, with claims to neutrality. Welby coined the neologism “significs” for her theory of signs and meaning to signal the need for an approach that is comprehensive and critical, with a focus on the problem of the relation of signs and values. “Significs” designates the disposition for evaluation and, therefore, the value conferred upon signs and sign

behaviour, the pertinence of signs, their scope, signifying value, sense and significance. Such an orientation also moves Bakhtin's philosophy of language or "metalinguistics", characterized by his detotalising approach to human semiosis in its globality.

3. *Three senses of globality—biosemiotic, anthroposemiotic, semioethical*
Says Levinas:

A religious age or an atomic age—these characterizations of the modern world, whether slogans or imprecations, hide a deeper trend.

In spite of the violence and madness we see everyday, we live in the age of philosophy. Men are sustained in their activities by the certainty of *being right (avoir raison)*, of being in tune with the calculable forces that really move things along, of moving in the direction (*sens*) of history.

That satisfies their conscience. Beyond the progress of science, which uncovers the predictable play of forces within matter, human freedoms themselves (including those thoughts which conceive of such a play) are regulated by a rational order. Hidden in the depths of Being, this order is gradually unveiled and revealed through the disorder of contemporary history, through the suffering and desire of individuals, their passions and their victories. A global industrial society is announced that will suppress every contradiction tormenting humanity. But it equally suppresses the hidden heart of man. Reason rises like a fantastic sun that makes the opacity of creatures transparent. Men have lost their shadows! Henceforth, nothing can absorb or

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reflect this light which abolishes even the interiority of beings. (Levinas 1960, Eng. trans.: 253)

Well before the development of today's global communication system concomitantly with progress in science and technology and the global market, globalisation was already a fact of life. Globalisation today may be understood as a corporate-led phenomenon characteristic of modern society, investing the entire social reproductive system in its various phases—production, circulation and consumption—with wide-ranging (often devastating) effects over the entire planet. However, far more radically, before the advent of today's global communication society, globalisation was already a *biosemiotic fact of life*, that is, a condition for the evolution of life from its very origins. This conception is central to Thomas A. Sebeok's *global semiotics* (1920-2001) (cf. Sebeok 1991, 1994, 2001; two important reference points in Sebeok's sign theory are the biologist and "criptosemiotician" J. von Uexküll and the mathematician and semiotician René Thom).

Globalisation as biosemiosis is structural to the processes of evolutionary development and the proliferation of life interconnectedly over the entire planet. The human being is born into the network of life, which is also a sign network preexistent to the single individual. The sphere of *anthroposemiosis* appears relatively late on the evolutionary scale and develops interrelatedly with other spheres of semiosis which coincide with the superkingdoms—*phytosemiosis*, *mycosemiosis*, *zoosemiosis* of which *anthroposemiosis* is a specification. Together these spheres form the global *biosemiosphere*. And, in a global semiotic perspective, with ongoing progress in the development of life and technology,

other spheres of semiosis continue to emerge ranging from *endosemiosis* to *cybersemiosis*. (For a panoramic view of global semiotics, cf. Posner, Robering, Sebeok 1997-2004).

Viewed in this context, today's world of global communication-production is a fact of life from which we cannot prescind, if life, including the human, is to flourish globally as foreseen by the nature of sign activity. Indeed, as biosemiotics demonstrates, life and "semiosis" converge, all life forms may be analysed in terms of dynamic sign systems (cf. Sebeok 1991, 1994, 2001; also Ponzio and Petrilli 2001). On the contrary, globalisation, as understood in terms of today's global socio-economic system, that is, as corporate-led globalisation, is neither inevitable nor desirable, and even threatens to destroy life on earth as we know it.

Today's global communication-production society is only one aspect of the great web of communication formed by life over the entire planet. Global semiotics evidences the relation of interdependency between human life and all other life forms on Earth, therefore, the condition of global interrelatedness. Furthermore, the global semiotic perspective not only evidences human life in its structural, dialogical and

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biosemiotic interdependency with all other life forms on Earth, the condition of global interconnectedness, but it also puts into focus the specificity of anthroposemiosis as socio-cultural semiosis.

After Peirce followed by Charles Morris (1901-1975), Sebeok's approach to the "doctrine of signs" represents a major contribution to the development of global semiotics for a critical understanding of global communication today and of the status of the subject. This must not prescind from the problem of freedom and accountability in the communication network as delineated particularly by Levinas for what concerns us in the present paper.

Our emphasis is on the double modality of existing in the world as characterized by semiosis in human beings. Firstly, as biological organisms flourishing interconnectedly with other organisms in the great *biosphere* —which, as anticipated, coincides with the great *semiosphere*. Secondly, as a specification of this vital sign network. Thanks to the species-specific capacity for *metasemiosis*, or *semiotics*, or *language* understood as a *primary modelling device* and differently from other life forms, human beings are able to survey and tend to the good functioning of the whole biosemiotic system, for which as such we are accountable.

All life forms are endowed with a capacity for *modelling, communication* and *dialogism*. Modelling determines worldview, with the specification that the modelling device assigned to human animals is endowed with *syntactics*. For this reason the term "language" for human modelling, as proposed by Sebeok, is an appropriate designation (cf. Sebeok 1986, 1991; also Sebeok and Danesi 2000). In fact, language here is not referred restrictively to verbal language or any other human sign system with communicative and expressive functions, but to the modelling device specific to human beings.

Thanks to syntactics human beings can construct, deconstruct and reconstruct an infinite number of worldviews with a finite number of elements, differently from other animals where the relation between

modelling and worldview is univocal, unidirectional. Nonhuman animals are born into a world they are not programmed to modify, if not according to an original *bauplan* as established by the genetic patrimony of their species. Instead, thanks to syntactics human beings are *metasemiotic* or what we propose to call *semiotic animals* endowed with a capacity for creativity and criticism, for the suspension of action and deliberation.

The immediate implication is that each human being is invested biosemiotically and phylogenetically with a unique capacity for responsibility towards life, for caring for life in its joyous and dialogical multiplicity. The capacity for making decisions, taking a stand, intervening upon the course of semiosis over the entire planet implies nothing less. In this sense the “semiotic animal” is also a “semioethical ani-

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mal”. The capacity for semiotics or metasemiosis is the biosemiosical *a priori* of the anthropological and cultural propensity for responsible and dialogical living.

The semiotic capacity, therefore, implies a third modality of being-in-the-world, specific to human beings, the *semioethical* (Petrilli and Ponzio 2001, 2002, 2003). This is connected to our capacity for creative awareness of the other, the assumption of responsibility for the other, accountability or answerability. All this presupposes the global condition of interrelated and intercorporeal dialogical otherness to which we are subject biosemiotically as living organisms. This third modality of being-in-the-world, the semioethical, is the key to a full understanding of the extent of our responsibility, as human beings, for the health of semiosis in all its forms, therefore of life, whether human or nonhuman, over the entire planet.

4. *Freedom and responsibility in the “world” and the properly human*

Responsible living implies *listening* and *hospitality* in the face of difference, the other in each one of us, the other beyond self (cf. Sebeok, Petrilli, Ponzio 2001). Listening and hospitality are conditional to cohabitation and cooperation among differences, where individual freedom must be negotiated with the other. Otherness is not conceded with an act of generosity, but is structural to life itself. Otherness is imposed upon the subject as the very condition of life. Indeed, life is the right to otherness which is connected to nonfunctionality, unindifferent difference, excess with respect to a world based on reason and identity, which tend to deny the other (cf. Ponzio 1997). To remember the words of Levinas evoked above, in global industrial society reason makes the opacity of creatures transparent, so that human beings have lost their other, their shadow (cf. also Levinas 1948, Eng. trans. in Levinas 1987).

The nonfunctionality of alterity may be juxtaposed to the ideology of functionality, productivity, competitiveness as fostered through social behaviour and roles on the basis of the logic of identity. The properly human may be characterized in terms of nonfunctionality, the time of otherness and excess, of differences that far from being indifferent to each other interrelate dialogically and are reciprocally responsive to each other. All this is presupposed by identities, roles and conventions but is not englobed by them. On the contrary, the properly human

evades identities, roles and conventions with respect to which it presents an excess. Distinguishing with Levinas between *relative otherness* and *absolute otherness*, roles and identities are differentiated on the basis of the otherness relation, but this is a question of relative otherness, otherness that is relative to a given role, a given identity, and serves to indi-

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cate alternatives. This type of otherness is accompanied by the condition of limited responsibility. Instead, “absolute otherness” (cf. Levinas 1961, Eng. trans. 33-52) cannot be reduced to the Same, to reason, to identity, but rather it transcends roles and identities. As such absolute otherness is connected with unlimited responsibility, responsibility without alibis, and admits of no form of indifference.

The properly human, or, in Levinas’s terminology, the “metaphysical”, or “transcendence” of the human, lies in our capacity for absolute otherness, which is not only beyond the totality but also its very basis.

The properly human is our capacity for unlimited responsibility, the relation of dialogical intercorporeity among unindifferent differences, nonfunctionality with respect to the functionality of identity and relative roles. Levinas speaks of the “desire for otherness” (cf. Ibid. 33-35).

The properly human is the condition of vulnerability and exposition to the other.

The places that best evidence the properly human are those where time is beaten out in terms of the relation to the absolute and nonfunctional other; the time of aging, disease, and death, the time of friendship and eroticism, of mothering and nurturing, the time of aesthetic discourse—literature, figurative arts, music, cinema—, the time of inventiveness and scientific progress, of the play of musement, of the ephemeral. This is the time of excess with respect to closed identity, the time of dialogical detotalisation and proliferation of differences that cannot be recruited and put at the service of the World.

By “World” here is understood the most vulgar forms of realism characteristic of dominant ideology in the Western world today—identity, being, the order of discourse, the functional subject with a good conscience, the lying rhetoric of political systems or of mass media. All these respond to today’s global and totalising world, a world where *transparency* is the motto, where even the interiority of beings is abolished, a world without a shadow. With respect to the tendency toward globalisation understood as homogenisation and levelling of differences onto today’s dominant values which are connected with the global market and the global communication network (through which is exerted power and control over bodies proposed as self-sufficient and separate individual entities), the flourishing of special semioses, languages and cultures in their multiplicity bear signs of resistance.

The World is constitutively based on identity, it is predisposed or programmed for sacrifice of the other, of otherness, in the name of identity.

In such a perspective, peace is no more than an interval, momentary repose, reintegration of forces, respite, a truce which ensues from war, preparation for war, similarly to rest, free-time, the night functional to the resumption of work, to the violence and “madness of the day” (cf. Blanchot 1969, 1973).

The questions we must ask are those which Levinas posed throughout the entire course of his research: whether there is any other sense for being than being in the World and for the World?, whether the *properly human* may exceed the space-time of objects, the space-time of identity?, whether there exist relations that cannot be reduced to the category of identity, that are alien to relations between subject and object, to relations of exchange, equivalence, functionality, interest, productivity?, whether there be interhuman relations that are altogether *other*, yet at once material and earthly, relations to which one's body opens?, whether there be a sense that is other with respect to sense in the world of objects? (Levinas, "Notes on Meaning", in Levinas 1998: 152-171). All this goes in the direction of the proposal of a form of humanism different to the humanism of identity, what we may indicate as the *humanism of alterity* (cf. Levinas 1972).

Such an orientation is regulated by the logic of otherness, is "movement" without return to the subject, a movement which Levinas calls *œuvre*, exposition—at a risk—to alterity, hybridization of identity, rupture of monologism and evasion (cf. Levinas 1935-36: 373-392) from the subject-object relation. *Hors-sujet* (Outside the subject) is the title of a book by Levinas of 1987; "hors-sujet" also in the sense of being off the subject, not responsive to thematization, representation. All this is founded on the logic of otherness—the condition of possibility for a form of humanism where a good or clear conscience, human rights which are the rights of self, of identity, are interrogated in the light of the rights of others.

Before the face of the other, the I is called into question. Through its nudity, exposition, fragility, the face says that otherness will never be eliminated. The otherness of others resists to the very point of calling for recourse to homicide and war—evidence and proof of the other's irreducibility. Another one, *autrui*, this other, says Levinas, puts the I into the accusative, summoning it, questioning it, calling it back to the condition of absolute responsibility, outside the I's initiative. Absolute responsibility is responsibility for the other, responsibility understood as answering to the other and for the other (cf. Levinas "Substitution", in Levinas 1974, Eng. trans.: 99-130).

The relation to the other is asymmetrical, unequal: the other is disproportionate with respect to the power and freedom of the I. Moral consciousness interrogates freedom of self. However, interrogation is at once constitutive of self and its freedom insofar as it sanctions the passage from spontaneity to consciousness, from freedom as passive enjoyment (*jouissance*) (cf. Levinas, "Section II, B. Enjoyment and Representation", in Levinas 1961, Eng. trans.: 122-143) and self's happy spontaneity, to freedom as a right, and speaking that right.

It is before the need to answer to others, under the weight of unlimited responsibility, that rights and freedom of self are instituted.

The origin of self, an origin without an *arché* (cf. Levinas, "Humanism and An-archy", in Levinas 1972, Eng. trans.: 127-139), in

this sense *anarchical*, lies in an uneasy conscience in front of others, in a dirty conscience, therefore, in the need to justify one's presence, in one's responsibility without alibis and without escape from others. In the continued effort to achieve a good conscience, the self in the nominative, understood as the subject, as intentional consciousness, as speech, derives from interrogating self and putting it into the accusative. From such interrogation also derive self's freedoms, self's rights—"human rights", elaborated to defend the self summoned by the face of the other to account for the rights of others, to defend itself as "I".

The opposition of a nude face, the opposition of disarmed eyes, devoid of protection, beginning from which self is constituted as responsibility, is not the opposition of a force, a relation of hostility. It is a peace-loving opposition, where peace is not understood as suspension of violence, withheld in order to be used more effectively. On the contrary, the violence perpetuated consists in eliminating this very opposition, in outwitting it, in ignoring the face, in avoiding the gaze. "No" is written on the face of the other—firstly "Thou shalt not kill"—for the very fact of being a face. Having a sense in itself, having been absolved from the relation with an I, the other as such may absent itself from the presence of self and its projects, not go along with it. Violence is perpetuated when no inscribed on the face of the other is converted into hostile force or submission. Violence consists in prevailing over the other, to the point even of murder and war. Prevarication is perpetuated in spite of opposition to violence expressed in the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill", which is inscribed on the face even before it is explicit in a formula (cf. Levinas, "Entretiens", in Poirié 1987: 104); it precedes rational thought, being as an "I", statements made by the subject, knowledge and objectifying consciousness. Humanism is responsibility for the other human being and implies the interpersonal relationship where the subject "reaches the human condition assuming responsibility for the other person in the election that elevates it to this degree" (Levinas 1990).

The work of interpersonal responsibility is the work of the individual in his singularity, of the person who is absolutely responsible: responsible like a hostage who must answer for something he did not do, for a past which was never his, which was never present to him (cf. Levinas, "Entretiens", in Poirié 1987: 118).

Responsibility for others is oriented in a dual sense: the other is elevated and taken upon one's own shoulders, so to say, in a relationship that is asymmetrical. Says Levinas, the person I must answer for is also the person I must answer to. I must answer to the person whom I must

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answer for. Responsibility in the face of the person I am responsible for: responsible for a face that regards me, for its freedom (cf. Levinas, "Freedom and Command", in Levinas 1987b: 15-24).

The situation of peace and responsibility in relation to the other, where individuals give themselves in their singularity, difference, noninterchangeability, non-indifference, precedes politics and logic, says Levinas.

Politics and logic share the fact that they consider individuals as

belonging to a genre, as equals. The relation of alterity is prepolitical and pre-logical. Politics and logic arise because, given my exclusive responsibility towards every other, I am obliged to keep faith to this responsibility and to relate to every other indifferently, therefore, not only to a singularity, but according to a genre; I am obliged to relate to the individual of a given system or group, who as such is interchangeable, indifferent.

Therefore, political and community organization with its logic, laws, distinctions, classifications, finds its justification in responsibility for the other. However, history shows that such justification, therefore the sense of politics, the order of logic may be lost. This is particularly manifest today despite so-called global communication.

A paradox connected with globalisation in its current phase of development is that social relationships emerge as relations among individuals who are separate from each other, reciprocally indifferent to each other. The relation to the other is suffered as a necessity for the sake of achieving one's own private interests. Furthermore, exclusive preoccupation with one's own identity, one's own difference indifferent to the differences of others, increases fear of the other understood in the transitive as fearing the other. Following such logic, the community is a passive result of the interests of identities that are indifferent to each other. Indeed, thus construed the community presents itself as compact identity only for as long as its interests require cohesion and unification. The egological community, the community of selves forming the identity of each one of us presents the same type of sociality. Sociality thus understood is founded upon relations of reciprocal indifference among differences and identities. Such a condition at once ensues from and is evidenced by separation between public and private behaviour in the same individual subject: separation and mutual indifference among roles, competencies, tasks, languages, among responsibilities in the same individual, in the same subject, separation viewed as the "normal" or "standard" way of conforming to the social system that subject belongs to.

Fear of the other, to fear the other, ensues from the constitution of identity thus described. In today's world, fear of the other understood as fearing the other, fear that the subject experiences of the object, has

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reached paroxysmal degrees. However, contrary to the Hobbesian principle of "*homo homini lupus*", fear in the transitive is not the starting point but the point of arrival in the constitution of identity (cf. Levinas, "Entretiens", in Poirié 1987: 117-120).

"Fear of the other" means fear that the subject experiences "of the other" understood as object genitive: the other constitutes the object of fear. Logic distinguishes the *object genitive* from the *subject genitive*— the other subject of fear, the other who fears. Subject and object. However, to grasp the third sense of fear, fear *for* the other, it will be necessary to abandon this dichotomy as traditionally established in logic. According to this third sense, fear of the other means to experience the other's fear, fear as experienced by the other, therefore, fear for the other. Here we no longer distinguish between subject and object, nor refer to community

identification. In other words, the relationship among differences no longer implies community identification, that is, indifference among identities and differences. On the contrary, the relation among differences is based on non-indifference among differences, absolute otherness, transcendence with respect to identity. Following this logic and developing Levinas, the expression “of the other” may be designated as an *ethical genitive* (cf. Ponzio 1995, 1996). This third case of the genitive should be taken into account by logic as the third sense in which we may disambiguate the expression “fear of the other”: that is, as “fear for the other”.

5. *Humanism, otherness, and semioethics*

The passage cited above from the text by Levinas, “Judaism and their Present”, continues as follows:

What matters is to be authentic and not at all to be true (*dans le vrai*), to commit oneself rather than to know. Art, love, action are more important than theory. Talent is worth more than wisdom and selfpossession (Levinas 1960, Eng. trans.: 254).

With the spread of “biopower” and the controlled insertion of bodies into the production apparatus, global communication goes together with assertion of the idea of the individual as a separate and self-sufficient entity (cf. Foucault 1977; Foucault *et alii* 1996). The body is experienced as an isolated biological entity, belonging to the individual, the individual’s sphere of possession. This has led to the quasi total extinction of cultural practices and worldviews based on intercorporeity, interdependency, exposition and opening of the body. What we are left with are mummified residues studied by folklore analysts, archeological remains preserved in ethnological museums and in the history of national literatures—the expression of a situation of generalized museumification.

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Think of the different ways the body is perceived by popular culture as discussed by Bakhtin, the various forms of “grotesque realism” which do not conceive the body and corporeal life generally in individualistic terms or separately from the rest of terrestrial life, indeed, from the rest of the world (cf. Bakhtin 1963, 1965). Signs of the grotesque body (only weak traces of which have survived in the present age) include ritual masks present in Middle Age popular festivities and in all precapitalist cultural systems over the planet (e.g. among the Amerindians studied by Lévi-Strauss, cf. Lévi-Strauss 19753). Antecedently to the development of individualism connected with the rise of the bourgeoisie, “grotesque realism” in medieval popular culture presented the body as undefined, not confined to itself, but on the contrary as flourishing in relations of symbiosis with other bodies, of transformation and renewal transcending the limits of individual life. However, far from weakening the individualistic, private and static conception of body, which is a vision functional to the “technologies of self”, global communication, which is global communication-production, reinforces it (cf. Foucault 1988).

As Foucault in particular has revealed (but important to signal are also the acute analyses by the Italian philosopher Ferruccio Rossi-Landi [1921-1985] in his books of the 1970s) (e.g. Rossi-Landi, “Linguistic

Alienation Problems” 1970, in Petrilli 1992; Rossi-Landi 1975 and 1978), division and separatism among the sciences are functional to the ideological-social necessities of the “new canon of the individualized body” (Bakhtin). This, in turn, is functional to the controlled insertion of bodies into the social reproductive cycles of today’s communication production system.

An approach to the study of signs that is global and detotalising must be founded on the logic of otherness with a high degree of availability for the other, readiness to listen to the other, opening to the other, not only in quantitative terms (the omnicomprehensive character of global semiotics), but also qualitatively (Petrilli 1990). All semiotic interpretations by the student of signs, especially at a metasemiotic level, must not prescind from a dialogical relationship with the other. Dialogism is a fundamental condition for an approach that is oriented globally and at once privileges opening to the local, the particular that is not isolated or closed in upon itself. Accordingly, such an approach privileges the tendency towards detotalisation by contrast with totalization. Otherness obliges the totality to reorganize itself ever anew in a process related to “infinity” (besides Levinas 1961, cf. also Levinas 1995), as especially Levinas has demonstrated, or to “infinite semiosis”

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3For an appreciation by Lévi-Strauss of Sebeok’s work, cf. Lévi-Strauss, “Avant-Propos”, in Bouissac, Herzfeld, Posner 1986: 3.

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in Peirce’s terminology. The relation to infinity is far more than a cognitive issue: beyond the established order, the symbolic order, convention and habit, it implies a relation of involvement and responsibility. The relation to infinity is the relation to *absolute otherness*, to that which is most refractory to the totality, to the Same. The relation to infinity implies a relation to the otherness of others, to the otherness of the other person, not in the sense of another self like one’s own self, another *alter ego*, another I belonging to the *same community*, but the other that is alien, in its extraneousness, strangeness, diversity, difference towards which we must not be indifferent despite efforts to the contrary and guarantees offered by identity of I, by self.

The global and detotalising approach to the life of signs that we are proposing does not orient semiotics according to some specific ideological plan. Rather, our focus is on human behaviour and the unique responsibility with which the human being is invested as a “semiotic animal”. As anticipated above, the expression “semiotic animal” indicates a responsible agent capable of *signs of signs*, of suspending action and deliberating, of creative mediation, reflection and critique.

Global semiotics must be adequately founded in cognitive semiotics, but it must also open to a third dimension beyond the quantitative and the theoretical, that is, the ethical, or what we are designating as the “semioethical”. Semioethics is related to our proposal of a new form of humanism (cf. Petrilli and Ponzio 2003). In fact, recalling Levinas, but also the other authors mentioned in this paper, semioethics summons us to the authenticity of commitment at a pragmatic level, in action, beyond the purely theoretical, to participation and involvement with the other beyond individual separatisms and interests, to care and

love for the other (cf. also, Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love", in Levinas 1998: 103-121). Art, talent is more important than wisdom and self-possession, says Levinas, beyond reason reasonableness says Peirce. Semioethics aims to transcend separatism among the sciences and the objects of their research relating the natural sciences to the logico-mathematical and the human sciences.

Semioethics does not have a program to propose with intended aims and practices, nor a decalogue, nor a formula to apply more or less sincerely or hypocritically. Rather, what is implied is the propensity for critique with a special vocation for evidencing sign networks where it seemed there were none, revealing and evaluating interconnections and implications that cannot be evaded where it seemed there were only separations, boundaries and distances with their relative alibis.

The new form of humanism we are proposing can only be the humanism of alterity, as demonstrated by Levinas throughout all his writings, and most explicitly in *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (cf. also "The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other", in Levinas 1987b: 116-
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125). Dominant ideology has centred the claim to human rights on the rights of identity, eliminating from the very concept of "human rights" the rights of the other. If we are to safeguard life globally over the planet Earth, this approach must be quickly counteracted by the humanism of alterity where the rights of the other are the first to be recognized. Our allusion is not just to the rights of the other *beyond self*, but also to the self's very own other, to the other *of self*. The self characteristically tends to remove, suffocate and segregate otherness mostly sacrificed to the cause of identity. However, identity thus achieved is fictitious and all efforts made to maintain or recover identity in such terms are vain. Semiotics contributes to the humanism of alterity by evidencing the extension and consistency of the sign network connecting one human being to every other, both on a synchronic and diachronic level. The worldwide spread of communication means that a communication system is progressively being established on a planetary level, and as such is a phenomenon susceptible to synchronic analysis; and given that the human species is implied in all events, behaviors, individual decisions, in the overall destiny of the individual from its most remote to its most recent and closest manifestations, in its past and evolutionary future, on a biological level and on a historico-social level, diachronic investigations staggering for diversity, to say the least, are also necessary. This sign network concerns the semiosphere constructed by humankind, a sphere inclusive of culture, its signs, symbols, artifacts, etc.; but global semiotics teaches us that this semiosphere is part of a far broader semiosphere, the semiobiosphere forming the habitat of humanity (the matrix whence we sprang and the stage on which we are destined to act).

Semiotics has the merit of demonstrating that whatever is human involves signs. Indeed, it implies more than this: whatever is simply alive involves signs. And this is as far as cognitive semiotics and global semiotics reach. But semioethics pushes this awareness even further in the direction of ethics and beyond; in fact, in a semioethical perspective the question of responsibility cannot be evaded at the most radical level

(that of defining commitments and values). Our ethos, even more, the cosmos itself falls within the scope of human responsibility. The implication, among others, is that we must interpret human sign behaviour in the light of the hypothesis that if all the human involves signs, then all signs in turn are human. However, this humanistic commitment does not mean to reassert monologic identity yet again, nor does it imply another form of anthropocentrism. On the contrary, what is implied is a radical operation of decentralization, nothing less than a Copernican revolution. As Welby would say, “geocentrism” must be superseded, then “heliocentrism”, until we approximate a truly cosmic perspective (cf. Welby 1983). To reach such a perspective is an integral part of our ultimate end, a point where global semiotics and “semi-

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oethics” intersect. Otherness more than anything else is at stake in the question of human responsibility and therefore of humanism as we are proposing it. But we must now add that otherness here is understood differently from previous interpretations: not only otherness of one’s self, and then of our neighbour, or even of a person at a distance, in truth now easily perceived to be close, but also otherness of living beings distant in genetic terms.

Reformulating a famous saying by Terence (“homo sum: umani nihil a me alienum puto”), Roman Jakobson (1963) asserted that: “linguista sum: linguistici nihil a me alienum puto”. The semiotician’s commitment to all that is linguistic, indeed, endowed with sign value (not only relatively to anthroposemiosis or more simply to zoosemiosis, but to the whole semiobiosphere) is not only cognitive but also ethical. This commitment implies concern not only as “being concerned with...”, but also as “being concerned for...”, “taking care of...”. In truth, in such a perspective, concern, care, responsibility are not limited to the sphere of belonging, proximity, community, nor to the “linguist” or “semiotician”. Beyond Jakobson, it is not as professional linguists or semioticians that anything that is a sign is not “a me alienum”. Rather “homo sum” (leaving the first part of Terence’s saying unchanged) and as humans not only are we semiotic animals (like all other animals), but also uniquely semiotic animals, therefore nothing semiotic including the biosphere and the evolutionary cosmos whence it sprang, “a me alienum puto”.

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