

# **The responsibility of power and the power of responsibility:**

## **From the “semiotic” to the “semioethic” animal\***

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on a form of semiosis that is specifically human, that is, what we may identify as the human capacity for metasemiosis or semiotics. As a semiotic animal, the human being is capable of reflecting upon signs, not only upon human signs but upon all types of signs over the entire planet. To the extent that human beings are capable of reflecting upon signs, therefore to suspend action, deliberate and make decisions, they are also in a position to answer for themselves. The capacity for metasemiosis, or semiotics, implies the capacity to account for one's choices and behavior, therefore the capacity for responsibility, which indeed pertains to humankind. The power of human beings rests in this unique capacity for responsibility. Consciousness, both in a cognitive and moral sense, is connected with this kind of power. Insofar as human beings are capable of reflecting on signs, their own signs as well as the signs of others, responsibility which ensues from such a capacity for reflection is the capacity to answer not only for one's own signs but also for the signs of others. In this context of discourse, by 'others' is not only understood the other human being, nor only the other of one's own self. In other words, *the other* is not only the other *of* self or *from* self within the sphere of anthroposemiosis, but also all other living beings over the entire planet. This implies the species-specific capacity to take responsibility for all of life, for all of semiosis across the biosemiosphere. The capacity to 'answer for', to 'account for' structural to human beings implies responsibility for life on earth in its globality. Therefore, we must emphasize the power of responsibility which presupposes man's semiotic or metasemiotic power, and the importance of the power of responsibility for life: beyond the responsibility of power the power of responsibility. Such discourse leads from the sphere of semiotics into what we have proposed to denominate the sphere of ethosemiotics or semioethics (cf. Petrilli 1998b; Petrilli and Ponzio 2003).

### **1. Two meanings of semiotics**

‘Semiotics’ may be understood as indicating the *specificity of human semiosis* and at once the general *science of signs* (see Petrilli 2001).

According to the first meaning semiotics is the specific human capacity for *metasemiosis*. In the world of life which coincides with semiosis, human semiosis is characterized as metasemiosis, that is, as the possibility of reflecting on signs, of making signs not only the object of interpretation not distinguishable from the response to these signs, but also of interpretation as reflection on signs, as suspension of response and possibility of deliberation.

Developing Aristotle’s correct observation made at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, that man tends by nature to knowledge, we could say that man tends by nature to semiotics. Human semiosis, anthroposemiosis, may be characterized as presenting itself as *semiotics*. Semiotics as human semiosis or anthroposemiosis can venture across the entire universe in search of meanings and senses considered, therefore, in terms of signs. However, as testified by the history of ideas, semiotics thus understood may also absolutize anthroposemiosis and oversimplifying identify it with semiosis itself.

Instead, according to the second meaning semiotics is the study of signs conceived as a discipline or science (Saussure) or theory (Morris) or doctrine (Sebeok). The field of semiotic studies and the model of sign may be extended to the whole universe insofar as it is perfused with signs (Peirce), to the world of organisms, to the living world (Sebeok) and thus emerge as ‘global semiotics’, or, on the contrary, the range may be restricted to verbal and nonverbal human semiosis alone. In this case the risk is that semiotics as the study of signs should end up developing an approach that is limited and anthropocentric.

Thanks to Thomas A. Sebeok a new trend in semiotics has been evolving since the 1960s, appropriately denominated ‘Global Semiotics’ (Sebeok 2001) or ‘Semiotics of life’ (Ponzio and Petrilli 2001, 2002). Sebeok expands the boundaries of traditional semiotics, or, rather, semiology, which contrary to global semiotics is restrictively based on the verbal paradigm, and consequently is vitiated by the *pars pro toto* error. He tags this conception of semiotics the ‘minor tradition’ and promotes what he calls the ‘major tradition’ as represented by John Locke and Peirce and early studies on signs and symptoms by Hippocrates and Galen. In Sebeok’s conception, the sign science is not only the ‘science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale’ (Saussure), that is to say, the study of communication in culture, but also the study of communicative behavior in a biosemiotic perspective. Consequently, by comparison with other approaches Sebeok’s global semiotics is characterized by a maximum broadening of competencies.

## **2. Global Communication, Biosemiotics and Semioethics**

In what follows global semiotics is developed in the direction of what we propose to call *semioethics*. As a unique semiotic animal, therefore, the only animal capable of reflection upon

signs and communication, the human being has a singular responsibility toward life (which of signs and communication is made), which also means the quality of life. More than *limited responsibility*, that is, *responsibility with alibis*, the type of responsibility involved is *unlimited responsibility*, *responsibility without alibis*, *absolute responsibility*. Our responsibilities toward life in the global communication-production phase of development in late capitalist society are enormous, indeed unbounded, also in the sense that when we speak of life the implication is not only human life, but all of life throughout the whole planetary ecosystem, from which of course human life cannot be separated. As the study of signs semiotics cannot evade this issue.

Originally, semiotics was understood as 'semeiotics' (a branch of the medical sciences) and was focused on symptoms. Nowadays the ancient vocation of semiotics as it was originally practiced for the 'care of life' must be recovered and reorganized in what we propose to call 'semioethic' terms. This issue is particularly urgent in the present age in the face of growing interference in communication between the historical-social sphere and the biological sphere, between the cultural sphere and the natural sphere, between the semiosphere and the biosphere. *Semioethics* is the result of two thrusts: one is *biosemiotics*, the other *bioethics*.

*Bioethics* offers a unified and critical point of view on ethical problems connected with biological and medical discoveries with progress in such fields as genetic engineering, neurobiology and pharmaceutical research. With bioethics ethical problems become the object of study of a specific discipline. However, even before the introduction of this new discipline, ethical problems were already part of two totalities that together contribute to the characterization of these problems: one totality is the *semio(bio)sphere*, the other is today's *global socio-economic communication-production system*. Coherently with its philosophical orientation that is at once critical and foundational, bioethics must necessarily keep account of this dual contextualization when addressing the problems at the center of its attention.

The semio(bio)sphere is the object of study of *global semiotics* or what has also been designated as *semiotics of life*. Given the breadth of its scope global semiotics is no doubt in a position to provide bioethics with an adequate contextualization in terms of quantity (therefore extension across the various spheres of semiosis) and of quality for the resolution of the problems to be addressed. And with the expression 'adequate contextualization' is also understood the possibility of *critical reformulation*. Global semiotics contributes to an *approach to bioethics that is foundational and critical*.

In addition to the context offered by global semiotics, which is at once of the *phenomenological* and *ontological* orders, another type of contextualization is necessary for an adequate understanding of problems relevant to bioethics, the *socio-economic*. Bioethical problems must be reviewed in the light of today's socio-economic context, that is, the context of *global communication-production*. The phenomenological, ontological and socio-economic contexts are all

closely interrelated from the point of view of bioethics. And, in fact, semiotics today understood as global semiotics must accept the responsibility of denouncing incongruities in the global system, and consequently it must denounce any threats to life over the entire planet produced by this same system (see below, Petrilli and Ponzio forthc. Part III, 2.1, 2.2).

### **3. Global communication and global semiotics**

Late capitalist society in its present phase of development may be characterized in terms of *world* communication and globalization. Given that communication has extended over the whole planet and is realistically accommodated to the world as it is, the expression ‘world communication’ would seem especially appropriate. Moreover, given that communication pervades the whole production cycle not only interfering with human life but with life in general, this is unquestionably the era of globalization.

Consequently, an adequate analysis of capitalism today calls for a perspective that is just as extensive, just as inclusive, in other words, truly global. While the special sciences taken separately are not in a position to provide such a perspective, the general science of signs or semiotics has the right instruments at its disposal to do so. This does not imply that semiotics as it is practiced today is ready for such a task. If anything, the opposite is true. However, it is no longer possible to practice semiotics adequately, especially when a question of communication theory or the communication sciences, without keeping account of today’s situation of worldwide and global communication.

Moreover, a communication model that fails to keep account of the *global* nature of world communication, a phenomenon which is altogether new from the point of view of history, will prove inadequate for semiotic analysis, at the very least the approach will be shortsighted and anachronistic. In the present era, general semiotics formally re-envisioned as *global* semiotics has a *detotalizing* function to carry out: global semiotics must be designed to formulate a critique of all alleged totalities, in the first place the totality world and global communication. If general semiotics or global semiotics fails to perform such a detotalizing function, its work will prove useless or, even worse, the mere syncretic result of the special semiotics, a transversal language of the encyclopedia of unified sciences, or a philosophical prevarication suffering from omniscience with respect to the different disciplines and specialized fields of knowledge.

The worldwide extension of communication is a surface phenomenon and as such can only be understood by studying its foundations. To adopt this approach means to reject what has been denominated by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi the postal package communication model, which is reductive and oversimplifying given that it describes the communicative process in terms of preconstituted messages that are emitted by a source and accepted by a receiver, similarly to the postal package that is sent out from one post office and received by another. In 1961, that is to say,

at a time when communication was not yet the pervasive phenomenon it is today, Rossi-Landi had already heavily criticized this particular communication model. In reality we are speaking of the 1950s when Italy had not yet been exposed to anything approximating the level of social reorganization reached by today's communication-production system. To interpret human communication in terms of the postal package communication model, which is a model based on the concept of equal exchange, means to refer to a communication model that is reductive and oversimplifying as much as it is still influential. In fact, this particular communication model with its recourse to such concepts as information transmission and message transmission is not capable of a critical analysis of any of the components forming the communication process whether a question of the emitter, receiver, code, message, context, or of the needs propelling communication. Indeed, according to this approach such components are preconstituted, that is, they are fully defined before communication actually takes place (cf. Ponzio 1997 and 1999). This description loses sight of the consistency of the communication phenomenon, which is far broader and more complex than what could ever be expected referring to a model that limits communication to an intentional exchange of messages among distinct and separate individuals, on the basis of a common code accepted as a fact of convention.

A full understanding of global communication implies a full understanding of the risks that communication today involves, including the *risk of the end of communication*, the risk that communication may come to an end. Here, the risk we are alluding to is not simply the risk of the rather trivial phenomenon known as 'incommunicability' theorized and represented in film and literature, a subjective-individualistic disease which emerged during the transition to communication as it has developed today in terms of communication inseparable from production, what we have denominated 'communication-production'. Far more radically, the risk of the end of communication refers to nothing less than the risk of the end of life on the planet Earth, considering the enormous potential for destruction in society of the present era by contrast with preceding phases in the development of the social system. With such a statement it should be obvious that communication is not understood in the oversimplifying terms described above but rather is equated with life itself. As especially Thomas A. Sebeok's approach to biosemiotics has made clear, semiosis and life, communication and life converge. And in this perspective, the end of communication would mean the end of life (see Petrilli and Ponzio forthc., Part One, V).

For an adequate understanding of communication in the present era that keeps account of its historical-social specificity as a worldwide phenomenon and of its interconnectedness to life over the whole planet (remembering that life and communication, life and semiosis coincide), semiotics must adopt a 'planetary', therefore *global* perspective in both spatial and temporal terms. Such an approach will grant the critical distancing necessary for an interpretation of contemporaneity that is not imprisoned within the limits of contemporaneity itself.

#### **4. Responsibility and semioethics**

With the spread of 'biopower' (Foucault) and the controlled insertion of bodies into the production apparatus, world and global communication goes hand in hand with the dissemination and assertion of the conception of the individual as a separate and self-sufficient entity. The body is understood and experienced as an isolated biological entity, as belonging to the individual, that is to say, as part of the individual's sphere of belonging. This has led to the quasi total extinction of cultural practices and worldviews that are 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, being the expression of a situation of generalized museumification.

Think of the different ways the body is perceived by the representatives of popular culture as discussed by Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1963 and 1965), of 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. Signs of the grotesque body (only weak traces of which have survived in the present age) include ritual masks, for example, masks used during popular festivities, carnival masks. Antecedently to the development of individualism connected with the rise of the bourgeoisie, 'grotesque realism' in medieval popular culture presented the body as something undefined, not confined to itself, but on the contrary as flourishing in relations of symbiosis with other bodies, in relations of transformation and renewal transcending the limits of individual life. Far from weakening the individualistic, private and static conception of the body, global communication-production reinforces it.

As Michel Foucault in particular has revealed (but let us also remember Rossi-Landi's acute analyses of the situation as already articulated in his books of the 1970s), division and separatism among the sciences are functional to the ideological-social necessities of the 'new cannon of the individualized body' (Bakhtin). This, in turn, is functional to the controlled insertion of bodies into the reproductive cycles of today's communication-production system.

An approach to semiotics that is global and detotalizing is connected with the logic of otherness demanding a high degree in availability for the other, readiness to listen to the other, the capacity for opening to the other, understood not only in quantitative terms (the omnicomprehensive character of global semiotics), but also qualitatively. All semiotic interpretations by the student of signs, especially at a metasemiotic level, cannot prescind from a dialogic relationship with the other. In fact, dialogism is a fundamental condition for an approach to semiotics that is oriented globally and at once also privileges opening toward the local and the particular, which is not simply enclosed and englobed. Accordingly, such an approach may be described as privileging the tendency toward detotalization rather than totalization.

As Emmanuel Levinas above all has demonstrated, otherness obliges the totality to reorganize itself ever anew in a process related to what he calls 'infinity' and which (to use an expression

associated with Charles S. Peirce) we could also relate to the concept of 'infinite semiosis'. This relation to infinity is far more than a cognitive issue: beyond the established order, beyond the symbolic order, beyond our conventions and habits, it is a relation of involvement and responsibility. The relation to infinity is the relation to *absolute otherness*, a relation to that which is most refractory to the totality. Therefore, 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 rather in the sense of the other that is alien, the other in its extraneousness, strangeness, diversity, difference toward which we must not be indifferent in spite of all the efforts and guarantees to the contrary offered by identity of I, of self.

The approach we are delineating does not orient semiotics according to any specific ideological plan. Rather, semiotics thus described concerns our understanding of behavior in relation to the human being's unique responsibility as a 'semiotic animal'. Properly understood, the 'semiotic animal' is a responsible agent capable of *signs of signs*, of mediation, reflection, and awareness with respect to semiosis over the whole planet. In this sense global semiotics must be adequately founded in cognitive semiotics, but it must also be open to a third dimension beyond the quantitative and the theoretical, that is, the ethical. Given that this third dimension concerns the ends toward which we strive and wish to reach, we have designated it in past papers with the terms 'teleosemiotics' or 'telosemiotics'. We now also propose the term 'semioethics' (Petrilli and Ponzio 2003).

If semiotics is to meet its commitment to the 'health of semiosis' and to cultivate its capacity to understand the entire semiotic universe, it must continuously refine its auditory and critical functions, that is, its capacity for listening and critique. And to accomplish such tasks we believe that the trichotomy that distinguishes between (1) cognitive semiotics, (2) global semiotics, and (3) semioethics is no less than decisive not only in theoretical terms but also for reasons of a therapeutic order.

## **5. Identity and alterity: on subjectivity and reasonableness**

The category of 'identity' and that of 'subjectivity' which is closely interconnected with the former, both perform a decisive role in worldwide and global communication, whether a question of the identity of the individual subject or of the collective ('Western world', European Union, nation, ethnic group, social class, etc.).

The concepts of individual identity and of community identity alike need to be analyzed in a semiotic key. In either form identity may prove to be governed either by logic oriented in the sense of monologism, what we could call a 'mono-logic', or by logic oriented in the sense of dialogism, therefore a 'dia-logic'. The difference is profound and pervasive.

Peirce's reflections have contributed significantly to a redefinition of the subject (see Sebeok, Petrilli and Ponzio 2001). The human being, the I, is a sign of an extraordinarily complex order, made of verbal and nonverbal language: '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 dialogic and relational entity, an *open* subject gradually delineated in the intrapersonal and interpersonal interrelationship with other signs and other subjects. Therefore the boundaries of the subject-sign cannot be defined once and for all, but rather emerge in dialogic encounters with other signs, with other subjects, and are never definitive.

The human person develops in sociality, that is, in relation to the experiences of others and never in isolation. Indeed, the self, the subject is a community of selves obeying the laws of the logic of otherness. The self is a community of dialogically interrelated selves. If we interpret the word 'in-dividual' literally as meaning 'non divided, non divisible', using Peirce's words we may make the claim that 'a person is not absolutely an individual' (CP 5.314; see Petrilli and Ponzio forthc., Part One, I.2.1). Peirce rejected the 'illusory phenomenon' of a finite self or a self-sufficient self. Indeed, on her part, in support of this thesis, though independently of Peirce, Victoria Welby was to state a similar position when she claimed that, 'It is precisely our di-viduality that forms the wealth of our gifts'.

The social and communal character of self does not contradict the singularity or uniqueness of self, its signifying otherness with respect to any interpretive process that may concern it. The self is ineffable (cf. CP 1.357). It is saying beyond the said. The utterances of self convey significance beyond the conventional meaning of words. At the same time, however, the ineffability and uniqueness of self do not imply a condition of incommunicability.

Peirce's conception of identity as we have discussed it recalls Welby's and vice versa. For both alike the identity of the subject is multiplex, plurifaceted and plurivocal, it is delineated and modeled in the dialogic relation among its various parts. Welby established a distinction between the I and the Self, as emerges from her unpublished manuscripts which include a file entitled *Subjectivity* with texts written between 1903 and 1910 (see Welby Collection, York University Archives, Toronto; Petrilli and Ponzio, Part One, I.2, Part Two, I.2.1; cf. also Petrilli 1998a for a description of the materials available at the archives). Welby analyzes the problem of subjectivity in terms of the complex and articulated relation between what she calls the 'I', or, introducing a neologism, *Ident*, and what she calls the 'self' (cf. the manuscripts of 1907-10). According to Welby's analysis identity is constructed in the dialogic relationship of the self with the I. The I or Ident is not the 'individual' but the 'unique'. The self is also designated with the neologism



*ephemeron*, and is described as being mortal, ephemeral like the body. By contrast, the I is described as tending toward immortality beyond the mortality of the body and of the self. Formed in this way, identity is not unitary or compact, but, on the contrary, presents a surplus, something more with respect to identity itself, which it transcends.

The subject is inevitably an incarnate subject, thus intercorporeal being, that is to say, a body connected to other bodies from the very outset, an expression of the condition of intercorporeity on both a synchronic and diachronic level for the whole of its subsequent life, the subject is not incarnated in a body isolated from other bodies. The subject is an incarnate entity from the point of view of biological evolution, of the species, as well as from the point of view of sociality and of cultural history. The body plays a fundamental role in the development of awareness or consciousness. Consciousness is incarnate consciousness. The body is a condition for the full development of consciousness, of the human being as a semiotic animal. The incarnate subject develops interrelatedly 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. Indeed, echoing Bakhtin, the word is a bridge joining one's own body to the body of others. Peirce makes recurrent use of the expression 'flesh and blood' (cf. *CP* 1.337, 7.591) for the physiological body that, however, can only be distinguished from the semiotic body by abstraction.

Given its broad scope, semiotics must keep account of and account for the 'reason of things'. However, the capacity for detotalization as the condition for critical and dialogic totalization implies that the ability to grasp the *reason* of things cannot be separated from the capacity for *reasonableness*. The issue at stake may be stated in the following terms: given the risks inherent in social reproduction today for semiosis and for life, *human beings must at their very earliest transform from rational animals into reasonable animals*.

The dialogic relation between self and other (the other *from* self and the 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 in the sense of *agape*. In fact, according to Peirce, the most advanced developments in reason and knowledge are possible thanks to the creative power of reasonableness and the transformative suasions of *agape*.

Thus conceived, reasonableness is endowed with the power of transforming one's horror of the stranger, the alien, one's fear of the other understood as the fear one experiences of the other foreign to oneself, into sympathy for the other become lovely. Developing Peirce's discourse in the direction of the philosophy of subjectivity elaborated by Levinas, we might add that under the hardened crust of its identity the subject rediscovers its fear for the other, for the other's safety through love. Such fear renders the subject incessantly restless and preoccupied for the other. Love, reasonableness, creativity are all grounded in the logic of otherness and dialogism. Together, as we learn from the authors thus far cited, otherness and dialogism in the terms described not only move

the evolutionary dynamics of human consciousness but far beyond this of the entire universe taken globally.

While working on pragmatism with reference to the problem of subjectivity, to the self considered as a set of actions, practices, habits, Peirce identified 'power' as opposed to 'force' as one of its fundamental characteristics. He describes the self as a center oriented toward an end, an agent devoted to a more or less integrated set of 'purposes'. The latter may be related to what Welby understood with the terms 'purport' or 'ultimate value' in her description of sense in terms of the signifying value designated by the third element of her meaning triad, that is to say, 'significance'. Power is not 'brute force' but the 'creative power of reasonableness', which, by virtue of its agapistic orientation rules over all other forms of power (cf. *CP* 5.520). We could say that power, in other words, the ideal of reasonableness, is the capacity to respond to the attraction exerted upon self by the other; power and reasonableness are related to the capacity for response to the other and the modality of such response is dialogue.

The relationship between the self's humility and fragility, on the one side, and the risks implied in the self's readiness to venture toward that which is other, on the other side, has already been portrayed by Plato in his myth about Eros (in the *Symposium*), a sort of intermediate divinity, or demon, generated by Penia (poverty, need) and Poros (the God of ingenuity), who is capable of finding the way even when it is hidden. With reference to the human world, Welby described the connection between self-enrichment and risky opening toward others as a condition for evolution. Such connection engenders an orientation which may be described in terms of the critique of 'being satisfied', therefore, in terms of 'transcendence' with respect to reality, that is, to the world as it is, with respect to ontological being that is given and determined once and for all: 'We all tend now, men and women, to be satisfied [...] with things as they are. But we have all entered the world precisely to be dissatisfied with it'. 'Dissatisfaction' is an essential component in the concept of 'mother sense' or 'primal sense' and signals the need to recover the critical instance of the human intellectual capacity. Beyond the cognitive capacity, the allusion here is to the capacity for otherness, to the structural capacity for creativity and innovation, for shifting and displacing sense. And thanks especially to the procedures of abductive logic, this critical instance allows for prevision and 'translation' where the latter is understood in the broadest sense possible, that is to say, beyond the limits of interlingual translation, translation as interpretation and verification of verbal and nonverbal signs alike. Scientific rigor in reasoning is possible on the basis of 'primal sense' as conceived by Welby and agapastic logical procedure as described by Peirce. This implies the courage to admit the structural necessity for the evolution of such things as sign, subject and consciousness of the factor of reasonableness as against reason, therefore of otherness, intercorporeity, dialogue, love, inexactitude, instability and crisis.

## **6. Signs of humanity and humanity of signs**

In the light of what has been said so far, semioethics may be considered as proposing a new form of humanism. In fact, beyond the cognitive level semioethics is committed in terms of the ethical perspective, therefore at the pragmatic level. Furthermore, it aims to transcend separatism among the sciences connecting the natural sciences and the logico-mathematical sciences, on the one hand, to the historical-social or human sciences, on the other, recovering interconnections that are originally inscribed in the various fields of human knowledge. In particular, semioethics evidences the connection between the problem of humanism and the logic of alterity.

As most convincingly demonstrated by Levinas throughout all his writings and especially in *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (1972), this new form of humanism must be nothing less than the humanism of alterity. The claim to human rights centered on identity, which is the approach to human rights that has dominated through to this very moment in history, has left out from the very concept of 'human rights' the rights of the other, nor are there significant signs of change in the present-day world. Instead, for the sake of the health of semiosis over the entire globe, which today is heavily compromised, this approach must urgently be counteracted by the humanism of alterity where the rights of the other are the first to be recognized. And as should be obvious by now, our allusion here is not only to the rights of the other *beyond self* but to the self's very own other, to the other *of self*. The humanism of identity alludes to a condition characterized by the tendency of self mostly to remove, suffocate, segregate the other, that is, to sacrifice otherness on the altar of identity. But identity thus achieved is fictitious, and all efforts made to maintain or recover identity in such terms are destined to fail.

Semiotics contributes to the humanism of alterity by bringing to light the extension and consistency of the sign network that interconnects each human being to every other. And interconnection is a fact of synchrony as much as of diachrony. The dissemination of communication worldwide actually means that the communication sign system is operative on a planetary level involving living organisms worldwide, which as such is a global phenomenon susceptible to synchronic analysis. Therefore, human beings, and more generally all living organisms, are part of a life system where all terms are interconnected synchronically. Too, just as the destiny of the single individual, as of all life forms, is implied in the overall destiny of the human species, vice versa the human species in its entirety together with all life forms are implied in any events, behaviors, and decisions made by the single individual, that is, they are implied in the destiny of the single individual, from the remotest to the most recent manifestations, in the past and in the evolutionary future, in biological terms as well as in historical-social terms. This also renders diachronic investigations, staggering at the very least for diversity, absolutely necessary. The sign network as commonly understood concerns the semiosphere as 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, which forms the habitat of humankind and of its humanity (the matrix whence we sprang and the stage on which we are destined to act).

Semiotics has the merit of having demonstrated 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 have reached. However, semioethics offers a perspective that pushes such awareness even further, in the direction of ethics and beyond ethics. We are alluding to the fact that in a semioethic perspective the question of responsibility at the most radical level (that of defining commitments and values) cannot be escaped. Our ethos, but more than this, the cosmos itself falls within the scope of our responsibility. Among other things, this implies that we must interpret the sign behavior of humanity in the light of the hypothesis that if all the human involves signs, all signs in turn are human. However, this humanistic commitment does not at all mean to reassert humanity's (monologic) identity yet again, nor to propose yet another form of anthropocentrism. On the contrary, this commitment implies a radical operation of decentralization, nothing less than a Copernican revolution. As Welby would say (1983), 'geocentrism' must be transcended, then 'heliocentrism' itself, until we approximate a truly cosmic perspective – what we might call a cosmo-semiotic perspective as against the geosemiotic and heliosemitic perspectives. The attainment or approximation of such a perspective is an integral part of our ultimate end, hence a point where global semiotics and teleo- or telosemiotics or, as we now propose, semioethics intersect. As already observed, the logic of alterity more than anything else is at stake in the question of human responsibility and therefore of humanism as we are describing it. But the logic of alterity, and of the form of humanism we propose it to subtend and orient, now implies an other that is other from what has been commonly acknowledged so far: in other words, it is not only a question of the otherness of our neighbor or even of another person distant in space, in truth with global communication now perceived as being extremely close, but of the otherness of living beings most distant from us not only in space or for that matter in time, but on a genetic level as well.

Reformulating a famous saying by Terence (*'homo sum: umani nihil a me alienum puto'*), Roman Jakobson (1963) asserts that: *'linguista sum: linguistici nihil a me alienum puto'*. This commitment on the part of the semiotician to all that is linguistic, indeed, to all that is endowed with sign value (not only relatively to anthroposemiosis nor just to zoosemiosis, but to the whole semiobiosphere) should not only be understood in a cognitive sense but also in the ethical. And this commitment means to be concerned not only in the sense of 'being concerned with...', but also in the sense of 'being concerned for...', 'taking care of...'. However, viewed in this perspective, such concern, or care, or responsibility, which is not limited by the logic of identity nor, therefore, by the logic of belonging, proximity, community, communion, is not even that of the 'linguist' nor of the 'semiotician'. Modifying Jakobson's assertion, we could make the claim that it is not as professional linguists or semioticians, but rather (leaving the first part of Terence's saying, *'homo sum'*, unchanged) as human beings that anything that is a sign cannot be considered as *'a me alienum'*. As human beings not only are we *semiosic* animals (like all other animals), but also we are *semiotic* animals, animals capable of critical deliberation and responsibility, and in this sense we are unique. On this basis, nothing semiosic, including the biosphere at large and the evolutionary

cosmos whence it sprang, is alien to me as a human being, therefore nothing semiotic ‘*a me alienum puto*’.

Semioethics does not have a program to propose with intended goals and practices, nor a decalogue, nor a formula to apply more or less sincerely, therefore more or less hypocritically. Semioethics contrasts with *stereotypes* as much as with *norms* and *ideology* and, if at all, may be described as proposing a *critique* of stereotypes, norms and ideology, consequently a critique of different types of value (consider, for example, the analysis of values offered by Charles W. Morris in his book of 1964, *Signification and Significance*, with his tripartition into operative value, conceived value, and object values, along with the subordinate distinctions of the dimensions of value into detachment, dominance, and dependence). Semioethics is the capacity for critique and its special vocation is to render sign networks manifest where it seemed there were none, bringing to light and evaluating connections, implications, involvement, histories and stories which cannot be evaded where it seemed there were only net separations, distinct boundaries and distances with relative alibis. Such alibis serve to safeguard responsibility in a limited sense, consequently enabling consciousness to present itself in terms of a ‘clean conscience’. The component ‘*telos*’ in the expression ‘*teleo-*’ or ‘*telosemiotics*’ does not indicate some external value or pre-established end, an ultimate end, a *summum bonum* outside the sign network. On the contrary, it is intended to indicate the *telos* of semiosis itself understood as an orientation beyond the totality, beyond the closure of totality, transcendence with respect to a given entity, a given being, infinite semiosis, movement toward infinity, desire of the other. And in the present context, we propose that one of the special tasks of semioethics must be to expose the illusoriness of a common claim to the status of indifferent differences, that is to say, of differences that are mutually indifferent to each other (cf. Ponzio 1995).

## **7. Semiotics as an attitude and the critical work of semioethics**

Semiotics not only as a science but also as an attitude arises and is developed within the boundaries of anthroposemiosis. This is to say that semiotics is uniquely connected with the *Umwelt* of human beings, with the species-specific modeling capacity proper to human beings, which is capable of producing a great plurality of different worlds and worldviews – and not with the *Umwelt* of any other animal species. Semiotics is a fact of the human species and is decided as a part of the world that is produced historically and socially by human beings. In other words, the effective possibility of its realization, its capacity for the conferral of understanding and awareness is a fact of the historical-social order beyond the biological. Our *Umwelt* is determined by the species but it is also a historical-social product. Therefore, the possibility of transformation or alternative hypotheses has its effective grounding, point of departure, terms of confrontation, materials necessary for critique and programming in historical-social reality as it gradually emerges in semiosis.

The critical work of *semioethics* shows how the condition of differences that are reciprocally indifferent to each other is an illusion and how, on the contrary, the whole planet's destiny, in the last analysis, is implied in the choices and behavior of human beings. Semioethics must necessarily begin with unprejudiced analysis and interrogation of the social system in which it was formulated and which now advocates it. In other words, it must depart from where we are today in historical-social terms, from a rigorous and precise analysis of contemporaneity, and therefore of today's communication-production relationships.

We know that globalization and the worldwide dissemination of communication-production has reached high degrees in homologating social models of production, which in a sense is an advantage for the work of semioethics. A single type of market dominates over the whole planet, a single type of production and consumption system that leads to homologation not only in human behavior, habit, fashion (in the sense of dress fashion too), but also in the life of the imaginary. With respect to the overall social reproductive system as it dominates and englobes the entire planet today, we could make the claim that difference understood in terms of *otherness* is in the process of being replaced ever more with difference understood in terms of *alternatives*.

The advantage we are alluding to consists in the fact that what we are faced with is a unified object of analysis. This means that a great variety of multiform aspects will not have to be taken into account in our analyses, which implies at the very least no risk of wasting energy. However, it should also be obvious by now that the word 'advantage' is intended ironically because the implication is that what we must deal with is reality taken as a single, compact block. This is the advantage of *monologism*, which as such inevitably backfires on the capacity for critique, obstructing critical analysis, by contrast with the condition of plurivocality and polylogism, which, instead, favors creative interpretation and critical questioning. Moreover, the work of critique is also rendered difficult by the fact that appropriate conceptual instruments are not yet readily available and, therefore, must be invented; categories beyond the dominant ones must be constructed and assumptions which are not those taken for granted in the present phase of development in history must be introduced in reply to innovations.

We believe that semioethics offers the widest perspective possible that human beings may ever reach in their role as semiotic animals and, therefore, as *cosmically* responsible agents. Today, perhaps more than ever before, not only must we explain this perspective but we must also emphasize the inexorable need of cultivating it in the most conscientious, imaginative, and responsible way possible. Otherness demands nothing less.

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