

Rhetoric, Social Alienation and Semioethics in Global Communication

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Bionote:

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Abstract: Global communication today is strictly connected to the dominant social reproduction system which is regulated by dominant ideology and official discourse. These are grounded in the logic of identity, therefore the logic of roles with their limited responsibilities and alibis, ultimately the logic of self-interest. Human behaviour is sign

behaviour and ideological behaviour, in other words, it is never neutral, but, on the contrary, is permeated with values and regulated by social programs. Global semiotics and semioethics contribute towards a critical understanding of communication today, of semiosis, in a globalized world. Dialogism and listening are the condition for a new form of humanism based on the logic of otherness rather than on the logic of identity.

The increase in communication may not only fail to give agreement in valuations and modes of conduct but may actually be used to increase conflict, competitiveness and slavery. For sharing a language with other persons provides the subtlest and most powerful of all tools for controlling the behavior of these other persons to one's advantage—for stirring up rivalries, advancing one's own goals, exploiting others. Modern propaganda is the witness to this within existing nations; a world language would make the same phenomena possible over the earth as a whole. And semiotic itself, as it develops, will be subject to the same kind of utilization by individuals and groups for the control of other individuals and groups in terms of self-interest.

[...] If one of the practical tasks of the theory of signs is to further co-operative behavior, another complementary and equally insistent task is to so incite and fortify the individual that he keeps his own creative integrity in the face of the powerful forces in the modern world that tend to reduce him to a puppet pulled by the socially controlled strings of communication. (Charles Morris, *Signs, Language, and Behavior*, 1946, in Morris, 1971, pp.293—294)

0. Premise; 1. Rhetoric versus argumentation; 2. Global communication and behaviour programs; 3. The problem of social alienation; 4. Communication and semioethics; References

0. Premise

In this presentation a distinction is made between rhetoric and argumentation. The former is associated with persuasive discourse and is used to deceive. This is the case, for example, of political discourse, mass medial discourse and publicity. Rhetoric is used in publicity as a means of imposing dominant ideology. Deceptive rhetoric is related to ideology where the latter is understood in a narrow sense, but rhetoric is deceptive only if it is not questioned. Rhetoric is related to strategies for keeping a clean conscience, to the official discourse of institutions and is committed to defending dominant

ideology. A clean conscience resorts to alibis and is based on the logic of identity, the order of discourse, the logic of roles with their limited responsibilities, on unquestioning obedience to the social order. Rhetoric contributes to the necessary conditions for maintaining a clean conscience, limited responsibilities, in the last analysis an attitude of indifference to the other. As such it emerges as an effective means of imposing dominant ideology and keeping the masses under control in submission to the dominant social order. Human behaviour is sign behaviour and ideological behaviour, where I now understand the latter in a broad sense. Here the expression "ideology" is used to indicate the fact that human behaviour is never neutral, but rather is permeated with values and regulated by social programs. As such human behaviour calls for analysis from the perspective of the interrelation between sign theory, communication theory and value theory. Furthermore, a semiotic approach to the problem of ideology and social planning must keep account of the dialogic relation with the other. Dialogism is the condition for an approach that is at once global and detotalized, capable of opening to the other, of involvement with the other, of listening and critique. In its current phase of development, semiotics understood as so-called "global semiotics" (Sebeok, 2001) contributes to developing the humanism of otherness (as against the humanism of identity) by evidencing the extension and consistency of the sign network interconnecting each human being to every other globally. Beyond global semiotics, the proposal of "semioethics" (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2003) underlines the need to develop the capacity for critique and is oriented by the logic of otherness, of the relation to the other, with a special vocation for evidencing sign networks where it seemed there were none. For the health of semiosis, which from a global semiotic perspective converges with life, relations with the other are structured by the logic of dialogic intercorporeity and interconnectedness, unindifferent difference, listening, hospitality, unlimited responsibility. Only on the basis of such values is it possible to create sustainable life conditions for all life forms on Earth, human and nonhuman.

The title of my paper includes the expression "global communication" which refers to the situation we live in today, contemporaneity. I distinguish between rhetoric, on the one hand, and argumentation, on the other. If we imagine two columns, on the side of rhetoric we have the art of persuasion, deceptive discourse, dominant ideology, limited responsibility (by comparison to unlimited responsibility). Rhetoric involves keeping a clean conscience on the basis of recourse to alibis, even if unconsciously. In the last analysis, rhetoric is based on the "logic of identity," where this expression is understood in a negative sense, as closed identity, as identity which is closed in upon its own short-sighted, egotistic interests, completely indifferent to the other, to the need for

listening and hospitality and welcoming the other. In what follows, I distinguish rhetoric understood in these terms from argumentation. By contrast with rhetoric, argumentation is based on the logic of otherness, of dialogue and opening towards the other, where dialogue is understood not necessarily as speaking, but in the biosemiotic sense of dialogism, that is, of dialogic interconnection with the other, and therefore of listening to the other, the welcome. Before we speak we need to listen, but not only. Listening is not external to the word, rather it is structural to it; the word as a live word is listening, hospitality, opening to the other. With reference to the second imaginary column, argumentation is associated with what has been indicated by Mikhail M. Bakhtin as “substantial dialogue,” and “responsive understanding,” by contrast with “formal dialogue,” and is based on creative listening, the capacity for interrogation, and critique, that is, dialogic critique and response to the other (cf. Ponzio and Petrilli 2008).

1. Rhetoric Versus Argumentation

Rhetoric and argumentation are juxtaposed: negativity of rhetoric and positivity of argumentation. This would seem to be a classical position: very much *à la* Plato. But to describe discourse as *rhetorical* when it is not sincere is also a question of common sense. Discourse sounds rhetorical when it is unclear and confused in terms of logic, when it is egotistic in ethical terms, and despite this, or, rather, precisely because of this, it expects to persuade. Rhetoric resounds in the grain of discourse as an attempt to deceive and is perceived as such before it is actually understood for what it is. In fact, rhetoric as we are describing it is ideological discourse in a narrow sense, and therefore deceptive discourse.

But what are the signs of deceptive rhetoric? Rhetorical discourse exploits the immediacy and allusiveness of mental association, giving rise to inferential processes that are suggestive and effective, though this type of discourse can only deceive *if it is not questioned*. Is the logic of rhetorical discourse different from the logic of straightforward reasoning? do these different discourses have the same logical structure? what makes the difference between the two types of discourse? Is rhetorical discourse simply manipulative discourse aiming to seduce by making false promises? In truth, this is an oversimplification. For example, when rhetorical discourse is encomiastic, eulogistic, that is, praising discourse, it is not only deceptive, like publicity. Encomiastic, eulogistic discourse is structural to the rhetoric of institutions which aims to defend dominant ideology, dominant values and keep a clean conscience by providing it with alibis.

To keep a “clean conscience” involves appealing to alibis and finding justification in axiomatic foundations, in the logic of identity, of belonging, in roles regulated by such logic. The logic of identity leads to undersigning the concepts

of nation, *esprit de corps*, duty, etc. established with reference to contracts and civil accords. By guaranteeing rights and establishing duties and responsibilities—limited responsibilities—, such concepts are part of strategies of reassurance that keep the masses happy and under control, in their places. Rhetoric connected with the market, the ideology of consumption, with publicity causes people to daydream, creating a sense of satisfaction and happiness. Indeed, rhetoric can be pleasant and consolatory when it safeguards “beliefs and habits,” as says Charles S. Peirce in his renowned essay, “The Fixation of Belief” (CP, 5. 358—387). Understood as “false conscience,” rhetoric confirms and exploits dogmas and idola for precise ends, instead of questioning them. And in fact as anticipated above, deceptive rhetoric can only prevail if it is not interrogated. The rhetoric of propaganda connected with institutions promises, as inferred on the basis of recourse to stereotypes, to defend and safeguard the masses. By constructing stories and presenting facts so as to make them not only acceptable, but also desirable, rhetorical devices are part of the information game and play an important role in winning over general consensus.

It would seem that to inform with no other intention but to inform, that information for the sake of information is desirable. But the truth is different: when the sole end of information is information, what this really means is that the sole end of information is to reproduce the information production process. And the information production process can only be reproduced by consuming information. Italian twentieth century philosopher of language and semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1921—1985) applied the principle of homology between studies in language and communication, on the one hand, and economics, on the other. Rossi-Landi demonstrated that information for the sake of information is nothing less than the other face of production for the sake of production.

In the information sphere and in mass communication generally (we have mentioned publicity and propaganda), rhetoric commonly employs discourse expedients that favour dominant ideology, given values and not others, official institutions. An important rhetorical expedient, for example, is *obsessive reiteration*. Reiteration exploits the fascination of repetition orienting sense in the direction of consumption as against reflection, critical interrogation and responsible behaviour. The facts are proposed to the public like pills or hamburgers served at Macdonalds, nicely packed into categories and frames, and of course without ever questioning taste. . .

An extraordinary characteristic of Plato's texts (at least his better ones) is the harmony achieved by interweaving three elements: dialogic displacement, mythical interpretation or narrative, and dialectic or logico-inferential skepsis. These elements contribute to developing argumentative discourse. But they also

tend to disappear in three types of rhetorical discourse: in the apologetic, dialogue is lacking; in information, narration is lacking—and if it is present, it is reduced to the skeleton of a fabula, deprived of plots, adventures, of ornamentations of any sort; in publicity, dialectic inference is lacking.

Rhetoric also plays a part in science and in the formulation of definitions. An example of the rhetoric of definition is offered by Rossi-Landi—he quotes from Benedetto Croce's definitions of art: "*Art is intuition or sentiment enclosed in an image or a particular theoretical moment of the spirit*" (cited in Rossi-Landi, 1972). A false dialogue is established between the interpreted sign and the interpretant, that is, between the *definiens* and the *definiendum*. Known terms dominate over unknown terms in need of a definition. Croce introduced the exchange value "art is intuition, etc." onto the linguistic market, and his followers were then able to write, "art, as we know, is intuition."

In a letter to Victoria Welby (mother of modern semiotics and inventor of signifiés), the Italian mathematician and philosopher Giovanni Vailati emphasizes the importance of pedagogical expedients, for example, caricature, parody, irony, in the development of critical and inventive dialogue. According to Vailati, caricature is one of the most effective pedagogical expedients at our disposal: it involves detecting the weak points of discourse, using the word of the other and making it resound with the voice of another who makes fun of it, parodies it, etc. This is an ambiguous form of reported speech: neither direct discourse, nor indirect discourse, but commented free indirect discourse.

To examine discourses and texts means to pass from analytics to dialectics and beyond, from dialectics to dialogics. This approach evidences the specific dialogism of all discourse. The presentday media world is connected with formal dialogue, monologic dialogue, and as such does not signify at high degrees of dialogism. On the contrary, *substantial dialogism* is oriented by the logic of otherness and listening. This confirms the appropriateness of relating the semiotic research of Charles S. Peirce to Mikhail M. Bakhtin, which means to relate "semiotics of interpretation" to "philosophy of dialogism," as proposed by Augusto Ponzio in his own studies on the problem of interpretation analyzed in terms of "answering comprehension" or "responsive understanding" and dialogism (see Ponzio 1984, 1990, 2006).

A connection can also be established between the problem of dialogue and the work of Welby and Charles Morris. Both scholars focus on the interrelation between signs, values and action, therefore between semiotics, axiology and pragmatics. Both evidence the importance of this interrelation in cognitive processes and in praxis. Values are vehicled by signs, indeed are made of sign material, while the opposite is not necessarily true. Not all signs necessary involve values, such as signs in the nonhuman animal world, or signs forming

our genetic code, etc., but values do necessarily involve signs. In turn, signs and values relate to behaviour.

Morris divided “meaning” into “signification,” the object of semiotics, and “significance,” the object of axiology. Signification indicates the condition of “having meaning,” while significance the condition of “being meaningful” or “significant.” Welby before Morris had already taken a similar standpoint with her own distinction between “sense,” “meaning” and “significance.” In both cases, the term “significance” underlines the connection of signs and meaning to values and human behaviour. Welby used the term “significance” to refer to the overall signifying import of signs, to sign processes that produce value—whether cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, ethic, or operative-pragmatic, and thematized the relation between the problem of “significance” and the problem of responsibility, which she considered a central issue in the production of signs and meaning. Both Welby and Morris described sign action, particularly *verbal* sign action, as producing knowledge and truth values. But beyond this, sign action is also related to the production of ethic and aesthetic judgment, therefore, to the capacity for critique and responsibility. This implies the production of signifying processes at high degrees of dialogical potential, signifying processes that call for a standpoint, for response and understanding grounded in the logic of otherness, a *dia-logic*.

To study meaning in relation to value, that is, to study signifying processes from the point of view of significance, means to interrogate the value of meaning beyond its systemic articulation, and to consider its relation with responsibility. This implies the critical effort of examining the “conditions of possibility” of meaning following Kant, and attempting to recover the sense of semiosis for man, of semiosis considered in terms of “social reproduction” following Marx (see Rossi-Landi, 1968, 1985, 1992). In fact, to associate signs and values, to study signifying processes in terms of the production of significance, implies doing what Marx did with his critique of merchandise. That is, to focus on the relation between signs and values means to deconstruct sense, and to show that relations among things are, in reality, relations among human beings who produce things and signs, and relations among things and signs to the end of producing given values, such as use value and exchange value. So-called “facts,” “things” and “relations” are part of production processes and not independent of them. This also means to restore sense to things and facts given that by focusing on the processes of production, it is also possible to analyze and critique the processes that produce linguistic and social alienation to which humankind is subject in daily signifying and communicative practices.

As regards Charles Morris on the connection between signs, values, and action, he proposed a typology of values and typology of action which he related

systematically in a book of 1964, *Signification and Significance*. Value is classified as “object,” “operative” and “conceived” value and corresponds to action classified respectively as “perceptual,” “manipulatory” and “consummatory” action. Furthermore, from the perspective of Peirce’s most renowned sign triad, a correspondence can also be established between these three types of value and action, on the one hand, and the “index,” “symbol” and “icon,” on the other. In fact, *object values* (stereotypes) relate to their objects indexically for the interpretant, that is, according to the law of necessity. *Operative values* (ethical, juridical, religious norms) relate to their objects symbolically, that is, on the basis of convention. *Conceived values* (ideologies) relate to their objects iconically, that is, on the basis of similarity (see Ponzio 1985, 1990).

Real dialogue, whether among several interlocutors or within the single consciousness, is genuine and anti-rhetorical when it allows for discussion and debate. That is, when dialogue is dialectical, or better, dialogical in the “substantial” sense, as understood by Bakhtin, and when it appeals to the *verisimilar* (see Bonfantini & Ponzio, 1986; Bonfantini, Ponzio, & Petrilli, 2006). Real dialogue and argumentation simulate the reality of experience. That is, contrary to rhetoric which favours *dissimulation* and deception, dialogue and argumentation favour *simulation*.

The term “simulation” is ambiguous. As studies on iconicity and abduction so eloquently teach us, simulation plays a fundamental role in metaphors and models and is at the basis of inventiveness and the capacity for planning. The relation of argumentation to the verosimilar is also determined by the fact that, as demonstrated by Welby (1985a, p. 13), “one of the most splendid of all our intellectual instruments” is the “image or the figure.” The problem is not to eliminate figurative or metaphorical discourse to the advantage of so-called literal discourse, but to identify and eliminate inadequate images that mystify relations among things and distort reasoning. “We need,” says Welby, “a linguistic oculist to restore lost focusing power, to bring our images back to reality by some normalizing kind of lens” (*Ibid.*, p. 16). And let us remember that truth is the sister of verosimilitude! At this stage two questions come to the fore: firstly, how do we identify the linguistic-logical traps used by rhetorical reasoning to deceive? secondly, how do we identify the devices (including discourse genres or semiotic genres in general) which make for well grounded and critical argumentation?

2. Global Communication and Behaviour Programs

The language of publicity is ambiguous, allusive, equivocal, inventive, imaginative, creative, suggestive, insinuating, figurative, metaphoric. But in spite of such signifying qualities, the discourse of publicity is monologic,

repetitive, stereotyped. This renders the language of publicity functional to dominant discourse, to reproducing the current production system and maintaining the established order. In such a context the new is already stale. Innovation, in fact, here converges with the destruction of products readily available on the market. With the consumption phase, the ultimate aim of the reproductive cycle is to start again in the name of production for production, communication for communication, consumption for consumption. Everybody belonging to the system shares a common task, that of indulging in the market as a consumerist.

Verbal linguistic production and material production are part of one and the same semiotic process, that of social reproduction, which is reproduction of human social life. All economical-cultural forms are made of verbal and nonverbal sign systems and share in subtending semiotic processes. As a development on his “methodics of common speech” (Rossi-Landi, 1961, new ed. 1980), Ferruccio Rossi-Landi proposed a “methodics of common semiosis” (Rossi-Landi, 1985, new ed. 2006), based on the homology he had already identified in the 1960s between verbal linguistic work and nonlinguistic work in his monograph *Il linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato* (Ferruccio, 1968, Eng. trans. as *Language as Work and Trade*, 1983). According to Rossi-Landi a general theory of society must identify the structural-genetic interconnections among the various expressions of semiosis beyond separations of the historical-social and ideological order, or relatively to specializations in the sciences. As such a general theory of society converges with general semiotics given that human beings communicate with their whole social organization (Rossi-Landi, 1968). There are no such things as “natural divisions” that impose separations between verbal work and nonverbal work, the production of verbal messages and the production of commodities given that, in both cases, it is a question of the same type of semiosis. In other words, if we relate Rossi-Landi’s conception of “work” to the research of Thomas A. Sebeok and his conception of “modeling,” remembering that another term he introduces for human primary modeling is “language” (Sebeok, 1991, 2001a, b), the claim is that verbal and nonverbal work are both expressions of the common “linguistic” (but nonverbal or preverbal) work of modeling. For this reason, the study of one sign system in human culture and social reproduction can be useful in the study of another, given that whether we study one sign system or another, we are fundamentally studying the same thing. Whether a question of commodities or of verbal messages, the production and exchange of objects, or the production and exchange of signs, semiotics focuses on the same problem, the work processes that produce them and make exchange possible (Ponzio and Petrilli, 2008, pp. 12–18).

This standpoint is confirmed by the presentday phase in the development of capitalism, described as “globalization” or “communication-production,” as proposed by Augusto Ponzio (2000). In this phase of socio-economic development communication is pervasive: we now know that not only are commodities messages, but that messages themselves have become commodities and that in the productive cycle today communication does not only occur in the intermediary stage of that cycle—that of exchange, circulation, the market, but that it is now an essential part of the initial and final stages, that of production and consumption.

Furthermore, according to Rossi-Landi (1972, 1978, 1992), human behaviour is sign behaviour, therefore behaviour related to communication and programs: human sign behaviour is communicative behaviour and programmed behaviour. Social programs, projects and plans are interconnected and interdependent in an ongoing progression resembling the relation among a series of concentric circles. The more the capitalist production system develops, the more such interconnection is inevitable. What is a program? Here “program” is not understood in terms of a “television program.” It is not by proposing new television programs that we will survive today’s television crisis. On the contrary, a general social plan is necessary for “new and more human programs.” The concept of “communication programs” was first introduced by Rossi-Landi in the early 1960s. He demystified human social communication showing how communication consists of communication programs, of the relation of signs and behaviour to ideology. This led to evidencing the need for new and more human communication programs against the reality of linguistic and social alienation.

This essay presents a semiotic perspective on communication and social reproduction, but reference is not to code and message semiotics which was thoroughly criticized by Rossi-Landi as early as 1961 with his monograph, *Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune* (Meaning, communication and common speech), and which he ironically tagged “postal package semiotics.” Nor is the approach proposed in this paper connected with “semiotics of marketing.” In fact, as demonstrated by Rossi-Landi in his epochal book of 1968, *Language as Work and Trade*, what is commonly understood by “semiotics of marketing” loses its critical function and is subservient to the “verbal and nonverbal market.” In other words, semiotics of marketing loses its capacity for critique and puts itself at the service of the capitalist social reproduction cycle, of equal exchange market logic, of the production, exchange, and consumption of merchandise-messages and messages-merchandise. In such a framework semiotics is not even capable of critiquing communication connected with television which answers to dominant ideology. Semiotics of marketing is an ally to dominant ideology (whether state or private),

it serves the established order, and is subject to market logic and the circulation of publicity. A recent trend in the “professionalization” of semioticians is to sell one’s expertise as consultants to advertising agencies, which in turn privilege television as their most powerful communication channel. Today it is urgent for semiotics to free itself from subservience to official ideology, communication programs, the market, and recover its capacity for critique.

Rossi-Landi defined the dominant class as the class that holds control over the emission and circulation of verbal messages in a given community (1972, pp. 203–204). These days anyone wishing to gain consensus for his “preventible rise” (“The Preventible Rise of Arturo Ui,” Brecht) must have control over communication and the communication network—the press, especially newspapers, but now television even more so. Arturo Ui must now necessarily resort to television. And differently from Brecht’s Ui who consulted a theatre actor, in order to learn the tricks of the trade and present himself successfully to the public today’s Ui must consult an advertising agent, or better, a semiotics of marketing expert. This is the reality of communication today. Television and publicity are so closely interconnected that they have become interdependent. Television depends on publicity from a financial point of view, and television and publicity in turn depend on whomever controls the communication network. All television programs are part of the same network, the same text, that is, the publicity network. To speak to the public implies to enter this network. Even politics has been televised to the extent that televised political discourse has become a publicity spot. That is, the political message itself has become a photogram in an ongoing publicity sequence.

Semiotics today must be critical semiotics. And in fact ideologies and concepts such as Reality, Subject, Reason, Truth can only be demystified through a critique of signs ready to address the production, exchange and consumption of signs in the global context of social reproduction. This critical approach to semiotics is committed to the project for the development of a new and more conscious form of humanism focused not only on the sign dimension of man, but also on the human dimension of signs (in addition to Peirce important references are Karl Marx, Victoria Welby, Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Adam Schaff, Emmanuel Levinas, Charles Morris, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi). With his critique of political economy, Marx (as anticipated above) evidenced social relations among human beings where it was thought that there only existed relations among things and reified relations among signs.

The tendency in today’s global world is to submit passively to social programs that pass off refined forms of oppression as liberating practices. This mystification is typical of mass communication and dominant ideology or “ideologic,” to use another expression proposed by Ponzio (1992; see also Petrilli

ed., 2004; Petrilli & Ponzio, 2005; Ponzio, 2006), and in fact subtends the whole global multi-medial communication network. Massimo A. Bonfantini (see 1985, 1993) underlines the need for critical and creative intervention, and suggests a series of strategies to counteract the negative effects of the invasive use of television. According to Bonfantini, people need to enter face-to-face interpersonal relations, recover the properly human dimension of things and signs, and evidence the human relations that interconnect them. He suggests that one strategy is for people to make their own videos.

Favoured by the connection between telecommunications and informatics, the communication network has expanded at a planetary level. A new socio-cultural system has emerged without precedents in terms of the quantity of messages produced and the velocity, extension and immediacy of circulation. Television channels and services continue to proliferate and the practice of zapping across different programs enables the consumer to create his own intertext. But an immediate consequence of advanced technology and intensified sign traffic is redundancy in message production.

3. The Problem of Social Alienation

In this context the problem of social alienation remains and in many cases is exasperated—alienation of the human subject, the single individual, the “each” of everyone of us. Communication processes call for critical evaluation in terms of their effects on human behaviour, and so-called “progress” will inevitably emerge in its connection with the problem of social alienation. The more message production is redundant, the more the single individual is overwhelmed by communication processes, and the greater is the problem of social alienation in spite of seemingly active participation in these production processes. In the era of globalization and the electronic revolution dominant ideology and global communication favour mystification of linguistic and nonlinguistic products for the market. Consciousness is separated from praxis in a production cycle whose end is production itself where even those subjects who seem immune to equal exchange market ideology variously contribute to the expansion of a “sign marketplace” worldwide (see Sebeok, 1987).

As regards the problem of the status of the subject considered as a user-consumer, developments in the communication network do not necessarily imply developments in critical awareness, creativity, responsible participation, or “freedom.” Quite on the contrary, the risk is that of remaining trapped in the communication network as it expands and becomes ever more invasive, of being overwhelmed by sign redundancy on the market, and alienated—socially, linguistically. We need to interrogate the nature of the relation between products, for example, electronic devices, and the user-consumer, verifying the degree of

critical participation and creativity in the relation between the subject, on one hand, and the sign market and its products, on the other. The acritical subject passively submits to dominate ideology, the order of discourse, socio-economic production processes conceived in the interests of whomever controls the communication network, and operates as a function of that system without interrogating one's own status a subject, or the sense and effect of one's own behaviour on the other.

Mass media contributes to the transformation of anything into commodities, reinforcing processes of reification, or better liquefaction or fluidification functional to the market, and maintaining the production-communication cycle, as in the case of television and publicity. As observed by Gunther Anders (1956, 1980), television and radio products, and today products connected with telematics generally do not necessarily take the form of objects or property, but rather are what he calls "liquid" products flowing into the general social reproduction system. The word "transmission" is symptomatic as it resounds with two different meanings: the act of transmitting and the object transmitted. We own the apparatus used to transmit the commodity, but not the commodity itself. "Stated in the form of a paradox," says Anders, "we are sovereigns of a mere passivity. [...] Figures not less comical than the Stirnian owners of their own hunger," scorned by Marx (Anders, 1956, 1980, lt. trans., p.48, Eng. trans. my own). According to Anders, the term "reification" commonly used to describe trends in the past century does not adequately characterize the state of affairs today. We are now on the threshold of a new phase in history in which forms are acquired and things are liquefied, or at least liquefaction will be as characteristic as reification. "I propose we use the term 'liquefaction' to indicate this state of affairs which is still forgotten by theory" (Ibid.). Recorders and videocassettes, for example, do not contradict the production cycle's interest in producing products "in the liquid state," although such products are "not created in the interest of production." Rather, they are created for those consumers who wish to own their transmissions in forms just as solid as books and paintings. However, when a question of favouring the development of capital, the capitalist industry is ready to produce new commodities, "even if the new product contradicts the principles of production" (Ibid., p.49).

Presentday social reproduction and cultural systems interrelate with capitalism in such a way as to capitalize on both verbal and nonverbal signs. In the context of globalization and global communication (see Petrilli, 2008) strategies must be developed to counteract the signs of social alienation as it directly ensues from such capitalization. From a socio-semiotic perspective, Bonfantini for example proposes that work groups be set up with the task of interpreting, critiquing, and even transforming mass-medial signs. In this

context, it is important to underline that the expression “cultural capital” is not an ornamental metaphor, but rather is part of the very structure of reality (see Petrilli, 2006c). Linguistic and nonlinguistic work produces and develops cultural capital and similarly to all processes that produce capital, “cultural capital” is increased on the basis of surplus value and surplus work (see Rossi-Landi, 1968, 1992). Such mechanisms mostly operate without the subject’s awareness, indeed not only is the subject unaware of the ends orienting his activities, but most often he does not even know he is working. As says Rossi-Landi:

We can admit that man supplies labour-force even without being aware of doing so for some end and therefore without being aware of the fact that he is working. The end pursued may be supra-individual in that it is imposed by a social program which remains unconscious. In these cases *work is distinguished from activity insofar as it carries out programs that are indifferently conscious or unconscious. As Marx says, mankind does not know it but does it.* (1971, p.22)

Capitalist production today is pushed to the extreme, which implies that dominant ideology serves the development of capital. In this context ideology is mostly *invisible* and exploitation, which we could even claim is now structural to behaviour, is imperceptible. The era of globalization is one of the most difficult ever for the critique of ideology and analysis of social alienation. Cultural systems are regulated by the self-interest of multi-media capital. It is not incidental that the dominant social order ignores such issues as social alienation and exploitation, or that it proclaims the “crisis” or even the “end” of ideology, or that it ignores or does not even recognize such expressions as “alienation,” “class interest,” and “social exploitation”.

One way of counteracting and resisting this situation is to construct different communicative situations and act on the mechanisms that regulate production cycles for the reproduction of cultural capital. Such intervention requires a pragmatic perspective on the signs of culture and ideology, with the capacity to critique popular consensus gained through mass-media. From this point of view, the power of television has been made particularly manifest from 1991 onwards with the serial entitled “Gulf War.” This episode in Western history has revealed just how easy it is to gain support for an idea through recourse to television, even when initially that idea was unpopular. At the time, the Bush administration in the United States needed popular consensus for a war that was described as a necessary means for the resolution of differences internationally and for the imposition of peace.

Exaggeration may be used as a discursive device to focus upon problems afflicting today's world against the numbing effect of stereotypes and "common places". Exaggeration can be used to shift meaning, deconstruct obvious sense, plain meaning, and to construct new meanings and metaphors, which can also involve translating and betraying meanings that seem obvious or are simply taken for granted. A significant example of counter-information achieved through recourse to such discourse expedients is the *comunicué* below entitled, "Subcommander Marcos is more than just gay". This is the response from the Mexican Zapatists in Chiapas to the news featured about their leader Marcos and his homosexuality in *The San Francisco Chronicle*. Marcos was quoted as saying that he had worked for a San Francisco restaurant but had been fired for being gay. The pro-government Mexican press exploited the incident to cause a scandal and discredit Marcos, ridiculed as a "queer revolutionary":

About whether Marcos is homosexual:

Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristóbal, a gang member in Neza [a huge Mexico City slum] a rocker in the National University [a folk music citadel], a Jew in Germany, an ombudsman in the Defense Ministry, a communist in the post-Cold War era, an artist without gallery or portfolio...

A pacifist in Bosnia, a housewife alone on Saturday night in any neighbourhood in any city in Mexico, a striker in the CTM [the giant pro-government union federation, which virtually never authorizes strikes], a reporter writing filler stories for the back pages, a single woman on the metro at 10 p. m., a peasant without land, an unemployed worker... an unhappy student, a dissident amid free-market economics, a writer without books or readers, and, of course, a Zapatist in the mountains of southeast Mexico.

So Marcos is a human being, any human being, in this world. Marcos is all the exploited, marginalized, and oppressed minorities, resisting and saying, "Enough!" (in *Monthly Review* 46/4, Sept. 1994, p.1).

4. Communication and Semioethics

A critical approach to signs, communication and dominant ideology from a semiotic perspective requires a high degree of listening, opening towards the other, and dialogism. Opening is not only quantitative (as allowed for by the

omnicomprehensive character of global semiotics, see Sebeok, 2001a), but also qualitative. A semiotic approach must keep account of the dialogic nature of the relation with the other (see Ponzio, 2006). As anticipated above, dialogism is the fundamental condition for an approach to signs and meaning—a detotalizing approach—that is oriented globally and is based on listening, on opening towards the other, rather than englobing and sacrificing the other.

As Emmanuel Levinas has evidenced, otherness obliges the totality to reorganize itself ever anew in a process related to what he calls “infinity”. This can be related to infinite semiosis as emerges from the writings of Charles S. Peirce. The relation to infinity is not only cognitive: beyond the established order, beyond the symbolic order, beyond conventions and habits, the relation to infinity is a relation of involvement and responsibility. A detotalized approach to signs and communication is refractory to the totality. Contrary to the tendency towards totalization, the detotalized approach opens to the otherness of others, to the other *from* self and to the other *of* self, where “self” is not understood as another self like myself, another *alter ego*, another self belonging to the *same community*, oriented by the logic of identity, but as absolute otherness. According to this logic, the other is experienced in terms of strangeness, difference, and uniqueness towards which indifference is impossible despite any efforts made to the contrary.

Semiotics favours awareness of human responsibility as a “semiotic animal” for the health of semiosis, indeed of life over the entire planet. Differently to nonhuman animals, the semiotic animal is capable of producing *signs of signs*. In other words, the semiotic animal is capable of mediation, reflection, critical awareness, of taking a standpoint and assuming responsibility. From this point of view, the semiotic animal may also be designated as a semioethic animal: An in fact with co-author Augusto Ponzio we propose to call this particular dimension of semiosis “semioethics” (see Petrilli, 1998, 2001; Petrilli (Ponzio, 2003, 2005, 2007). “Semioethics” can contribute to a critical understanding of the negative, even destructive, aspects of global communication. A critical approach is necessary to communication today with its commonplaces, stereotypes, and vocation to deceive as manifested in global marketing and the discourse of publicity.

Global communication is functional to the ideologico-social standards of the “new cannon of the individualized body” (Bakhtin), which in turn is functional to control individual bodies and inserting them into the social reproduction system. “Bio-power,” as discussed by Michel Foucault, in fact relates to a concept of the individual as a separate and self-sufficient entity subtending the global communication system worldwide. In such a framework, the body is experienced as an isolated biological entity that belongs to the individual, and this is

connected with the almost total extinction of cultural practices and worldviews based on intercorporeity, interdependency, opening and exposition to the other (what is left are mummified remains studied by folklore analysts, archeological residues preserved in ethnological museums and in the histories of national literature—the expression of a generalized situation of museumification).

Instead Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1963 and 1965) analyzes the perception of the body in popular culture, the various forms of “grotesque realism.” In this context the body is not conceived individualistically or separately from life over the planet in its totality. Signs of the grotesque body, of which only very weak traces have survived in the present day, include ritual masks, masks used during popular festivities, carnival masks. “Grotesque realism” in medieval popular culture precedes the development of individualism as connected to the rise of the bourgeoisie, and presents the body as an undefined entity flourishing in symbiosis with other bodies, in relations of transformation and renewal that go well beyond the limits, barriers and separations of individual life. Subsequently, with the rise and development of the capitalist reproduction system, the individualistic, private and static conception of the body gradually asserted itself and now in the context of global communication is reinforced.

Subjectivity must recover the link between subject-semiotic self-body-living being, which means to say the condition of continuity and interrelatedness connecting one's own body to the body of others, to other living beings in the global communication network. Insofar as the “global communication network” is described as converging with the biosphere, our conception of communication is far broader than what is commonly understood by this expression. Our conception of subjectivity can also be appropriately reformulated in terms of the logic of otherness by contrast to monologic identity which, on the contrary, sacrifices and excludes the other. Also important to underline is that such reformulation is not limited to the cognitive-theoretical order, but rather is concrete and vital, relative to praxis, to the quality of life, in other words it is also of the ethical-pragmatic order.

With Levinas (see, for example, 1972), but also with Bakhtin, Peirce, Welby and Morris, we propose a new form of humanism: not the humanism of identity which has dominated Western civilization so far, where human rights are always the rights of identity, but the humanism of otherness based on listening and welcoming the other. The revendication of human rights oriented by the logic of identity has mostly forgotten the rights of the other; instead with the humanism of otherness the rights of the other are the first to be recognized. The humanism of otherness conceives the other as both the other *from self* and as the other *of self*. Indeed, the self most often removes, suffocates, segregates its own otherness sacrificing it to the cause of identity which thus attained is fictitious and

destined to break down at some point.

Semiotics contributes to the humanism of otherness by evidencing the extension and consistency of the sign network. As part of this network each human being is interconnected to every other on both a synchronic and diachronic axis (the allusion is to worldwide and planetary communication from a biosemiotic perspective). The global destiny of the human species — from its remotest manifestations to the most recent, from its past to its evolutionary future, in biological as well as historical-social terms — is implied in the behaviour and decisions of each and every one of us, and vice versa.

Semioethics does not have a program to propose with intended goals, nor a decalogue, nor a formula to apply more or less sincerely, more or less hypocritically. The human capacity for critique and responsibility is a special focus for semioethics, which it proposes to develop. Semioethics critiques *stereotypes*, *norms* and *ideology*. For example, with Charles Morris it focuses on different types of value (e. g., see Morris, 1948, 1956, 1964). A special vocation for semioethics is to evidence sign networks and interconnections where it seemed there were none. The semioethic approach to semiosis in fact focuses on connections, implications, and narrations that cannot be evaded, where it seemed there were only separations, boundaries, and distances with their relative alibis. Alibis serve to safeguard responsibility understood in a limited sense, based on the logic of identity and allowing for consciousness in terms of a “clean conscience.”

By contrast to the condition of “joyous relativity,” as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, the dialogic conviviality of difference, the critical work of semioethics shows how the condition of differences indifferent to each other is delusory, and how in the last analysis the entire planet’s destiny is implied in the choices made by each human being, and vice versa. Semioethics must necessarily begin by analyzing and interrogating today’s social reproduction system—which means to say contemporaneity, where we stand today, historically and socially, and elaborate an analysis that is rigorous and precise of today’s communication-production relations.

In the era of globalization, social models of production, therefore global communication-production relations have been largely homologated. In a sense this is an “advantage” for the work of semioethics. The whole planet is now dominated by a single type of market, by a single type of production cycle which has not only homologated human behaviour, habits, and fashion (including dress fashion) worldwide, but also the life of the imaginary. In today’s global social reproduction system as it embraces the entire planet, difference understood in terms of *otherness* is replaced ever more by difference understood in terms of *alternatives*. The so-called “advantage” for semioethics is that this situation

presents a unified object of analysis, so that a great array of different issues will not have to be taken into account in that they are no longer relevant. However, it should also be obvious that the word “advantage” is intended ironically, for the implication is that we are dealing with reality taken as a single, compact, monologic block. But the “advantage” of *monologism* inevitably backfires on the capacity for critique and obstacles interrogation, by contrast to the condition of plurivocality and polylogism which instead favours creative interpretation and critical questioning. Moreover, the work of critique is made difficult by the fact that appropriate conceptual instruments are not yet readily available; new categories and assumptions beyond those taken for granted are necessary if we are to deal appropriately with innovations emerging in the current phase of development in history. Such work is now urgent given the worldwide spread of the global communication-production system and with it of global mass media communication which in globalization, as we know, is closely interconnected with the social reproduction cycle.

Semioethics offers an eyeview that is as global as the semiotic animal is capable of. Today perhaps more than ever before we must become aware of our semioethic capacity as semiotic animals, and live up to it, that is, to the human capacity for dialogue, otherness, listening, hospitality, critique and responsibility, by contrast to the indifference of monologism and acritical submission to official ideology and social programs. Most significantly, it is now urgent to realize that such values as critical and creative awareness, dialogic responsiveness and responsibility, therefore the semioethic dimension of human semiosis must be fully recovered and developed if life—not only human life but all life forms—is to survive over the planet.

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