Lesson 2

From Semiotics to Semioethics. Signs, Language, Responsibility

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1. From semiosis to semioethics; 2. The semiotic animal, a semioethic animal; 3. The sign science and its developments in the direction of semioethics; 4. Nihil humani mihi alienum; 5. Global communication as global listening

1. From semiosis to semioethics

The expression “semiotics” refers to both the specificity of human semiosis and the general science of signs. Under the first meaning semiotics relates to the specific human capacity for metasemiosis. In the world of life that encompasses semiosis, human semiosis is characterized as metasemiosis, that is, as the possibility of reflecting on signs. We can approach signs as objects of interpretation indistinguishable from our responses to them. But we can also approach signs in such a way that we suspend our responses to them so that deliberation is possible. Semiotics as metasemiosis is connected to responsibility: the human being, the only “semiotic animal” to exist, is the only animal capable of accounting for signs and sign behaviour. Consequently, the semiotic animal, the human animal is subject to responsibility and subject of responsibility. Under this aspect, the critical instance of the

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1 Semiosis is the process, or relation, or situation, whereby something serves as a sign. The sign is inseparable from semiosis. For something to be a sign, something else must be present to it. This second thing is referred to as an interpretant. The interpretant itself is a sign and is thus connected to another interpretant, and so on in an open and infinite chain of interpretants (see Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 1.3). All of this means that for every sign there is a semiosis. Every sign is a portion of its own semiosis and cannot be detached from it. This is similar to the relationship between a cell and the cell tissue it helps form. And every semiosis is in turn connected with other semioses. Signs are linked together in an infinite chain; for their part, semioses form something like a network. In the same way that the sign is a portion of semiosis, semiosis is a portion of the sign network.
philosophy of language toward the science of signs consists concretely in not limiting its attention to the cognitive aspect of semiosis, but of focusing on the pragmatic dimension as well, and on the well-being of semiosis, therefore of life, on caring for life, for the health of semiosis generally.

From this point of view general semiotics, which in its current configuration as “global semiotics”\(^2\) (see Sebeok 2001) posits that semiosis and life converge and consequently concerns all of life over the planet, thereby recovering its relationship with ancient *medical semeiotics*. This is not only a question of the historical order, involving knowledge of the origins, but rather it concerns our approach to reality today in a globalized world where the implication of each one’s destiny in the destiny of all of life, of all others over the planet is rendered manifest as never before. We have denominated this orientation, this special bend in the study of signs, “semioethics” (see Petrilli 2014a; Petrilli and Ponzio 2003, 2010).

Semioethics is closely connected with the question of listening, where “listening” is understood in the sense of *medical semeiotics*, and not under its specifically theoretical aspect, that is, in the musical sense. We must listen to the symptoms of today’s globalized world and identify the various aspects of social *malaise*, and thus counteract the race toward our own destruction.

Our future is the “future anterior of semiotics”. We decide today for the future of

\(^2\) Semiotics studies the different forms of semiosis, sign processes, sign activity forming the semiosphere. From the perspective of so-called “global semiotics” where *semiosis* is described as converging with *life* (in this sense global semiotics is “semiotics of life”), the *semiosphere* identifies with the *biosphere* (term coined in Russian by Vladimir Vernadskij in 1926) to emerge, therefore, as the *semiobiosphere*. The semiosphere thus extended is articulated into different subspheres which overlap and converge with the great kingdoms of life: the zoosphere whose material is zoosemiosis, object of study of zoosemiotics; the phytosphere made of phytosemiosic processes studied by phytosemiotics; and the mycosphere whose mycosemiosic activities are the object of study of mycosemiotics. Semiosis in the human world, anthroposemiosis and its various articulations, enters the more general and inclusive sphere of zoosemiosis, it forms the anthroposphere and is studied by anthroposemiotics.

But all this only concerns a part of global semiotics, that involving the world of “eukariots”, leaving aside the enormous quantity of “prokariots” with which life arises on earth and continues to flourish and evolve to this very day. All this occurs thanks to an incredibly refined communication system which interconnects all life forms in a network that covers the entire planet. Prokariots are the object of study of a branch of general semiotics known as microsemiotics and specified as endosemiotic. As the expression itself explains endosemiotics focusses on semiosis and communication inside the organisms populating the great kingdoms. In addition to prokariots, endosemiotics studies intercellular communication in larger organisms including the genetic code, the immunitary system, the neuronal system, all communication systems all of which allow for the reproduction, maintainance and overall behaviour appropriate to a specific *Umwelt*.  

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semiotics, not only as a science, but also as a human species-specific capacity for using signs to reflect on signs and making decisions as a consequence. The problem is not only of a theoretical order, but inevitably involves semiotics as semeiotics, symptomatology, and as semioethics, thus the future of semiotics (indeed of life) is a problem of the cognitive, pragmatic and ethical orders.

Never has the present (as today, our own present) been so charged with responsibility toward the future, and so capable of putting the possibility itself of a future at risk. Today decides our tomorrow, today’s decisions condition the life of signs and the signs of life, their future, the continuity of semiosis on the planet Earth. As a semiotic animal, the human being is the only animal responsible for semiosis, for life. And the person involved in the study of signs as a profession is even more responsible than any other.

Reformulating a famous saying by Terence (“homo sum: umani nihil a me alienum puto”), Roman Jakobson (1959) asserts that: “linguista sum: linguistici nihil a me alienum puto.” This commitment by the semiotician to all that is linguistic, indeed, to all that is sign material (not only relative to anthroposemiosis or more extensively to zoosemiosis, but to the whole semiobiosphere) is not only intended in a cognitive sense, but also in the ethical. Such a commitment involves concern for the other, not only in the sense of “to be concerned with...”, but also in the sense of “to be concerned for...”, “to care for...”. Indeed, viewed from such a perspective, concern for the other, care for the other imply a capacity for responsibility without limitations of belonging, proximity, or community. In truth, this capacity is not exclusive to the “linguist” or “semiotician”. Developing Jakobson’s intuition, we could claim that it is not as professional linguists or semioticians, but more significantly as human beings that no sign is “a me alienum”. And leaving the first part of Terence’s saying unmodified, “homo sum”, we may now continue with the statement that insofar as we are human beings not only are we semiosical animals (like all other animals), but we are also semiotic animals. From this point of view humans are unique by comparison to the rest of the animal kingdom. The consequence is that nothing semiosical, including the biosphere and the evolutionary cosmos whence it sprang, “a me alienum puto”. Paraphrasing Terence: “I deal with signs, so nothing in the life of signs is indifferent to me”.

The human being is a “semiotic animal” thus denominated to the extent that we are endowed with a capacity for semiotics understood as “metasemiosis,” with the capacity for making decisions, taking a stand, intervening upon the course of semiosis, which implies
that the human being is invested with a unique capacity for responsibility toward semiosis. From this point of view, the semiotic animal is also a “semioethic animal”. The expression “semioethics” indicates a propensity in semiotics to recover its ancient vocation as “semeiotics” (or symptomatology) interested in symptoms and the quality of life. Semioethics is not intended as a discipline in its own right, but as an orientation in the study of signs developed in the framework of “global semiotics”.

“From semiotics to semioethics” describes a research itinerary that studies signs in relation to values. Though a constant focus in sign studies across the twentieth century (with such figure as Victoria Welby, Charles Morris, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi and on the background others still like Mikhail Bakhtin and Charles Peirce), the relation between signs and values has not been a mainstream interest, but today, in a globalized world, this relation has become ever more urgent to address and foster.

Semioethics is a crucial part of the answer to the question regarding the future of semiotics, the destiny of semiosis, proposed by Thomas A. Seboek in “Semiosis and Semiotics: What Lies in Their Future?” (in Sebeok 1991a: 97-99). Semioethics intends to evidence the responsibility of semiotics toward semiosis, consequently proposing that “global semiotics”, which is founded in the general science of signs as conceived by Charles S. Peirce, now be further developed precisely in terms of “semioethics”.

Biology and the social sciences, ethology and linguistics, psychology and the health sciences, their internal specializations – from genetics to medical semeiotics (symptomatology), psychoanalysis, gerontology and immunology – all find in global semiotics the place of encounter and reciprocal exchange, as well as systematization and unification. Important to note, however, is that “systematization” and “unification” are not understood neopositivistically, in the static terms of an “encyclopedia” (whether a question of juxtaposing knowledge and linguistic practices, or of reducing knowledge to a single scientific field and its relative languages, as in neopositivistic physicalism). Global semiotics is a metascience concerned with all academic disciplines as sign-related. It cannot be reduced to the status of “philosophy of (ideoscopic) science”, though of course as a cenoscopic science3 it is dialogically engaged with – is indeed intrinsic to – philosophy.

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3 Peirce 1908: CP 8.342 and 8.343, in a letter to Lady Welby: “the cenoscopic studies (i.e., those studies which do not depend upon new special observations) of all signs remain one undivided
Global semiotics unites what other fields of knowledge and human praxis generally keep apart either for justified needs of a specialized order, or because of a useless and even harmful tendency toward short-sighted sectorialization (which is not free of ideological implications, most often poorly masked by motivations alleged to be of a scientific order).

Instead, the continuous and creative shift in perspective that the global approach to semiosis makes possible favours the identification of new interdisciplinary relationships and new interpretive practices, as foreseen by Charles Morris among others. Sign relations are identified where it was thought there were none: that is, where no more than mere “facts” and relations among things had been identified, as if independently from communication and interpretive processes. Moreover, this continuous shift in perspective also favours the discovery of new cognitive fields and languages which interact dialogically – in truth a question of dialogical relations among signs that already exist and call for recognition. It is not just a question of building bridges ex novo, but of at last recognizing in the interconnectedness, the dialogical intercorporeality that is already there, structural to the existent. Characterized by the capacity to explore the boundaries and margins of an array of different sciences, by its capacity for opening to the other, semiotics has been dubbed by Sebeok as the “doctrine of signs” (1976, 1986a).

A fundamental claim made by semioethics is that semiotics most not only describe and explain signs, but must also search for adequate methods of inquiry for the acquisition of knowledge as well as make proposals for human behavior and social programming. As the general (cenoscopic) science of signs, semiotics must overcome parochial specialisms – that is, all forms of separatism among the sciences (see Perron, Sbrocchi, Colilli, Danesi, eds. 2000; Rossi-Landi 1968, 1972, 1992a). The ethical aspect of semiotics is projectual and critiques human practice generally with reference to all aspects of life from the biological to the socio-cultural, paying attention to reconnect that which is generally considered to be separate. For an approach to semiotic studies intending to interrogate not only the sense of science, but the sense of life for humankind, the capacity for criticism, social awareness, and responsible behavior are central issues. Developing Sebeok’s standpoint and proceeding beyond him, semioethics evidences the ethical implications of global semiotics and their importance for communication and life overall (see Copley 2010b; Petrilli, ed., 2014).
2. The semiotic animal, a semioethic animal

Thanks to the “human modelling capacity” and its “syntactics,” also designated as “language,” a species-specific characteristic, the human being can be described as a “semiotic animal”. Because of this special modelling device, we now know that the human being is not only endowed with *semiosis*, but also with *metasemiosis* or *semiotics*, that is, a capacity for using signs to reflect on signs, for critical awareness (Deely, Petrilli, Ponzio, 2005). In this proposition the expression “language” is used to denominate the human capacity for *modelling* as distinct from *communication*; whilst the expression “semiotics” in addition to the name for the general *science of signs* indicates the *specificity of human semiosis, metasemiosis* (Petrilli 1998a: 8-10, 145-7). “Semiotics” in this second sense qualifies human animals as “semiotic animals” and connects human behavior with conscious awareness and the capacity for responsibility, where “responsibility” is understood both in the sense of responsivity and of answerability, accountability.

The capacity for language understood as modelling and characterized by syntax (better, syntactics) endows human beings with the capacity to construct not only one world, like all other animal species, but numerous possible worlds. This species-specific modelling capacity appeared with hominids and determined their evolution during the whole course of

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4 The term *language* is introduced by Thomas Sebeok for the primary modelling system specific to the genus *Homo*. The *primary modelling system* is not natural language (Fr. *langue* / It. *lingua*), as instead the Moscow-Tartu school maintains, but rather language in the sense of the French *langage* and Italian *linguaggio*. Instead, natural language (Fr. *langue* / It. *lingua*) appears quite late in human evolution and is a *secondary modelling system*. Consequently, cultural sign systems that presuppose natural languages are *tertiary modelling system*.

The concept of *modelling* comes from the so-called Tartu-Moscow school (A.A. Zaliznjak, V.V. Ivanov, V.N. Toporov. Ju.M. Lotman, cf. Lucid 1977; Rudy 1986) where it is applied to natural language (Fr. *langue* / It. *lingua*), which it describes as a “primary modelling system” (cf. Deely 2007), and to the other human cultural systems described as “secondary modelling systems”. On our part we implement the term *modelling* following Sebeok who extends the concept beyond the sphere of anthroposemiosis and connects it to the biologist Jakob von Uexküll and his concept of *Umwelt* (“surrounding world”) (cf. Kull 2010a, b). In Sebeok’s interpretation, *Umwelt* means “external world model”. On the basis of research in biosemiotics, we know that the modelling capacity can be observed in all life-forms (cf. Sebeok 1979: 49-58, 68-82 and Sebeok 1991a: 117-127). “Modelling systems theory” has recently been reformulated by Sebeok in collaboration with Marcel Danesi (Sebeok, Danesi 2000). They study semiotic phenomena as modelling processes. In light of semiotics oriented in the sense of modelling systems theory, semiosis can be defined as a capacity in all life-forms which produces and understands signs according to specific models, organizing perceptive input as established by each species (*Ibid.: 5*).
development from *Homo habilis* to *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens* and now *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Syntax or writing (*ante litteram* writing, that is, writing before the letter, *avant la lettre*, to use an expression introduced by Emmanuel Levinas (1972), writing before verbal transcription) involves the capacity to (mutely) construct multiple meanings and senses, multiple registers, that is, multiple meanings relative to different registers, with a finite number of elements. From this point of view, oral verbal language can also be discussed in terms of “writing” (Petrilli and Ponzio 2003b: 7–10, 11–26; see also Petrilli 2012: 122-123). Parallel to activation of the modelling capacity (language) in the evolutionary development of *Homo*, nonverbal signs were also used for communication as in all other animals, but with the difference that in humans they were rooted in (mute) language (modelling). In this sense these nonverbal signs are linguistic nonverbal signs (Posner et al., 1997–2004, Art. 18, §5, §6).

As “semiotic animals” human beings interpret signs without distinguishing between the levels of immediate interpretation, what I propose we call *direct semiosis, primary semiosis*, and the understanding of interpretation; instead, as “semiotic animals” or “metasemiotic animals,” human beings can suspend the immediate, direct interpretation of signs and set the conditions for reflection and deliberation, for what we can call *indirect or secondary semiosis, complex semiosis*. In fact, that in the life-world human semiosis should be characterized as metasemiosis means that not only can we approach signs as the object of interpretation undistinguished from our response to them, but that we can also suspend our responses and deliberate.

Metasemiosis is a biosemiotic and phylogenetic endowment that, thanks to syntactics, or language understood as modelling, favours a unique capacity for creative and critical intervention on semiosis. Thus equipped the human being is uniquely capable of assuming a responsible attitude to life, signs and sign behavior; and attending to the quality of life. This is connected to the human capacity for listening and accountability, for caring for life in its joyous and dialogical multiplicity, where “caring for” implies an object, the other, to be concerned for that other, but without making claims to power and control through therapy and cure. Such a propensity arises in the context of global intercorporeity, dialogical interrelatedness, and creative awareness of others as actors in the same semiosic web that is life.

Remembering the axiom formulated by Sebeok with his “global semiotics” which
recites that where there is life there is semiosis, that life and semiosis converge (Sebeok 1986a, b, 1994, 2001a), the “semiotic animal,” the rational animal that is *homo* is uniquely capable of reflection, deliberation, of making critical choices and taking a standpoint. Consequently, the semiotic animal is capable of taking responsibility for semiosis and life over the entire planet, for their health and good functioning. In this sense, we are both subject *to* and *of* responsibility.

As semiotic animals human beings are capable of a global view of life and communication⁵: hence the question “What is our responsibility to life and the universe in its globality?” (Petrilli and Ponzio 2010: 157). This question is central to the orientation in semiotics designated as “semioethics,” an expression introduced to indicate what we consider to be an evitable turn in semiotics studies today in relation to the human world (more exactly, the multiple human worlds, real and possible, that characterize anthroposemiosis) (Petrilli 2010; Petrilli and Ponzio 2003b, 2005: 562). The capacity for reflection that is at once creative and critical (as stated, a specific characteristic of human semiosis), for metasemiosis, effectively contributes to a better understanding of why, in what sense we are responsible for semiosis, for life throughout the “semio(bio)sphere.”

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⁵ “Communication,” “modelling” and “dialogism” are three fundamental concepts in semiotics where the first is generally privileged over the other two, but cannot be understood without them.

Communication presupposes modelling, given that communication occurs internally to a world produced by the modelling processes it presupposes. Modelling systems, in turn, also evolve from communication as it occurs in the species, and from the environment – being the context of modelling produced by adaptation. But communication always occurs on the basis of the type of modelling that characterizes a species.

By *dialogue* is understood the way in which an organism in its specific *Umwelt* relates to the intraspecific and extraspecific organic, and to the inorganic. Semiosis is generally *dialogic*. The notion of *dialogism* does not contradict, but rather supplements and confirms those notions that insist on the autonomy of the living organism, for example, Jakob von Uexküll’s *functional cycle* and Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s *autopoiesis*. Furthermore, *dialogue* must be distinguished from *communication*. Communication is only one aspect of semiosis. The other two are *modelling* and *dialogism*.

Dialogism, modelling and communication – which in the human being are characterized species-specifically – belong to semiosis in general and for this reason can be traced, in different forms, degrees and modalities, in all living beings. The dialogic character of verbal semiosis, its modelling and communicative functions, are specific characterizations of the human species of capacities that can be traced in semiosis generally in any living being. A more detailed study of the semiosis of language understood as “*langage*/*linguaggio*” (primary modelling), and as *langue*/*lingua* (secondary modelling), and of other cultural sign systems that presuppose language understood as “*langue*/*lingua*” (tertiary modelling) are available in the chapter “Language as primary modelling and natural languages: a biosemiotic perspective,” co-authored with Augusto Ponzio, for the volume *Biosemiotic Perspectives on Language and Linguistic*, 2015.
The semiotic (i.e. metasemiosic) capacity implies a third human species-specific modality of being-in-the-world beyond the *biosemiosis* and the *semiotic*, what we have denominated the *semioethic*. Viewed together these different perspectives on sign activity in the global communication network afford a fuller understanding of the extent to which human beings are responsible for the health of semiosis generally in all its forms, for the *quality of life*, human and nonhuman, over the planet. The “semiotic animal” is also a “semioethic animal.”

The idea that *homo* is not only a “semiotic animal”, but also a “semioethic animal” is elaborated keeping account of Charles S. Peirce when he thematizes the concept of “reasonableness” beyond “reason”. “Reasonableness” is understood by Peirce as open-ended dialectic-dialogic semiotic activity, unfinished and unfinalizable, unbiased by prejudice and regulated by the logic of love, otherness and continuity or what he also calls “synechism” (*CP* 1.615, 2.195, 5.3). The concept of reasonableness is intended to supersede the limits of abstract gnoseologism and to orient semiotic research in a pragmatic-ethic or evaluative-operative sense. In his Preface to his 1903 *Lectures on Pragmatism* (*CP*, Vol. 5, Bk. I), Peirce makes the following statement (cited from his 1902 dictionary entry “Pragmatic and Pragmatism”):

> Almost everybody will now agree that the ultimate good lies in the evolutionary process in some way. If so, it is not in individual reactions in their segregation, but in something general or continuous. Synechism is founded on the notion that the coalescence, the becoming continuous, the becoming governed by laws, the becoming instinct with general ideas, are but phases of one and the same process of the growth of reasonableness. This is first shown to be true with mathematical exactitude in the field of logic, and is thence inferred to hold good metaphysically. It is not opposed to pragmatism in the manner in which C. S. Peirce applied it, but includes that procedure as a step. (*CP* 5.4)

According to Peirce the most advanced developments in reason and knowledge are achieved through the creative power of reasonableness, governed by the forces of agapasm (on the relation between logic and love, see Boole 1931b [1905])⁶. He maintains that love is

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⁶ Peirce identified the ultimate end of semiosis in the human world neither in individual pleasure (hedonism), nor in the good of society (Utilitarianism), but rather in a principle regulating the evolutionary development of the universe, what he calls “reasonableness” (*CP* 5.4). In Peirce’s view, the ultimate value of the concept of the *summum bonum* is reason and the development of reason, that is, reason understood as an open, dialectic process, as unprejudiced research, or as Bakhtin would say, as an ongoing dialectical-dialogical process, a movement oriented by the logic of otherness. This process is never complete or finished, but rather is rooted in the principle of
directed to the concrete and not to abstractions; toward one’s neighbour, not necessarily in a spatial sense, locally, but in the sense of affinity, a person “we live near [. . . ] in life and feeling” (CP 6.288). Love is a driving force in logical procedure characterized in terms of abduction, iconicity and creativity. The development of mind occurs largely through the power of love thus understood. The type of evolution foreseen by synechism, the principle of continuity, is evolution through the agency of love. On such issues Peirce refers us directly to his essay of 1893, “The Law of Mind” (CP 6.289). Furthermore, Peirce polemically contrasts progress as achieved through a relation of sympathy among neighbours, the “Gospel of Christ,” with what he calls the “Gospel of Greed” which reflects the dominant ideology of his day and encourages the individual to assert one’s own rights and interests, its own individuality or egoistic identity over the other (CP 6.294).

Love, reasonableness and creativity are all grounded in the logic of otherness and dia- logism and together move the evolutionary dynamics of semiosis in the human world. And given their unique, species-specific capacity as semiotic animals, human beings, as anticipated, are also invested with a major role in terms of responsibility toward semiosis generally, which means to say toward life in all its forms over the entire planet.

From the point of view of human social semiotics, our own approach to sign studies, linguistic and nonlinguistic, verbal and nonverbal, is oriented “semioethically” to embrace questions traditionally pertaining to ethics, aesthetics and ideology (see Rossi-Landi 1978 and 1992a). Indications in this sense can be traced in Peirce who, coherently with his pragmatism, developed a cognitive approach to semiotics in close relation to the study of the social behaviour of human beings and the totality of their interests. From a Peircean perspective, the problem of knowledge necessarily involves considerations of a valuational and pragmatical order. Semioethics in fact extends its gaze beyond the logico-cognitive and epistemological boundaries of semiotics to focus on the relation of signs to values and thus continuity or synechism (CP 1.172). Therefore Peirce himself transcended the limits of a merely gnoseological semiotics working in the direction of what can be described as an ethical-pragmatic or valuative-operative approach to the study of signs and human behaviour. In addition to his Collected Papers, here we shall simply recall the telling title of his posthumous collection of essays, which is indicative of his orientation: Chance, Love and Logic (1923). In the final phase of his production (which overall spans approximately from 1887 to 1914) – what Gérald Deledalle in his 1987 monograph on Peirce calls the Arisbe period (the name Peirce gave to his home in Milford, Pennsylvania, where he lived to the end of his days) – Peirce specifically turned his attention to the normative sciences: in addition to logic these include aesthetics and ethics and hence the question of ultimate ends or of the summum bonum.
on the axiological dimension of sign activity, which includes the human disposition for evaluation, critique, creativity and responsibility, thereby overcoming any tendency toward dogmatism and unquestioning acceptance.

This orientation is also prefigured by Victoria Welby (1837-1912), ideator of significs\(^7\) which saw very interesting developments across the first half of the twentieth century (see Petrilli 2009a, 2015). The term “significs” indicates the human disposition for evaluation, the import conferred upon something, the signifying potential and significance of human behaviour, participation in the life of signs not only on the cognitive and logical levels, but also in corporeal, emotional, pragmatic and ethical terms\(^8\).

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\(^7\) “Significs” is a neologism coined by Welby in the 1890s for her theory of meaning and special approach to the study of signs in all their forms and relations with a special focus on their relation to values. Significs transcends pure descriptivism and gnoseological or logico-epistemological boundaries in the direction of axiology and study of the conditions that make meaningful behavior possible (cf. Welby 1983, 1985, 2009). As Welby claimed in a letter of 18 November 1903 to Peirce (in which she mentions her intellectual solidarity with the Italian philosopher and mathematician Giovanni Vailati, 1863–1909), “significs” is a “practical extension” of semiotics: “Prof. G. Vailati,...shares your view of the importance of that – may I call it, practical extension? – of the office and field of Logic proper, which I have called Significs” (in Hardwick 1977: 5–8; see also Vailati 1971, 1987). Though this specification may seem superfluous given that the pragmatic dimension is inscribed in Peirce’s approach to semiotics, that the ethical-valuational aspects of signifying processes are closely interrelated with the operative-pragmatic is important to underline.

\(^8\) Significs elects “significance” as its ultimate object of study with respect to “sense” and “meaning”, the other two terms forming her meaning triad. “Sense” corresponds to the most primitive level of pre-rational life, that of one’s response to the environment, it concerns the use of signs and emerges as a necessary condition for all experience; “meaning” concerns rational life, the intentional, volitional aspects of signification; “significance” implies both sense and meaning and extends beyond these to concern the “import” and “value” that signs have for each one of us. As such, this notion can be associated with Morris’s own interpretation of the concept of “significance” (Welby 1983 [1903: 5–6, in Petrilli 2009a: 264, see also pp. 265–272]). According to Welby, “sense,” “meaning” and “significance” indicate three simultaneous and interacting dimensions in the development of expressiveness, interpretive capacity and operative force (cf. Heijerman and Schmitz 1991; Schmitz 1985, 1990).

In the Preface to her monograph *Significs and Language* (1911), Welby describes significs as “the study of the nature of Significance in all its forms and relations, and thus of its workings in every possible sphere of human interest and purpose”; and the interpretive function as “that which naturally precedes and is the very condition of human intercourse, as of man’s mastery of his world” (Welby 1985: vii). In *Significs and Language*, as in all her writings, the problem of analyzing signifying processes is also the problem of investigating the processes of the production of values as a structural part of the production of meaning in human sign activity. The epistemological, ethical and pragmatic dimension of signifying processes finds expression in unconsciously philosophical questions asked by the “man in the street,” as Welby says, in everyday language: “What do you mean by ...?,” “What does it signify?,” “What is the meaning of...,” etc. In what may be described as her most complete published work on the problem of signs and meaning, *What is Meaning?* (1903), Welby observes that “Man questions and an answer is waiting for him. ... He must discover, observe, analyse, appraise, first
Creative love and reasonableness associate knowledge and experience to the pragmatic-ethical dimension. If we do not persist in proceeding in a contrary sense and separate, even juxtapose processes that, instead, should integrate and complete each other, the sense of all that he senses through touch, hearing, sight, and realize its interest, what it practically signifies for him; then the meaning – the intention – of action, the motive of conduct, the cause of each effect. Thus at last he will see the Significance, the ultimate hearing, the central value, the vital implication – of what? of all experience, all knowledge, all fact, and all thought” (Welby 1983: 5–6).

Further on in the same volume she specifies that “signifies in a special sense aims at the concentration of intellectual activities on that which we tacitly assume to be the main value of all study, and vaguely call 'meaning'” (Welby 1983: 83). Therefore, in the face of accumulating knowledge and experience, the so-called “significian,” whether scientist, philosopher, or everyday person, is urged to ask such questions as: “What is the sense of ...?,” “What do we intend by ...?,” “What is the meaning of ...?,” “Why do we take an interest in such things as beauty, truth, goodness?,” “Why do we give value to experience?,” “What is the expression value of a certain experience?” In Welby’s view, such questions and their responses concern the sense of science and philosophy, and are at the basis of all controversies concerning aesthetics, ethics, and religion. Consequently, signifies is relevant to all spheres of life not because it claims semiotic omniscience, but because it turns its attention to interpretation and meaning value as the condition of experience and understanding.

As the study of significance, signifies advocates an approach to everyday life and to science that is oriented by the capacity for critique and creativity, release from dogmatism, dialectic-dialogic answerability, by the capacity for listening and responsibility. Signifies results from relating the study of signs and sense to ethics. Ethics not only constitutes the object of study, but is also the perspective. The measure itself of the semantico-pragmatical validity of all human knowledge and experience is ethical insofar as they produce sense and value.

The term “significance” designates the disposition toward valuation. Reference is to the value we confer upon something, the relevance, import, and value of meaning itself, the condition of being significant. This is determined by the involvement of human beings in the life of signs at the theoretical, emotional, ethical and pragmatic levels together. Welby oriented a large part of her own research in the sense of the relation of signs to values, what we have indicates as “semioethics” as a development on “global semiotics” and preferred the term “signifies” to underline the direction of her studies rather than “semiotics” and other similar expressions such as “semantics” (Bréal 1897), “semasiology” (Reisig 1839), or “sematology” (Smart 1831, 1837), etc.

In a letter to Welby dated the 14 March 1909 (in Hardwick 1977: 108–130), Peirce established a correspondence between Welby’s triad, “sense,” “meaning” and “significance” and his own that distinguishes between “immediate interpretant,” “dynamical interpretant,” and “final interpretant.” Peirce’s “immediate interpretant” concerns meaning as it is normally used by the interpreter. As Welby says in relation to sense, it concerns the interpreter’s immediate response to signs. The “dynamical interpretant” concerns the sign’s signification in a specific context. So, as Welby claims in relation to meaning, it is used according to a specific intention. But even more interesting is the connection established by Peirce between his concept of “final interpretant” and Welby’s “significance” (Petrilli 2009a: 288–293). According to Peirce, the final interpretant concerns the sign at the extreme limits of its interpretive possibilities. In other words, it concerns all possible responses to a sign in a potentially unlimited sequence of interpretants. As attested by the correspondence to Welby’s “significance,” the “final interpretant” also alludes to signifying potential, to the capacity for creativity and critique and is fundamentally concerned with valutational attitudes.
we soon realize that to transcend the limits of a strictly gnoseological approach in the study of sign activity is not only appropriate, but necessary (see Petrilli 2014a: 67-83).

In sum, these considerations present general semiotics with a plan that is not related to any particular ideological orientation. The semiotic animal is a properly responsible actor, capable of *signs of signs*, mediation, reflection, awareness, of suspending action and of deliberation. As such, the semiotic animal is capable of critical, creative, and responsible awareness as regards semiosis over the entire planet, of taking a critical standpoint with respect to semiosis in its various aspects, and on this basis of acting rationally and reasonably. From this perspective we have seen that the semiotic animal can also be described as a semioethic animal.

3. The sign science and its developments in the direction of semioethics

Semiotics (therefore semioticians) can commit to the health of semiosis and cultivate the capacity for responsible and responsive understanding toward the semiosic universe. Metasemiosis is a condition for global responsibility and implies the capacity for listening, for listening to the other. Semiotics conceived as the general science of signs needs to refine its auditory and critical functions, the capacity for listening and critique, and “semioethics” can contribute to the task. From this perspective, “global semiotics” is not limited to a cognitive approach to semiotic processes, but is also sensitive to the pragmatic-ethical dimension of sign activity. Global semiotics is founded in cognitive semiotics, but as we have claimed must also be open to a third dimension of semiosis beyond the quantitative and the theoretical which is the ethical. This third dimension concerns the ends toward which we strive: in fact, other expressions previously introduced for this particular dimension of semiosis include in addition to “ethosemiotics,” the expressions “teleosemiotics,” and “telosemiotics,” though for the relation between semiotics and ethics we now prefer the expression “semioethics” (Petrilli 1998a: 180-186; Petrilli and Ponzio 2016: 223-259). Semioethics is not intended as a discipline in its own right, but as an orientation, a perspective in the study of signs, which inherits the critical instance of philosophy of language, the quest for sense⁹.

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⁹ In response to a query from John Deely *à propos* the term “semioethics,” Ponzio explains as follows in an e-mail exchange between 4 and 5 January 2010:
The expression “semioethics” indicates a propensity in semiotics to recover its ancient vocation as “semeiotics” or “symptomatology” which focuses on symptoms. We have mentioned that a major issue for semioethics (like semeiotics) is care for life, but from a global perspective, where semiosis and life converge, as postulated by Sebeok. The expression to “care for life” does not imply any form of therapeutic power, the power to cure, but far more essentially the capacity for involvement with the other, interest in the other, unindifference to the other. It is in this sense that general semiotics can be related to ancient medical semeiotics or symptomatology with the ancient Greek physicians Hippocrates of Cos (c. 460 BC – c. 370 BC) and Galen of Pergamon (c. 129 AD – c. 200 AD) and their vocation for the health of semiosis, for life. Given that semiosis converges with life (at least), the focus on the health of life practiced by this ancient branch of the

Semioethics was born in the early 1980s in connection with the introductions (written by Susan Petrilli) to the Italian translations of works by Thomas Sebeok, Charles Morris, Victoria Welby and my own introduction and interpretation of works by Mikhail Bakhtin, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, Giovanni Vailati, and Peirce (see my Bibliography). The problem was to find, with Susan, a term which indicates the study of the relation between signs and values, ancient semeiotics and semiotics, meaning and significance, and which somehow translates Welby’s “Significs” into Italian: we coined terms and expressions such as “teleosemiotica,” “etosemiotica,” “semiotica etica” in contrast with “semiotica cognitiva” (see the Italian edition by Massimo Bonfantini of Peirce, La semiotica cognitiva, 1980, Einaudi, Turin).

The beginning of semioethics is in the introductions by myself and Susan to the Italian editions (translation by Susan) of Sebeok, Il segno e i suoi maestri, Bari, Adriatica, 1985, of Welby, Significato, metafora e interpretazione, Adriatica, 1985, in the essays by Susan and myself published in H. Walter Schmitz (ed.), Essays in Significs, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1990, in Susan’s books of the 1980s, such as Significs, semiotica, significazione, “Prefazione” by Thomas Sebeok, Adriatica, 1988, and Ponzio’s, such as Filosofia del linguaggio, Adriatica, 1985.

In a private note written in the context of the International Colloquium, “Refractions. Literary Criticism, Philosophy and the Human Sciences in Contemporary Italy in the 1970s and the 1980s,” held at the Department of Comparative Literature, Carleton University, Ottawa, 27–29 September 1990 (in the discussion following delivery of my paper “Rossi-Landi tra Ideologie e Scienze umane”), I used the Italian term “Semioetica” playing on the displacement of “e” in the Italian word “semeiotica”: indicating in Semiotics the ancient vocation of Semeiotics (as conceived by Hippocrates and Galenus) for improving life, bettering it.

But in the title of 3 lessons delivered with Susan at Curtin University of Technology, Perth in Australia, we still used the term “teleosemiotica”: “Teleosemiotics and global semiotics” (July–September, 1999, Australian lecture tour: Adelaide University, Monash University, in Melbourne, Sydney University, Curtin University, in Perth, Northern Territory University, Darwin).

The book Semioetica, co-authored by Susan and myself, was published in 2003 and is the landing achievement of this long crossing of texts, conceptions, and words, as results from our bibliographic references […].

It is very difficult to say exactly when an idea is born with its name: “universal gravitation” was born when an apple fell from a tree on Newton’s head: isn’t that so? (in Petrilli 2012: 186-187).
medical sciences can be recovered by “semiotics” understood as the general science of signs and reorganized in terms of “semioethics”.

The semiotician concerned with the health of semiosis, the health of life (human and nonhuman), focuses on symptoms (of illness, malaise, and individual and social disorders), but not as a physician, a general practitioner, or some type of specialist. He does not prescribe drugs or administer therapeutic treatments of any sort. Indeed, the widespread condition of medicalization in present-day society needs to be challenged, as does uncritical recourse to such paradigms as normal/abnormal, healthy/sick (view how to ignore warnings in this sense from Thomas Szasz in the United States, see, e.g., Szasz, 1961, 2001, 2007; Petrilli and Ponzio 2017; Schaler, Lothane, Vatz, eds., 2017).

The semiotician’s interest in symptoms bears a certain resemblance to Freudian analysis given the central role played by interpretation in both cases and the inclination to listen to the other which is decisive for interpretation. But listening here is not understood in the medical sense: to listen to the other is not to auscultate. And if semiotic or, better, semioethic analysis of symptoms is similar to Freudian analysis, it shares nothing with the practice of institutionalized and medicalized psychiatry, with medicalized and “psychiatrized” psychoanalysis, with psychiatric patients, psychiatric treatment, administration of drugs, and sundry concoctions, that is, it shares nothing with the medicalization and psychiatrization of life as practiced ever more in today’s globalized world.

Another connection can be established here with Victoria Welby and her original approach to the study of signs, “significs,” when she observes the following, thereby developing her theory of meaning in full consideration of the critical, pragmatic, and ethical dimensions of semiosis:

It is unfortunate that custom decrees the limitation of the term diagnosis to the pathological field. It would be difficult to find a better one for that power of “knowing through,” which a training in Significs would carry. We must be brought up to take for granted that we are diagnosts, that we are to cultivate to the utmost the power to see real distinctions and to read the signs, however faint, which reveal sense and meaning. Diagnostic may be called the typical process of Significs as Translation is its typical form. (Welby 1983 [1903]: 51)

Analogically “diagnostic” can be associated with the semioethic orientation in semiotics. In fact, semioethics derives its inspiration from Welby’s significs and its focus on sense, meaning and significance, from Peirce’s interest in ethics, and from Charles Morris’s (1901–
focus on the relation between signs and values, signification and significance, semiotics and axiology (Morris 1964\textsuperscript{10}), as much as from the focus on otherness and dialogism thematized by Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas\textsuperscript{11}. By contrast with a

\textsuperscript{10} The title of Morris’s 1964 book, \textit{Signification and Significance. A Study of the Relations of Signs to Values} is significant in itself. In it he draws attention to the relation between signs and values as anticipated by the subtitle. Morris dealt with values almost as much as he dealt with signs and opposed the idea that the mere fact of describing signs would give an insight into values (Rossi-Landi 1953, 1975\textsuperscript{2}; 1992: Chs. 2, 3; Petrilli 1992a: 1–36). Morris devoted a large part of his research to the problem of ethical and aesthetic value: after his \textit{Foundations of the Theory of Signs} (1938) and \textit{Signs, Language and Behavior} (1946), he concentrated specifically on value theory in his book \textit{Varieties of Human Value} (1956).

He opens \textit{Signification and Significance} describing two senses according to which the expression “to have meaning” can be understood: as having value, of being significant, on the one hand, and as having a given linguistic meaning, a given signification, on the other. Morris uses the term “meaning” to indicate a global concept analyzable into “signification” and “significance.” He aimed to recover the semiotic consistency of signifying processes in the human world as testified by the ambiguity of the term “meaning”. Meaning understood as signification is the object of semiotics, while significance is the object of axiology. An important aspect of the relation of signs to values is that it calls for recognition of the inevitable relation of semiotics to axiology. Though working from different perspectives, these disciplines converge in their object of study, namely human behavioural processes. Morris was intent upon rediscovering the semiotic consistency of the signifying process to which the ambiguity of the term itself “meaning” testifies. As he explains in the Preface to the volume in question: “That there are close relations between the terms “signification” and “significance” is evident. In many languages there is a term like the English term “meaning” which has two poles: that which something signifies and the value or significance of what is signified. Thus if we ask what is the meaning of life, we may be asking a question about the value or significance of living or both. The fact that such terms as “meaning” are so widespread in many languages (with the polarity mentioned) suggests that there is a basic relation between what we shall distinguish as \textit{signification} and \textit{significance}” (Morris 1964: vii).

\textsuperscript{11} Irrespective of the philosophical importance of dealing with the relation between signs and values, there are at least another two reasons – the first historical, the second theoretical – for treating the question of values in the context of sign theory: (1) research in this direction has already been inaugurated (especially by Peirceans); (2) an adequate critique of decodification semiotics calls for close study of the value theory that subtends it.

Sign theory as elaborated by Saussure in his \textit{Cours de Linguistique générale} (1916), the “official Saussure,” but actually written by a handful of students on the course, is based on the theory of equal exchange value formulated by the School of Lausanne with such representatives as Leon Walras and Vilfredo Pareto and marginalist economics (Ponzio 1986, 1990: 117–118). Saussure associates language with the market in an ideal state of equilibrium. Language is analyzed using the same categories developed by “pure economics” which studies the laws that regulate the market leaving aside the social relations of production, what Rossi-Landi (1968, 1975a, 1992a) calls “social linguistic work” and its social structures. This approach orients the Saussurean sign model in the direction of equal exchange logic, establishing a relation of equivalence between \textit{significant} and \textit{signifié} and between communicative intention, on the one hand, and interpretation understood as decodification, on the other.

This particular sign model and the value theory it implies had already been critiqued by Rossi-Landi by the mid-1960s. In the light of historico-dialectical materialism he evidenced the limits of language theories that ground instead linguistic value in equal exchange logic. He applied
theoretical instruments originally developed in the context of the Marxian critique of exchange value in relation to questions of a more strictly socio-economic order to the analysis of language (Rossi-Landi 1972, 1985). However, his critique can be traced back even further to his monograph, Comunicazione, significato, e parlare comune, 1961, where he discusses what he calls (with ironic overtones) the “postal package theory”. This expression underlined the inadequacy of those approaches that describe signs, language and communication as messages that, like a postal package, are sent off from one post office and received by another. With this metaphor, Rossi-Landi critiqued communication analyzed in terms of univocal intentionality, as though formed from pieces of communicative intention neatly assembled by the sender and just as neatly identified by the receiver.

Rossi-Landi translated Morris onto the scene of semiotic studies in Italy. He inaugurated his commitment to semiotic inquiry with an early monograph on Morris,1 953, followed the year after with his translation of Morris's Foundations of the Theory of Signs (1938). Signs, Language and Behavior (1946) had already appeared in Italy in 1949, translated by Silvio Ceccato. But despite such input, as Rossi-Landi recounts in “A fragment in the history of semiotics” (1988), in Italy the times were not ripe for Morris and his work was not as well received as he had hoped for. Since then Morris’s research has proven to be nothing short of seminal for semiotic inquiry internationally. In 1975 Rossi-Landi’s monograph on Morris appeared in a new enlarged edition with Feltrinelli (Milan), at last receiving the attention it deserved. Reflecting on the conditions that make for successful cultural communication, Rossi-Landi explains like this: “For cultural communication to obtain, the codes and subcodes must be sufficiently similar already; and noise and disturbance must be relatively low. Alternatively, an enormous redundancy is required. To make clearer what I mean: if one wants to be properly understood, one has to repeat the same things in a high number of different occasions, through a high number of different channels. Cultural communication must become a sort of propaganda. Each author is then compelled to choose between concentrating on the production of ideas and waging a sort of warfare for conquering an audience. Here, again, we can see how inextricably fortuitous the tangle of theoretical and practical factors can be. And, as Caesar put it, ‘multum cum in omnibus rebus, tum in re militari potest fortuna’” (Rossi-Landi 1992: 14–15).

Rossi-Landi’s work can also be related to Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s (1895–1975) research. Bakhtin’s name is commonly associated with a monograph Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, published in 1929, by Valentin N. Voloshinov (1895–1936), his friend and collaborator. In this book, but even earlier, in 1927 with Freiduism. A Critical Sketch (Voloshinov 1927), Bakhtin and Voloshinov critique Saussure’s Cours, illustrating how it does not account for real interpretation processes, for the specificity of human communicative interaction, that is, for phenomena that qualify human communication as such. The phenomena alluded to include, for example, the capacity for plurilingualism or heteroglossia, plurivocality, ambiguity, polysemy, dialogism, and otherness. Bakhtin-Voloshinov maintain that the complex life of language is not contained between two poles, the “unitary language system” and “individual speaking,” that the signifier and the signified do not relate to each other on a one-to-one basis, that the sign is not at the service of meaning pre-established outside the signifying process (Voloshinov 1929: Part II, Chs. II, III).

In this perspective, “linguistic work” (Rossi-Landi 1968, 1992), which is “interpretive work” (Bakhtin, Voloshinov) is not limited to decodification, to the mechanical substitution of an interpreted sign with an interpretant sign; in other words, interpretation is not merely a question of recognizing the interpreted sign. In contrast, interpretive work develops through complex processes which may be described in terms of “infinite semiosis” (Peirce) and “unending deferral” (Derrida 1967) (on the difference between these two concepts, see Eco 1990), of “renvoi” (Jakobson 1963) from one sign to another, activated in the dialectic-dialogic relation among signs.

Bakhtin-Voloshinov place the sign in the context of dialogism, responsive understanding, and otherness, thereby describing interpretive work in terms of dialogic responsiveness among the parts in communication. Thus analyzed, interpretive work is articulated through the action of deferral, in this sense translation, constitutive of sign activity or semiosis. In such a framework, the focus is on interpretation/translation viewed in terms ofsignifying excess with regard to communicative
strictly cognitive, descriptive, and ideologically neutral approach to signs, language, and behavior as it has traditionally characterized semiotic studies, an important task for semiotics today is to recover the ethical–axiological dimension of human semiosis.

To the question why each human being must be responsible for semiosis, for life over the whole planet, why and in what sense, which is pivotal in semioethics, our response distinguishes between ethics and semioethics. In fact, from the point of view of ethics, this question does not necessarily require an answer: to be responsible for life on the planet is a moral principle, a categorical imperative. Instead, from the point of view of semioethics this question does require an answer: unlike ethics, semioethics involves scientific research, argumentation, interpretation, a dialogic response regulated by the logic of otherness, and questioning. It formulates a definition of the human being as a “semiotic animal” which also implies a “semioethic animal”.

In our discussion of responsibility, the reference is not to limited responsibility, responsibility with alibis, but to unlimited responsibility, responsibility without alibis, absolute responsibility. Responsibility toward life (which converges with signs and communication) in the late capitalist communication-production phase of development is unbounded, also in the sense that responsibility is not limited to human life, but involves all life-forms in the planetary ecosystem with which human life is inextricably interconnected. As the study of signs, semiotics cannot evade this issue. The task of recovering the semioethical dimension of semiosis is now urgent, considering the nature of communication\(^\text{12}\) between the historical-social sphere and the biological, the cultural sphere

intention, that is, in terms of the generation of signifying surplus value in the dialectic-dialogic relation between the interpreted sign and the interpretant sign.

Bakhtin already saw in the 1920s what interpretation semiotics recognizes today: in real signifying processes the sign does not function in a state of equilibrium or on the basis of equal exchange between the signified and the signifier. Interpretation semiotics proposes a sign model that is far broader, more flexible, and inseparable from its pragmatic and valuative components; and that with its analyses of sense, signification, and significance is able to better account for the specificity of human signifying processes and communicative interaction.

\(^{12}\) When considering the philosophical question of “communication” with reference to semiotics, presentday theorists think less and less in terms of “sender,” “message,” “code,” “channel,” and “receiver,” while practitioners of the popular version of the sign science still tend to cling to such concepts. This particular way of presenting the communication process mainly derives from the semiological approach to “sign studies,” thus tagged given its prevalently Saussurean matrix. This approach is commonly identified with such expressions as “code semiotics,” “decodification semiotics,” “code and message semiotics” (Bonfantini 1981), or “equal exchange” (Ponzio 1973, 1977). It was amply criticized by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1921-1985) as early as the 1960s with his groundbreaking
and the natural, between the semiosphere and the biosphere, where interference is ever more destructive at a planetary level. Just to cite a relatively recent example, think of the devastating effects on the environment worldwide, natural and cultural, caused by the petrol platform explosion of 29 April 2010 in the Mexican Gulf; but think also of the anthropological derangement, anthropological r/evolution provoked by mass migration today over the globe, think of the causes and of its effects on socio-economic systems worldwide, of its implications for humanity.

According to Levinas, the sense of human life, the properly human, is founded on responsibility of the I for the other. Responsibility thus understood is more ancient than the conatus essendi, than beginnings, in principium; in other words, responsibility is an-archical, prior to being and to ontological categories. This type of responsibility is not stated in ontological categories. The shortcoming of modern antihumanism, as Levinas says in the conclusion to his 1968 essay, “Humanism and Anarchy,” is in not finding in man, lost in history and in the totality, the traces of this prehistorical and an-archical responsibility. Responsibility for the other is the original relation with the other and is unlimited, absolute responsibility (in Levinas 1987a: 138–39). Responsibility thus described, as Levinas says in “Diachrony and Representation,” is the “secret of sociality” (Levinas 1991, Eng. trans.: 169).


This orientation is now counteracted by “interpretation semiotics,” thanks in particular to the recovery of Charles S. Peirce (1931–1958) and his writings, therefore of such concepts as “infinite semiosis” and the dialogic relation between signs and interpretation. The interpretive approach describes interpretation as a phenomenon that results from the dialogic interrelation among “interpreters,” or, more precisely, among “interpreted signs” and “interpretant signs” (Ponzio 1990a: 15–62). Meaning is not preestablished outside sign processes, but rather is identified in the “interpretant,” that is, in another sign that takes the place of the preceding sign. The interpretant, as a sign, subsists uniquely by virtue of another interpretant, and so forth, in an open chain of deferrals. This movement represents semiosis as an open process dependent on the potential creativity of the interpretant in the dialectic-dialogic relation with the interpretive “habit,” convention, or “encyclopedia” of a given social community (Eco 1990; Eco et al. 1992). Unlike decodification, or code and message, or equal exchange semiotics, in interpretation semiotics sign activity is not guaranteed by a code. The code only comes into play as a part of the interpretive process, as a result of interpretive practice, and is susceptible to revision and substitution.

However, in terms of commitment to a global understanding of humanity and its signs, to the totality of human relations to itself, to the world and to others, interpretation semiotics has its limits. Semiotics characteristically tends to concentrate on the gnoseological aspect of signs, and neglect the problem of the relation between signs and values which cannot be reduced to the cognitive problem of “truth” merely in a gnoseological sense. From this point of view, semiotics has often presented itself in terms of theoretism, adopting a unilaterally and abstractly gnoseological approach to the life of signs, which implies neglect of those aspects that concern values different from truth value.
Encounter with the other from the very beginning, *in principium*, is responsibility for the other, for one’s “neighbor,” whomever this is, the other for whom one is responsible. As Levinas says in *Entre nous*, precisely in the section entitled “Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” love as unindifference, as charity, is original and is original peace (*Ibid.*: 103–21). Absolute responsibility is responsibility for the other, responsibility understood as answering to the other and for the other. This type of responsibility allows for neither rest nor peace. Peace functional to war, peace intrinsic to war, a truce, is fully revealed in its misery and vanity in the light of absolute responsibility. The relation to the other is asymmetrical, unequal: the other is disproportionate with respect to the power and freedom of the I. Moral consciousness is this very lack of proportion. It interrogates the self’s freedom (Ponzio 2006a).

General semiotics conceived in the framework of global semiotics presents itself as a metascience which overcomes artificial separations established between the human sciences and the natural sciences and, instead, favors a transversal and interdisciplinary approach which evidences the condition of interconnectedness among the sciences. General semiotics in a global semiotic framework also continues its philosophical search for sense, as indicated above all by teachings in phenomenology, with special reference to the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In our own interpretation, the question of the sense for man of scientific research in general and of semiotics in particular is oriented by Husserl’s distinction between the “exact sciences” and the “rigorous sciences” as thematized in his essay, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science,” and in his monograph, *The Crisis of the European Sciences* (1954). Husserl interrogates the sense for man of scientific knowledge, avoiding all forms of scientific and technicalism, all forms of separation between means and conscious awareness of ends, by contrast to the alienated subject and false consciousness. From this point of view, semiotics is also “semioethics.”

13 As stated earlier, from a diachronic perspective, the origins of general semiotics understood as global semiotics can be traced back at least to the rise of the medical sciences and specifically to symptomatology, see Petrilli 2014: 4.1 and 4.4). That the genesis of semiotics be identified, following Sebeok, in medical semiotics or symptomatology, according to the tradition that leads from Hippocrates to Galen, is not only a question of agnition, that is, knowledge about origins. To relate semiotics to the medical sciences, therefore to the study of symptoms also means to recover the ethical instance of studies on signs. In other words, it means to recover the ancient vocation of “semiotics” for the health of life which is an immediate concern for semiotics given that, as Sebeok posits, semiosis and life, that is, life globally over the entire planet, are coextensive. Semiotics is semioethics in this sense too. As anticipated, the ethical instance of semiotics as developed by semioethics also revolves around the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Mikhail Bakhtin.
The trichotomy “global semiotics,” “cognitive semiotics,” and “semioethics” is decisive in our understanding of semiosis not only in theoretical terms, but also for ethical-pragmatic reasons. Semiotics must constantly refine its auditory and critical functions, its capacity for listening and critique in order to turn its attention to the semiosic universe in its globality and meet its commitment to the “health of semiosis,” apart from understanding in cognitive and analytical terms. To accomplish this task, therefore, we believe that semiotics must be nothing less than 1) global semiotics, 2) cognitive semiotics, and 3) semioethics.

Global semiotics provides both a phenomenological and ontological context. However, as discussed earlier, reference to the socioeconomic context is also necessary for a proper understanding of communication today, especially when understood in terms of “communication-production”. A semioethic approach must keep account of the fact that global communication-production converges with the socioeconomic context. These three contexts – the phenomenological, ontological, and socioeconomic – are all closely interconnected from the point of view of semioethics. And an important task today for general semiotics conceived as global semiotics and semioethics is to denounce any incongruities in the global sign system and, therefore, any threats to life over the planet produced by that system.

When developed in the direction of semioethics, global semiotics underlines the human capacity to care for life, which implies the quality of life. As anticipated, this approach does not orient semiotics in any particular ideological sense, but rather it focuses on human behavior as sign behavior interrelated with values. Semioethics is the result of two thrusts: one is biosemiotics (the complex of sciences that study living beings as signs), and the other is bioethics. Semioethics can offer a unified and critical point of view on ethical problems connected with progress in the biological and medical sciences – for example, in such areas as genetic engineering, microbiology, neurobiology, and pharmaceutical research. With bioethics, ethical problems become the object of study of a specific discipline. But prior to the introduction of this new discipline, ethical problems were already part of two totalities which together contribute to their characterization: the semio(bio)sphere and the global socioeconomic communication-production system. General semiotics developed in terms of global semiotics and semioethics must keep account of this dual context when addressing problems at the center of its attention. In this sense, it can also contribute to the philosophical vocation of semioethics and to the possibility of critical reformulation,
therefore to an approach to the life of signs and method of research that is both foundational and critical.

The founder of biosemiotics, the Estonian born, German biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944) made an extraordinary contribution to research on signs and meaning, communication and understanding in the human world. He conducted his research in biology in dialogue with the sign sciences and evidenced the species-specific character of human modelling – which precedes and is the condition for human communication through verbal and nonverbal signs. According to Sebeok, Uexküll’s work has carried out a crucial role in renewing the sign science itself, or “doctrine of signs” (Sebeok 1976, 1979), especially when it elects such issues as its object of research. “Biosemiotics,” a relatively new branch of semiotics (which includes zoosemiotics and anthroposemiotics) and is also a foundational dimension of general semiotics (Favreau 2010; Petrilli 1998a: 3-14, 29-37).

According to Uexküll, every organism enacts different inward and outward modelling processes for the construction of its Umwelt, its species-specific world. Umwelt, a characteristic endowment of each living organism of any species, concerns the species in general, whether human or nonhuman. But while in nonhuman living beings Umwelt is stable, in human beings it allows for change and involves each individual in its singularity. In other words, a species-specific feature of the human Umwelt and modelling is the capacity for creativity and innovation (Kull 2001, 2010a, b).

This led Uexküll, the biologist specialized in zoology, physiology, ethology, to move beyond the field of biology and the life sciences strictly speaking to focus on problems of an ethical-political order in the human world. As he stated explicity – e.g. toward the conclusion in Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren and Menschen (1934), the human Umwelt is a prerogative that endows humans with an advantage by comparison with other living beings. However, it also exposes humanity, puts it at risk and in danger. In fact, not only is our species-specific Umwelt the condition for collaboration in its different forms, but also for competition and conflict, to the point even of programming war. As early as 1920, the biologist Uexküll published a book entitled Staatsbiologie. Anatomie-Physiologie-Pathologie des Staates.

In the light of a semiotic theory of modelling, semiotics referred to human behaviour and environments (human Umwelten) clearly cannot avoid taking a turn in the direction of ethics understood in a broad sense. “Ethics understood in a broad sense” means to include
all that which concerns human social behaviour according to models, projects and programs, that is, according to social planning, in this sense according to ideologies (Rossi-Landi 1972, 5th edition 2011: 203–204), with reference to ethics, religion, politics, etc. And as claimed above, another interpretant for the word “ethics,” or better “semioethics” is “responsibility”. The open character of human modelling favours deferral from one individual to another and inevitably involves the question of choice, taking a standpoint, and of taking responsibility for that standpoint.

4. Nihil humani mihi alienum

The “semioethical turn” proceeds from ongoing confrontation with different trends in semiotic inquiry, in dialogue with different figures as they have emerged on the semiotic scene. This orientation has a vocation for critique not only in relation to semiotics and its history, but toward itself as well. A whole philosophical tradition can be evoked here, beginning from Kant (1724–1804), where the expression “critique” resounds in a special sense, the “ethical” in the sense of the obligation to “answer to/for self,” even before, or at least simultaneously to the request for reasons and justifications from others. Other key authors in this particular tradition of philosophical thought on the concept of “critique” include: Karl Marx with his “critique of political economy,” an expression in the subtitle of most of his basic texts; Mikhail Bakhtin (1923) who recovers neokantism – critically – as developed by the Marburg School (headed by Hermann Cohen, and counting such prominent representatives as Ernst Cassirer, Paul Natorp); Victoria Welby and her Significs; Charles S. Peirce with his return to Kantism and critique of Cartesian dogmatism (see “On a New List of Categories,” 1867, CP 1.545-567).

The approach we are outlining relates signs and values, semiotics and axiology, signification and significance, meaning and sense, semantics and pragmatics. It calls for a detailed study of the concepts of model and structure, and therefore of the relation between modelling systems theory and different positions that have gone under the name of “structuralism”. This inevitably involves confrontation between so-called “global semiotics” as introduced by Sebeok and semiotics as practiced under the denomination of “semiology” at the beginning of the twentieth century. Semiology interrupted the connection not only with semiotics as conceived by John Locke, but also with much earlier roots, the origins as
traced by Sebeok in ancient medical semeiotics (symptomatology) with the work of Hippocrates and Galen.

After various phases in the development of semiotics, commonly tagged “code semiotics” (or “decodification semiotics”) and “interpretation semiotics” (see Bonfantini 1981, 2004), the boundaries of this science are now expanding to include studies that focus more closely upon the relation between signs and values. In truth, this relation is inscribed in the make-up of semiotics and in its very history. To concentrate on the relations of signs and values is important for a better understanding of expression, interpretation and communication.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) founded his sign theory on the theory of exchange value adapted from marginalist economics. Instead, Peirce breaks with the equilibrium of equal exchange logic thanks to a sign model based on the concept of infinite semiosis (or, if we prefer, infinite deferral from one sign to the next). This approach is oriented by the logic of otherness. It allows for opening to the other and for the concept of signifying surplus. Morris explicitly emphasized the need to address the relation between signs and values and oriented a large part of his research in this direction. However, official semiotics has largely emerged as a theoretistic or gnoseological science, as a descriptive science with claims to neutrality. With semioethics we propose to recover and develop that special slant in semiotics which is open to questions of an axiological order and is more focused on a global understanding of humanity and its signs.

Semioethics focuses on the relation between signs and sense and, therefore, on the question of significance as value. However, we have seen that Welby in the nineteenth century had already introduced the term “significs” for the same purpose, marking her distance from what was commonly understood at the time by both “semantics” and “semiotics”. In addition to the renowned classics just mentioned – Saussure, Peirce and Morris –, Welby too deserves a place in the reconstruction of the history of semiotics for her invaluable contribution to furthering our understanding of signs and meaning not only from a historico-chronological perspective, but also in theoretical terms. And, in fact, she is now emerging as the mother-founder of modern semiotics alongside Peirce, recognized as the father-founder (Petrilli and Ponzo 2005: 35-79, 80-137).

Thinkers such as those mentioned can be considered as the representatives of a theoretical tendency which focuses on the relationship between social signs, values, and human behaviour in general, by contrast with philosophical analyses conducted exclusively in abstract epistemological terms divorced from social practice.
If, in agreement with Peirce we can say that the human being is a sign, a direct consequence is that with respect to signs, *humani nihil a me alienum puto (nothing human is alien to me)*. An important implication of this statement is that signs in the human world should not be studied separately from valuative orientations, nor should the focus be exclusively on truth value and its conditions. Instead, a general sign theory that is truly general should be capable of accounting for all aspects of human life and for all values, not just truth value. Signs are the material out of which the self is modeled and developed, just as they are the material of values. While signs can exist without values, values cannot exist without signs (Petrilli 2010a: 137-158). From the point of view of human social life, to evidence the sign nature of the human person has a counterpart (particularly on a practical level) in asserting the human, the properly human nature of signs.

To work in this direction leads to the possibility of identifying a new form of humanism which critiques the reification and hypostatization of signs and values and, instead, investigates the processes that produce them. The relation between signifying processes and values subtends the human capacity for establishing relations with the world, with the self and with others, and as such requires the critical work of demystification. In this framework, signs and values emerge as the live expression of historically specified human operations. With respect to social signs, this means to recover their sense and value for mankind, rather than accept them as naturally given which ultimately means to recover the project originally conceived by Husserl with his transcendental constitutive phenomenology.

However, all this is possible on a condition: that any claim to pure descriptiveness, to neutrality be left aside. Practiced in these terms, the general science of signs can contribute significantly to philosophical investigation for a better understanding of our relations to the world, to others, to the self. This means to recover our search as proposed by Husserl and his phenomenology for the sense of knowledge, experience, and practical action, and of the sciences that study them. It is well worth noting that Husserl authored an important essay entitled “Semiotik” and dealt extensively with signs and their typology in his *Logische Untersuchungen* (Husserl 1900–1901). Such a philosophical framework for the science of signs favours a more adequate understanding of the problem of communication, meaning, value and interpretation. And by working in this direction, the general science of signs or semiotics may operate more fully as a human science, where the “properly human”
is a pivotal value (Petrilli 2010a: 205-209).

Semioethics arises as a response and continuation of the critical approach to sign studies outlined in this text. It is intended to describe an approach to the study of signs that contrasts with approaches that tend toward abstract theoretism characteristic of so-called “official semiotics.” It is inevitably associated with the proposal of a new form of humanism identifiable as the “humanism of otherness” inscribed in the analysis, understanding and production of values relatedly to signs in signifying processes. As much as, strictly speaking, the term “semiotics” (understood as the global science of signs, hence as covering the domains of both signification and significance in Morris’s sense relative to semiosis in the human world) should suffice, we believe that “semioethics” (which, as stated, indicates an approach to sign studies that is not purely descriptive, that does not make claims to neutrality but rather extends beyond abstract logico-epistemological boundaries to concentrate on problems of an axiological order, pertaining to values, therefore to ethics, aesthetics and ideology theory) signals more decisively the direction semiotics is called upon to follow today.

5. Global communication as global listening

Global communication in today’s world is dominated by the ideology of production and efficiency. The “interesting”, “desire” are now determined in the capacity for homologation with respect to such values. In dominant ideology which in today’s world converges with market logic, which is capitalist, or, if we prefer, post-capitalist exchange logic, the “interesting” is crudely substituted ever more by egotistical and vulgar “self-interest”. This is in complete contrast with the “carnival” worldview, as thematized by the Mikhail Bakhtin.

But the world of global or better globalized communication celebrates individualism to an exasperated degree and with it the community understood as the “closed community”, it too founded on individualism. Without the community understood as the “open community”, the individual tends ever more to be alone, isolated and afraid. Without the open community, the individual is only an individual. Moreover, individualism is inevitably accompanied by the logic of competition, in the sense of shrewd and cunning competition. Infact, such values as productivity, efficiency, individualism, competitiveness and velocity
represent dominant values in contemporary society over the “properly human”, and consequently are inevitably accompanied by fear, that is, fear of the other.

However, despite such an orientation, that we are claiming is dominant in the globalized world today, the structural presence of the grotesque body, the condition of intercorporeity and involvement of self’s body with the body of others, cannot be ignored. In this sense, the human being’s vocation for the “carnivalesque”, for excess with respect to the dominant order still resists, as testified, for example, by literary writing. In this sense literary writing, indeed artistic discourse in general, is and always will be carnivalized (Petrill and Ponzio 2003b, 2006).

Listening is decisive for global semiotics, for the capacity to tune into and synchronise with the semiosic universe. The capacity for listening is connected to music. Listening is necessary for a critical discussion of separatism and different trends that tend to exchange the part for the whole, whether by mistake or in bad faith, as in the case of exasperated individualism in social and cultural life, and the current “crisis of overspecialization” in scientific research. The capacity for listening is a condition for connecting semiotics to its early vocation as medical semiotics and the interpretation of symptoms, as observed by Sebeok (1986; see also Petrilli and Ponzio 2001, 2002a, b).

If semiotics is concerned with life over the whole planet given that life and semiosis converge, and if one of the original motivations for studying signs, symptoms precisely, is “health”, the health of semiosis, the health of life, then a task that semiotics should not neglect in the era of globalization is to interpret the symptoms of social and linguistic alienation and emphasize the need to care for life in its globality. Social symptoms of malaise are on the rise globally and tell us as much.

Listening evokes auscultation, a medical attitude. In Ancient Greece music was thought to have a therapeutic character, as is still thought to today. And as hinted above, semiotics originates from semeiotics (or symptomatology), classified by Galen as one of the principal branches of medicine, whose task we know is to interpret the symptoms of illness.

But medicine today is functional to “bio-power”, to promoting techniques of subordination of the body to the knowledge-power of biopolitics (denounced by Michel Foucault). Medicine contributes to the controlled insertion of bodies into the production system. With their specialisms and treatment of the body as a self-sufficient entity, the
medical sciences today strengthen the dominant conception of the individual as a separate sphere, efficient and self-contained, indifferent to the other.

In such a context, listening becomes “direct, univocal listening”, listening as it is imposed by the Law, by the “order of discourse” (Foucault 1971), “applied listening”, “wanting to hear”, imposition to speak and, therefore, to say univocally (Barthes and Havas 1977). Listening is one thing, to want to hear is another. Listening is responsive understanding, answering comprehension: “listening speaks”, as Roland Barthes says, similarly to Bakhtin; listening focuses on signs in their constitutive dialogism. On the contrary, to hear, that is, wanting to hear, or “applied listening”, excludes the capacity for responsiveness, for responsive and dialogical listening. As such it belongs to a “closed discourse universe” (Marcuse) which fixes questioning and social roles and separates listening from responsive understanding. “Applied” listening freezes signifiers and interpretants in a fixed and rigid network of speech roles: it maintains the “ancient places of the believer, the disciple, the patient” (see Barthes and Havas 1977: 989-990). Instead, listening understood in terms of dialogism and responsive understanding (or answering comprehension) produces new signifiers and interpretants without ever fixing sense.

Rossi-Landi’s philosophical methodics (1985) is a methodics of listening (Petrilli and Ponzio 2016: 11-37). Listening is an interpretant of responsive understanding, a disposition for hospitality, for welcoming the signs of the other, the signs of the other person, for welcoming signs that are other into the house of semiotics: signs that are other to such a high degree that generally we can only denominate them in the negative, that is, as “nonverbal signs”. Listening is the condition for a general theory of signs.

Semiotics is a critical science, but not only in Kant’s sense, that is, in the sense that it investigates its own conditions of possibility. Semiotics is a critical science in the sense that it interrogates the human world today on the assumption that it is not the only possible world, not the only world possible, it is not the definitive and finalized world, as established by some self-interested, individualistic, profit-oriented ideology. Critical semiotics looks at the world as a possible world, which means to say a world that is subject to confutation, therefore as one among many possible worlds.

As global semiotics, as metasemiotics, as critical semiotics, as semiotics subject to responsibility in a dual sense, that is, of “responding to” (rather than of indifference) and of
“taking the blame for” (rather than of fleeing or cleansing, as in ethnic cleansing for example), semiotics must concern itself with life over the planet – not only in a cognitive sense, but also in the pragmatic and in the ethical. In other words, semiotics must care for life. From this point of view, semiotics must recover its relation with medical semiotics. Nor is this just a question of history, of remembering the origins. Far more radically, we are signaling a question of the ideologic-programmatic order.

Again, semiotics is listening, listening in the medical sense, and not just in the sense of general sign theory subtending semiotics; semiotics is listening in the sense of medical semiotics or symptomatology. Semiotics must listen to the symptoms of today’s globalized world and identify signs of unease and illness, as claimed earlier, in social relations, in international relations, in the life of single individuals, in the environment, in life generally over the planet. According to the orientation in semiotics baptized as “semioethics”, we need to diagnose, prognose and indicate possible therapies for the future of globalization, for the health of semiosis globally, therefore of life, by contrast to a globalized world tending toward its very own destruction.

Semiotics shows how the other is inevitable and cannot be escaped. We can even go so far as to state that the vocation of the sign – the stuff of life and of the business of living, of communication (whether verbal or nonverbal), of human relationships – is the other. The other is the indistinct background from whence we, each one of us, are born into this world; the other testifies to my entry and to my exit from this world; the other is no less than the condition of possibility for life and communication to flourish. Extending the gaze beyond subsystems and microsystems, global semiotics evidences the condition of total interrelatedness and interdependency not only among the subsystems forming the anthroposphere and their porous boundaries, but between the latter and all other subsystems forming the great biosphere, ultimately between nature and culture as we know them, certainly as far as Gaia, and possibly beyond.

The quality of life and destiny of each and every one of us is determined by the relation with the other, irrevocably, and by our conscious awareness of this state of affairs. For as long as we are alive and connected to the sign network which accommodates us all, the other cannot be escaped and must be dealt with, in one way or another. The upshot is that in the bigger picture we do not choose the other, but if anything the other chooses us.
The world is nobody’s if it is not everybody’s. Indifference toward the other is not a reasonable option. In nature the tremors of the earth tell us as much, in culture the tremors of humanity, the symptoms of social disease also do, whether a question of wars, terrorism or alienation in its various forms, social and linguistic. And such a state of affairs implies the responsibility of each and everyone of us toward every other, whether a question of conquering lands and preexisting human and nonhuman societies, of creating new socio-political systems, of building nations and international relations, or simply caring for the most vulnerable, for the world’s children, our own.

The contemporary world, the world-as-it-is, is overwhelmed by dominant ideology whose reach today is unbounded, global, thanks to a communication network that is just as unbounded, just as global, thereby acting as the perfect support for the overriding system. Semioethics underlines the need for conscious awareness of the role of values in our sign systems, our life systems. In the human world, signs and values come together, in the same packet: where there are values there a signs, the material of values are signs, values are construed and communicated through signs, whether verbal or nonverbal, and signs, properly human signs are perfused with values. This is another axiom we cannot escape. Our language, our behaviour, whether verbal or nonverbal, is intonated, accentuated, orientated in one direction or another, and is so before and beyond what are easily recognizable as the great ideological systems.

With reference to the citizens of the world, all this should not translate into a justification for passivity, a sense of fatality, of indifference toward the other simply because we enter an already given world, an already intonated world, a set social program. We have claimed that the vocation of the sign is otherness. The allusion here includes to the other that each one of us is, to the singularity, uniqueness of each one of us, therefore to absolute otherness and to the capacity it represents for creativity, critique and excess with respect to any one given system, for overflow, and for escape with respect to the order of discourse.

Involvement, participation in the life of the other, whether the other from us, or the other of us, is inevitable. How we process such inevitability will depend upon the values that drive our actions beyond immediate circumstance. Directly proportional to the global spread today is the need for critique, listening and love, not fear but love for one’s neighbour, as close or as distant as that neighbour may be. And how we process that neighbour is a choice for each one of us to make, a responsibility for each one of us to take.