

Lesson 1

Modelling New Worlds

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1. Semioethics *alias* the art of listening; 2. Dialogism, modelling, interpretation; 3. Writing as the play of musement

The expression “semioethics” can also be explicated with such expressions as “the art of listening”, “the art of caring”, “semiotics of otherness”. To care for the human is to care for all of life over the planet given the condition of interdependency in a system which flourishes interdependently, in turn, with the larger system called Gaia, and possibly beyond. Given the inexorable condition of *intercorporeality* interconnecting all life-forms on earth, what we might call “dialogic intercorporeality”, the other, in whatever form, is always upon us, and demands to be taken into account. The health of life over the planet requires nothing less. This condition of intercorporeality, of *biological dialogism* – where the reach, the implications of what to understand by “dialogism” extend well beyond human communication –, tells us that the other cannot be avoided, indeed warns us that we all either flourish together or perish together.

To *care for* the other, indeed to *care about* the other is an imperative for survival over the planet and calls for a listening attitude. Listening to the other is a necessary condition for healthy communication, which must be participative and dialogic communication. This is a question of listening to the signs of the other, whether verbal or nonverbal, human or nonhuman, with reference to the strictly human world a question of listening to the verbal and nonverbal languages of the other. From this perspective, listening is not simply a concession a subject decides to make to another. Far more essentially listening is a structural component of the word and of life generally.

Our own special interest is in the life of signs and language in the human world, in verbal and nonverbal languages, where the vocation of the sign for otherness and listening is particularly manifest. The issue at stake is of the cognitive, pragmatic and ethical orders together, in a relation where these spheres of sign activity are clearly interconnected and as

important as each other, and not discriminated according to some preferential ladder: science, praxis and values come together in whatever sphere of human semiosis. They are inexorably implicated with each other and are so in the materiality of the sign. Any form of separatism, of division that consists in excluding the other, in expunging the other is no less than delusional short-sightedness to the detriment of the health of life generally over the planet. As the open book of nature clearly shows us, health is the health of a totality; and as culture teaches us, the health of this totality depends entirely upon the other and listening to that other. As such this totality is what we may call a “detotalized totality” and the overarching characteristic of this totality is dialogic union in diversity.

As inhabitants of the same “biosphere”, all life forms flourish in the same “semiosphere”. Though introduced by Jurij M. Lotman (1990), the expression “semiosphere” is here understood following Thomas A. Sebeok (2001), that is, as extending beyond human culture to include communication and semiosis throughout the whole biosphere. The sign network that is life is a communication network, a global communication network far before and far beyond the rise of global communication as we know it today, that is, as the mere expression of globalized communication in a technologically advanced world. From a semiotic or better biosemiotic perspective, semiosis, dialogism and communication are characteristic properties of living beings, and conditional for life.

We know that “semiotics” is the name of the “general science of signs”, “general theory of signs”, or “doctrine of signs”¹. With Sebeok semiotics goes a step further to become “global semiotics”, an expression which indicates the extraordinary range of the “semiotic field”.² Here the term “global” indicates an orientation, a project, a trend. Semiotics practiced as global semiotics fosters an interdisciplinary approach to the life of signs that includes all the special fields of semiosis from medicine, physics, chemistry, biology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics, mathematics, logic, grammar, stylistics, poetics, musicology, architecture, aesthetics, literature, to philosophy, linguistics, and so forth. Consequently, global semiotics is “unbounded semiotics” (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005).

Global semiotics is in a position to evidence the extension and consistency of the sign network which includes the semiosphere as construed by human beings, that is, the signs, symbols, artifacts of human culture and society. But most importantly global semiotics evidences the fact that the human cultural semiosphere is part of a *far broader semiosphere*,

¹ The “doctrine of signs” is an expression recovered by Sebeok from John Locke to indicate an approach still in formation in terms of methodology, conceptual instruments and objects (see Sebeok 1976, 1986a; also Cobley et al. 2011; Deely 1976).

² “The semiotic field” (“Il campo semiotico”) is the expression that Umberto Eco chose for the book series he directed for a lifetime with Bompiani publishers in Milan.

the *semiobiosphere*, with which it is interdependent, a sign network human beings have never left and as *living beings* never will.

To the axiom that the biosphere and the semiosphere coincide, we will add a gloss concerning the speculation that the semiosphere, the “sign network”, might transcend the “life network”. Looking at life retrospectively while raising the gaze toward the future, the hypothesis is that signs might overflow with respect to life itself, before and beyond life, in fact supercede it.

However that may be, there is no doubt that where there is life there are signs and where there are signs there is life. The life sciences and the sign sciences just like their respective objects of study, life and signs, proceed together, with the difference, as regards the past, that consciousness of the association is now much greater. A significant indication in this sense is the birth in the second half of the twentieth century, at the interface between the life sciences and the sign sciences, of a science that studies semiosis in the biosphere, “biosemiotics”, a new branch of general semiotics and at once foundational. As posited by Sebeok, one of the most representative pioneers in the field, the criterial feature of life is the sign, semiosis.

By virtue of this “global” or “holistic” approach to semiotics, research into the “life of signs” is immediately associated with concern for the “signs of life”. Signs, communication, interpretation are prerogatives characteristic of living beings. Semiosis originates with the first stirrings of life. In fact, the sign science today is all but limited to the “science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale” (Saussure) with its anthropocentric, glottocentric, phonocentric, alphabetocentric and, ultimately, ethnocentric bias. Therefore, as sectorial and specific a given interest in semiotic studies may be (Umberto Eco 1984 distinguishes between “general semiotics” and “special semiotics”), that special interest has its place in the larger context of semiotics understood precisely as global semiotics.

Global semiotics includes any sign relation, any interpretant or interpreter whatsoever, so that the model of sign used by semiotics, however restrictively, however specialistically, must necessarily be construed in such a way as to be applicable to all sign processes (or semioses), as is in the nature of a model with claims to generality, whatever the special use in any given instance. Semiotics must base itself on a *general theory of signs*. And this general theory with its related notion of the sign in general must avoid the limit often presented by semiotics, specially when it takes the form of *sémiologie* of Saussurean derivation: that is, a general theory of sign must avoid *glottocentrism*. Glottocentrism means to elect the verbal sign as a general sign model, therefore, linguistics as the model science of semiotics. From this point of view, Roland Barthes (1968) was right when he said that *sémiologie* is affected

by glottocentrism and consequently is englobed by linguistics, in spite of Saussure's intention to the contrary.

It ensues that a general sign model as proposed by a general sign theory cannot be construed on the sole basis of the verbal sign. This glottocentric approach to semiotics is based on the fallacy that any type of sign can only be dealt with by speaking about it, through verbal signs, in other words, that all signs can only be fully understood if they are transposable, translatable into verbal signs. On the contrary, a sign model intending to be general must represent the sign under the aspect that is most refractory to verbal translation, most resistant, most irreducible, in this sense most other with respect to the verbal signs, for example, as in the case of musical signs. Music calls for a listening capacity (Petrilli 2007; Petrilli and Ponzio 2016; Ponzio 2009a, 2018; Ponzio and Lomuto 1997).

In relation to the human world semiotics must reflect upon the conditions of possibility of that which Edmund Husserl describes as the already given world, the already constituted world. Critical analysis of the world, with a focus on *alternative planning*, on the construction of *new possible worlds*, requires this type of reflection. Our claim is that semiotics today is in a position to carry out the general task of "constitutive phenomenology". As Husserl clearly demonstrates in *Erfahrung und Urteil [Experience and judgement]*, 1948, the aim of *constitutive phenomenology* is to describe the entire complex of operations that lead to the constitution of a *possible world* (see Petrilli 2010: 159-192).

To investigate how the world is constituted means to deal with the essential form of the world in general and not the effectively existent world, the world-as-it-is. This means to investigate the modelling structures and processes of the human world not simply in terms of factuality, reality and history but also of potential and possibility. Such an investigation is specific in the sense that it deals with a species-specific modality of constructing the world (Petrilli and Ponzio 2001, 2002a, 2007).

By comparison to semiosis generally throughout the biosphere, anthroposemiosis has a special characteristic: it doubles into two levels at least, that of "semiosis" and of "metasemiosis" (see Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: II.3.2). In other words, human beings do not only behave, think and communicate directly like all other life-forms, but they are endowed with a capacity to suspend immediate semioses to reflect and deliberate. In fact, unlike other animals, the human animal is capable of constructing innumerable possible new worlds. Sebeok baptises the human *modelling device* of the world as "language". This capacity is specific to the human species. Thanks to language, humans, unlike all other species, are in a

position to construct innumerable real or imaginary, concrete or fantastic worlds, and not just a single world always the same (Sebeok 1986a, 1991a, 2001a).

In fact, as a science semiotics is founded on a special capacity, that is, on semiotics understood as *metasemiosis*, a modality of using signs that is specific to the human being, the “semiotic animal” (Deely 2005, 2010; Deely, Petrilli, Ponzio 2005; Mladenov and Iankova 2016). Metasemiosis distinguishes the human being from all other life-forms capable only of *semiosis*. Semiotics as a science is aware of metasemiosis as its very own condition of possibility. Unlike semiotics understood as metasemiosis specific to human beings, semiotics as a science presents itself as meta-semiotics. If the human being is a “metasemiosical animal”, then the semiotician who practices the semiotic science, is a “metasemiotical animal”.

Metasemiosis understood as the capacity to reflect upon signs is connected with responsibility: the human being, the only semiotic animal existing, is the only animal capable of accounting for signs and for sign behaviour, of accounting for self. Therefore, the human being is subject *to* responsibility and subject *of* responsibility. And to the extent that he practices metasemiotics, the semiotician is doubly responsible: for self and for others, and as a global semiotician for life over the entire globe.

2. Dialogism, modelling, interpretation

The interpretant of a sign is another sign which the first creates in the interpreter, being “an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign”, as the American scientist, father of modern semiotics and ideator of “pragmatism”, Charles S. Peirce says (*CP* 2.228). Therefore, the interpretant sign cannot be identical to the interpreted sign; it cannot be a totalizing repetition, precisely because it is *mediated*, interpretive and therefore always new. With respect to the first sign, the interpretant is a *response*. As such, it inaugurates a new sign process, a new semiosis. In this sense, it is a more developed sign. As a sign the interpretant determines another sign which acts, in turn, as an interpretant: therefore, the interpretant opens to new semioses, it develops the sign process, it is a new sign occurrence. The meaning of a sign is a response, an interpretant that calls for another response, another interpretant. This implies *the dialogic nature of sign and semiosis* (Ponzio 2006a). A sign has its meaning in another sign which responds to it and which in turn is a sign if there is another sign to respond to it and interpret it, and so forth *ad infinitum*. In our terminology, the “First Sign” in the triadic relation of semiosis, the object that receives meaning mediated by the sign, is the

interpreted, and what confers meaning is the interpretant which may be of two main types (Petrilli and Ponzio 2002a).

The interpretant that allows for mere recognition of the sign is an *identifying interpretant*. As such, it is connected with the signal, code and sign system. Whereas the specific interpretant of a sign, that which interprets its actual sense, is indicated with the expression *answering comprehension interpretant* or *responsive understanding interpretant*. This second type of interpretant does not limit itself to identifying the interpreted, but rather expresses its properly pragmatic meaning, installing with it a relation of involvement and participation: the interpretant sign responds to the interpreted sign and takes a stand toward it.

“Dialogism”, or “dialogicality”, characterizes the life of signs and is strictly related to a biosemiotic conception of semiosis. In fact, the dialogic relation is not only present in the human world, but in the biological world at large. The “Copernican revolution” operated by the Russian scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin, on a philosophical level, and by Fedor Dostoevsky, on an artistic level, concerns the human being involved with all one’s life, needs, thoughts, and behavior in the life of others, human and nonhuman (Bakhtin 1981). This approach evidences the body *in its vital and indissoluble relation to the body of others, to the world*. The shift in focus from identity (whether individual, as in the case of self-consciousness, or collective, that is, a community, historical language, or cultural system at large, etc.) to otherness is a sort of Copernican revolution in itself. With such a shift, the Bakhtinian critique of dialogic reason not only interrogates the general orientation of Western philosophy, but also the dominant cultural tendencies that engender it. On the basis of his own dialogic and biosemiotic conception of the sign, Bakhtin in fact criticizes both subjective individualism and objective abstraction.

But let us return to the problematic of language. Another characteristic specific to the human species is language understood as “verbal language” (speech). However, in his description of language, speech and communicative functions in the human world, Sebeok maintains that verbal language, speech, is based on the primary modelling system he also calls “language”, precisely: *language as modelling is one thing, language as communication is another*. On Sebeok’s account, at a certain point in the evolution of the human species, verbal “language” arises with a “communicative function” as part of an adaptation process regulated by “language” understood as “modelling”. This position is behind his critical stand against theories and training practices, popular at the time in the USA, exploring and promoting the idea that animals can “speak”.

According to Sebeok's modelling theory, in the course of the evolutionary development of human beings, the primary modelling system called "language", specific to *Homo*, the hominid, arose as an adaptive mechanism much earlier than "verbal language", "speech". It ensues that language as we are describing it was not originally a communicative mechanism, but rather a modelling device. On Noam Chomsky's account as well, language is not essentially communicative. But when Chomsky says "language" he is referring to "verbal language", "speech", and not to language as modelling as described by Sebeok. The first hominid was endowed with language understood as a modelling device. And however rudimentary at the time, this modelling device is at the basis of the human species' development through to *Homo sapiens*.

Whether "language as modelling" or "language as communication", the distinctive feature of language is "syntactics". The syntactical capacity is what distinguishes the human animal, the semiotic animal, from other animals, nonhuman animals that too are endowed with a capacity for consciousness, problem solving, resourcefulness, and initiative, but at far lower degrees. Thanks to the primary modelling device, in addition to mere "consciousness" the human animal, the "semiotic animal" has a capacity for inventiveness, innovation, creativity, originality, for the "play of musement", to evoke Peirce once again (see also Sebeok 1981a, who adopts the expression as the title of a book). We have claimed that the human animal is endowed with a "semiotic" capacity for semiosis, which is precisely a "metasemiotic" capacity, the capacity to use signs to reflect upon signs, for consciousness and self-awareness, and for a conscience, which is accompanied by the consequent condition and capacity for responsibility, inexorable, mandatory responsibility. Again, as stated by Bakhtin:

The witness and the judge. When consciousness appeared in the world (in existence) and, perhaps, when biological life appeared (perhaps not only animals, but trees and grass also witness and judge), the world (existence) changed radically. A stone is still stony and the sun is still sunny, but the event or existence as a whole (unfinalized) becomes completely different because a new and major character in this event appears for the first time on the scene of earthly existence – the witness and the judge. And the sun, while remaining physically the same, has changed because it has begun to be cognized by the witness and by the judge. It has stopped simply being and has started being in itself and for itself [...] as well as for the other, because it has been reflected in the consciousness of the other (witness and judge): this has caused it to change radically, to be enriched and transformed. ("Notes Made in 1970-1971", in Bakhtin 1986: 137)

3. Writing as the play of musement

As predisposed by our primary modelling device, or language, humankind has continuously invented new languages, in the sense of “languages for communication”, what considering the syntactical component we may also call new forms of “writing”. Thanks to new technologies, on the one hand, and encounter and exchange among different cultures, on the other (the global situation of interculturalism), writing today, in its various forms, is proliferating more than ever before. We could even maintain that this is the civilization of writing, where “writing” as used here should not be confused with the “written sign”, transcription. Thanks to progress in technology and artificial intelligence, different forms of “writing” as forms of expression and communication – which are based on “language or writing as modelling” – are proliferating (literary writing, design, photography, cinema, theatre, television, new media in its different forms). These are all expressions of the human capacity for writing and as such all enhance in turn the human capacity for the “play of musement”.

In the communication world today, the global communication world, it is important to thematise and value the different forms of writing and not juxtapose “writing” to the “image”, as though the latter in its various manifestations were not an expression of writing. Instead, what does need to be recognised is the objective contradiction between the expansion of writing, the increase in languages, of the free play of musement, on the one hand, and increasing control over the communication network by the economic-political order, where power is concentrated ever more in the hands of the few, on the other.

However, the proliferation of different forms of “writing”, especially when a question of art forms, represents the possibility of escape from social programming and dominant ideology, from control by those who program the so-called “communication-production”³ world in the present day and age. In his novel *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury projects writing as the last stronghold for critique, revolt, and radical social change in the face of power and control as legitimated and exerted by the status quo. In the words of Beatty, a character in this novel, addressed to Montag, the protagonist:

It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. Today thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time, you are allowed to read comics, the good old confessions, or trade journals. [...] We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of

³ In the capitalist system at its current phase of development, communication is production. Today's capitalistic system is a global communication-production system (see Ponzio 1999 and 2009: II, 1, 63-65; Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 491-494, 520-527).

every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against (Beatty in dialogue with Montag, in Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*).

Homologation of the communicative universe reduces “listening” to “wanting to hear” (which is connected to *silence*). This means to say that homologation reduces the spaces of *taciturnity* where the *freedom of listening* is as necessary as the freedom of speech. The difference between *listening* and *wanting to hear* is that between opening to the other or closing to the other. Wanting to hear implies silence (or muteness); instead, listening implies *taciturnity* which is *responsive understanding*, therefore irony, indirect discourse, and so forth. The difference is a difference of attitude toward the other with implications of the ideological and political orders.

Levelling processes in the communicative universe invest all sign systems indiscriminately, verbal and nonverbal, reduced to the status of indexicality or symbolicity, as understood by Peirce. Whether a question of the conventional characteristics of the signal or of the natural characteristics of sound, from the necessity of the natural to the repetition of the conventional, or, as Peirce says, from *indexicality* to *symbolicity*, the homologated sign is the sign which loses its ambivalence, plasticity, originality, autonomy, absolute otherness, that is, all those special qualities which Peirce attributes to *iconicity*. The homologated sign is no longer able to question the existant, the world as-it-is, identity, but remains trapped within the boundaries of a monologic and closed universe of discourse, in the relation of equal exchange between signifier and signified, between the interpreted sign and the interpretant sign.

Monologism translates into monolingualism, whether externally to the same language or internally, making for the loss of expressiveness and of the capacity for critique to the benefit of efficient, functional and obedient communication. Relegated to the spaces of silence, separated from *taciturnity* and liberated listening, the sign is reduced to the mechanical and to the natural, to conventionality of the signal and naturality of sound, of that which makes no claims to sense and significance. Emptied of its capacity for the properly human, for opening to infinity, the communication universe, languages are reduced to expressing the same needs, the same desires, the same dreams.

In his *Lezioni Americane (Six Memos for the Next Millenium)*, Italo Calvino describes the gaze of literature as the “possibility of health” against the “pestilence” that has struck humanity in its most distinctive faculty, a “plague in language” and in life generally: “I don’t wish to dwell upon the possible sources of this epidemic, whether they are to be sought in politics, ideology, beaurocratic uniformity, the monotony of mass-media, or the way the schools dispense the culture of the mediocre. What interests me are the possibilities of health.

Literature, and perhaps literature alone, can create the antibodies to fight this plague in language” (Calvino 1988, Eng. trans.: 56).

Literary writing is particularly interesting from this perspective thanks to its extraordinary capacity to stage values that animate life to the best in terms of the properly human. Through inventiveness, parody, irony, experimentation in the construction of the fantastic, literary writing opens to otherness, to a vision that is other with respect to the dominant vision of reality in the world, and of the world, the “world-as-it-is”. Literary writing addresses the question of portraying the discourse of the other, and consequently of listening to the other, and of dialogue. Artistic value cannot be reached by a vision of the world centred on the self, the monological and totalizing self. Instead, artistic value requires the other, perspectives and values relating to the other, detotalized with respect to the self and its identity logic. These values in fact are characterized by high degrees of opening to the other, by a propensity for giving time to the other, by responsiveness/answerability toward the other, for listening to the other.

Other places that evidence opening toward otherness include, for example, the practice of translation across different languages, or the phenomenon of migration of peoples across the borders of different lands and nation states. Both translation and migration involve encounter not only among different languages but also among different cultures, and can be oriented as listening or as wanting to hear, where “listening” is connected with hospitality and “wanting to hear” with denial of the other on the basis of the logic of closed identity. This generally involves recourse to categories intended to defend the rights of identity, that is, one’s own rights, to the disadvantage of the rights and viewpoints of the other.

Applied to translation, listening evidences the ethical dimension of the shift across languages in terms of the translator’s responsibility as responsibility for the other. The translator too must account to the other and for the other and in fact carries out an important role in the encounter among languages, signs and cultures. From the perspective of a semioethics of translation, the translator is an interlocutor who does not expel the other, but who instead is called to respond to the other, to the other’s singularity, to cultural difference, to the other’s values and specific idioms. The semioethic translator is a device for listening, for hospitality toward the word of the other, toward the other’s otherness.

A special task for semioethics is to unmask the delusive nature of the claim to the status of indifferent differences and to evidence the biosemiotic condition of intercorporeity, interconnectedness, of dialogic involvement among signs. The critical work of *semioethics* helps to reveal how the condition of indifference among differences is unhealthy, given that

the planet's destiny is ultimately implied in that of each single individual and vice versa. Semioethics must begin from where we are today in socio-historical terms, from contemporaneity, and question the values and social practices that dominate and orient our social systems, today's communication-production relations, their sense for humanity.

Semioethics does not have a program with intended aims and practices, nor a decalogue or formula to apply more or less sincerely, more or less hypocritically. If anything semioethics accounts for the human capacity for critique, proposing to critique *stereotypes* as much as *norms* and *ideology*, the different types of value (see Morris 1964). Its vocation is to evidence sign networks where it seemed there were none. This means to trace connections and implications (which, in truth, cannot be avoided in the great semiotic network), where there seemed to exist only net separations and divisions, boundaries and distances, with relative alibis. Alibis serve to safeguard responsibility in a limited sense, that is, the individual conscience which readily presenting itself as a clean conscience. Semioethics is not fixed upon a pre-established end, an ultimate end or *summum bonum*, but rather is concerned with semiosis in its dialogical and detotalized globality. Indeed, semioethics pushes beyond the totality, outside the closure of totality, with a gaze that transcends the totality, the defined entity, the given being, in the direction of unending semiosis, according to a movement toward the infinite as demanded by otherness.