The epistemological sustainability of semiotics

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- Researchers in any discipline hold a mental landscape of the way in which their discipline maps knowledge and the successive stages along which this knowledge has developed over time. If we look at semiotics as it emerged during the previous century, we can witness a constant attempt toward epistemological imperialism (e.g., Charles Morris and Algirdas J. Greimas), and persistent efforts to reconstruct intellectual roots deep in the past of Western philosophy (from a time when scientific and practical knowledge, medicine and military arts, religion and philosophy were not as distinct from each other as it is the case since the 19th century with the advent of academic specializations, secularism, and experimental methods). In spite of the ambitious agenda of modern semiotics, it is obvious that its impact on the disciplines which now map human knowledge has been so far minimal if noticeable at all. In fact, it is being rejected as irrelevant by most of the contemporary disciplines including those which address specifically the type of problems that are within the concern of semiotics. Semioticians should confront this situation and ask themselves how they can define their epistemology (that is, what is the goals they pursue through their research; what is the value of the concepts and the methods they use to reach these goals; and what kind of results they consider valid). This seminar is an informal attempt at raising questions concerning the epistemological status of semiotics and at reflecting upon ways to make semiotics more relevant in the contemporary state of human knowledge and more compatible with the research which is taking place on its frontiers.
- There is an agreement among most semioticians that the epistemological agenda of semiotics in its modern formulation can be traced back to both C.S. Peirce and F. de Saussure. Both formulated their epistemological visions as *scientific* endeavours and expressed their discouragement at having only adumbrated such projects with tentative insights. The same kind of modest self-assessment is found in those who considered themselves to be their early successors and made their contributions to semiotics in a programmatic manner. But semiotics progressively became a set of discourses devoted, on the one hand, to the interpretation of

cultural objects in terms of *a priori* abstract models and, on the other hand, to the exegesis of the problematic texts left by the founding masters, exegesis which became an end in itself. Soon, philosophers hijacked the semiotic project and developed a "*doctrine* of signs" that claimed universal validity in the form of a utopian grand narrative from the Big Bang to the human mind, relying on intuitive phenomenology and *ad hoc* example or thought-experiments in order to support their arguments. In this process, semiotics became disconnected from the scientific advances of the time, mostly ignoring the operationalization of Darwinian evolutionism, the cumulative knowledge accruing from the brain sciences, and the principles of scientific empirical research. Semiotics took a *dogmatic turn* and fostered a conceptual language which was not transparent for the other disciplines whose agenda should nevertheless have been perceived as relevant to the initial semiotic agenda.

- Once semiotics was defined as a *doctrine* rather than a *science*, it became something to be taught rather than a heuristic strategy. Semiotic teaching and research then consisted of (i) assuming that semiotics was a self-sufficient body of research which could be taught and further developed as a close system and (ii) engaging in the "indoctrinating" of students who were "taught the truth" and shown how it applied to everything. In the manner of religious philosophy such as Buddhism, it even was presented by some in the double form of a major tradition and a minor tradition, the latter expectedly being defined as such by the former. The comparative merits of the various schools became an object of sterile scholastic debates and pointless polemical controversies (e.g., John Deely). A doctrine cannot generate information as it is driven toward self-reproduction by means of a tautological discourse. By contrast a scientific endeavour consists of an epistemological dynamic that constantly questions its own premises, raising new hypotheses, devising ways of probing counter-intuitive ideas, and producing real information which contributes to the construction of new horizons of uncertainty to be further explored. Disciplines are sociological phenomena through which researchers sharing a common agenda and a set of compatible methods organize themselves through institutional structures aimed at facilitating

the tackling of specific problems and the production of a particular kind of knowledge. It is symptomatic that semiotics was never able to take the form of a viable discipline nor to produce the kind of counter-intuitive knowledge that would have to be taken into account by the other disciplines or even would force a restructuring of the contemporary mapping of knowledge.

- Nevertheless, semiotics has played, and continues to play a part in the scientific landscape of today. Semioticians' most credible contribution to human knowledge has been the development, in several of its schools of thought, of qualitative models which provide ways of describing abstractly cultural objects and some natural processes in a consistent manner that makes possible comparative studies. The elaboration of heuristic models encompassing several domains of inquiry is indeed a precious epistemological resource. However, these are descriptive conceptual tools, not explanatory arguments. Scientific knowledge means explanation and control. Purely semiotic conceptual constructions have no practical impacts on the understanding of life and society. They have no predictive value. At best, they can help formulate some interesting questions. Unfortunately, these models are most of the time used to engage in a kind of reverse engineering rather than formulate testable hypotheses. They have been trivialize to form a kind of "folk semiotics" (e.g., Marcel Danesi, Arthur Asa Berger) closer to journalism than science. Or they have inspired essayists thriving on anecdotes to create an entertaining discourse, a higher form of journalism, a hybrid of literature, philosophy, and science (e.g., Thomas Sebeok, Roland Barthes). This discourse is not sustainable over the long term because it is bound to quickly become redundant and obsolete, and to indefinitely remain derivative with respect to the creation of knowledge that keep occurring in the sciences.
- On which conditions could semiotics become relevant and sustainable? New heuristic models could be developed in light of advances in the information sciences and evolutionary biology. Returning to the fundamental questions which motivated in the first place the early models which were proposed toward the end of the 19thcentury and clear expression of the goal which is to understand how organisms, particularly humans, make sense of their natural and social

environments; share knowledge about this environment and control it through the manipulation of information; make appropriate or inappropriate decisions on the basis of limited information; create artificially meaningful niches and tools; foster illusions and ill-adaptive behaviors; strive for understanding the information which controls their lives; and indirectly uncover dynamic patterns which are beyond their perceptual and phenomenological range. In many respects, the concept of "sign" was invented to account for all these processes but it amounted more to naming the problem than solving it. This notion has become obsolete and the safest would probably to dump it, with the traditional models which it generated, into the waste lands of the history of human errors with the ether, the phlogiston and countless fallacies. Semiotics is in need of innovative thinking which questions long-held assumptions and consider counter-intuitive hypotheses. This can emerge from exploring interfaces with the sciences which constantly advance through unexpected discoveries. This could allow semiotics to produce quantitative and predictive models instead of fostering the qualitative models and their limited ability of describing "what is and what happens" in the general abstract terms of a theory or another. This turn to metrics, algorithmic, and experimental methods will imply a radical reconsideration of the notion of sign and will strive to achieve some form of dovetailing with other scientific advances. Semioticians can achieve this through the meta-analysis of the data and theories which emerge at the frontiers of the scientific disciplines. They can also inspire experimental research through interacting with researchers in those disciplines. Semiotics is indeed in need of a scientific revolution and the creation of new paradigms. Recent moves such as the tentative developments of memetics and communicology are symptomatic of the discontents of some semioticians with their traditional concepts and models.

- The Peircean and Saussurean models are epistemological dead ends because they imply a metaphorical ontology which cannot be functionally mapped unto the neuro-chemical processes of the brain. They are apodictic assertions which are applied top-down on an open-ended number of phenomena and whose generality is such that they indiscriminately apply to everything and their contrary. A sign

does not stand for anything, a sign IS something. What is it? A state of the brain? An algorithm? A meme? A fractal phenomenon? A disease? A decision process? A catastrophe? Anticipation of a reward? A gamble? A game? A very exciting and promising field of inquiry is open for the semioticians who will dare to question old assumptions and create new formal, quantitative and predictive models. It is only on these conditions that semiotics will be sustainable in the long term. Semiotics must reinvent itself in order to become relevant again to the current state of human knowledge.