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THE RIGHT OF UNFUNCTIONALITY – EXPLORATIONS IN PONZIO’S
PHILOSOPHICAL SEMIOTICS

Few efforts have been made to renew or even reflect upon the epistemological bases of traditional or “classical” semiotics, established (roughly) at the beginning of the twentieth century and continuing up to the present day. It seems that traditional semiotics has accepted the normative communication model – such as that elaborated by Shannon and Weaver to improve the efficiency of telecommunication – as the self-evident starting point for any semiotic research. It requires a semiotician with a philosophical mind to go beyond accepted truths and search out new avenues for the study of signs.

Augusto Ponzio is one such scholar. Grounded in philosophy, he at the same time takes a keen interest in the worldly phenomena of our *Dasein*, and does so with the kind of encyclopedic zest that characterizes the great semioticians of our time, from Roland Barthes to Umberto Eco. Ponzio’s version of semiotics is a fascinating combination of his roots in the line of Charles Morris/Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas on dialogue and, perhaps above all, the “existential” philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Ponzio’s interest in what may be called sociosemiotics stems from the first source, his ideas on Russian formalism from Bakhtin, and his fundamental view of Otherness from Levinas. It is tempting to argue that the common point for all these sources is the notion of subject as the *primus motus* of “semiosis”. Yet Ponzio turns the situation around: it is signs that constitute subjects, not vice-versa. In this aspect of his philosophy, he shows himself as a semiotician. I quote:

It is my contention that once a sign is produced it has a life of its own, independent from the person who generated it, continues using it or interprets it: such a modality of sign life is dialogic. From this point of view, sign dialogism constitutes a form of resistance, if not opposition, which to the person who uses signs is more than a means through which he manifests himself. Sign resistance is more properly designated as the semiotic materiality which comes to be added to the mere physical materiality of nonsigns as they are transformed into signs (Ponzio 1993: 2).

This comes close to John Deely’s idea that signs are not things. But Ponzio continues: “Sign objectivity or semiotic materiality constitutes the *otherness* of signs with respect to their producers and interpreters. The essence of the sign, its semiotic material, is what lies beyond the sphere of the subject ... and figures as *other*” (*ibid.*).

Ponzio's statements bring to mind the early phase of Greimas's semiotics. In his *Sémantique structurale*, Greimas subordinated Georges Bernanos's novel *Journal d'un curé à la campagne* to a rigorous seme-analysis and ultimately reduced the whole novel into a Levi-Straussian algebraic model depicting the "transformations" that constitute the Bernanosian universe. However, what was forgotten in such an extremely textual analysis was the idea of the story, which was clearly existential in nature. The tale's concern with subjectivity was expressed quite cogently in Bresson's film version of the novel. The young priest, in the novel and the film, faces a semiotic problem: he does not understand what kind of sign he is to his community, and this causes the failure of his idealistic "Christ" project. As Ponzio states: "Absolute otherness is an expression of the fact that we are signs" (*ibid.*: 3).

Of course, we could put the problem in another way, and claim that it is about the *alien psyche* (*Fremdseeligkeit*). Ponzio, however, remains faithful to his sociosemiotic roots, and thinks in terms of signs themselves. For him, the resistant "materiality" of signs constitutes their crucial value to genuine human dialogue. It is signs and dialogue – i.e., semiosis – that determine the man, and not vice versa. Here Ponzio also shows his allegiance to structuralism, which held that the automatism of sign systems force us to do and say things in a certain manner, if we want to communicate.

Moreover, Ponzio's confounding of signifier and opus connects him to a certain marxist tradition: "Both the signifier and the opus contain a movement from the subject, the self, from the sphere of the same to the other". But then intervenes the factor of ideology, central to Rossi-Landi, which inheres both in the "false consciousness" of the subject, and also in the signs themselves and in their usage: "Ideology is also false praxis". Therefore semiotics cannot do, in a deeper sense, without the study of ideology. Semiotics can of course be exercised as the mere study of how signs *function*; but in doing so it remains dominated by existing practices without ever questioning their bases. Therefore, if semiotics wants to remain a science of the avant-garde – and in my view it should always be, paradoxically, a kind of "continuous avant-garde" – it cannot assert its "currency" simply by cataloging what happens in the contemporary world, such as new innovations in communications technology, processes of globalisation, and so on. Semiotics must go further, and search out the often hidden ideological aspects of those objects, which range from mobile phones to urban spaces to military forces. There must be some intellectual moment in the semiotic discourse as such which makes it appealing in our times.

Therefore we should not misunderstand Ponzio's doctrine of material resistance of signs. We might well hear echoes of Sartre's "semiotics is humanism" in the following

declaration by Ponzio: “Before concerning us as specialists and experts, ideology concerns each and everyone of us as human beings. This is particularly significant today in view of the fact that such concepts as the *crisis of ideology* or even *the end of the era of ideology* are now commonplace: in truth such expressions merely confirm that a given ideology is dominating over others, to the point of being represented as the modality of the existence of reality” (*ibid.*: 9-10).

If on one hand Ponzio wants to preserve the idea of resistance of signs as a reserve against the dangers of subjectivism – the world is not just a creation of our mental, signifying acts – on the other hand he admits that, ultimately, it is the perpetually rebellious subject who powers the resistance against certain ideological practices.

In his later study, *Comunicazione* (1999), Ponzio delves deeper into the essence of this fundamental notion of all semiotics. He starts from two premises: Communication is being, and being is communication. In making that determination he at once seems to expand the entire semiotic project into a kind of ontology. Biosemiotics, which the late Thomas A Sebeok so strongly propagated from his own background as a zoosemiotician, claims that all organic being is ultimately communication – a claim that many philosophers found upsetting. One of them was the Finnish philosopher and elaborator of modal logics, Georg Henrik von Wright – a thinker that was highly respected by Greimas and that succeeded Wittgenstein as the Chair of Philosophy at Cambridge – who said he could not conceive of cells as in any way communicating. Evidently the problem lay in his relatively restricted understanding of the notion of “communication”. Namely, biosemioticians take a broader view of communication, seeing it not only as the transmission of messages with contents, but as a process and interaction between the organism and its *Umwelt* via two operations: *Merken* and *Wirken* (Jakob von Uexküll’s terms). The organism either accepts or rejects signs coming from its environment, which process forms the basis of its “identity”, “semiotic self”, or *Ich-Ton*. Ultimately the “being” of this organism is totally determined by the operations of *Merken/Wirken*, which are further undergirded by the operations of acceptance/rejection – or to put it in philosophical jargon, *affirmation* and *negation*.

Ponzio does not remain at the biological level, but moves onto the next one – that of anthroposemiosis. Here we encounter the facts of language and speaking, historical-social factors, and economic production. Here we might identify communication with production, such that to “communicate” means participating in the economy of production – exchange – consumption. The model of communication thus obtains a new configuration, which we may, like Ponzio, describe as communication-production.

Of course, the notion of communicating via the exchange of objects is not at all new (think of Malinowski's study of the bartering systems of Trobriand Islanders or the notion of "exchange" advanced by Marcel Mauss). But, again, Ponzio does not stop here. He goes on to assert that not all being is communication, since the latter involves not only the category of being but also that of becoming. He argues that to communicate does not mean to "externalise" something that is first internal. Rather, communication begins with something "external" then moves inward, in a kind of autoaffirmation. By what principle does this kind of "communication" operate? Ponzio finds this question to be uninteresting, in the limited or regional ontological sense. What *is* interesting, is that communication is being: "... if we want to venture into ontology, we can say: being is not communicating but communicating is being" (Ponzio 1999: 7). Can we *be* without communicating? Karl Jaspers asks a similar question: Why do we communicate? Why do we not prefer to be alone? For Ponzio this fact is not a matter of the subject's decision or choice: we are in communication whether we want to be or not. Hunger comes first, then the act of seeking nourishment. Organism is communication.

This brings us to the threshold of supremely fundamental questions. Certainly the major problem with classical semiotics, such as that of Greimas, has been its static nature, its categorial, Cartesian thought which remains alien to the world conceived as processes, temporalities, dynamism and action. My own efforts at expanding Greimassian theory have gone toward supplementing and refining his notion of being/doing with that of "becoming" (see my entry on *devenir* in Greimas & Courtés 1986: 67). This led me to deal also with his semiotic square, in which regard I was more interested in how we move from one corner to the other in the narrative process, than in defining the precise content of each logical articulation, i.e., s1, s2, non-s2 and non-s1. More recently I have tried to make his notion of "being" more subtle by stratifying it into at least four aspects: being-in-myself, being-for-myself, being-in-itself, being-for-itself – notions inspired by a certain philosophical thread that runs from Hegel to Sartre.

The fact remains, however, that the only truly dynamic concept of standard semiotics has been the idea of communication. We can elevate it to the status of a first-principle, but in doing so we might risk universalizing what is ultimately nothing but a superficial and mechanical, Shannon-Weaver model of communication. The latter always goes in the same direction, from left to the right, describing some kind of transfer among its fixed "boxes" as the ultimate entities of communicative movement. Henri Bergson warned us early on about a view of temporality that reduces it to a chain of discrete shifts among designated entities. He

used melody as an example: melodic motion is not only “chronological”, i.e., a chain of successive movements from pitch to pitch; it also projects a global, phenomenal quality in its aspect as *duration*. If Ponzio hesitates to explore more deeply the notion of “being” as “becoming”, I have recently found such investigation to be essential in theorizing appearance (*Erscheinung*) as a horizontal, temporal phenomenon.

We now come to Ponzio’s concept of alterity, or Otherness, which stems from Levinas. As semiotic animals we can conceive the states of the world as alternatives, as possibilities, we might say. It is the nature of man to think in terms of “otherwise” (*altrimenti*). Ponzio concedes that human behaviour cannot be understood exclusively in terms of communication, being, and ontology. Here we encounter the possibility of the Other:

Questa capacità di animale semiotico, di portarsi al di là dell’essere e del mondo della comunicazione lo rende assolutamente responsabile non solo della riproduzione sociale ma anche inscindibilmente da essa della vita dell’intero pianeta (Ponzio 1999: 10).

With that statement we have already traveled quite far from his starting point: the materiality of signs, which constitute human subjects. After all, because subjects are able to conceive and imagine alternatives, we are freed from the materiality of the sign and sign-practices, which we also have the capacity to change. Does this not constitute another type of resistance to the existing world and its ideologies of communication-production? This distinctively human situation – freedom from necessity – is reflected in Ponzio’s nicely formulated locution: the “right of unfunctionality”, *diritto all’infunzionalità* (*ibid.*: 30). I want to stop on this fascinating concept, since I think it is the core of Ponzio’s philosophy. Here also is where Ponzio’s philosophy comes close to existential semiotics, particularly its latest developments (see Tarasti 2006). Let me explain why.

First of all, Ponzio’s notion of alterity, inherited from Levinas, is almost identical to the concept of *transcendence* in my own theory. Man is a transcending animal, which simply means that we often use signs to speak about something which is absent, but present in our minds. We may go even further and ask, Isn’t every act of communication somehow transcendental? Even in communication between just two speakers – say, Saussure’s Mr. A and Mr. B – there is always a gap to be filled. When communicating we always run the terrible risk that the other, to whom we speak, does not understand us. We always engage with an alien psyche, knowledge of which we have only via abduction or inference (cf. Schütz & Luckmann 1994).

The empty space between interlocutors always presents the possibility of

rearticulation. If we are Greimassians, we might think that this gap is filled by modalities. In which case, we would be dealing with what Ponzio calls “relative alterity”. In contrast, “absolute alterity” surpasses even the modalities; it is a virtual universe, filled with such entities as values, ideas, presigns – anything that is not yet fixed in the sign-objects of communication or “production” processes of our everyday world (*Dasein*). It is this absolute alterity which corresponds to my own conception of transcendence, which we can reach only via the acts of affirmation and negation. This not the same as the “smaller” transcendences of our everyday communication, with which Saussure and Bakhtin are obviously concerned in their theories of human dialogue. Schütz and Luckman (1994) speak of such quotidian exchanges as “middle” transcendences. But “major” transcendence pertains to the whole world of possibilities, which we can conceive and become aware of, and which constitute the sphere of spirit (*Geist*). According to Adorno, it was in this latter sphere that art, ethics, and truth originated, such that something non-material (*Ungegenständlich*) becomes actualized and objectified in our living world (see Adorno 1993).

Ponzio’s “absolute alterity” equates to the major transcendence described by these other theories. “Relative alterity”, by contrast, is instantiated as a social position or role; e.g., professor, student, father, son, labourer, etc. For Hegel this signified being *für-sich-sein*, i.e., as determined by society, whereas *an-sich-sein* meant our being as such. I have extended Hegel’s notion by adding the principles of *Moi/Soi* (cf. Ricoeur, Fontanille), and subdividing those further into four categories: *being-in-myself* (our individual corporeal essence) and *being-for-myself* (our identities via habits), which together constitute the *Moi*; and *being-in-itself* (i.e., norms, abstract values existing in a society) and *being-for-itself* (the application of these norms in our behaviours, i.e., social practices), which together make up the *Soi*. This reasoning parallels that of Ponzio, whom I quote:

L’alterità relativa è quella che fa la nostra identità, ma se per un ipotesi di “riduzione” togliamo tutte le nostre alterità relative che costituiscono a nostra identità, non resta più nulla o persiste un “residuo” indipendente da esse? Ebbene, in contrasto a quanto questa forma sociale vuol farci credere, un tale residuo sussiste, un’alterità non relativa che fa esistere ciascuno di noi non semplicemente come *individuo* e quindi come rappresentante di un genere, di una classe, di un insieme, e come altro a – relativamente – ... neppure come *persona*, termine di riferimento di quanto è “personale”, “appartenente”, “proprio” ma come *unico*, *singolo*, come *assolutamente altro*, non sostituibile, non intercambiabile, un genere a sè, *sui generis* (Ponzio 1999: 31-32).

Is he talking here about the above-mentioned category of “being-in-myself”, i.e., our individual bodily – kinetic, gestural, pulsational, khoratic – existence before it becomes stabilized into what we call one’s identity? I think not. The absolutely Other, as the absolutely

transcendental, cannot be trapped within the confines of the semiotic square, which portrays our subjective states within the world of *Dasein*, i.e., the world of signs, object and subject, including ourselves. Transcendence in its “major” form designates our ability to go beyond those states or “semiotic positions”. Now, Ponzio still supposes that this absolute Alterity is unique and singular. And that is the problem: if there is transcendence or absolute alterity that is no longer limited to our corporeal existence as subjects, then what can it be, epistemologically speaking? How can we communicate with it? And is such communication even possible?

The theologians do not speak in terms of transcendence, but rather of the supernatural, which only announces itself to us via *revelation*. If we are Kantian philosophers, however, and insist on speaking about transcendence as a philosophical principle, then we can not avoid confronting the issue of proving its existence. One such proof has been offered by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, in his study *The Sources of the Self*, who argues that, because certain behaviours take place in our world which cannot be reasonably except by supposing they refer to transcendence, then there must be transcendence (absolute Alterity).

To pick up on my earlier reasoning: in my existential semiotics Ponzio’s idea of absolute Alterity, is totally compatible with the notion of Transcendence. At the same time, I admit that many problems remain open. In any case, I agree that Alterity in that sense is always beyond the relative alterity we encounter in our everyday life. I have suggested that the traffic between absolute Alterity (or transcendence) be portrayed by the notion of *metamodalities*. These are not quite the same as the primary modalities (will, can, must, know, believe, etc.). Rather, metamodalities are something like metaphors of the primary ones, based on the assumption that we are able to conceive the Cosmos, Alterity or Transcendence only via concepts stemming from, and entering into, our own world.

The consequence which Ponzio draws from all this is simply: *diritto all’infunzionalità* – the right to stand on oneself, as a goal in itself, as an alterity that is non-relative (*ibid.*: 32). And when getting to the social semiotic, he says: “the right to unfunctionality assumes a subversive character – the unfunctional is human. And still, human rights do not discuss the right to unfunctionality. That would lead us to the humanism of identity. And it is the foundation of all rights of alterity” (*ibid.*).

What does this mean? Certainly it comes close to the American Transcendentalists’ notion of quietism, or if we like, to the Heideggerian principle of *Gelassenheit* – or if we prefer to keep within semiotics, to Charles Morris’s world-view of “letting things happen” or movement “away from” (the related motions being “towards” or “against”). I would venture

to guess that the Ponzian principle of “unfunctionality” would not always mean isolation or separation from the world, but rather first getting mentally freed or emancipated from it, but only in order to be equipped for fulfilling what the subject feels to be the demands of Absolute Alterity, which at the same time accounts for one’s accountability to other subjects – since our world is one of intersubjectivity and being with others.

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