Winfried Nöth and Lucia Santaella

OTHERNESS AT THE ROOTS OF CULTURAL SEMIOSIS

> L'ascolto è un interpretante di comprensione rispondente, è il disporsi all'accoglienza e all'ospitalità, nella casa della semiotica, dei segni altri, dei segni altrui: totalmente altri che generalmente li denominiamo nel complesso soltanto in forma negativa rispetto al verbale, e cioè segni *non* verbali. L'ascolto è la condizione di una teoria generale del segno in quanto *semiotica dell'alterità.* (Caputo, Petrilli and Ponzio 2006: 14)

1.   *Augusto Ponzio: Pioneer of the semiotics of otherness*

In *Man as a Sign*, Augusto Ponzio (1990: 249) put forward his fundamental semiotic axiom that "the problem of the sign cannot be separated from the problem of otherness", Ponzio's crown witnesses corroborative of this axiom are Bakhtin, Peirce, and Lévinas (Ponzio 1983). The concept of alterity or *otherness*, according to Ponzio, serves to explain why the semiotic universe is "made of deviations, differences, deferment and *renvois*, displacements, and transformations" (*ibid*.: 197). The tenet that alterity is at the root of semiosis is fundamental to Ponzio's semiotics of communication (Ponzio 1995, 1999; Ponzio and Petrilli 2000), dialogue (Ponzio 1993), and literature (Ponzio 1992; Petrilli and Ponzio 2003), which the Bari semiotician is now presenting together with Susan Petrilli in the framework of their still broader joint horizon of a semiotics of culture *and* nature in *Semiotics Unbounded* (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005; Deely, Petrilli and Ponzio 2005).

When Ponzio first expounded his semiotic ideas on alterity and the roots of semiosis in *La relazione interpersonale* (1967), the prevailing paradigm of semiotics in the Romance countries was still Hjelmslev's hyperstructuralism. Whereas, after the beginning of the third millennium, semiotics adhering to the dogmas of structuralism has either become extinct or is surviving in crisis, the semiotic horizons on which Ponzio has been focusing since the 1960s have remained as topical as they had been when first proposed.

The root of semiosis, according to the structuralist paradigm, was not alterity, but *difference* or *opposition* (Nöth 1994). Difference was the key concept of the Saussurean paradigm of semiology. One of Saussure's fundamental axioms was that "in language, as in any semiological system, whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it. Difference makes character just as it makes value and the unit" (Saussure 1916: 121).

Otherness is involved in this line of thought, but, according to Saussure, otherness is pure negativity, since "in language there are only differences *without positive terms*" (*ibid.*: 120). The concepts associated with verbal signs are merely differential, "defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system" so that their "most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not" (*ibid.*: 117). What constitutes the structure of an element of any semiotic system is its "noncoincidence with the rest" (*ibid.*: 118). The logic behind this model of structure is a logic of exclusion, the constitution of a structure at the expense of what it excludes: *p* is only *p* because of its difference from *not-p*.

The dyadic plus/minus model of distinctive features in *binary opposition*, which became the new structuralist loadstar of the Prague School and Roman Jakobson, is equally imbued with this logic of exclusion although a shift from the paradigm or negativity to a first recognition of the mutual presence of the excluded and the excluding is noticeable. On the one hand, Jakobson's (1962a: 637) model of binary oppositions takes inclusion into consideration when it postulates that "the presence of one term […] necessarily implies and educes the other, opposite term", and both terms are more closely related than terms forming a mere "contingent duality". On the other hand, the underlying logic of exclusion is blatantly apparent when the model of phonological values is transferred to, and transformed into, semantic values, for example, when Jakobson (*ibid.*) quote with approval: "à l'idée du blanc, il n'y a que celle du noir qui soit opposée, à l'idée du beau celle du laid", which reveals an unconscious parallelism excluding the idea that black might be beautiful, too.

It is true that explicit reference to *otherness* appears in the structuralist paradigm of Greimas's textual semiotics, which faces us with the dialectics of *sameness* vs. *otherness* at the root of the "elementary structure of signification". Since, according to Greimas and Courtés (1979: 79), "a difference can only be recognized over against a supporting background of resemblance", the French semioticians, with the reductionist axe of the dualism (cf. CP 7.570), reduce the relation between the two constituents of the dichotomy of otherness vs. sameness to the category of "alterity/identity".

In sum, in his search for the roots of semiosis, Saussure arrived at the idea of pure negativity in the difference between an element and what it was not. Jakobson, in his formalization of the notion of opposition in terms of plus/minus dichotomies, succumbed to what Derrida (1977: 236) denounced as the "metaphysical pathos" of setting up axiological polarities while *subordinating* one of their pole to the other. As soon as the binary model of the presence or absence of features (such as *voiced*) was transferred from phonology to

semantics, the model of binary oppositions was bound to face a crisis. (The row of feminist linguists against the description of females as "–male" is still reverberating). Greimas, in the concert of the semiotic structuralists of the 20th century, increased the gulf between the poles of binary opposites by reducing alterity to something radically opposed to identity.

Ponzio's role in the history of semiotics since the 1960s has been the one of an original and forward-looking nonconformist propagating subversive and innovative semiotic theories. Against the Heraclitian dualistic tenet that "all things come into being by opposites" (Diog. Laert. *Lives* IX.8) embraced by the structuralist, Ponzio sets Levinas's notion of an otherness "located inside the subject, the self", which is "itself a dialogue, a relation between self and other […], inseparable from the ego" (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 390). From Peirce, Ponzio derives the insights that alterity "is able to infiltrate the very sphere of the symbolic" and that otherness is "constitutive of the very identity of the sign" (1990: 197), since the "*identity* of the law of the symbol is continually exposed to the *alterity* of its interpretant and its object" (*ibid*.: 198), and with Bakhtin, Ponzio reminds us that the value of a sign (Bakhtin's "word") cannot be reduced to its opposition to other signs of a system abstracted from the processes of semiosis. Instead, "it is both directed to the object of discourse as well as to the alien word, that is, to the discourse of others", so that "before being one's own word, originally the word belongs to others" (*ibid*.: 215).

How foresighted Augusto Ponzio was when he substituted, as early as in the 1960s, the paradigm of opposition, negativity, and the dualism of the absence vs. presence of strructures in opposition by his more encompassing paradigm of otherness or alterity based on Peirce, Bakhtin, and Levinas will become evident in the following discussion of the role of otherness in the broader contexts of cultural philosophy and intercultural communication, a central topic in linguistic, literary, media, and cultural studies.

2.   *Alterity and cultural philosophy and sociology*

Among the philosophers whose writings on the topic of alterity or otherness have found most reverberation with the intellectuals of the 20th century are Norbert Elias, Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida, and Zygmunt Bauman. Far from having a view of otherness in the clear light of sharply defined categories of human experience, Levinas discerns alterity in the category of incongruence and difference, locating the understanding of the other out there in the distance. Levinas's hermeneutically inspired ideas resist the ontology of identity as it prevails with Heidegger. He conceives of the autonomous presence

of the other as something irreducible, preceding even the identity of the subject (Lévinas 1961, 1979; Moebius 2003).

According to Derrida (1987, 1991a, b, c, 1997), thought as such is based on a fundamental principle of exclusion. As soon as logos articulates itself, it excludes nonsense, paradox, the meaningless, or the insane, so that thought, with its claim to understanding and comprehension is totalitarian, claiming hegemony and domination over otherness and the absent by imposing on alterity the present and the constrains of comprehensibility. Derrida's concept of *différance* is not restricted to questions of verbal meaning. It constitutes itself from the much more radical insight into a permanent refusal inherent in a logocentric thought molded by the category of difference. Against this heritage, Derrida declared *différance* to be a fundamental category inconceivable in its potential of creating differences and irreducible to the idea of an ultimate and fundamental identity.

Bauman (1987, 1993) and Elias (1997-2005) have introduced the category of alterity in cultural sociology. Their ideas on otherness have been highly influential in the current debate on interpersonal, cultural, and global conflicts.

Peirce, in this context, deserves a special mention as the forerunner of a philosophy of otherness, as Petrilli and Ponzio (2005: 50-52) have shown. Peirce's synechism postulates continuity and transition instead of separation and rupture. Otherness is not a monolithic category; there are rather modalities and degrees of otherness (cf. Wadenfels 1999: 51-53). "The self is never wholly divided or isolated from the other. Peirce teaches us that human existence completely isolated from the other is impossible" (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 51). Instead of postulating limits, borders, boundaries, oppositions, and polarities between the self and the other, the synechist knows about the continuities, transitions, and permeabilities (cf. Nöth 2007).

3.   *Alterity and cultural studies*

The question of the cultural impact of what is foreign, alien, or strange has been one of the central issues in cultural studies during the last decades. Key terms in the discussion among anthropologists, ethnologists, psychologists, and sociologists have been concepts such as otherness, alterity, difference, plurality, diversity, strangeness, the foreign, and the alien on the one hand, and singularity, the self, the familiar, identity, or ownness on the other. The commitment of the intellectuals for the topic of the foreign and the familiar reveals a certain philosophical skepticism against any form of abstract totality, universalism, and rationalism.

From anthropology to philosophy and especially in cultural theory with its great topics of feminism, postcolonial studies, or hybrid cultures, much research has been dedicated to the topic of otherness, strangeness, and the foreign.

Until a few decades ago, reflections on identity and alterity in foreign cultures had mainly been restricted to cultural anthropologists. However, as we know today, research by anthropologists in exotic cultures ended up in aporias and paradoxes (for the latter, see Wadenfels 1999: 117-151): on the one hand, exotic otherness excluded the European elites who reflected upon it; on the other hand, the studies of this same elite testified to the nature of their own European culture of against whose background the exotism of the colonized cultures was being discerned. Thus, the exotic nature of the others turned out to be nothing but the product of Eurocentrism. Against this background, some of the fundamental assumptions of ethnographic research deriving from this tradition have become questionable.

Since the postmodernism debate of the 1980s, especially in the context of postcolonialism and the study of hybrid cultures, numerous forms of cultural otherness have been described and cultural identities have been defined in their specificities from the most diverse segments of culture: women, the excluded, the exotic foreigners, Afro-Europeans, African Americans, homosexuals, and the mentally ill. In this extremely heterogeneous field of study, many diverse forms of cultural stereotype can be found, whose only common denominator is the one of marginalization.

4.   *Representation: An obstacle to the study of otherness?*

In postmodern times, the thesis has almost become a commonplace that representation is an obstacle to the knowledge of reality. Hacking (1999) has presented a panorama of various constructivist, antirealist, or nominalist theories which supposedly have given evidence to a masking of the real in all forms of representation. The common denominator of all of these theories is the claim that the only thing a representation might reveal is the human mind categorizing reality in this or in that particular way without ever being able to grasp it as such.

In contrast to such pessimistic premises, representation, in light of Peirce's semiotics is by no means an obstacle to knowledge but rather the only and genuine way of access to cognition, perception, and even feeling (Santaella 2003). Of course, representations of the so-called real are by no means always adequate and reliable; there are representations which depend on conventions, others that depend on indices, and still others that depend on

analogies. There are very rudimentary representations, quasi-representations, or presentifications, as in music, poetry, or in the visual arts. However, on the premises that being is representable and that being and representation coincide epistemologically, the conclusion is cogent that a systematic and rigorous study of the mechanisms of representation is mandatory.

Representation is part of the process which Peirce has defined as semiosis, the tendency and effect of signs towards their being interpreted. Peirce's triadic semiotics is hence a most appropriate foundation and a necessary tool in the study of otherness in intercultural communication. Santaella and Nöth (2004: 156-57) have described Peirce's triadic model of semiosis and its relevance to communication studies arguing that "the Peircean concept of semiosis is deeply intertwined with communication processes" (*ibid*.: 160). Being and being represented are only two aspects of a universal process of signification, that is, semiosis in culture and nature.

A true and frequent obstacle in the study of otherness is the paradox of discursive practices in which antiracist discourse become reversed, revealing themselves as fundamentally racist. Taguieff (1987) has given evidence of such tendencies in his detailed analyses of the discursive strategies of antiracial discourse from two centuries. The paradox inherent in this discursive tradition is the Cartesian epistemology of a "bifurcating nature" (Latour 2003), which is, however, surmountable with Peirce's triadic model of semiosis. Its three universal categories offer a powerful instrument to overcoming dualistic thought, which is the tendency to perform "analyses with an axe, leaving as the ultimate elements, unrelated chunks of being […] most hostile to synechism" (CP 7.570).

In contrast to the reductionist dualists seeking to sever representation from the represented world with the tendency towards an utter relativization of the real, Peirce's synechistic semiotics explains that there is continuity between representing and the represented world similar to the continuity with which we are familiar from infinitesimal calculus. An example of an approach giving attention to such continuities is Andacht and Michel's (1998) study of the transitions between micro- and macropolitics in the sociocultural life in Germany during the times of reunification. Without acknowledging the synechistic principle of continuity, it is impossible to understand the intricate intertwining of grand politics with ordinary everyday life.

Another theoretical problem in the study of the representation of otherness in the media is the danger of hypostasizing otherness as a socially given and fixed fact instead of admitting that it is nothing but a discursive position, an effect of the senses, as if there were

something in society that would have to count once and for ever as otherness. In several of his studies, Andacht has shown how the category of alterity of those marginalized in the course of time has acquired different identities in one and the same society. Depending on the historical and political circumstances, the prototype of alterity may be a member of an indigenous tribe threatened by extinction brought from South America to Europe in the second half of the 19th century (Andacht 1987), a guerillero leader (Andacht 2000), or a social group whose sexual identity is being discriminated, as in the case of homosexuals at the occasion of their first outcomings in Uruguay (Andacht 1995, 1996a, b, 1997).

5.   *Cultural otherness in the media: Between xenophobia and xenophilia*

Discourse on otherness has too often turned out to be a discourse of exclusion and marginalization. The marginalization of otherness is not restricted to social or geopolitical domains; there are equally powerful mechanisms which the media have at their disposal to marginalize sub- or countercultural groups excluded from the hegemony of the ruling culture (cf. Nöth 2007). The study of such processes of marginalization must be carried out with priority in especially those academic disciplines which have been calling themselves "human", in particular in communication and media studies.

Based on these premises, an intercultural research project on cultural otherness in the media is hereby proposed by the authors of this paper. Its goal is the comparative study of cultural similarities and differences in the representation of foreigners in film and advertising in Brazil and Germany. The dynamics of the constitution of the self against the background of the other in these two very different cultures is the focal point. The various attitudes towards otherness and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of cultural alterity which the project expects to reveal are localized between the two extremes of xenophobia and xenophilia with many gradings in between.

Variants of cultural otherness relevant to the proposed study appear in dichotomies such as *tourist* vs. *immigrant*, *center* vs. *periphery*, *rich* vs. *poor*, *white* vs. *black*, *males* vs. *females*, the *occupied* and the *well-to-do* vs. the *unoccupied* and the *jobless*. Of special relevance is the positioning of local cultures in the face of otherness and vice versa, for example, the positions of contrast, opposition, symmetry, equivalence, and sameness. The gradings between the poles of xenophobia and xenophilia in local attitudes towards otherness require attention to a broad spectrum of modalities ranging from aggression, hostility, slander, defensiveness, or segregation to tolerance, solidarity, cordiality, hospitality, or admiration.

Among the clichés and cultural stereotypes involved is the image of the expansive, cordial hospitality of Brazilians in the face of foreigners. Notorious is the cliché of the German predilection for exotism – as long as the latter is in sufficient distance from the German *Heimat* in order to avoid conflict in everyday life. Such clichés cannot be accepted as working hypotheses but their effects in the media must be considered.

A paradigmatic study of one aspect of alterity in the media is Andacht's (1987) study of "altericide", the discursive strategy of the media of concealing or canceling consciously or unconsciously the identity of the other in order to increase the degree of sociocultural homogeneity. Andacht's study of altericide in media campaigns are exemplary of the boundaries of the domain which Peirce has defined as the "immediate interpretant", i.e., the totality of the meanings which determine the interpretive spectrum of a sign before it is really interpreted in a given moment by a "dynamical interpretant". The author postulates parallelisms between the potential for interpretability, the faculty of a sign to create significations, and the concept of probability (*to eikós*) in Aristotelian rhetoric.

Research in alterity cannot simply have the aim of annihilating alterity, at transforming otherness into familiarity, for otherness is indeed constitutive of the identity of the self (Nöth 2001; Santaella 2004b, 2006). Nor must research in cultural otherness profit from the current unease with presentday problems such as immigration and the foreigners *ante portas* of Western countries. The study of cultural otherness must be guided by a semioethics free from any media bashing of superficial moralizing.

The role played by the media in this context is evident: in the creation of the image of cultural alterity, the media are omnipresent, penetrating all layers of cultural and social life, creating modes of otherness with ideological substrata, but even though ideological determinants of the discourse on otherness in the media will inevitably be revealed, moralizing advice cannot be the purpose of this study. Instead, its aim is to reveal otherness as a sociosemiotic construct and to penetrate into deeper layers to the roots of the methods of representing otherness in the media. After all, otherness is putting to the test the boundaries of interpretation, which coincide with the degree of tolerance of a culture for what is different, its ability to show understanding for those who do not disappear in the crowd.

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Winfried Nöth is Professor of Linguistics and Semiotics and Director of the Interdisciplinary Center for Cultural Studies, University of Kassel, Germany, Visiting Professor, PUC São Paulo, Honorary Member of the International Association for Visual Semiotics, and past President of the German Association for Semiotic Studies (2002-2004). Nöth's 200 articles, 13 authored and 10 edited books are on the topics of semiotic aesthetics, language, literature and culture, pictures, maps, evolutionary semiosis, and media semiotics. His *Handbook of Semiotics* of 1990 was awarded the *Choice Outstanding Academic Book* prize in 1992. His most recent books include (with Lucia Santaella) *Imagen: Comunicación, semiótica y medios* (2003) and *Comunicação e semiótica* (2004). Among his edited volumes: *Origins of Semiosis* (1994), *Semiotics of the Media* (1997), *Crisis of Representation* (2003), and *Semiotic Bodies, Aesthetic Embodiments, and Cyberbodies* (2006).

Lucia Santaella is Full Professor at São Paulo Catholic University, Brasil. She is Head of the post-graduate program in Technologies of Intelligence and Digital Design and Director of CIMID, Research Center in Digital Media, at the same university, and also director of the Center for Peirce Studies. She is one of the honorary Presidents of the Latin-American Federation of Semiotics and correspondent member of the Argentinian Academy of Fine Arts. She has been elected President of the Charles S. Peirce Society, USA, for 2007. She has published 28 books and organized 7 books. Besides these books she has published more than 200 articles in journals and books in Brazil and abroad.