Seeking other routes[*]

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The thesis of this work is made most explicit on page 78 when the authors state that

> The sign model we are proposing is a heterogeneous expression of the results that have been developed in different contexts and are related dialogically: interpretation theory (Peirce), dialogism (Bakhtin), otherness (Levinas), significs (Welby); and semiotics related to axiology (Morris). Furthermore, our sign model also accounts for research on the relation between semiotics and ideology (Rossi-Landi, Schaff).

Above all, the book contains a synthesis of semiotic perspectives which is used to elucidate a number of important themes in contemporary socio-political life. More telegraphically, one could say that this work is a broad semiotic meditation on the theory of otherness as it is filtered and distorted through global communication.

The book comprises many of the most recent developments on the explicitly political side of semiotics and provides a synthesis that marks this work off as cutting edge. Although Peirce, Bakhtin, Levinas, Sebeok, Eco, Rossi-Landi and, even, Welby have been written about before, the comprehensive and focused way with which they are dealt here is

highly original. As the statement on Bakhtinian dialogue makes clear, the perspective of the authors diverges from the somewhat stagnant mainstream of Bakhtin scholarship:

> Bakhtinian dialogue excludes all forms of equality, reciprocity between self and other; in this perspective the dialogic relationship is asymmetrical, irreversible. If we agree on this, then acclaimed interpreters of Bakhtin, that is, scholars such as Todorov, Holquist, Wellek, etc. have all fundamentally misunderstood his conception of dialogue. This is also confirmed by the fact that they all compare his work on dialogue to the approach developed by Martin Buber, Jan Mukařovský and Plato. Most significantly, they all understand dialogue in the abused sense of encounter, agreement, convergence, compromise, synthesis (p. 145).

I must say that I am more convinced by the reading of Bakhtin offered here than the usual 'liberal' one. Yet, it would be foolish to imagine that this is just a 'revisionist' work on Bakhtin. Even where the less contentious issue of Welby's work is concerned, for example – less contentious because there is less written on her – the work breaks ground. Areas of Welby's work which have previously been neglected are foregrounded here, for example her first book, Links and Clue*s*. The knowledge, understanding, synthesis and analysis of the work of the major figures under scrutiny are formidable and, as yet, unsurpassed. On these bases, Semiotics Unbounded makes a significant contribution to the field. If the field is taken to be 'general semiotics' then such a view is irrefutable. Yet the volume also makes a considerable contribution to Bakhtin studies, philosophy, cultural studies and the theory of dialogue.

One of the chief virtues of <u>Semiotics Unbounded</u> is that it is organized in a useful and unpretentious way. The chapter headings alone in Part 1 of the work make this clear: 'About Welby', 'About Morris', 'About Sebeok', etc. do exactly what they advertise. This kind of straightforward structure will instantly win the work friends. The thematic sections on dialogue, ideology and modelling are equally welcome and complement the thesis of the work. In terms of style, there is no doubt that Petrilli and Ponzio are able to make a whole series of links between the major figures in semiotics that other writers, lacking their clarity, are unable to even contemplate expressing. Take, for example, the brief explanation on pages 343-4 of how and why Sebeok translates von Uexküll's notion of *umwelt* as 'model'; even Sebeok, a master of clarity himself, has not seen fit to make the reasons for translation as explicit as they are here. Petrilli and Ponzio's style is very user-friendly and always illuminating, if occasionally baroque.

The chief bequest of this volume, however, will probably be its setting out of the co-ordinates of a nascent 'semioethics'. The idea of semioethics originates with, and has been extensively developed by, Ponzio and Petrilli, who, along with Deely in the 1990s, reconfigured the conception of the semiotic animal first posited by Hausdorff. The more local influence on semioethics is Sebeok's global semiotics and, in particular, his embrace of the biosphere as "one system" (Sebeok 2001: 29-30; cf. Deely 2005: 58).

In the 'global' light of Sebeok's semiotics, what might be considered 'care of the self', can only realistically proceed from a 'care of others', where 'others' must mean the entirety of the semiosphere. It is in this sense that Petrilli and Ponzio's semioethics

delineates not just a limited 'responsibility' but an "unlimited responsibility" to "all of life throughout the entire planetary ecosystem, from which human life cannot be separated" (p. 534). Furthermore, central to their semioethics is the theorizing of otherness. For them, Levinas, Bakhtin and, crucially, Peirce, reveal that

> Otherness is inherent in the sign and at the same time the precondition for the sign's capacity to transcend itself. Signs – or better, signifying routes generated by the relations among signs in the macroweb of semiosis, or semiosphere – emerge from the tension between determination and indeterminacy; between a particular configuration of the sign and its continual displacement, transformation and deferral to the other; this other being both imminent to the sign and external to it, transcendent with respect to any given instance of semiosis. The other – this surplus or excess – prevents the sign totality from closing in on itself and thereby invests it with the character of openness and potential for creative generation. Openness or detotalization of the sign totality is the precondition for questioning and criticism, for the possibility of evaluating the operations of the 'mind', of semiosis, as good or bad (pp. 39-40).

Otherness, therefore, is thoroughly grounded in the sign. This implies that human will is, at the very least, mediated – an agency that is compelled into compromise with circumstances. Yet, nascent semioethics still carries with it a voluntarist tinge derived from what Petrilli and Ponzio, following the lead of Levinas, call a "humanism of the other" (pp. 545-549). They insist that "the entire planet's destiny, in the final analysis, is

implied in the choices and behaviour of human beings" (p. 549). Moreover, they risk introducing further voluntarist overtones which seem at odds with the grounding of responsibility at the level of the sign, suggesting that "semioethics can be considered as proposing a new form of humanism" (p. 545).

Although Petrilli and Ponzio point out that their semioethics comprises a Levinasian "humanism of alterity" (p. 546), semioethics' tarrying with humanist principles offers a hostage to fortune. At present, Petrilli and Ponzio go some way to dispelling anthropocentrism and traditional humanism. Yet the pitfalls of Levinasian humanism may still prove unfortunate, despite Petrilli and Ponzio's worthy desire to avoid reasserting "humanity's (monologic) identity" (p. 547). The stress on the 'other' and, especially, *commitment* to the other, requires an even greater evacuation of semioethics' voluntaristic aspect than Petrilli and Ponzio have achieved so far.

The humanist imperative in respect of signs should in no way correspond to Petrilli and Ponzio's sign model. The former misconstrues the nature and limitations of agency in relation to sign-making; it re-casts sign making as an entirely voluntarist affair, an act of will in which signs are the result of acts of (individual) consciousness. This is precisely what Petrilli and Ponzio - in their embrace of biosemiotics, global semiotics and the notion of semioethics – seem to be tying to avoid. The humanist conceit is precisely symptomatic in the liberal conception of dialogue – a conception whose poverty Ponzio and Petrilli's work, individually and collaboratively, has been instrumental in demonstrating – where contact and 'communication' with the other is the result of a

choice, disposition or other individual act. For many, and in common parlance, dialogue retains the vanguardist hue whereby one reaches out to another or, in sociosemiotic terms, where the relations of motivation between signs and their users is supposedly subject to an act of will (see, for example, Schrag 2001: 125-6) . Petrilli and Ponzio's work seems to call for a disbelief in the phantom of the will in the face of the other's absolute demand.

Meditation on the other in the last two decades has been done to death by a host of commentators drunk on the possibilities of postmodernism served up in a cocktail of Levinas and Bakhtin. This work constitutes an important challenge to the dominant liberal perspective of such scholarship. I believe that the work represented in <u>Semiotics Unbounded</u> – carrying an influence that has hitherto been most prominent in non-Anglophone circles – is important and demands to be appreciated. Anglophone writing on Welby, Rossi-Landi and, even, Morris and Sebeok, remains unwarrantably scarce. But apprehending otherness through the prism of these thinkers amounts to an important pathfinding exercise for future semiotics. Despite the infelicities of emphasis which are inherent in finding paths, <u>Semiotics Unbounded</u> is an important manifesto for sign makers and users.

References

Deely, John (2005) <u>The Semiotic Animal: A Postmodern Definition of Human Being to Supersede the Modern Definition as "res cogitans"</u>, New Bulgarian University: Sofia.

Schrag, Calvin O. (2001) <u>Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity</u>, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press.

Sebeok, Thomas A. (2001) <u>Global Semiotics</u>, (= Advances in Semiotics), Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press.