

Rossi-Landi Interpreter of Morris

In Italy the only monograph on Charles Morris is that by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi in its two editions of 1953 and 1975; the latter reproduces the 1953 monograph without modifications, with the addition of a revised Italian version of "Signs about a master of sign". Therefore, the first part of the 1975 edition covers Morris up to 1946, and the second part, beyond observations concerning WGTS, returns to examining certain fundamental concepts in Morris' theory, as formulated in 1938 and 1946, in the light of more recent developments in twentieth century semiotics and of Rossi-Landi's own research. On the other hand, the novelty of this volume lies in the fact that it presents a complete bibliography of Morris' works, prepared by Rossi-Landi with the aim of offering a more comprehensive view of Morris' research itineraries.

Between these two editions of his monograph, Rossi-Landi published two major papers on Morris (in addition to the introduction to his translation of *Foundations*):

(a) His 1958 essay (written in 1956), "Universo di discorso e lingua ideale in filosofia" is dedicated to a confrontation between Gustav Bergmann and Morris. This paper continued to focus on Morris' two books of 1938 and 1946, though his new research was also mentioned—on the basis of information Rossi-Landi received from Morris through their correspondence (cf. Petrilli 19??)—with the expectation of new and original developments. Furthermore, Rossi-Landi announced the imminent publication of the long-awaited and important *Varieties of Human Value* (1956), the result of the "new empirical research on values, on which Morris has been working for more than a decade".

(b) His "Presentazione" of Morris' writings on esthetics, which he had translated into Italian for *Nuova corrente* in 1967; this piece was subsequently republished in 1972 in *Semiotica e ideologia* under the title "Sul modo in cui e stata fraintesa la semiotica estetica di Charles Morris". Here we simply wish to observe that in this paper Rossi Landi once again stresses the importance in Morris of value theory, reminding us of its presence in his work as far back as his 1939 essay on esthetic semiotics. At the time Morris had distinguished between three primary types of discourse: scientific, esthetic, and technological. According to Morris, any discourse proposing valuations was classifiable as technological discourse; consequently, insofar as it involved value judgments, esthetic criticism required not only a theory of signs (sufficient for esthetic analysis) but also a theory of values.

Finally, concerning Rossi-Landi's updated interpretation of Morris with respect to his 1953 monograph, we must return to his most recent essay on Morris, "On some post-Morrisian problems" first published in English in 1978, followed by German and Italian editions in 1981 and 1988, respectively. Though interesting from the viewpoint of the relation between Morris and Rossi-Landi, this essay is substantially a reworking of the English and Italian versions of Rossi-Landi's 1975 paper "Signs about a master of signs" in which Morris' concept of behavior is developed in relation to Rossi-Landi's own concepts of social reproduction and communication. Rossi-Landi underlines the importance of value theory in semiotics in this paper as well, both in Morrisian semiotics (given that Morris "dealt with values at least as much as he dealt with signs") and in semiotics at large as it was emerging in those years. In the section entitled "Signs and values", after recalling Morris' 1939 essay and his "Science, art and technology", published in that same year, and after mentioning his books *Paths of Life* (1942), *The Open Self* (1948), *Varieties of Human Value* (1956), and *Signification and Significance* (1964), Rossi-Landi makes the following observation:

Morris was thus placing values beside signs and opposing the idea that the mere study of signs could give any right to judge about values. Present-day discussions on the limits of structuralism, on the differences between analysis and evaluation, and on the relations between systems of signs and systems of values or ideologies tend to indicate that no

semiotic system, and the more so no text, can be completely understood and properly assessed unless the values it necessarily springs from, and conveys, are also taken into account. (1978: 9)

In his 1953 monograph on Morris, Rossi-Landi criticized the behavioral framework of SLB, which made of Morris' semiotics not only a theory of signs but also a biological science as distinct from philosophy. Rossi-Landi maintained that the reduction of semiosis to behavior, and therefore of semiotics to the study of sign behavior—where behavior is limited, in accordance with the dominant American tradition, to observable behavior—was already implicit in FTS.

In Rossi-Landi's view such a biological ring constituted the very limit of Morris' semiotics. He summed up his criticism in three propositions: (1) the science of behavior is founded on observation; (2) the condition of being a sign cannot be studied as the property of a thing that has become a sign; (3) there is no single criterion permitting a univocal distinction between nonsign behavior and sign behavior. Proposition (2) is further elaborated with another three propositions: (a) the property of being a sign can be attributed to anything whatsoever; (b) it is a property of investiture; (c) it is a property that comes in pairs. All this clarifies that a sign cannot be explained observationally. Rossi-Landi followed up the three main points of his criticism with another three specifications: (4) this does not mean accepting the mentalistic alternative; (5) it still remains to be seen whether a technique of sign activity is possible insofar as it is non-observational; (6) within certain limits it is possible to develop a sort of natural history of sign behavior on an observational basis. Expressed in more discursive terms, Rossi-Landi's criticism consisted in underlining the fact that the property of being a sign may be applied to physical objects and their representations as much as to such things as memories or sentiments: anything may become a sign. For sign property to be obtained a relation must be established between a thing and a significatum; but on his part Morris lost sight of this relation when he articulated sign behavior into response sequences. Rossi-Landi much preferred FTS to SLB from this viewpoint as well: in fact, in FTS Morris spoke of signs as "properties of things in their function of serving as signs" (Morris 1938c: 4), thereby recognizing that nothing is intrinsically a sign and that semiotics may study anything that participates in the process of semiosis. In his introduction to the Italian translation of FTS, Rossi-Landi (see 1954d) substantially repeated his critical assessments as they had been formulated in his 1953 monograph.

A step forward in Rossi-Landi's research on Morris is represented by his 1958 essay "Universo del discorso e lingue ideale in filosofia". Here Rossi-Landi's discussion of Morris' thought system and confrontation with Gustav Bergmann opens the way to questions that were to find a thorough theoretical treatment in Rossi-Landi's 1961 volume, *Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune*. In fact, the problem of the relation between behaviorism and sign theory is treated with reference to the question of the relation between "common speaking" and the "historical flux of language" on one hand, and to the historical languages and ideal or technical languages on the other. Morris' semiotics in 1946 proposed a technical language, and as such it was considered to be distinct from philosophy. On his part, instead, Gustav Bergmann had developed a philosophical conception of language which recalled certain aspects, subsequently abandoned, of Morris 1938. The limits of Morris' biologism largely stemmed from his "excessive trust" in the possibility of constructing a technical language. Though Rossi-Landi was substantially in agreement with Morris concerning the non-philosophical character of semiotics, to Morris he juxtaposed the more cautious approach of Bergmann, who posed as a problem—a philosophical problem also—the relation between "common speech" and ideal language. In short, in this essay of 1958 Rossi-Landi attempted an interpretation of the two principal phases of Morrisian semiotics in terms of "special", or "technical" or "ideal" languages specifically constructed to talk about signs, as well as in terms of the universe of discourse to which such special languages belong.

In his "Premessa" to the Italian translation of Morris' three pieces (see Morris 1967a) published in *Nuova corrente*, Rossi-Landi took a stand against the widespread equivocation concerning Morris' esthetic semiotics, specifying the following: (1) To speak of "semiotic esthetics" (and worse still given its even more reductive nature, of semantic esthetics) is a distortion. Rather, we should speak of "esthetic semiotics", or of a sign theory that is applicable to esthetics as well. (2) As anticipated above, esthetic criticism deals with both signs and values, and must therefore involve the two fields theorized by Morris, semiotics and axiology. (3) Finally, Morris' tripartite division of semiosis into syntax, semantics, and pragmatics should not be considered as a real distinction: on the contrary, it is the result of abstraction and is functional only for analysis. Bearing in mind that certain theoretical trends still maintain the ontological character of this distinction, the latter is the most important specification today.

In his 1975 essay, "Signs about a master of signs", Rossi-Landi discussed the historical-philosophical matrix of the three dimensions of semiotics theorized by Morris. In fact, if we consider the genesis of Morrisian semiotics, says Rossi-Landi, going back at least to Morris' booklet of 1937, *Logical Positivism, Pragmatism, and Scientific Empiricism*, it is immediately clear that Morris was projecting the unification of methodological rationalism, radical empiricism, and critical pragmatism—three components that correspond to the three dimensions of semiotics: methodological rationalism is a syntactic inquiry; radical empiricism a semantic inquiry; critical pragmatism a pragmatic inquiry. Rossi-Landi adds:

All this may be surprising to anyone coming to semiotics without a taste of philosophico-historical culture, and accepting the tripartition of semiotics as a mere result of objective investigation carried out on signs. Instead, such "objective" investigation would not have been possible without the described confluence of different currents of thought. Objectivity is always a complex result, even if afterwards it may present itself to us as simple. (1975b: 161)

In this same essay, Rossi-Landi returned to the problem of the relation between sign and behavior, and did so within a sort of self-critical theoretical framework. Having said, in 1953, that it was not possible to distinguish between sign behavior and nonsign behavior on the basis of bio-psychological behavioristics, Rossi-Landi realized that so expressed the implication then was that such a distinction was in any case possible. Instead, in 1975, he clearly asserted the impossibility of distinguishing *tout cours* between sign behavior and nonsign behavior—the fundamental reason being that we cannot have behavior without communication. Furthermore, in this paper, Rossi-Landi repeated his conviction that Morris' *Foundations* deserved consideration more than his *Signs, Language and Behavior*, and that the foundations of semiotics, especially as an eminently social science, could possibly be located in behavioristic psycho-biology.

Rossi-Landi often returned to Morris, developing his thought system in relation to his own theoretical works. Indeed, as stated by the same Rossi-Landi (1988), his interests and studies with respect to such authors, beyond Morris, as Ryle, Wittgenstein, and Vailati have always been of a theoretical order, while his books and papers have always dealt with specific problems. Rossi-Landi's references to Morris recur in his 1961 book, *Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune*. He returned in particular to certain problems that had already been treated in his 1958 essay, and precisely to the concept of "universe of discourse", reporting a personal communication—the exchange of letters of December 27, 1955 and January 10, 1956 (cf. Petrilli 1992c)—in which Morris specified the three significations according to which the notion of universe of discourse might find application: (1) Delimitation of an area of the Universe which is to be talked about; (2) delimitation of the language to be used; (3) a combination of the above two (cf. Rossi-Landi 1998: 65).

Rossi-Landi developed this problem still further in 1961 with his proposal to push ahead with respect to what Morris himself had succeeded in grasping of the signifying process (1998: 193), while at the same time taking up two fundamental points from the master: (1) that meanings are not

entities detached from the real processes of communication and interpretation (1998: 177); and (2) that the three dimensions of the signifying process or of semiosis identified by Morris are inseparable.

After complete silence on Morris in his book of 1968 *Language as Work and Trade*, Rossi-Landi continued working on him in his 1972 collection of essays *Semiotica e ideologia*, in which he uses Morris as a major reference point for the development of his own sign model as well as in determining the boundaries of the semiotic field generally. Morris' contribution was invaluable to Rossi-Landi for the distinction between semiotics and its reductive identification with semantics, as well as in supporting his material and dialectical interpretation of the Peircean sign model, which in the words of Rossi-Landi "is taken up and proficuously simplified by Charles Morris" (1994: 305). In *Semiotica e ideologia*, Rossi-Landi (1994: 116) also referred to Morris' master, George H. Mead, with the intention of granting him the merit of having already studied merchandise in communicative terms in his early 1934 book, *Mind, Self, and Society* (edited by Morris in a new edition of 1965). In addition, Rossi-Landi (1994: 197) also granted Mead the further merit of having understood that mind must be explained in terms of signs rather than explaining signs in terms of mind ontologically intended.

The republication of his 1953 monograph in a new edition of 1975 testifies to the renewal of Rossi-Landi's interest in Morris, whose name also reappeared in his more recent papers as collected in his book of 1985, *Metodica filosofica e scienza dei segni*. In this volume, Rossi Landi brings our attention to Morris in relation to the concepts of *interpretant* and *denotatum*. His ongoing dialogue with the "master of signs" never fails to be both critical and constructive, as when, for example, Rossi-Landi (1985a: 152) introduces the terms *signans* and *signatum* to talk about signs, observing that Morris, like Saussure, had fallen prey to a misunderstanding concerning the relation between signans and signs, he had confused a part of the totality with the totality itself.

In Rossi-Landi the study of signs was to be more and more characterized as the study of social reproduction, with respect to which the concept of social practice is fundamental. Here we shall limit ourselves to underlining that though the notion of social reproduction was originally derived from Hegel and Marx, behaviorism as intended by both Mead and Morris was also to play an important role in Rossi-Landi's theories, if only because the notion of "social practice" has, as clearly stated by Rossi-Landi himself (1978), a certain Morrisian flavor.

In the words of Rossi-Landi (in Morris 1938, It. trans.: xix): "After his Foundations, Morris' research developed in two different directions. One consists in elaborating the notion of sign and a general sign theory [...]the other deals with the problem of value" (trans. from Italian by S.P.).

Rossi-Landi continued his "dialogue" with Morris in his 1978 essay, "On some post-Morrisian problems", which, as mentioned, for the most part repeats his viewpoint as expressed in "Signs about a master of signs". However, in 1978 he proposed a particularly important novelty which deserves special attention: his reinterpretation of Morris' behaviorism in terms of "social practice", a concept on which Rossi-Landi worked throughout his lifelong research.