

Sebeok's Doctrine of Signs as Global Semiotics

Thomas A. Sebeok may be counted among the figures who have contributed most to the establishment of semiotics, and in particular to its configuration as an interdisciplinary perspective. His work is largely inspired by Charles S. Peirce, but as he declares in an interview released to me in 1987 (now in Sebeok 1991b:95-105), his *maîtres à penser* also include such figures as Charles Morris and Roman Jakobson, of whose work he may be considered a student and continuator. His numerous and diversified research interests cover a broad range of territories, from the natural sciences to the human sciences. He is concerned with theoretical issues and their applications viewed from as many angles as the disciplines that come into play in his research: linguistics, cultural anthropology, psychology, artificial intelligence, zoology, ethology, biology, medicine, robotics, mathematics, philosophy, literature, and narratology, etc. Even though the initial impression might be that Sebeok proceeds rather erratically in his coverage of such a great multiplicity of different fields, which would seem distant from each other as he experiments varying perspectives and embarks on differing research ventures, in reality the broad scope of his research comes together in the focus on his "doctrine of signs", and finds an explanation in a fundamental conviction subtending his general research method: the entire universe is perfused with signs, indeed, as Peirce hazards, is perhaps composed exclusively of signs. In what may be defined as a "global" or "holistic" approach to sign studies, Sebeok stretches his gaze over the whole universe insofar as it teams with information, messages, signifying processes; a universe which is characterized, as he never tires of repeating, as a fact of signification long before becoming a fact of communication (for one of his most recent statements in this sense, cf. Sebeok 1994). And as he playfully puts it in a text of 1990 "Semiotic and communication" (Sebeok 1990b: 391): "The world is composed entirely of signs, and therefore, I think of the whole world as my oyster; whereas for some people only the human world, and then only a small portion of that, is their oyster".

Sebeok's research into the "life of signs" may be immediately associated with his concern for the "signs of life". Indeed, a fundamental conviction supporting his research runs as follows: given that semiosis or sign behavior involves the whole living universe, a full understanding of the dynamics of semiosis may in the last analysis lead to a definition of life itself. In Sebeok's view semiosis and life coincide. Semiosis originates with the first stirrings of life on the planet, which leads to the formulation of an axiom he believes cardinal to semiotics: "semiosis is the criterial attribute of life" (Sebeok 1991b: 124), that is, "the criterial mark of all life is semiosis", which is accompanied by his second axiom, that is, "semiosis presupposes life" (Sebeok 1994). No wonder all the life sciences find a place in Sebeok's intellectual horizon, estimated in their importance for a full understanding of signs and their workings in the terrestrial "biosphere" (cf. Vernadsky 1926).

In Sebeok's view then, the universe is perfused with signs all interconnected and interdependent in a huge semiotic "network" or "web"—as expressed with an image lauded in 1975—while the sign science or semiotics represents the point of confluence and observation for studies on the life of signs and on the signs of life. His abductive approach to the analysis of the signifying material of the biosphere leads him to contemplate the whole universe *à la* Peirce as a sign in its global complexity. Indeed he recalls that for Peirce, the whole universe was itself a comprehensive global sign, "a vast representamen, a great symbol... an argument... necessarily a great work of art, a great poem... a symphony... a painting" (CP 5.119). Sebeok's studies are turned toward signs commonly covered by specialists from a great variety of different fields, viewed at one and the same time both in their specificity and interrelation: signs appertaining to "nature" and to "culture" ranging from human signs to animal signs, from verbal signs to nonverbal signs, from natural languages to artificial languages, from signs at a high level of plurivocality and dialogicality to univocal and monological signs, or better signals, signs in their varying degrees of indexicality, symbolicality and iconicity, signs of conscious life and of the unconscious. As a student of signifying processes,

Sebeok's attention is turned toward the whole universe which does not imply a claim to intellectual omnipotence, as some have intimated, but simply his profound awareness that signs are interdependent and relational, so that an understanding of any one particular type of sign—such as the verbal—is only possible in the light of its relation with other signs forming semiotic processes in the great sign network, in which the signs of nature and culture in Sebeok's ecumenical perspective are not considered as divided and separate but as interpretants of each other. As regards this last point, Sebeok explicitly states, polemicizing with major exponents of contemporary currents in semiotics today, that "to me, however, the imperium of Nature, or *Weltbuch*, over Culture, or *Bücherwelt*, has always been unmistakable. Only a patent theoretical basis was veiled to resolve what Blumenberg (1981:17) has called an 'alte Feindschaft' between these two semiotic systems, the latter obviously immersed in the former. This is why my 'rediscovery' of the *Umweltlehre* came as such a personal revelation" (Sebeok 1994).

Sebeok's global approach to sign life presupposes his critique of anthropocentric semiotic theory and practice which, instead, he opens to zoosemiotics or even more broadly to biosemiotics, on one hand, and to endosemiotics, on the other, as he explores the boundaries and margins of this science or, "doctrine" of signs, as he prefers to call it. The latter is at one and the same time recent for what concerns the determination of its status and awareness of its possibilities of extension, but ancient if we trace its roots, as does Sebeok, back to the theory and practice of Hippocrates and Galen (cf. Sebeok 1979a). The "semiotic doctrine", as conceived by Sebeok, is characterized with respect to other sign theories by a maximum broadening of competencies (it is interesting that with respect to his 1976 book, however, after almost twenty years he no longer considers the debate on whether semiotics is a "science", a "theory" or a "doctrine" of much consequence, as he states in his paper of 1994, *cit.*). The sign science, as Sebeok conceives it, includes not only the "science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale" (Saussure), that is, the study of communication in culture, but also the study of communicative behavior of a biosemiotic order, considered as the wider context, given that "biological foundations lie at the very epicenter of the study of both communication and signification in the human animal" (Sebeok 1976: x), and certainly not as a sphere separate from semiotics reductively identified with anthroposemiotics or semiotics of culture. The orientation of Sebeok's overall semiotic discourse is subtended by his promotion of the critique of anthropocentrism and therefore of glottocentrism, extensible to those trends in semiotics which look to linguistics for their sign model. Indeed, Sebeok's interest in cultural processes at the intersection between nature and culture induces him to take into consideration the research of such scholars as Konrad Lorenz and Jacob von Uexküll.

To free oneself from the anthropocentric perspective as it has characterized semiotics generally, implies taking into account other sign systems beyond those specific to mankind. Such systems are not alien to the human world even though they are not specific to it, and concern the encounter between human communication and the communicative behavior of nonhuman communities within the species and with the environment, in addition to the dominion of endosemiotics, that is, the study of cybernetic systems inside the body both on an ontogenetic and phylogenetic level. Sebeok's position succeeds in avoiding both the biologism involved in reducing human culture to communication systems traceable in other species as well as, viceversa, the anthropomorphic reduction of nonhuman animal communication to characteristic features and models specific to mankind. Consequently, Sebeok's doctrine of signs insists particularly on the autonomy of nonverbal sign systems with respect to the verbal, and such autonomy is demonstrated through the study of human sign systems which depend on the verbal only in part, in spite of the predominance of verbal language in the sphere of anthroposemiosis.

Sebeok's opening remarks to his book of 1979, *The Sign & Its Masters*, which he defines as "transitional" may be extended to the whole of his research, if we consider it in the light of the

present situation in philosophico-linguistic and semiotic debate characterized by the transition from "code semiotics", that is, semiotics centered on linguistics, to "interpretation semiotics", which differently from the former, accounts for the autonomy and arbitrariness of nonverbal signs whether "cultural" or "natural". Through his panorama of problems and masters of signs, Sebeok evidences aspects that differentiate these two different modalities of practising semiotics, which may be expressed, to simplify, with two names—Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce: the study of signs is in "transit" from the first to the second of these two positions as represented by these two emblematic figures, and indeed may now be said to have largely shifted toward Peirce.

Sebeok's previous book of 1976, *Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs*, is strongly theoretical in character and clearly expresses his preference for the semiotics of interpretation, while *The Play of Musement*, a collection of papers published in 1981, explores the efficacy of semiotics as a methodological tool and extensibility in more discursive and applicative terms. In both cases, Sebeok sets his interpreters before a position that is consolidated and rooted in his theoretical formation, while *The Sign & Its Masters* proposes all the diverse possibilities ensuing from one or the other of these two semiotic alternatives. In fact, in addition to being a compact theoretical book, *The Sign & Its Masters* also has the merit of offering a survey of the various alternatives, positions and phases historically incarnated in important scholars directly or indirectly dealing with the problem of signs. Sebeok's research transforms us into the direct witnesses and interpretants of the (abductive) passages of a discourse that considers, expounds, tests and evaluates different possibilities not only in the choice of an appropriate method for semiotic research but also in identifying one's own object of analysis and specific disciplinary field. In this sense, this particular book, but in reality the overall orientation of Sebeok's research, is transitional given that it significantly contributes to the shift toward interpretation semiotics definitively freed from its subordination to (Saussurean) linguistics. (In Italy, for a sign theory wholly oriented in the direction of "interpretation semiotics" and completely free from false dichotomies, such as communication semiotics vs signification semiotics, referential semantics vs nonreferential semantics, cf. Bonfantini 1981; Ponzio 1985a).

I Think I Am a Verb of 1986 is the fourth book of a tetralogy, the other three being those just mentioned: *Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs*, *The Sign & Its Masters*, and *The Play of Musement*. Ever since, other important volumes have followed in rapid succession and include: *Essays in Zoosemiotics*, 1990, *A Sign is Just a Sign*, 1991, *American Signatures*, 1991, *Semiotics in the United States*, 1991, and *Come comunicano gli animali che non parlano*, 1998 (without forgetting important earlier volumes such as *Perspectives in Zoosemiotics*, of 1972, and many others under his editorship including *Animal Communication*, 1968, *Sight, Sound, and Sense*, 1978, and *How Animals Communicate*, 1979). Without continuing this list of publications, it will suffice to remember that Sebeok has been publishing since 1942 so that his writings may be viewed as the expression of his ongoing research and reflexion constantly enriched with new information and documentation, conducted over more than half a century, as the interpreter of a semiotic universe whose variegated and multifaceted consistency he has substantially contributed to manifesting. Furthermore, a part from the fact that almost all Sebeok's books are now available in Italian translation, beyond English and Italian Sebeok may also be read in a surprising range of other languages including German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Serbo-Croatian, Norwegian, Hebrew as well as the Asian languages such as Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese.

Given its variety and breadth of interest, *I Think I Am a Verb* acts as a point of confluence and launching pad for the irradiation of new research itineraries in the vast region of semiotics. The title of this particular volume reevokes the dying words of the 18th President of the United States, Ulysses Grant, made to ring with Peircean overtones. In fact, in Peirce's view man is a sign, and

Sebeok's choice of a verb instead of a noun to characterize this sign (which is not only each one of us, but the whole universe in its globality) serves to underline the dynamic, processual character of semiosis. A fundamental point in Sebeok's doctrine of signs is that living is sign activity so that to maintain and reproduce life and not only to interpret it at a scientific level necessarily involves the use of signs. Sebeok theorizes an immediate connection between the biological and the semiotic and, therefore, between biology and semiotics. All his research would seem to develop Peirce's conviction that man is a sign: and it would seem that Sebeok is adding that this sign is a verb: to interpret. And in Sebeok's particular conception of reality, the activity of interpreting coincides with the activity of life, and referring to himself, with his own life. If I am a sign, as Sebeok would seem to be saying through his life as a researcher, then nothing that is a sign is alien to me—*nihil signi mihi alienum puto*; and if the sign, situated as it is in the interminable chain of signs, cannot avoid being an interpretant, then "to interpret" is the verb that can best help me know who I am.

Sebeok is very distant from the narrow spaces to which Saussure wished to confine the sign science by limiting his attention to the signs of human culture, and still more reductively, to signs produced intentionally for communication. He obviously does not wish to leave aside any aspect of sign life, just as he is never content with limits of any sort placed on semiotics, whether contingent or deriving from epistemological conviction. At the same time, contrary to what could be a first impression, Sebeok's attitude discourages any eventual claim on the part of semiotics to the status of scientific or philosophical omniscience, of exhaustive knowledge with a capacity for solving all problems. My personal conviction is that Sebeok's very awareness of the vastness of the territories to be explored and of the variety and complexity of the questions to be analyzed, confers a sense of prudence, of extreme problematicity and also of humility on all interpretations advanced not only in the treacherous territory of signs, but above all in the still more deceptive sphere of the signs of signs in which semiotic work is immersed.

In Italy long before Umberto Eco defined semiotics as the discipline that studies lying, Giovanni Vailati realized that signs may be used for deviating and deceiving and in fact entitled his review of Prezzolini's *L'arte di persuadere* "Un manuale per bugiardi" (A handbook for liars). This aspect of Vailati's studies is analyzed by Augusto Ponzio in a paragraph entitled "Plurivocità, omologia, menzogna" (Plurivocality, homology, lying), in a chapter of his monograph on Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (cf. Ponzio 1988), centered on the relation between Vailati and Rossi-Landi (cf. also Vailati 1987). Sebeok also evokes Vailati in relation to Peirce in his paper "Peirce in Italia" of 1982). He describes the nonisomorphic character of signs with respect to reality, representing another leitmotif in his research: the use of signs for fraud, illusion and deception, their capacity for masking and pretence.

Deception, lying, and illusion are forms of behavior which a semiotician like Sebeok interested in signs wherever they appear cannot resist. He is fascinated by the signs of the magician, for example, and he constantly returns to forms of behavior and situations of the Clever Hans type, the horse which presumably knew how to read and write, but which in reality was an able interpreter of signals communicated to it by its trainer either inadvertently or as an attempt at fraud.

It seems to me that there are two main reasons for Sebeok's focus on the capacity for lying in the animal world. The first concerns his intention of unmasking pretence in certain cases, or of undermining illusions in others, relatively to the possibility of making animals "talk" in the literal sense, that is, in the sense of extending to animals a characteristic that is species-specific to mankind. Sebeok has often contributed to semiotic debate with discussions, documentation and even parody (cf. "Averse Stance," in Sebeok 1986) to demonstrate the impossibility of homologizing human verbal language and animal language. The second reason arises from the fact that if signs do not belong exclusively to the human world, but to nonhuman animals too as

evidenced by studies in zoosemiotics, and given that to use signs also means knowing how to lie, then the fascinating problem of whether animal lie as well must necessarily be considered.

The world of signs, however, is not only the world of deception, but also of other practices—no doubt connected with the former—such as playing, using symbols and making gifts. The fact that nonhuman animals use signs implies that all such practices, mostly considered as the prerogative of "culture", may also be traced in the nonhuman animal world. In their studies on signs, researchers often insist too strongly or too exclusively on the functions carried out by signs, Sebeok, on the contrary, highlights the importance of sign activity as an end in itself, as a sort of idle turning of semiotic mechanisms. This aspect of Sebeok's research is not limited to ritual behavior which in both human and nonhuman animals may be considered as excess behaviour as regards specific functions and aims. Verbal language too which is most often than not interpreted in the light of its communicative function, is in fact better understood in terms of play and of the human propensity for fantasizing and daydreaming (examined by Morris, for example, in "Mysticism and Its Language", 1957, being a rather unusual paper for those who identify Morris' work with his books of 1938 and 1946, and which I have included in Italian translation in *Segni e valori*, 1988, a collection of writings by Morris) and, therefore, of such operations as predicting the future or "traveling" through the past, thereby constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing reality, inventing new worlds and interpretive models. Let us remember that the happy expression, *The Play of Musement.*, is the title of one of Sebeok's books. In an article of 1988 entitled "Semiosis and semiotics: What lies in their future?" (originally written on invitation from Norma Tasca, representing the Associacao Portuguesa de Semiotica, for the Portuguese journal *Cultura e Arte*, now available in *A Sign is Just a Sign* (1991), and published in Italian as a supplement to the 1990 Italian edition of *I Think I Am a Verb*), Sebeok avers that

Semiotics [...] simply points to the universal propensity of the human mind for reverie focused specularly inward on its own long-term cognitive strategy and daily maneuverings. Locke designated this quest as a search for 'Humane understanding'; Peirce, as 'the play of musement'. (1991b: 97)

And indeed, as Peirce had already demonstrated, the inferential mechanism allowing for the qualitative development of knowledge, what Peirce called "abduction", is fundamental to play and fantasy, to the practices of simulation. In the words of Sebeok:

the central preoccupation of semiotics is an illimitable array of concordant illusions; its main mission to mediate between reality and illusion—to reveal the substratal illusion underlying reality and to search for the reality that may, after all, lurk behind that illusion. This abductive assignment becomes, henceforth, the privilege of future generations to pursue, insofar as young people can be induced to heed the advice of their elected medicine men (Sebeok 1986:77-78).

And to show how the unconscious aspect of sign behavior exceeds the intentional symbolic order precisely oriented according to functions and ends, Sebeok also refers to the problem of dreaming, to what Freud called "oniric work".

The lack of functionality, forms of unproductive consumption, of dissipation are identified by Sebeok as entropic phases necessary to the development of life on earth: it is as though life is in continual need of—indeed is founded on—death in order to reproduce and maintain itself. The implications of such a statement in the different approaches to the philosophy of history are numerous; for what concerns sign theory, the consequence is that the semiotic chain is subject to loss, to gaps, to the annulment of sense which implies that a sort of anti-material must also be necessarily postulated in relation to sign material.

In *Semiotics in the United States* Sebeok analyzes U.S. semiotics at three different levels which though closely interrelated are easily singled out. At the *first* level he surveys the various theoretical

trends, perspectives, problems, fields, specializations and institutions characterizing U.S. semiotics, both in a synchronic and a diachronic perspective. As regards the latter, Sebeok takes on the difficult task of reconstructing the origins of American semiotics, which he seeks in discourse fields that were not yet connoted as semiotics at the time and which in certain cases are still considered as either only marginally associated with semiotics or completely distant from it. The *second* level is theoretico-critical. Sebeok takes a stand with respect to various problems in semiotics: problems of a general order concerning, for instance, the delimitation of the field of semiotics or the construction of a general sign model; and problems of a more specific order concerning the various sectors and subsectors of the science, or "doctrine of signs" (as he also likes to call it). The impression, which Sebeok would seem to confirm here and there, is that this more problematic level sets the perspective for the whole volume completing the first level and stopping it from limiting itself to pure historical description. The *third* level is connected to the second in the sense that while developing and illustrating his theoretical views, Sebeok colors them with more personal overtones, often delightful biographical anecdotes. There are very few pages in *Semiotics in the United States* in which Sebeok does not figure as one of the characters populating the (hi)story, episodes, and enterprises of his narration. This is largely because of his surprising and perhaps unprecedented involvement in the organization and promotion of the semiotic science at a world level, a cause to which he has been committed since the gradual emergence of semiotics as a discipline in its own right. Sebeok has been in direct contact with many of the authors mentioned in his volume and has many "memories" of his personal experiences with them, which have found their way into his description of the problems and orientations characterizing the semiotic globe.

With reference to these three shaping factors, the other one of Sebeok's books which would seem to come closest to *Semiotics in the United States* is *The Sign & Its Masters*. Here the historical, theoretico-critical and anecdotal threads of Sebeok's discourse come together and interweave even more than in his other books, even though the autobiographical aspect is never lacking. All the same, *Semiotics in the United States* may also be related to *I Think I Am a Verb* where autobiographical motivations are not lacking for his choice of some of the topics, authors and personalities cited, including the eighteenth U. S. President, Ulysses S. Grant, whose words inspired the volume's title.

Something that is immediately noticeable in the work of this great master of signs is his approach, which I would not hesitate to characterize as dialogic and polyphonic in the Bakhtinian sense. Sebeok acts as a promoter of dialogue among signs, among the different orders of signs, that is among the different interpretive practices and discourse fields, and among the "masters" of signs, including those who have never been in any form of direct contact with each other, or who did not even know they were dealing with signs (his "cryptosemioticians"). Even Peirce—who had been forced to work in isolation having been excluded from academic life—, had had occasion to write (in a letter to Victoria Lady Welby of December 2, and very much in accord with her own views) that "after all philosophy can only be passed from mouth to mouth, where there is opportunity to object & cross-question" (cf. Hardwick 1977: 44). And, as his long teaching career and constant involvement in the promotion of the "community of inquirers" would seem to demonstrate, Sebeok too attaches much importance to the continuity of dialogic exchange. Indeed, as says Iris Smith (cfr. Sebeok 1991b: 6) in her introduction to Sebeok's book of 1991, *American Signatures: Semiotic Inquiry and Method*, his own peculiar way of living his condition as an intellectual testifies to the fact that "individual reflection must be measured against the reflections of others".

The "play of musement" activating Sebeok's research is so free from common place prejudice that, as mentioned, on reposing the question whether life and semiosis coincide, he risks the hypothesis that the end of life does not necessarily imply the end of semiosis: with some probability sign processes building unlimited interpretants might continue in machines independently of

humans. This Orwellian conclusion—clearly formulated by Sebeok in his aforementioned paper "Semiosis and Semiotics: What Lies in their Future?"—, which plays with the hypothesis of the machine as the unique place for the workings of the "life of signs", however we wish to play on the word "life" and on the word "signs", no doubt proposes a sort of negative utopia which from one viewpoint, however partial and limited considering the limits of the human condition, is surely a form of nonlife and, therefore, of absence of signs. To conclude playfully, we could propose an autobiographical reading of this message and interpret it as the expression of the desire of the "semiotician" as distinct from the man, that semiotics should continue after Sebeok!.