

Semiotics in Italy from the mid 1970s onward

Semiotics from Decodification to Interpretation

Italian semiotics has largely been influenced by what we may generally call the Saussurean sign conception, inclusive of such trends as that established, for example, by the Prague Circle or by the work of Louis Hjelmslev. But parallel to this influence, or interfering with it, another very strong influence is represented by American semiotics. We could cite Ferruccio Rossi-Landi's monograph of 1953 on Morris, and going back still further, the 1949 Italian translation by Silvio Ceccato of Morris's 1946 *Signs, Language and Behavior*, which appeared just three years after the publication of the original English edition. But even before this, between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Peirce's pragmatism had already exerted a strong influence on philosophy of language in Italy through Giovanni Vailati (for a flashback on the origins of Italian semiotics, see Rossi-Landi 1988).

Two books by Umberto Eco—*A Theory of Semiotics* of 1975 and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* of 1984—may be viewed as expressions of this transition. However, Italian semiotics is rich with many other problems and perspectives beyond the Saussurean influence or even the Peircean, which renders the semiotic scene during the years under discussion rather complex and varied. We are alluding to such factors as the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, the rediscovery of Victoria Welby, and the pioneering work inaugurated in the early 1950s by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi.

There are two main reasons for beginning our description with the second half of the 1970s. First, 1975 saw the publication of Eco's *Trattato di semiotica generale*, which may be taken as the point of arrival of the initial phase in Italian semiotics and the point of departure of current orientations which are strongly Peircean as compared with the previous phase. (It is no coincidence that the second edition of Rossi-Landi's 1953 monograph on Charles Morris also appeared in 1975.) Second, the development of Italian semiotics up to 1975 has already been thoroughly examined by Augusto Ponzio in *La semiotica in Italia* (1976), this paper being the beginning of a possible continuation.

The recent ferment in critical thought and theory in Italy should be seen in the context of intellectual developments at the European and world levels, and in relation to various fields. Such interconnections have led to the flourishing of such a great multiplicity of semiotic methodologies, theories, and practices that to speak of the "adventures" of the sign is doubtlessly appropriate (cf. Ponzio 1990a: part 1). Furthermore, semiotic studies have developed interdependently on the vertical axis of historiographical reconstruction, with numerous contributions tracing the life of signs through ancient and medieval thought (cf. Corvino et al. 1982; Eco 1984; Manetti 1987; Ponzio ed. of Peter of Spain 1986 [1230?]; Ponzio 1985c; *Versus* 15, 1976; *Versus* 50/51, 1988), and on the horizontal axis populated by the dissemination of the various specific semiotics. For this reason, one of the best ways to form an idea of the nature and extension of semiotics in Italy today is to consider the great variety of orientations, methods, viewpoints, and objects of analysis.

Two useful volumes which work in this direction include: *Dove va la semiotica?* (1986), edited by Gianfranco Marrone, and *La semiotica letteraria italiana* (1982), edited by Marin Mincu. Both are collections of interviews with various scholars, but they differ in that the first looks toward international semiotics, thereby offering an important point of confrontation for developments in Italian semiotics, while the second focuses on a specific area in semiotics as it is practiced in Italy—i.e., literary semiotics—thereby verifying on a national scale the various critical and theoretical currents present at an international level. In addition to these as well as Ponzio's book of 1976, other noteworthy publications from the mid 1970s onward include: Calabrese and Mucci 1975; Garroni

1977; Eco 1979, 1984; Bettetini e Casetti 1986; Ponzio 1988b; and Marrone and Ruta 1989; Calabrese, Ponzio, Petrilli 1993.

In the framework of the present overview, to narrate the Italian "semiotic adventure" of the past fifteen years means to "narrate" it in the first person and on the basis of the experience of a single individual. This inevitably implies recourse to precise methodological choices (given the characteristics of the discourse genre we are using), and a channeling of the great plurality of semiotic experiences into a single viewpoint. Nonetheless, while recognizing the limitations of a first person narration, the presence of a single voice on a formal level does not necessarily imply univocality and monologism on a substantial level. Should this be the overall effect of the present paper, the result can only be imputed to my own limitations, since the "object" of semiotics is unquestionably plural and polyphonic. The semiotic science is composed of many voices, logic, perspectives, and objects of analysis which all frequently interconnect on the basis of relations that are substantially dialogic. This also emerges from the widely supported proposal of describing semiotics as a "multidisciplinary" or "interdisciplinary" field, or even in terms of "interdisciplinary dissemination", rather than more reductively as a discipline in its own right (cf. Petrilli 1991a). Already in the title of his 1984 book, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Eco significantly associates general semiotics with philosophy. Indeed, for a fuller understanding of the specificity of semiotic discourse, it is important to look at semiotics through the eyes of philosophy, and particularly of the philosophy of language (which is not only verbal "language").

Bearing in mind the sign's orientation (by contrast with the signal) toward plurivocality, polylogism, and multivoicedness, and therefore its ability to adapt to new and different situational contexts, we soon realize how important it is to use the right models and methodologies in explaining just these values—i.e., plurivocality, polylogism, multivoicedness, semantic flexibility, etc.—in the science of signs, rather than to expect to force the great variety of sign phenomena into monolithic and unitary thought systems. This occurs, however, when we privilege such categories as "code" and "message", "*langue*" and "*parole*", "collective unitary system" and "differential individual use", typical of decodification semiotics or "code and message" semiotics (cf. Bonfantini 1984) as developed from a distorted approach to Saussurean linguistics and information theory. We are alluding here to the tendency—whose limits today are obvious—to describe the communication process reductively in terms of an object in transit from one place to another. A critique of this orientation had in fact already been formulated by Rossi-Landi in his 1961 book, *Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune*, where he describes the decodification approach with ironical overtones as the "postal package theory"; in other words, Rossi-Landi underlines the fact that decodification semiotics reduces messages to the status of packages sent from one post office and received by another. His position is developed by Ponzio in a 1984 paper, "Semiotics between Peirce and Bakhtin" (now in Ponzio 1990a: 251-273). As alluded to in the title, Ponzio establishes a connection between Peirce's interpretation semiotics (which places the sign in the global context of semiosis and of the relation with the interpretant) and Bakhtin's philosophy of language (according to which a sign can only subsist as a sign in the context of dialogism). The "new" model of sign which emerges from this description is at last free from the underlying assumptions of so-called "code and message", or "decodification", or "equal exchange" semiotics.

The "official" date of birth of semiotics in Italy is commonly (though erroneously) considered to be 1966 (cf. for example Bettetini and Casetti 1986)—that is, the year of publication in Italian of Roland Barthes' *Elements de semiologie* (1964), largely accepted as the "manifesto" of the semiotic movement. This date entails neglecting a series of earlier studies as far back as the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth with Vailati whose approach to language analysis was influenced by Peirce's semiotics and pragmaticism (cf. Rossi-Landi 1988). Nonetheless, there is something significant in this error: the year 1966 is important in Italian

semiotics because of Barthes' proposal to invert the relation between linguistics and semiology as established by Saussure in *Cours de linguistique generale*. Apart from one's position regarding this issue (including incorrect interpretations of Barthes' inversion)—i.e., whether semiotics encompasses linguistics (Saussure) or vice versa (Barthes)—the success and dissemination of semiotics in Italy was wholly conditioned by its close association with linguistics, and in particular structuralist linguistics. At the same time, however, the wealth of theories and empirical researches of structuralist orientation characterizing the transition from the 1960s to the mid 1970s was also accompanied by a critique of structuralism, thereby creating a need for new solutions.

From the mid 1970s onward, Peirce's intellectual inheritance began to be more substantially remembered and considered as a fundamental point of reference not only in Italy (cf. Bonfantini, Eco, Proni, Sini, etc.), but throughout the world. As regards Italy, an international conference on Peirce was held for the first time in November 1990 in Naples, representing a climax in the recovery of Peircean semiotics in this country. Considering that, in Italy, studies in semiotics began with an interest in Peirce and subsequently in Morris (whose epochal 1938 volume, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, was translated into Italian in 1954), we might see this "new phase" of the mid 1970s as a return to the research of the 1950s after a decidedly "Saussurean phase", and therefore a return to the minor Italian tradition such research recalls.

Semiotics today may be described as transcending the phase designated as decodification (or, if we prefer, code, or equal exchange) semiotics (cf. Bonfantini 1984: 28ff), with its subdivision into communication semiotics (Saussure, Buyssens, Prieto) and signification semiotics (Barthes 1964), and as working in the direction of so-called interpretation semiotics (Peirce, Bakhtin, Barthes, etc.). The categories developed by decodification semiotics have often proven to be reductive, especially when applied in such areas as discourse analysis, writing, and ideology; on the contrary, interpretation semiotics accounts better for signifying processes in all their complexity thanks to its theories of sense, significance, and interpretability (*interpretanza*, as Eco says—cf. 1984: 43), and therefore to its broad, flexible, and critical conception of the sign.

To describe sign processes as the ongoing deferral of interpretants in an unending chain-like formation leads to the necessity of considering the terms and sense of this deferral—that is, the problem of "the limits of interpretation", as expressed in the title of Eco's 1990 book. Eco proposes two concepts of interpretation: on one hand, to interpret means to consider the objective nature of a text, its essence, its independence relatively to the effort of interpretation; on the other hand, we have a concept of the text as something open to infinite interpretation in a process tagged as "hermetic semiosis". Eco is critical of the latter and maintains that, despite appearances, it proposes something altogether different from the Peircean theory of "unlimited semiosis". The main object of his criticism is Jacques Derrida's notion of "infinite deferral" as it is developed by "deconstructionism". And to show how the concept of "infinite drift" in Derrida, and above all in the deconstructionists, is different from Peirce's "infinite semiosis", Eco refers to the Peircean notion of "habit", which, being fixed by community convention, underlines the intersubjective character of interpretation (see Eco 1990: 350).

Eco's specifications concerning the Peircean notion of "unlimited semiosis" may be associated with the dialogic character of interpretation as theorized by the philosopher of dialogism, Mikhail Bakhtin. Thanks to Bakhtin, we are today in a position to recognize that the relationship among interpretants is essentially dialogic (i.e., the logic binding interpretants is a dia-logic; cf. Bonfantini and Ponzio 1986). This implies that an interpretant sign cannot impose itself arbitrarily on the interpreted sign; that is, it does not relate to the interpreted sign authoritatively or unconditionally. To understand the Peircean chain of interpretants in terms of dialogism means to escape the risk of considering the interpretation process as being equivalent to a free reading in which the will of the

interpretants (and with them of the interpreters) beats the interpreted "into a shape which will serve their own purposes" (cf. Eco 1990: 42). This makes the association between Peirce's position and Bakhtin's even more interesting (cf. Ponzio 1990a).

Studies in the field of semiotics of literature are particularly effective in illustrating the inadequacy of reducing sign value to exchange value. The expression "of literature" is here intended as a subject genitive (cf. Ponzio 1986); in other words, literature stands to semiotics in the sense that the sign is considered from the viewpoint of literature—of the unfunctionality, unproductivity, and excess of literature as regards the logic of equal exchange—and not in the sense that prefixed models and categories are applied to literature. In this connection, the research of such authors as Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, and Mikhail Bakhtin has exerted considerable influence on Italian studies. The following oppositional pairs of concepts help underline the difference in semiotic theory and practice of the 1960s by comparison with the 1970s and 1980s: "static nature of sign" and "dynamic nature of semiosis", "univocality" and "plurivocality", "monologism" and "polylogism", "monolingualism" and "plurilingualism", "identity" and "otherness", "equivalence" and "excess", "decodification" and "interpretation".

The association of Peirce's semiotics with Bakhtin's philosophy of language has not only helped to place the sign in the dynamic context of inference, interpretation, and dialogism, but also contributes to emphasizing still other aspects in the relation among signs in signifying practices. For example, Ponzio (1985a) proposes that we consider the meaning of signs, verbal and nonverbal, in terms of an interpretive route. This concept in fact proposes interesting solutions for a series of problems at the heart of current semiotic-philosophical debate. These include: the question of the plurivocality and ambiguity of signs; the relation of meaning and referent; the intersemiotic relation between signs which opposes the conception that signs and sign systems are reciprocally independent to the point of seeming autonomous; the relation of the signifier (sign vehicle, signans) and the signified (designatum, significatum, signification, signatum), with special focus on signifier excess with respect to the signified as determined in the interpretation process.

Ponzio describes meaning as a possible interpretive route in the sign network; a route that interweaves with other routes, with other meanings irradiating from the same sign. On moving away from a sign intersection, the sign may shift among the various alternative signifying routes, which accounts for the indeterminacy, openness, and semantic availability of signs, for their semiotic materiality (cf. Petrilli 1990b; Ponzio 1990a). Therefore signs find their place in the context of dialogic relations, which is determined by: (1) the relation of signs and interpretants, which in argumentation is (2) the relation between premises and conclusions (the latter is characterized by varying degrees of dialogism depending on whether we are dealing with deduction, induction, or abduction [Peirce]); (3) the relation between the multiple interpretants, verbal and nonverbal, constituting the open trajectory of an interpretive route; and (4) the relation among interpretants of different interpretive routes (cf. Ponzio 1985a, 1990a).

Signs, Values, and Ideology

Another aspect which has strongly emerged during the 1980s is the relation between semiotics and axiology, thanks also to the association with studies on ideology (Rossi-Landi offers a detailed analysis of the relation between sign value and economic value in his so-called Bompiani trilogy: cf. Rossi-Landi 1985, 1992, 1994; Ponzio 1988a). Greater efforts are now being made to recover and develop that particular bent in semiotics oriented toward questions of an axiological order. This involves a more global reconnaissance of man and his signs, which means that a significant feature of presentday trends in semiotics is this very extension of its boundaries to include the problem of the relation of signs and values. Until recent times official semiotics has mainly operated as a

cognitive science with claims to being neutral consequently emerging as a descriptive science. Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, sign theory had already been introduced to the problem of value with Saussure who adapted his theory of exchange value from marginalistic economics. Morris (1964) too underlined the need for examining the relation between signs and values. Going back still further toward the end of the last century, let us remember that Victoria Welby had already coined the term "significs" (cf. Welby 1983, 1985) in her effort to highlight the difference between her own approach to the study of signs and meaning and the predominantly cognitive orientation of contemporary trends in semantics and semiotics. A selection of her writings is now available in Italian translation in a booklet entitled *Significato, metafora, interpretazione* (1986). As far as the problem of value is concerned, we must also note the strong influence exerted in Italy by the school of Algirdas J. Greimas. Greimasian thought and its followers in Italy thematize the relation of signs and values with particular reference to developments in semiotics of passions (cf. Pezzini 1991).

An original chapter in Italian semiotics is offered by studies on semiotics and ideology, which go back at least as far as the 1960s. To analyze ideology semiotically is not simply a question of applying semiotical instruments to the study of ideology; even though signs can exist without ideology, ideology cannot exist outside a sign medium. Therefore we must study the ideological nature of signs where applicable, and the semiotic nature of ideology (which is constitutive of ideology), and in this perspective review our model of sign. Such an approach should also involve reflexion on the ideological nature of the science that studies ideology—in this case semiotics (cf. Ponzio 1991a, 1992b).

Rossi-Landi uses the concept of "social reproduction" articulated into three levels (structure, sign systems, and superstructure) to explain the dialectic relation of ideology and social structure. According to Rossi-Landi this relation is mediated by sign systems; the entire process of social reproduction is pervaded with ideology through sign systems. After a phase in which the problem of ideology seemed to have been ousted from semiotics (not only in Italy), it is now finally being reconsidered. The problem of the relation of semiotics and ideology is also linked to the relation of semiotics and Marxism. And in both *I Think I Am a Verb* (1986) and *Semiotics in the United States* (1991), Sebeok refers to studies carried out in Italy (with particular reference to Rossi-Landi and Ponzio) as possible examples of a critical and nondogmatic approach to the relation of semiotics and ideology, and semiotics and Marxism. Unfortunately, however, dogmatic approaches have often prevailed in this field, provoking a general neglect of important categories originally developed from Marx and present in various forms in the study of signs.

The Special Semiotics

Another issue which should at least be mentioned here concerns the relation between the specific semiotics, general semiotics, and philosophy. In Eco's opinion (1984), as grammars of particular sign systems, the specific semiotics need not concern themselves with philosophical reflection on the categories in which they are grounded, which does not mean denying their philosophical foundations. This statement is also made as a reply to Emilio Garroni (cf. Garroni 1977, and his polemic response to Eco in Mincu 1982), who takes the opposite stand. Garroni maintains that even though the specific semiotics may privilege empirical research, they must be fully conscious of the categories through which they operate. Cesare Segre (in Marrone 1986: 153-163) also believes that the so-called "specific semiotics" must deal directly with problems of a philosophical order, for they work within a specific theoretical framework and therefore at some stage must inevitably deal with the general problems of semiosis as well.

The practitioners of semiotics in Italy work in a great variety of different fields including esthetics, psychology, information theory, literary theory, literary criticism, philology, mathematics, biology,

etc., in addition to philosophy and linguistics. Semiotic theory has benefitted from the contribution of theories and methods imported from different territories, which in turn have been enriched through their use of semiotic instruments. In response to the request that he identify the major Italian representatives of semiotics and underline their originality with respect to other European schools, Eco (in Mincu 1982: 68) mentions the field of architecture, reflexion on iconic signs and on literature, the importance of philosophical speculation ("it was precisely in Italy that the transition was achieved from a structuralist semiotics of Saussurean derivation to a philosophical semiotics of Peircean derivation"), and the stronger characterization of Italian semiotics as social semiotics (with interesting grafting from Marxism) as compared for instance with French semiotics, which is decidedly oriented toward studies in psychology, with graftings from psychoanalysis.

Literary theory has shifted its attention from textual structure to the text considered in its historico-cultural context and in its dialectic-dialogic relations with the intertextual tradition. The rediscovery of Bakhtin, the theorizer of language and literature (cf. Ponzio 1992a), has been fundamental for developments in this direction, but we must also remember the research of Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky on the typology of culture, and more generally the notion of culture as developed by the Russian tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (cf. Avalle 1982; Prevignano 1979). As regards the relationship between Russian and Italian literary semiologists, Segre (in Marrone 1986: 161) recalls their common background as philologists or historians of literature.

Italian literary semiotics is deeply rooted in the great tradition of linguistics and philology. Segre explicitly attributes his own inclination toward literary criticism to his background studies in philology and linguistics, and states that good work in this area requires "a sense of the text, knowledge of the ways in which it is developed and diffused, recognition of the necessity of keeping account of all the facts and of historico-cultural precedents" (in Mincu 1982: 44). As underlined in the title of his 1979 book, *Semiotica filologica*, Segre believes that critical analysis and philology are always closely correlated and together produce the sign models he privileges.

In Italy, Giorgio Prodi's research (cf. 1977, 1982, 1983b) has taken a direction similar to Sebeok's. Prodi identifies the most significant connection between the natural sciences and the human sciences in the "contact" between biology and semiotics, which he believes may become a solid connection under the banner of "general semiotics". It is not a question of interdisciplinarity, altogether vain in most cases where it was attempted, nor of good relations among neighbouring corporations: but of a new language, a new unitary perspective that does not coincide with any of the perspectives from which the question arose. In short, it was a new way of outlining the problems of knowledge. On the basis of the assumption that human knowledge is grounded in the proposition of "being significant in relation to ...", and that the entire apparatus of knowledge focuses on the interpretation of meaning Prodi too, in line with Sebeok and using organismic metaphors that recall Welby's analyses of signifying processes (cf. Welby 1983), identifies the association of biology with semiotics in research on meaning:

We have observed that the deciphering of meaning is at the very root of all biological machines. All reactions and structures composing any organism whatever are decipherings of meaning and exist insofar as they produce selective actions in which each term is a sign for the reader who reads it. Biology is pure natural semiotics. Biological processes are "sign translations". The organism's capacity to survive over the environment is connected with the discrimination of significance in the environment: but this would not be possible if the organism itself were not defined, internally, as a confederation of meanings. (Prodi, in Marrone 1986: 122)

Even though the numerous trends, standpoints, and topics in Italian semiotics have only been briefly outlined in this paper, we hope to have at least given the reader some idea of the liveliness and ferment of Italian semiotic research with reference not only to Italy, but also to its reception internationally. No doubt Italian semiotics has felt the influence of what we have generically called

the Saussurean conception of the sign (comprising the work of the Prague Circle and of Hjelmslev); but parallel to this orientation, or complementing it, influences from other semiotic traditions including in particular the American and the Russian have also played a determining role on the Italian scene. Consequently, an important characteristic of Italian semiotics is its intimate association with the theories and practices of other countries.