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## **The Semiotic Animal**

*Understanding global communication in today's world. Global semiotics and semioethics (by Augusto Ponzio)*

With Thomas A. Sebeok and from the perspective of global semiotics and research in the domain of biosemiotics, we may posit that life and semiosis converge, that semiosis coincides with life – indeed may even extend beyond life, a hypothesis for the future to explore. Global semiotics has taught us that semiosis is a phenomenon that extends across the entire planet and that human semiosis is part of this global context.

For an adequate understanding of human semiosis, the globality of context must be taken into account with an attitude that is critical, creative and propositive. Attention must be focused on the life of reflection as much as on the life of action and values, with a view to the human propensity for responsibility, social planning and programs. From the perspective of human semiosis signs, actions and values are inextricably interconnected. Only in this global context can human semiosis be understood in a critical key, similarly to the special semioses produced in the sphere of anthroposemiosis, or more specifically anthroposociosemiosis.

Global semiotics provides us with the conceptual instruments that are necessary for a better understanding of global communication today.

The human being is part of the great biosemiosphere and as such is a semiosic animal like all other animals. However, the human being is also part of the anthroposociosemiosphere. Therefore in addition to being a semiosic animal the human being is also a semiotic animal., Differently from all other life forms, the human being is capable not only of semiosis but also of metasemiosis, of suspending the immediate flow of semiosis

and deliberating. Thanks to a primary modeling device endowed with syntactics, also called language, the semiotic animal is endowed with a capacity for criticism and creativity.

Consequently, the human being, a semiotic animal as such is capable of taking responsibility. Responsibility is understood here as responsibility for the other as opposed to responsibility connected with the egotistical interests of identities in the present context of socio-economical globalization.

Globalization understood in socio-economic terms is limited and short-sighted given that it is functional to sectorial and egotistical interests, paradoxical as this may seem. Instead, the semiotic perspective evidences the condition of reciprocal involvement and interrelatedness of all life forms over the planet. And the condition of interrelatedness implies that indifference towards the other, the tendency to oppress the other in the long run can only backfire on the oppressor.

Human beings are endowed with a capacity for responsibility understood as responsiveness and answerability towards the other – the other that in social, biological, ontological, and phenomenological terms may be more or less close, more or less distant. The semiotic animal is capable of a global perspective on semiosis and as such is responsible for the health of semiosis in its plurality and diversity over the entire globe.

As stated, global semiotics provides the conceptual instruments necessary for a *better understanding* of the global phenomenon that is communication today. However, with the expression 'better understanding' we wish to indicate not only understanding in theoretical terms but also involvement of moral conscience.

We propose the term 'semioethics' (Ponzio and Petrilli 2003) to name an approach or attitude we consider necessary today more than ever before in the context of globalization, for a better understanding of semiosis today – its implications, perspectives, the risks involved and responsibilities. By 'semioethics' we understand the propensity in semiotics to recover its ancient vocation as 'semeiotics' (or symptomatology), with its focus on symptoms. A major issue for semioethics is 'care for life' in a global perspective according to which semiosis and life coincide.

The semiotician today must be ready to interpret the symptoms of semiosis and its malfunctioning as produced by globalization in today's global communication-production society.

The world of global communication is the world of communication for production, profit, and reproduction of the same socio-economic system with all necessary means available, including war. The destructive character of global communication ('the destructive

character' is an expression used by Walter Benjamin in 1931 to describe the capitalist socio-economic system at the dawn of Nazism) is evident in the destruction of the environment, in the increase of poverty, in structural unemployment, in exploitation of the South of the world by the North, and in the unjust distribution of wealth between a quarter of the world population (in the developed world) and all the rest of the world population (in the underdeveloped world). The most powerful expression of the destructive character of capitalistic competition in its global communication-production phase is war. The world of global communication is the world of *infinite war*, of war to war. Life on the planet is in serious danger.

As global semiotics, general semiotics today must carry out a detotalizing function. In other words, general semiotics must conduct a critique of all (claims to the status of) totalities, including global communication. If general semiotics is not critical and does not adopt a detotalizing method it will be no more than a syncretic result of the special semiotics, a transversal language of the encyclopaedia of the unified sciences, prevarication of philosophy suffering from the will to omniscience with respect to the plurality of different disciplines and specialized fields of knowledge.

What we propose to call 'semioethics' must take the current phase in historico-social development as its starting point and proceed to analyze today's society rigorously and critically, therefore communication-production social structures, the communication-production relationships forming today's world. And given that the social forms of production in the current communication-production system have been mostly homogenized, semioethics is at an advantage. We could go so far as to make the claim that the whole planet is regulated by a single type of market, by a single form of production, by a single form of consumption, so that not only behavior, habits, fashions (including 'dress fashion'), but the imaginary, our capacity for the play of musement have all been severely homogenized. In today's dominant communication-production system difference understood in terms of otherness is substituted ever more by difference understood in terms of alternatives.

In the present situation of monologism, of closure of the universe of discourse, the critical task of semioethics is rendered extremely difficult, even impossible. The conceptual instruments necessary for the work of critique are not readily available. Semioethics needs categories that are not those of dominant ideology that contribute to misunderstanding our reality. The working hypotheses of semioethics do not derive from common sense or common knowledge and consequently cannot be taken for granted.

An understanding of world-wide global communication-production requires a perspective that is just as global, which the special sciences taken separately cannot provide. On the contrary, a global perspective is offered by global semiotics, the general science of signs or *semiotics* as it is taking shape today on the international scene thanks particularly to the work of Sebeok.

Global semiotics begins with the hypothesis that semiosis and life converge and focuses on the interconnection among signs. Its gaze moves from the protosemiosis of energy-information to the overall processes of the complexification of semiosis in the evolution of life over the planet. Interconnection and interdependence among signs consists in a *network* which, following Sebeok, extends from the Lilliputian world of molecular genetics and virology, to the man-size world of Gulliver and finally to the world of Brobdingnag, the gigantic biogeochemical ecosystem called Gaia.

A full understanding of global communication today implies a full understanding of the risks involved by global communication, including the risk that *communication itself may come to an end*. With this statement we are not just alluding to the risk of the subjective-individualistic phenomenon known as 'incommunicability', amply theorized and represented in film and literature, but far more radically to the risk that life itself may come to an end if we agree that life and semiosis, therefore life and communication converge. In light of the enormous potential for destruction in today's society by contrast with all other earlier phases in the development of the social system, the risk that life may come to an end on the planet earth should not be undervalued.

When analyzing communication today our approach must be as global as the problem under analysis. A global approach must not limit its attention to partial and sectorial aspects of the communication-production system as dictated by internal perspectives functional to the system itself; it must not be limited to psychological subjects, that is, to subjects reduced to the parameters imposed by the social sciences, subjects measurable in terms of statistics. Global communication-production calls for a methodological and theoretical perspective that is as global as the phenomenon under observation. Such a perspective will favour a better understanding of the logic of global communication-production and, therefore, our capacity for a *critique* of the system of social reproduction constructed upon such logic.

*Globalisation in socio-economic and in biosemiotic terms*  
(by Susan Petrilli)

Global communication in today's social reproduction system, in other words, global communication understood in the socio-economical sense connected with progress in technology and with the market, is only one aspect of communication in the great communication network involving life over the entire planet. All life forms may be analyzed in terms of dynamic sign systems. From a global semiotic perspective human life forms may be considered in the fundamental terms of biosemiosis. This approach, as stated, evidences the relation of interdependency among all life forms, therefore of human life with all other life forms on Earth. And while evidencing the condition of global interrelatedness, this approach also evidences the specificity of human life in terms of socio-cultural semiosis.

Globalization was already a fact of life well before the advent of global communication as understood in today's capitalist, or post-capitalist society, that is, well before the spread of the communication network at a world-wide level thanks to progress in technology and to the global market which supports this network in socio-economic terms. In other words, globalization may be understood reductively as a corporate-led phenomenon characteristic of modern capitalist society, which now invests the entire reproductive system globally in its various phases — production, circulation and consumption —, and has wide-ranging (and most often devastating) effects over the entire planet. But globalization may also be understood in biosemiotic terms, as globalism, that is, as a tendency that characterizes the evolution of life from its origins (Petrilli and Ponzio 2001).

In fact, globalization in this second acceptance is the structural condition provided by the processes of evolutionary development for the proliferation of life itself over the planet, in its multifarious and interconnected manifestations, which are sign manifestations. As a specific form of life, the human, we are born into a sign network that is preexistent with respect to specific ontogenetic, even phylogenetic phenomena, presumably as a potential contribution to the further development of this network in evolutionary terms. The sphere of anthroposemiosis appears relatively late on the evolutionary scale and develops interrelatedly with the other spheres of semiosis, which coincide with the superkingdoms – microsemiosis, phytosemiosis, mycosemiosis, zoosemiosis of which anthroposemiosis is a specification. Together these different spheres of semiosis form the global biosemiosphere. Of course, in the light of global semiotics other spheres of semiosis have also emerged ranging, for example, from endosemiosis to cybersemiosis. These are studied by as many branches of semiotics. And new spheres of semiosis continue to emerge with ongoing progress in the development of life and technology (see Posner et al. 1997-2004).

Global communication, understood as globalism, indeed detotalized globalism, is a fact of life. And the interrelation between global communication and life must not be forgotten if life – including human life – is to continue flourishing globally as inscribed in the nature of sign activity. On the contrary, globalization, as understood in terms of today’s global socio-economic system, that is, as corporate-led globalization, is neither inevitable nor desirable, and even threatens to destroy life on earth as we know it.

Global communication in today’s social reproduction system is only one aspect of the great web of communication formed by life over the entire planet Earth. All life forms may be analyzed in terms of dynamic sign systems. From our own perspective, human life forms are considered in the fundamental terms of biosemiosis, which evidences the relation of interdependency with all other life forms on Earth, therefore, the condition of global interrelatedness. Also, human life is put into focus in its specificity as human socio-cultural semiosis.

Our emphasis is on this double modality of existing in the world characteristic of semiosis among human beings. Firstly, human beings exist as biological organisms flourishing interconnectedly with other organisms populating the great *biosphere*. According to recent findings in biological research the biosphere coincides with the great *semiosphere*. Secondly, human beings exist as a specification of this vital sign network.

Furthermore, thanks to the human species-specific capacity for *metasemiosis*, or *semiotics*, or so-called *language* and differently from other non human life forms, human beings are endowed with the capacity to survey and tend to the overall good functioning of the general biosemiotic network. As such human beings may be defined as “semiotic animals” (Deely, Petrilli and Ponzio 2005). (As used in the present context, the terms ‘metasemiosis’, ‘semiotics’, ‘language’ refer to a modeling capacity specific to human beings, the only “semiotic animals” on the planet. Therefore these terms have more than one meaning: ‘semiotics’ is not only the name of the science of signs. It is also the name of a specifically human capacity for semiosis, or ‘metasemiosis’. The term ‘language’ does not only refer to verbal language or to other human sign systems with communicative and expressive functions, it also indicates the specifically human capacity for modelling, primary modelling. For all these aspects see Sebeok 1986, 1991; Petrilli and Ponzio 2002a, 2002b).

The metasemiotic or semiotic capacity also implies a third modality of being-in-the-world reserved to human beings, what we propose to call the *semioethical* modality. This implies our capacity for creative awareness of the other, which presupposes the global

condition of interrelated and intercorporeal dialogical otherness to which we are all subject as living organisms (see Petrilli 2003b, Chapter Two).

This third modality of being-in-the-world, the semioethical, is the key to a full understanding of the extent of our responsibility as human beings for the health of semiosis over the entire planet. And our allusion is to semiosis in all its forms – whether a question of the semioses of other human beings or of other nonhuman life forms, which flourish interconnectedly with the nonliving forms of existence and together engender the great geobiosystem called Gaia (see Petrilli and Ponzio 2003a).

All life forms as such are endowed with a capacity for *modeling*, *communication* and *dialogism* (see Petrilli ed. 2003b, Chapter One). Modeling determines worldview. However, differently from other life forms, the human animal, that is, the ‘semiotic animal’, is endowed with a special modeling device which may also be called *language*, as anticipated, or *writing*, and is characterized by *syntactics* (see Sebeok and Danesi 2000). (The term ‘writing’ should not be confused here with ‘writing’ understood as the transcription or translation of oral verbal signs into written verbal signs. With respect to transcription or translation, writing or language as we are now using these terms is an a priori).

Thanks to syntactics the human being is able to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct an infinite number of worlds and worldviews on the basis of a finite number of elements. This capacity distinguishes human beings from other animals where the relation between modeling and what the biologists call *Umwelt* is univocal, unidirectional (J. von Uexkull 1909, 1992; Hoffmeyer 1996). Non human animals are born into a world which they are not programmed to modify, if not according to an original *bauplan* as established by the genetic patrimony of the species they belong to. On the contrary, thanks to syntactics human beings are endowed with a capacity for creativity and metasemiosis, consequently, the human being may be defined as a *metasemiosic* or *semiotic animal* (see Petrilli 1998: 8 and 181-182).

Metsemiosis entails a capacity for the suspension of action and deliberation, therefore, for critical thinking and conscious awareness. The immediate implication is that by contrast with other animals the human being is invested biosemiosically and phylogenetically with a unique capacity for responsibility, for making choices and taking standpoints, for creative intervention upon the course of semiosis throughout the whole biosphere. In this sense the ‘semiotic animal’ is also a ‘semioethical animal.’ Human beings are invested biologically with the capacity for the assumption of responsibility, therefore for caring for semiosis in its joyous and dialogical multiplicity (see Petrilli and Ponzio 2001, 2002a).

From a biosemiotic perspective modeling, communication and dialogism are interconnected and presuppose each other. From this point of view communication is not understood in the oversimplifying terms of message transmission from emitter to receiver (though this of course is one of its possible manifestations). Far more extensively communication coincides with semiosis and therefore with life: sign activity tells of the universal condition of interrelatedness and interdependency, in this sense sign activity is synonymous with communication and as such is dialogical. Here too dialogism does not refer reductively to the exchange of rejoinders among speakers but far more radically and vitally it refers to the permanent condition of intercorporeal involvement and reciprocal implication among bodies and signs throughout the semiotic universe. Modeling, communication and dialogue together form the foundation and condition of possibility for the engenderment of life in its multiplicity and its specificities, including human life. As stated, human life is endowed with the species-specific trait called syntactics, therefore with the species-specific capacity for metasemiosis beyond the less complex level of semiosis in its direct and immediate forms.

Metasemiosis, or 'semiotics', understood as metasemiosis and not simply as the name of the theory, or science, or doctrine, or discipline that studies sign activity, has determined the course of hominization through to the present phase of development in evolution. 'Semiotics' thus described is the biosemiotic a priori of the anthropological and cultural necessity for responsible and polyphonic living.

Responsible and polyphonic living implies the capacity for *listening* and *hospitality* towards differences, towards the other in each and every one of us, as well as towards the other beyond self (see Sebeok, Petrilli, and Ponzio 2001). Otherness is not a condition we concede with an act of generosity towards the world. On the contrary, otherness is structural to life itself, a condition for life to flourish, intercorporeity. Dialogic otherness is connected with the nonfunctional.

A global and detotalizing approach to semiotics demands openness to the other, the extreme capacity for listening to the other. Therefore, it presupposes the capacity for dialogic interconnection with the other. Accordingly, semiotics as we conceive it must privilege the tendency towards detotalization rather than totalization. Otherness opens the totality to infinity or to 'infinite semiosis.' Such an approach leads beyond the cognitive order or the symbolic order to enter the ethical order, creating the condition for infinite involvement with the other, therefore for the assumption of responsibility towards the other.

Semiotics thus conceived is not the result of some ideological plan. On the contrary, considered in such terms semiotics concerns behaviour and awareness of our capacity for responsibility as a 'semiotic animal.' Properly understood, the 'semiotic animal' is a responsible actor capable of signs of signs, of mediation, reflection, and conscious awareness in relation to semiosis over the entire planet. In this sense global semiotics must be adequately founded in cognitive semiotics, but it must also be open to a third dimension beyond the quantitative and the theoretical, that is the ethical. Since this third dimension concerns the ends towards which we strive, we propose to designate it with the neologism 'semioethics.'

Semioethics is not fixed upon a given value or preestablished end, an ultimate end or *summum bonum*, but rather is concerned with semiosis in its dialogical and detotalized globality. A special task for semioethics is to unmask the illusory character of the claim to the status of indifferent differences and to evidence the biosemiotic condition of intercorporeity and dialogic compromise among signs. The gaze of semioethics transcends the totality, a given being, a defined entity within a totality and accounts for infinite semiosis, desire of the other, unending movement towards the infinite.

*Translation from Italian by Susan Petrilli*