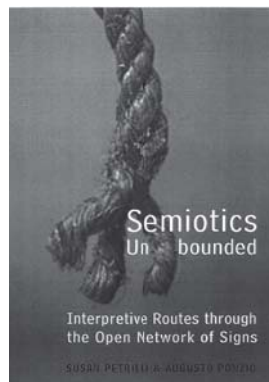


SEMIOTICS UNBOUNDED

INTERPRETIVE ROUTES THROUGH THE OPEN NETWORK OF SIGNS

Susan Petrilli & Augusto Ponzio



Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio *Semiotics Unbounded: Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005,

Article-review

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This ambitious book arises from the fruitful co-authorship of Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, who bring to an English-speaking audience insights into the work of Italian language semioticians whose total oeuvre is not yet available in English. The book traces the development of 'interpretive' semiotics from 'Problems on Peirce's Desk', Charles S. Peirce establishing the 'perspective for the book as a whole'. There follows six chapters on each of Victoria Welby, Mikhail Bakhtin, Charles Morris, Thomas A. Sebeok, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi and Umberto Eco: figures 'in semiotics whom we consider essential to the construction of the semiotic project' (p.xxiii). This overview of key authors and of key terms and their development makes this an excellent candidate for a textbook in semiotics, especially as the introduction provides an outline of the key terms used in the book: 'a series of notions that are fundamental to the study of signs' – or 'signs to talk about signs' (p.xxii).

The authors also set themselves a large political project, although such large projects have been the self-appointed task of other semioticians. In the final stage of his research, Peirce turned to 'the ultimate good, the *summum bonum*, which he saw in "the evolutionary process" itself – more precisely in the "growth of reasonableness"', 'first shown to be true with mathematical exactitude in the field of logic' (p.65). Welby analysed 'history, the evolution of the human species' (p.131), seeking to 'develop a theoretical-linguistic apparatus capable of reconsidering and re-evaluating the history of mankind' (p.108), encompassing 'human and non-human, verbal and non-verbal signs' (p.109). Sebeok's 'global semiotics' analyses contemporary advanced capitalism and its

consumption of communication which is ‘a danger for communication; we are at risk of destroying communication itself, understood as the possibility of life throughout the planet’. Sebeok offers a perspective which links communication and life and so allows the possibility of changing the global world, by focusing on ‘the body in the sign’, ‘the bond that links body, mind, and culture’ (p230). Rossi-Landi extends the global analysis by making it clear that ‘commodities are messages and messages are commodities’ and lays the foundations for an approach to ‘general semiotics that includes and unites the linguistics with economics as well as other social sciences’ (p233). Rossi-Landi also saw semiotics as an ethical venture, as allowing rather than ‘a science of what already has been done’ ‘*a science of what is to be done*’ (p.255).

The authors also promise an ‘unbounded semiotics’ based on the need to consider ‘planetary semiotics’ and ‘global communication’, the exchange and flows of people (legal and illegal, wanted and repulsed), goods (legal and illegal); the impact of consumption, production and communication flows on ‘not just human life, but all life’, modifying ‘space, distances, time, ... our feelings and affections’ (p478). Given ‘that life and semiotics coincide’, the authors propose a ‘semioethics’: ‘it may well follow that an important task for semiotics today is to care for life in all its diversity, especially now in this era of globalization. Semiotics is capable of understanding the entire semiotic universe as well as discussing its various forms of separatism, technicalism, and overspecialization: all this should result in awareness of ethical responsibility’ (p.xxii). ‘As a unique semiotic animal, ... the human being has a singular responsibility toward life (which is comprised of signs and communication)’, ‘responsibility without alibis, absolute responsibility’ (p535).

Throughout the book, the authors reflect on identity and difference, ultimately leading to their hope for a ‘sociality that exceeds the limits of territoriality, nationality, ethnicity, gender identity, and so on’, ‘predicated on the logic of otherness, openness toward the other, responsibility for the other – the other who is distant and alien and has now been transformed into our neighbour as a side effect of globalization’ (p.xxiv). As they note, the multiplicity of languages both share the common ‘essential and shared needs of expression and communication’ and yet find ‘different solutions’ due to ‘different cultural traditions and spheres of human experience’ (p471).

‘In-dividual’ literally means ‘non-divided, non-divisible’ and ‘the self, the subject is a community of selves obeying the laws of the logic of otherness’ (p541). There can be no self without the other: thus Peirce described sympathy and fellow-feeling as an ‘outreaching identity – such as a word has’. When I speak with a friend do I not live in his (sic) brain as well as in my own’ (p.49). Bakhtin points out that we ‘suffer’ dialogue: ‘Dialogue is not the result of an open attitude toward the other; quite the opposite, it is the impossibility of closing with the other’ (p.145). We ‘suffer’ dialogue because humans always have trouble negotiating identity and difference, self and other, or rather other selves we assimilate as like us and others we find unassimilable and reject or hate. Levinas’ philosophy of subjectivity suggests that ‘Love transforms fear *of* the other – fear that the other provokes in the self – into fear for the other, for his or her safety, to the point that one becomes entirely responsible for the other’ (p.64).

The authors provide an example of (not) working through identity and difference in the disregard for the Helsinki Final Act (1975) updated in 1990 with the input of semioticians, including Rossi-Landi, and which claimed that there is no such thing as a 'just' war. Unfortunately, the defence of this proposition relied overmuch on grounds for co-operation based on 'otherness' as mutual recognition by self-sufficient entities or 'otherness' through assimilation of the other, or co-operation based on a common past or culture (p499). The otherness that would have most strongly militated against war was due to relations among states based on a 'passive solidarity' that is not chosen, on the fact of economic, environmental and security interdependence: a 'non-indifferent difference'. States depend on each other and so cannot withdraw from their common destiny (p495,500). Because this third reason or ground for co-operation is insufficiently explained, the document became a 'list of good intentions without argumentative force' and failed to exert any real influence on world events, as the Gulf War in 1991 first made clear (p502).

The communication channel dominates the message, so that communication is now produced 'for the sake of communication and for the sake of reproducing communication' (p487). 'Global communication-production is the communication-production of war', promoting identity and difference even though they are not threatened by the 'other' (p557). Even 'peaceful' innovations within capitalism are based on the capacity for destruction, of displacing the products already in existence (p556). The authors conclude with a discussion of 'dispossession' and 'extralocalization' as techniques to 'escape without rest' the global communication-production system in which humans presently dwell, some of us almost completely.

Reviewed by Chilla Bulbeck, University of Adelaide, chilla.bulbeck@adelaide.edu.au

The more human knowledge increases, the more signs grow and, with this expansion, the more the boundaries of the science that studies signs also grows. In *Semiotics Unbounded*, Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio explain the explosion of the sign network in the era of global communication and discuss the important theoretical responses offered by semiotics. Providing a much-needed introductory guide to the subject, Petrilli and Ponzio explore the ever-growing frontiers of semiotics through the thought of prominent sign scholars such as Charles Peirce, Victoria Welby, Mikhail Bakhtin, Charles Morris, and Thomas Sebeok.

In an era of global communication, a global approach is necessary, and what may seem to be the whole, is only a part – a view being at once globalizing and open. Each and every sign is never self-sufficient and closed but exists always in a relation of otherness. This is true of the signs forming animals and human beings, individuals and communities, and involves the implication of all living beings in the life of all others. *Semiotics Unbounded* offers a new and original survey of the science of signs, evaluating it in relation to the problems of our time, not only of a scientific order, but also the problems concerning everyday social life.

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