

## **The World is Nobody's if It's not Everybody's**

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### **1. Introduction - One world, the context as text**

The challenges to living together in today's world often appear unsurmountable, but in spite of the difficulties, living together is not only possible, but unavoidable, if not desirable. The problem is how as a community we choose to organize and live out cohabitation over this planet. This is the message heralded by the several voices coming together in the collective volume *Challenges to Living Together. Transculturalism, Migration, Exploitation. For a Semioethics of Human Relations*. Our project is committed to outlining perspectives and pathways for a vision of the world conceived in terms of encounter, hospitality, creativity, responsibility, and as such, in spite of disaster and worldwide catastrophe – poverty, exploitation, racism and their manifold faces, in spite of “humanitarian” wars and ecological emergency, it is intended to open the heart to hope, love and desire (Petrilli 2013: 200; Seif 2016).

The expression “semioethics” (Petrilli and Ponzio 2003a, 2010) is associated with “the art of listening”, to the other (Petrilli, ed., 2007; Petrilli and Ponzio 2016), “the art of caring”, for the other, human and nonhuman. Given that humanity is but a piece in the larger picture made of a countless number of other pieces, interdependent and interrelated, to care for the human is to care for all of life over the planet which flourishes, in turn, interdependently with the larger system called Gaia, and so forth, according to a progression whose boundaries, if boundaries there are, ultimately we do not know. We propose to listen to and care for human relations, or better “interrelations” given the inexorable condition of intercorporeality, “dialogic intercorporeality”, interconnecting all lifeforms on earth. And in terms that are not uncertain, this condition of

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Ponzio, Joseph Pugliese, Geoffrey Sykes –, distributed across five parts: I. Identity Matters. Ethnicity, Difference, Nation; II. Culture Matters. Global Communication and Its Mystifications; III. Whiteness Matters. Social Justice, Human Rights, and the

Other; IV. Subject Matters. Intercultural Dialogue, Education, Alienation; V. Art Matters.

Between Ethics and Aesthetics.

intercorporeality, of biological dialogism, wherewith the other cannot be avoided, warns us that in the long term we all either flourish together or perish together, whether literally or metaphorically.

As inhabitants of the same “biosphere” we live in the same “semiosphere”. This expression is taken from Jurij M. Lotman (1990) but is understood by Thomas A. Sebeok (2001) in a far more extended sense than Lotman’s. Originally the latter limited the sphere of reference of the “semiosphere” to human culture with the initial claim that communication does not take place outside the semiosphere thus connoted. The different types of semiosis, sign processes, sign activity forming the semiosphere are studied by semiotics. And from the perspective of so-called “global semiotics” where semiosis is described as converging with *life* (in this sense global semiotics is “semiotics of life”), the *semiosphere* identifies with the *biosphere* (term coined in Russian by Vladimir Vernadskij in 1926) to emerge, therefore, as the *semiobiosphere*. The semiosphere thus extended is articulated into different subspheres which overlap and converge with the different spheres of life: the zoosphere whose material is zoosemiosis, object of study of zoosemiotics; the phytosphere made of phytosemiosis processes studied by phytosemiotics; and the mycosphere whose mycosemiosis activities are the object of study of mycosemiotics. Semiosis in the human world, anthroposemiosis and its various articulations, enters the more general and inclusive sphere of zoosemiosis. It forms the anthroposphere and is studied by anthroposemiotics.

But all this only concerns a partial sector of global semiotics, that involving the world of “eukariots”, leaving aside the enormous quantity of “prokariots” with which life arises on earth and continues to proliferate and evolve to this very day, thanks to an incredibly refined communication system which interconnects them all in a network that covers the entire planet. Prokariots are the object of study of that branch of general semiotics known as microsemiotics and specified as endosemiotics which, as the expression itself explains, has a focus on semiosis, that is, communication, as it occurs inside the organisms populating the superkingdoms. In addition to the prokariots, endosemiotics studies intercellular communication in larger organisms together with the genetic code, the immunitary system, and the neuronal system, all being communication systems that allow for the reproduction, maintenance and overall behaviour appropriate to a specific *Umwelt*.

The sign network that is life is a communication network, a global communication network extant far before the rise of global communication as we know it today, the expression of globalisation and its technological supports. From a semiotic or, better, biosemiotic perspective, communication is no less than a property characteristic of living beings, a condition for existing, a condition for life.

To repeat then, global semiotics is in a position to evidence the extension and consistency of the sign network which includes the *semiosphere* in Lotman’s sense, as constructed by human beings, human culture, signs, symbols and artifacts, etc. But global semiotics evidences that the human cultural semiosphere is part of a *far broader semiosphere*, the *semiobiosphere*, a sign network human beings have never left and as *living beings* never will.

To the axiom that the biosphere and the semiosphere converge, we will add a gloss concerning the possibility that the semiosphere, the “sign network” may in fact extend beyond the “life network”. Looking at life both retrospectively as much as raising the gaze towards the future, particularly to developments in cyberspace, the

hypothesis is that sign activity may well overflow with respect to life itself, but certainly where there is life there are signs and where there are signs there is life. The life sciences and the sign sciences just like their respective objects of study, life and signs, proceed together, with the difference, as regards the past, that consciousness of the association is now much higher. An indication in this sense is the birth, in the twentieth century, at the interface between the life sciences and the sign sciences, of “biosemiotics”, whose object of study is the great multiplicity of semioses forming the biosphere, and produced therein, a new branch of general semiotics and at once overarching vision of life and the sciences that study it (Petrilli 2012: 71-126). As posited by Sebeok (1991, 2001), one of the most representative pioneers in the field, the criterial feature of life is the sign.

## 2. Global semiotics and the critique of glottocentrism

The name of the “general science of signs”, “general theory of signs”, or “doctrine of signs” (see Sebeok 1986, an expression he recovered from John Locke to indicate an approach still in formation in terms of methodology, conceptual instruments and objects) is “semiotics” and “semiotics”, that is, “general semiotics” goes a step further with Sebeok to become “global semiotics”, an expression which indicates the extraordinary range of the “semiotic field” (in Italian “Il campo semiotico”, the expression chosen by Umberto Eco as the name of his book series, which he directed during a lifetime with Bompiani publishers, in Milan). Here the term “global” indicates an orientation, a project, a trend. Semiotics practiced as global semiotics fosters an interdisciplinary approach to the life of signs that includes all the special fields of semiosis from the human sciences to the hard sciences – philosophy, mathematics, physics, chemistry, economics, architecture, medicine, biology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, logic, grammar, stylistics, poetics, musicology, aesthetics, literature, and so forth. Consequently, global semiotics is semiotics unbounded (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005).

By virtue of this “global” or “holistic” approach to semiotics, research into the “life of signs” is immediately associated with concern for the “signs of life”. Signs, communication, interpretation are prerogatives characteristic of living beings. Semiosis originates with the first stirrings of life. In fact, the sign science today is all but limited to the “science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale” (Ferdinand de Saussure) with its anthropocentric, glottocentric, phonocentric, alphabetocentric and, ultimately,

ethnocentric bias. Therefore, as sectorial and specific a given interest in semiotic studies may be (Eco distinguishes between “general semiotics” and “special semiotics”), that special interest has its place in the larger context of semiotics understood as global semiotics, precisely.

Global semiotics includes any sign relation, any interpretant or interpreter whatsoever, so that the model of sign used by semiotics, however restrictively, however specialistically, must necessarily be construed in such a way as to be applicable to all sign processes (or semioses), as is in the nature of a model with claims to generality, whatever the special use in any given instance. Global semiotics is based on a *general theory of signs*. This general theory with its related notion of sign in general intends to avoid the characteristic limitation of semiotics, especially when it takes the form of *sémiologie* of Saussurean derivation, that is *glottocentrism*. Glottocentrism means to refer to the verbal sign as the general sign model and, therefore, to linguistics as the model science of semiotics. From this point of view, Roland Barthes was right when he said that *sémiologie* is affected by glottocentrism.

Consequently, semiology is englobed by linguistics, despite Saussure's intention to the contrary of semiology englobing linguistics.

It ensues that a general sign model as proposed by a general sign theory cannot be construed on the sole basis of the verbal sign. This glottocentric approach to the life of signs is based on the fallacy that any type of sign can only be dealt with by speaking about it, through verbal signs, in other words, that all signs can only be fully understood if they are transposable, translatable into verbal signs. On the contrary, a sign model intending to be general should account for the sign under the aspect that is most refractory to verbal translation, most resistant, most irreducible, in this sense most other with respect to verbal signs, as in the case of musical signs. Music requires a capacity for listening.

*À propos* the general science of signs, this of course is not the whole story, but this is not the place to tell it. Here our concern is simply to outline a context, in reality more a text than a context, for the studies presented in the collective volume *Challenges to Living Together* – which features contributions from different authors working in different disciplinary areas and from a variety of different points of view –, and thus evidence the overarching sense of our common enterprise. We have drawn our map so that we might now more easily see how we human beings, the actors of anthroposemiosis (specified as anthropobiosesemiosis and anthropobiosociosemiosis), are placed in the bigger picture, as a part in the global system interrelated and interdependent with all others.

### 3. Possible worlds, the semiotic animal

Concerning the human world, semiotics must reflect upon the conditions of possibility of what Edmund Husserl calls the already given, already done, already constituted, already determined world. Critical analysis of the world, with a focus on *alternative planning*, on the construction of *new possible worlds*, requires this type of reflection. Our claim is that semiotics today is in a position to carry out the general task of “constitutive phenomenology”. As Husserl clearly demonstrates in *Erfahrung und Urteil [Experience and Judgement]*, 1948, the aim of *constitutive phenomenology* is to describe the entire complex of operations that leads to the constitution of a *possible world* (Petrilli 2010: 159-236; Petrilli and Ponzio 2007).

To investigate how the world is constituted means to deal with the essential form of the world in general and not our real actual existent world, the world-as-it-is. This means to investigate the modelling structures and processes of the human world not simply in terms of factuality, reality and history but also in terms of potential and possibility. Such an investigation is specific also in the sense that it deals with a species-specific modality of constructing the world (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005; Petrilli 2012, 2014a, 2016).

As compared with sign activity, with the semioses of life-forms inhabiting the other spheres that together constitute the biosphere, anthroposemiosis has a special characteristic: it doubles into two levels at least, that of “semiosis” and of “metasemiosis”. In other words, human beings do not only behave, think and communicate directly like all other life-forms, but they are endowed with a capacity to take a step back and reflect, speculate, and deliberate. This brings us to the point we wish to make about human beings and how they are different from other lifeforms in a way that is species-specific. In fact, unlike other animals, the human animal is capable of constructing innumerable possible new worlds.

Sebeok baptises the human *modelling device* of the world as “language”. This

modelling capacity is specific to the human species. Thanks to language, unlike all other species humans are in a position to construct innumerable real or imaginary, concrete or fantastic worlds, and not just a single world always the same (Petrilli and Ponzio 2015; Sebeok 1991).

As a science semiotics is founded on a special capacity, that is, on “semiotics” understood as a species-specific modality of using signs by the “semiotic animal” (Deely, Petrilli, Ponzio 2005; Mladenov and Iankova 2016), or human being. This is the capacity for *metasemiosis* just mentioned. It distinguishes the human being from all other living beings that are only capable of semiosis. Semiotics as a science is aware of metasemiosis as its very own condition of possibility. Unlike “semiotics” understood as metasemiosis specific to human beings, “semiotics” as a science presents itself as meta-semiotics. If the human being is a

metasemiosical animal, then the semiotician, the person who practices the semiotic science, is a metasemiotical animal.

Metasemiosis understood as the capacity to reflect upon signs is connected with responsibility: the human being, the only semiotic animal existing, is the only animal capable of accounting for signs and for sign behaviour, of accounting for self and for one’s actions. Therefore, the human being is subject to and subject of responsibility. To the extent that the semiotician practices metasemiotics, s/he is doubly responsible: the semiotician accounts for him/herself and for others, and as a global semiotician for life over the entire globe.

#### 4. Modelling, dialogism and interpretation

The interpretant of a sign is another sign which the first creates in the interpreter, being “an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign”, as the American scientist, father of modern semiotics and ideator of “pragmatism”, Charles S. Peirce says (*CP* 2.228). Therefore, the interpretant sign cannot be identical to the interpreted sign; it cannot be a totalising repetition, precisely because it is *mediated*, interpretive and therefore always new. With respect to the first sign, the interpretant is a *response*. As such, it inaugurates a new sign process, a new semiosis. In this sense, it is a more developed sign. As a sign the interpretant determines another sign which acts, in turn, as an interpretant: therefore, the interpretant opens to new semioses, it develops the sign process, it is a new sign occurrence. The meaning of a sign is a response, an interpretant that calls for another response, another interpretant. This implies *the dialogic nature of sign and semiosis* (Ponzio 2006). A sign has its meaning in another sign which responds to it and which in turn is a sign if there is another sign to respond to it and interpret it, and so forth *ad infinitum*. In our terminology, the “First Sign” in the triadic relation of semiosis, the object that receives meaning mediated by the sign, is the *interpreted*, and what confers meaning is the interpretant which may be of two main types (Petrilli and Ponzio 2002, 2007).

The interpretant that allows for mere recognition of the sign is an *identifying interpretant*. As such, it is connected with the signal, code and sign system. Whereas the specific interpretant of a sign, that which interprets its actual sense, is indicated with the expression *answering comprehension interpretant* or *responsive understanding interpretant*. This second type of interpretant does not limit itself to identifying the interpreted, but rather expresses its properly pragmatic meaning, installing with it a relation of involvement and participation: the interpretant sign responds to the interpreted sign and takes a stand towards it (Petrilli 2010; Ponzio 1990).

Dialogism characterises the life of signs and is strictly related to a biosemiotic conception of semiosis. In fact, the dialogic relation is not only present in the human world, but in the biological world at large. The “Copernican revolution” operated by another Russian scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin, on a philosophical level, and by Fedor Dostoevsky, on an artistic level, concerns the human being involved with all one’s life, needs, thoughts, and behaviour in the life of others, human and nonhuman (Bakhtin 1981). This is the body *in its vital and indissoluble relation to the world and to the body of others*. The shift in focus from identity (whether individual, as in the case of self-consciousness, or collective, that is, a community, historical language, or cultural system at large) to alterity, otherness, is a sort of Copernican revolution in itself. With such a shift, the Bakhtinian critique of dialogic reason not only interrogates the general orientation of Western philosophy, but also the dominant cultural tendencies that engender it (Ponzio 1993). On the basis of his own dialogic and biosemiotic conception of the sign, Bakhtin in fact criticises both subjective individualism and objective abstraction.

But let us return to the problematic of language. Another characteristic specific to the human species is language understood as “verbal language” (speech). In his description of language, speech and communicative functions in the human world, Sebeok maintains that verbal language, speech, is based on the primary modelling system he also calls “language”, precisely: *language for modelling is one thing, language for communication is another*. On Sebeok’s account, at a certain point in the evolution of the human species, verbal language arises with a communicative function as part of an adaptation process regulated by language understood as modelling. This position is behind his critical stand against theories and training practices, popular at the time in the USA, exploring and promoting the idea that animals can “speak”.

According to Sebeok’s modeling theory, in the course of the evolutionary development of human beings, the primary modelling system called “language”, specific to *Homo*, the hominid, arose as an adaptive mechanism much earlier than did “verbal language”, “speech”. It ensues that language was not originally a communicative mechanism, but rather a modelling device. On Noam Chomsky’s account as well, language is not essentially communicative. But when Chomsky says “language” he is referring to “verbal language”, “speech”, and not to language as modelling as described by Sebeok. The first hominid was endowed with language understood as a modelling device. And however rudimentary at the time, the belief is that this modelling device is at the basis of the human species’ development through to *Homo sapiens*.

Whether language for modelling or language for communication, the distinctive feature of language is “syntactics”. The syntactical capacity is what distinguishes the human animal, the semiotic animal, from other animals, nonhuman animals that too are endowed with a capacity for consciousness, problem solving, resourcefulness, and initiative, but at far lower degrees. Thanks to the primary modelling device, in addition to mere “consciousness” the human animal, the “semiotic animal” has a capacity for inventiveness, innovation, creativity, originality, for the “play of musement”, to evoke Peirce once again (see also Sebeok 1981, who adopts the expression as the title of a book). We have claimed that the human animal is endowed with a “semiotic” capacity for semiosis — which is precisely a “metasemiotic” capacity, the capacity to use signs to reflect upon signs —, for consciousness and self-awareness, and for a conscience, which is accompanied by the consequent condition and capacity for responsibility, inexorable, mandatory responsibility. Again, as stated by Bakhtin:

The witness and the judge. When consciousness appeared in the world (in existence) and, perhaps, when biological life appeared (perhaps not only animals, but trees and grass also witness and judge), the world (existence) changed radically. A stone is still stony and the sun is still sunny, but the event or existence as a whole (unfinalised) becomes completely different because a new and major character in this event appears for the first time on the scene of earthly existence — the witness and the judge. And the sun, while remaining physically the same, has changed because it has begun to be cognized by the witness and by the judge. It has stopped simply being and has started being in itself and for itself [...] as well as for the other, because it has been reflected in the consciousness of the other (witness and judge): this has caused it to change radically, to be enriched and transformed (“Notes Made in 1970-1971”, in Bakhtin 1986: 132-158).

## 5. Global communication and writing

As predisposed by our primary modelling device, or language, humankind has continuously invented new languages, what considering the syntactical component we may also call new forms of “writing”. Thanks to new technologies, on the one hand, and to encounter and exchange among different cultures, on the other (the global situation of interculturalism), writing today, in its various forms, is proliferating more than ever before. We could even maintain that this is the civilisation of writing. And “writing” as we understand it here is not to be confused with the “written sign”. Writing manifests itself in numerous forms, which thanks to language as modelling are on the rise — literary writing, novels, poetry, painting, design, photography, cinema, theatre, television, multimedia, social media, technology and artificial intelligence in its various manifestations, and so forth. These are all expressions of the human potential for writing and as such they all enhance, in turn, the human capacity for the “play of musement”.

A section in the volume *Challenges to Living Together* is titled “Art Matters. Between Ethics and Aesthetics”. In it are discussed different forms of artworks, from the pictorial expressions of Aboriginal Australia (“An Argument Against Essentialist Nostalgia and Its Consequences. Colonial Afterlives and Contemporary Australia Indigenous Art”, by Renata Summo O’Connell) to the poetry and painting of those who came after, in particular the visual arts as represented by James Gleeson (“Towards a Theory of Multiform Expression”, by Geoffrey Sykes), and the literary word as represented by Jack Lindsay (“Love, Poetry and Revolt: The Embodied Aesthetics of Jack Lindsay”, by Anne CrannyFrancis). All are witnesses to the liberating power of artistic discourse, as enabled by the different forms of “writing”.

In the communication world today, the global communication world, it is important to thematise and value the different forms of writing and not juxtapose “writing” to the “image”, as though the latter in its various manifestations were not an expression of writing. Instead, what needs to be recognised is the objective contradiction between the expansion of writing, the increase in languages, of the free play of musement, on the one hand, and increasing economico-political control over the communication network, concentrated ever more in the hands of a few, connected with the rise of another “Newspeak” order, on the other.

The proliferation of different forms of “writing” (especially when a question of art-forms) represents the possibility of escape from social planning and dominant

ideology, from control by the presentday “communication-production” order. Communication is production in today’s world, that is, in the capitalist or post-capitalist system in its current phase of development. The capitalist system today is a global communication-production system (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 491-494, 520-527).

In his novel *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury projects writing as the last, the most resistant stronghold for critique, revolt, and radical social change in the face of power and control as legitimated and exerted by the dominant communication order, the dominant social order, the status quo. In the words of Beatty, a character in this novel, addressed to Montag, the protagonist:

It didn’t come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. Today thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time, you are allowed to read comics, the good old confessions, or trade journals. [...] We must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the Constitution says, but everyone made equal. Each man the image of every other; then all are happy, for there are no mountains to make them cower, to judge themselves against (Beatty in dialogue with Montag, in Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*).

Global communication in today’s world is dominated by the ideology of production and efficiency. The “interesting”, “desire” are now determined in the capacity for homologation with respect to such values. In dominant ideology which in today’s world converges with equal exchange logic, capitalist, or if we prefer post-capitalist exchange logic, the “interesting” is crudely substituted ever more by egotistical and vulgar “self-interest”. This is in complete contrast with the “carnival” worldview, as thematised by the same Bakhtin.

But the world of global or better globalised communication celebrates individualism to an exasperated degree and with it the logic of competition. Productivity, efficiency, individualism, competitiveness and velocity represent dominant values in contemporary society over the “properly human”. All the same, the structural presence of the grotesque body, the condition of intercorporeity and involvement of the body with the body of others, cannot be ignored. In this sense, the human being’s vocation for the “carnavalesque”, thus for excess with respect to the dominant order continues to resist, as testified by literary writing. In this sense, literary writing, indeed artistic discourse in general, is and always will be carnivalised (Petrilli and Ponzio 2003b, 2006).

Artistic discourse, literary writing, in particular the novel articulates language (here understood as verbal language, speech) into primary and secondary discourse genres, the direct and the indirect word, thereby enacting and enhancing language (as modelling) as it characterises the semiotic animal in its capacity not only for semiosis, but also for metasemiosis, for reflection, critique, creativity and responsibility. In literary writing, secondary discourse genres depict and portray the primary discourse genres of everyday life. And thanks to such mediational capacity the novel in particular is capable of reflecting on life and perspecting new possible worlds. Again, to evoke Bakhtin, author of an early programmatic text of 1919, “Art and Answerability”: “For what I have experienced and understood in art, I must answer with all my life, so that all that has been

experienced and understood does not remain inactive (in Bachtin e il suo Circolo 2014: 29, Eng. translated directly from the Russian original).

## 6. The art of listening and global semiotics

Listening is decisive for global semiotics, for the capacity to tune into and synchronise with the semiotic universe. The art of listening is connected to music. Listening is necessary for a critical discussion of separatism and different trends that tend to exchange the part for the whole, whether by mistake or in bad faith, as in the case of exasperated individualism in social and cultural life, and the current “crisis of overspecialisation” in scientific research. The capacity for listening connects semiotics to its early vocation as medical semeiotics and the interpretation of symptoms, as observed by Sebeok (1986; see also Petrilli and Ponzio 2001a, b).

If semiotics is concerned with life over the whole planet given that life and semiosis converge, and if one of the original motivations for studying signs, symptoms precisely, is “health”, the health of semiosis, the health of life, then a non-negligible task for semiotics in the era of globalization is to interpret the symptoms of social and linguistic alienation, thus emphasise the need to care for life in its globality. Social symptoms of *malaise* are on the rise globally and tell us as much: from the various forms of social and linguistic alienation, depression, eating disorders, from growing violence, including at school among children who bully other children, to an increase even in the suicide rate, and all this in the so-called “developed” world, including in countries like Australia at the centre of interest in the book *Challenges to Living Together*.

Listening evokes auscultation, a medical attitude. In Ancient Greece music was thought to have a therapeutic character, as it is still thought to today. And as hinted above, semiotics originates from semeiotics (or symptomatology), classified by Galen as one of the principal branches of medicine, whose task we know is to interpret the symptoms of illness.

But medicine as practiced today is functional to “bio-power”, to promoting techniques of subordination of the body to the knowledge-power of biopolitics (denounced by Michel Foucault). Medicine contributes to the controlled insertion of bodies into the production system. With their specialisms and treatment of the body as a self-sufficient entity, the medical sciences today strengthen the dominant conception of the individual as a separate sphere, efficient and self-contained, indifferent to the other.

In such a context, listening becomes “direct, univocal listening”, listening as it is imposed by the Law, by the “order of discourse” (Foucault 1971), “applied listening”, “wanting to hear”, imposition to speak and, therefore, to say univocally (Barthes and Havas 1977). Listening is one thing, to *want to hear* is another. Listening is responsive understanding, answering comprehension: “listening speaks”, as Barthes says, similarly to Bakhtin; listening focuses on signs in their constitutive dialogism. On the contrary, to hear, that is, wanting to hear, or “applied listening”, excludes the capacity for responsiveness, for responsive and dialogical listening. By excluding responsive listening, to “want to hear” or “applied listening” belongs to a “closed universe of discourse” (Marcuse 1964: 103) which fixes questioning and social roles and separates listening from responsive understanding. “Applied” listening freezes signifiers and interpretants in a fixed and rigid network of speech roles: it maintains the “ancient places of the believer, the disciple, the patient” (see Barthes and Havas 1977: 989990). Instead,

listening understood in terms of dialogism and responsive understanding (or answering comprehension) produces new signifiers and interpretants without ever fixing sense.

The methodics of semiotics (Rossi-Landi 1985) is a *methodics of listening* (Petrilli and Ponzio 2016). Listening is the interpretant of responsive understanding, it is the disposition for hospitality, for welcoming the signs of the other, the signs of the other person, for welcoming signs that are other into the house of semiotics: signs that are other to such a high degree that generally we can only denominate them in the negative, that is, as “nonverbal signs”. Listening is the condition for a general theory of signs.

Semiotics is a critical science, but not only in Kant’s sense, that is, in the sense that it investigates its own conditions of possibility. Semiotics is a critical science in the sense that it interrogates the human world today on the assumption that it is not the only possible world, not the only world possible, it is not the definitive and finalised world as established by some self-interested, individualistic, profit-oriented ideology. Critical semiotics looks at the world as a possible world, which means to say a world that is subject to confutation, therefore as one among many possible worlds.

## **7. Semioethics and responsibility**

As global semiotics, as metasemiotics, as critical semiotics (in the double sense mentioned), as semiotics subject to responsibility in a dual sense, that is, of “responding to” (rather than of indifference) and of “taking the blame for” (rather than of fleeing and cleansing, as in ethnic cleansing), semiotics must concern itself with life over the planet — not only in a cognitive sense, but also in the pragmatic and in the ethical. In other words, semiotics must care for life. From this point of view, semiotics recovers its relation with medical semeiotics. Nor is this just a question of history, of remembering the origins. Far more radically, what we are signaling is a question of the ideologic-programmatic order.

Again, semiotics is listening, listening in the medical sense, and not just in the sense of general sign theory subtending semiotics; semiotics is listening in the sense of medical semeiotics or symptomatology. Semiotics must listen to the symptoms of today’s globalised world and identify the different expressions of unease and illness — in social relations, in international relations, in the life of single individuals, in the environment, in life generally over the planet. Semiotics thus oriented is what we have proposed under the name of “semioethics” (Petrilli and Ponzio 2003a, 2010a; Petrilli 2010, 2014a, b). By contrast to a globalised world tending towards its very own destruction, “semioethics” underlines the need to diagnose, prognose and indicate possible remedies for the future of globalisation, for the health of semiosis globally, therefore of life.

Semiotics shows how the other is inevitable and cannot be escaped. We can even go so far as to state that the vocation of the sign—the stuff of life and of the business of living, of communication (whether verbal or nonverbal), of human relationships — is the other. The other is the indistinct background from whence we, each and every one of us, are born into this world; the other testifies to my entry and to my exit from this world; the other is no less than the condition of possibility for life and communication to flourish. Extending the gaze beyond subsystems and microsystems, global semiotics evidences the condition of total interrelatedness and interdependency not only among the subsystems forming the anthroposphere and their porous boundaries, but between the latter and all

other subsystems forming the great biosphere, ultimately between nature and culture as we know them, certainly as far as Gaia, and possibly beyond.

The quality of life and destiny of each and every one of us is determined by the relation with the other, irrevocably, and by our conscious awareness of this state of affairs. For as long as we are alive and connected to the sign network which accomodates us all, the other cannot be escaped and must be dealt with, in one way or another. The upshot is that in the bigger picture we do not choose the other, but if anything the other chooses us.

The world is nobody's if it's not everybody's. Indifference towards the other is not a reasonable option. In nature the tremors of the earth tell us so, in culture the tremors of humanity, the symptoms of social disease also do, whether a question of wars, terrorism or alienation in its various forms, social and linguistic. And such a state of affairs implies the responsibility of each and everyone of us towards every other, whether a question of conquering lands and preexisting human and nonhuman societies, of creating new socio- political systems, of building nations and international relations, or simply caring for the most vulnerable, for the world's children, our own.

The contemporary world, the world-as-it-is, is overwhelmed by dominant ideology whose reach today is unbounded, global, thanks to a communication network that is just as unbounded, just as global, thereby acting as the perfect support for the overriding system. Semioethics underlines the need for conscious awareness of the role of values in our sign systems, our life systems. In the human world, signs and values come together, in the same package: where there are values there are signs, the material of values are signs, values are construed and are communicated through signs, whether verbal or nonverbal, and signs, properly human signs are perfused with values. This is another axiom we cannot escape. Our language, our behaviour, whether verbal or nonverbal, is intonated, accentuated, orientated in one direction or another, and is so even before and beyond what are easily recognised as the great ideological systems that orient social practice.

With reference to the citizens of the world, all this should not translate into a justification for passivity, a sense of fatality, of indifference towards the other simply because we enter an already given world, an already intonated world, a set social program. We have claimed that the vocation of the sign is otherness. The allusion here is above all to the other that each and every one of us is, to the singularity, uniqueness of each one of us, therefore to absolute otherness and to the capacity it represents for creativity, critique and excess with respect to any one given system, for overflow, and for escape with respect to the order of discourse. Involvement, participation in the life of the other, whether the other from self, or the other of self, is inevitable. How we process such inevitability will depend upon the values that drive our actions beyond immediate circumstances. Directly proportional to the global spread today is the need for critique, listening and love, love for one's neighbour, as close or as distant as that neighbour might be. And how we respond to that neighbour is a choice left to each and every one of us to make, a responsibility for each one of us to take, each and everyone of us.

But response is associated with responsibility even before initiative taken by a speaking subject. This is responsibility ensuing from the condition of intercorporeality, unavoidable responsibility, responsibility that is not established on the basis of roles and relative duties. Our allusion is to responsibility as responsiveness, listening, gifting, in a relation that is not decided by the subject, but ensues from the condition of objective global involvement of

human life with all other life-forms over the planet, throughout the ecosystem, in one plurifaceted, multi-voiced world, united in diversity.

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