

On Cyber-Envy



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“False modesty is the last refinement of vanity”.
(Jean de La Bruyère, *Les Caractères*, Paris: Flammarion, 1880, p. 286; *Quoted text in the public domain according to European Copyright Law*)

Abstract The essay points to the roots of many of the phenomena of aggression that characterize the contemporary digital communication, arguing that they are based on ancestral mechanisms of signification and communication, and even on the bio-semiotic imbalance between the full and the empty, the said and the unsaid, and above all on the sign and cultural imbalance between memory and forgetting. Contemporary digital communication seems to have lost access to those ritual forms that allowed human communities of the past to remedy the said and the done, to manage through counter-narratives a painful past that is impossible to forget and yet necessarily present in memory. Instead, the fragile digital communities of contemporaneity prefer to abdicate this work of continual stitching together of meaning and memory that is necessary for coexistence and prefer to take refuge in the constitution of a reticent collective, where everyone is afraid to say and do because everyone feels that everyone is being watched by everyone else and at the same time everyone succumbs to the ancestral fear of the indelibility of meaning. In this way, however, digital society is transformed into a collective of passive-aggressive voyeurs who are just waiting for someone else to show or express themselves to trigger the

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mechanism of public ridicule, digital pillorying, generalized stigmatization, and collective hatred fueled by the frustration of reticence. Against the formation of this community of seemingly modest but, in reality, frustrated and violent voyeurs, the essay incites instead to rediscover a taste for the responsibility of speech and criticism, of exposing oneself personally, of showing one's colors, of transforming the digital arena into a symmetrical theater, where there are no exhibitionists and voyeurs, but individuals eager to speak and listen.

1 The Biosemiotics Roots of Envy

There is no semiotic balance between saying and not saying, expressing and not expressing, showing and not showing.¹ On the contrary, it can be said that between these bastions, one being the negative of the other, there is a gap, although in many cases it remains invisible. Since classical semiotics, like linguistics, is a positive discipline with a scientific vocation, it focuses more on the full than on the empty and tends to study the latter from the perspective of the former. Take any verbal statement, for example the exclamatory sentence “I’m hungry!” For linguistics and, from another, broader point of view, for semiotics, it is always wonderful to observe how, from the linguistic void, that is to say, from the silence of the voice, of writing, but also—in a more general sense—from the silence of a communication system, takes shape—in the literal sense of the term, in the sense of a formless matter which is intentionally given meaning by the human, like the air of the phonation or the light of the colors of the writing—a message, that is to say an expression which already potentially is an impression, an effect on the other human beings and thus on the world.² Before communication, there is nothing; after it, on the other hand, these few syllables and their imperious intonation seem to express a need as old as the body, as old as the species, a foundational need. Once this sentence has been pronounced, “I’m hungry!”, it is impossible to go back; the sign is indeed irreversible, in the sense that once it has been interpreted as such, as something that

¹This imbalance has not been the subject of specific studies, but one of these polarities, that of negation, has already attracted the attention of several researchers in the fields of the sciences of language and meaning, including semiotics; see Zilberberg (2011). As this author, founder of tensive semiotics, suggests, “If affirmation and negation belong to the metalanguage, they can nevertheless be the object of a *mise en abyme* and give rise to an analysis” (*ibidem*; our transl.); see also the other articles on the semiotics of negation in the same issue, stemming from an edition of the Greimassian seminar of Paris, edition directed by Denis Bertrand, Jean-François Bordron, and Jacques Fontanille; some of the articles collected in this number also aim at the non-verbal languages, as the contribution of Maria Giulia Dondero; of this author, moreover, see also the work, co-edited with Sémir Badir (2016). Of the author of the present article, in the already cited issue, see “Négation et englobement” [“negation and wrapping”].

²The dialectic between unexpressed potentialities within a system and the affirmation of an utterance expressed from it has been the object of structural reflection at least from Saussure onwards; see, on this subject, my several contributions on “negative semiotics”, destined to be republished soon in a book bearing the same title.

represents something else for someone, under a certain aspect or capacity, it can only remain a sign. From this point of view, a spoken sentence is eternal.

2 “Semiophagies”

It often happens to humans that they regret having said or communicated what they did. Complex pragmatic rituals, more or less socially codified, are then necessary to try to push the expression back into the void that preceded it, except that this void no longer exists, since it is called memory.³ However, we must not be so naive as to believe that the fullness of language, that which memory captures, is a fullness of signs; it is not so; it is a fullness of meaning, not of signs. Let us take an example: someone, a close and loved one on the doorstep of an apartment, calls me insistently, pronounces my name several times, while I walk away down the stairs of a building. I do not answer, and especially I do not turn around, but, like Orpheus, I pretend not to hear, and continue to descend the stairs, while moving away. I do hear my name being called with increasing insistence, but I make the other person believe, the voice that calls me, that I do not really hear this call, or at least I let the uncertainty run: will I have heard and pretended not to hear? Will I not have heard? Here, in this example, there is no audible response other than silence, other than not reacting to a call; and there is no visible expression; rather, there is a body that disappears into invisibility and does not reappear despite the call. Yet this emptiness of signs, this absence of response, this disappearance of the potential caller’s body, is a fullness of meaning. As such, it is impossible to empty it.⁴ It would take an enormous amount of semiotic work and sign effort to uproot the trace of this meaning from the two memories involved, that of the one who withdraws, impassive, and that of the one who recalls him, anguished; such an uprooting is in fact impossible, and, as we shall see, this biological impossibility is at the root of the imbalance we have reflected on at the beginning of this essay. A laborious semiotic operation of recutting would be necessary, on the contrary, not to erase the memory from the meaning, but to recontextualize it, to allow the two protagonists to relive it in the present by referring to the memory but through a different staging, an alternative narration.

Here, another imbalance appears in the study of communication, this time in its narrative aspect; most approaches to narrative emphasize, often implicitly, its—again—positive dimension, in the sense that they observe the way in which the

³Memory is a much-studied subject, especially regarding its social dimension; cognitive semiotics, in particular, has focused on individual memory and its mechanisms; for an attempt at synthesis, see Salerno (2021).

⁴The Palo Alto school of communication pragmatics codified this condition under the axiom of “impossibility of communication”; see Watzlawick et al. (1967), especially the chapter “Some Tentative Axioms of Communication”.

narrative expresses meaning, constructing its staging for an audience.⁵ Often, however, we do not even consider the fact that narratives, or at least many narratives, do not have the primary purpose of imprinting semantic content in the memory of others, but rather of suppressing it.⁶ Indeed, the rhetorical efforts of storytelling are tied to the, as it were, physiological impossibility of such removal; given the inexorability of memory, and thus of the memory of inscribed meaning, the only result one can aspire to is to recontextualize it, building a different story around it. For example, in trying to claim a right or express a displeasure, I created a tense situation with a family member, who reacted harshly, hurting me further. At this point, it is not possible for me to go back and remove what I have said; nor is it possible to ignore how I have been further hurt. It is then necessary for my interlocutor and I to create a new shared narrative, in which we represent ourselves with extenuating circumstances, for example, as individuals who said and did what they said and did because they were driven by higher forces, such as grief over the loss of a shared affection. This reframing will not erase all the meaning of the past but will make it read in a different light.⁷

A broad and deep study would reveal that language, and with it communication and narration, does not only consist in the creation of meaning, as a certain “positivist” semiotics seems to believe (in the sense that it is attentive rather to the positive side of meaning), but also consists in the impossible attempt to erase the meaning that has already occurred, and thus, given this impossibility, to recontextualize it. In various languages, in the Romance languages for example, there are idiomatic expressions that express the possibility or the desire for “semiophagy”. The most common ones concern an oath, a promise or, more commonly, a given word: someone has not kept his word and so, in Italian, it is said that “*se l'è mangiata*”, literally, “he/she ate it”. But a semiotic intention can also be expressed in cases where, precisely, one wants to go back on one’s steps, and eliminate what has already been said or expressed; one would then say, in Italian, after realizing, for example, that one has wrongly accused someone: “*mi rimangio tutto*” (lit., “I eat it all again”; “I swallow it all”, “I take it all back”), a phrase that obeys a very primitive oral imagery, in which words would be like food, offered to others by the mouth when they are pronounced, but which can be swallowed if one realizes that the offer is not appreciated. This expression, “to swallow it all”, also gives the idea of the

⁵This is essentially what all structural semiotics of narrative does, as well as narratology, but it is also the perspective, from a philosophical point of view but allied to semiotics, of Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics.

⁶It is rather the Freudian psychoanalysis that, in particular in its study of repression, has concentrated on this dimension of the narrative; for a formulation that cross-fertilizes the two, see, rather on the side of the first, the semanalysis developed by Julia Kristeva; on the side of the second, on the other hand, psychiatric semiotics; on this last subject, see Lanteri-Laura (2007); the author indicates that one of the goals of this branch of psychiatry is notably that of “exploring a certain return towards the past of the subject”.

⁷Psychiatric anthropology also inquires about this “ritual” and “reparative” use of narrative.

effort, and even the disgust due to the act of regurgitating a word thrown up in haste, and without having thought it through.

But this expression embodies a “magical linguistic thinking” also because it does not take into account the fact that the impossibility of “swallowing what has been said” depends above all on the memory not only of ourselves but also of others, of those who have heard, interpreted, and preserved these words in their memory. “I swallow everything” is thus a pseudo-illocutionary act, which does not really carry out the action it states—all the more so since this action is metaphorical—but recontextualizes what has already been said, attempting to attenuate its memory and thus its meaning by a ritualistic projection. For those who do not believe in dogma, the phrase “this is the body of Christ” is not a performative illocutionary act that transforms the host into the Eucharist, but a ritual linguistic act that rhetorically encourages belief in the certainty of this transformation.⁸ In the same way, “I swallow everything” does not erase the signs of what has already been said, and even less its meaning, but encourages the interlocutor to believe that, of what has been said, the one who pronounced it prefers that nothing remains either with the interlocutor—in his/her hearing, in his/her memory. . . in his “linguistic stomach”, so to speak—nor with the speaker—who is as if reintroducing everything into him/herself—nor, above all, in the space of meaning between the one and the other, the one that, through signs and their meaning, constructs the relation between the two. The linguistic-ritual metaphors related to food are very powerful because they evoke a symbolic space in which the passages from the inside of the body to its outside and vice versa are, so to speak, “naturalized”.⁹ Still in Italian, it is not only the cancellation of what has been said that is evoked through the locution “*rimangiarsi tutto*”, where the “*tutto*” is important to make it clear that not even a crumb of the proposed meaning should remain, but also locutions that are not “semio-phagic” but “poto-linguistic”, such as the classic “*bersi tutto*” (“drink it all”, “swallow it all”), which is used to indicate that someone has believed what he or she has been told without uncertainty, often dealing with contents that are not reliable. There is a discrepancy of inertia and material adherence between the ease and fluidity of “drinking it all” and the difficulty of “swallowing it all”, as if the meaning slipped smoothly down the throat of those who wanted to believe it, but on the other hand was very viscous and difficult to remove from the table of language once it had taken the form of a sign.

⁸The liturgical act of the Eucharist has been analyzed several times under the aspect of linguistics or semiology; see, for example, Silverstein (2004).

⁹See, in this regard, the reflections contained in Stano and Bentley (2022).

3 The Laws of Oblivion

Indeed, the disappearance of meaning in nothingness is a difficult task. As Umberto Eco and others have pointed out well,¹⁰ concerning the impossibility of an “*ars oblivionalis*”—that is, of an art of forgetting parallel to the art of remembering—there is a physiological imbalance in the constitution of our cognition, which means that we can exercise partial positive control over memory, striving to remember something and devising related mnemonics, while negative control is nil. The neurophysiological basis of this cognitive imbalance is probably due to the adaptive nature of the impossibility of deliberately forgetting: if we had been able to do so as members of the species, we would probably have forgotten painful experiences and would therefore have been condemned to repeat them, probably to the point of extinction, as can happen to an amnesiac animal that keeps going to a body of water when it has seen other members of its own species mauled there by predators.

To be fair, however, to assert that humans can partially exert positive control over memory, while such control would be impossible with respect to forgetting, and thus on the negative side of memory, would perhaps be tantamount to asserting too peremptory an opposition. In reality, we also have control over what we forget, but this control is based on different cognitive tools. To remember something—for example, the name of a ruler—we can repeat it ten or a hundred times until it sticks in our memory, but we can also compose an epic poem that will pass the name of the ruler on to posterity. To forget something—for example, again, the name of a ruler—we cannot resort to negative mnemonics. We can, it is true, resort to the classic and often successful expedient of “*damnatio memoriae*”, disfiguring the face of any visual representation of the sovereign’s effigy and erasing his name from epigraphs and registers. But despite all our efforts, the name of the despised sovereign will not be erased from the memory of the subjects who loved him. They will continue to cherish his memory in their hearts despite everything, even if the fact of pronouncing it publicly is punishable by condemnation and the death penalty.

However, storytelling is far more effective than the threat of death for those who speak the name of a now hostile ruler: narratives of another kind begin to circulate, in new poems as well as in history textbooks, in which the old ruler appears lazy and insignificant, unworthy of being celebrated, corrupt and prone to abject practices. Through this and other possible examples, a general rule emerges, broad but often neglected by semiotics, that *storytelling* is not actually the best way to place a certain content at the center of a culture, or semiosphere, as Lotman puts it, but rather the best way to shift attention, to hide a now embarrassing meaning, to have what has been said or done recontextualized and presented in a different light, forgotten not in an ontological sense, as a trace that is eliminated, a sign that is erased, or a meaning that is forgotten, but in a semiotic sense, as something that used to mean something else but now, in and through the narrative, continues to mean something new, different, or even opposite to the original.

¹⁰See, in particular, Eco (1988).

I cannot retrace my steps, I cannot respond to a voice to which I have guiltily failed to react, I cannot swallow what I have said, I cannot erase from my memory the name of the loved one or the name of a hated ruler, but I can nevertheless formulate a narrative of these steps that brings them back to their origin, imagine a response not given, diminish the echo of the name of the loved one or the ruler by recounting or dramatizing their insipidity or insignificance. The story, in short, cannot precipitate into oblivion but can make that which hurts us become insignificant.¹¹

In obedience to the academy's need for systematicity, one could constitute an inventory of semiotic and communicative practices, whose aim would not be to leave traces but to eliminate them, or at least to obscure or recontextualize their meaning. It would then be a matter of continuing the inventory of "modes of sign production"¹² by a specular but negative inventory. The English language and the other Anglo-Saxon idioms possess a marvelous suffix "un-" that allows one to reverse, at least linguistically, the temporal, causal, and effective arrow of the communication: in English, one can thus not only "do" and "make" but also "undo" and "unmake". The equivalent suffix of the Romance languages, in Italian "dis-", in French "dés-", has a lesser scope. In Italian, indeed, one can "undo", "*disfare*" something, but "*disdire*" has a different, and more limited, meaning than the Anglo-Saxon "*unsay*". The freedom with which, in these Nordic languages, prefixes can be used to create unusual words means that the particle "*un-*" can also be adopted to express the paradoxical inversion of actions that cannot be undone, for example the fact of "unsaying" certain words. The Italian "*disdire*", as we have mentioned, can only be applied to a very specific group of "sayings", i.e., those that have a pragmatic effect on the planning of future actions. A restaurant reservation can be "*disdetta*", "cancelled", but a declaration of love cannot, although the latter often has much more relevant and disruptive effects than the former. A declaration of love is withdrawn, but with the effect that a shadow of it lingers in memory, excruciating.

Similarly, it is difficult to find an antonym for "production", since, once again, language names the birth of new ontologies as a result of human intention and action, while it does not name the opposing efforts, often vain and desperate, to bring meaning back into the realm of insignificance, or to say it in the indistinction of silence. The expression "modes of semiotic erasure" would not be entirely relevant either, since, as we have seen, the problem here is not only to eliminate the sign as a material signifying trace, but also as a semantic and, therefore, mnemonic counterpart. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to speak of "modes of semantic counterduction", to designate all the linguistic and semiotic practices whose aim is not to create a new meaning, but rather to try to eliminate the one that has already been created, or at least to favor its erasure through various practices of

¹¹ On the subject of the "semiotics of meaninglessness", see Leone (2019).

¹² From the name of the section of the treaty of general semiotics of Umberto Eco ("*Modi di produzione segnica*", in Eco (1975)).

recontextualization, starting with the narrative ones. “Counter-duction” would, then, be the opposite of “production”, and would also be a term constructed by analogy with “counter-deduction” in the legal technoelect (indicating a practice that opposes “deduction”).

4 The Ideology of Reticence

However, this nomenclature and articulation of “modes of sign counter-duction” are far from being developed, for much more general reasons that touch a central nerve of the production and circulation of meaning within the current digital communication, and notably in social media. This could be summarized by the expression “ideology of reticence”. In reality, as it is often the case, the grafting of communication in the digital infrastructure has only highlighted, mainly thanks to a process of acceleration, lines of ideological development that were already present in the semiosphere, frequently with a very long course. It has already been pointed out, in fact, that the interweaving of questions—in our opinion, extremely central to semiotics—that revolve around the imbalance between the presence and absence of meaning, between the emergence of the trace and its indelibility, very probably goes back to the bio-cognitive source of the human approach to the world and, as such, has accompanied the species since the dawn of time. In short, the bio-cognitive mode of operation of human memory has always conditioned the behavior of the species, but at the same time, this conditioning takes on new forms and becomes more pronounced as technological devices extend human cognition, expression, and memory.

Human societies have thus always been specifically conditioned by the fact that between saying and not saying, doing and not doing, expressing and not expressing, there is not only an ontological but also a semiotic gap. For once meaning has come into being, it cannot be plunged back into obscurity, except in an imperfect way, or in the indirect modes of narration mentioned above. Adopting a hyperbolic mode of reflection, one might even say that some of the most widespread myths concerning the creation of meaning, and thus the meaning of creation, seem to insist strongly on this rocky character of meaning, on its inexorability once it has emerged from the nothingness, the darkness, the void that precedes meaning. In Abrahamic religious traditions, for example, a scenario of meaninglessness is evoked as negative in relation to its presence, an inconceivable nothingness that is nonetheless evocable as a paradoxical backdrop preceding the spark of creation.¹³ In the beginning there was darkness, but when, by a transcendent impulse, it was torn apart by the ray of creation—which then diffused itself in a thousand subtle threads of light that gave a luminous body to the immense variety of creatures—it is as if the agent at the origin of this spark—who coexisted in a way with emptiness and absence, with darkness—

¹³ See Ugo Volli’s semiotic reflections on the semiotics of the genesis narrative (Volli 2012).

had been transformed into a spectator, had passed from the role of creation to that of assistance. The creator, from a mysterious place where he could operate on darkness, tore it apart with an act of love, but from then on he began to shudder, observing that what was born could no longer seem to be plunged back into absolute darkness. The frustrated deities of antiquity look at man, the pinnacle of creation, with bewilderment, knowing that the creature is imperfect, subject to abjection, unworthy; yet even then—in the myths of destruction that tell how divine dissatisfaction results in floods, destroyed cities, and terrible plagues aimed at exterminating mankind—it is as if they fail to fulfill their task to the end: transcendence is bitterly disappointed by creation, but fails to push it back into darkness. Read as semiotic apologies, these tales thus seem to transpose into a cosmic sphere the disarray of the one who creates, of the one who gives light and life to a meaning outside of oneself: this trace, this sign, this other than myself but linked to myself, is henceforth a viscous offshoot thrown into the world, indelible.

5 Habits and Fears

Such can be the consequences of a sign, of any sign produced and thrown in the midst of humans, that only the blindness of daily distraction, or perhaps only the absence of alternative, and the impossibility of existing in complete insignificance, do not paralyze in front of the enormity of a word. Those that many consider as “fragile beings”, and that psychiatry even tries to “cure”, those minds that suddenly, or sometimes from birth, close themselves in a terrified silence, are perhaps different from the others, from the ‘normal’ beings, only because they are more clear-sighted, because they realize to what extent each small act of creation can give rise to an uncontrollable degeneration. A small sentence, a distracted gesture, a spontaneous movement of the body suffice for the web of human destinies to change radically, take a direction, and produce a lenticular, tentacular rhizome, which envelops beings and things through the centuries, and which would never have existed without the small jump between doing and not doing, between saying and not saying.

We decide to talk to a young girl who watches a movie in a movie theater, and after 15 years, this tiny act of creation has given rise to complex worlds, stretching further than the empire of Alexander the Macedonian, and touching more individuals than a great battle, creating and forging other tiny destinies, vicissitudes that would never have taken place or time without this tiny trace of sign released between one body and another after watching an Indian documentary. Certainly, the creation of meaning can generate possible worlds where happiness shines and love blossoms everywhere, but what should leave the individual who becomes aware of it stunned, paralyzed into muteness—and push the mystic to the extreme attempt to flee all speech, and to live in silence and by silence—is that it is only from a very limited, and therefore necessarily myopic, perspective that one can judge this lichen of consequences as an omen of hate or love, of grace or perdition; many, many years later, a very sweet union may be the cornerstone of a war, and a brutal act the tile

that, however tiny, constitutes the mosaic of an ecstasy. It is obviously not possible to be fully aware of what this may imply in the course of universal history, and only a few individuals, in very special circumstances, are brought to the overwhelming realization that what they decide to say or not to say, to do or not to do, will be destined to change the course of time.

The great personalities of history—in whose hands lies the power to influence thousands, even millions, of people even in the immediate future—perhaps feel, or at least should feel, the roar of history emanating from their every breath. Unfortunately, throughout history, many have been complacent about this power, when perhaps they should have feared it. On the contrary, most men and women who walk the carpet of history live under the illusion that a kind of bubble of inertia surrounds them, in which what they say, do, or choose will have only local consequences, and will condition the evolution of their environment only for a limited time. Words, gestures, and actions accumulate on a daily basis, with the impression that they produce a meaning without consequences, a kind of background noise that weaves a thin web under life, broken only by the major, often catastrophic, events that punctuate existence. It is only at very particular moments, cusps, that this accumulation of apparently inertial and anodyne signs proves to be indispensable in creating, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, the precipice from which one ends up falling, or even the pedestal on which one ends up being elevated. One only realizes at this culminating moment, which many experience with dismay—and which is only manifested to the most lucid in its revelatory character—that one has not reached the abyss or the summit with the last two or three words uttered before the flight, or the crash, but through a very long, dense, and generally incomprehensible drip of meaning, the drip of the meaning of life.

It is therefore necessary to remain in a state of moderate daze, so as not to grasp, like a carpet repair expert, where the threads that weave the dense web of signs of an existence lead. Above all, it is better not to grasp in advance the path along which the fine thread of the warp will begin to thin, become increasingly rare, and break into an embarrassing hole, into which the other threads will also gradually fall, until they widen into an abyss that devours entire patterns; it is better, moreover, not to realize how the thread turns into an irregular, unplanned, monstrous knot, a cancer that abnormally reproduces its fiber in the carpet of meaning. A colleague began to address us with hostile attitudes, to show us his enmity in a thousand ways, yet not with blatant gestures of defiance, but rather with an almost imperceptible palpitation of acrimony, until these traces accumulating in the memory and as if clumping around an already discovered nerve ignited a deep irritation, and then an existential indignation, until the decision was made to define one's own identity in opposition to that of this enemy individual. Perhaps enemies in life have no more important function than to make us realize how existence and its meaning are knotted, coagulated, and unraveled, until they weave that carpet of imperfections, of indecipherable twists, that is a life.

The daze by which we survive as social beings, without realizing the weight of each of the signs we leave in our environment, has been observed philosophically by Peirce as a habit, which from this point of view is nothing but a tendency to isolate a

link in the infinite chain of unlimited semiosis and to consider its scope as limited and local. It is only by virtue of a habit, whose socio-psychological effect is precisely a dulling, a quiet daze, that a whole series of semiotic phenomena can seem normal to us, whereas, seen from a distance, they are golden threads in the fabric that paints the meaning of a whole life. It can seem normal, for example, and quite significant, not to speak to the loved one, or to do so unintentionally, or absent-mindedly, or by repeating the clichés that accompany this daze day after day. Yet, there was perhaps a time when a couple spoke joyfully to each other, told each other worlds, sought each other's attention, each investing in the enchantment; more often than not, this sparkling regime of meaning-making does not disappear as a result of an accident, illness, or catastrophe, but by the same wear and tear as that of fabrics, those of clothes as well as those of habits. Without realizing it, we make the words we address to our loved one become neutralized until they become insignificant, until we adopt the indistinctness of our signs, their repetitiveness, and their banality, as our habit, as the normality of our interaction. Moreover, is this not how we destroy not only the semiotic environment in which we express ourselves and establish relationships, but also the physical environment in which we breathe and feed ourselves? It is only at a stage of the catastrophe, when this environment does not seem to answer our desires anymore, that we realize how much even with it, with 'nature', we had adopted by daily inertia habits and behaviors destined to destroy it, without ever calling into question the second nature in which we were born, had been raised, and which had accustomed us to consume, destroy, and waste.

The moment of awakening to the environment of signs that we create from birth often comes as a catastrophe; we realize that we have prepared with a lifetime of irreflexive habits the furrow in which we will stumble. At this point, revolutionizing everything may no longer be an option, it may no longer be safe to start weighing words, gestures, and actions. The most common response is to withdraw from the world, to stand aside, silently, avoiding setting new traps for one's own future of meaning. It is true that even in this case there are individuals who are morbidly aware of the extent of their own semiotic acts, but this often leads them not to active awareness, and creative questioning of habits, but to inaction, to inertia, essentially to fear. For fear of not creating the fabric of one's own future defeat, one chooses to act as little as possible.

6 A Turnaround

It is necessary at this point to carry out an abrupt operation, a kind of sharp turn taken at full speed, in order to give a global sense to the reasoning developed in this essay. The operation will consist in linking the reflection on the dialectic between memory and oblivion, on the inexorability of meaning, on its indelibility, and, thus, on the necessary stupefaction that habits grant to those who nevertheless wish to subsist in a semiotically uncontrollable environment, with the opposition between exhibitionism and voyeurism. It is an apparently 'trivial' pair of concepts; it is spoken about in the

salons, it is used to stigmatize the behavior of others, to give salt and pepper to the magazines; at most, it can be spoken about with propriety in the psychological sphere, but with a psychoanalytical halo and a hint of moralism that seems far from the most current tendencies of the psychological disciplines. If it is mentioned here, it is not to translate this dyad of concepts in the terminological net dear to semiotics. This could easily be done, for example, by invoking the Greimassian abstraction and reducing the two psychological attitudes to epistemic modalities within textual configurations, and precisely to modes of ostension within the enunciative scaffolding. Basically, one could present exhibitionism and voyeurism as two styles of disengagement (“*débrayage*”), in which a desire to show that is superior to what is considered median in a certain enunciative culture and ideology and a desire to observe that is also superior to the average are opposed.¹⁴ In both cases, what emerges is an “observing actant” which, both in its positive function of information flow and in its negative function of concealment, produces a meta-level sanction that is essentially negative: in both cases, the actorial manifestation of the observing actant is stigmatized, if not ostracized, with respect to its own abnormality.

This abstract reformulation is useful but does not represent the heart of the problem, which is not theoretical but psychosocial. At this point, the maneuver that is attempted in this reversal will perhaps be clear. Although in the Greimassian reformulation, exhibitionism and voyeurism can even be shown as two sides of the same coin, there is no ideological symmetry between these two excesses. The structure of this imbalance has already been described by Thomas Aquinas with reference to Aristotelian ethics: it is true that virtue lies in the middle, but the excesses on either side of this middle are not to be placed on the same moral plane: one should be neither prodigal nor miserly, but between the two immoderations, the first is closer to virtue than the second. It is as if the scales of moral equilibrium were tilted, and so it is in measuring the vices and virtues of the two scopo-erotic excesses of exhibitionism and voyeurism: both are ‘abnormal’, and to be stigmatized in relation to the median measure of the functioning of the ideologically model observer, and yet, of the two, one, namely exhibitionism, is further from virtue than the second.

It is useful to review the worldly reflection on these abnormal attitudes because it is precisely in it that this imbalance is expressed in everyday life. In salons, in the media, even in mainstream moral philosophy books, as well as in everyday conversation, it is exhibitionism that tips the scales downward, as in one of those Counter-Reformation iconographies where the archangel points his flaming sword at the dish pulled down by a mischievous little devil. This is how this unbalanced dialectic combines with the discourse held so far on meaning and its inexorable ‘presence’; if exhibitionism is condemned much more than its scopo-erotic counterpart, it is not because of a causal primacy. It is not because exhibitionism, as the popular rumor about it perhaps believes, somehow provokes voyeurism that the latter is morally less deplorable than the former. To establish a both temporal and causal priority and

¹⁴ A full articulation of this relational hypothesis can be found in Leone (2011).

posteriority between those who show more than they should and those who observe more than they should is a pure optical illusion, as well as a psychoanalytical fallacy. The voyeur takes advantage of the exhibitionist, but the former would like to be able to exercise the same excessive attention towards those who do not exceedingly show themselves and would perhaps be even more excited to observe through the peephole the reticent, the timid, those who hide and conceal themselves. In the same way, the exhibitionist meets the voyeur, and yet it is not towards this latter that the former usually direct their excesses, precisely because it is too easy, and therefore not announcing a particular satisfaction, to capture the acute scopo-erotic interest of someone who is already excessively curious. The psychological reality of these often-associated attitudes is that they are, on the contrary, intrinsically distinct, in the sense that exhibitionism exhibits itself to capture a look, not to satisfy it, while voyeurism spies not to receive a view, but to capture it.

On the contrary, as we have tried to indicate in this essay through progressive approaches, if exhibitionism is the stigma with which the contemporary world of communication is most afflicted, it is because it translates in the excessiveness of a moral attitude a much deeper and even ancestral semiotic imbalance, that between those who leave traces and, thus, meaning in the world and those who refrain from doing so. By condemning the exhibitionist, and especially the one of the new digital contexts, the yardstick of the collective morality is launched against the scapegoat of the species, the one in whom the common destiny of having to live and, therefore, to suffer by signifying is expressed and revealed. Those who make no mistakes, make nothing, as one could paraphrase the whole argument with a popular saying, which however does not explain the ancestral and then ideological roots of this condition: to produce signs in the world, not only by making their expression but also by recognizing them as such, is tantamount to engaging on a steep path where to go back on one's steps is very difficult. Once a proposal has been made in a council, or a poisonous message has been read on the screen of a cell phone, it is impossible to go back. The semiotic backtracking, as has been said, imposes excruciating efforts, and is never complete and completely satisfying, and it is then much better to refrain, not to say, not to do, not to expose oneself, not to show oneself, not to take initiatives, to keep a low profile, not to throw oneself or venture, 'minding one's own business', where, however, it is not clear what such 'business' is, for it can be reduced more and more to the point of relegating the individual to a state of total inaction, in reluctance, in a tarnishing of habits that make one look more and more like a machine. Like a machine, I pronounce a few words of greeting, I limit myself to pleasantries, I wait cautiously for someone to speak, for someone to act, for someone to show up, because the opposition between doing and not doing, saying and not saying is not a dry opposition, but one that is modulated by an additional possibility of enunciation and sociality, which is that of living in the backstage.

7 Living in the Backstage

I can abstain completely from the production of signs, or limit their scope to protocol, so as not to take risks, or retreat into mutism and social isolation, but I can also, if these choices seem too harsh—because in fact they do not allow my ego to express itself—say and do in a way that is not direct but indirect, in a ‘-meta’ way to be exact, that is to say, always on the saying and the doing of another, on the signs that he or she has deposited in the social space, either by producing them, or by identifying them.

However, one should not confuse this life of linguistic and semiotic counter-movements with the exercise of criticism; criticism is absolutely a saying and a doing, so much so that it is often costly to the one who exercises it. But we must distinguish between criticism as speaking in the first person, or at most in the name of a collective—in which we frankly lean into the arena of public communication, and, in turn, lend ourselves to the criticism of those we have criticized, with a back-and-forth that, if it is open, sincere, and reasonable, can only improve both parties, or at least make them more aware—and the attitude, instead, of those who criticize from a position of irresponsible speech, in the sense that they do not assume responsibility, but stigmatize the saying and doing of others behind a peephole, in the invisibility conferred by any form of anonymity, even that which is constituted when one camouflages one’s own voice in that of a chorus.¹⁵ This position is all the more deplorable morally and, one could say, semiotically, insofar as those who entrench themselves in it do not generally define their communicative identity and derive from it a feeling of psychological belonging and an aesthetic pleasure in criticizing, albeit in anonymity, a specific saying and doing. This would not be a courageous act—because it would always be an attempt to hide one’s signs in the hubbub of a multitude—but would nevertheless represent a punctual contribution to the construction of public opinion. On the contrary, the semiotic figure that emerges here is even looser, for it does not criticize a saying or a doing but saying and doing in general, that is to say, it rebels against those who would be guilty of taking the initiative too often, of talking too much, of expressing themselves too much, of throwing too many signs into the world. When this attitude of passive-aggressive reticence multiplies in a social space, it tends to transform it into a game of poker where everyone keeps silent, stands on the fence, remains cautious, because one is waiting for an opportunity to express oneself in the safest possible way, that is to say, by stigmatizing, behind a door, the production of signs by others. A reticent community, however, inevitably is, it must be said with force, a community of voyeurs. If these voyeurs can point the finger at anyone who dares to express oneself, it is because they are effectively watching this discursive arena in which they never express themselves, and where they nevertheless feel like ridiculing in a flagrant, collective, and anonymous way those unfortunate ones who express themselves there. Indeed, the reticent voyeur does not have a mystical conception of language,

¹⁵On the communicative distortions of anonymity, see Maani (2019).

wanting to abstain from it to safeguard its purity; he or she does not simply withdraw into the background, renouncing signs except for those that are strictly necessary; nor can it be said that this silent voyeur, who stigmatizes the speech of others, is simply dumbfounded, like a kind of raw being who lives immersed in the semiotic habit, like a machine.

8 Three Effects of Passive-Aggressive Reticence

On the contrary, the arena of reticent voyeurs we describe is animated by an empty but feverish tension; it cannot wait for an imprudent person to speak out, to show up, to sin by over-signing, for it is precisely at that moment that the unfortunate person will be transformed into a semiotic scapegoat, someone whose public derision restores the supreme value of the community, which is that of semiotic negativity: words and deeds are bad, unless they serve to condemn the words and deeds of others.¹⁶ The establishment of a network of voyeurs means that those who fall prey to it can only belong to three categories: first, the exhibitionist, who reacts to the condemnation of meaning with even more ostentatious meaning, thus drawing even more vivid strides from the stern chorus all around, but countering them in turn with even more exuberant expressions, with an escalation that makes the performance more and more extreme, because it is the only way not to escape the condemnation of the reticent voyeurs, but rather to grant them the aesthetic, almost libidinous pleasure of belonging to the community of the virtuous, those who say the right thing and do the right thing without exaggeration. In reality, the community of reticent voyeurs needs the exhibitionist precisely to construct the relational legitimacy of its own non-exaggeration, where moderation, however, is expressed not in the heaviness of intentions, but in abstention.

The one who dares to say something first immediately falls into the second possible type of interaction with the passive-aggressive community of the reticent, namely masochism. For no matter how much one weighs one's words before uttering them, or one's actions before performing them, if they are not totally ritualized, and thus conform to a collective protocol without any spark of singularity of meaning, they will always be stigmatized and criticized. In the arena of voyeurs and hypercritics, the one who makes the first move always loses, and the one who continues to do so, under the illusion that there is a constructive way of saying and doing, is bitterly mistaken and falls, precisely, into the position of the masochist, since he accepts to play the role of the scapegoat again and again.

There is also a third possible type, and it is also the most frequent. This is the type of person who, though willing to say and do, ends up throwing in the towel, afraid of the ostracism of others, because he or she has seen too many attempts to construct

¹⁶Zygmunt Bauman has described from a socio-political point of view these "negative communities" where no positive consensus can be formed.

common sense turn into a public pillory, and, thus, joins the chorus of critics, of voyeurs, standing in the wings, spying through the keyhole on the signs of others, and vehemently condemning them when someone dares to fill the sacred void of the arena of discourse with his or her personal expression. The corollary of this third possibility is that not all critical voyeurs are critical out of desire; many are critical out of fear; they would like to say, but do not have the courage; they would like to expose themselves, but do not feel capable of doing so, and so prefer to acquire a negative adherence, so to speak, which is built up by systematically stigmatizing those who, on the contrary, break through the hesitations and leave their mark on the world. The fact that in the backstage arena of reluctance are not only “Solons” but also sheep, i.e., individuals who do not refrain from speaking out of aggression but out of fear, gives this invisible and vociferous audience a single background emotional tone, that of frustration. There is in fact no worse aggression against signs than that of those who would like to signify but who refrain from doing so, fearing to spread them in the world. The latter hate those who say and do, immediately designating them as reckless exhibitionists, not only because they see in them the ideal scapegoat with which to construct their own negative identity, but also because they, the ones who insist on signifying, do what the others, the critical voyeurs, would also like to do but cannot, and thus end up hating what they cannot be.

9 Modesty

Passive-aggressive reticence, on the other hand, cannot present itself in its true nature and needs a discourse, also negative and discounting the discourse of the other, that morally justifies its rightness. This discourse essentially revolves around the so-called virtue of modesty. Modesty has a very old ethical, spiritual, and religious tradition, but in the reticent and passive-aggressive communities that animate the arenas of contemporaneity, modesty is not configured as the virtue of those who conceal their virtues, hiding them in order not to appear haughty or to arouse in the other an unpleasant feeling of moral inferiority. Contemporary modesty is not individual but collective; it does not protect those who are supposed to be lower, but stigmatizes those who, in the representation of modesty, pretend to place themselves higher than others. Thus configured, in reality, modesty, like its heroic outcome, namely humility, is not a virtue but a vice; it is the weapon with which one can silence all those who say or do something, whatever it may be, by immediately labeling it as an expression of immodesty. For it is clear that, in a community of reluctant and critical anonymous voyeurs, any expression becomes a manifestation of immodesty. Modesty is thus transformed into a gagging virtue, a muzzling virtue, evoked to identify the ideal model of the one who is but does not seem, who does but does not show, who thinks but does not say, who reflects in silence, who abstains from any ostentation. In its contemporary hypertrophy, modesty thus ends up condemning all appearances as devoid of being, all showing as empty of substance,

all words as treacherous to thought, and all saying as the sacrilege of a communal silence. The rhetoric of modesty tends indeed to hide the fact that there could be, as in a semiotic square, a not-seeming that does not seem because it hides the being, but because it hides nothing; a not showing that is not the result of virtuous modesty but, more simply, the only choice for those who have nothing to show; a not saying that does not hide a deep philosophical thought, but rather the fact that the silent individual in question has nothing to say, or is simply too cowardly to say it. In the worst case, modesty thus takes the form of the worst and most twisted pride, since it stems from such a deep-seated self-confidence, such a belief in one's own moral superiority, that one leaves it to others to discover it, without in any way seeking consensus through signs and ostentations. The modest man does not show his treasures but waits for them to be discovered by the eyes of others, often denying that they are such when some unfortunate person falls for the trap and praises them, even ending up being accused of flattery by the modest man or woman. For the modest man or woman must not be flattered in any way, he or she must be left in his or her insignificant silence. If he or she wants to show nothing, let him or her disappear.

On the contrary, modesty does not disappear, but starts to develop a negative and frustrated discourse, which consists in stigmatizing the immodesty of others. It is very easy to build this position of moral superiority because it is enough not to speak and not to act, and to wait for the word and the action of the others so that they are at once welcomed by a sneer of disapproval. A society of the humble and modest, contrary to what the religious discourse predicts, and especially the Christian discourse—which nevertheless interprets modesty as a trait of individual character, and not as a strategy of collective belonging—is in reality a very aggressive society, and potentially a violent one, not only towards those who expose themselves, but also towards those who do not expose themselves, and who brood in frustration, in lividity, in envy.

10 Conservative Voyeurism

What has been described and called the “community of the reticent” is not a historical novelty but finds its origin, as we have tried to show, in the very roots of the relationship of human cognition with traces, signs, and memory. It is precisely because the trace of the sign is in some way indelibly specified that the imbalance is created not only semiotically but also morally between those who do and those who do not, those who say and those who do not say. Reticent communities have thus always existed throughout history, and they are often small circles of very conservative frustration in which old habits oppose any change by accusing it of being an act of hubris. But hubris, as we know, is an invention of the gods to silence humans. Likewise, reticent communities often stigmatize precisely those statements and actions that seek to disrupt the status quo, to introduce novelty, and especially to highlight how much injustice, how much pain, and how much suffering there is in

the established garb of a community, those that critical voyeurism protects with its anonymous chorus of modest voices.

The small premodern communities that still exist in some pockets of modernity and pre-modernity, for example in small rural centers, institutionalize communities of reticence and indeed subject to their scrutiny and judgment a very wide range of behaviors and pronouncements: for every occasion, from birth to death, there is a specific way of doing, saying, behaving, and anyone who deviates from this exposes themselves to criticism and to be labeled at best as bizarre, at worst as witch or mentally ill. Many of the characteristics of these reticent lifestyles are often structured by the most conservative patriarchy, the one that subjects any excessive externality, often connoted as a form of female ‘chatter’, to the harsh gaze of the silent father. In fact, the aforementioned congenital imbalance gives rise to a stigma involving gender stereotypes: those who expose themselves, those who speak, those who do, those who flaunt themselves, are singled out in the same way as those who, throughout history, used the colors, shapes, and exuberance of speech—i.e., women—and were, hence, symbolically subjugated, as were those who appropriated that repressed exuberance, the LGBTQA+ world. How often have we seen well-meaning conservatives whispering in the wings of society criticize gay pride for being “too exhibitionist” or “too brazen”. But sometimes, when you live surrounded by a repressive and reticent society, the only way not to succumb, not to be bullied, intimidated, or worse, reduced to siding with the collective frustration, is to break the shores of meaning, to exhibit, to dance, to dot yourself with colorful feathers and colors like a bird finally out of the gray cage you were trapped in.

11 Conclusion: Against Cyber-False Modesty

While communities of reticent people emerge from ancestral anthropological traits, they draw new energy from their digital transposition. If you went to a party and started talking with your friends, dancing, having one too many drinks, going wild, and at some point you noticed that someone, sitting still and silent in the corner of the room and even taking notes in a notebook, had a disapproving smile on his face, and occasionally whispered soft but husky words to a neighbor, well, if you saw such a guy, wouldn’t that bother you? Wouldn’t you ask the partygoer who this person is and who invited him/her? Wouldn’t you confront him/her, even asking for help if this behavior continued? Well, people on social media are surrounded by hundreds of such individuals, still and silent voyeurs who observe, take notes, criticize, without ever revealing anything about themselves. In real life, we would dismiss them as inappropriate voyeurs. In digital life, we not only tolerate them, but we accept that they make a critical judgment on the meaning of others, a criticism that is all the more absurd for the falsely modest reticence from which it emanates. In social media, from Facebook to Instagram and beyond, the excessiveness of the exhibitionist is there for all to see, but we rarely stop to consider how excessive is also the

attitude of those in the digital world who take snoring notes about others, whilst saying nothing about themselves.

Obeying a primordial prejudice, some features of which have been highlighted here, even the academic discourse—from the society of the spectacle to the invective against social media—has stigmatized those who, in these new digital arenas, put themselves into play, experiment, discover more or less intimate parts of themselves, learn to measure private life and publicity, secrecy and revelation, announcement and discretion. There is nothing easier than to point the finger, as the grand old men of the rural villages used to do, at the colleague who ‘sins by immodesty’, who ‘shows off’, who ‘exhibits’, who exaggerates in the production of signs. Few, on the other hand, have dwelt on the vileness, the cowardice, the aggressiveness and the fundamental violence of the reticent community of those who receive the signs of others only to criticize them, and who do not participate in this game of blows and counter-blows but pretend at every moment to be the referee, a particular referee, who does not care about the fairness of the game but about that libidinous moment when, finally, the red card can be drawn.

Let us identify, then, these anonymous Solons and banish them from our social media; let us not banish those who argue with us, who argue against our ideas, who criticize us openly and in our face; let us rather eliminate all those humble and modest voyeurs who look at us through the peephole, because they express a model of community whose misdeeds we know all too well in history. Let us all play together and have fun in these extraordinary new digital arenas, and let us send home the killjoys, those who would like to measure our words, our colors and the body parts we show off, and lock our faces behind a veil of digital modesty. Long live the selfies, those who show themselves, those who put themselves forward, those who open themselves to the gaze and judgment of others, those who invent and propose, those who sincerely seek their own slice of meaning, and produce signs that sometimes please us and sometimes bore us, sometimes exalt us and sometimes annoy us, but at least they tell us again and again that we exist as a community that exchanges meaning and language, and not as a sect where we play the game of silence and where the most cowardly of offenders ends up winning. We no longer play the game of silence, we want to speak, all together, without reticence.

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