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Cultural Semiotics and Communication in the 21st Century

Massimo Leone
in conversation with Alexander Wolodtschenko and Florian Hruby

Volume 3 of *meta-carto-semiotics* already includes two interviews with Gennady Uzilevsky, semiotician from Orel, Russia and with Tositomo Kanakubo, cartographer from Tokyo, Japan. We extend this series of conversations with Massimo Leone from the University of Torino, Italy, cultural semiotician and expert in communication.

About the interview

This interview was conducted via email during autumn 2010. The final version was authorized in November 2010.

About Massimo Leone

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Massimo Leone (born 1975) focuses his research on the role of religion in modern and contemporary cultures and authored, among other texts, two monographs on these subjects (Leone, 2003; 2010). Furthermore, he is chief editor of "Lexia", the semiotic journal of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Communication at the University of Torino, Italy.

1. On traditions of the 20th and 21st centuries in cultural semiotics: In your opinion, which trends and traditions will be dominant in the next 10-20 years?

It is difficult to say: scholarly and scientific paradigms evolve and adapt not only because of internal systemic rationales but also in relation to external contextual factors. The paradigm of cultural semiotics is currently emerging with increasing vigor in the international semiotic panorama. I see September 11, 2001 and the consequent global intellectual discussion on "the clash of civilizations" as a major force behind this trend. More than ever, cultures as a whole have started to be considered as autonomous agencies, and therefore as consistent units of semiotic inquiry. The epistemological, methodological, and analytical models formulated by Jurij M. Lotman have been attracting more and more attention as a potential point of departure

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for the elaboration of a semiotics of cultures. The main task semioticians of the present and future generations will have to face is twofold: on the one hand, weaving the semiotic tradition of the 'School of Tartu' with the ethno-anthropological tradition of socio-cultural studies; on the other hand, connecting the semiotic inquiry with new trends in natural sciences, such as neurosciences. Finding models able to observe, describe, and interpret the behaviors of individuals and groups in the complex societies of the new millennium is the main task of present-day semioticians, a task that will not be possible to carry out neither if they retreat in sterile disciplinary enclaves nor if they follow superficial cross-disciplinary trends without first investigate their epistemological preconditions in-depth.

2. On information technology versus human culture: Merely "digital generations" may form modern societies in 30-40 years. Where do you think will these upcoming generations take us?

I believe there will soon be a return of fascination for old, analogical technologies. On the one hand, they have never completely disappeared: electronic books thus far have not completely replaced the digital ones, and animation movies are far from substituting analogical cinema in movie-theatres around the world. On the other hand, many analogical mediatic technologies, devices, and socio-cultural processes will soon become 'vintage'. They will be sought for and purchased because of the semantic connotations they carry on. Such connotations cannot be easily summarised in few lines, but it could be argued that they fall all under a single broad category: materiality. Future generations will be nostalgic for the materiality of letters, books, analogical photos, and other paper devices in general. This does not mean that future generations will stop enjoying the speed and sharpness of immateriality. On the contrary, digital mediatic technologies, devices, and socio-cultural processes will dominate most societies, but materiality will become a status symbol. Only few people will be able to acquire a library of paper books, have their pictures printed on paper, find time to enjoy sending non-digital Christmas cards. In other words, non-digital materiality will become a luxury niche.

3. On scientific publishing culture and communication: What can we expect in the next decades of the 21st century regarding publishing culture?

The main issue of the 21st-century publishing culture will be, from a certain point of view, opposite to the main issue of publishing culture at its early-modern inception. Whereas in the 15th -century publishing culture the main issue was to find new technologies to enable an increasing amount of people to publicize their ideas, in the 21st-century publishing culture the main issue is, and will increasingly be, finding new technologies to enable an increasing amount of ideas to be publicized to people. Whereas the book was the symbol of the publishing culture in its early-modern inception, the symbol of the 21st-century publishing culture is, and will increasingly be, the search engine. People will be ready to invest more and more material and symbolical resources to create an audience for their ideas. Readers will become as a rare and precious resource as writers were in the early-modern and modern publishing culture. The historical phase in which specialized people will be payed to read in the same way as specialized people nowadays are payed to write is, I believe, not too far. Digital technologies will make publishing such a smooth and costless process that the balance between writers and readers will be reversed. We'll be willing to pay people to read what we write.

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4. How and which potential of cultural semiotics can be of particular use to cartosemiotics and cartography?

I believe cultural semiotics might be fundamental for the development of both "cartosemiotics" and cartography, and vice versa. On the one hand, each cartographic device stems from a particular semio-geographical culture, which includes a specific way of establishing cognitive relations between space (for instance, the space of a territory) and representations (for instance, traditional or digital maps). Applying cultural semiotics to cartography will allow scholars not only to reinterpret the history of maps as a history of mapping codes, but also to device the new mapping strategies of the future.

On the other hand, "cartosemiotics" and more generally cartographic studies will provide cultural semiotics with a fascinating corpus for the testing of theories concerning the imaginaire of space, for instance in the construction, transformation, or elimination of frontiers. Since the beginning of cultural semiotics, and above all in the works of Jurij M. Lotman, keen attention has been paid to maps as diagrams that disclose the properties of a certain culture. An increase in cooperation between semioticians and cartographers could grant more specificity to the on-going semiotic interest in space, territories, and maps.

Selected Writings

Leone, M. (2003). *Religious Conversion and Identity: The Semiotic Analysis of Texts*. London, New York: Routledge.

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