

Massimo Leone

Semiotic of pretext, semiotics of pre-text

Abstract: Semioticians obsessively talk about texts and their analysis. Yet, in the history of semiotics, few texts have been analyzed. One might even argue that semiotics has never analyzed texts. Indeed, semioticians, including the fathers of the discipline, have rather turned texts into pretexts: what mattered in their analysis was not to bring about a hermeneutic result (for instance, changing the way in which a community receives the significance of a text) but to demonstrate the validity of a method (for instance, reassuring a community, usually composed of other semioticians, about the epistemological soundness of a certain analytical procedure).

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Massimo Leone: University of Torino. E-mail: massimo.leone@unito.it

No man is an island, / Entire of itself

– John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, Meditation 17

1 Introduction

As a young lecturer in visual semiotics at the University of Siena, Italy, one of my duties was to assist undergraduates in the preparation of their papers. Students would come to my office with an image of their choice and I would offer them bibliography and recommendations about how to best tackle the semiotic analysis. Most students would choose paintings similar to those already analyzed by famous visual semioticians such as Omar Calabrese, Jean-Marie Floch, or Felix Thürlemann. Fewer students, instead, would be more adventurous and choose complex abstract paintings, photographs, and other contemporary images.

One day, a young girl, entirely clothed in black, her head completely shaved, came to my office with a sheet of paper in her hands, telling me that she needed methodological advice about the analysis. As I replied that I was ready to help, she showed the image to me: it was a big black swastika on a completely white background. It was January 27, the Day of Memory, commemorating the entrance of the Red Army in Auschwitz on January 27, 1945. During my morning class, I had

analyzed the *Self-portrait with Jewish passport* by Felix Nussbaum,¹ the German-Jewish painter assassinated by the Nazis in Auschwitz. Now, during my office hours in the afternoon, a young neo-Nazi was seeking to provoke me, or rather to hurt me, by flagging before my eyes her big swastika. For a few seconds I was aghast. I didn't know whether I should run out of my office, tear the image into pieces, or reply.

What matters for the purposes of the present paper is not so much my response to the neo-Nazi student, but the chain of thoughts that this episode triggered in my mind. Had I been completely faithful to my role, I should have assisted her exactly as I did with every other student. I should have recommended literature on the iconography of twentieth-century totalitarianisms, suggested to focus on the plastic structure of the swastika, pointed out that this sign has different connotations in Hindu symbology, etc.

In other words, had I limited myself to comply with my didactic duties, I would have offered essentially methodological advice; advice about how to best use the theoretical, conceptual, and analytical devices of semiotics in order to describe the meaning of an image. That which was at stake in the communicative relation between the student and myself was not the proposed object of analysis, a swastika, but a procedure. I had learned this procedure through my previous studies and my duty as a lecturer was to pass it on to my students. The particular images they would choose to analyze was not my concern: a painting by Velazquez, a photograph by Cartier-Bresson, and a swastika were just pretexts to test their familiarity with the semiotic methodology. Had the neo-Nazi student produced an effective semiotic analysis of the swastika, I should have been pleased with my ability to teach her the semiotic method.

Of course, I was not pleased. I started to interrogate myself about the purposes of teaching semiotics, and I was not pleased at the idea that semiotics could be taught and learned as a method that does not entail any reflection about its preconditions; for instance, a reflection about the opportunity to choose such or such object for semiotic analysis.

On the one hand, one might argue that the indifference of semiotics vis-à-vis its preconditions, including the rationale of analyzing a certain object instead of another, is not intrinsic to semiotics but surfaces whenever semiotics is placed within a didactic framework. Since that which counts is that students learn the fundamentals of the semiotic mindset and method, what objects they choose to analyze is not relevant: objects are not analyzed as texts, but as pretexts of the semiotic exercise.

1 Osnabrück, 11 December 1904 – Auschwitz, 2 August 1944.

Furthermore, it could be argued that the same distortion takes place whenever any discipline is taught, that is, whenever research is oriented more toward the acquisition of a method than toward the investigation of an object. For young students of biology, for instance, the particular object they choose to analyze through a microscope is relevant only insofar as it allows them to learn how to use a microscope for subsequent, and more purposeful, analyses.

On the other hand, though, one might wonder whether indifference toward pre-conditions is not only extrinsic to semiotics, and depending on a didactic environment, but somehow intrinsic to it, and related to the way in which semiotics has been developed as an academic discipline in the last century.

2 The history of semiotics as methodological endeavor

A retrospective look at the history of semiotics might be useful to this regard. Although – as eminent historians of semiotics such as Costantino Marmo, Giovanni Manetti, John Deely, and others have pointed out – the roots of modern semiotics spread throughout the entire history of the “Western” thought, the emergence of semiotics as a new independent discipline essentially coincides with the emergence of modernity, and particularly with the rise of the so-called late- and post-modernities.

There is little doubt that the “invention” of semiotics both embodied and brought about a Kuhnian shift of paradigm, inextricably intertwined with the shift of paradigm that modernity itself represents. That is the case to such an extent that the history of modernity is unthinkable without the history of semiotics, and vice versa. Since the elaboration of semiotics, scholars and lay people have been provided with the opportunity of looking at reality in a completely different way.

However, the Kuhnian shift of paradigm represented by semiotics is different from the equally paramount shift of paradigm brought about by, for instance, quantum physics. Quantum physics was able to offer an unprecedented interpretation of reality because it was able to ground it in quite a detailed knowledge of subatomic physics, which in turn came about thanks to a dramatic improvement in the technology of experimental nuclear physics.

On the contrary, semiotics’ shift of paradigm was not based on the experimental discovery and investigation of a theretofore little explored level of reality. Peirce, Saussure, and Lotman did not offer revolutionary representations of reality because they had access to new objects of investigation. To a certain extent,

the objects of their inquiry were quite similar to those focused on by Aristotle and other eminent philosophers centuries before. The representations of reality proposed by late- and post-modern semioticians were revolutionary because they had access to a different point of view, one that was hardly available to previous thinkers.

Put straightforwardly, the shift of paradigm of quantum physics and other experimental sciences was possible because of a change in the object of investigation, whereas the shift of paradigm of semiotics was possible because of a change in the angle of investigation. Since the beginning, semiotics was less the investigation of new objects through old methods than the investigation of old objects through new methods.

The epistemological status of semiotics, that of a discipline whose novelty consisted in a new method, and not in a new object, was immediately conceived of as both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, semiotics was able to challenge previous academic boundaries by claiming that its method might be fruitfully applied to objects traditionally investigated by other disciplines. It was purported, and to a certain extent it still is, that semiotics could provide an all-encompassing methodology, able to discover the secret interconnectedness of all phenomena, and even bridge the gap between natural sciences and humanities.

On the other hand, the fact that the epistemological identity of semiotics was based on the elaboration of a method, more than on the investigation of a class of objects, led semioticians to develop that which I would like to call “the methodological syndrome.”

3 The methodological syndrome

One of the most common symptoms of such syndrome is the difficulty of finding a universally accepted formula to define the discipline itself. Traditionally, academic disciplines have been defined in relation to the object, or the class of objects, of their inquiries. It was soon evident, though, that defining semiotics as the discipline that investigates signs is not the same as defining geology as the discipline that investigates the physical matter that constitutes the earth.

Signs are not an object of investigation as physical matter is. In introducing semiotics to the Italian audience in the 1970s, Umberto Eco was careful to indicate that his *Trattato di semiotica generale* was not only about that which lay people identify as “signs” (street signs, for instance), but about the possibility to study whatsoever *sub specie signi* (Eco 1975). In other words, signs were not the new object of investigation that semiotics was based upon, but a sort of concretion of the new method characterizing semiotics.

The second recurrent symptom of the “methodological syndrome” of semiotics has been the tendency to represent its quest of the most effective semiotic method as a quest for the most appropriate semiotic object. Not only have many semioticians in the past believed that semiotics was the discipline, or even the science, of signs. Adding delusion to delusion, they have reinforced this epistemological travesty by debating about what the right object-unity of semiotic inquiry was.

Handbooks of semiotics for undergraduates usually narrate the history of semiotics as a Hegelian evolution from the science of signs to the science of discourse, and from this to the science of texts. Currently, most semioticians are deceiving themselves again by claiming that cultures, and not texts, are the appropriate object semiotics should focus on.

However, this object-driven anxiety seeks to hide that which is evident since the beginning of semiotics as an autonomous discipline: semiotics is a method with no specific object. Signs, discourses, texts, and even cultures are not the objects of semiotics but the theoretical, epistemological, methodological, and analytical metaphors through which semiotics interprets reality. Defining semiotics, as some semioticians have done in the recent past, as the discipline that investigates texts, is tantamount to define biology as the discipline that investigates microscopes.

The third symptom of the methodological syndrome of semiotics is a direct consequence of the first two. Given the impossibility to define semiotics in relation to its object, and given the propensity of many semioticians to mistake the methodological metaphors of semiotics for its objects, the history of semiotics has been replete with researchers presenting texts, discourses, and cultures as the object of their investigation when they were merely a pretext in order to focus on the real object of semiotics: its method.

This trend of delusion was particularly evident in post-Saussurean semiotics. Algirdas J. Greimas, for instance, who gave a fundamental contribution in developing the structural method in semiotics, can be said to have rarely analyzed any texts. In Greimas’s hands, texts most often became pretexts to prove the correctness of a certain theoretical, epistemological, and methodological turn of the discipline.

Even Greimas’s most articulated textual analysis, that of Maupassant’s short story “Deux amis,” is, to most regards, a methodological exercise (Greimas 1976); a wonderful methodological exercise, of course, and the accomplishment of a systematic genius, but still an exercise. After reading Greimas’s *Maupassant*, one can hardly think that the main purpose of the analysis was to offer an interpretation of its object. On the contrary, one can more easily think that the chief goal of the analysis was to offer an application of its method. Perhaps, it is only in

Greimas's investigations on Lithuanian folklore that the desire to prove the correctness of the semiotic method subsides, and the object of the analysis takes the foreground (Greimas 2005).

Most post-Greimasian structural semioticians have inherited the same tendency to turn the texts of their analyses into pretexts of methodological self-righteousness. Most often, texts become like exempla in the lives of medieval Saints: their relevance is not in the biographical content, but in the way they let a superior light shine through them, the light of a certain theoretical, epistemological, and methodological conception of meaning.

If Greimas's methodological focus is understandable in relation to his role as the founder of a new methodology, the methodological frenzy of Greimas's followers is less comprehensible: it is as if most post-Greimasian semioticians were more interested in perfecting the methodological intuitions of Greimas than in applying them to a specific class of objects. As if the role of semioticians was that of creating methodological devices more than using them. As if the moment in which the method is finally confronted with the object of investigation could be delayed indefinitely. As if the choice of such object did not really matter, provided that it proves effective in supporting the new methodological insights of semioticians.

As it will be pointed out later, I personally believe that this attachment to the methodological foreplay is not entirely innocent, but betrays a disconnection between semioticians and the socio-cultural reality in which they live.

Semiotic analyses more or less based on the philosophy of Peirce have not been less enthusiastic in turning texts into methodological pretexts. As it is well known, Peirce was not primarily interested in shaping a method for semiotic analysis, although some of his insights into the philosophy of signs have been used, not always with appreciable results, to elaborate a semiotic methodology.

However, the so-called "interpretative semiotics," which Umberto Eco and his followers introduced and developed on the ground of Peirce's concept of abduction, shows many of the symptoms characterizing the methodological syndrome of Greimas and his school. Eco has written several marvelous essays about the semiotic interpretation of texts but, with few exceptions, he has never interpreted a text for the sake of its interpretation.

On the contrary, as in Greimas, so also in Eco, texts become essentially examples, pretexts in order to falsify alternative interpretative theories and validate the semiotic method. The most articulate semiotic analysis Umberto Eco has ever carried out is probably that of Gérard de Narval's *Sylvie* (Eco 1994). However, both Eco and his followers refer to such analysis not as a revolutionary exploration in the meaning of this literary text, and as a radically new page in the philology of French literature, but as the clearest evidence that Eco's semiotic method of inter-

pretation is effective. Again, the success of the analytical method seems to be more relevant than the success of the analysis itself.

The third major branch in the history of contemporary semiotics, the one essentially initiated and developed by Jurij M. Lotman, deserves special consideration. In many of his writings, Lotman seems to adopt the same mindset of the methodological syndrome described above. Literature, history, folklore, etc., are not referred to as specific fields of semiotic analysis, but as reservoirs of examples that can be mentioned in order to increase the rhetoric efficacy of the theoretical discourse. A problematic consequence of this transformation of cultural objects into theoretical pretexts is that their analysis can be falsified only if the entire construction of Lotman's semiotic theory of culture is.

Most present-day students of semiotics vividly remember Lotman's micro-analyses of certain aspects of the Russian literature, history, and folklore. Yet, they remember them not as insights into the Russian civilization, but as fragments of such civilization buttressing the magnificent building of Lotman's semiotic theory of culture.

However, saying that Lotman was as prone to the methodological syndrome as the other giants of contemporary semiotics were would be unfair. Lotman did not merely produce theoretical essays in which texts are turned into pretexts of methodological rhetoric. He also produced analytical essays in which the semiotic method is taken for granted, retreats in the background, and leaves the foreground to texts.

In Lotman's exemplary analyses of the masterpieces of Russian literature, for instance, readers can immediately perceive that what is at stake is no longer the need to demonstrate the efficacy of the semiotic method, but the desire to apply this method in order to provide fresh, unprecedented interpretations of a fundamental page of human history (e.g., Lotman 1976). In these essays one comes across the same balance between care for the analytical method and passion for the object of analysis that is found also in Greimas' semiotic analyses of Lithuanian folklore.

Lotman was able to strike such balance between method and object because he was not only a semiotician. He was also a philologist and a historian. In other words, he did not entirely succumb to the methodological syndrome because the existential question that animated his scholarly efforts was not merely: how can I improve the theoretical, epistemological, and analytical potential of semiotics? His existential question was also: given that this potential exists, how can I use it in order to rewrite the history of the Russian civilization?

Many lessons can be learned from the recent history of semiotics. Contributions by Greimas, Eco, and Lotman to the development of the semiotic theory were extraordinary. We are, and we shall always be, dwarfs on the shoulders of

these giants. However, reverence toward these masters does not entail that alternative paths should not be explored. Focusing on the elaboration of the semiotic method was important in the beginning of semiotics as an independent discipline. Semioticians had to shape its identity in competition with the other humanities and, comprehensibly, decided to strengthen their theoretical position.

Yet, it is time that, as in the most compelling essays of Greimas, Eco, and Lotman, semioticians stop conceiving of semiotics as a universal method in search of suitable objects and start looking for particular objects in search of a suitable semiotic method. It is only by turning their gaze from method to objects that semioticians will finally bring about the analysis of texts, instead of pretexts for the analysis.

4 The cultural and enunciational delusion

Several present-day semioticians, predominantly in the post-Greimasian trend, currently call for increased attention toward the enunciational framework characterizing the analytical enterprise. In plainer words, semioticians should not simply observe, describe, and analyze the main semiotic features of a textual structure, but also reflect on the theoretical, methodological, and epistemological pre-conditions that enable such structure to become salient. The question should be no longer, or at least not merely, “how do I analyze this text?,” but also “how did I single out this text in the first instance?” “How did I detach this text from its context and turned it into an object for analysis?” (Marrone 2010)

The answer several contemporary semioticians are presently giving to such questions is that semiotics of texts should be expanded into a semiotics of cultures in order to understand how texts are shaped into what they are by the cultural dynamics characterizing a certain semiosphere, in keeping with Lotman (Leone 2010; Lorusso 2010; Leone 2012).

However, this turn of the semiotic method toward an enunciational and cultural self-awareness is not new and, from a certain point of view, is not dramatically useful either. The urge to ponder on the meta-linguistic enunciation that brings about texts as analytical units is nothing but a re-elaboration, using the trendier vocabulary of Benveniste’s enunciational semio-linguistics, of Umberto Eco’s reflection on the limits of texts (1990). Moreover, the entire literature on the concept of paratexts, from Genette on, revolves around the necessity to develop an increased awareness of the reasons for which texts begin and end as they do (Genette 1987).

As regards the plea for a thorough investigation of the cultural surroundings of texts, it has recently been repeated so much, with the consequent blossoming

of courses and handbooks of cultural semiotics both in Italy and elsewhere, that it has turned into an empty mantra.

Reflecting on the enunciational and cultural preconditions of the semiotic method will not heal semioticians' methodological syndrome because it will simply expand the domain of that which I would like to call "procedural thinking." Present-day semioticians are becoming increasingly aware that the status of semiotics as an objectless method is unsustainable. They are more and more conscious that if semiotics wants to survive as an autonomous discipline, it must go beyond the stage of methodological foreplay and start having intercourse with reality.

However, the strategy that current semioticians are envisaging in order to switch from a semiotic of pretexts into – finally – a semiotic of texts is yet another methodological procedure. Let us analyze how we single out our texts – semioticians are now saying –, according to which cultural dynamics and enunciational moves, and we shall eventually be able to ground the epistemological legitimacy of semiotics vis-à-vis its objects.

This procedural fantasy is a new version of a perverse tendency that has often manifested itself in the recent history of semiotics as well as in that of other humanities. Longing for the same epistemological status and consequent financial endowment of hard sciences, semioticians have dreamed of an analytical situation in which the method encounters the object without any intervention of the analyst. In this fantasy, the analyst becomes a computational machine whose choices are rationally guided by a procedure.

Whereas in the procedural thinking of twentieth-century semiotics Greimas, Eco, Lotman, and others fantasized about a method capable of applying itself to whatever object, in the new procedural thinking of twenty-first-century semiotics, such fantasy is being extended from the methodological domain to the analytical one: if we work hard, this fantasy says, we can not only elaborate a procedure to mechanically analyze texts; we can also elaborate a procedure to mechanically determine how we single out the texts we analyze.

This new version of an old procedural thinking will not change the status of semiotics as an objectless discipline because it will merely answer a syntactic question, the question that all methodologies are about, the question "how?" How do I analyze this text? Traditional semiotics has an answer for you. How do I single out the text I analyze? New semiotics has an answer for you.

However, procedural thinking will not be able to answer a semantic question, the question methodologies of any sort are unable to answer, the question "why?". Why do I analyze this text instead of another? Why Maupassant, why Gérard de Nerval, why Russian folktales? Thus far, most semioticians have implicitly answered: I analyze these texts and not others because the semiotic method

applies to these texts better than to others. Yet, it is evident that this answer pushes semiotics into a vicious circle, into the vicious circle of the methodological syndrome.

If I analyze texts through semiotics only because they can be analyzed through semiotics, then I am not dealing with texts but with pretexts. My semiotic work, no matter how procedurally impeccable might be, is being blind. I use the semiotic method by degrading myself into a computational machine.

5 Toward a renewed awareness

In order to escape the vicious circle of the methodological syndrome, semioticians should stop obsessively dealing with the syntactic question “how?” and start dealing with the semantic question “why?”. Yet, this question can be answered not procedurally but existentially; by carrying all the burden that the free will and its choices imply.

Why does a certain text matter to me? Why do I decide to spend time and energy applying the semiotic method to such text? Why don't I decide to analyze another text instead? If professional semioticians do not start dealing with these questions, they will all give the impression that semiotics is a blind method, which can be indifferently applied to a poem, a spot, or a swastika.

Answering these questions matters because that which is at stake is not merely the psychological, existential, and autobiographical introspection semioticians might exert on their work. What is at stake is much more relevant: it is the status of semiotics in society.

In the 1970s, when Umberto Eco was elaborating his semiotic theory, the Italian society was radically different from what it is nowadays. In several of his essays, Eco would emphasize that semiotics should be used as an analytical device able to cast light on the way in which relations of power are embodied in the communications characterizing a certain society. Eco even coined the term “semiotic guerrilla warfare” to indicate the theoretical combative status semiotics should hold in contemporary societies (Eco 1973).

Nowadays, not only very few people still mention the concept of “semiotic guerrilla warfare” (Leone 2009), but if you ask Italian undergraduates studying semiotics in communication programs about what they think the purpose of semiotics is, they will predominantly answer that they seek to learn semiotics because it is a useful device in commercial communication, and particularly in planning different forms of advertisement.

The semiotic methodology is, indeed, quite effective in analyzing and elaborating the discourse of advertisement. Several important semioticians have given fundamental contributions to this regard. However, this is not the point. This is the point only if semiotics is understood procedurally, as an objectless method available for the analysis of whatever text. As it was pointed out above, the fathers of the discipline were unwillingly responsible for bestowing such a universal methodological aura upon semiotics.

How can I analyze an advertisement campaign? How do I elaborate one? Semiotics has an answer for me. But shouldn't professional semioticians and especially teachers of semiotics also encourage students to complement these procedural questions with some existential interrogations? Shouldn't they urge students to ask themselves not only how, but also why they analyze certain texts?

In order to abandon a semiotics of pretexts and embrace a semiotics of texts, a semiotics that is not object-blind, semioticians should not merely develop a new meta-metalinguistic procedure or fantasize that cultures might replace signs and texts in the quest for the perfect semiotic objects. Semioticians should develop a semiotics of pre-texts: what socio-cultural conditions push me to attribute importance to the analysis of certain texts? Why do my students prefer to analyze advertisements instead of paintings?

The purpose of this investigation is not to push semioticians and their students toward a semiotics outside of the market or even against it. Both semioticians and their students are perfectly entitled to choose to analyze whatever objects they wish through the semiotic methodology. On the contrary, the purpose of this self-investigation is to encourage both semioticians and their students to acknowledge that semiotics is not a neutral universal method without any particular object, and that the choice of the object deeply conditions the social status of semiotics.

Again, semiotics should no longer merely ask, procedurally, "how do I analyze this text?" but also existentially, "why do I analyze this text?". However, it is impossible to answer this existential question in a non-dialogical way. The question "why do I analyze this text?" implicitly entails the question "for whom do I analyze this text?". For whom, for instance, do I choose to apply the semiotic method to an advertisement? For those who design advertisements, hoping to become one of them, or wishing to work with them, or else for those who receive these advertisements in their everyday life, to help them to decode the language of commercial persuasion?

The fantasy of a neutral semiotic method, indifferent to the choice of its objects, immune from any ideological entanglement, is a travesty for that which the human civilization, and especially the so-called "Western" world, has come to name "the humanities." If semiotics is part of the humanities, as I believe it is, it

cannot ignore the fact that the choice of the objects of its sophisticated analyses is an integral part not only of the analyses themselves but also of the very status of semiotics as a discipline.

For whom do semioticians debate about signs, discourses, texts, cultures? Thus far, and especially since the disappearance of the idea of “semiotic guerilla warfare,” it seems to me that semioticians have mostly carried out their analyses having as an interlocutor other semioticians, or students of semiotics. In other words, the semiotic discourse has turned into an academic one, and has lost any contact with the audience of lay people. The abstruse jargon many semioticians have elaborated has both embodied and emphasized this phenomenon.

For whom should semioticians, instead, apply the effective methodology of semiotics? Each semiotician will be free to answer this question in a different way, and according to a different ideology. Yet, not even asking this question, not even taking responsibility for the answer this question is given, should not be tolerated anymore.

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Bionote

Massimo Leone (b. 1975) is a research professor at the University of Torino <massimo.leone@unito.it>. His research interests include semiotics of culture, semiotics of religion, visual semiotics, and semiotics of law. His publications include *Religious conversion and identity: The semiotic analysis of texts* (2004); *Saints and signs: The cultural semiotics of early modern Catholic spirituality* (2009); *Sémiotique de l'âme: langages du changement spirituel à l'aube de l'âge moderne, 3 vols* (2012); and *Annunciazioni* (2013).

