Time and Meaning

A Cultural Semiotics of Temporal and Aspectual Ideologies

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ABSTRACT: Cultures can be categorized depending on whether they concentrate their attention on the past, the present, or the future, and depending on whether this attention is euphoric, dysphoric, or neutral. The present essay intends to complexify such articulation through suggesting that it might include also aspectuality and be traversed by the three semiotic dimensions of indexical reference to the ontology of time, iconic representation of it, and symbolical evocation of it. In other words, cultures do not diverge only in terms of 'when' in time they focus their attention on, but also in terms of 'how' in time they do so.

> Si nemo ex me quaerat, scio;
> si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio
>
> Augustin of Hippo, *Confessions*, XI, 14

1. Indexes, symbols, and icons of time

Whereas time is ontological, temporality is semiotic[1]. Visitors to the Grand Canyon are told that each layer of the multicolored stratification

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[1] One could argue that the whole history of western philosophy is about time; seeking to provide a bibliography about it is, therefore, meaningless. Among the semiotic texts that most focus on the difference between time and temporality, see, in particular, those written by Algirdas J. Greimas and Paul Ricoeur in their intense dialogue about

of rocks took shape a certain number of years ago. Although the segmentation of time into years is a partially semiotic matter (singling out an astronomical phenomenon among others)[2], the dating of the layers is a question of precision, not one of interpretation. The same visitors, however, are instructed to recognize, within the majestic amphitheater of minerals, "the Temple of Shiva", or "the Pyramid of Cheops" (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Pareidolias in the Grand Canyon.

Such enticing exercise of pareidolia (Leone 2016) invites spectators to appreciate a dimension of temporality, not one of time. The sumptuous mineral formations are not ontologically dated, but semiotically attributed an aura of time, a narrative temporality. Temporality is the product of the encounter between ontological time and language. Sciences measure the time of nature, whilst humanities gauge its temporality (Jaroszkiewicz 2016). It is impossible to directly grasp

this subject: Ricoeur and Greimas 2000; see also D'Agostino 2009. Among recent titles of secondary literature in semiotics that concentrate on time, see Pinto 1988; Fontanille 2005; Guillemette and Hébert 2005. Most of the 'classics' of linguistics and semiotics, then, implicitly or explicitly deal with the relation between language and time.

    2. See Buccellati 2013.

the ontology of time without the filter of language (Biémont 2000). Chronometers, clocks, and calendars are, indeed, language (Spagnou 2017). They are so, however, according to a semiotic dynamic that Charles S. Peirce would have defined as "indexical": there is a certain relation of cause and effect, of physical contiguity, between, on the one hand, the natural fact that the earth needs a certain ontological time to revolve around the sun and, on the other hand, the cultural fact that Gregorian calendars comprise 365 days on non–leap years, 366 on leap years (Holford–Strevens 2005).

Temporality, on the contrary, is never indexical. It is, rather, iconic: language seeks to construct semiotic artifacts of various kinds whose inner structure resemble that of ontological time, without, for that reason, being in any physical contiguity with it (Weinrich 1964). In literary narratives, for instance, readers receive the impression that fictional events happen in a temporal framework that somehow resemble that of the ontological time in which they, the readers, are immersed (Segre 1974). When they shudder at the imminent death of the protagonist, they do so because they grasp an intimate analogy between the protagonist's fictional mortality and the ontological finitude of their own days. It is precisely on the basis of this analogy, then, that narrative temporality can dramatically diverge from the ontological instinct of time, as it is the case in all those literary genres that play with such distortion (science fiction, fantasy, etc.) (Jones and Ormrod 2015).

Both natural elements and cultural artifacts indexically refer to the ontological line of time. Only cultural artifacts, however (that is, elements of reality that would not exist without the initiative of human agency), also iconically refer to it, meaning that they deploy an array of semiotic means in order to analogically represent such line (Phillips 2017). Temporality is the product of this representation. But the Peircean semiotic trichotomy applies to time too. Natural elements contain indexes of time only; cultural elements also include indexes of time, but might function as icons of time too; cultural elements, however, contain symbols of time as well, that is, semiotic hints at a temporal dimension that refers to no ontological counterpart. Symbolical temporality is particularly evident in those cultural artifacts that do not denote time but connote it. Verbal language, indeed, can resort to a morphology (that of verbs, for instance) whose

structure analogically refers to that of the ontology of time (Jaszczolt and de Saussure 2013). Human beings psychologically experience the fact that time flows from a past some images of which they store in their memory, through a fleeting present that they live in *in medias res*, to a future some images of which they construct in their expectations, hopes, and fears (Wearden 2016). Analogously, many verbal natural languages allow human beings and groups to iconically refer to the structure of such psychological apperception of the ontology of time (Mozersky 2015).

Nevertheless, many cultural artifacts are not constructed through systems of signs including such possibility, that is, a morphology that iconically resembles that of the ontology of time. A courthouse, for instance, is made of materials that indexically refer to ontological time (marble that appeared in nature two hundred million years ago, wood that appeared in nature five decades ago, glass that was fabricated few years ago, etc.) (McNamara 2004). A courthouse, however, does not iconically represent time. It might refer to its aspectuality, as it shall be seen, but not analogically involve a representation of it. Most architectural entities, indeed, as well as many other non–verbal cultural artifacts, uniquely live in the present. That does not mean, though, as historians and semioticians of architecture know well, that a building cannot symbolically refer to the ontology of time, connoting, rather than denoting, a certain temporality and aspectuality. The architect of a courthouse can, for instance, play with the temporal ontology of materials, as well as with their cultural connotations, in order to convey a certain symbolical temporality. A courthouse entirely fabricated in glass and carbon fiber, will symbolically connote a projection of both the building and the human activities that it hosts — that is, the administration of law — into the future. A marble courthouse will, on the contrary, transmit a retrograde idea of time, connoting, through its own material, a symbolical temporality focused, rather, on the past of human legal relations (Leone 2015).

The three semiotic dynamics of ontological time, iconic temporality, and symbolic temporality differently involve an aspectual dimension. Ontological time does not involve any aspectuality, meaning that it does not entail the semiotic presence of a point of view on time. Marble, for instance, will always ontologically refer to the Triassic geological era, independently from how it is looked at. Verbal

iconic representations of time can rely on a systemically structured morphology in order to represent not only when things take place in time, but also how they do so. The traditional study field of linguistic aspectuality precisely focuses on such morphology (Guentchéva 2016). Non–verbal artifacts, including non–figurative visual representations, do not iconically refer to the aspects of ontological time (to the fact, for instance, that an event takes place in a precise instant of time, or that it lasts, instead, throughout a stretched present). They can, however, symbolically refer to it. The architecture of a courthouse, for example, can not only symbolically evoke a certain temporality through the choice of its own construction materials and their temporal connotations; it can, also, connote a specific aspectuality. A wooden courthouse, for example, such as those where trials would take place in early US history, symbolically connotes both a temporal dimension (the recent past of its materials) and an aspectual dimension (the building, as well as the law, is impermanent, subject to the impetus of external forces).

In a previous article of mine, I have pointed out that cultures can be categorized depending on whether they concentrate their attention on the past, the present, or the future, and depending on whether this attention is euphoric, dysphoric, or neutral (Leone 2014 *Longing*). The present essay intends to complexify such articulation through suggesting that it might include also aspectuality and be traversed by the three semiotic dimensions of indexical reference to the ontology of time, iconic representation of it, and symbolical evocation of it. In other words, cultures do not diverge only in terms of *when* in time they focus their attention on, but also in terms of *how* in time they do so.

2. Temporal and aspectual cultures

Combining the Peircean semiotic thrichotomy with both the customary framework for the articulation of time (past, present, future, plus further nuances that will be expounded upon later) and the complex array of aspectual marks (denotations and connotations, explicit iconic morphology or symbolic hints), quite a rich typology of "temporal cultures" can be obtained, as diagram 1 shows at a glance.

	Indexical temporality (ontology of time)	Iconic temporality (representation of time through linguistic or analogous morphology)	Symbolic temporality (evocation of temporal phases)
PAST			
PRESENT			
FUTURE			
TEMPORAL ASPECTS	Inchoate / during / terminal aspect; etc.		

Such typology seeks to account for a theoretical need: in the semiotic study of temporal cultures, it is not sufficient, for instance, to single out cultures that focus on the past, for the particular way in which they do so is fundamental as well. In other words, that which is essential is the aspect of such temporal preference.

Aspects of time that are represented through the morphology of verbal languages are manifold (Guentchéva 2016); in the present essay, for the sake of exemplification, only a category of them will be dealt with, that is, the dialectics among the inchoate aspect of time (something is seen as beginning to happen), its punctual or durative or iterative aspect (something is seen as happening at a precise time, lasting through it, or occurring repetitively through time), and its terminative aspect (something is seen as ending in time); these three aspects, then, can apply to the past, the present, and the future, and receive positive or negative emotional connotations. In the verbal morphology of English, for instance, one can say that "the mausoleum was about to be erected" (inchoate past); "the mausoleum was erected" (punctual past); "the mausoleum was being erected" (durative past); "the mausoleum was destroyed and erected over and over again" (iterative past); or "the mausoleum was going to be finally erected" (terminative past). This variety of verbal and adverbial forms seeks to iconically render the ontology of temporal aspectuality. Two caveats are necessary to this regard.

2.1. *Aspectuality and motivation*

First, saying that verbal morphologies establish an iconic semiotic relation with time does not mean that they are per se motivated.

The variety of linguistic ways of representing the aspects of time, indeed (through prefixes in languages like Russian or other Slavic idioms, through explicit verbal morphologies like in English, through adverbial expressions like in Japanese, etc.) shows that there is no motivated relation between how events happen in time and the specific ways in which languages 'choose' to represent them through words (Josephson and Söhrman 2013). Here, the adjective "iconic" should be interpreted in Peircean, rather than in Saussurean, terms: a relation of similarity obtains between the dialectics of aspects in the ontology of time and that of aspectual forms in language. That means that, although languages end up representing the aspects of time in a totally arbitrary way, the internal logic through which this representation takes place is, on the contrary, motivated.

For example, there is no motivation behind the fact that one should indicate the iteration in time of an action like "jumping" by means of either explicit verbal forms, like in the Italian "saltellare" (different from "saltare", which is its punctual counterpart), or through adverbial forms, like in the English "jump over and over again"; there is, on the opposite, a precise motivation in the fact that each of these two languages come up with distinct verbal forms (either suffixes or adverbs) in order to distinguish between punctual and iterative jumping, for this distinction is important not only in language but also in the ontology of time and time perception. In certain circumstances, indeed, differentiating between jumping that is beheld only once and jumping that is beheld over and over again is essential, and so it is essential also that this discrimination in perception finds its expression in language. For a sport judge, for example, it may be key to determine whether, in the ontology of a sport action, someone "jumped" or "jumped over again", since one of either actions might be invalid; similarly, for a novelist it might make a big difference to say that someone "jumped, rejoicing at the news" or that someone "jumped over and over again, rejoicing at the news".

2.2. *Aspectuality and point of view*

The second caveat: the iconic relation between the aspectual ontology of time and the aspectual morphology of language is not the same as the iconic relation between the ontology of time and the verbal

(or adverbial) morphology of language, for aspectuality intrinsically involves the presence of a point of view on time[3]. In other words, when aspectuality is evoked, it means that time is not considered in its naked ontology, as flowing of events through the physical dimension of their evolution; time is, on the opposite, considered as temporal ontology that is already filtered by the gaze of a (supposedly human) observer, concentrating its perceptual attention on such or such facet of temporal ontology. The sentence "the monument was about to be erected", for instance, certainly refers to a temporal ontology, meaning that, in reality, there was no monument up to a certain time, then the process of its erection started, was carried on, and, at the moment in which the sentence refers to, such erection is almost completed; the sentence, however, already implies the presence of an observer that casts its gaze on such reality, and is also endowed with sufficient cognition so as to realize and foresee that the completion is about to take place but has not done so yet.

This example, nevertheless, shows that the difference between, on the one hand, the iconic relation between temporal ontology and temporal verbal morphology and, on the other hand, the iconic relation between aspectual ontology and aspectual verbal morphology is not one of kind but one of degree. In simpler words, there is no direct relation between language and time. Representing time through language always evokes the presence of an implicit observer that focuses its attention on the ontology of time through a certain perspective. The sentence "the monument was tall", again, does not constitute a naked and immediate iconic representation of the ontology of time, since it chooses to focus on the past rather than on the present or the future. Such filter, however, is less complex (that is, it implies a cognitive less complex observer) than the one intrinsically active in the sentence "the monument was about to be erected"; in the second case, indeed, the iconic representation of the ontology of time involves a gaze that not only looks at the past but also does so with the ability to foresee its evolution toward the less recent past, toward a moment in which a monument still to be erected is about to become so.

3. On this topic, see most contributions in this volume, and especially that by Manetti.

3. Non–verbal aspectuality

The two caveats just dealt with are instrumental to introduce a more central and difficult question, that of determining whether not only verbal language but also other systems of signs contain elements that are able to iconically represent not just the phases of the ontology of time, but its aspects too. This issue is not separated from the task of articulating a typology of temporal and aspectual cultures but is, on the contrary, conducive to it. An "aspectual culture" is not simply one in which, for instance, verbal expressions of the inchoateness of the past occur but one in which, in addition to that, all sorts of non–verbal "modeling systems", as Yuri M. Lotman would call them (2001), also focus their implicit reader's attention on the fact that, first, the past is more relevant than either the present or the future and, second, the beginning of the past is more relevant than either its duration or its end. Nevertheless, in order to ascertain whether such "aspectual culture" could not only be 'sensed' by the researcher, but also pinpointed with reference to the fact that some specific texts, instead of others, circulate in the semiosphere, one should be able to demonstrate that certain aspectual marks are objectively present in such texts.

   That largely depends on the system of signs to which texts refer to. Movies, for instance, can rely on filmic discursive means in order to (Wildfeuer and Bateman 2017): 1) represent something that happened in the past (in relation to the moment in which the movie is made and shown): that does not necessarily imply resorting to specific filmic discursive means in order to iconically represent the past (Stewart 2007); 'period dramas', for instance, refer to a historical past through deploying clothes, hairstyles, vehicles, etc. of that epoch, which they nevertheless depict as if it was the present, through enunciating it in the fictional '*hic et nunc*' of the filmic discourse; 2) represent something that happened in the past of the movie: that, again, does not necessarily involve specific filmic discursive means: showing a character first, then showing the same character impersonated by a younger actor who closely resembles the one impersonating the first one is a conventional strategy to represent the past of a movie character (Thain 2017), a strategy that, nevertheless, is not specifically filmic, that is, cannot be compared to, for instance, the verbal morphology

of the present perfect tense in English; showing the passing of time through visually representing aging is not the same as iconically representing it through an arbitrary semiotic formula; in the example just mentioned, for example, motivation does not obtain between the structure of time and that of language but between an aging face and its fictional representation; in other words, such representation is motivated, and its arbitrariness rather consists in its being part of a conventional filmic formula, which nevertheless remains unspecific of the filmic discourse (there is no difference between realizing that a friend has aged in reality and realizing that a character has aged in a movie); 3) there are, however, some specific or quasi–specific filmic discursive means through which a movie makes reference to the past, be it the historical past of the ontology of time or the discursive past of the semiotics of the movie.

As regards 1), a present–day movie resorting to an obsolete filmic technique in order to produce its own discourse adopts specific discursive means so as to evoke the past; the relation of arbitrariness between the antiquarian filmic feature and the evocation of the past is not exactly the same as the arbitrariness that obtains, for instance, between the morphology of the simple past in English and the evocation of a remote temporal ontology through verbal language; present–day black and white movies do not evoke the past arbitrarily but because black and white movies are part of the ontology of the past (on the contrary, the simple past is exactly the same in the present time as it was at the time that is represented through its use); resorting to black and white photography in order to evoke the past in a movie might be rather compared, in verbal language, to resorting to archaic words in order to evoke past historical and linguistic eons, like in the classical expedient of the 'retrieved manuscript', by which many historical novels begin.

As regards 2), certain kinds of film transition are sometimes used to enunciate a past within the discourse of the movie; that might be the closest thing to an arbitrary and specifically filmic formula that conveys a past temporal ontology (Hesselberth 2014).

The issue of determining whether non–verbal systems of signs (or secondary modeling systems, as Lotman would call them) are endowed with specific discursive means so as to iconically represent not only *when* events happen in time but also *how* they do so, is even

more complicated. Cinematically representing the beginning of an action, indeed, is not tantamount to linguistically focusing on the beginning of the representation of an action. Iconically rendering the aspect of an event through simply producing a simulacrum of that event that focuses on an aspect of it is not the same as relying on a conventional formula in order to render that aspect. In simpler words: the Italian verbal discourse adopts the verbal morphology of the imperfect so as to represent both a bouncing ball that keeps bouncing through past time ("la palla rimbalzava" [the ball was bouncing], "–ava" being the desinence of such verbal tense) and whatever other event that keeps occurring through past time ("l'uomo mangi–ava", [the man was eating], etc.).

Nevertheless, when the filmic discourse intends to represent an event that lasts through past time, it has no other way than representing that event through a filmic simulacrum that cannot be used to represent the lasting of another event, exactly because the relation between signifier and signified is not only motivated but is also indexical: the simulacrum was created by the fact that the event actually kept occurring during a certain time in front of the camera. The example of the filmic discourse, however, might be misleading, since this semiotic system can rely on signs that indexically represent the passing of time. Focusing on semiotic systems that, conversely, cannot rely on such possibility, might be revealing.

Painting, for instance, cannot indexically represent the fact that an event keeps occurring through the past. First of all, painting, like most if not all non–verbal semiotic systems, is bound to represent the present, and the present only; the past can be evoked only indirectly, by showing a situation or character twice in different circumstances, and hinting through various expedients at the fact that one situation or character constitutes the past of the other; or, alternatively, by choosing to represent an instant in the logical sequence of instants that constitute an act or action, and prompting beholders to infer the past or future of such instant on the basis of their cultural awareness of the narrative script of that act or action (Calabrese 1985). Within its representation of non–present temporality (it should rather be said: within its representation of a temporality that is not simultaneous to that of the pictorial enunciation), however, painting can, in addition, hint at the fact that its simulated temporality is also looked at through

a particular aspect. Many of Velazquez's paintings, for example, resort to the expedient of the blurring representation of an object in order to signify that that object has been visually grasped and depicted (and must be mentally imagined) while its transformation through time was taking place, that is, from the perspective of a durative aspectuality (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Diego Velázquez. Circa 1657. *Las Hilanderas* (*"The Spinners"*). Oil on canvas. 220 cm x 289 cm. Madrid, Prado Museum.

Such visual expedient is now conventional but its genesis was probably indexically motivated: when objects keep moving fast in front of our eyes, we cannot perceive them distinctively (from a certain point of view, a similar indexical origin might be behind the visual convention of using certain transitions so as to represent a past temporality within the filmic discourse: the visual memories that we retrieve are not usually sharp).

To conclude this preliminary esthetic inquiry into the aspectual discourse of non–verbal systems of signs: whereas verbal language adopts arbitrary semiotic means in order to iconically render both the dialectics among the ontological phases of time and that among the aspects of such phases, non–verbal systems of signs rely on few of such arbitrary means and rather resort to a simulation of the aspectuality characterizing the represented action or act itself. The verbal,

adverbial, or semantic rendering of aspectuality in verbal language is, therefore, much more powerful and versatile. Furthermore, the fact that texts produced through non–verbal systems of signs share few common conventional aspectual marks makes the work of the cultural semiotician more complicated: how is it possible to detect an aspectual isotopy throughout a given semiosphere, if aspectuality is signified through it only by means of either verbal artifacts or local systems of signs?

4. Towards a cultural semiotics of temporal and aspectual ideologies

The fact that aspectuality works in radically different ways depending on the semiotic system that is adopted to signify it might not, however, be entirely central. That which constitutes the main goal of the cultural semiotician, indeed, is not to ascertain whether a certain form of temporality or aspectuality statistically occurs more frequently in a given semiosphere. Ascertaining that, for instance, the present–day world literature uses less the future tense than the world literature of the 1960s might be relevant but only as a symptom of the fact that the former semiosphere ideologically attributes less value to the future than the latter (Bode 2013). In other words, that which matters is not the statistic relevance of a certain temporality or aspect of time, but the observation that they become the cornerstone of a narrative. In other terms, that which matters is not how often a society talks about the past, or about the beginning of the past, but rather how often a society situates the key stages of its narratives in such temporal phase or aspectual dimension.

It is now time to seek to fill up the empty typology schematized above, taking into account the semiotic caveats subsequently formulated, but minding, above all, the way in which such typology is pervaded with narrative values.

5. Ideologies of the past

A semiosphere can concentrate on the past. That implies that, first, many if not most texts circulating through such semiosphere adopt a verbal or non–verbal morphology in order to refer to previous historical periods. In a demographically stagnant society like the present–day Italian one, for instance, it is common to come across conversations where most statements revolve around the rekindling of a remote past, which is then contrasted to the present so as to devaluate the latter in relation to the former. This kind of comparison is not new; it recurrently dominates the social discourse especially in the phases of sociocultural crisis and renewal; the French "querelle des anciens et des modernes", which flourished from the 17th century on (Lecoq 2001), is another example of such 'present time bashing' through the uncritical extolling of the past. Also non–verbal texts and representations can contribute to a semiosphere's focusing on the past, albeit with the semiotic restrictions that have been described above. In late 18th–century France, for instance, the flourishing of the Neoclassical school of historical painting, represented by artists such as Jacques–Louis David and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, can be considered as the pictorial outcome of a cultural context that was shocked by the revolution (a sociopolitical event that usually wipes the past away and dramatically institutes a new radically different present) and nervously sought to come to terms with its past, through both historical visual representations and their metaphoric power (Bordes 2005; Porterfield and Siegfried 2006).

A semiosphere's concentration on the past, however, does not usually limit itself to verbally or non–verbally referring to it but tends to embed it in narratives where the past itself becomes an object of value. That can occur with different aspectualities. Certain cultures especially valorize the inchoate aspect of a past historical period. Such is the case, for instance, of all societies that are obsessed with commemorating their historical or, rather, mythical foundations (Watthee–Delmotte and O'Connor 2017). The entire discourse of the "places of memory" [in French, *lieux de mémoire*] studied by Pierre Nora develops this kind of perspective when iconically or symbolically representing a past ontology, through either verbal or non–verbal artifacts (Nora 1984–92; 2011). The nostalgic discourse on the past, on the contrary, which is

common in the abovementioned rhetoric of 'present–bashing', also refers to remote historical periods but focuses on their ending. In present–day Iran, for example, citizens who are disappointed with the socio–economic consequences of the 1979 predominantly Islamic revolution often develop a discourse in which their country is seen as having experienced the peak of prosperity under the government of the last Shah, an epoch that is represented as irremediably lost as a consequence of the revolution (Milani 2011).

The aspectual dialectics concerning the representation of the past can also oppose other semantic features, such as punctuality and durativity. Most modern societies implicitly or explicitly institute a symbolical calendar of salient dates, which stand out by virtue of their historical, social, or religious relevance. In commemorating saints, for instance, the Catholic semiosphere circulate texts that represent the past at a specific point of its development (Leone 2010). In this case, however, the focus is neither on the beginning nor on the end. The chosen date, indeed, does usually relate to a punctual event in the life of a saint, such as a beginning (birth) or an end (death), but this origin is usually disregarded or even forgotten by popular piety, for which the position of the commemoration in the Catholic calendar is rather arbitrary and gives rise to a sort of recurrent punctuation of the year (Wuerl and Aquilina 2014).

The past, however, can be commemorated also in its continuous tense, for instance, when the either material or emotional effects of a past event or epoch are seen as prolonged through the past itself toward the present. Given such aspectual semantics, texts and representations of the past do not simply institute a punctuated calendar, but seek to continuously rekindle a remote era through showing its impact on the present community. As in all the aspectual rhetorics described above, in this case too, representations can be underpinned by either a positive or a negative connotation. On the one hand, the present–day Argentinian society seeks to keep the memory of the *desaparecidos* alive, for instance, through showing pictures of their student IDs as posters in the main hall of the University of Buenos Aires (Faculty of Architecture) (Violi 2014); on the other hand, the past can continue through the present with a positive, beneficial connotation, for example, under the form of cyclical ritualization; such is the case of miracles that, in the Catholic semiosphere, keep occurring in

the present, year after year, as they occurred in the past, such as the liquefaction of Saint Januarius's blood in Naples every September 19 (Saint Januarius's Day, commemorating his martyrdom), December 16 (celebrating his patronage of Naples and its archdiocese), and on the Saturday before the first Sunday of May (commemorating the reunification of his relics) (Sallmann 1994).

Whereas the past is, ontologically, something that is not anymore, semiospheres construct a semiotic memory of it through indexically project on such past time a grid meant to articulate it, measure it, and, above all, allowing communities to establish a significant relation between such memory of the past, the present, and the expectation or planning of the future. The semiotic rekindling of the past, however, is never purely indexical; relics themselves, for instance, need an entire cultural (and, therefore, symbolical) framework in order to function as signs of the past that physically caused them or was in spatio–temporal contiguity with them (Leone 2014 *Wrapping*). As a consequence, verbal and non–verbal artifacts seek to signify a past that is ontologically absent (but that is phenomenologically present in people's memories) through either iconic or symbolical strategies, adopting verbal or non–verbal means. In doing so, texts usually chose to valorize not only when a given ontology took place, but also how it did so. They therefore position themselves within the aspectual dialectics mainly offered by verbal language but also, to a lesser extent, by other systems of signs, in order to express a preference for the beginning of the past, for its ending, for its punctuality, for its durativity, etc. Each of these temporal and aspectual choices, then, can be attributed an either euphoric or dysphoric value, depending on the place that the represented time occupies in the shared narrative of its rekindling.

6. Ideologies of the future

Such typology symmetrically presents itself as regards the future too. The ontology of the future, however, is different from that of the past. Whereas the past vanishes while leaving traces of it that can turn into signs to recover its memory, the future pertains to an ontology that, by definition, is not yet (Gidley 2017). The custom of seeking to forecast the future through the signs of divination is immemorial (Leone 2011

Sulla chiromanzia), whereas one of the marks of modernity is the thirst for statistically anticipating the future through rational procedures (Leone 2015). In both cases, though, the relation between signs and the ontology of either the past or the future is radically different. On the one hand, a ruin reminds us of the past building it was part of for an indexical relation of physical contiguity obtained between the dilapidated piece of marble that we see and the majestic temple it belonged to (Leone 2017 *On Broken*). When semiotically foreseeing the future, instead, the relation that divination establishes between signs and an ontology yet to be is totally arbitrary, although it is usually travestied as a pseudo–indexical one; but also statistical methods of forecasting cannot rely on the same signs that the archeologist refers to so as to reconstruct the past; that which the former deal with, indeed, are not signs of a future ontology but rather signs of a past ontology that closely resembles that which may occur in the future. Similarly, seismographers seeking to predict a future earthquake do not collect indexes of the earthquake but indexes of a present situation that is similar to those which, in the past, gave rise to earthquakes. This is a general semiotic law: per definition, indexes of the future do not exist; the future can be signified only through iconic or symbolical representations.

That, nevertheless, does not amount to deny the fact that the future can be indexically measured. We can project a calendar onto the foreseeable development of the future exactly as we do it with the past, but in this case too, the grid that articulates the ontology of time in a given culture will not segment an ontology that was and is not anymore, but one that is not yet and (probably) might be. Our conception of mathematical infinitude allows us to imagine a calendar that stretches beyond the end of the physical universe, as we can imagine a date on an imaginary calendar one day before the big bang. In the former case, though, the grid is not simply imaginary but virtual; the world might exist tomorrow, or might not: my future calendar is there, ready, awaiting the inexorable fading of the present into the future.

Differences between iconic and symbolical representations of the past on the one hand, and analogous representations of the future on the other, are less dramatic. When we construct a mental image of the future we do so without any reference to an actual ontology,

but since the relation between sign (representamen) and object, in the case of both icons and symbols, is not one based on causal contiguity, differences between texts that recount the past through iconic simulacra or arbitrary connotation and texts that imagine the future through similar means are not so sharp. That is probably the reason for which many thinkers and philosophers of the past have pointed out and formulated the idea of a symmetry between a past that "is no longer" and a future that "is not yet". In reality, such symmetry holds as regards icons and symbols of either the past or the future but not as regards their indexes. It is true that the past is no longer, but the traces of it that it leaves behind are indexically related to it, whereas there are no indexes we can rely on in our present perception so as to signify the future in the same compelling way in which we signify the past (Gatard 2014).

This asymmetry begets important consequences in the functioning of different temporal and aspectual cultures in the semiosphere. People might want to seek comfort from an excruciating present through delving into an elaborate imagination of the future, yet the pragmatic force of such imagination will always be inferior to that which exudes from an elaborate reconstruction of the past. That might be the reason for which, in times of deep crises, cultures more compulsively seek refuge in the past than in the future. But that might also be a consequence of the prevailing semiotic ideology of representation, pushing the members of a culture to prefer more tangible representations of non–present ontologies.

Given this fundamental difference, though, many verbal systems of representation possess specific semiotic means so as to depict the future as they do to represent the past. Future tenses are common in Indo–European languages (De Brabanter, Kissine, and Sharifzadeh 2014), probably signaling also a temporal ideology for which it is important to distinguish between phenomena that are, phenomena that were and are not any more, and phenomena that are not yet. Semiospheres in which a temporal ideology of the future prevails will, then, circulate an abundance, if not a majority, of texts in which future tenses are used but also, as it was pointed out as regards the past too, texts in which the future occupies the narrative role of an object of value. Such is the case of historical periods in which prophecies of an imminent radical change start to permeate the public discourse (Murphy

and Jeffcoat Schedtler 2016), like in the feverish period that precedes a revolution, or in millenarianisms (Frykholm 2016), when tales of future and irreparable catastrophes become the textual environment in which members of a semiosphere leave their daily semiotic life (Yar 2015). All these textual genres (divinations, vaticinations, prophecies, revolutionary scenarios, etc.) partake of the fictionality that is intrinsic in all non–indexical signs, yet they do not present themselves as pure icons, or as pure symbols, but as texts that are somehow able to read the signs that, in the present, a future yet to come mysteriously produces in anticipation of its occurrence. Other kinds of texts, instead, such as, typically, science fiction representations, do not claim for themselves such capacity, but openly declare their iconic or symbolical nature. They do not pretend to expose the indexes of the future that the present contains (which is semiotically impossible per se), but to offer analogies and connotations that, on the basis of what is known about the past and the present, anticipate a surprising and yet somehow believable image of what is yet to come (Burton 2015).

The primary modeling system of language stems from the positioning of a virtual observer in relation to the present ontology (the only proper ontology), a positioning which gives rise to both a temporal grid and its aspectual nuances. These concern not only the past but also the future. Out typology must, then, be further enriched.

6.1. *The past of the future and the future of the past*

Before dwelling on the aspectual cultures of the future and their euphoric or dysphoric colorations, another structural feature of the semiotic ideology of time of many Indo–European languages and societies must be expounded upon. The temporal grid through which language, as well as other non–verbal temporal diagrams, 'capture' the ontology of time and iconically render it through their signifying structures, contain a virtual possibility that some verbal morphologies actualize and exploit: verbal language can not only represent a past ontology or simulate a future one. It can also verbally depict the future of the past and the past of the future. A verbal tense like the Italian "anterior future" ["future anteriore"], for instance, structurally aims at evoking a past ontology, which is nevertheless seen from the perspective of a more remote past and, therefore, as a future ontology

for such point of view.

Underlying the existence and the systemic place of such possibility of temporal signification is important also in the terms of a semiotics of temporal ideologies. Although the anterior future sounds like a future from a semiotic point of view, from a strictly ontological perspective it is not one. It iconically renders a past ontology as well, something that, from the point of view of enunciation, is not anymore but something that, from the point of view that the enunciation situates in an even more remote past, is not yet. The asymmetry between the anterior future and the future is evident but can be fully grasped only if the indexical rendering of a future ontology and its iconic representation through verbal language are kept apart. When using the future tense we depict a time that is ontologically absent, whilst when using the anterior future we semiotically simulate such absence, for the time represented by this tense is actually part of the past, that is, it *was* already and, as a consequence, has left some traces of itself in the present. That is the main reason for which, as I have pointed out in other essays (Leone 2014 *Longing*), the anterior future is the tense of nostalgia, not only in verbal representations but also and above all in sociocultural practices that incarnate and express the same tense through other systems of signs[4].

Vintage, retro, and other aesthetic trends, as well as all kinds of 'retrotopias' do not simply revere the past, but often revere a past that is inscribed in the temporal ideology of an anterior future. In other words, a vintage aficionado does not adhere to the same temporal ideology as, for instance, a retrograde nationalist. The latter worships an event or era in the past for he or she considers them as the point of beginning of a glorious past, which is either lost or endangered in the present. The former, instead, does not see in some hipster traces of the past simply the relics of a remote and more euphoric temporal phase, but also the remnants of a past in which the future was expectantly and euphorically awaited. On the one hand, fascists collect relics or pseudo–relics of the Roman past (also through mimicking it in verbal language and architecture) for they venerate it as the mythical past beginning of the 'Italic civilization'; on the other hand, hipsters collect

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4. See, in this volume, the essay of Gabriele Marino, which articulates a typology of musical nostalgias.

relics or pseudo–relics of the 1960s not because this decade is seen as the glorious past incipit of the present but because, quite contrarily, it is cherished as the last decade in Italian history in which youngsters would expectantly look at the future. In this as in similar 'retrotopias' that refer not to the past but to the future of the past, the temporal ideology that emerges is not simply a retrograde one but one that, albeit being projected toward the future, prefers to seek it not in the uncertain area of the ontological future, but in the reassuring dimension of the semiotic future that which language iconically depicts as 'the future of the past'. Both retrogrades and retrotopians implicitly flee from the ontology and from the semiotics of the present, and both shun the uncertainty of the future, seen as either the expected copy of a more glorious past (the fascist) or an era that, given the deterioration of the present state, will never matches such glorious past (the hipster). The former, however, reassure themselves by rekindling the past, while the latter comfort themselves by rekindling the future of the past.

The verbal morphology of many Indo–European languages allows one also to represent the past of the future. Such possibility and the relative temporal ideology are particularly effective in providing motivation for a representation of the future that, as it was pointed out earlier, is doomed to be fictional. Hollywood movies more and more frequently resort to such temporal modality in order to fictionally reconstruct the historical genesis of a future catastrophe, cataclysm, or future development (Heinze and Krämer 2015). In movies, we do not only see that the earth has been conquered by apes, we are also told the story that, being the past of such future, led to it. The rhetorical effect of such temporal construction is evident: every time that, in a narrative, a future becomes the past of a more distant future, the former is somehow motivated by the second by virtue of a sort of *mise en abyme*. The meaning effect is analogous to that of a visual representation embedding an analogous visual representation: when in a advertisement image some fresh tomatoes are represented beside a can of tomato soup, the former inevitably look like 'real' tomatoes and convey, thus, the idea that they constitute the genuine content of the soup[5].

5. This technique for the induction of a reality–effect was already experimented in

Both the future of the past and the past of the future, therefore, entail a persuasive effect, which reassures one about the existence of the future by projecting it either into the past as its future (nostalgia of the future) or into a more distant future as its future (genealogy of the future). In both cases, a temporal dimension that is, by definition, devoid of any ontology, is referentialized through either projection or retro–jection.

6.2. *The emptiness of the future*

Most temporal ideologies and rhetorics, indeed, explicitly or implicitly revolve around the same existential issue of seeking to provide a fundament for the representation of a temporal dimension, that of the future, that does not entail a proper ontology. The human species is endowed with the cognitive ability of formulating verbal and non–verbal simulacra representing possible future developments of present states (Leone 2012). We can both elaborate a verbal prophecy about when we shall die or represent it through a painting or a movie, although the first system of signs is more powerful and articulate than any other. The inevitable emotional byproduct of such cognitive ability is anxiety: we know from bitter experience that some of our simulacra of the future prove correct by the turning of the future into present, whereas others are proven wrong, sometimes with catastrophic consequences. As a result, we develop both verbal and non–verbal persuasive strategies so as to attribute ontological solidity to the future. The morphology of verbal forms meant to express the future is one of the most peremptory rhetorical means seeking to reassure human beings about such uncertain ontology. When I say "I shall buy a new car tomorrow", I always know that this sentence is, by definition, devoid of any ontology and that it actually constitutes a verbal simulacrum fictionally representing a possible (but never certain!) future development of the present state; yet, the fact itself of expressing the possibility of a future through such tense confers to it a pseudo–ontological firmness.

painting; see Bokody 2015.

6.3. *Future aspectualities*

The future, however, is referred to not only as temporal dimension but also as temporal dimension that is looked at from the perspective of a particular aspect. In many verbal morphologies, a perfect symmetry obtains between the array of aspectual dialectics that can invest the representation of the past and that which can nuance the temporal representation of the future. The question of determining whether these aspectual modalities also give rise to as many aspectual ideologies, interacting and sometimes conflicting in the semiosphere, is more complicated. On the one hand, some cultures tend to deal with the future as punctual aspect of value, positing in their calendar a forthcoming instant that is seen either with vibrant expectation or with terror, but that is conceived of, in any case, as a singular, isolated, and unrepeatable event. Lars von Trier beautifully dismaying movie *Melancholia* (2011) offers a metaphor of the existential condition of doom by staging the emotions of a community that awaits, terrified, the impact of an asteroid on the earth. The Christian eschatology, symmetrically, injects into the semiosphere verbal and non–verbal texts that revolve around a valorization of the future as instant, seen as either glorious or terrifying depending on everyone's destiny at Doomsday. Paintings contribute to represent this momentous interruption of history as an instant frozen in time: Christ raises his judging arm and does not move (Leone 2017 *The Frowning*).

The future, however, can be valorized also according to a durative aspectual ideology. Socio–political discourses of progress, for instance, do not circulate texts that simply foresee a punctual catastrophe or an instant liberation in the remote future, but a temporal framework of improvement that stretches from the present to infinity through progressive and steady amelioration (Wagner 2016). Whereas punctual ideologies of the future tend to close the horizon of human experience within an either tragic or luminous circle, durative ideologies of the future open such horizon toward a temporal progression whose end is not foreseeable if not in the form of the abstract idea of a paradisiac future state.

Articulating such oppositions between aspectual ideologies in a diagram like the Greimassian square, one can realize that they can sometimes hold a relation of suspension or co–presence of their re-

spective semantic values, for instance, in the aspectual ideologies of revolution: those who, in 1789 Paris or in 1979 Teheran, dreamed of a revolution, adhered to iconic representations of a future time that would depict it both as liberating instant and as point of departure of an undetermined progression toward human improvement.

As in aspectual ideologies of the past, so in those of the future too, the accent of valorization can fall not only within the dialectics between punctuality and durativity but also within the one opposing different stages in the development of the future itself. On the one hand, cultures might circulate verbal and non–verbal texts that emphasize the inchoate aspect not of a past epoch but of a future eon. In such cases, the future, or rather an instant in the future extension of time, becomes the mythical point of departure of an epoch (usually not a point but a period) that is seen as more ahead in time and radically different from what comes before. Narratives of 'new beginnings' systematically resort to and incarnate this aspectual ideology; a typical example of it can be found in mythologies of liberation: enslaved populations or oppressed minorities elaborate and diffuse paradigmatic tales in which that which is highlighted is the watershed that will be created, in the future, between what comes before the moment of liberation and what comes after. In such narratives, the aspectual structure of narrative valorization associates the instant of the future turning point with all sorts of equally powerful and decisive figures, including the character of the savior. The savior (or the *libertador*) will come and such arrival will change history.

Narratives that valorize the inchoate aspect of the future, however, can be dysphoric too: the future arrival of a natural disaster, or rather the invasion of an enemy population, is seen as the future beginning of the end (Leone Forthcoming). Nations (and semiospheres) that live under the constant threat of a hostile frontier nation (and semiosphere), such as present–day South Korea, for example, give rise to iconic representations of the future that contain the anguishing instant starting from which 'life as we know it will be lost forever'.

Fictions of the 'end of history', on the contrary, usually attribute cognitive and emotional value to the ending of the future (Fukuyama 1992). In such case, the watershed imagined in a future time separates incommensurable entities, one that corresponds to an actual ontology and one that, on the opposite, stems from the separation from time

and being: after the final instant, that which is will be forever, and that which is not, won't. Religious eschatologies often produce narratives in which the 'end of time' is not followed by a proper new epoch but by a time that is not actually one, since it is destined not to flow ahead anymore (Byerly and Silverman 2017).

Aspectual ideologies of the future valorizing its durativity are difficult to exemplify, since they represent a sort of contradiction: given that, by definition, iconic representations of the future do not refer to any actual ontology, but limit themselves to simulate one, they can hardly emphasize the durative aspect, since they cannot rekindle an ontology, as durative ideologies of the past usually do. Simulacra of the future can, nevertheless, resort to the aspectual figure of the eternal return, that is, not to an ideology of durativity but to one of ciclicity: the future, in such case, is neither something that begins nor something that ends, and it is not something that lasts either but something that keeps reoccurring on and on into the future time.

6.4. *Cyclic aspectualities*

The aspectual cyclicity of the past is different from that of the future. In order to understand such difference, the structural nature of cyclicity itself must be understood. As it has been pointed out earlier, the temporal phase of the future, to which no ontology actually corresponds, can be looked at by either iconic or symbolical representations that chose among opposite tendencies of various aspectual dialectics; they can either, as we have seen, euphorically or dysphorically emphasize the initial moment of a future era or they can stress the final instant of a future series of events. Playing with another opposition, whose possibility is mainly inscribed in the morphology of the primary modeling system, that is, verbal language, but can be found also in other systems of signs — although with the difficulties that were described earlier — such representations of a future state of events — by definition, an imaginary one — can either represent it as continuous or as punctual. The semantic articulation of this opposition, however, also includes the possibility of a co–presence of these aspectual marks, that precisely occurs in cyclicity (Toivonen, Csuri, and Zee 2015): in cyclical aspectuality, an event both takes place in an precise instant and keeps repeating in time at equal temporal intervals (Chen 2017).

The aspectuality of the event is, therefore, both punctual and durative, giving rise to the complex semantic term of iterativity (which linguists usually oppose to semelfactivity, that is, the aspectual quality of something that occurs only once in time).

It seems, as a consequence, that the opposition between iterativity (or cyclicity, a word that designates the same aspectual structure but emphasizes its revolving topology rather than its intermittent rhythm) and semelfactivity is not independent but is somehow a specification (an over–aspectualization, one might say) of the opposition between punctuality and durativity: a text first situates an actant observer that sees the punctuality of an event, then situates an actant observer that focuses on the opposite semantic aspectual feature, noticing that the same event keeps occurring along a stretch of time. The propensity to adopt this kind of semantically complex perspective toward the past is typical of the philosopher of history: at least from Vico on, an important trend in the philosophy of history has revolved around the attitude of seeing the succession of human events not as random sequence or as progression but as series of states characterized by cyclical structure, in which salient states of the same nature tend to occur and reoccur at regular intervals and according to a cyclical structure (Cacciatore 2009; Mali 2012).

The insurgence of the French revolution, for instance, is not simply considered as punctual event in the past and, therefore, regarded from the perspective of punctuality and semelfactivity, but rather as an element in a more complex and iterative pattern, wherein periods of conservatism are followed by periods of innovation, which sometimes accelerate and condensate into revolutionary explosions. Such was also the aspectual perspective of the semiotics of history formulated by Jurij M. Lotman, which was certainly also inspired by Vico's aspectual attitude (Lotman 2009; cfr Frank, Ruhe, and Schmitz 2012). This can be either euphoric or dysphoric: we can both rejoice at the periodic resurgence of saintly prophets in the religious history of humanity and mourn the reoccurring tendency of human beings to segregate and oppress minorities. In general, though, the fact itself of spotting a cyclical nature in the past encourages one to look at it in a more dispassionate way: a tragic event that is inserted in a cyclical pattern will necessarily be followed by a more euphoric state, and vice versa, a happy circumstance in human history will inexorably be marred

by deterioration and decay, until an opposite desolation, or even a catastrophe, occurs.

The precise structure with which the cyclical pattern of the past is looked at is determined by its rhythm, which is also an indexical consequence of the ontology of things: some events in reality 'explode', some other events evolve into their final conditions, and this alternation of explosions and evolutions is exactly the ontological characteristic that language seeks to render first indexically, through the institution of chronology, and then iconically, through representations of the past that grasp not only its cyclical nature but also the precise pattern with which this cyclicity takes place.

No matter what the pattern of cyclity is, however, spotting it into the past is somehow conducive to ataraxia: things do not only happen; they keep happening. There is no need in worrying about a sad event or to be elated about a happy one: what is euphorically seen will be superseded by its dysphoric opposite, and vice versa. That relates also to the aspectual divergence between –emic and –etic aspectual perspectives on human facts: for those who experience an earthquake, for example, the catastrophe is a punctual event, represented and felt as irremediable destructor of lives and life environment; from the point of view of the philosopher of history, though, or also from the point of view of the geologist, the earthquake is not any longer the punctual event that has destroyed lives, but an element in a more complex and cyclical series of circumstances, in which moments and periods of destruction are followed by moments and periods of reconstruction: there is no reason for extolling a palace, since it will be destroyed in time by a calamity; but there is no reason for mourning its destruction either, for it will be reconstructed.

Adopting an aspectual perspective that realizes the cyclicity of human events in the past, however, is different from inscribing the same perspective in iconic representations of the future. As it has been underlined many times already, the texts that a semiosphere circulates as simulacra of future states cannot indexically refer to any ontology: the future is not seen but foreseen. The contrast between this empty ontology and the cognitive ability to represent it generates an anxiety that is typical and, perhaps, characteristic of the human kind. Divination, however, is not the only strategy to 'tame' such uncertainty; projecting the cyclical aspectuality of the past into the

future allows one to better bear with disasters and calamities, personal failures and social catastrophes: no matter what will happen in the future, it will be followed by better conditions of life, since the cyclicity itself of human history entails it. Such soothing aspectual ideology, however, consists not only in foreseeing the iterativity of the future, but also in somehow planning it through the adoption of rituals. A ritual, indeed, from this point of view, is nothing but a semiotic machine meant to generate cyclicity in future ontologies (Leone 2011 *Rituals*). "Do this in memory of me": by instituting the Eucharistic ritual and sacrament, Jesus provides his followers not only with a powerful mnemotechnique, thanks to which they will periodically remember him, but also with a powerful generator of cyclicity; the future, whose ontology is not only absent and uncertain, but also tragically bereft of Jesus's presence on earth, is sweetened by the institution of a ritual whose aspectual consequence is that of bringing about a relieving cyclicity; every Sunday, at every mass, Jesus will relive among his faithful. More trivially, but not less importantly, we celebrate birthdays not only as indexical projections, in the social calendar, of the yearly distance from our birth in the social calendar but also as instances of a rituality that, too, seeks to cope with the bitter taste of an absent ontology: another year will come, and we'll celebrate again, seeking to remember that, one day, celebrations will end, and us with them.

7. Ideologies of the present

It is time now to tackle the most difficult aspect of aspectuality and its ideologies: after briefly dealing with aspectual ideologies of the past and the future, it is imperative to dwell on aspectual ideologies of the present. On the one hand, hinting at the possibility of an ideological valorization of the present seems pleonastic or even absurd: human beings experience the present moment after moment and they can conjure a past or imagine a future only by temporarily distracting themselves from the present in which they inexorably live. Mental images of the past and the future, moreover, although 'encouraged' by signs of the latter (relics) and of the former (omens) that are disseminated in the present, can be semiotically and even linguistically

constructed only from the point of view of this last temporal eon. As Émile Benveniste first formally intuited, the abstract enunciation point from which the future and the past, as well as any beyond, can be linguistically evoked, inevitably places itself in the phenomenological present that is occupied by the mind and the body of the speaker. I can say "I shall buy a car tomorrow", but this verbal evocation of a future state of the world has its technical roots in the present, in here, in my persona. An essential dissymmetry, then, holds between the ideological valorizations of the past and the future, on the one hand, and apparently similar ideological valorizations of the present, on the other hand. "Cultures of the present" basically arise as a result of the systematic effort of blocking the switch between the present awareness and the imaginary transportation to either the past, through remembrance, or the future, through fiction (the separation between the two mental processes is, of course, not so sharp: there is a lot of fiction in remembrance, and a lot of remembrance in fiction). Ideologies of the present are not, nevertheless, more 'natural' than ideologies of the past and the future. They might seem so because human beings phenomenologically live in the present, but that is also a consequence of an ideological construction itself (Huber 2016). In reality, blocking the switch that leads from this present phenomenology to a remembrance of the past or to a fiction of the future requires an effort, which is sometimes enormous.

As regards the switch between the present and the past, it is all the more obvious to consider it as an effort to 'block' it or to 'hamper' it when one considers that, both at the individual and at the social level, an *ars oblivionalis* does not exist; an equivalent of the many mnemotechniques that have been invented and experimented with more or less success throughout history, and on which an abundant literature is extant, does not exist as regards the art of forgetting. That was a central preoccupation of the late Umberto Eco, who underlined in several essays that there is a semiotic dissymmetry between forgetting and remembering (Eco 1988); probably for evolutionary reasons, our cognition exerts an active agency as regards remembrance (to a certain extent, at least), meaning that we can voluntarily decide to remember a phone number or the name of a person, but no agency whatsoever as regards oblivion (we cannot in any way decide to forget a word, or a face). That has probably to do with the fact that

memorizing and keeping in our mind, at least for a certain time, the memories of past unpleasant events and experiences is useful for us not to undergo the same experience again; were we to exert direct and intentional agency on our memory, on the opposite, we would be inclined to immediately remove any painful memory, losing, thus, the possibility of learning from it (Draaisma 2013). Blocking or thwarting the switch from the present phenomenology to the recollection of the past is, therefore, somewhat unnatural, in the sense that, at the individual level, it gives rise to an attitude and practice of systematic removal, a condition on the pathological implications of which abundant psychoanalytical literature exists.

Removal, though, can permeate a temporal ideology also at the level of society (Plate 2017). There are human groups in which such systematic oblivion of the past is not spontaneous but imposed by power with the aim of bringing about that which commonly goes under the name of *damnatio memoriae* (Augé 1998): with the advent of the new leader, the society as a whole is encouraged and sometimes even forced to get rid of all signs that might work as relics of an undesired past: in these cases, the temporal ideology that prevails works symmetrically to the monumentalization of the past that is typical of nationalisms. The two and their relative practices can actually coexist, for instance in dictatorships, that simultaneously remove all traces of previous democratic regimes and figures and build their symbolical pantheon and pedigree by extolling the memory of previous dictatorial periods and protagonists (Mussolini with Caesar, for example). Both the social and the psychological ideologies of the present operate by eliminating from the personal or social entourage a series of signs that are closely or even remotely connected with a past epoch (Weinrich 2000): a person will avoid certain streets, pictures, or songs etc. so as to limit or avoid any access to a past whose remembrance is saddened with the presence of a lost beloved one; a society will reduce or erase statues, plaques, festivities, etc. so as to block the temporal switch that leads from the present to a previous painful or disdained historical period.

Temporal ideologies of the present, however, usually do not involve only the systematic erasure of such or such wounding or enemy memory but also the disabling of the switch itself that allows individuals and especially groups to transfer from the phenomenology of the

present and its ontological fullness to the fantasmatic phenomenology of the past[6]. In radical or even extremist ideologies of the past, it is not a particular memory that is eliminated or a range of souvenirs but the practice itself of passing from the perceived present to the conjured or recollected past. Those individuals or groups that, voluntarily or involuntarily, adhere to such ideology do not limit themselves not to remember something; they do not remember anything; and that is the case not because they cannot remember, as in the circumstance of a pathological amnesia, but because they do not value the access to reconstructed mental images of past events any longer. Hence, an amnesic aesthetics takes place[7]. Given the natural propensity of human beings to refer to the past, developing an individual or social amnesia does not usually involve an effort but is the consequence of a trauma: the individual is so anguished by the possibility of reminiscing some painful events that he or she does not try to eliminate a specific memory or a range of souvenirs but puts the entire mechanism of remembrance itself into brackets. The same goes for societies: those of them that embrace, often unconsciously, an extreme temporal ideology of the present do not forget only one period, one memory, or a determined series of them, they rather adopt the moral suggestion of the famous Neapolitan song: "those who received, received, those who gave, gave, let's forget about the past, we're all from Naples, comrade![8]" In more explicit terms, in extreme temporal ideologies of the present, people and groups leave in a constant obnubilation, in which any mental or psychosocial bridging toward the past is systematically discouraged. Ideologies of the present are quite successful in times of crises of various kinds for they are, at least at first sight, relaxing: anything that might bother from the past is simply erased from the scene, and the entire past with it.

The current evolution of most psychotherapy can exemplify this

6. Connerton 2008 articulates social oblivion as follows: repressive erasure; prescriptive forgetting; forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity; structural amnesia; forgetting as annulment; forgetting as planned obsolescence; forgetting as humiliated silence; that which is at stake here is similar to Connerton's "structural amnesia"; see also Connerton 2009.

7. Such 'amnesiology' would be the counterpart of Derrida's 'hauntology' (Derrida 1993).

8. Song "Simmo 'e Napule paisà" (1944); lyrics by Peppino Fiorelli; music by Nicola Valente.

trend in an interesting way. In psychoanalysis, and especially in the classical Freudian one, minutely reconstructing the complexity of a patient's childhood and family relations so as to ascertain how they impacted on the adult psyche of the individual is paramount; it is actually one of the main tenets of the whole Freudian epistemology: the past can explain the present (Strenger 1991). In most present–day psychotherapy (CBT), on the contrary, the patient is almost discouraged to overthink about her or his distant past, as if the painful present was a temporal dimension somehow disconnected from what preceded it. The perspective toward past memories is actually reversed: the patient is believed not to gain anything from remembering her or his childhood relation with her or his parents; this recollection is, in the eyes of predominant contemporary psychotherapy, nothing but an harmful effort to a posteriori justify some present painful conditions (Slife and Williams 1995). A complex relation obtains between such focalization on the present — and the simultaneous devaluation of the past — in present–day psychotherapy and the raising of individualism: the more a society becomes individualistic, the more it tends to devaluate the influence of the context, be it social or psychological, and, therefore, underestimate the importance of the past. Present–day psychotherapy seems to imply that the individual is what it is not because a past has decided for it but because he or she has decided to recollect a certain past as an alibi, which works as fictional background to her or his present cognitions, emotions, and actions.

At both the individual and the social level, extreme ideologies of the present that obliterate the past are dangerous for the same reasons for which remembering is a compulsory and adaptive human activity: both individuals and societies learn from the past; the goal of psychoanalysis, just to continue with this example, is not to delve into the familial past of a patient but to delve into it in a way that identifies plausible causal relations between a present psychopathology and past family configurations. On the one hand, bad psychoanalysis sometimes concocts mythical and even absurd etiologies, which in the end prove useless or even detrimental to liberating the patient from her or his dolorous condition; on the other hand, that does not justify a generalized stigmatization of the whole Freudian method. Thinking of the individual as living in a present that is constantly disconnected from its remote past turns her or his actions into mere immediate

reactions to the present environment, without due consideration for the way in which such environment is filtered by the semiotic patterns and habits that have crystallized throughout the entire patient's life and, perhaps, especially in the first years of her or his emotional existence (Fancher 1995).

Similarly, a society that does not cultivate a reasonable devotion to the past is condemned to repeat its mistakes. That does not mean that the mere commemoration of the past is sufficient to generate progress in human history, and to avoid that, for instance, meaningless wars are waged around the globe. Unfortunately, thus far, the construction of monumental war cemeteries has not prevented societies from engaging in devastating wars over and over again. On the contrary, reacting to the ideologies of obnubilation should entail refraining from yielding to the opposite risk of embracing chauvinistic ideologies of the past or sterile self–victimizing and should encourage cultivating, instead, the art of reasonable etiology, which is part of the more encompassing art of historical hermeneutics. In the present, that which matters is not remembering the past per se. What matters is, first, discovering, in the past, patterns whose configurations are analogous to those that are observed *in fieri* in the present; and, second, formulating plausible hypotheses about the genealogy of the present from the past. That is the case at both the individual and the social level.

Radical ideologies of the present, however, do not cause only the obliteration of the past but also that of the future. As it was suggested earlier, ideologies of the past are frequently embraced by human beings and groups so as to soothe the uncertainty of the future: given the empty ontology and the statutory unpredictability of this temporal eon, individuals and societies start obsessively delving into their past, diverting their attention from the present but, above all, from the future. Extreme ideologies of the present are motivated by the same anxiety but they give rise to different side effects. Indeed, even though the mania for relics of nationalist pseudo–monuments distracts a collectivity from the anxious need for imagining a future, it does not disrupt, notwithstanding, the faculty of imagination itself too. Reconstructing the past from traces or pseudo–traces of it, indeed, inevitably relies on the human cognitive capacity for switching from the present perception of the world to the imagination of possible worlds, which are ontologically absent but semiotically hinted at

by their relics. The nostalgic, the nationalist, and the hipster do not abdicate such faculty of imagination but simply reorient its efforts toward the past instead of aiming at the imagination and planning of the future.

The ideologies of the present, on the contrary, do not obliterate only the past and the future but also the human propensity itself for mentally and linguistically accessing possible worlds. From this point of view, the radicalization of these ideologies is even more dangerous. It leads to the paralysis, or at least to the ankylosis, of an essential human faculty, one that has been probably selected throughout natural history as adaptive for its ability to allow human beings and groups to better cope with sudden modifications of the environment, and not through experience but through prevention. In the long perspective of natural history, the superiority of the latter approach over the former is evident: those who must experience dangers in order to avoid them are likely to succumb to such dangers in the short period. It is only through imagining both risks and opportunities before they present themselves that the individual (as well as the society) can survive in an ever changing natural and cultural context.

The current ideologies of the present, instead, are usually characterized by abnormal valorization of experience over planning. Accumulating experience in all fields of human activity, from the sentimental to the professional one, seems to have become the moral imperative of the present time; many young people in the west do not know when and if they will secure a permanent job; when and if they will have a house; when and if they shall give rise to the next generation. As a reaction to the current difficulty or even impossibility of planning a future, they are successfully marketed an aesthetics of the present in which they even pay for accumulating experience without ever building or planning anything solid in the future. They travel, eat, love, and, more generally, consume by simply exposing themselves to experiences whose purpose is neither that of accumulating as memories of the past, nor that of turning into the basis for devising a future but to remain encircled within an epidermal aesthetics, which soothes the natural anxiety for the future and its empty ontology by caressing the senses with increasingly sophisticated and sundry immediate environments. In relation to them, what matters is not to learn how to better react to a certain context, but to enjoy the superposition

of sensations earned in *Umwelt* that present themselves as constantly changing and in which prevision is not an issue.

Contemporary tourism is one of the epitomes of such aesthetics (Frow 1997). Present–day European youths travel extensively by means of low cost travel companies, they accumulate experiences, they are satisfied with a feeling of pseudo–adaptability, and yet what they adapt to is not the ever changing environment of their own society, but the pseudo–changing environment of traveling. Through Google Maps, Tripadvisor, Booking, Airbnb and other apps, travelling nowadays is, in most areas of the world, a mere organizational routine. Young people enjoy the pride that derives from this pseudo–adaptability, and forget about developing the skills and attitudes that are indispensable to survive in their own environment. Similarly, museums and other traditional cultural institutions are marketed more and more not as deposits of those signs and texts that are the most valued in a given culture, but as places that, suitably modified and arranged, allow one to 'experience' fine arts and culture without the burden of having to develop, through access to these cultural items themselves, a structured representation of the past. The present is sold and consumed as vanishing phenomenology that neither accumulates into the material marks of the past nor solidifies into an image of the future. Souvenirs are in decline, not only because young people often do not dispose of physical spaces where to accumulate and arrange them, but also because material accumulation itself is increasingly devaluated, in contrast with the immaterial aesthetics of the present and its experiences.

The vertiginous digitalization of photographs, and the consequent disappearing of material repositories of images, like photo–albums for instance (only the vintage or cyber–vintage version of them survives), contributes to the contemporary radicalization of the ideology and aesthetics of the present: what matters is taking a picture, better if it is a selfie, and not to print it, store it, or look at it after a certain time. Photography, which at its onset inherited from painting the mythical task of fixating the profile of a fleeting ontology, currently tends to lose its pragmatic contact with the past: people do not take pictures anymore because they want to preserve, for the future, images of a present that will soon become past; they take pictures because they have learned to readapt this technology of the past to the contempo-

rary ideology and aesthetics of the present; they take pictures in order to experience the present as if it had the cultural exclusiveness of a selected past. They do not take pictures for their future memories but they attribute memorability to their present pictures.

Analogously, collecting is becoming an elite activity for those who have money and space to accumulate material items from the past into the present for the future. For most of us, cultural entities that would heretofore acquire the status of tangible traces of past intellectual experiences (books read as children, records listened to as teenagers, pictures of parties, souvenirs of journeys, letters of friends) are more and more lost into the invisible ocean of digits of hard disks or, even more ethereally, into the clouds of digital networks. At the same time, forms of consumptions that do not produce any trace or accumulation are at the core of the present cultural industry and marketing. The most central of them is eating: people nowadays, and especially young people, do not want to accumulate books, or painting, or even clothes; they want to consume food and revel into its vanishing aesthetics. Countless restaurants and bars mushroom in European cities: what they sell turns into calories, and then into everyday activities, but does not leave any trace behind, if not the fleeting memory of a taste (but how many meals are we able to remember?) (Leone 2016 *Critique*).

Given this characterization of the radical ideologies of the present, reflecting on their aspectuality is quite pleonastic. It is clear that there is no particular dialectics between the inchoate, the central, and the terminative aspect of the present. The ideological valorization of the present implies extirpating any perception that would hint at its continuity from the past and into the future. In radical ideologies of the present, the only aspect that is emphasized is durativity, which is, nevertheless, paradoxically conflated with a sort of bizarre semelfactivity. When I visit as a tourist a city that I don't know, for instance, I am encouraged not to store perceptions into my future memory of the place, but to be entirely engrossed in the instantaneous and simultaneously durative contemplation and aesthetic experience of the urban environment. That is the reason for which, among young tourists, 'walking tours' through cities are now one of the most favorite forms of visiting them: they allow participant to immerse themselves in the flux of perception, without bothering too much for the accumulation of memories and their material counterparts.

7.1. *The ideology of the selfie*

The selfie constitutes the photographic glorification of this attitude[9]: not only do I look at reality through a camera, that is, through the idea of a visual present that is attributed the aesthetic validation of a memorable past, but I even turn my back to reality, and do not look at it directly anymore, not even in the margins of my visual field (Kuntsman 2017); in the selfie, I take an image of the present that includes myself as being a memorable person, objectifying so to speak the memory of myself as remembered person (by myself). In the selfie, again, I do not take a picture that will allow me to remember how I was (as in the case of photographic portraits or self–portraits, for instance) but I take a picture that allows me to perceive myself as someone to be remembered. The selfie, as most present–day digital photographs, is a way to bestow to the vanishing present, isolated from any memory of the past and any plan for the future, the aura of a visual souvenir, of something that will survive me in the future.

That, however, does not disrupt the aesthetics of the ideological valorization of the durative aspect of the present but reinforces it: I shall never look back at my selfie, because I am already looking at it in the instantaneous and durative moment in which I take it. The selfie conflates the present moment of the making of a picture of myself and the potential future moment in which I shall look at such picture in order to remember how I was: in the selfie, I look at myself as I am in the making of the selfie itself, and yet this looking at my own image in the present is not the same as looking at myself in the mirror. It shares the narcissism of the mirror but at the same time it absorbs the durativity of a photograph and its traditional connotations of mnemonic device. The selfie is, as a consequence, the perfect synthesis between mirror and camera, between a visual device that captures the present state of myself, delivering an image of it that, nevertheless, will vanish with my moving far from the mirror, and a visual device that captures the present state of myself for a potential future spectatorship. It is as if, by taking selfies, I was granting myself

9. Scholarly literature on the selfie is growing but is often too attached to the psychological framework of narcissism. Explaining the diffusion of selfies in these terms is, perhaps, too simplistic (Pavoncello 2016; Riva 2016; Di Gregorio 2017).

the possibility to attach a temporal dimension to my mirror, stretching its reflected image into a possible future (Godart 2016).

The purpose of a selfie, nevertheless, is not functional but symbolic: I shall never look at my selfies again, yet I take them as if they were to become future images of myself to be looked at as visual deposit of my past identities. From this point of view, being a semiotic hybrid between a mirrored image and a photographed one, the selfie works as an index — meaning that it would not be there if the camera had not been in physical contiguity with my body in the *hic et nunc* — but also as an icon — meaning that this mirror actually retains a permanent picture of such indexical presence of mine — and as a symbol. The symbolical function of a selfie exactly derives from its conflating indexical and iconic properties: with digital photography, the ontology of the photographed object becomes uncertain; by connecting it with the idea of a firm physical contiguity with my body (through my arm or its prosthesis, the selfie–stick), I attribute an indexically ontological aura to digital icons of myself. Selfies are so popular because, in a temporal ideology of the present, reassure us about our ontological continuity. They provide a present version of the temporal ideology of the past and its memories. Selfies are a visual device to remember the present as present and not as past. They attribute to experience the phenomenological aura of memory. In a selfie, I remember my present. It is the epitome of the radicalization of the temporal and aspectual ideology of the instantaneous, durative present.

Such ideology, then, manifests itself in a myriad of everyday experiences and gadgets, which nevertheless propose, in the present–day semiosphere, always the same temporal and aspectual attitude: do not look at the past, it is painful; do not look at the future, it is anguishing; look at the present, at a present that is disconnected from what precedes it and from what follows it, at a present that manifests itself as continuous instant, without the burden to remember or to plan, without the bother to accumulate, without the pain of imagination and its risks of disillusion.

Bookstores now commonly sell coloring albums for adults (Fig. 3)[10]: the logic behind them is not any longer that of encouraging

10. For a recent, descriptive survey, see http://www.independent.co.uk/extras/indybe-st/arts-books/colouring-books-colouring-books-for-adults-johanna-basford-millie-

children to focus on the coloring of empty and beautiful patterns but to promote, in adults, a full–mindedness that, in the terms of alternative, more traditional temporal ideologies, would have been called "absentmindedness". The current temporal ideology of the present pushes us to consider that our mind is full when it is not encumbered with images from the past or with plans for the future; from the point of view of alternative, previous temporal ideologies, yet, this full mind would be considered as an empty, or an absent mind, unable or unwilling to exert its fundamental task of linking the present ontology with that which begot it and to that which it might beget.
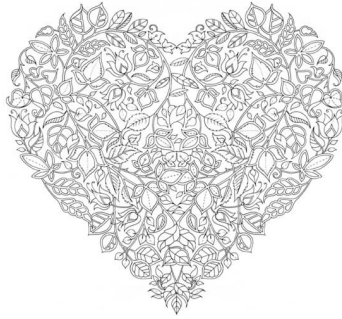

Figure 3. J. Basford (2015) Coloring pattern for adults[11].

Conclusion

According to an easy form of cultural relativism, we should not bother about the permanence of a certain cultural form in our society because this form is absent in other societies or presents itself in completely different ways. As regards the specific domain of the ideologies of time and aspect, in particular, any deontic consideration about them

morotta-10464381.html.

11. Available at http://www.independent.co.uk/extras/indybest/arts-books/colouring-books-colouring-books-for-adults-johanna-basford-millie-morotta-10464381.html.

would be superfluous for, as the new age vulgate says — often on the basis of sketchy anthropological knowledge — there are distant cultures, notably in the 'East', in which the future does not exist, or at least, language does not capture it and, as a consequence, people do not bother about it. The empty ontology of the future is simply not a problem.

The veracity of such new age clichés should be questioned with reference to serious scholarly investigation, but that is not the central issue. The central issue is that this 'cheap' cultural relativism relies on an Orientalistic vision of the East in order to legitimize the radicalization of a temporal ideology of the present, and demonstrate that we, 'the West', are 'wrong' with our pernicious obsession for the past and, above all, for the future, whereas in the 'serene East' people live in psychological peace and social harmony exactly because they do not concentrate, and their languages, religions, and cultures do not encourage them to concentrate, on what is not yet.

This kind of xenophilia, however, has something paradoxical about it. The fact that non–Western cultures focus less on the future does not mean that that is a more 'natural' way of dealing with time through language and culture. On the contrary, one could claim that, with regards to such matters, the only 'nature' that counts is exactly that of language and the culture that it both gives rise to and is given rise by. As it is often the case in cultural semiotics, it is more opportune to reason in terms of 'second nature': focusing on the future in language and culture is not 'natural' per se (although the human capacity for envisaging possible future worlds is), but it is the 'second nature' of the western world. Most of our literature, arts, architecture, not to speak of philosophy, economy, technology, etc. would be unthinkable of, and actually would not exist as we know them, without this general cultural framework that includes a keen attention toward that which might be.

The western cultures, and most of its languages, are based on an equilibrate trichotomy and dialectics among the three temporal and linguistic eons of past, present, and future. Any cultural development that pushes the western semiosphere to alter such equilibrium, then, is not negative per se in universal terms but in relation to the very long period of western cultural history. Temporal obsessions for a nostalgic past, for a nervous future, or for an obnubilated present,

indeed, betray one of the central patterns in accordance to which most western culture has been constructed, the idea that preservation of memory, delectation of the present, and expectation of the future should be in constant balance and never prevaricate over each other. Cultural semioticians do not necessarily endorse an ethics of time, but limit themselves to warn about the fact that, going astray from this balance, most of the semiosphere in which we live becomes unintelligible. Excessive concentration on the past, for instance, risks to annihilate that instinct for planning that is at the core of so many manifestations of European culture; exceeding focus on the future, symmetrically, endangers that cult of past memories that is also an essential attitude of the western temporal episteme; and the currently prevailing radical temporal ideology of the present, finally, with its obsessive diverting from both the past and the future, is probably the most potentially harmful of them all, since it risks atrophying that exercise of imagining possible worlds (in terms of simulacra of the past or future scenarios) that, again, has been an essential fixture of the western way of approaching meaning in both individual existence and collective life.

Such a caveat against temporal radicalisms and their cultural consequences is not abstract but relates to a multitude of everyday practices (Darrault–Harris and Fontanille 2008), including the kind of syllabi that are taught in schools, the aesthetic education of youths in society, and the working of economic institutions such as banks or insurances (a society in which banks, including the central ones, do not worry anymore about saving, for instance, eliminate a central economic practice of western society, which gave rise to the accumulation of capitals, among other things).

In a nutshell, cultural semioticians should not turn into Savonarolas, and urge people to burn their smartphones in a present–day version of bonefires of vanities. Selfies, for instance, are a form of psychological and cultural expression that is symptomatic of the current disconnection of the present from the past and the future. Cultural semiotics, nevertheless, should not campaign against this practice of self–representation but encourage awareness of its meaning and underline the need not to neglect aesthetic practices that are oriented toward other temporal eons. There is nothing intrinsically despicable in taking selfies with artworks in museums, for instance, but cultural

semiotics must warn that this tribute to the durative experience of the present would be diminutive of the complexity of the western culture of time if, before or after taking such selfies, the visitors of a museum were not to indulge in aesthetic practices that, on the contrary, cater to the symbolical needs of other temporal dimensions.

Let us continue taking selfies with Monna Lisa, but then let us take pictures of this painting as well, and, above all, let us look at it (Stavens 2017), thus engrossed in it that the mysterious smile becomes a figurative door to all the past smiles that we irremediably lost, and to all the future smiles that, hopefully, await us.

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