Eero Tarasti

What is existential semiotics? From theory to application

Background

During the past fifteen years I have been elaborating a new theory of semiotic inquiry, starting from its philosophical and epistemic premises. I have called this project Existential semiotics due to its roots in continental philosophy – following the line Kant-Hegel-Kierkegaard-Jaspers-Heidegger-Arendt-Sartre-de Beauvoir-Marcel-Wahl – and in the history of semiotics via its various generations: classic, structuralist/post-structuralist, and postmodern thinkers. In fact this enterprise has led me almost to the borderlines of semiotics, since the new configuration of knowledge that I propose has become so strongly philosophical and so close to certain hermeneutical and phenomenological approaches, that it may be at first difficult to see its link to the whole tradition of semiotic studies.

As to the latter, my new theory does not aim to show that "classical semiotic thought" has become outdated; rather, it is still valid, but within the limits of a new, more encompassing theory. Coming from Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism (I was his only Finnish student, having studied with him in Paris in 1973–1975, then doing research in Brazil in 1976 following his ideas) and from the Paris School of semiotics founded by Lithuanian born semiotician and linguist Algirdas Julien Greimas, I remain faithful to those classic authors. On the other hand, I am forging an independent theory that can no longer be confined within the framework of Parisian semiotics. In the semiotic context and tradition I would call my theory a "neo-semiotics". It is no longer a "post-" phenomenon (like poststructuralism or postmodernism) but something new, in that it purports to represent 21st-century thought and, as a philosophy of our time, engages with challenges of the present era.

My new theory is not a return to "existentialism", as its title might suggest. Rather, I am reconsidering and rethinking the foundations of semiotics in the light of certain philosophers, who have paid attention to such notions as subject, Dasein, transcendence, situation, existence and value. Basically what this involves is a scrutiny of "semiosis", the process of production of signs and meaning, from the inside, so to speak. I am interested in how signs become signs and, particularly, how they are preceded by what I call "presigns", i.e., virtual, transcendental entities. In the most abstract form these presigns are values, axiological entities; in more concrete form, they are "ideas" which, say, an artist may have, prior to their being actualized, transformed, or transcribed into what I call "actsigns". Moreover, when actsigns are performed or received by the community in which signs are conveyed, they become "post-signs"; i.e., they are realized and exercise their "real" impact upon the destinatees.

Such a theoretical scheme is essentially based on two fundamental categories of an ontological nature: Dasein and transcendence. The first term (literally, "Being-there") I leave untranslated from the German, because of its subtle meaningfulness. It is simply the world in which we as subjects live, surrounded by other subjects and objects with which we try to come to terms. In structuralist narratology, a primal "desire" to be conjuncted/disjuncted was viewed as the "initial force" behind narrative processes, and this holds true also in existential semiotics, within the limits of Dasein. Note that here Dasein is not only "my Being-There", as it was for Heidegger, but also covers other subjects and objects. Still, we feel our Dasein to be incomplete, lacking something, and this catalyses our wish and longing for the transcendent. That is how Sartre explained the notion of transcendence – i.e., as a lack in Dasein which forces us to go beyond its borderlines – as did phenomenological sociologists such as Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann.

Transcendence is the realm beyond the concrete world of Dasein which our subject can reach via two acts, negation and affirmation. In the first case the subject realizes "Nothingness" in the Hegelian or existentialist sense, with its anguishing psychic reflections; in the latter, as "plenitude" (Gr., pleroma; Lat., plena), understood as an archetypal experience of the universe as full of meanings rather than devoid of them – an experience endorsed by the Gnostics, and described as well by modern philosophers (e.g., Vladimir Soloviev) and semioticians (e.g, Eco 1990).

Already this theoretical outline seems to stray from common semiotic thought, but when we return to sign studies we will notice how radical the consequences are for the latter. Namely, entirely new sign categories emerge from the traffic of signs between Dasein and transcendence. These are new categories of sign – to use the term by C. S. Peirce – and thus far I have been able to enumerate at least the following ones: presigns, actsigns, postsigns, endosigns, exosigns, transsigns, as-if-signs, genosigns, phenosigns. But even more fundamentally, we can now reinterpret the entire classical semiotic approach as a kind of transcendental science (in the Kantian sense). Traditionally semiotics has been considered to consist of two great inquiries: one dealing with signification, the other with communication.

Every sign is, in fact, a transcendental unit, in light of the classical medieval definition of sign as aliquid stat pro aliquo (something standing for something). This means the following: by signs we talk and think of objects which are absent. The most serviceable definition of the transcendental might be as follows: the transcendent is anything that is absent, but present in our minds.

The second essential field of semiotics is communication, i.e., how we use signs to transmit meanings and content to others. In Saussure's classical model of dialogue (1916), Mr A says something to Mr B. Yet we might say that a huge gap separates A from B. Mr B is a "transcendent entity" to Mr A, since Mr B represents what might be philosophically called the alien-psychic (Fremdseelig). The only certain thing, phenomenologically, is Mr A's stream of consciousness, which may be called "self-" or "auto-psychic" (Eigenseelig). Therefore in every act of communication Mr A risks being misunderstood by his partner in dialogue. And yet the space between them is not empty, but filled by what Greimas called modalities. In the theory of existential semiotics I distinguish traditional linguistic and logical modalities, which concern life in Dasein, from metamodalities, which portray communication between Dasein and transcendence.

A theory of subject

All this leads us to reconsider the role of the subject in communication and signification, the aspect so strongly criticised and denied by structuralist semioticians ever since Lévi-Strauss's The Savage Mind (1962), which rejected the Sartrean theory of subjective "dialectics". Yet the subject re-entered semiotics in its poststructuralist phase in the 1980s, in the work of many scholars, from Julia Kristeva to Michel Foucault and, in a certain sense, Roland Barthes and A. J. Greimas, with his "third semiotic revolution" – which meant nothing other than the (re)discovery of values and of the modalities, as the ways in which speakers provide their utterances with emotions, expectations, and psychic contents.

If we want to understand the basic problem of every society – namely, why individuals obey its rules and become "socialized" by it – we see this is made possible only by the fact that social rules and laws are somehow "internalized" into a subject's mind. The society must be "inside", otherwise it would have no impact but remain a matter of indifference to the subject. How can we explain this process of internalisation and clarify its mechanisms?

There has been much talk about subjects and subjectivity in many neighbouring areas of semiotics, such as psychoanalysis, gender theories, social sciences, philosophy, arts research, etc. Yet, without a more articulated vision of how the subject appears in the fields of communication and signification, such theoretical views stop short of their goals, as laudable as their efforts might be.

To do so requires a short excursion to the roots of existential semiotics, which means going back to Hegel and his logics. For some semioticians Hegel is mere "conceptual poetry"; to others, he is acceptable only after a "Marxist turn-around", but to still others, like Hannah Arendt, he was the most central thinker of Western philosophy, one who compiled phenomena of nature and history into a homogeneous construction – but as Arendt notes, whether prison or palace, we cannot say. For Arendt, Hegel was the last word in Western philosophy. All that came after him was either imitated him or rebelled against him. Contemporary schools of thought, which in Arendt's case were Husserl, Heidegger and Jaspers, constituted mere epigones of Hegel.

I take as my starting point only one detail from Hegelian logic, the principle by which we may construct further our theory of subject; namely, his categories of an-sich-sein (being-in-itself) and für-sich-sein (being-for-itself). In the Hegel dictionary edited by Michael Inwood there is an entry entitled "In for, and in and for, itself, himself ..." (Inwood 1992: 133–136). The third person reflexive pronoun in German, sich, is both singular and plural, and covers all three genders. It may thus mean one-, him-, her-, or itself; themselves; each other. It may be either accusative or dative, but not nominative or genitive. It accompanies German's numerous reflexive verbs, and can also be preceded by several prepositions. For example für sich (for oneself, himself, etc.) occurs in such contexts as "He needs a room for himself", "She lives by herself", and "That is a problem in itself", that is to say, apart from its connections with other matters. In ordinary usage an sich (in itself, etc.) often differs little from für sich: to consider a matter an sich is also to consider it apart from its connections with anything else; and if something is certain an sich, its certainty is IMMEDIATE, and not dependent on anything else. In both these contexts, an und für sich is simply a more emphatic equivalent of an sich.

In ordinary German such expressions usually do not have a single, well-defined usage, but a range of uses overlapping those of other expressions. The only one that had acquired a settled philosophical use by Hegel's day was an sich. In Plato it meant the form or idea; e.g., the form of beauty is "the beautiful itself", or an sich. For Kant a thing an sich is something apart from its relation to our cognition and the way it appears to us. Thus an sich contrasts not with für sich but with in uns or für uns.

Hegel used the terms an sich and für sich in their ordinary senses, but also provided them with contrasting meaning. As finite, a thing has a determinate nature only in virtue of its relation with other things, its negation of, and by, them. This is true not only of items in the world, but also of Kant's thing-in-itself, since it, too, is cut off from our cognition. Thus a thing as it is an sich has no overt determinate character; at most, it has potential character, which will be actualized only by its relations to other things. For example, an infant an sich is only potentially rational, not actually so. A tailor is a tailor an sich in the sense of having certain innate skills that suit him for this role, and of having certain overt features which distinguish him from, say, a sailor. Being a tailor, or musician, thus involves an interplay between being an sich and being for another. But a person is not simply a role occupant. He is also an individual, an "I", and as such can distance himself from his role and think of himself just as me or I. When doing so, he is no longer for others, but for himself. For instance, consider a bus driver who has already left but notices one person still running to the stop. Against the rules he stops and takes on the passenger, since he feels compassion for the late arrival. Although his self-consciousness may presuppose recognition by others, an I is not just one in a system of contrasting roles: everyone is an I.

Furthermore, the idea that "if something is for itself, it is aware of itself", leads to the notion that an entity may have in itself certain characteristics that are not for itself. A slave is, as a man, free in himself, but he may not be free for himself. The student is a future doctor and professor, but he does not know it. Finally, the terms an sich and für sich start to mean potential and actual, and may be applied to the subject's development: when a person becomes "for himself" what he is "in himself", he usually recognizes his identity: he becomes meaningful to himself (to use semiotic terms).

The preceding linguistic excursion was probably necessary in order to understand the next reasoning, in which we proceed toward a theory of individual subjectivity. But before we turn Hegel to existential-semiotic use, let us look what Søren Kierkegaard did with the notions of an sich and für sich. In him they turn into subjective and objective being. In the chapter "Becoming a subject", in his treatise Concluding Unscientific Postscript (Kierkegaard 1846/1992), he speaks about an individual who is said to be a subject, or such an individual "who is what he is because he has become like it." In existential semiotics, such a subject who has become himself may be considered a genosign. The advent of a subject from an sich being to für sich being, corresponds to his becoming a sign to himself, or the emergence of his identity. Kierkegaard sees the task of a subject as "more and more to take off his subjectivity and become more and more objective." The objective being is the same as observing and being observed. In his theory, this observation has to be of an ethical nature.

The next careful reader of Hegel (and of Kierkegaard) was Jean-Paul Sartre, whose L'Être et le néant (1943) was largely based upon Hegelian concepts of an sich and für sich, or in Satre's terms: être-en-soi and être-pour-soi. According to Sartre, being simply is; it cannot help but be. But it has as its potentiality the fact that it becomes aware of itself via an act of negation. In Kierkegaardian terms, the being becomes an observer of itself and is thus shifted into being-for-itself. This is precisely transcending. The pour-soi as the outburst of negation forms the basis for identity. It appears as a lack. This, according to Sartre, is the beginning of transcendence: human reality strives for something which it lacks (Sartre 1943: 124–125). Man starts to exist when he realizes the incompleteness of his being. Also via this effort, value enters human life. Value is that to which one aspires. Being-in-itself precedes every consciousness; Being-in-itself is the same as what Being-for-itself was earlier. The essential change in Sartre's theory, as regards Hegel, is the movement between these two categories, and a kind of subjectivisation of them considering existence.

We need still one more "modernisation" of Hegel and his categories. It has been offered by Jacques Fontanille in his study Soma et séma: Figures du corps (Fontanille 2004). The author deals with corporeal semiotics, but presents the distinction between categories of Moi and Soi in a fresh manner.

As a Greimassian semiotician Fontanille starts from the actant and his/her body. He distinguishes between body and form. We speak of body as such or "flesh" (chair), which is the center of everything, the material resistance or impulse to semiotic processes. The body is the sensorial, motor fulcrum of semiotic experience (Fontanille 2004: 22). Yet, on the other hand there is a body in the proper sense, which constitutes the identity and directional principle of the body. The body is the carrier of the "me" (Moi) whereas the proper body supports the "self", or Soi (ibid.: 22–23). The Soi, or "self", builds itself in discursive activity. The Soi is that part of ourselves which the "me" (Moi) projects out of itself in order to create itself in its activity. The Moi is that part of ourselves to which the Soi refers when establishing itself. The Moi provides the Soi with impulse and resistance whereby it can become something. In turn, the Soi furnishes the Moi with a reflexivity which it needs in order to keep within its limits as it changes. The Moi resists and forces the Soi to confront its own alterity. Hence, the two are inseparable.

Although Fontanille is a semiotician (and here quotes Paul Ricoeur), his reasoning fits well with the above-mentioned Hegelian categories. What is involved is a new interpretation of an sich and für sich, the first one corresponding to bodily ego and the latter to its stability, identity, and aspiration outwards – that is, to Sartrean negation. The self (Soi) functions as a kind of memory of the body (Moi); it yields form to those traces of tensions and needs which have been inserted in the flesh of the "me", or Moi.

*In light of Fontanille's concepts, we could change the Hegelian Being-in-itself or Being-for-itself, the an-sich-sein and für-sich-sein, into an-**mir**-sein and für-**mich**-sein, i.e., Being-in-**myself** and Being-for-**myself**. But before we ponder the consequences this has for our existential semiotics, let us scrutinize the principles of Moi and Soi as such, and in music particularly. Anything belonging to the category of mich (me) concerns the subject as an individual entity, whereas the concept of sich has to be reserved for the social aspect of this subject.*

Let us take Uexküll's (1940) principle of Ich-Ton, which determines the identity and individuality of an organism. In it we can distinguish two aspects: Moi and Soi. In "me" the subject appears as such, as a bundle of sensations, and in the "self", Soi, the subject appears as observed by others, as socially determined. These constitute, respectively, the existential (individual) and social (communal) aspects of the subject.

The Moi of the artist is the pure source of ideas. But we can also say that transcendence lives within a man. The Moi, however, is surrounded by the sphere of the Soi, that part of the ego which is social, coded and community-bound – not existential. Together they form the phenomenon that Thomas Sebeok called "the semiotic self". This concept coined by Sebeok is determined by the physical and virtual body. Some identify the semiotic moment either with social codes (the Saussurean tradition) or with the kinetic energy of the ego (Julia Kristeva). These theories also have their supporters in musical semiotics.

My colleague in musical semiotics, Raymond Monelle, adheres to the first one when he says that the semiotic appears particularly well in the socially codified forms of eighteenth-century music (Monelle 1992: 5). The latter is exemplified by the "new musicologist", Richard Taruskin, who speaks of the "semiotic" in Russian music; his description as such of the undulating gestures of Polovetsian girls in Borodin is a typically Kristevan "semiotics" of music (Taruskin 1997: 152).

In my theory, both are necessary: they together form the Ich-Ton of an organism, which is surrounded by the Other. Insofar as this Other is another subject-organism, one can presume that it is construed in the same manner of Moi and Soi. Thus the point and surface in which one Ich-Ton touches the Other (Dich-Ton) and its organism, is of course the sphere of Soi. Only on this level does language function as a codified set of rules, which enables communication in the proper sense between these organisms.

Above I asked whether one's Moi can directly communicate with the Other's Moi. The answer is: mostly, no. Moi must first transform into Soi within one's organism. I must become Me, in the sense of G. H. Mead, before one subject reaches another one.

But correspondingly, if Sois were only communicating between themselves, we could never be sure if what Others express, via gestures and words, really represents what they intend in their noemas. Intention always covers both Moi and Soi.

The primus motor of art history is the becoming of Moi in relation to Soi; or rather, the constant rebellion of the Moi against the communal, conventional world of the Soi. In sonata form, the appearance of the Moi was at first permitted only during the development section, amidst harmonic and motivic instability. Then Wagner elevated this principle, as "continuous transition", into the constructive principle of his operas, or their Soi. Later came the shift to atonality and serialism, giving total dominance to the Soi. Yet even it was negated, since it is impossible to repress completely the Moi. The sphere of Soi forms a perpetual resistance to the being of the Moi. Correspondingly, the existence of Moi prevents communication from becoming the mere domain of the Soi, a field comprised exclusively of langue.

Paradoxically, however, if the Moi is left to realize itself freely, the results are not a rich tapestry of modalities, but their scarcity and suppression. In Nietzsche's musical compositions, the modalities of will, know and can do not develop into anything, since they do not take shape in forms codified by the Soi. Only with such forms can one create a hierarchical, structured work. Although Nietszche's inner resolve was tremendous, and although he scatters German performance indications everywhere, in his writings emphasizes the principle of will, and resorts to extra-musical programs in Ermanarich and other works, his musical 'will' does not develop to its climax, and neither does 'know' nor 'can'. They lack the 'must' of the Soi. Modalities favored by the Soi are precisely 'must', 'know', 'can' and 'will', in that order, in such a way that their amount and cogency diminishes towards the end of the list. Conversely, the modalities of the Moi go from heaviest to lightest: 'will', 'can', 'know', 'must'.

Of the modalities of the Moi, 'will' is the most important; it conveys the inner pressure of movement, the stability of the work. 'Will' does not necessarily appear solely as 'want-to-do', but may manifest also as want-to-be or want-not-to-do or want-not-to-be (this holds true also for other modalities). The second important modality for the Moi is 'can', or power (pouvoir), often even a corporeally important category. Next most essential is 'knowing', which concerns the memory of the Moi, a kind of "profound ego" (le moi profond) in the Bergsonian sense. The concept of "intellectual effort" as it relates to Bergson (see Bankov 2000) is interesting since it seems to be based upon the modality of 'know', and at the same time on 'do' and 'can'. For instance, a musical or literary composition delivers information only via an effort, not by itself. With the help of the memory of the Moi, the composition, as an "organism", remembers its earlier solutions during its enunciation. Finally, even the Moi possesses its own inner obligation, its particular 'must' – one cannot go against the laws of Moi. Whoever does so, subdues his own expression.

In the modalities of the Soi, 'must' comes first, as normative forms and communication structures: styles, techniques and topics (musical-rhetorical figures). If a writer calls his literary work a "novel" or "comedy", or if a composer designates his work as a sonata, symphony or fugue, then he commits himself to a certain 'must' or obligation of the Soi. Second important is the modality of 'know' or the penetration of elements from the store of intonations (Eco would say, from the encyclopedia of knowledge), which are transcendent to the work. For instance, the beginning of Beethoven's last piano sonata (Op. 111) displays not only the topics of Sturm und Drang, but also the French ouverture of the Baroque era, with its dotted rhythms (see, e.g., the first movement of Handel's Suite in G minor). Therefore, when we say that the Ich-Ton of an art work determines which elements it accepts from its surroundings, taking them into its organism and transforming them into endosemiotic entities, what is involved is precisely the modality of 'know'.

The third important modality for the Soi is 'can', understood as the adoption of certain techniques and resources whereby the aforementioned 'must' and 'know' can be realized. Least important to the Soi is 'will'. Yet even it appears as a kind of collective wanting; for instance, when a composer expresses the voice of his community, when a painter like Rubens praises his ruler Maria di Medici, when Clara Schumann writes variations on the Emperor Hymn, or when Wagner writes Mastersingers in the atmosphere of the Franco-Prussian War. The 'will' of the Soi is thus of collective origin.

These reflections can be put into the following model, which has three circles:

The diagram shows transcendence is filtered via Soi to the sphere of Moi.

Is the production of an art work mostly an affair of Moi or mostly of Soi? If one writes a fugue it is an event of Soi, without doubt. If one provides it with a little tinge of expressivity, in the line of Mozart-Beethoven-Franck-Brahms, it has a little bit of Moi as well. But if one writes a fantasy or an aleatoric work, it is certainly more an activity of Moi. In literature, Charles Mauron spoke about obsessive myths of a writer. In films by Kaurismäki or Renoir or Eisenstein we see certain personal themes recurring and being elaborated. Yet Moi, left all to itself, is most often helpless, a fact exemplified by musical improvisation. When the performer has full freedom in performances, the probable results are outworn clichés and mannerisms: either as techniques stemming directly from the unconscious of the Soi, or as such forms of the Moi which our subject supposes the audience wants to hear. What is involved is the artistic das Man: man schreibt so, man malt so, man komponiert so….

We can now put together the most important ideas of this essay. My intention was to specify, among other things, the category of 'being', by providing this basic modality with new flavours from Kant and Hegel, and by following the phases of this concept further, from Kierkegaard to Sartre and Fontanille (of course, the project of existential semiotics need not stop here). When one aims for more subtle tools in semiotics, one can still find radical innovations in the classics of philosophy. The Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself became Being-in- and Being-for-myself in existential semiotics. When these notions are combined on Greimas's semiotic square of logical oppositions, one gets the following cases:

They can be interpreted as follows:

1) Being-in-myself represents our bodily ego, which appears as kinetic energy, khora, desire, gestures, intonations, Peirce's First. Our ego is not yet in anyway conscious of itself but rests in the naive Firstness of its being; modality: endotactic, 'will'.

2) Being-for-myself corresponds to Kierkegaard's attitude of an observer. Sartre's negation obtains, such that mere being shifts to transcendence; it notices the lack in its existence and hence becomes aware of itself and transcendence. The mere being of the subject becomes existing. This corresponds to the transcendental acts of my previous model, negation and affirmation. Ego discovers its identity, reaches a certain kind of stability, permanent corporeality via habit; modality: endotactic, 'can'.

3) Being-in-itself is a transcendental category. It refers to norms, ideas and values, which are purely conceptual and virtual, they are potentialities of a subject, which he can either actualize or not. What is involved are abstract units and categories; modality: exotactic, 'must'.

4) Being-for-itself means the aforementioned norms, ideas and values as realized by the conduct of our subject in his Dasein. Those abstract entities appear here as applied values, choices and realizations, which often will be far away from the originally transcendental entities; modality: exotactic, 'know'.

The essential aspect of the model is that it combines the spheres of Moi and Soi, the individual and collective subjectivities. It portrays semiosis not only as a movement of the collective Hegelian Spirit, but also the presence of a subject, via the addition of Being-in- and -for-myself. Crucial is not only the distinction of these four logical cases, but also the movement among them, the transformation of a chaotic corporeal ego into its identity, the becoming of ego into a sign to itself; furthermore, the stable and completely responsible ego impacts the actualisation of transcendental values, such that the ego becomes a sign to other subjects. In this phase, the Being-in-myself and for-myself meets Others; i.e., you, or Being-in- and Being-for-yourself. Behind this social field looms the realm of transcendental and virtual values and norms: signs which have not yet become signs to anyone.

In the classical sense, the semiotic sphere consists only of the fields of Being-for-myself and Being-for-itself. The extremities of the semiotic square are the field of pre-signs, which surround from two sides the semiosis, properly speaking. These are totally "concrete" and "sensual" qualities on the one hand, and on the other, they are entirely abstract, "intelligent" norms and values (recalling Lévi-Strauss's distinction into le sensible and l'intelligible). However, this semiosis, the process of act-signs, cannot be understood without going outside of it, to transcendence. Hence, in these two phases existential analysis becomes a Kantian, transcendental analytic.

Ultimately we can formulate our semiotic square as follows:

Most recently I prefer to speak of two different directions or movements among coordinates of the semiotic square portraying a subject's mind. This movement goes from the concrete and corporeal towards the abstract and "intelligible": Moi gradually unfolds, developing a Soi, and reaching even the most abstract categories of a society. In this development, the weight of Moi gradually diminishes, of course, but a tiny trace of it remains in even the most extreme case of Soi. The other direction starts from the Soi, with its norms and values, and leads towards their enactment in certain institutions and practices, and their impact on an individual's behaviour on a personal level, reaching into the tiniest subtleties and nuances of his corporeality. For purposes of analysis, let us call these moments Moi1, Moi2, Moi3 and Moi4, and correspondingly Soi1, Soi2, Soi3 and Soi4. We can easily see how in this model these two movements coincide. Both "streams" can have their own particular signs, and the interesting and provocative point in this theory is the encounter of these two types of signs:

Each phase of subjectivity appears to itself as specific and characteristic signs (endosigns, as we called them earlier); whereas when the subject enters into activity and signifying action, he/she produces again its own signs which are quite overt (exosigns). These two attitudes – observing oneself and realizing oneself – correspond to two basic attitudes in Schelling's system of transcendental idealism: anschauen and handeln.

From postcolonial analysis to a theory of resistance

The new theory of existential semiotics, presented above in a nutshell, has two important venues for application. First, for a theory of arts and culture we may sketch new ways of analysing artistic texts of any nature: music, theater, film, painting, poetry, and more. The processual character of the model enables us to employ it particularly for a theory of the performing aspects of arts, that is to say, how signs are actualized from their pre- and virtual state into actsigns.

Second, the applications also cover the social field of values, communities, ideologies, axiologies. I have already done two experiments in this direction in my essays on "Postcolonial Analysis" and "A Theory of Resistance". This aspect is important since it shows that the existential theory has the capacity to account for the condition humaine in our globalized era – and to do so in a responsible fashion. Existential semiotics is an epistemic theory, yet it illuminates quite pragmatic problems of our own world. It comes close to what has been called "semioethics" by some scholars (such as Augusto Ponzio, Susan Petrilli and John Deely). Looked at another way, as Bulgarian semiotician Kristian Bankov has done, and with slight modifications, existential semiotics is occupied with the "knowledge-based" and "value-based" society in which we live, at least in Europe. What, then, are the central issues of these two fields of socially oriented, existential semiotics?

In postcolonial semiotics we ponder a situation in which there are two subject positions: the dominant and the dominated. My proposal started from my reading of anthologies on postcolonial analysis in general, and mostly focusing on the typical cases of, say, the British Empire – India, France – Algeria, Spain – Latin America, Portugal – Goa, Macao, etc. It was easy to notice, however, that the postcolonial situation prevailed even within Europe itself, among its "central" and 'peripheral" countries. Ultimately, every nation has, inside its borders, certain minorities which it colonizes. Many kinds of semiotic discoursive mechanisms are used to maintain such a distinction. Yet they were all essentially based upon a rather simple theoretical scheme: the two actantial roles, as said, of dominant and dominated; i.e., those retaining power and those accepting it and subordinated to it. Moreover, concerning postcolonial discourses themselves one needs only the old Saussurean notions of langue/parole and signifier/signified in order to explain their functioning. The "grammar" is set by the dominant; the dominated are allowed to adopt and apply it, sometimes even brilliantly, but they are not permitted to change it. If the dominated want to communicate, they must accept what the dominant Soi dictates, as I would say now. Yet very often even that is impossible, and the dominated are simply "silenced", deprived of using their voice in any audible or effective manner. Representatives of the periphery – those who are dominated – are forbidden to speak out about their wishes and aspirations, neither in politics nor in the arts. In the latter case, they are often presented as something "picturesque" and "exotic", which only strengthens the central/peripheral dichotomy. This kind of repression may occur in the most innocent-looking ways, such as praising the national values and qualities of a composer, writer, painter, movie maker, and so on. In fact, however, his real message is quite universal, displaying Music, Poetry, Painting as such.

Still, the dominated do have the possibility to rebel, within the sign practices themselves, letting their Moi emerge and break the norms, topics, and standards of the "official" grammar that forces signifiers into prees-tablished, precodified forms. The signified (content) can be so new and radically alien, but at the same time convincing, that it "explodes" the chains of the signified and forces the destinatee to receive the message. This process is similar to what Roland Barthes recommended long ago in his classical essay on the "fascism of language", which we may resist by "cheating" language in literature, which cares little about the rules of everyday communication. The same was said even earlier by the Russian formalists, with their idea of ostranenie, "estrangement".

The relationship of colonialism and nationalism is also interesting since the latter very often emerges as a reaction against the former, and hence relies upon its suppressive power. But it depends very much upon whether we have to do with a benevolent nationalism conveying some new quality, or an aggressive, repetitive, iconic nationalism with subordinating tenden-cies.

A theory of resistance likewise emerges from certain epistemic premises, though even they are closely linked to and motivated by certain social prac-tices. Again, we are aiming for a more "universal" theory to be applied in the most varied cases of "resistance" in our contemporary world and soci-ety. In fact, typical of existential semiotics, which also includes an inbuilt semioethic program, even a theory of resistance has two sides and two start-ing points. One the one hand, it was launched by a criticism of certain forms of globalisation, which already have been much debated by some intellectual semioticians. Existential semiotics does not just look at the world from a distance but elaborates models and discourse whereby the subjects, living in their Daseins, could improve their situation. Hence it shares with structural-ism the aspiration to serve as a kind of "social therapy".

On the other hand, we need a theory that is challenging by its purely logical and intellectual qualities, in order to intervene in the course of the world. Such a theory may open by reversing the ordinary course of semiosis, which we normally think of as going from "left to right", that is, from sender to receiver. What if there were a countercurrent of signs? That is, what if the signs were to go from right to left? This would require that we stop for a while, in the process of sign production and emission, so as to reflect on categories such as Being, Memory and History. The first mentioned is by itself central to existential semiotics, as we saw above in the varieties of Being based on Hegelian logics. But it has also been treated richly by Umberto Eco in his comments on Heidegger in his Kant e l'ornitorinco (1997). Moreover, Memory, in the sense of Henri Bergson in his Matière et mémoire (1941), means that we compare the present, "now" moments in the temporal course to the store of previous events in our memory. This eventually leads to a theory of counterfactuals, i.e., pondering "what might have happened". If, on its surface level, reality consists of chains of events, there are alternatives which might have happened, which at a deeper level constitute a network of possible but not-realized events. According to Georg Henrik von Wright, we can imagine something as possible only if it has happened at least once earlier in History – our third category – and only if we can remember it. Yet, the other, more "existential" view would say that mankind has imagination and that we can figure out possible worlds creatively – something that has never existed before, but which becomes a reality. Altogether, these three mechanisms form the theoretical basis for resistance, in the term's largest purport.

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