

Accidents and Explosions in Semiotic Research in Italy: Introductory Notes

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Summary. A history of Italian semiotics has yet to be written. This issue therefore has completely different aspirations: more than a history, or even less a geography, its intended goal is that of self-analysis of, roughly speaking, the last twenty or twenty-five years. Something like this: let us stop for a moment, let us see where we have sown our seeds, and what we have reaped, what we still need to plan, and in which direction we will proceed. The essays collected here do just that: they outline the conceptual map of semiotic research in Italy, combining research themes, methods of investigation and, when they may overlap, research centres scattered throughout the country. So, Italian semiotics has experienced euphoric intellectual growth in recent years: it has reaffirmed its programmes of action and passion, has equipped itself with the appropriate tools of investigation, has passed tests and counter-tests, has achieved numerous results and is receiving, in hushed tones, the recognition it deserves.

Keywords. Italian semiotics, history of semiotics, semiotic research, text, discourse

Zusammenfassung. Eine Geschichte der italienischen Semiotik muss erst noch geschrieben werden. Diese Ausgabe verfolgt jedoch einen höheren Anspruch: Sie soll mehr sein als ein historischer Abriss oder gar ein reiner kartographischer Überblick. Das Ziel besteht darin, eine Selbstreflexion der letzten zwanzig oder fünfundzwanzig Jahre zu ermöglichen. Halten wir einen Moment inne und betrachten, was wir gesät und geerntet haben, was wir noch planen müssen und in welche Richtung wir gehen. Die hier versammelten Aufsätze erfüllen genau diese Aufgabe: Sie skizzieren die konzeptionelle Landkarte der semiotischen Forschung in Italien, indem sie Forschungsthemen, Untersuchungsmethoden und über das ganze Land verstreute Forschungszentren miteinander verbinden. Die italienische Semiotik hat in den letzten Jahren einen euphorischen intellektuellen Aufschwung erlebt: Sie hat ihren Aktionismus und ihre Leidenschaft bekräftigt, sich mit den entsprechenden Untersuchungsinstrumenten ausgestattet, Tests und Gegentests bestanden und zahlreiche Ergebnisse erzielt. Nun erhält sie in aller Stille die Anerkennung, die sie verdient.

Schlüsselwörter. Italienische Semiotik, Geschichte der Semiotik, semiotische Forschung, Text, Diskurs

A history of Italian semiotics has yet to be written (as indeed of semiotics in general). Scattered throughout various kinds of magazines and books, many different studies, explorations, summaries, chronologies, and bibliographies can be found.¹ Nothing comprehensive, from a historiographical point of view, or exhaustive, from a theoretical one. It is by no means certain, moreover, that the time has come to issue such a challenge. When a discipline begins to look back on its own history, it is almost certainly in crisis. And this is not the case with semiotics today in Italy, where, on the contrary, in all likelihood we find ourselves in a moment of strong growth, from both the point of view of the propulsive trends in research and from the more institutional, academic and generally cultural point of view. Notwithstanding the inevitable (corporate? ideological? political?) resistance to the development of the paradigm of studies on meaning and signification, on signs and discourse, on texts and on socio-cultural models (resistance dating back several decades yet remaining perennial), Italian semiotics has experienced euphoric intellectual growth in recent years: it has reaffirmed its programmes of action and passion, has equipped itself with the appropriate tools of investigation, has passed tests and counter-tests, has achieved numerous results: and is receiving, in hushed tones, the recognition it deserves.

This issue therefore has completely different aspirations: more than a history, or even less a geography, its intended goal is that of self-analysis of, roughly speaking, the last twenty or twenty-five years. Something like this: let us stop for a moment, let us see where we have sown our seeds, and what we have reaped, what we still need to plan, and in which direction to proceed. To do this, the strategies to follow may be numerous and varied, yet connected to each other.

First of all, every time you try to discover something like an identity, you have to deal with the outside, with otherness, and therefore, in our case, with other research perspectives, with other study traditions, other learning institutions. Is there a specificity of Italian research on signification? If so, how does it differ from other research on the same (or similar) object of study? The essays that make up this volume mostly answer these questions implicitly, between the lines, or in passing, which is why we will try to say something about them, a little later on, in this introduction.

Secondly, the need emerges to map out and delineate an internal articulation of Italian semiotic research, the field of study within which it is practised, and the theoretical and epistemological wagers that it proposes within its own laboratory. What have been, in the recent past and in our present time, the privileged objects of analysis, reflection, and methodological elaboration of Italian semiotics? What types of thinking have been prac-

tised, which intellectual gestures, what increases in knowledge? In what terms have semiologists (self-styled or considered as such) thought about, as well as practised, their own work? Along which tracks, based on which scientific assumptions, in view of which objectives? In the current academic scene, increasingly fossilised and bureaucratic, where the hateful principle of “publish or perish” is aimed above all else at accumulating titles and fawning to publishers (strictly Anglophone), these kinds of questions, precisely because they are being evaded, appear pressing as well as crucial. A little self-analysis, in fact, helps in this sense. The essays collected here do just that: they outline the conceptual map of semiotic research in Italy, combining research themes, methods of investigation and, when they may overlap, research centres scattered throughout the country.

The number of clarifications and distinctions that these opening words might necessitate are many: what is a research centre? How (and why) is a team set up to work around a theme? What forms of aggregation – or conflict – can be established between academic institutions scattered throughout Italy? To what extent is research done in universities and in what terms also elsewhere? How are its results disseminated? Does the media, when reporting them, absorb them internally and to what extent? And finally, how should we draw the boundaries of this national territory within which semiotics moves? Does a mapping of scientific research conducted separately between countries still make sense? In the semiotic field, for example, there are many national semiotic associations (the *Italian Association of Semiotic Studies*, celebrates its fiftieth anniversary in 2022) and there is an international association that groups them all (the *International Association for Semiotic Studies*, also with more than five decades behind it). However, there are also other forms of association, such as that encompassing the semiologists of Latin America or, more recently, that grouping the research centres that operate in the Romance language (called *FedRoS*, or the *Romance Federation of Semiotics*), launched from the idea that, outside of Anglo-Saxon semiotics, there are study perspectives on signification with different peculiarities. All important and delicate issues that we are unable to discuss here.

Thirdly, to return to what was mentioned at the beginning, in addition to relations with otherness and to internal articulation, in order to reconstruct the identity, however dynamic and changeable, of Italian semiotic research, it is necessary to be aware of – if not its history and less so its origins – at least its genealogy. Obviously in the Nietzschean and Foucauldian sense. It is known that semiotics was born in the intersection between different fields of knowledge, between different registers of thought, between different discursive genres. The reflection on the linguistic and non-linguistic sign (in rhetoric, in poetics, in logic, but also in gnoseology, in metaphysics and so on) is as ancient as it has long been misunderstood, just as the innumerable practices of signification (from medicine to divination, from emblematics to the arts, from military strategies to legal arguments, etc.) have a distant as well as recent past. It is customary to distinguish the phil-

osophical-cognitive side from the linguistic-empirical side of semiotics, as two distinct currents with few tangencies and even fewer overlaps. In Italy it was also – and in some ways still is – like this. But in our country the fields of knowledge which contributed to the construction of the discipline that deals with signification, within a very precise historical-cultural context, have been numerous, and of various descent and authority: from philological textual criticism to literary – even militant – analysis, from aesthetics in search of theoretical renewal to the critical study of media, with, in fact, important contributions from structural and textual linguistics, narratology and information theory, pragmatics of communication and filmology, as well as the history of art and iconology, architecture and design, and psychoanalysis. And we could go on. The genealogical intertwining, oblivious of all origins and any possible pedigree, is therefore configured as the path to take. Also in this case, the essays collected here do not tackle this third question head on, even if they sometimes refer to it. We should therefore say something about it in these introductory notes.

Let us go back to the question of the potential specificity of Italian semiotics compared to that of other countries. Many have expressed their opinions by trying to provide definitions, outline physiognomies, draw lines of continuity, or hazard comparisons. For example, when questioned on the subject in an interview with Marin Mincu (ed. 1982), Cesare Segre argued that Italian semiotics is “little inclined to formulas and doctrines”, shuns “universal keys and dogmatisms”, and is therefore closer to an “empirical” attitude towards its object of study: the text (*ivi*: 48). Segre, a philologist and linguist, is talking above all about semiotics focussed on history and literary criticism and considers the notion of text from that specific point of view: “Italian semiological critics prefer to start from concrete cases and problems, leaving the footholds in view for subsequent developments on other texts and other eras. Theorising is never carried out in the abstract but is the result of the work on the texts” (*ibidem*). Theorising, in short, *suivra*. In general terms, this position is substantially still valid, albeit revisable. Even if in fact there were already more general philosophical-epistemological reflections during those years (suffice to name Eco and Garroni); in our country semiotics has tended to deal with concrete textual objects, whether they be from literature, the visual arts, mass media, folklore and so on. Where, for example in France, textual and discursive analysis has been, and still is, mostly aimed at the elaboration of general theoretical models (in search of the “grand bleu”, as Greimas said ironically), in Italy it was, and still is, quite the opposite. As Paolo Fabbri (1998) has often repeated, the text is the semiologist’s “savage”, his main object of investigation: and it is starting from the resistance it opposes to the methods already elaborated that the theory can move forward, to invent (in the double sense of the term) other finer and more effective instruments.

A further prerogative of Italian semiotics is derived from a comparison with the Anglo-Saxon tradition. The latter, while making constant reference to Peirce’s pragmatism, generally tends to annex ever new objects of study

(including those which are traditionally the prerogative of the hard sciences: biology, ethology, etc.), progressively widening the territory of reflection to include topics and often heterogeneous problems, while usually neglecting to identify a unified point of view from which to consider them, with little interest in the unity of the discipline. In Italy, on the other hand, that which Fabbri himself (2021) called a “marked semiotics” has been practised, one that is attentive to the non-scholastic elaboration of a method, a theory, and an epistemology consistent with each other and with the empirical objects subjected to analysis. From this point of view, as the essays in this volume also demonstrate, this has been conceived as belonging to the domain of the human and social sciences – renouncing however the aspiration Greimas’s early work expressed to pose as their general methodology.

Regarding the question of the genealogy of semiotic research in Italy, I will limit myself to sketching out some demarcation lines, and then some passages, which for the sake of exposition I will separate into phases: logical rather than temporal moments, since that which is typical of one phase often remains in another, or recurs after having been considered decisively surpassed.

The moment when semiotics appeared in Italy – during the Sixties of the last century – obviously preceded its construction as a discipline. The study of signs, as it was called back then, participated instead in that general aspiration towards critical, methodological, philosophical, and intellectual renewal that emerged after the Second World War, and which led to the introduction of highly heteroclite currents of thought such as phenomenology, existentialism, Marxism, or logical neo-positivism into our culture. The common enemy, equipped with quite different weapons, was idealism, first Gentilian and then Crucian, and along with it, historicism.² Moreover, the latter was shared by Marxism, but strongly rejected by the nascent structuralism, a label under which semiotics found a rational – however convenient – refuge, often times allowing itself to be assimilated. Thus, the so-called disciplines of the spirit in the idealist and Dilthey’s tradition were gradually replaced by the human and social sciences, which invoked a different form of scientificity, a new epistemological vision. Anthropology, psychoanalysis, sociology, religious comparativism, linguistics and, indeed, semiotics were presented as numerous fields of knowledge which, going beyond reassuring and pacifying historicism, severely criticise the dialectical materialism that aspired to take its place. The too easy dichotomy that opposed structure to superstructure, reviled in words, re-emerged almost everywhere, bringing with it a mechanistic (simplifying and reductive) interpretation of history, society, and culture (always in the singular). The study of signs, information, communication, and signification, therefore, has been above all polemical, so that semiotics is defined first and foremost in the negative: we do not understand exactly what it is, but we know what it is working against. In this respect, as in other countries such as Russia or France, the emphasis on the linguistic and semiotic dimension goes hand in hand, often finding vital support through artistic experimentalisms and literary avant-gar-

des. Like Jakobson with Mayakovskij, or Barthes with Robbe-Grillet, Eco (1962) from the outset with Berio and Balestrini, Manzoni (Piero) and Antonioni.

The emergence of structuralism, which soon became (to its great misfortune) an unexpected cultural trend, was concomitant with the widespread diffusion of mass media: so that the first provided the intellectual and methodological tools to grasp the meaning, as well as the constitutive mechanisms, of the second. Where the apocalyptists of the *Frankfurt School* (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse) found in mass media the ultimate outcome of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, and with this an enemy to fight every inch of the way, semiologists like Barthes in France, and Eco (with many others), in Italy, went further: they underlined that the media have their own languages, their own forms of communication that should be taken into account, thereby recovering ancient poetic and rhetorical theories. If advertising is the persuasive technique of our times (Corti), live television uses the narrative *topoi* of Attic tragedy (Eco). This gave rise to more misunderstandings, and consequently somewhat confusing debates, as if comparing *Carosello* to Aristotle (Calabrese) from the point of view of forms would mean assimilating their semantic values.

The negative definition of semiotics thus began its transformation into a more defined and positive physiognomy.

On the one hand: since structuralist semiotics is a highly transdisciplinary intellectual gesture, the boundaries between fields of knowledge crumbled, and with them the asphyxiated specialisms of academic practice. The semiotic gaze, interested in form rather than substance, cut across disciplines and their canonical objects of study, once again provoking the raising of shields in defence of the traditional systems of science. Just to give an example: a reader like *Letteratura e semiologia in Italia* [Literature and semiology in Italy] edited by Caprettini and Corno (eds. 1979) collected some of the most representative writings of Italian literary semiotics of the Sixties: and there we find a medievalist like D'Arco Silvio Avalle analysing a text by Eugenio Montale, an aesthetician like Umberto Eco discussing the *Beati Paoli*, an anglicist like Marcello Pagnini writing about *A Zacinto* by Ugo Foscolo, a Romance philologist like Cesare Segre analysing Samuel Beckett's *Acte sans paroles*, and a historian of language like Maria Corti with a Proppian reinterpretation of Italo Calvino's *Marcovaldo*. But that was the norm then. And at the end of day, very few were alarmed: even the media, which today are so moralistic and conservative, back then extolled semiotic structuralism *très à la mode*.

On the other hand, the introduction of semiotic-structural themes from France (but also from Russia and the USA) required a kind of resizing and filtering. Thus, De Mauro (1968) interpreted the arbitrariness of the sign according to Saussure in a strongly historical-sociological sense, while Eco (1968) warned of an all-encompassing structuralism while distinguishing between the ontology and the methodology of forms. In turn Segre and Corti opposed French semiotics, which they claimed was excessively for-

malistic, with the Soviet semiotics of Lotman, Uspensky and the others, who were more attentive, they argued, to history and society. In short, the still prevailing Marxism diluted the results of semiotics, adapting it to the Italian cultural context. The wide-ranging dissemination of semiotics required its ideological re-dimensioning. And this is how the first Congress of the *International Association for Semiotic Studies* came to be held in 1974 in Milan (with Cesare Segre as President) and the third, ten years later, in Palermo (Antonino Buttitta as Secretary General).

It was literature, at this juncture, that received greater attention from semiologists to the point that the science of signs and literary semiotics seemed to coincide. There was much discussion about literariness and poetry, the poetry of art and para-literature, artistic codes and media texts, and the specificity of languages. But the study of signs found a place in almost all fields of human and social research: from philosophical aesthetics to film theory, from theatrical studies to architecture and design, from folklore to mediology, from the history of music to that of painting. It was the period of *emes* (phonemes and monemes, but also *cinèmes* and *gustemes* ...), of double articulation almost everywhere, in other words, of the predominance of the linguistic model to be applied in any so-called code. And it would be easy to expose the naivety of such research perspectives.

Seen as a trend, at a certain point, structuralism inevitably fell fatally out of fashion. And while, internally, research on the sign and its codes gave way to that on signification and the text, on narrativity and discourse, elaborating new categories and new models of analysis, criticism of semiotics increased; sometimes as the result of the notorious post-structuralism and de-constructionism, at times by virtue of a creeping return to historicism, or the emergence of the cognitivist paradigm. The main accusation was that of “imperialism”, or rather, of pervasiveness, of indiscriminate multiplication of the objects of study. The misunderstanding is clear: the omnipresence of signification was reinterpreted as the omnipresence of the discipline that was concerned with it.

The trend of semiotics was thus followed by speaking ill of it. Right at the moment when, first with the creation of the *DAMS* in Bologna and then courses in Communication Sciences in various universities in Italy, semiotic studies tended to acquire university recognition, the teachings of this discipline multiplied and, in general, the study of artistic languages and media communication received academic legitimacy. Semiotics was suffering from a crisis of overproduction. A strange fate – if in the previous period everyone had professed to be semiologists to be chic, now they did it to find a university position. With bad results for the discipline, from the point of view of its, so to speak, epistemological authenticity, and exceptional results, from the point of view of its institutional standings. Many semiotics manuals were published and the students studying them multiplied. Semiotics was now recognised as a field of knowledge in its own right, earning high public esteem but losing the transdisciplinarity that characterised its beginnings. What Barthes had prophesied occurred: the criticisms of today's

myths become myths themselves, the anti-stereotype becomes a stereotype – obviously without realising it. And many, like Monsieur Jourdan, are semiologists without knowing it.

This brings us to today, or, rather, those last twenty or twenty-five years which, as has been said, the essays in this volume deal with. Passions have more or less cooled. Semiologists, on the one hand, have widened their interests while, on the other, do so starting from several dominant theoretical tendencies. Among these, that of socio-semiotics, a field of knowledge that, in dialogue with certain sociologists, is attempting to critically reinterpret some of their objects of study, especially in the field of media (information, advertising, television, etc.), as well as political discourse, urban spaces, technological artefacts, cooking and food (Marrone 2001). In what sense “critically”? First of all, in a polemical sense, in order to detect, rather than ideological mystifications, the discursive complexities, the narratives of veridiction, the enunciative devices that link, mediate, and re-mediate, the mass media with their public. But the term “criticism” must be understood in a more technical sense, linked to the Kant of *The Three Critiques*: rather than working directly on social phenomena, socio-semiotics in Italy (but following here the teachings of scholars such as Eric Landowski and Jean-Marie Floch) seeks to identify the conditions of possibility, the semiotic devices of their discursive functioning, the cultural models that bring them into being. Hence the link between socio-semiotics, semiotics of culture and ethno-semiotics. The very notion of text, a model of analysis rather than an object of study, whose immanence the semiotician reconstructs each time on the basis of the specific objectives of its description, is thus strongly rethought. In this sense, the text is not only what the various cultures – always with different anthropological meta-mechanisms, as Lotman demonstrates (2022) – refer to us as such (*etic* approach), but also what is re-invented as such starting from the models and purposes of the analysis (*emic* approach). From this point of view, the notorious distinction between text and context has nothing given, nothing predetermined, since it varies from situation to situation, from historical period to historical period, from culture to culture. Each element of (so-called) context that becomes significant is thus integrated into the text and becomes such in all respects. The context being only, in the eyes of the semiologist, that which is not pertinent in a given textual analysis. “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte”, said Derrida, something upon which Greimas and Lotman, for different reasons, can only agree, on condition to be clear: beyond the text, one does not lose signification at all, but one meets the semiosphere, which is perpetually textual in nature.

The essays collected here illustrate this kind of problem, seeking to offer an overview that is as exhaustive as possible – albeit not complete³ – of semiotic research in Italy over the last two or three decades. In order to detect identities and internal differences, lines of continuity and points of fracture, forms of coherence and theoretical controversies. In view, needless to say, of future research. This volume, not without a certain collective pride, is a mine of information, insights, observations, reconstructions, and

ideas that would be superfluous to list here. Thanking all of the authors for their excellent work is the only way to wish each other – reciprocally – more accidents, more explosions. And not just for the next twenty years.

Notes

- 1 See for example: Avalor (1970), Corti and Segre (eds. 1970), Segre (1971, 1977), Segre (ed. 1965), Fabbri (1973), Ponzio (1976), Corti (1977), Caprettini and Corno (eds. 1979), Mincu (ed. 1982), Marrone (ed. 1986), Marrone and Ruta (1989), Bertetti (ed. 1999), Mirabile (2012).
- 2 In his critical edition of Saussure's *Cours De* Mauro (1968) is very clear in this sense: if the unrepeatability of the linguistic act is for Croce a point of arrival, for Saussure it is a starting point.
- 3 Design is missing, for example, on which Italian semiotics has conducted various studies over the last twenty years (Marrone and Landowski eds. 2002; Mangano 2008, 2014, 2019, 2021; Mangano and Mattozzi eds. 2009; Ventura Bordenca 2021) and other fields of study on which, on the other hand, critical efforts have been partially eased: politics (Pezzini 2001; Cosenza 2012); journalism (Marrone 1998, 2001; Pozzato 2004; Lorusso and Violi eds. 2006), literature (Pezzini 2007; Fabbri and Pezzini eds. 2012; Panosetti 2015; Piga Bruni, Ragonese and Schmid eds. 2021).

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