

## Ethnosemiotics

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**Summary.** The purpose of this article is to present the major theoretical orientations of ethnosemiotics in Italy. Ethnosemiotics is a semiotics that aims to deal with the analysis of socio-cultural phenomena, considering these as a privileged place within which to grasp the signification in its making. In the article we will try to outline the historical and theoretical path of the discipline focusing attention on the works of Maurizio del Ninno and on the Bolognese *Research Center of Ethnosemiotics* coordinated by Francesco Marsciani, to try to retrace the main stages that led to the development of this particular branch of Italian semiotics. Finally, the theoretical ideas on which the *Ethnosemiotics Laboratory* and the Bolognese University *Center of Ethnosemiotics* are working will be presented.

**Keywords.** Ethnosemiotics, semiotics, anthropology, ethnography, signification

**Zusammenfassung.** In diesem Artikel werden die wichtigsten theoretischen Orientierungen der Ethnosemiotik in Italien vorgestellt. Die Ethnosemiotik befasst sich mit der Analyse soziokultureller Phänomene und betrachtet diese als einen privilegierten Ort, um Bedeutung in ihrer Entstehung zu erfassen. In diesem Artikel wird versucht, den historischen und theoretischen Werdegang der Disziplin zu skizzieren, wobei das Hauptaugenmerk auf den Arbeiten von Maurizio del Ninno und dem von Francesco Marsciani koordinierten Bologneser *Forschungszentrum für Ethnosemiotik* liegt. Hierbei werden die wichtigsten Etappen nachvollzogen, die zur Entwicklung dieses besonderen Zweigs der italienischen Semiotik geführt haben. Schließlich werden die theoretischen Ideen vorgestellt, auf denen das *Laboratorium für Ethnosemiotik* und das *Zentrum für Ethnosemiotik* der Universität Bologna aufbauen.

**Schlüsselwörter.** Ethnosemiotik, Semiotik, Anthropologie, Ethnographie, Signifikation

### 1. Introduction. The historical background

Ethnosemiotics is, in general terms, a semiotics that deals with the study and the analysis of phenomena of interest to the social sciences. This par-

ticular branch of semiotics has had a distinct development within the Italian semiotics panorama.

Therefore, rebuilding a historical-theoretical framework of ethnosemiotics is an unprecedented operation. Until now, no ethnosemiotic scholar has felt the need to reconstruct the historical traits that led to the generation of this particular field of Italian semiotics. This article is an opportunity to begin this work of historical and theoretical reconstruction of the main guidelines that have outlined ethnosemiotics since the early 2000s. The difficulty of structuring a coherent discourse on the origins and development of ethnosemiotics are nested in the fact that ethnosemiotics did not have a linear history in Italy, but had different points of origin, which have merged into a univocal direction only in recent years. We could therefore hypothesise two points of origin of ethnosemiotics: the first, close to the studies of Maurizio Del Ninno of the University of Urbino and the second resulting from the research of Tarcisio Lancioni of the University of Siena and Francesco Marsciani of the University of Bologna. The theories and concepts born around these two “schools” then merged, more or less starting from 2014, in what we could define today as “the Bolognese school of Ethnosemiotics”, which is structured around Francesco Marsciani, at the C.U.B.E. research centre which he founded (*Center of the University of Bologna for Ethnosemiotics*) and at the *Laboratory of Ethnosemiotics*, an internal branch at the C.U.B.E., which developed a certain line of research on ethnosemiotics in the years between 2014 and 2018. Before going into the details of the single moments that have marked the history of ethnosemiotics in Italy however, it is necessary to try to introduce the reasons for the approach of Italian semiotics to certain research themes, in particular the interest of semiotics in dealing with themes and topics familiar to social sciences and anthropology in particular.

The initial project of an ethnosemiotics is certainly to recover the anthropological foundations inherent in semiotic theory, especially in the Greimasian works. Everyone knows Greimas’s interest in addressing certain anthropological issues, and equally well known is the influence that the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss have had in the formulation of Greimasian theory in general. The relationship between the study of meaning as a fundamental part of the study of “man”, in an anthropological sense, is clear from the first lines of *Sémantique structural: recherche de methode*, where the Lithuanian semiologist writes:

The human world seems to us to be defined essentially as the world of signification. The world can only be said to be ‘human’ insofar as it signifies something (Greimas 1966, English translation: 5).

In this short sentence we can see how the whole Greimasian theory is based on a strong tension between the disciplinary fields of semiotics and anthropology: signification and man.

We can therefore say with certainty that ethnosemiotics arises from an interest shared by various semiotic scholars to dust off some problems his-

torically linked to the period in which the “linguistic turn” spread in the social sciences. However, it is necessary to understand how ethnosemiologists wanted to resume the debate to readjust it to the contemporary academic context.

In this first part I will try to retrace some important steps that have allowed the development of a structured debate on the tension between semiotics and anthropology, with the dual purpose of tracing the moments in which these two disciplines met and laid the foundations for an active and fruitful dialogue and to understand the reasons that led some Italian semiologists to reinterpret their objects of study in light of some reflections that emerged from this comparison.

The origins of the interest of Italian semiotics in entering into dialogue with anthropology and anthropological studies can be traced back as early as the 1970s. In those years the boundary between semiotics and anthropology was still not very marked and scholars of both disciplines openly dialogued on common themes. There have been several Italian conferences on the subject. In this regard, it is important to remember the work of the *Sicilian Semiological Circle* thanks to which, today, we can trace a coherent path on the interests of semiologists on the problems of anthropology. A first trace of contact between semiotic and anthropological scholars can be found in a conference, held in Palermo between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> April 1970, whose proceedings were collected in a volume, published by Flacovio, entitled *Strutture e generi delle letterature etniche* (Avalle D'arco ed. 1970). In this work, followed over the years by many other texts edited by people close to the *Sicilian Semiological Circle* (Ruta and Lendinara 1981; Miceli 1982; Pasqualino 1992; Buttitta 1996), we can find the first origins of a direct comparison between anthropology and semiotics and they constituted the basis on which the theoretical discourse of ethnosemiotics was set, at least for its first years of life.

Specifically in the Italian context, one of the first research initiatives of great importance for the birth of ethnosemiotic theory, was the conference *Forms and practices of the party* held in Montecatini Terme between the 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> October 1978. In this conference, organised by semiologist Maurizio del Ninno and anthropologist Carla Bianco, the speakers were invited to discuss, starting from the theme of the “party”, theoretical and analytical issues in an attempt to find a meeting point between anthropology and semiotics. The authors themselves clarify in the introduction the interest in opening a dialogue between semiotics and anthropology, which is the basis of the constitution of semiotics itself. The two write:

By opening the conference to scholars of different backgrounds, the intention was to promote collaboration, a constructive debate between researchers of ethno-anthropology and semiotics. The intention was to draw, on the one hand, anthropologists to the problems of greater methodological rigor, on the other, semioticians to the problem of ethno-anthropology, which used to be one of the focal points of the discipline's development and now appears to be neglected (Bianco and Del Ninno eds. 1981: VII, my translation).

After 1978, there are no texts or conference proceedings that can testify research activity regarding the relationship between the two disciplines. Not until 2007, the year that marks the official birth of ethnosemiotics in Italy.

This year, as a matter of fact, is by all means the “date of birth” of ethnosemiotics. In 2007 the two fundamental texts were published: *Etnosemiotica. Questioni di metodo* is published in Urbino, edited by Maurizio del Ninno, while the *Tracciati di Etnosemiotica* by Francesco Marsciani is published in Bologna, introduced by an article, written by Francesco Marsciani together with Tarcisio Lancioni, titled “La pratica come testo: per un’etnosemiotica del mondo quotidiano”, published in a volume edited by Gianfranco Marrone, Nicola Dusi and Giorgio Lo Feudo titled *Narrazione ed esperienza: intorno a una semiotica della vita quotidiana* (eds. 2007), in turn the result of an AISS (*Italian Association for Semiotic Studies*) conference held at the University of Cosenza in 2006. During this conference the ethnosemiotic project of the Sienese-Bolognese school was presented, applied to particular types of analyses commissioned to the two speakers. The Sienese-Bolognese ethnosemiotics was therefore born as a response to the practical needs of applying semiotic theory and methodology to case studies of particular interest to the social sciences, namely human behaviour in specific contexts. The resulting speculation has led the theoretical proposal to become an actual movement of Italian semiotics.

The origin of Urbino’s ethnosemiotics, however, is different, starting from the interest of Carla Bianco and Maurizio Del Ninno in resuming the dialogue between semiotics and anthropology neglected in recent years (eds. 1981). As a matter of fact, the authors give rise to the need for a resumption of these studies as a consequence of the debate subsequently opened to the post-modern movement in the human and social sciences, which was spreading in Italy in the 1990s and early 2000s, opening important debates on the scientific status of the human and social sciences. In 2012, Del Ninno’s sudden death caused a long interruption of ethnosemiotic research in Urbino, which some young scholars in the Urbino academic environment have recently been resuming (cf. Mariani 2022). Maurizio Del Ninno left traces of his research activity on the website [www.etnosemiotica.it](http://www.etnosemiotica.it) (last accessed on April 25, 2022), an important source for recent studies on ethnosemiotics.

On the other hand, the Sienese-Bolognese ethnosemiotics had a different fate, it found fertile ground in Bologna to continue research and give life to a real “school”, coordinated by Francesco Marsciani.

Ethnosemiotics therefore, after a first phase of construction of the theoretical proposal and analytical attempts on both sides, returned to public discussion only in 2014, the year in which a day of discussion entitled “Ethnosemiotic research” was organised in Urbino, at the CISS *International Center of Semiotic Sciences* (recently dedicated to Umberto Eco), coordinated by Paolo Fabbri at the time. On the occasion Paolo Fabbri, a central figure for the birth and development of the discipline, gave a lecture in memory of the works of Maurizio Del Ninno and Alessandro Falassi titled *Ind-*

*agini etnosemiotiche. Richiami a Maurizio Del Ninno (Urbino), Alessandro Falassi (Siena).* In his speech, Fabbri introduced the hypothesis of defining ethnosemiotics by comparing semiotics and ethnography, a point of interest shared by many Italian semioticians, as demonstrated in works by Pozzato 2002; Demaria and Pozzato 2006; Lancioni and Marsciani 2006; Marsciani 2007; Mazzarino 2015. In many of his works he has always insisted on leaving a dialogue open between semiotics and anthropology and to take into account that “anthropological vocation” that semiotics has always had (Fabbri 1991; Mazzarino 2015; Donatiello and Mazzarino 2017a, 2017b).

In Bologna, on the other hand, in 2012 the ethnosemiotics course was established, which is still active and held by Francesco Marsciani. The course is part of the “Semiotics and Visual Arts” master’s degree study programme. In February 2015 the C.U.B.E created the series *Quaderni di Etnosemiotica* (Esculapio Editore)<sup>1</sup>, the first volumes, edited by students and researchers close to the Bolognese research centre and the teachings of Francesco Marsciani, also mark the birth of the orientation promoted by the *Laboratory of Ethnosemiotics*, which tries to find the link between the most anthropological works of Del Ninno and the profoundly semiotic (and/or phenomenological) reflections by Marsciani.

Another important opportunity for debate in the constitution of ethnosemiotics, always under the guidance of Francesco Marsciani, is the *Seminar of the Foundations of the Theory of Signification* (<https://www.marsciani.net/seminario>, last accessed on April 25, 2022), which was intended as a place for reflection for the master’s degree students about ten years ago. It is now a reference point for Italian semiotic studies and research. In recent years, thanks to the active collaboration in the organisation of the *Ethnosemiotics Laboratory*, the seminar deals with extremely current topics to carry out the ethnosemiotic project in the light of new developments and theoretical advances in anthropology, semiotics and philosophy.

## 2. Brief notes on the theoretical debate: from text to practice

The theoretical reasons that led to the birth of ethnosemiotics in the Italian context of the early 2000s can be found in a debate that precedes the period we have dated the birth of this semiotic orientation to.

Ethnosemiotics, as well as other branches such as sociosemiotics and semiotics of culture, develop from an internal debate of human and social sciences that appeared starting as early as the early 1990s (Landowski 1989; Marrone 2001; Rastier 2002; Lorusso 2010). The hint of a ‘change of course’, of the need for a turning point that would be able to eliminate the last cumbersome residues of structuralism, was already coming at the end of the 1980s. But only in the second part of the 1990s, after a period of great fortune even outside the academy, which turned out to be a place in which to practice theory and reflect on possible new theoretical horizons, did Italian semiologists begin to feel the need to extend their analytical horizon.

The developments of social sciences, the postmodern turning point and the growing interest of semiologists in the theories of enunciation to the detriment of the study of *langue*, have led to a will to extend the fields of research and even to think about the possibility of broadening one's own object of study, identified in the notion of 'text', to less 'defined' objects.

The constant reference to the idea of a systematic semiotics, dedicated to synchrony and syntagmaticity, appeared to be out of fashion at this point due to the postmodernist wave. All this led some Italian semiologists to criticise the idea of a text intended as the only possible object of study of their discipline. The need to extend one's research horizons, so as to conform and keep up with the rest of the human and social sciences, takes shape in a real theoretical proposal that sees the text as an object that is now obsolete and no longer sufficient to meet the needs of semiotics.

The critique of the text by a part of semiotics and some circles of philosophy and the human and social sciences, consists in considering this object as limited and 'closed', no longer able to take into account the "signification in its making" (Lancioni and Marsciani 2007: 65). The text, therefore, limits the object of study to what is only part of the world of cultural production and not of 'culture' in the anthropological sense of the term. This last consideration is not entirely out of place if we consider that Italian semiotics was born and developed precisely from the analysis of artistic, literary, photographic, television products, etc., objects that in the Anglo-American landscape were incorporated into cultural studies. In Italy this development has led to the birth of two branches, one anchored to this type of textuality and dedicated to analysis and another that has tried at all costs to readjust to the contemporary theoretical and academic context by proposing new methodological approaches in an attempt to replace "texts" with "practices" (Rastier 2001; Fontanille 2006a, 2006b; Basso ed. 2006; Volli 2007).

The spread of the term "practices", which had by now also caught on in Italy, at least since 2003, after the Italian publication of *Outline of a theory of practice* by Pierre Bourdieu (1973), also coincides with a change of internal orientation in Italian semiotics, increasingly distant from the Greimasian point of view and ever closer to the perspectives of Peirce, Lotman and the "cognitive turn" (Eco 1968, 1997; Violi 1997; Lorusso 2010; Paolucci 2010, 2021).

The influence of the Limoges school will be the point of reference for this shift from "text" to "practices". The positions of Jacques Fontanille expressed in 2006 in *Pratiques Semiotiques*, translated into Italian only in 2010 for Edizioni Ets, pushed Italian semiotics towards an interest in the "pratique". In 2006, shortly before the Italian translation of Fontanille's text, a volume of the *Semiotiche* journal was published entitled *Testo, pratiche, immanenza* (Basso 2006) in which, also on the basis of Fontanille's positions, the debate on the need for an exit from the text was expressed. We can consider this volume as one of the first texts produced by semiologists to make explicit in the Italian context those ideas that were already present in the classrooms of Italian universities since the early 90s. "Text" is



therefore cumbersome if thought of as a simple ‘closed object’ that is there in the world and is waiting to be ‘grasped’.

The effectiveness of the text is questioned in the 2006 volume. There are several contributions that attempt, in various ways, to dismantle the textualisation operation and the value of the text as an *enunciato* which relates the discursive level to the level of the manifestation. The proposal of practice, as an alternative to the text, therefore serves to restore a certain sense of ‘substantiality’ that the object of study of semiotics does not seem to have. The “enunciation practice” is conceived as a semiotic operation that takes into account complex levels of relevance, not attributable to the “texts” (Fontanille 2006a, 2006b).

In Italy in the 1990s, therefore, there was the need, perhaps following the wake of the new substantialist paradigms of the post-modern human sciences, to overcome formalism, still too close to structuralism, to get one’s hands dirty in ‘substance’. Therefore, some semiologists are increasingly pushing to define the enunciation in a concrete act, rather than thinking of it as a formal operation of reordering different levels of signification.

The problem of semiotics was therefore that of providing new methodological tools capable of satisfying this need to ‘engage in practice’, with the firm conviction that Greimasian theory was unable to face this challenge. Therefore many authors have done their utmost to search for new theoretical-methodological ideas to help solve this problem.

The first forms of ethnosemiotics, which emerged at the turn of 2006 and 2007, derive precisely from this debate and affirm their will to ‘remain’ anchored to the notion of text. According to the first works that we can consider ethnosemiotic, the Greimasian theory has within it many open fields, within which it is possible to explore forms of textualisation of socio-cultural phenomena (Greimas 1976). These research fields favour the encounter between semiotics, anthropology and sociology. The birth of semiotics dedicated to the study of experiences, practices, actions, objects and their uses, etc. is a clear sign of this tendency of Italian semiotics to give itself to something other than its classic object, which, to use Marsciani’s words, had by then turned out to be just a “world of paper” (Marsciani 2020a).

So we can say that starting from the debate, a third path is formed, which intends to read the possibility of “engaging in practices” without abandoning the methodology of textualist semiotics. The text is not to be seen in opposition to another object and certainly cannot be replaced by another substantially different object.

Semiologist Gianfranco Marrone eventually clarified this point in 2010. In the pages of *L’invenzione del testo*, the Italian semiologist tried to resolve the misunderstanding and restore dignity to the text as an indispensable methodological tool for certain semiotic studies, believing that it is an:

[...] expressive medium designed to convey certain contents, with its specific features, recognizable boundaries, internal processes and so on (Marrone 2010: 5, my translation).

Ethnosemiotics was therefore born within this debate, but in opposition to the ‘practices turning point’, that is, to the construction of an object of study other than the text. Since ethnosemiotics wants to be a semiotics of Greimasian derivation, the interest of the first works was concentrated, in fact, on a reinterpretation of the generative theory in order to find, within it, a field of study to explore, in which the problem of the analysis of socio-cultural phenomena and daily practices could be incorporated. Aware, nevertheless, of the fact that the ‘text’ is a construct of the analyst that acts as an instance of control of meaning which the semiologist cannot do without (Lancioni and Marsciani 2007).

If, however, the other similar semiotic trends, in particular sociosemiotics, have dealt with how the “cultural product” interacts and acquires significance within society, in the footsteps of Floch and Landowski’s works (Floch 1990; Landowski 1989; Landowski and Marrone eds. 2002), the destiny of ethnosemiotics, on the other hand, is to open a field of reflection and study on the real application of Greimasian theory to socio-cultural phenomena of the natural world. In the first place, deconstructing the preconceptions that over time have been structured around the notion of text in semiotics, which has become a simple theoretical synonym to define films, books, photographs and some everyday objects. A preconception that arises mainly due to the fact that the text is considered as an “object” and not as a model (Marrone 2010: 52, my translation).

The first works of the ethnosemiologists therefore consisted of an immersion in Greimasian theory to try to think of the study of these ‘objects’ improperly called “practices” as production processes of ‘semiotic systems’, or rather of ‘micro universes of meaning’. Phenomena that, as we will see later, can be subject to processes of textualisation and therefore of analysis.

Therefore ethnosemiotics, even if from two apparently different theoretical starting positions, presents itself, starting from 2007, as the semiotics capable of responding to the needs of opening up to new objects of study by not providing new methodological tools, as the *pratique sémiotique* attempted, but opening a direct comparison with the Greimasian theory, to search within it the conditions of a comparison with anthropology and the epistemological reasons to be able to structure a semiotic theory capable of analysing signification and meaning “in its offering” (Lancioni and Marsciani 2007: 65).

By presenting the major theoretical proposals of ethnosemiotics we will try to reconstruct the key points of this debate from the point of view of the authors who gave birth to this particular orientation in the Italian context.

### **3. Definitions and theoretical proposals: from Maurizio Del Ninno to the Bolognese School**

Now that we have pieced together the essential theoretical points that led to the birth of ethnosemiotics in the Italian academic context, it is neces-



sary to move on to the examination of the various theoretical ideas developed over time, starting from the common thread that binds them, the dialogue between semiotics and anthropology.

Tracing the history of ethnosemiotics, in fact, also means tracing the history of its definitions. The only certainty that one has in trying to define this field of study is that the term is composed of two elements: “ethno” and “semiotics”. The difficulties, however, lie in being able to define the connections and boundaries between the two elements that make up the term. “Etnosemiotica” is not a name invented by the Italian authors, but explicitly refers to a lemma in *Semiotics and Language: an Analytical Dictionary*, of which I will quote only the essential points:

1. Ethnosemiotics is not a truly autonomous semiotics. If it were, it would be in competition with a field of knowledge already established under the name of ethnology or anthropology, whose contribution to the advent of semiotics itself is considerable. Rather, it is a privileged area of curiosities and methodological exercises. This is due, first of all, to the fact that anthropology appears as the most rigorous discipline among the social sciences, because of the demands that it imposes on itself and because, on the other hand, it has had to attack Eurocentrism and go beyond it, by developing a way to study the universality of cultural objects and semiotic forces as a result of its awareness of the cultural relativism that the very object of its research ceaselessly calls to its attention. [...]

6. Given that general semiotics authorizes the treatment of nonlinguistic (gestural, somatic, etc.) syntagmatic concatenations and discourses or texts, the field of ethnolinguistics can be enlarged to become an ethnosemiotics; analyses, still rare, of rituals and ceremonies lead us to suppose that ethnology can become, once again, the privileged locus for the construction of general models of signifying behavior (Greimas 1976, English translation: 109).

What is clear in the words of Greimas and Courtés (1979) is the intention to think of ethnosemiotics as an evolving field of analysis, in which semiotics can exercise its methodology at the service of objects of study coming from ethnology. Maurizio del Ninno also refers to this. The semiologist from Urbino, who always focused on a direct and profound comparison with anthropology, defined ethnosemiotics as the semiotics that deals with objects of study of anthropology (or ethnology).

Del Ninno argues that Greimas placed ethnosemiotics alongside ethnolinguistic studies by devising a ‘tactic’ to broaden the field of semiotic studies to include ritual discourses, therefore offering a meeting point between anthropology and semiotic studies in which to deal with the analysis of pertinences related to human behaviour with the tools of narrative and discursive analysis. For the author, in fact, the crisis induced by postmodern thought in the context of the human and social sciences has led to the need, on the part of sociologists and anthropologists, to acquire semiotic methodologies of analysis useful for dealing with “contemporary worlds” (Del Ninno ed. 2007: 8). Ethnosemiotics can therefore be a methodological support to ensure

an effective analysis of socio-cultural practices. Del Ninno's suggestion is to go back to the Levi-Straussian precepts that were the background to Greimasian semiotics and to think of ethnosemiotics as that orientation capable of contributing, in general terms, to the construction of a theory of human behaviour. In a 1985 article, he argues that semiotics should also deal with the study of "social practices" and rituals and treat them as discourses, so as to be able to apply "the methodological apparatus of discursive analysis" (Del Ninno 1985: 12). For Maurizio Del Ninno, the meeting point between semiotics and anthropological studies is social anthropology as presented by Claude Lévi-Strauss, in continuity with Saussurian thought (Lévi-Strauss 1960). Levi-Straussian anthropology is capable of comprehending how social facts convey meaning, ensuring a systematic understanding of signification that spans from discursive structures to the conditions of immanent possibilities. The element of innovation of ethnosemiotics in this procedural model of analysis of social facts, would consist in integrating cultural analysis with the tools of the generative trajectory of meaning, as it studies both "human action", through the structuring of this in semio-narrative structures, and "cultural diversity", thanks to the possibility of investing narrative structures in all *figures* from the natural world (Greimas 1970, 1983; Del Ninno ed. 2007). To do this, it is necessary to refer to the text, as formalised by generative semiotics, that is an object constructed by the analyst, capable of giving a structure to the discursive procedurality of socio-cultural phenomena, reinstating a significant form to the "nebula in which nothing is delimited" (Del Ninno ed. 2007: 13, my translation). Therefore the methodological procedure proposed by Del Ninno involves addressing the rituals as textualised discourses. Some methodological problems arise from these considerations that Del Ninno lists in one of his writings (1985), in order to clearly clarify the complexities that must be overcome in order to face a discursive analysis of the rituals. Among these, the two most important problems are: what is the privileged "language of manifestation" in a ritual and how is it possible to delimit a "beginning" and an "end" of its textualisation.

In the case of the first question Del Ninno confidently affirms that the ritual is formed by a "plurality of languages of manifestation" (1985: 2); but regarding the second problem, that relating to the closure of the text, he refers to the temporality of the ritual itself. This, however, appears to be, from a strictly methodological point of view, not entirely suitable, as the boundaries of the text would thus be dictated by events within the ritual itself and not by the analyst's adequate research question. However, theoretically it is still consistent with the precepts of his proposal, since the pertinences that structure the text must obviously be limited to the single analysed case. However, the split that arises from this problem offers an interesting prompt for subsequent works.

Del Ninno's reflection is based on a somewhat outdated concept of the subject of study that should be considered when attempting to approach anthropology from a semiotic perspective. The textualisation procedure is still one of the most complex problems for ethnosemiotics. And it is precise-

ly from this point that we can start to talk about the already briefly mentioned study perspective brought forward at first by Francesco Marsciani together with Tarcisio Lancioni and then continued by Marsciani only, together with the C.U.B.E. research group and at the *Ethnosemiotic Laboratory* in Bologna.

This perspective derives from different assumptions both on a theoretical and methodological level. Firstly, an important change is made in the very definition of ethnosemiotics in Greimas's Dictionary (Greimas and Courtés 1979). The term "ethnology" in the definition, which justifies the presence of the suffix "ethno" in the name, is replaced with "ethnography". This passage overturns the entire theoretical apparatus of previous ethnosemiotics, both of Greimas and Del Ninno. In fact, because of its being a methodology that implies and imposes a certain observational practice applied to specific case studies, "ethnography" allows ethnosemiotics to experiment with a different methodological system, where ethnographic observation is added to the analytical level of semiotics (Lancioni and Marsciani 2007; Mazzarino 2015). This also implies a particular insight into the construction of the object of study, which is not limited to being the ritual in itself or the practice as a human action coordinated by structured and structuring logics (*habitus*), rather the object is the signification in its being able to be produced, in the conditions of its possibility. Subsequently, Francesco Marsciani, with his *Tracciati di Ethnosemiotica* (2007) opens this perspective to various case studies in which the social actor, human or non-human, coincides with the instance of enunciation and the analysed phenomenon is seen as a process, that is, the discursive component of generative theory. The analysis will then find the pertinences and link them to the systematic lines of the semio-narrative levels, based on the preparation of the 'text', made starting from the analyst's research question. Thus we have overcome the limit according to which only certain already identified anthropological objects could be considered, because of a vice inherent to the discipline. Identifying itself as "ethno" because of its "ethnographic" nature, this particular semiotics becomes a discipline capable of analysing any socio-cultural phenomenon, respecting specific epistemological parameters for the construction of the object of study and analysis and searching for the inter-subjective relationships that structure the phenomena. This is where the previously examined dichotomy 'text/practices' finally crumbles. Ethnosemiotics does not deal with practices but with texts constructed from the observation of socio-cultural phenomena, considering the fact that they are multiple and can also consist of simple daily actions: shopping, strolling in a town square, going to a funeral, uncorking a bottle, provided that they "become meaningful actions in the eyes of someone, from that certain distance" (Marsciani 2007: 10, my translation).

Marsciani also realises there is a difficult problem in the Greimasian theory, which concerns the passage from immanence to manifestation. The Bolognese professor understands that in order to take into account all the pertinences necessary for the textualisation of a phenomenon of the natu-

ral world, it is necessary to review the relationship between themes and figures, as well as between plastic and figurative. The phenomenon is a *discursive scene* in its manifestation, which, clinging to a plurality of manifestation languages (Del Ninno, Mazzarino), requires more complex theoretical tools to be able to take into account its completeness. The “figure of the natural world” alone does not fulfil the needs of textualisation as it is unable to tie the different figures in the scene together, despite the coherent isotopies. Marsciani therefore adds the concept of ‘image’ to the theory. The image is the theoretical tool that unites the different figures of the natural world to reproduce, at a level immediately prior to the manifestation (which is the taking of meaning in reality), the totality of the pertinences and isotopic instances that bind the different figures of which the analysed scene is composed. The theory of the image is perhaps, to date, the greatest contribution that ethnosemiotics has given back to the original theory.

Therefore, the proposal to mean “ethno” as “ethnography” has allowed ethnosemiotic theory to make considerable progress. Between 2007 and 2018 there have been many works that have tried to apply this methodology to different subjects of study in the wake of this approach. However, the numerous works have brought to the surface different problems from several points and it was necessary, starting from 2017, to resume the debate on the definition of ethnosemiotics. There were three events that led to this reconsideration: the first is the drafting and publication of two volumes of the series *Quaderni di Etnosemiotica, Tra “etno” e “semiotica”. Affinità e divergenze ai margini di due discipline vol. I* and *Tra “etno” e “semiotica”. Conversazioni tra antropologia e teoria della significazione vol. II* (Donatiello and Mazzarino 2017a, 2017b), edited by the *Laboratorio di Etnosemiotica*. The second event is linked to the interest of ethnosemiologists in new anthropological theories of a semiotic nature, in particular the works of Edoardo Viveiros de Castro (2004, 2009), which led ethnosemiologists to think carefully about the current variety of meanings of the term “ethno” – as a term capable of restoring the fragmentation that characterises ‘culture’ today, as an object of study of anthropology – and to ask an important question about the ‘other’ nature of the observed phenomena. I had already raised this type of problem in 2015 in the text *Il potere dell’ipnosi. Proposte teoriche per un’etnosemiotica*, in which, starting from the dichotomy “ethnography/semiotics”, I attempted to rethink the concept of ‘alterity’, not considering it as a “group of individuals” or a “community”, but in its meaning as phenomenon (Mazzarino 2015). Furthermore, anchored to an idea of ethnosemiotics as a discipline, both theoretical and practical, capable of giving back an analysis of socio-cultural phenomena, I detected a problem in the concept of textualisation. Being purely theoretical in nature, it lacked its methodological counterpart. To be textualised, the phenomenon requires tools that can implement this process. Therefore it was necessary to identify an instance of control of signification capable of taking into account the different pertinence plans and relationships in the analytical phase. I call this instrument “writing” and by this I mean the methodological instrument

that allows the phenomenon to become an analysable ‘text’ (Mazzarino 2015). Writing is textualisation put into practice.

Meanwhile, the third event concerns the considerations brought forward during the seminar of the foundations of the theory of signification held in Bologna during the 2019/2020 academic year, in which semiologists, anthropologists and philosophers conversed starting precisely from the univocal construction of a concept of ‘alterity’.

#### 4. The *Ethnosemiotics Laboratory*

Before we discuss the latest developments in ethnosemiotics which came up during the discussions of the seminar of the foundations of the theory of signification, it is necessary to go back in time, to fully understand the historical events that have turned the seminar into the privileged place for discussion for ethnosemiotics it is today.

We must go back to 2014 when the *Ethnosemiotics Laboratory* was set-up, inside the C.U.B.E., in Bologna. Intended to open opportunities for research among the students of the master’s degree in semiotics, the laboratory immediately began a direct dialogue with anthropologists and philosophers on various topics, creating, over time, its own theoretical proposal, in line with the perspective promoted by Marsciani, focusing on the relationship between semiotics and anthropology from a methodological point of view.

The objective of the laboratory was to find a meeting point between Maurizio Del Ninno’s theory and the analytical and methodological proposal of Marsciani and Lancioni. I can say that all of the laboratory’s research work focused on four main phases: the first phase consisted in the rewriting of Greimas’s definition by replacing the word “ethnology” with the term “ethnography”, as already mentioned above. The laboratory took care of writing a Wikipedia contribution on ethnosemiotics in these terms; the second phase of research, consisted in the dialogue with phenomenology, inspired by the perspective of Francesco Marsciani (Marsciani 2012a, 2012b) and anthropology and led to the publication of volumes of fundamental importance for the development of ethnosemiotic theory (which we will see later). The third phase, simultaneous with the second, consisted in the application of the ethnosemiotic methodology to various case studies. The fourth phase, which is still active, consists in taking part in the seminar to open a debate about the status of the “ethnos” as a place of immanence.

These already previously discussed phases have developed parallel to the studies of Francesco Marsciani. The active role of the laboratory, however, has led ethnosemiotic theory to make significant and interesting theoretical changes, mainly originated from the dialogue with philosophers and anthropologists.

The results of the exchange which developed as part of the *Laboratory of Ethnosemiotics* can be found in at least three publications of the *Quad-*

*erni di Ethnosemiotica* series and in numerous meetings and seminars held between 2014 and 2019, when the activities of the laboratory merged with the seminar of the foundations of the theory of signification. The most important publications to come out of the *Ethnosemiotics Laboratory* are: *Corpo linguaggio e senso tra semiotica e filosofia* (Amoroso et al. 2016) and the two, already mentioned volumes, *Tra “etno” e “semiotica”. Affinità e divergenze ai margini di due discipline vol. I* and *Tra “etno” e “semiotica”. Conversazioni tra antropologia e teoria della significazione vol. II* (Donatiello and Mazzarino 2017a, 2017b).

The first text is a direct comparison with philosophy, in particular with Merleau Ponty’s phenomenology. The work initiates a comparison on the possibility of understanding meaning and the making of meaning, starting, as Manlio Iofrida says in the introduction to the text, quoting Merleau Ponty himself, from the “world perceived in its flooding inaccuracy” (Amoroso et al. 2016: 7–8). The dilemma is purely theoretical: ethnosemiotics seeks an answer to its search for signification taking place in phenomenology, to try to broaden its horizon more and more and extend that concept of “ethno” beyond the “tropics”.

The two volumes of *Tra Etno e semiotica* (Donatiello and Mazzarino 2017a, 2017b), the result of research work of the *Ethnosemiotics Laboratory* which lasted two years, are certainly of considerable importance for ethnosemiotics. In the two volumes, through a direct dialogue with semiologists and anthropologists, using an interview style, we try to find the crucial points of the relationship between the two disciplines, but above all to bring out the critical issues of such an interdisciplinary approach. Our well-known anthropologist, Michael Herzfeld, gave an interesting contribution on this point, collected in the second volume, which made us reflect a lot on the nature of ‘ethno’. In addition to providing a historical scenario on the use of the term “ethnosemiotic” in America, in the environments close to the University of Chicago, a place that has been a breeding ground of interest for semiotic reflections in anthropology for years, he also reports a specific use of ethnosemiotics in this academic environment between the 1970s and 1980s (Herzfeld 1981, 1983a, 1983b). Herzfeld in fact believes that the use of the term thought of as a combination of “ethnography” and “semiotics” is incorrect and suggests thinking of ethnosemiotics as an emic datum, as that particular ability of the studied actors to produce theories which can be observed during ethnography. Therefore ‘ethnosemiotic’ in this sense would acquire the characteristics of a way of managing meaning through ethnographic analysis. In fact, this way of seeing semiotics as ‘ethno’ would solve the problem of interdisciplinary methodology, but is still confined to the ‘distant’ margins of otherness to be sought elsewhere, in the different, in the native, apparently unable to produce signification if not thanks to the interpretative gaze of the anthropologist, who, thanks to his cultural categories, manages to accurately interpret it. Even though the contribution gave back an important observation for a reformulation of the theory, the semiotic problem of the definition of ethnosemiotics is still difficult



to solve. The question of the definition of “ethno” cannot be translated, in semiotic terms, neither as ethnographic methodology nor as ‘ethnicity’. The new studies of the *Ethnosemiotics Laboratory*, from 2018 to the present day, concern the resumption of research starting from the semiotic nature of the object of study of ethnosemiotics, which cannot be limited to the anthropological conceptualisation of ‘group’ or ‘community’. Ethnosemiotics, today, must rethink itself as an extended theory of enunciation and reflect, starting from this precept, on the alterity of the phenomena of meaning that it analyses as its objects of study.

## 5. Conclusions: Future plans and perspectives. ‘Ethno’ as ‘Alterity’

Nowadays, therefore, ethnosemiotics is in a phase of further revision of some basic concepts. The very definition of ethnosemiotics still remains an open problem, not so much because of the impossibility of semantically circumscribing its meaning, but because the definition hides all the theoretical importance of this orientation of semiotics.

In fact, in 2020 a contribution by Francesco Marsciani was published in the *Actes Sémiotiques* journal, titled: “Ethnosemiotica. Bozza di un manifesto” (2020a), in which the professor re-examines the prefix “ethno” and writes:

I would suggest going back to considering the name “ethnosemiotics”, ethnosemiotics without a hyphen, and think about what the prefix “ethno” can refer to. It could be useful and it seems legitimate to extract a sort of essence from it, a hidden core, and pass through its somewhat referential etymology (“too referential” I would say...) which has as its object meaning the people, the population, the classic “ethnic group”, which appears as a reality located somewhere in the world, preferably far away and in a forest, which we go to observe, visit, study, describe in its appearance and through the traits that it itself, that object people, allows us to reveal and recognize [...], shifting from this meaning to another valuation of “ethno”, that of any community that recognizes itself as such, that is, as a community, which implies that it must be considered as an intersubjective sharing of constitutive categories, which establish, let’s say, the relations that form a system and that allow a set of instances to coordinate one in relation to the others. This is no longer necessarily an external object, nor distant and wild. It is nothing less than the significant conditions of life in common, conditions that are significant insofar as they articulate and categorize the intersubjective experience of the experienced world (Marsciani 2020a: 6, my translation).

It is precisely from these considerations that we need to start to delineate the boundaries of ethnosemiotics again, within the space of a semiotics interested in the founding relationships of all those ‘discourses’, that acquire a socio-cultural value, where the latter is nothing more than a figurative effect connected to deeper levels and of a narrative type. ‘Ethno’ becomes

synonymous with ‘alterity’ to the extent that with this term we identify that void that needs to be filled in the identification of the *I-you* relationship. In this way, the ‘ethno’ coincides with the place of immanence, or that relational dimension that structures intersubjective relationships and distributes the roles of subject-enunciator and object-enunciation (or recipient) through the text.

This revolution should also affect anthropology, which needs a revision of its basic concepts in the light of the now established certainty of the domination of “hybrids”, of the collapse, at least substantially, of the rigid separation of the world into nature and culture, subjects and objects, human and non-human (Latour 1984, 1991; Viveiros de Castro 2004).

But while the interest of anthropologists is to build new forms of “ontologies”, the interest of ethnosemiotics is to study the ways in which immanent relationships crystallise into signification for someone and in a certain way; therefore analysing the complexity of events starting from their structuring into speeches and thus into potential texts. But here we do not want to propose a return to ‘inside the text’, but rather an expansion of the concept itself by opening it to the reference context, where this term means the set of relationships, that make what is observed ‘other’, starting from a certain perspective. Moreover, this idea of ethnosemiotics should also be able to overcome the postmodern idea of an interpretation of interpretations, since the game of perspectives, inserted within the context made up of relationships between subjects and objects, senders and receivers, enunciators and statements, allows us to read the interpretation itself as a perspective, which in turn constructs signification. This means that the texts are not interpreted or to be interpreted – an action that affirms a temporality *a posteriori* in relation to who/what is subjected to the action – as stated by a certain Geertzian anthropology, but they are always built on the basis of perspective relationships. Therefore the interpretation operation is *a priori* and constructs the scene starting from the observer’s perspective. Ethnosemiotics to date tries to work on these spaces of engagement. It is not looking for methods of interpreting events that occur, but is looking for the “conditions that make objects give themselves, things appear and make sense” (Marsciani 2020a: 7, my translation).

Therefore, the proposal of ethnosemiotics is to abandon the “substantiality” of enunciatinal praxis, and therefore of practices in the strict sense, and is capable of substituting the text to be promoted to an object of study, and thus propose a “formal theory of enunciation” (Marsciani 2020b: 34, my translation). The practice remains a manifest origin of an object that becomes a text, only to the extent that it is useful to untie the formal knots of the conditions of semiotic existence of the analysed phenomenon. What interests ethnosemiotics is perhaps reassigning importance to the relationship between *langue* and *parole*, conceived as an inseparable relationship between synchrony and diachrony. Quoting Merleau-Ponty, a well known author among ethnosemiologists, we could hypothesise the possibility of this semiotics of taking up a phenomenological concept of the act of lan-

guage, of the word, understood in its semiotic opening to different languages of manifestation, namely:

The word, as distinct from the language, is the moment of meaningful intention that is still mute and entirely in progress reveals its capability of incorporating itself into culture, mine and that of others, of forming myself and forming others by transforming the meaning of cultural tools. It in turn becomes “available” because it gives us, successively, the impression that it was inherent to the already available meanings, while, by a sort of cunning, it joined these meanings only to give them new life (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 107).

And it is precisely this new life of signification that ethnosemiotics intends to deal with, digging deep into the formal precepts that provide the conditions of possibility, inverting the perspective and welcoming the ‘other’ meaning of the phenomena of meaning it studies which are inevitably always culturalised.

Therefore, thinking of ethnosemiotics as the semiotics that deals with the “intersubjective experience of the experienced world” (Marsciani 2020a: 6) means paying particular attention to the perspectives of the subjects-objects that make up the scene, a way through which otherness is structured, which can then also be found in the relationship between “I” and what is “other” besides than me (Marsciani 2007; Mazzarino 2015, 2020; Galofaro 2015).

The idea, therefore, of converting the suffix “ethno” into an ‘other dimension’ leads ethnosemiologists to consider this particular semiotics as an enlarged theory of enunciation. To explain this point I will refer to the reflections of Louis Marin, taken from the text *On Representation* ([1994] 2002). The semiologist, in the introduction to his text, redesigns the theory of enunciation starting from Benveniste and focusing the attention on the construction of subjectivity in the practice of discourse. He writes:

It is thus other as “thou” who fills the empty identity of the form “I”, who carries it put as the sense act of full identification, who construes the phenomenological difference between “I”s as an identity. In other words, it is the other as “thou” who constitutes, in the mediated immediacy of the linguistic exchange, the “I” as Myself. From this point on, and to sum up the uncanny structure of the act of speaking in a non-hegelian formula, I shall say that the ontic identity of *Myself* is the difference – and here is the dialogic structure of its constitution – between possible systematic identity and real phenomenological difference. The being of Myself is the being of difference, not at all identity between the nonidentity and identity at same, but nonidentity between the identity and the nonidentity of the other.

The linguistic-semantic deduction of temporality is directly articulated with that of the subject, *ego*, in the sense that is simultaneously repeats and displaces it on another level (Marin [1994] 2002, English Translation: 134).

If with ethnosemiotics one leaves the purely 'textualist' dimension, but rather focuses on the processes of textualisation of the everyday phenomena observed as spoken discourses, it is necessary to think that an important part of the construction of the object of study of ethnosemiotics will concern grasping the relationships between the actors (*I-you*) that stage the observed discourse. At this point it is necessary, first of all, to have a research question that guides the analyst in assuming a certain perspective rather than another and to suggest a subject enunciator, secondly to understand the relationships that co-construct the identity of the actors involved.

Just as Marin understands the importance of the relationship between an "I" or "ego" subjectivity and an "other" identity that contributes, with its presence, in filling the previous one and making that "I" a real "I", that ego a true ego, in ethnosemiotics the discourse of identity extends to all the possibilities in which subjects and objects interact and produce signification by building the world (Mazzarino 2020). At this point, "ethnos" is nothing more than an extension of that "ego" that Marin tells us about. Observing signification in its giving itself as a perspective, as a sense oriented by someone or something, means assuming the "I/you" relationship in terms of a "we/they". The perspective, or rather the "culturalised" signification, is always something plural, shared. Observing and analysing the relationships that structure the signification inserted in this dynamic means, therefore, thinking of the "ego" in the plural terms of the community, of the collective subject (understood as a perspective from which to look at meaning). This is how ego becomes *ethnos*.

If Louis Marin's problem is to describe how the "I" becomes the starting point of the enunciation, the aim of the ethnosemiologist is to overturn this concept to extend this theory to the "others" point of view. For ethnosemiologists the theory of enunciation completes the theoretical plan presented, giving rise to an exhaustive theory for the analysis of the significance of everyday (and/or socio-cultural) phenomena. Starting from the identification of the conditions of possibility of the construction (on a semiotic and not ontological level) of the subjects, but above all of the conditions of construction of the identities at play: of an enunciating subject, that suggests a perspective through which to recognise an alterity which in turn contributes to the construction of signification as a "difference" (Marin [1994] 2002, English translation: 134). This way, in sum, the objective of ethnosemiotics is to explain the concept of alterity, going beyond a mere semiotic analysis of the elements of otherness, which was a mistake in the past for ethnosemiotics. To date, the research work of Italian ethnosemiologists is committed to reconstructing this theoretical framework.

Throughout 2021, a cycle of meetings was organised within the seminar of the foundations of the theory of signification at the University of Bologna, titled *Non siamo mai stati strutturalisti!(!?)* a title that, mimicking the well-known book by Bruno Latour (1991) *We have never been modern*, opens a dialogue between semiologists, anthropologists and philosophers discussing the post-structuralist status of the semiotic approach and how

ethnosemiotics would somehow have acquired the inheritance of this hidden trend of generative semiotics.

From 2007 to today, the internal changes in ethnosemiotics have been significant. First there was a direct confrontation with anthropology and then the debate on the semiotic analysis of everyday practices which led to the idea of an 'ethno' as a perspective of production of meaning, in which the relationship that structures the signification is more important than the interpretation that is given to it.

If before 2017, prior to the release of the two volumes *Tra etno e Semiotica* (Donatiello and Mazzarino 2017a, 2017b), the idea of ethnosemiotics as an interdisciplinary theory seemed achievable, in the following years, the comparison with philosophy and the new perspectives of certain anthropology presented ethnosemiotics as a transdisciplinary semiotics. A semiotics that crosses philosophical and anthropological thought and is positioned at a precise point of semiotic theory: the study of the taking of meaning in the world.

## Notes

- 1 From 2015 to 2021, the publications produced by the Bolognese school were: Accardo Lorenza et al. (2015). *Via Mascarella. Declinazioni di uno spazio denso*, Bologna: Esculapio; Giuseppe Mazzarino (2015). *Il potere dell'ipnosi. Proposte teoriche per un'etnosemiotica*. Bologna: Esculapio; Francesco Galofaro (2015). *Dopo Gerico. I nuovi spazi della psichiatria*. Bologna: Esculapio; Amoroso Prisca et al. (2016). *Corpo linguaggio e senso tra semiotica e filosofia*. Bologna: Esculapio; Jaqueline Crestani (2016). *Autorappresentazione e negoziazione dell'identità culturale. Il caso degli indigeni Mbya-Guarani*. Bologna: Esculapio; Maria Cristina Addis (2017). *L'isola che non c'è sulla Costa Smeralda, o di un'utopia che non c'è*. Bologna: Esculapio; Paola Donatiello and Giuseppe Mazzarino (2017a). *Tra "etno" e "semiotica". Affinità e divergenze ai margini di due discipline vol. I*. Bologna: Esculapio; Paola Donatiello and Giuseppe Mazzarino (2017b). *Tra "etno" e "semiotica". Conversazioni tra antropologia e teoria della significazione vol. II*. Bologna: Esculapio; Francesca Scanu (2018). *A lezione di canto barocco. Lì dove nasce un cantante*. Bologna: Esculapio; Isabella Pezzini and Riccardo Bertolotti (eds. 2019). *Viale Togliatti a Roma: una strada in cerca d'autore. Un'inchiesta semiotica tra paesaggio, pratiche, rappresentazioni*. Bologna: Esculapio; Michele Denticò (2019). *Sul tifare il Taranto. Ricerca etnosemiotica intorno ad una disaffezione*. Bologna: Esculapio; Francesco Marsciani (2020a). *Etnosemiotica: bozza di un manifesto, Actes Sémiotiques*, n. 123; Francesco Marsciani (ed. 2021). *Un etnosemiologo al museo*. Bologna: Esculapio; Chiara Petrini (2021). *La pratica religiosa cattolica ai tempi del coronavirus*. Bologna: Esculapio.

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