Semiotics, Communication Analysis, Surrealism.
New Epistemologies and Cultural Change.

Semiotica, comunucazione e Surrealismo.
Nuove epistemologie e cambiamento culturale.

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By crossing disciplinary boundaries, in this paper I propose to interpret the methodology of surrealistic (literary or visual) representation in terms of meta-communication to explore new criteria apt to understand contemporary socio-cultural scenarios. Indeed, we are in presence of such complexities that traditional categories show inadequacy for their understanding and several experiments are in progress in the social sciences, and in the Cultural Anthropological disciplines – including Cultural Studies -, to develop new paradigms apt to the task.

The estranging (displacing) effect generated by works of art in *strictu or latu sensu* ascribable to the surrealistic "genre" is to be adduced to a precise shifting. An object-information that we are used to see (perceive, know, experience) in a certain context is placed into a different, unusual, context.

Positing my idea on a semiotic concept of culture, and extensively discussing how knowledge *is* actually interpretation, which in turn is production of new sense, semiotically speaking, I pose the main question.

What is the role that semiotics plays in the theory and practice of cultural anthropology. This implies trasposing the discourse in terms of communication: communication analysis and its importance, particularly in our time.

On the bases of the communication mechanism that creates displacement in the Surrealistic works, I argue that distinctive cultural traits meet in a juxtaposed fashion, similar to that causing the "surrealistic effect". The category of Identity (at political as well as social and individual levels) follows analogous course, deconstructing its classical Western integrity and continuously renewing itself. These unprecedented circumstances require new instruments for their understanding. Once static and solid analytical pillars, many categories need now to change into open heuristic constructs with relative and mutant values that define them. New epistemologies, which I call "relational" to underline their dialogical purpose (vs. dichotomic), must be adopted at large. Old dichotomies, such as form and substance or mind and body, typically descending from a rationalistic Cartesian matrix, call for the intervention of what both Bakhtine and Lotman in the field of semiotics of culture described as "dialogical principle". As well, the perpetual dichotomy between exact "hard" sciences and no-exact "soft" sciences, need to be revised (Prigogine-Stengers, 1981).

Epistemologies that look at the *relation between* differences, rather than at differences *per sé,* or worse, that build oppositions upon mere differences, call for our attention. Epistemologies that privilege processes rather than absolute laws, and combinations rather than sums. Which seek to multiply the links between mind and body, nature and culture, science and poetry, humankind and universe. These constitute efficacious frameworks to understand the new assets of the contemporary socio-cultural-scapes.

Semiotic premises

In examining the two currents which laid the foundations for a theory of signs, that of Ch. S. Peirce is more appropriate for a semiotic of culture, because it does *not* require a sign to be intentionally sent and artificially produced as necessary conditions in order to be defined as such.

Conversely, the de Saussurian theory, since assumes as subject of semiological studies every object *that can be linguistically described,* implies that the study no linguistic objects can solely happen by stretching the use of the methodology particularly formulated to investigate linguistic objects.

Based on Peirce' work, more recently advanced by other semioticians, a *cognitive semiotics* earned credit, that started to be adopted in parallel with a semiotics of structuralistic saussurian origin.

Although the works of Ch. S. Peirce and those of Saussure date approximately the same, only recently the Peircian approach has been widely credited, just thanks to its theoretical and applicative advantages.

In its recent approaches, semiotics is considered to have a systemic character; and its organization and its dynamics are viewed as coinciding with cognitive and creative processes. The shared kernel and at the core of these three concepts (semiotic, cognitive, creative) is that of *interpretation.*

The entity who interprets is actually knowing, but at the same time is inferring on the real object, so is producing an increase of information, which modifies the

significance[1] of the object itself; and therefore is also establishing new segnic correlations.

The equivalence *knowledge = interpretation = production of sense* can be understood by reflecting on the impossibility to affirm the sameness between the mental image which follows to an elementary reception of information, like the conscious sensation, and the information which is in the |reality| realm.

The mental image and the real object are two different things. Stretching the thought, if a subject sees "white", what is actually seen is the result of the whole visible spectrum. The subject's mental image of the object is a sign, because that mental image can be assumed as significant substitute (a tranform) of the (real) object. This indicates we are moving into the semiotic sphere in the sense outlined before. If then the subject — examining a basic dyadic inter-subjective communication event — communicates the acquired information, the subject is interpreting (by coding the information in order to be able to "send" it) his/her own interpretation of the |real object|. Then, the receiver will add a further level of interpretation when s/he will de-code the text-message.

Now, given that the levels of interpretations can be numerically infinite, producing an *unlimited semiosis* (semiosis: production of sense), and given that each of these levels can be identified with an *interpretant* [2], it is possible to say that the unlimited semiosis is systemically structured in terms of logical types (levels, classes) (Bateson, 1972).

In line with the Theory of Logical Types (ref. Russell and Whitehead, volume two of *Principia Mathematica),* applied by Bateson to explain communication dynamics, we can observe interaction and interdependence between a lower and a higher logic levels. In fact, the higher level (context) allows a "correct" interpretation of the object-message, which is situated at the lower logic level.

Also, a consequent quality of the higher logical level is that of being always innovative relatively to the contiguous lower level.

Indeed the higher level represents a higher degree of learning, since it allows the transition from a given context to a meta-context. Moreover, every higher level exists

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[1]This moves from the assumption that a subject receives (and so perceives) only those amount and quality of information s/he/it is interested in receiving in the ways s/he/it is interested in receiving/perceiving them.
This is already a distortion — in this case information loss — assuming the information existing at the source (where the "source" can be reality or another locutor) as originary

[2]The interpretant is what the sign produces in the interpreter; it can be also conceived as the definition of the *representamen* — external referent — (Peirce, 1958)

in order to answer to questions "posed" by the lower level, and these are of this type: "how is this message to be interpreted? which is the exact sense to be assigned to it?". Answers to this kind of questions are provided by the meta-context — that is the higher logical level of interpretation).

Another component needed for the existence of the equivalence knowledge = interpretation = production of sense is *dialogue* (Lotman, 1985), more precisely definable as *dialogical principle*, following Bakhtine (Todorov, 1984).

This is an explicative principle that intervenes in the process of generation of sense, thus in the process of the information increase.

Dialogue only occurs if some conditions are present, and these are:

a) asymmetry. That is to say there cannot be homeostasis (same amount of information in the locutor and the inter-locutor/sender and receiver);

b) alternation of a sending-time and a receiving-time: if a subject-entity is sending information, that same subject-entity cannot receive any *at the same time*.

c) the sent text must contain elements translatable to another language. It is necessary the presence of a code for the circulation of information;

e) presence of both heterogeneity and homogeneity within the communication system. Not horizontal but vertical isomorphism must subsist among the various sub-parts which form the system. All the sub-parts have to be diverse one from the other, but all of them have to be — in different proportions — isomorphic to an element of the contiguous higher logic level of the same communication system to which the sub-parts belong.

Having said this, I leave out the list of all the possible applications and verifications of the dialogical principle, preferring to follow Lotman and introduce two corollary notes that extend the impact of the dialogical principle itself.

In first place, dialogue is not only meant as an event between two distinct entities: one same entity can fraction/fragment into smaller entities that can either dialogue among each other (intra-dialogue), or dialogue with the *n* classes belonging to the same level/context the (fragment/fraction of) entity belongs (inter-dialogue, horizontal: in the same logic level).

In second place, the sender and the receiver can be either organic or inorganic.

Hence, inner dialogue is possible to occur in senders and receivers, and the text-message is open: it produces sense, meaning. This not only because of the above

described observations, which highlighted presence of inter-textual dialogic dynamics between text and receiver, and also because of intra-textual dialogic dynamics[3].

From Semiotics to Culture as Communication

The above discussion was intended to lay the foundations for an introductory semiotic reading of culture, even if merely conceived as the old traditional Tylorian concept of culture (Tylor, E. B. *"Primitive Culture",* 1958). Indeed, to state that culture is "that complex set, that totality, which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, costume and every other capability and habit acquired from the human individual as member of a society" means to admit that culture can be studied as phenomenon of communication: communication of the signification systems which constitute culture to all the members who share it.

Yet, the question complicates as soon as a semiotic concept of culture (Geertz, 1973) is credited. And if it is understood that "pure" cultural products — if ever existed — disappeared (Clifford, 1988) and gave the way to a continuous increase of syncretism, the overall situation represents a deep mutation in the meta-communication cultural dynamics (Featherstone, 1992).

A Semiotic Concept of Culture

Interpretative anthropology, one of the most innovative and relatively recent currents of anthropological thought, whose founder and also most famous representative is Clifford Geertz, is based on a concept of culture that is semiotic.

Max Weber conceived culture as "a finite section of the no-sense infinity of the becoming of the world, to which sense, meaning, is attributed from the human point of view." Geertz (1973) argues, developing and extending such concept, that culture consists of interconnected systems of interpretable masteries (symbols — term to be here intended in its largest sense). Many and important consequences descend from this. Firstly, it follows that every cultural production *is* symbolic production. Secondly, all the theories of the so-defined "critical point", which see culture taking place at a certain stage of the phylogenetic evolution, as well as of the ontogenetic development

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[3]Acknowledging the dialogical principle one acknowledges diachronicity in the semiosic process, which plays a central role in the inner dialogue of a text-message fractionable in *n* sub-texts.

of humankind, crumble. In this framework, culture is *the ways in which* the individual relate to the environment and other human beings.

Put clearly, *culture is a context,* something within which all the objects can be described in legible ways. Knowing the real is *making the real intelligible* (significant, senseful, meaningful) to one's eyes, and not only in metaphorical ways, as explained by cognitive processes in the pertinent literature.

Knowing is filtering the real through interpretative categories peculiar of one's own psycho-cultural factors.

Ethnography (the activity at the basis of anthropological analysis as mode of knowledge) is gathering data about a determinate culture. Ethnography, examined as intellective activity, is interpretation — by the ethnographer — of another interpretation: that which the native has of his/her own culture. It is *thick* description, in opposition to *thin* description. Not a mere factual, photographic, superficial description, but an interpretative, deep, dense description, which tries to grasp the meaning that an event owns in its cultural context. Of course many other interpretation levels, all hierarchically organized, often add to the two above, which represents the basic ethnographic work module, by way of further data elaborations.

What just said goes straight to invalidate the choice that Marvin Harris (1968) forces to make between an "emic" approach — which assumes the explicative categories of the observed native— and an "ethic" approach — which assumes those of the observer (scholar) —. That oscillation that Harris claimed as impossible is at the core of this way of conceiving the ethnographic practice. Harris' ethic approach is simply an interpretative act situated at the immediately higher logic level than that where the emic approach is, but from which it cannot prescind. The two are parts of the same process.

Again, the ethic can become emic relatively to a descriptive (meta)ethic level, if someone else studied the culture of the scholar, or his/her elaborations on the data s/he gathered. This process can be set forth unlimitedly (Tullio-Altan, 1971), and produce an infinite semiosis internally structured in terms of logic types.

Geertz position also invalidates the potential idea of semiotics as comprehensive and autonomous analytical frame to understand culture, inasmuch as semiotics is a component of the essential organization of culture itself. So, the equivalence *knowledge*

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= *interpretation* = *production of sense* is applicable either to the semiotic concept of culture and to the concept of (thick) ethnographic description. Both are codes that give "publicity" to the description to which they are associated. In other terms, the signification comes to be signified: communicated through a shared code to be understood by a human being sharing a culture.

It is worth to note that what just said on one hand legitimates semiotics as component of cultural anthropology; on the other hand makes semiotics a valid cultural anthropological instrument favoring a (meta)semiotics of culture. Indeed, I suggest below a semiotic analysis of cultural dynamics, which is fraught with strong critical value towards the *status quo*. And curiously, the destabilizing communication mechanism was the same we find in Surrealism.

Dynamics of Displacement: The Surrealistic-like Cultural-scape

§1. The underlying statement of the following analysis is that the typical message-identifying signals and/or meta-context-identifying signals are not in used in the current cultural-scapes. Familiar associations linking certain signs to certain codes, and certain codes to specific contexts, are just invalidated by increasingly more contemporary socio-cultural settings both in Western and no Western realities, if analyzed from a communication perspective.

Such phenomenon, because of its functional mechanism, can be well compared to the surrealistic artistic effect. This comparative line justifies my interest in analyzing the Surrealistic artistic effect at its meta-communication level. By doing that, I will provide a deeper understanding of the current cultural dynamics, as well as open the way to more thorough studies on how cultural change and innovation are often produced nowadays.

The surrealistic matchings, apparently senseless, are on the contrary ruled by a specific coherence. According to Hauser (1977), *montage*, borrowing the term from a phase of the film-making process, is the best definition for this loose-like although not anarchic, text(ure).
Montage stays for a principle of discontinuity and mixing up of elements from different realms. The absolutely most interesting feature of the surrealistic style is that it results from a combination of elements belonging to the realm of empirical

experience, and elements belonging to an out-of-the-world realm, either hallucinatory and unreal, or unconsciously irrational.

Surrealism juxtaposes two spheres of existence: a world and a extra-world, and two styles, *the realism of details and the unrealism of the whole*. Just as it happens in dreaming, where single details taken from life, precisely corresponding to the empirical experience, are combined through unlikely connections in a fantastic picture-frame.

At this regard, it is interesting to draw a connection through abduction with the discourse Todorov develops on the fantastic genre in literature of the (1973). Authors like Kafka or Gogol are for Todorov the most authentic heirs of a genre which was fantastic in the nineteenth century, but evolved in the twentieth century by entering the sphere of the "strange and marvellous". Here two apparently incompatible genres meet. The supernatural is treated as granted, "the norm", although it seems inadmissible to the reader. Sartre proposes a theory of fantastic which is very close to Todorov's point. Writers like Blanchot or Kafka do not try to depict extraordinary, unusual beings. There is only one extraordinary and unusual object for these authors: humankind. Not the humankind of religions or spiritualism, that is to say only partially involved in the real world, but the given-human being, the natural-human being, the social-human being. The "normal", ordinary, typical human being *is* the fantastic creature; the fantastic comes to be "the rule", rather than the exception. Or better, the rule comes to be fantastic.

It is now more clear the connection between these observations and Houser's position. The metaphoric communication mode, by injecting the impression that behind every im*mediate* (no-mediated) reality there is an occult, hidden sense only *mediatedly* perceivable, reveals the absurdity of the immediate reality and puts in discussion the value of the traditional interpretative categories. This represents the main quality of the surrealistic "style" — narrative in the case in point, but well extensible to visual arts —. It was by adopting and meshing together two different spheres (I would suggest two different logical levels) that surrealists soon realized the affinity of their art with the way dreams work. In fact, it is on those same bases that the dreaming tissue and modalities — in which reality and unreality, fantastic realm and logics, sublimated character of the rationalized existence and vulgarity of immediately given existence form are assembled together in a "unity" — became paradigms for the surrealistic artistic structure.

I propose to examine closer the methodology of surrealistic (literary or visual) representation in terms of meta-communication and focus on its core: the displacing effect, common to all surrealistic art works.

The estranging effect provoked by many works of art that belong *in strictu* or *latu sensu*, to the surrealistic "genre" is adducible to the shifting from an object-information we are used to see in a certain context, into a diverse context.

In other terms, there is not decoding act (understanding act). That is, *couplings become semantically familiar (i.e. "class of objects x in class of contexts y = message-meaning given by the binomy (xy):1" are not adopted.*

Differently, in surrealistic art we are in front of such operation: "class of objects x in class of contexts z". This mechanism prevents the *usual standard* decoding processes to be successful, because the latter lay upon familiar combinations between classes of objects and contexts, which are instead successful in correctly interpreting messages in our everyday lives.

Thus, the new communication situation administered is: *"class of objects x in class of contexts z = message-meaning (xz):?".*

It must be noted that the object-information can be communicated in various discrete or iconic codes, and "context" here stays for "meta-communication context". It follows that analogical communication and discrete communication[4], at a meta-contextual level, are both deutero-learned (Bateson, 1972): a range of possible (familiar) relations that a certain class of objects x engages with a certain class of contexts. The class generated by these combinations is "stored" through interiorization and socialization, and then become "automatic" cognitive processes.

To exemplify what outlined before, the class of objects "chair", which also includes "armchair, stool, etc.", can be understood if put in relation to the class of contexts which include: bar, room, truck, garden, but not certainly sky!

This is the surrealistic operation if looked through communication analysis lens. This kind of works upset "recipes" of understanding that we usually adopt

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[4]The difference between analogical and discrete (digital) communication consists in this. Analogical communication includes iconic, natural communication and those parts of human communication that are paralinguistics and kinesics. An example of discrete communication is human language.
The fundamental distinction between the two is given by the arbitrariness or conventionality in discrete communication of the link between sign-signifier and the correspondent class of meanings-signifieds.
In analogic communication this link is recognizable: a visual representation of an apple resembles an apple; the word "apple" does not.

successfully, and produce that *estranging* effect to which Hauser and Todorov refer. Those explained above are the prime meta-communication criteria on which the method of "montage" is based, and whose paramount and primary effect is *displacement*. This same mechanism can, in turn, constitute a valid object-information to effectively decode messages belonging to a higher logical class (meta-messages).

§2. Observed from a communication perspective, the contemporary cultural "landscape" is pervaded with an increasing number of unprecedented combinations between signs and codes. These combinations take place in a surrealistic montage-like way, and generate a proliferation of new signs and new codes (i.e. increase of semiosis, see earlier in this text). As a chain reaction, these circumstances in turn produce a fragmentation of "culture" in *n* cultural identities. Which (sub)identities entertain a dialogical report among themselves, and can interact to form other transitory identities.

The category of Identity has to be theoretically re-thought at different levels: any "strong" idea of national identity as well as ethnic identity crumbles.

Continuous and increasing migration processes, together with intense interferences (now largely recognized) on the cultural, as well as on the social and political-economical levels, question those ideas who seek confirmation to the existence of "strong" identities.

The Identity once conceived as always identical to itself, unique and firm, gives way to a concept of Identity as *continuous becoming*. A dynamic identity is the product of ongoing negotiations on a short as well as long run between potentially infinite levels of experience within the same individual life-story (Canevacci, 1992).

The individual is not called up to try to place him/herself and to correctly interpret — that is according to univocal schemes — the peculiar system of codes of his/her culture. S/he is called up to handle, read, the new displacing juxtapositions and therefore generate (invent) unceasingly new interpretations. The individual is called to be as much open-minded and flexible as possible, and to renounce to the certainties which constituted solid charted territory for his/her identity before. In a patchwork of signs that look incongruent and confusing to the eyes of a traditional self, resistance to the complexity of the new setting will not serve to navigate the waives of the change. Instead, the skillful ability of coding and de-coding in new creative ways will provide infinite lifestyles possibilities.

Conclusions: Towards Relational Epistemologies

If on one hand all the above produces a blurred vision of the cultural-scape, which disorientates s/he who wants to understand its texture, on the other hand explicitly indicates the need for new epistemologies.

Abolishing old dichotomies such as form and substance or mind and body, typically descending from a rationalistic cartesian matrix, as well as the "dichotomy" between exact (hard) sciences and no-exact (soft) sciences (Humanities, Social Sciences), requires new epistemologies that are *relational.*
Epistemologies that look at the *relation between* differences, rather than at differences *per sé;* or worse, at oppositions built upon mere differences. Epistemologies that privilege processes rather than absolute axioms, and combinations rather than sums. Epistemologies that multiply the links between mind and body, nature and culture, science and poetry, humankind and universe. In particular, looking at the social sphere, epistemologies that study processes and modalities in which differences — or *diversities*, like Wallace (1961) calls them — between individuals and between groups organize themselves.

But the formation of such epistemologies is made difficult a) because of the pluralization of identities I examined above, b) because of the following infinite possible combinations between signs and codes which modify communication and culture, and most of all c) because is not merely a matter of replacing new key concepts to old ones, maintaining the same old epistemological processes.

All the categories — conceptual, operative, processual — should undergo deep critical analysis, facing two orders of obstacles.
The first is given by the subject having to observe him/herself: it is hard and difficult even merely to *see* what is "obvious", usual (Laing, 1968). And culture — of which epistemology is part, consisting of a interpretative system of categories and certain basic (yet not absolute) explicative principles— is always "obvious" for s/he who belongs to it. Culture is introjected to the extent of acquiring resemblance of "nature" for the most part.
The second order of obstacles is that to put in discussion one's culture is to say that one puts at stakes all the certainties that are the pillars on which one's life rests (Tentori, 1987).

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Inevitably, the decline of old epistemologies goes together with that of a paradigm once organically structured and coherently definable model in unidirectional relation with the investigated object. This shows the need for new paradigms that are open, whose validity is proportionally enhanced with its *"flexibility"*, that is its "ability to change". In other words, there is a need for paradigms that have capacity to tolerate modifications in order to adapt to the investigated historical (thus changing) object.

In final analysis, the "homogenous" and linear analysis of a basic cultural unit — a sign, for example — needs to become complex, multi-sided, *open,* so to respond to the nature of the unit itself, which is complex, multi-sided, stratified. The equivalence between knowledge, interpretation and production of sense delineated earlier in this text, is amplified in the current cultural landscape, becoming both a mode of cultural production and a framework to understand culture.

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