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Between trees, webs and mirrors. Dimensions of Immanence and a critical post-structuralist proposal

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The objective of this article is to outline some conceptual links between the “post-structuralism” (“radical” structuralism or dynamical structuralism) with philosophers such as Deleuze, Guattari but also Foucault, and semiotic research. Certainly this theme is not new, well known and analysed. Our aim, however, is to work on certain concepts that seem to bounce between philosophical theory and semiotic analysis.

In direction of a possible revision of structuralism, we would like to look at the critical, radical and sometimes “heretical” reinterpretation of the concept of “immanence”. This concept is closely linked, especially in Deleuze, to the concept of “expression”: from Spinoza’s political-philosophical theory all the way to Hjelmslev. We would like to show how this philosophical research could be further utilized as an innovative push for semiotics. We would also like to emphasize the fact that this theory has produced (and still could produce) a semio-critical approach, particularly, and possibly, for socio-semiotics and semiotics of cultures.

1. Rethinking the structures? How and when? And how to still recognize them?

We will start referring particularly to Deleuze, and his critical reinterpretation of structuralism, because his work is to be thought of as a “matrix”, a place of transition and translation¹. This of course, is not meant to belittle Guattari, to the contrary². We will resume our discussion from the well known essay by Deleuze, the classic, *A quoi reconnaît-on le structuralisme*³. This “mapping” operation developed “inside” structuralism itself, from the late ‘60s to the early ‘70s, in the height of the structuralist paradigm. But here Deleuze immediately indicates a possible “spark”: an “essential tension” between, to

¹ See, Fabbri (1998b) about work of Deleuze as a “translator” of concepts, in particular regarding the definition of sign.

² Cf., on this, Deleuze 1986; Patton 1996; Vaccaro 1997b; Fabbri 2005. The importance of Guattari should be emphasized precisely in relation to semiotic themes (and with the discussion on the concept of structures as *machines*): see Guattari (1987); Fabbri (ib.; 1998b). Cf., again, on this, Dosse’s important *croisée* biography (cf., 2007: 233, with the critical rereading of Hjelmslev by Guattari). Dosse (ib.: 18) shows, from interviews, testimonies and correspondences, the idea that Deleuze considered “*Felix comme le trouveur de diamants et que lui était le tailleur*”: producing this double figure of *tailor* and *discoverer*.

³ For a discussion and further examination of semiotic epistemology, starting also from Deleuze, see, Marscianni (1992; and recently, 2012, for a wider discussion on phenomenological foundations); Fabbri (ib.); Petitot (1985).



quote Kuhn, the “dominant paradigm” and the “iconoclastic rupture”. Our proposal is to consider that kind of “shock” useful nowadays.

1.1 Paradigmatic variation points, puzzles, and Deleuzian matrixes: the case of the tensive dimension

Continuity, in a “fixing of a scientific paradigm”, seems to have occurred in semiotics in the last two decades. Even in swinging between its two tendencies, structuralist and interpretative (or even mixing them)⁴, semiotics seems to have specified itself. In general, it would seem that something has been at work which, echoing Kuhn’s words, can be defined as the “effort required” by the very nature of the problems that scientists deal with in “normal science” (i.e., not in moments of revolutionary change). This work consists in attempts at solving headache-problems or “esoteric puzzles”, as it is well known with Kuhn (1977: 235): activities that may bring new moments of discovery, or eventual rupture (or transformation) of paradigm⁵.

But it is right here to remember a possible moment of variation: Deleuze’s impact on semiotics through the concept of intensity. Let us think about the introduction of (by narrative-structural semiotics) categories having to do with the so-called tensive dimension⁶. The concept of intensity precisely provided one of the triggers in the creation of the idea of “tensive”. This provoked, it must be said, a sort of “short-circuit” between already existing categories in linguistic-semiotics, such as between those of “intensive” (as opposed to “extense” or “extensive”, following Hjelmslev, from a very long logico-philosophical tradition) and those of precisely tensive and intensity⁷. In this case, deleuzian-guattarian research has produced a powerful variation. Zilberberg emphasizes that we can think dynamically about this linguistic-semiotic categorization thanks to deleuzian theory. Traditionally, in philosophy, intensity has to do with a qualitative nature and extension with a quantitative nature. Deleuze, instead, (very close to hjelmslevian concepts) sees these “two natures” as co-implicated⁸.

But could this “push” have brought us even further? Couldn’t precisely the study of this interconnection (inside of the tensive dimension) create other results, beyond the “schematization of the values of values” (in the form of values for “intensive” and “extensive”) as proposed by Zilberberg and Fontanille (ibid.)? Couldn’t there be further consequences (desirable) for the more general system of semiotic epistemology? In order to try to respond to these questions, we must remember that for Deleuze

⁴ See, for a current assessment of the two “souls” of semiotics, Traini (2006); Pisanty, Zjino (2009); Pozzato (2007); Paolucci (2010); and outside of italian debate, see, Fontanille (1999), and for a review, Chandler (2007).

⁵ Kuhn continues on this point (ib.): “Who, for example, would have developed the elaborate mathematical techniques required for the study of the effects of interplanetary attractions upon basic Keplerian orbits if he had not assumed that Newtonian dynamics, applied to the planets then known, would explain the last details of astronomical observation? But without that assurance, how would never discovered and the list of planets changed?”.

⁶ We are referring to Zilberberg (ad es., 2006) and Fontanille (1998; Fontanille, Zilberberg 1998), who more than others have studied the “tensive” issue, of course initiating also from Fabbri (1985), in some of Jakobson; and in general thanks to the opening of research on passions, beginning with Greimas, (see, Fabbri, Pezzini 1987; Marsciani, Pezzini 1997).

⁷ Recall that for Hjelmslev (1943; 1935: 199, tr. it.) “Intensive is the case in which content is concentrated” and “extensive” is the case in which it tends to expand and spread. Cf., Caputo (2010: 90-93), in which it is pointed out the fact that, starting from the debate about the correlation between categories, especially from Jakobson (marked/unmarked), Hjelmslev is looking for general operating modes for semio-linguistic categories: pre-logical micro-transformations (or “sublogical”) as basic “dimensions” of topological (directional and spatial) and dynamic (concentration/expansion) nature (see, Hjelmslev, ib.; Galofaro 2006). See, for a discussion of “tensive” syntax by way of the micro-components articulated from the two categories “intense” and “extensive”, Zilberberg 2002.

⁸ It must be remembered that semiotics considers now them as organizational elements of values (understood, of course, as sets of differential elements fundamental to the significance itself), as proposed in related descriptive “tensive” schemas by Fontanille and Zilberberg, ib.



(1968: 187) intensity is “*qui est en lui-même différence*” and “*pure différence en soi*”: dynamical elements, likely to expand and stabilize (in extent) themselves becoming a system⁹.

We will return on this concept of “dynamical” difference (at the center of all of Deleuze’s theory). Now it is important to remember that it is closely related to the issue of intensity for Deleuze. From here, as Deleuze and Guattari emphasized, we are faced with a sort of “setting in motion” of the structures, overcoming the idea of an oppositional relationship for a “networks and layers” model. “*Partout les couples, les polarités supposent des faisceaux et des réseaux; les oppositions organisées des rayonnements en toutes directions*” (Deleuze 1968: 72). Soon after Deleuze would present *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of the Sense*, in which the “true” profundities¹⁰ are conceived as “surface tensions”, waves (surface “differentials”) and “events” that cross the material of language, perception and sense¹¹.

1.2 Textual Archipelagos and discursive formations: Deleuze reads Foucault

We must remember yet another oscillation of the current semiotic models. It regards the case relative to the definition and the “dimension” of the textual phenomena. If in the previous case (relative to the “tensive” issue) there was an effective “invasion” of deleuzian theory within semiotics, this second moment could be reread in an indirect way, through the deleuzian lens. This debate about the nature of textuality has expanded in several research directions¹². If for some scholars maintaining the idea of the text is important (even if in its “broader” meaning), others think it should be reconsidered in favor of a wider taxonomy of “kinds of experience”¹³, or related to “levels of pertinence” and various “formal instances” (Fontanille 2004). In any case, Deleuze, with his work on Foucault (1986), seems to offer a perspective which permits to avoid these definitions and break these oppositions, perhaps too narrow and rigid.

As it has been well emphasized (Fabbri 2005), Deleuze sees networks of texts (“corpora”) that connect cultural-discursive and social-historical formations. Here again Deleuze is a “mediator” and “translator” of Foucault, from *L’Archéologie du savoir* and *Les mots et le choses*, to Foucault’s last writings. These *networks* of texts would be traversed by two major production regimes strictly connected (although equipped with autonomous characters): the “visible” and the “articulable”, that can be thought also as the “sayable” or “expressible”. They are two-dimensions that constantly intertwine throughout the history of text production, from social practices (like the famous prison example¹⁴), to aesthetic

⁹ Also Zilberberg (ib.; and in www.claudezilberberg.net) emphasizes the “musical nature” of this definition: intensity as qualitative variation.

¹⁰ Again, not far from Hjelmslev’s reading (see, Caputo, ib.), as well as by the same Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, 1987.

¹¹ Deleuze connects, here, Leibniz’s idea (the “minute perceptions” and the forms of material “folding”) with an idea that comes from the modern theory of perception and systems (from *Gestalttheorie*, albeit overcome in a dynamic sense by, especially, Simondon). All this, in general, is tied to a break with the traditional conception of identity that, according to Deleuze, pervades the history of occidental philosophy. In this regard, one of the important influences on *Difference and Repetition* is Althusser, with his “denunciation”, “in the philosophy of Hegel, of the omnipotence of identity, namely the simplicity of an internal principle” (ib.: 73).

¹² This issue has been widely discussed in past few years, let us think the opposition between texts and practices: methodological and epistemological problems regarding the status of “objects” on which semiotics works. Issues that risk slipping towards a debate that seems to hypostasize and “reify” these objects (see, for example, in Fontanille 2004).

¹³ Cf., Violi (2007); Fontanille (ib.), see also Basso (2008). On the contrary, socio-semiotics (Landowski 2004), ethno-semiotics (Lancioni, Marsciani 2007) and semiotics of culture, starting from Lotman (Marrone 2010), even in different ways, seem to preserve the validity of the idea of the text. But it is interesting to note how a linguist and semiologist like Halliday (2002: 3-4), coming from hjelmslevian functionalism, is able to hold together these various definitions of text: as “an instance of social meaning in a particular context of situation”.

¹⁴ The very famous example “of prison” is reanalyzed in a “hjelmslevian manner”, through a expressive level (prisons, with its forms and content, words, codes and laws related “crime”) and a content level (the prisoner’s prison system, with its regime of visibility, which is also articulated through form and substance).



formations, relational forms of power, technologies of bodily governance, health care and disease, to arms and weapons (Deleuze uses these same examples, *ib.*)¹⁵.

What is important to remember here is that Deleuze, with Foucault, as stressed again by Fabbri (*ib.*), tries to reconstruct a double model. The “visible” is explained through “pictures” (not strictly pictorial and “visual”), complex and integrated figurative organizations that hold together meaning systems that provide not only descriptions, but sketches, or schemas: hence the link with the definition of diagram, as production of “pure” functions. Deleuze insists that they can “in-form” a particular cultural universe. It seems that this “visible” dimension could be similar to the definition of figurative, as intended by Greimas. In dialogue with Ricouer, Greimas remarks the importance of the figurative as product of “complex and global configurations”, equipped with an almost gestaltic productive and organizational force. However, the question becomes, how do the discursive-semiotic formations are chained together (and inside themselves)? That would have to be due to the other type of operation, that which Deleuze (following Foucault) calls also the “curves”: trajectories and complex chainings of discourses able to express and to articulate the visible dimension,

On a more general level, what seems important for semiotics is that which Deleuze highlights in Foucault’s work, the idea of the text as made up of “layerings” of meanings inside of society and culture. Texts are seen as accumulations: “accumulators” which are connected to each other often in unpredictable and dynamic ways. These deposits¹⁶ can break up, giving rise to new discursive islands and archipelagos.

2. Networks, trees and “pseudo-rhizomes”: rethinking the case of the encyclopedia?

From these movements (local and/or historic, short and/or long-term events) we can draw maps and cartographies, observations of semiotic layers and pathways. However, we will always have to take into account the “escape routes”, the unexpected cracks, which are produced locally by the strategies inside these social and discursive-textual formations. Deleuze insists that in seeking to integrate texts, potentially divergent paths are always created. The intent (also political) is clear, both for Deleuze, the “reader”, and Foucault, the “writer”. According to Deleuze (1986, *cit.*) social dimension and cultures can never be completely mapped. Or rather, there are possible maps of cultures, epistemologies, and discursive universes (this is one of the slogans coined by Deleuze and Guattari in their definition of the famous “rhizome” model reiterated in *Mille plateaux* 1980). However, in this understanding, there are no guaranties of preferred and default pathways, as Eco instead seems to propose in his definition of encyclopedia (coming from his rereading of the deleuzian-guattarian “rhizome” concept) (1975; 1984)¹⁷.

It doesn’t seem that a “rhizomatic” encyclopedia could exist, because the rhizomatic model is by definition connective, a-centric, without default inputs or outputs¹⁸. Even if Deleuze and Guattari (1980) insist on the fact that, in concrete situation, there is not absolut (and idealistic) opposition between “rhizome” model and root/tree model – against a new dualism, and “the rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor to the Multiple”, *ib.*, 23 –, the encyclopedic model (even in definitions in contrast to

¹⁵ We must remember how important the idea of the diagram is in Deleuze, borrowed only in part by Peirce, and developed as an analysis of the figurative (his work on Francis Bacon and the two books on cinema). Following Foucault, in Deleuze diagrams aren’t only demonstrative “patterns”, or sites of reasoning processes, as in Peirce, but are real configurations that give another dimension to texts and languages. The diagrammatic seems to be a language “inside” the textual form, a figurative reasoning that connects the various components (images, situations, written texts). The diagram is a generative form (Deleuze 1986: *en. tr.* 60-61). Deleuze highlights also the relationship between diagram and the definition of power in Foucault.

¹⁶ The echo of a geological model can already be found in Foucault, but becomes explicit in Deleuze and Guattari, 1980.

¹⁷ Cf., for elaboration and commentary and, occasionally, critical insights on Eco’s theory, see Paolucci 2010.

¹⁸ There is a description of this model in the first chapter of *Mille plateaux* (*cit.*, 1980), that we would like to remember here, even if it is well known, because of its questioning of the “tree” model that would have dominated western philosophy, against this horizontal model: “a plane”, steppe, ad shrub, a garden, to continue the botanic metaphor.



“dictionary”) pretends “entries”, inputs¹⁹. This is not a trivial, superficial conflict between metaphors and models; it affects the very way we think about semiotic formation of discourses and cultures. And it is not even, as is sometimes claimed by vulgarizations, a “desiring-anarchic-chaotic” thought. The issue of desire is placed here, by Deleuze, and Guattari, only in this precise manner: in terms of assemblages.

Deleuze insists, in his reading of Foucault, on these points: first, we are faced with historical-cultural immanent formations made up of (heterogeneous) texts; second, that these heterogeneous texts are interconnected through *dispositifs* (apparatus) internal to the texts themselves (regarding layers and semiotic layering, Deleuze and Guattari also refers to Hjelmslev); finally, inside these contacts zones are created “folds of subjectification”²⁰. In these folds of subjectification strategic actions become manifest (between power-holders, classes, sexes): conflicts take place. But these strategic-conflictual zones (in cultures, in social-historical formations) are generally also in contact with something “external” to the semiospheres’ matters²¹. Deleuze emphasizes here that it is neither something “ineffable” or absolutely irreducible, nor totally “other”. This “external” seems to be a very crowded place, full of the comings and goings of immanent cultural elements, a site of surplus of meaning and of significance in becoming: site of “deposits” and “withdrawals” of materials and elements in continuous transformation.

We find here an affirmative, strong, idea that we share. Phenomenology, says Deleuze (and semiotics, we could add), often have “blessed too many things” and haven’t taken due account of conflicts. They do not deal enough with conflicts. Deleuze and Guattari, with Foucault, insist on this: even when we deal with memory (cultural memory, forms of forgetting, and “deposit” forms of remembrance), it is always a “struggle for”. Deleuze, even in *Proust et les Signes* (1964), emphasizes this point, that not even in *La Recherche* we cannot find work on “lost signs”, but instead on the traces and premonitions that these signs (of conflict, or of love) launch towards the future.

3. Logics, structures and assemblages

Let us take a step backwards and resume our analysis of Deleuze’s *A quoi Reconnait-on le Structuralisme*. We can see the possible connections with later moments, but also with some of the philosopher’s important premises (but, we repeat, also Guattari’s). The essay specifically states that it refers to 1967, as starting point. Just ten years earlier Hjelmslev (1957) had indicated that in the last “few decades” the idea of structure as an “an autonomous entity of internal dependencies” had “taken control” of linguistic thought. Deleuze’s maneuver was located, on the one hand, inside a research and interests in a specific conception of history of ideas²². And on the other hand, this essay connects to, the point where we find ourselves (almost contemporary), his book on Spinoza and the issue of expression, *Différence et répétition* and *Logique du sens*.

Deleuze here picks up again, from a “co-linking” of concepts. We recall that of the “imaginary” as opposed to the “real”, especially in lacanian theory. In regards to this, as is well know, Deleuze insists on one point: the idea of an intermediate level, the “symbolic” order. That is, utilizing the prevailing concept at the time, the “symbolic” dimension of semiotic, of language systems.

Certainly, Deleuze says, structuralism begins with linguistics, but what matters are the points in the paradigm that are amplified. In those years the reference points are Lévi-Strauss’s study of myths,

¹⁹ In this sense, not even the Web or Wikipedia resemble the rhizomic model, having the form, however complex, of an encyclopedia.

²⁰ Where new subjects exist, as well as “social actors”, subjected of new powers (prisoners, sick, as studied in *Discipline and Punish* or in *The Birth of the Clinic*, madmen, conscripted soldiers, salaried workers, today the new migrants); but also, on the other end, the holders of knowledge and power.

²¹ In this respect Deleuze helps here us to re-establish connections between Foucault, the idea of “extra-system” from Lotman’s semiosphere model and, at the same time, the Hjelmslevian definition of “matter”. Connections that require further critical research.

²² The essay was published in *Histoire de la philosophie* (edited by Chatelet) along with previous essays (the first work, on Hume, in 1957, the latter on Kant and, with a significant cross-over, in the mid ’60s, on *Proust et les signes*).



Lacan and Althusser, but Deleuze puts in his assessment the idea of dynamic connection. The “discovery of this ‘third realm’”, the “symbolic” (a concept²³ that later seems to disappear from Deleuze’s writings) involves the idea of a “genesis”, says Deleuze, of the semiotic-linguistic structures. Languages, semiotics, he and Guattari would say, are “production sites”. This conception of structure already contains the idea of its links with the other two dimensions (the “real” and “imaginary”). Or rather, it generates and produces them, just as they are connected. And here we find another problematic point for the semiotic paradigm: Deleuze no longer talks just about generativity but also of “genesis”. Albeit this is through a new type of understanding, in the form of “auto-production”, a “productive-machine” (Dosse, *ibid*: 273; Dawkins 2005), coming from the structures themselves.

In short, the presence of a semiotic-structural dimension means that the same tripartite division at that time in vogue (real, imaginary, symbolic) will come out radically transformed in favor of another deleuzian-guattarian concept. It is an (albeit special) ontology, or better, *ontogeny*, precisely because it is both dynamic and stratified. The different levels originate from each other through internal splits and folds. Even in semiotics, we find an idea that seems not to be very far from this one, albeit in a much more specific way (limited to the epistemological level, within the greimasian generative model). This idea arises from the conception of “modes of existence” that would transform into each other, with the virtual, actual and realized, as Greimas would say (see Marsciani 1992)²⁴. Structural organizations are, from this perspective, no longer seen as “a priori forms” but as something seemingly paradoxical: they create themselves producing new bonds. Deleuze and Guattari’s struggle is to free semiotics from the kantian understanding of structures. Starting from Deleuze’s examples: goods, economic systems, as well as various forms of bodily expression, sexuality, emotional systems (Foucault), or myths (Lévi-Strauss), they are reformulated as self-producing, through new reorganizations and connections. If, today, these ideas seem perhaps obvious (or containing some dated ideas), we do not agree. We are not trying to recall “the good old days” of a concept, or era (revolutionary²⁵), but to assess what these concepts have actually brought us.

These are the years in which Deleuze was working on *Logique du sens* (1969), which considers the philosophy of the Stoics and elaborates the Alice and “Snark paradoxes”, with parallel work on the definition of meaning derived from logic (particularly Frege and Russell, *ibid.*: 23). Deleuze’s interests regard the mechanisms of the reversal of common sense. He conducted “micro-experiments” on the forms of utterances and their propositional content, searching for pre-individual and pre-subjective logic structures. In our opinion, however, they are not at all different moments of Deleuzian theory. The analysis of propositional forms, of logical paradoxes, is immediately brought back to the above theory, further developed in his book on Foucault. He covers Benveniste in *The Logic of the Sense*, but also, precisely the issue of a typology of propositional content²⁶. Deleuze argues that, even before they represent, denote or describe, propositions are chained together, a process which produces something new, new events, new meanings.

²³ The symbolic sphere, as “semiotic” and linguistic terrain is used also by Lévi-Strauss (discussing Mauss) and by anthropology. It is well known that for Hjelmslev symbols are “mono-level structures”, symbols isomorphic to “their interpretation” like chess, symbols of logical-mathematicians (see, Caputo, *ib.*; Zinna 1987); and from here, as it is well known, Greimas and Floch propose to think about other types of structures like those of the semi-symbolic. See, for a discussion of the definition of symbols, Eco (1984: 246, *sgg.*) which yields yet another useful idea of symbol, as a “condenser” of different contents.

²⁴ Marsciani (1992) insists on this point, as a moment of crucial epistemological innovation inside semiotics, perhaps overlooked: modes of existence are no longer only just a property of the enunciation level, but are part of the whole model of the generative process, according to Greimas; conceiving it as phases of the successive production of meaning. See also Zinna (2008) and Caputo (2010: 83). For a broader definition of the modes of existence, see, Deleuze, Guattari (1991).

²⁵ Guattari, we recall (*cf.*, Dosse: 209-211) in addition to his critique of psychoanalysis and psychiatry, was actively involved in the militant groups active in may ’68, and would continue to work inside revolutionary networks and movements, up to his participation, in his last years, in a part of the environmental movements, critiques of war and antimilitarism; Deleuze expressed proximity with the French May uprising.

²⁶ According to the traditional tripartite division, of indication or designation, of manifestation of the subject and, finally, of assertion or signification.



We may ask ourselves how a series of propositions is constructed, but the real question is, again, regarding the production (auto-production) of meaning. The issue of series would expand, in Deleuze, to include poetic, literary and musical forms inside of aesthetic texts (referring to the music of the period, such as Messiaen and Boulez, that would remain an important part of Deleuze's work). In particular, the problem lies not as much in the tracking of combinatorial mechanisms through which series (parallel) of assemblages of sounds, phrases, or stories are connected to each other, but to assess what new events result from these assemblages²⁷.

We are looking for "singular points", that is, events that are at the same time products of the interaction between various assemblages and their source, says Deleuze in *Logique du Sens* (as already indicated in the more systematic piece, *Différence et répétition*). It seems the problem develops along these lines: we no longer need to find predetermined functions (even less "subjects that fill these functions"), but processes, events, that deform the given system. The famous image of "*case vide*", the empty box, is strictly related with this idea of dynamics, and it cannot be identified with "the subject" as, on the contrary, stated by other authors. On this point we just cannot agree with Paolucci's reading (2010: 460), where he writes: "The great error of the structuralist and poststructuralist theory (Deleuze, Foucault, Lacan) was to identify the subject with the empty box: on the contrary, the subject is always something like an occupant without a place, occupant that constitutively lacks its place because it doesn't have its own place. The subject is never empty [...]" (my transl.). The idea that the subject is full (in semiotics it would be better to say stratified and composite) is an essential point also for Deleuze (the subject is traversed by heterogeneous instances). The fact that subjectivity is always, for Deleuze, an occupant "without a place" or that it always misses "the place" because it is always "a little bit further", is exactly what is being repeated throughout his work and, more importantly, in his work on aesthetic production (think of his work with Carmelo Bene). Therefore, it is unclear where this "big mistake" is. If we want to allude here to a critique of the definition of "subject of enunciation" in semiotics (from Benveniste, to Greimas, up to Fontanille) judged too "personological", i.e. related to regulations and default representation of enunciation subjects, this is exactly what Deleuze and Guattari also state. The problem, if anything, is to remember the inter-subjective (and therefore social and power) regulations, from the enunciation structures (already very present in Benveniste). In this respect we can remember, the last parameter regarding the structural model is, for Deleuze, "from the subject to the practice". On the contrary, the "*case vide*" is exactly the description of the basic mechanism of the structural operation, says Deleuze. It is the exemplification of an event that, appearing in a semiotic system, causes a variation, produces new meanings. It poses the fundamental problem (for structural theory as well as theories of systems) of innovation and change.

Another famous example is the "refrain" model (developed with Guattari in *Mille Plateaux*, 1980, cit.). But, even if known, we must remember refrain is like a "small motif", but also a "whirlpool": a vortex that spins, that appears and reappears inside elementary structures, i.e., in song structures. This, we think, is the best representation and development of the "empty box" idea. An entity that, circulating inside structures, could be either the focal point, the conjunction of levels, a maintaining of continuity (as repetition), or an openness to further transformations (as difference: consider jazz invention, as

²⁷ Recall that, in the article on structuralism, Deleuze's other "parameters" (some of which we have already examined) are: the serial, the process of difference and differentiation, in the concept of "*empty boxes*" (*case vide*); as well as the principle of localism, well known and important also for structural semiotics and contemporary linguistics, especially with Hjelmslev (cf., 1935: 92-97). Regarding seriality Deleuze insists on one important point: if seriality regards a "*déplacement*", a rhythmic temporal unfolding of the structure, the principle of localism regards a kind of "internal theater", of topological configuration, that could support the languages and the phenomena of the signification: "[...] dans un espace proprement structural, c'est-à-dire topologique. Ce qui est structural, c'est l'espace, mais un espace inétendu, pré-extensif, pur spatium constitué de proche en proche comme ordre de voisinage, où la notion de voisinage a précisément d'abord un sens ordinal et non pas une signification dans l'étendue" (1973: 196); On this, see also Hjelmslev (ibid.: 198-199). For more details, see, Petitot, 1985, and, for subsequent developments, again on "localist" and spatial structures (even if, it seems, more distant from semiotics), see Petitot 2010.



stressed also by Paolo Fabbri, where a refrain could become a main theme, a “standard”, that can be varied later, up to its possible rupture with improvisation).

All structures are infrastructure, says Deleuze (1973, *ibid.*). What does this mean? He is not looking for an “ultimate cause”, nor trying to play roulette with a sort of combinatorial analysis. The issue is to get to the bottom of the idea in which the bonds, the structural components are produced in “the middle” levels, in different levels of semiotic systems, which gradually constitute heterogeneous forms of aggregation (“consistency”, says Deleuze).

What does structuralism add this idea? And in what way is it contemporary, not to be taken for granted? And, most importantly, can it help current semiotics? We believe that we can better understand the broader scope of this philosophical-epistemological proposal by linking it, as was said, to its “surroundings”, such as Deleuze on Spinoza and “the problem of expressions”, as well as his work with Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* and his book on Foucault.

4. “Il avait l’intention de traiter de la question de la sémiologie”²⁸: the demolition of the concept of sign, and the concept of infrastructure

Of course there is also a very important, and well-known, part of Deleuze’s work dedicated to the forms and practices of aesthetic research (from the analysis of language and work of the painter Bacon, to two books on cinema, to the writings on literature such as the collection *Critique et clinique*). However, in the space of this article, we believe it is useful to point out the more general aspects (without separating the two areas of research): made up of critical indications for an semiotic “epistemology”. Deleuze’s theory is taken from a continuous coming and going between theoretical and “ad hoc” example studies, yet most of it seems to revolve around one problematic center. In this respect, Fabbri (*ib.*) recalls Deleuze’s interests (accentuated from a certain point on, present in all of his work, intersecting with that of Guattari) in the discussion of the status of “signs”. But it seems like more than just a discussion. Deleuze, inspired by Spinoza, proposes the elimination of the concept of the sign, exactly while he searches for dynamic inter-semiotic processes.

In this regard, it is well known that his two books on cinema (1983, 1985) – not initially well received, especially by French cinema studies²⁹ scholars, later, enthusiastically taken up by filmologists, they were also initially little regarded by semiotic scholars – start from Peirce’s semiotics. This one is interpreted here as a sort of taxonomy of signs, like a chemistry, a kind of “periodic table of elements”. However, let us recall that just as Deleuze presents his peircean triads (and debates their developments and combinations), he encounters the philosophy of Bergson. And the central questions become here: a) the transformations and interconnections of images and b) the relationship between images and matter. If in *Logique du sens* the issue was the “expressibility of the proposition” (the ulterior sense produced in surplus by the propositions), here, discussing filmic theories of enunciation, the issue returns. Asking in what the expressible consists in filmic sequences means addressing not only the question of the images’ “own” meanings, but a larger problem. It means addressing the expressive level, becoming a philosophical concept, which for Deleuze is what makes an experiential or existential “semiotic” level.

Deleuze can no longer settle for the peircean categories of firstness, secondness or thirdness (why not, therefore, a “zeroness”?), adds Deleuze, however, neither provocative nor in mockery). He believes that the work of conceptualization, also semiotic, consists in revealing the passages and transformations “between” images. The peircean semiotic categories will no longer be sufficient for Deleuze precisely because they are tied to their inferential status. Just as the semiotics of cinema (in that moment the debate is primarily influenced by Metz) seems, to Deleuze, to stop itself at the recognition of visual utterances. The point, for Deleuze, seems to be another: to “dig into” the material of the film, in to the as-

²⁸ See, Dosse, *ib.*: 468.

²⁹ See, Dosse, *ib.*: 485, in particular the interview with Aumont, and the reconstruction of film scholars’ reactions. See, for a more general assessment of the sign’s status in the analysis of cinema in Deleuze, in relation to his theory of semiotics and spinozian philosophy, Dawkins (*ib.*).



sembling and construction modalities of this material. Of course, even within the history of cinema (as for philosophy), the problem is again finding the conceptual and expressive movements that punctuate this history.

The relationship between images and thought is conceived not as a study of the relationship between “representation” of the world and cinema, but concerning to the status of cinema in relation to society (remembering the idea, from *Foucault*, ib., that semiotic “strata are historical formations”). That is, the cultural transformation, the way in which film produces images, which then become material for a new form of reality. Again in this case, for Deleuze, “to express” is also “to explain”: explaining the potential implications of construction processes inside texts (i.e., filmic texts). Deleuze starts, no doubt, from a taxonomy of images, but from the taxonomy he switches to the discussions of possible “laws”. From the laws he goes in search of micro-mechanisms that govern a chemistry, or a ‘microphysics’ of meaning, echoing Foucault’s concepts.

Deleuze proposes to work on productive micro-mechanisms (similar, in part, to some current semiotic research paths, see, i.e., Fontanille, 1995), on syntax and the invisible processes that occur in the depth, and on the threshold, of textual-cultural systems. But perhaps this is still the difference: semiotics mainly works “vertically”, in terms of stratification and the study of the generation levels of meaning (and in particular, the analysis of these layers, shapes and substances formed). Deleuze (and Guattari) propose, instead, to work on the “infra-strata” diffusions (and “sub-strata”, see. 1980, ch. 3) of these micro-processes: observing the material transformations which may invade semiotic systems, undo and rebuild their layers, and not only when such systems are taken to be stabilized, formed and stratified.

Is this position incompatible with semiotics, as it works on the forms of meaning systems? Or is it an invitation to expand semiotics, and “radicalize” it?

In any case, the concept of infrastructure returns. Deleuze writes: “*Dans chaque ordre de structure, certes, l’objet = x n’est nullement un inconnu, un pur indéterminé; il est parfaitement déterminable, y compris dans ses déplacements, et par le mode de déplacement qui le caractérise. Simple-ment il n’est pas assignable: c’est-à-dire il n’est pas fixable à une place, identifiable en un genre ou une espèce.*” (1973: 213). In short, the problem is not the “unspeakable”, but the dynamics, the unassignability of the basic components of a structure. The structure, according to Deleuze (this position is also accepted by many contemporary epistemologists) is made up of links, not “atoms”, and especially of processes and dynamics, not static relationships. So far, besides this important insistence on dynamic and transformative levels in semiotic systems, and beyond the push for a “semiotics of matter”, we find several elements of proximity and continuity within the structural-semiotic paradigm, in its evolutionary phases.

However, there is yet another problem for semiotics, both specific and general. It is, as we have hinted at, the definitive overthrowing of the tradition concept of the sign. Of course, it can be said that semiotics has long provided for the partial transformation of this concept, or even its “removal”, in particular by Hjelmslev (see., Caputo, ib.: 137, 149, 197-198). From antiquity to Peirce, if that same idea of a sign (classifiable element), of the “to stand for...”, is perhaps only a “epistemological obstacle” for semiotics (ib.), for Deleuze it is even more. It must be radically rethought as part of a history of philosophy which is opposed a completely different path. This is where he plays the Spinoza “card”.

5. Deleuze-Guattari: from “Memories of a Spinozist” to a radical semiotics?

The issue is not just only to present “another history of philosophy” (made up of, in this view, an ancient idea of materialism that at a certain point is joined with radical immanence, which emerges in the “heresy” of the “apostate” Spinoza, see, Deleuze 1981), but to insist on the fact that there is a multiplicity of paths of knowledge and thought. Using the term multiplicity may seem naive and generic; we do not mean that the paths are many in a sort of relativist manner, but rather hope to establish, to use



Deleuze and Guattari's words, a "power of multiplicity". For Deleuze, the very question is in fact, on the contrary, the specificity of a conceptual node, and the "effect of heresy"³⁰.

Here we need to describe Spinoza's framework for a moment. In order to summarize instead of attempting to "characterize", we will stick to the points that we think are relevant for semiotics. Let us briefly remember that the radical nature of Spinoza's thought regards the idea of immanence, what Banfi refers to as "the has to be" (1969). Or to cite Yovel (1989), "Spinoza's heresy" has to do with the principle of immanence (as well as his reputation as the "atheist and Jewish", champion of free thought, and his link with anti-clerical circles, Christian dissenters and "libertarians" of Amsterdam, Leyden and Rjinsburg) which sees mundane existence³¹ as the only real *being* possible, a source of ethical values and political power and therefore a denial of any kind of transcendence (see also Nadler 2001). For Spinoza, and then for his followers and commentators, the immanence's dimension is such that it only implies itself: it is existence, modes, and strategies that it has to express itself.

One of the central points in Spinoza's philosophy, as Banfi points out (ib.) (regarding the relationship between the body and the mind, their reciprocal knowledge, mutual construction and expression of reciprocal images, producing knowledge of world) is known as the concept of "common notions". In Spinoza's philosophy there is a type of intermediate level between sensible knowledge and the third level of consciousness (the path that leads to god). These, we recall, may be generalizations derived from experience, but are not "mere abstractions", Banfi adds. This involves the construction of a "di-

³⁰ All in all, up until not long ago, Spinoza was (although of course a "classic" of philosophy), according to Yovel (1989), considered a bit of an "outsider" in the official history of philosophy, even if his thought is continuously rediscovered by the other philosophers (from Hegel to Nietzsche). In recent decades, the return of Spinoza's philosophy comes on the wake of cultural and political wave. In part, certainly, it is also linked to the cultural "success" of Deleuze and Guattari's writings, especially after the derridian, and later, foucauldian impact, in the United States, but also through the radical political thought (i.e. with Negri and Balibar). But it is important to remember the very long tradition of spinozism, either in continental Europe as well as in anglo-saxon culture (see note 32).

³¹ According to the well known Spinozian claim, "*Deus sive natura*", this mainly regards the immanentist concept of the oneness of substance, of "all is one, one-all": God, or in other words, Nature (see Banfi, ib.). This is also the idea that it would be presented to his followers and the exegetes of the Spinozian legacy, especially in his reading that would give a part of Enlightenment thought and later Romanticism that, as is known, opens with the "Spinoza dispute". However, rather than pantheism, according to Assman and other commentators, it was be a form of "cosmo-theism" (not "God is everywhere", but "the world and nature are God, themselves"). Even the accusation of atheism that will follow starts here, with the Enlightenment interpretation and the whole story of Spinozism. For a definition of the immanentist "rupture" in Spinoza, also starting from the rereading and dismantling of conception of plotinian emanationism, see Negri (1998) which refers to an "horizontal emanationism", as well as Deleuze 1969a; see, also, other classic works that have reopened the study of Spinoza, Matheron 1969; Wolfson 1934. For example, the Wolfson's chapter dedicated to duration, time and eternity, in comparison to Plotino's discussion on time and the "solution" of Spinoza developed through his reading of Arab philosophy and then Hebrew, in particular Maimonides (see, Wolfson, ibid.). In Spinoza, time and duration, in this immanent dimension, are "the attribute by which we conceive of the existence of created things as they persevere in their existence". Even if, adds Wolfson, Spinoza here is still close to the Cartesian idea of time, leading to the idea that the time is a way of thinking and expressing ("unfold") the duration of things. More broadly, the attributes, for Spinoza (Deleuze 1969a: 18), are "like points of view on substance" but come from substance itself; they are auto-expressive forms of the substance itself (ib.: 323).

lemma of infinite modes”, but also, and at the same time, the resolution of this dilemma³². Here, with this concept, Deleuze returns to Spinoza³³.

Deleuze interpreter of Spinoza, sees transcendence (if it exists), as stiffness, demanding vertical control, the construction of an abstract or absolute point of view. Deleuze (1969a) captures and highlights another key aspect of Spinozian ethics. Along with immanence we find here the “expressive” dimension, expressionist ethics. In Spinoza, “understanding” (both the capacity to understand and to feel) is “*explicatio*” et “*expressio*”. The unfolding of casual forms must not be understood as a priori schemes, but as a “de-implication” of the mechanisms and internal connections from the substance. This is yet another of Spinoza’s famous proposals: parallelism, between the soul or the mind as the “*idea corporis*”, and the body as “*idea materiale mentis*”, which are reflected in one another. This parallelism, however, seems to be interesting on yet another level: the expressive level and that relative to what is “expressed”, ie meanings and signification processes. Thanks to Deleuze’s reading, this additional point emerges: expression as capacity and process.

And it is precisely from this point that a neurophysiologist like Damasio (2003) would find, in his *Looking for Spinoza*, a real anticipation of the models of corporeality that, even partially, modern neurosciences are developing. According to this idea, to function, an organism needs to produce different types of images and “mappings” of itself, both internal and external to the body. Thanks to this idea, perhaps a new concept of “lower thresholds” of semiosis can develop³⁴.

In any case, beyond the complexity of Spinoza’s thought and the philosophical-historical reinterpretation, especially in Deleuze, there is a very stimulating point for semiotics, which is at the heart of this philosophy. That is, the link between the immanentist position and the concept of expression. This concept is further developed and emphasized in Deleuze’s reading.

5.1. The power of the expressive-immanent dimension: some consequences on semiotic categories

According to Deleuze, the immanent dimension is only such when it is “expressive” (Deleuze 1969th: 159). All of the aspects and categories of expression (imply, connect, explicate or explain, from their origin and development in Spinoza, starting from medieval philosophy, as discussed by Deleuze, ib.) are related to the immanent dimension: we grasp the elements of a reality that is given as such, with-

³² According to Banfi’s reading (ibid.: 214-215), very close to that Deleuze, Spinoza’s “*notiones communes*” (common notions) consist in the understanding of bonds: “the system of relations that ties sensitive data amongst itself. When Spinoza speaks of these ‘*notiones communes*’ he did not mean to speak of scholastic universals: rather his criticism of the universal Aristotelian-scholastic is final [...] they are simple abstractions, they do not capture the structure inside the real.” (my transl.). Instead Spinoza’s common notions would be, for Banfi, the “system of relationships that determine the real”: starting from the existence of “infinite modes” of the substance they are a “dilemma of the finite”, the attributes, end up returning to the dilemma itself of the substance of the world. (Banfi, ib.; Spinoza, *Ética*, II, 37).

³³ Idea, moreover, closely related to his more broad proposal for methodological reinterpretation of the history of philosophy. Duffy (2006) insists on this point: the Deleuzian re-reading of Spinoza, resuming Gueroult’s work on Spinoza, offers a “structural-genetic” method of the history of philosophy, the search for links and patterns of “structural” order.

³⁴ According to Damasio at least two main types of “body images” would be produced (that make a body of themselves, we would say): 1) images of flesh: configurations of an “internal milieu” (a kind of landscape that we have of the body both at a conscious level, but also transmitted by the body itself); 2) images from parts of the body: produced by special “sensory probes” (retina, cochlea). Both produce structural and physiological changes, and in order to be read require special interfaces between the body activity and these cerebral images-activities, which reside in specific brain regions. In this “expressionism” and parallelism we find the great proximity between Spinoza’s philosophy and modern biological sciences and neuroscience. We could include proximity to semiotics, if we consider Greimas’s idea, from the phenomenology and psychology, of the basic semantic components “proprioceptive”, “interoceptive” and “extero-ceptive”. Deleuze and Guattari refer several times to Von Uexküll’s zoosemiotics in a similar manner, also in relation to Hjelmlev. Caputo (cit.: 190-191) uses the zoosemiotic theme, and returns to Eco (1997) specifically in relation to the renewed interest in semiotics in the “material” dimension, thanks to Hjelmlev.

out, therefore, finding causes or external explicative elements, through the ways in which it is expressed, in its evolution, in its differentiated articulation, related to the idea of an intensive potential³⁵. And here, in Spinoza, and later developed by Deleuze (1981), we find the contrast between the concept of sign and that of expression. Signs are, in Spinoza, the effects of partial knowledge or misunderstandings (such as superstitions, revelation effects, prophetic signs or prohibitions, which, Spinoza emphasizes in particular in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, could not do other than make us obedient; either omens, or even signs on the body, as symptoms for which do not yet know the causes).

This where Deleuze and Guattari's seem to, in their attention to hjelmslevian semiotics, connect the hjelmslevian principle (methodological, epistemological) of immanence to Spinoza's³⁶ (philosophical e ontological) immanentism. Are there direct traces of "Spinozism" in Hjelmslev? To our knowledge, no, or at least Hjelmslev scholars seem not indicate them explicitly. However, there are still some elements that converge in Deleuze and Guattari's proposal, that here we reiterate: a dynamic concept of semiotic systems, and of "inter-strata" relationships (cf. Hjelmslev 1957), inside of which can be found their formation and immanent transformation modes and the forms of their internal linkages (see, in this regard, Zinna 2008³⁷). On the other hand, both Caputo (ib.) and Galassi³⁸, while stressing the importance of the sub-logic dimension in Hjelmslev's semantic categories, insist on its being organized according to areas of co-participation and tension.

In any case, if in semiotics, and in particular in greimasian structural semiotics, the "immanent dimension" is opposed to the "manifestation dimension", a new interesting line of research can be opened, thanks to the recovery of the Spinozian vision through the work of Deleuze and Guattari. We could think about immanence not just from a methodological point of view, and therefore meta-linguistic (see, Zinna, ib.; Caputo, ib.), but also, in relation to the level of manifestation, in a wider way. What does it mean? That the construction of expressive substance and content converge on the manifestation level? According to the deleuzian-guattarian reading this would be possible if we think of the levels and layers (immanent, relative to the stratifications of the semiotic systems) as layers in continuous and potential process of de-structuring and re-structuring. In short, we could think about the immanent dimension also on a "horizontal" plane: a manifestation that takes on the expressive plane as a potential transformation of languages.

According to this hypothesis we are following, we are not dealing with a "primacy" of the expressive dimension, or a kind of expressive "autonomy" (or a "generative path of expression", as was predicted in part by Greimas, and with greimasian' scholars, such as Fontanille, opening a critical discussion within semiotics itself, see, Marsciani 1992). Rather, we can ask ourselves if this dimension doesn't play an important and specific role in the dynamics of semiotic systems. We would need to think, in other words, of a "transforming" function of the expressive level. We wouldn't need an expression "in itself" because any component that comes into play inside a potential semiotic system is susceptible to become an expression, faithful to hjelmslevian intuition. The novelty would be to think about how the semiotic system model becomes "asymmetric", compared to Hjelmslev's position (with its levels of expression and content as "funcive designation", "interdependent" and "solidarity", through the layers). Could the semiotic mechanism consist precisely in this breaking of symmetry?

³⁵ Duffy writes (2006: 240-241): "It is according to the logic of expression, that the variations of a finite existing mode's degree of power, of power to act, are determined by the dynamic nature of the relations in which it is further differentiated [...]. This dynamism, which determines the variations of a mode's power to act and therefore of 'what is expressed', is actualized in the concept of intensity". Duffy insists that this concept of intensity (as a qualitative change) is in sharp contrast with that of Hegel, another of Spinoza's "readers".

³⁶ Deleuze and Guattari give life to the image of Hjelmslev as the "Spinozist dark prince" (see, for a discussion of this point, Fabbri, cit.).

³⁷ On the other hand, Zinna (ib.: 4) in making systematic reference to Deleuze and Guattari, and reporting their critical proposal for a "semiotic dynamic of variations," insists on a possible meeting point between methodological immanentism ("of functions", which coincides with the analysis and meta-linguistic work of semiotics) and that of philosophy ("of concepts"). Even Zinna refers here to greimasian categories of virtual, actual and realized "semiotic modes of existence", to be compared with the concepts coming from Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy.

³⁸ See, Introduction to Hjelmslev, 1935.



There is always a “potential” inside a semiotic layer, say Deleuze and Guattari (ib.), a “dimension of the expressible or expression as a condition of a relative invariance”. Anything can become an “expression”, but this becoming could produce the asymmetry that can trigger the semiotic mechanism. Certainly, in Hjelmslev, there can be no expression without content, or content without expression. However, the route that we take through Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, seems to cast a shadow over this “productive” and, at the same time, generative of expression dimension (“*d’une histoire un peu cachée, un peu maudite*”, Deleuze argues, 1969a: 299). And finally, (163): “*Et l’expression, en effet, a ce double aspect: d’une part est miroir, modèle et ressemblance, d’autre part germe, arbre et rameau*”.

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