Federico Montanari
(Dipartimento di Discipline della Comunicazione
Università di Bologna)

Semiotics at war.
Semiotics and Representation of International Conflicts: the example of Journalistic Communication during the Kosovo war.

War is not only an activity based on the destruction of targets and human beings, but also an activity based on the construction of signs and messages, exchanged by opponents during the course of events. Therefore, as from the past, war has also and always been a "semiurgical" activity. On this point and by quoting the philosopher Alexis Philonenko: "the declaration of war relates to philosophical semiotics. Far from it being a simple assertion, the declaration of war is a true and real 'Sinngebung': attribution and creation of meaning, of sense".

Consequently, in conceiving war as a semiotic activity, I would like to discuss certain questions, from a theoretical and analytical point of view,2 arising from the representation of the Kosovo War, as shown on Italian Television News. The approach taken consists of an extended analysis of items deriving from a semiotic, semantic and political survey on television, concerning also the general implications on the use of media during the war.

Generally speaking, the relationship between war and media and between war and communication has always been one of the most debated issues.
In our opinion, semiotics could illuminate this debate with its analytical tools. It is commonly understood that within a social system and in particular within "post modern society", or "Late Modernity" as Anthony Giddens calls it, the question of communication prevails, at times becoming hypertrophic, and at times hiding other issues and phenomena. Semiotics, however, tries to consider communication as a cultural process; a cultural practice which needs to be studied, broken down and analysed in all of its components and according to the roles of the various parties concerned.

In our case, the recent conflict in the Balkans created an extraordinary regime, also in journalistic communication. This conflict saw Italy, and not only Italy, directly involved both on the army front, since the country had troops in the field, as on the civilian one, since thousands of refugees sought haven on its shores. The result was that journalistic reporting as well as other activities had to adapt to a highly dramatic situation and cover issues different from usual home news, foreign news and current affairs.

The exceptional professional, ethical and humanitarian efforts made by reporters and anchormen alike in responding to the challenge, provided the starting point for a survey on television news reporting on the war in the crucial months from late March to early June 1999. The news sample analysed consisted of bulletins aired in prime time evening slots on the three RAI channels and on Canale 5, Mediaset's main channel, as well as political talk shows and other news and current affairs programs. The main object of this study was the manner in which the public was
informed by RAI and Mediaset during the war, both in terms of styles of communication as of airtime dedicated to various aspects such as diplomatic activity, military activity, government decisions, humanitarian aid, etc. Given the length of the period concerned, another question that arose was whether any change occurred in the way information was presented as the conflict proceeded.

I believe that this is the first and fundamental point of our representation of socio-historical events such as war. The main issue is that information and communication on certain events transform the events as they occur.

More specifically, as the semiotician Jurij Lotman underlines in his study on cultural semiotics, the representations(or image) that a certain culture portrays of itself, automatically transforms the culture: in other words, a culture that observes itself is automatically transformed; in cybernetic terms we could talk about “self-observing systems”. And this is a particularly delicate matter when related to war. For instance, how does a culture codify death or define its limit on how to authorise and ritualise "Legitimate death" in war?

Questions like this arise when dealing with cultural boundaries: war for a certain culture represents the utmost limitation of the culture itself. *But, how has war changed its forms in "late modernity"?*

And how has the military system and its representation of the world changed this form of "self-observation" through theory and practice?

Going back to our specific research on television - and trying to answer to these questions - a qualitative analysis based on a semiotic and political study, was applied, and focused on several points:
- Was information accurately given on the origins of the war?
- Was the problem of scarcity, or non-verifiability of sources treated properly?
- Were all the numerous points of view adequately represented?
- Was there a good balance between international information delivered and that delivered by local and home news?
- Could the reporting of unfolding events, the most important ones at least, be defined as timely and objective?
- What role had the experts played, whether in news bulletins or in news and current affair programs?

Given the complexity of the subject matter and the sensitiveness of the topic, a three-pronged approach was given to the research: the first focused on communication styles and their relative effectiveness with due account of characteristics provided by television as a medium; the second focused on the adequacy, accuracy and completeness of television communication with respect to events taking place and their causes; and the last focused on understanding the behaviour and expectations of the radio and television public during the conflict and after.

An attempt was made to classify war events according to "themes", as portrayed by the media. What emerged was a war made up of different parallel conflicts, some of which were hidden by others for strategic reasons, for "audience appeal", for "rhetorical" and television "appeal", and for semiotic or textual implicit reasons. More generally speaking, what semiotics helps us to assert is that conflict, or war is built upon narrative events, as fragments of narrative sequences and actions, as seen
through the work of Jerome Bruner, Paul Ricoeur, and the Greimas semiotics. Through the application of semiotics, an analytical grid was created and divided into different points of understanding:

- narrative structures: conflicting values and relative "modal" transformations. For instance: "good and evil"; "Ethnic vs. Nationalist" and "Nato vs. Europe";

- discursive devices for enunciating the above mentioned structures, through the development of verbal or visual expressions. For instance: representations of viewpoints and/or, focalisations in the discourse, etc.;

- Use of rhetorical structures such as the "calling of witnesses" (like experts) or specific use of images, like technical and military images, and rate of television enunciations;

- More or less stereotyped dramas: passionate scenario configurations. For instance: the "saga" of refugees.

This analytical grid helped us answer some practical questions on the representation of how, for instance, refugees were portrayed or how the characters of the victim and of the oppressor were constructed in terms of narration. During this war new roles and new identities made their appearance in the media. Europeans and non-Europeans, alike, had to come to terms with the great issue of "the foreigner who is like us". Vast masses of desperate, utterly destitute people were suddenly penetrating the cloud of prosperity and relative social peace of the West, by pressing upon its frontiers.

It is possible to formulate some suppositions on the problem of
representation as seen through the eyes of a semiotic theorisation of conflict. Hence, some more general points must be touched that go beyond our research.

What mutations occur in new forms of armed conflict? According to the Clausewitzian aphorism, we must think of war as "a way of pursuing communication through other means or better, other "media". But, as strategy experts, and also philosophers such as Foucault, asserted, *a continuous reversibility between politics and war and especially between war and politics-made–communication*, could take place. Today the Clausewitzian aphorism is completely reversed.

It is communication itself that may pursue war through other means.

The implications of such mutations are both practical and theoretic, both for new forms of war and communication as for theory of conflict. A reflection on war may help us rethink political communication and, I believe, representation, too. We are far too used of thinking communication as an "influencing medium", in spite of decades of mass-media research, and media as an almighty entity, derived from myth, from the unveiling, unmasking of counter-information. Instead, exactly during the Kosovo war, great weakness in politics and media was shown. Too often representation is considered to be a way of “depicting the world”, however, it is the world itself that is transformed by acts of representation.

Let's try to give some more general examples and make some considerations. First of all let's take into consideration what has been defined by US strategic theoreticians as the Revolution of Military affairs (RMA), i.e. the new paradigm and new "ecumenical" representation of American Military Power. Such concepts tell us how communication in
the eyes of America is considered strategically fundamental. But this is nothing new.

What is important is that communication can be considered to have different functions. First, it is an environment (or scenario) where the actors in conflict play their roles; second, it can be a means, a tool that may be used by different antagonists. But communication is also a leading character, a protagonist. In fact, within its different forms, it seems to have a main role in conflict: it transforms the flow of events as witnessed, as proved the well known "CNN effect" or "CNN curve".

**From media manoeuvres to semiotic logistics.**

How can we better describe this new form of war? It is interesting to point out what two researchers, John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt affirmed, in their well known work on the new paradigm of war, where the new cyberwar terminology such as infowar and netwar appears. They stated that "the next war shall be won by who manages to narrate it best". But what does narration mean? Certainly not who will be able to provide sufficient media coverage, being this just a megalomaniac and banal illusion that "all and everything is communication" on behalf of the media and mass-mediologists, but who shall be able to manage the flow of signs/messages, of signs/messages-bombs (the so called "soft-war"), and also of bombs considered as "signs".

Ennio Remondino, the RAI anchorman form Belgrade, very sharply stated: "These bombs don’t specifically kill. They are messages, signs of logistic planning". However this sign/message harms.

We can rapidly make a list of the characteristics of new wars, from a
semiotic point of view:

a) appearance of hybrid actors:
much more than ever today we are confronted with people who have mixed roles: IT technicians, communication experts, didactic experts, ecological and urban analysts and researchers;
b) compound war models:
it is the objective and the decision making process that has changed: decisions are made through techno-functional processes. Army action becomes a possible option among others of the same; and also, as mentioned above, it can be considered a dramatic hybrid between civilians and the army. It’s the idea of intervention that has changed.
More generally speaking,, war seems to assume a definite yet paradoxical nature of "counter insurrection", but without any classical rebels. It may be similar to a form of military intervention within our society, carried out by, for example, the police force.

What about the war in Kosovo and its representation?
Which are the stereotyped, or implicit, contents of this "global representation"? 
Apparently built on archaisms - populations escaping, slit throats, ethnical cleanliness, which is rather a modern concept - it has become a hybrid war, a disseminated yet fluid war, even in it’s "violent" nature. In this war hyper-technologies, rape, door to door ransacking, road and bridge bombings go together. The mobile phones used by Serb officials are the same as those we commonly use in our home towns.
To conclude, I believe that semiotics can add a lot to this matter and can add even more to other social sciences. The sociologist and anthropologist of science, Bruno Latour, says that semiotics has to become a sort of "Organon" for the social sciences.

Furthermore, semiotics can help say more on the rhythm and emotional involvement of socio-historical events, and their representation on television or by the media. This is the way semiotics could deal with the events concerning strategy in war.

It tries, first of all, to show *which kind of cultural constructions*, implicit categories, views of the world, ways of thinking, ways of creating "expectations" are interacting during conflict, when dealing with opponents, enemies, or even among partners: it is a question of *forms* of representation. Communication takes place within such processes and semiotic systems, insofar as cultural practice and effective representation.

War is but one of the most dramatic examples of representation in practice.

REFERENCES


Joxe, Alain, 1999, "Représentation des alliances dans la nouvelle
stratégie américaine", in: *Le Monde*, 23 April.


