

BETWEEN TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND RECEPTION STUDIES. NEGOTIATION PROCESSES

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A Crossroads in Media Studies

In the past few years I have been working in such a way that I found myself at a junction, a “crossroads:”¹ my research had been (and still is) devoted to exploring the possible convergence between the analysis of the communicative strategies activated by texts and the modes of reception activated by social subjects. They are, in fact, different entities: in the former case, we are dealing with possible worlds and virtual subjects (subjects made of words and images); in the latter, we deal with factual worlds and factual subjects (flesh-and-blood subjects). Nevertheless, I am under the impression that there is some form of connection between what a text says to someone who is constructed as its interlocutor, and what a subject grasps and uses from that text, by connecting it to its world and to itself. This connection does not necessarily have to be one of continuity, in the sense that one level does not necessarily mirror the other; however, there is definitely a connection in the sense of a mutual determination.

Traditionally, two fields have undertaken the task of studying these levels or components of communication: semiotics focused on the linguistic dimension (i.e., the representations arranged by the text and the relationships figured in the text); sociology focused on the social and cultural dimension (the effect of representations on society, the relationships activated in the act of reception.) I feel it is necessary to combine the two approaches. This necessity does not depend merely on the subject matter; indeed, it is inscribed in the evolution of the two disciplines. We can see it at work in semiotics’ evolution towards pragmatics,² and in sociology’s attention to the processes of meaning-creation. In both cases, these two disciplines leaned, as it were, towards each other: the former by accounting for the way signs are used, that is, for the relationship between signs and *interpreter*; the latter by questioning the way in which social subjects make sense of actions, words, decisions – ultimately – *signs*.

Drawing On Experience

Let us go back to our main focus: communicative processes and media. Again, although we should distinguish between the two, that is, between processes and apparatus, right now we will consider them together, as two elements of media communication.

I would like to begin with a question: what has been the role of the notion of *experience*³ in encouraging scholarship to consider simultaneously the strategies of commu-

nication articulated by texts and the forms of reception employed by subjects? The notion of experience can be understood in three distinct ways: first, it indicates our surroundings, the world we live in (first meaning of “experience,” as in the sentence “the experience of the city is different from that of the country”); second, it refers to “doing” something, or to “know how” in something (second meaning of “experience,” such as in the sentence “this doctor has great experience”); third, it implies the recollection of something we lived through (third meaning of “experience,” such as in the sentence “this experience has deeply changed me”). Then the question becomes: to what extent has the reference to all these meanings of experience encouraged scholars to combine these two fundamental dimensions of media communication (i.e. texts and subjects)? I think it has to great extent, and on multiple levels.

It would seem that the appeal to experience by different disciplinary fields reveals two major methodological and conceptual issues which have made it necessary for these disciplines to combine communicative strategies and modes of reception – within our metaphor, to “inhabit the crossroads” between texts and subjects.

The first issue involves the idea, slowly emerging both within the sociology of communication and within semiotics, that communication is not a mere transmission of data from a sender to an addressee, but rather an interaction among communicative partners and, as a consequence, that meaning is not given, but constructed through this interaction. Experience (in each of its three meanings) tells us that there isn’t such a thing as a meaning of the text separated from the meaning of the addressee, that there is not a meaning of the text which the addressee has to comply with, and neither is there a meaning of the addressee to which the text would conform. Rather, there is a complex layering of inputs and adjustments contributing to the emergence of meaning from the encounter between text and addressee.

The second issue is more methodological in nature. It has to do with the need to connect the processes of interpretation and reception back to their natural context, while avoiding the abstractions of, respectively, the critical approach or the quantitative approach (which, for opposite reasons, reduce the complexity of the encounter between text and addressee). Reader Response Criticism,⁴ on the one hand, and the ethnography of reception, on the other,⁵ responded to this need by introducing notions such as that of “natural audiences,” or by researching the use of media in everyday life.⁶ Once again, the reference to experience and all that this implies (the implicit reference to our surroundings, the reference to “doing,” or “know how,” the reference to something we lived) becomes stronger. Consistently, the need to cross the boundaries between what pertains to the text and what pertains to the social subjects also increases. A symptom of this methodological and theoretical move can be easily found in the tendency to collapse – despite Eco’s efforts –⁷ the difference between interpretation and use (including cognitive use). The implied meaning of a conversation is a good example of this merging of interpretation and use. (Consider the exchange between parents and baby-sitter: “how was the child?” “the house didn’t fall apart.” What follows is a tip, not an inspection of the house’s architecture). Aberrant readings also, depend on the construction of a meaning that is maybe inconsistent with the text itself, but perfectly consistent with its use (this is the case of a mother and a daughter watching a soap-opera).⁸ As I will show shortly, the distinction between “interpretation” and “use” can be freed from its abstract nature and re-thought within the more concrete horizon of negotiation processes.

The effect of these conceptual and methodological shifts is precisely a closer relationship (or, at least, the need to have a closer relationship) between the attention to texts' communicative strategies and subjects' modes of reception, and, as a consequence, between the disciplines that investigate them. As I have already mentioned, this occurs through the "re-discovery" of the role of *experience*. Even if we consider it only in its third meaning, i.e., as a process of symbolic elaboration of something we lived, the reference to it has forced both disciplines to expand their focus: semiotics discovered that a text is also something which is "symbolically processed as something we lived", and sociology discovered that what is "symbolically processed as something we lived" is indeed a text (and all that this entails). This mutual discovery brings about even greater consequences when we move from a discourse on the experience *with* the media to the experience *caused by* the media.

This doesn't necessarily mean that semioticians should somehow become sociologists, nor that sociologists should become semioticians. That may very well be the case and I would not object to it. More importantly, however, this means that we should perhaps raise questions which affect (or challenge) both disciplines, and which would elicit common research projects. The questions relating to the connection between media and experience (media and everyday life, media and their reception, media and the formation of ideologies, media and construction of social rituals, media and multimediality in the perception of the audience) could be very useful.

At the same time that such questions are formulated, what appears, or we need to make appear, is the presence of some analytical categories that, once adjusted specifically for each approach, would allow the two disciplines to join in a partially common perspective and theoretical language. I will now consider this point, and will deal with one of such categories, the notion of *negotiation*.

The Horizon of Negotiation

The concept of negotiation appears both in sociological and semiotic research.

The fact that communication entails negotiation has been apparent to those working within a sociological perspective: consider the contribution of those scholars who analyzed the ways in which media messages are interpreted, and discovered that they are only partially determined by the sender, in so far as they emerge from the "clash" between the addresser's intention and the addressee's expectations or from the "clash" between the cognitive mapping of the former and that of the latter. Stuart Hall, for example, talks about "negotiated" reading, as well as "dominant" and "resistant" (others talk about "oppositional" and "aberrant" readings).⁹ Fiske ascribes meaning-creation to a tension between "structural polysemy," that is, the "complex of preferred meanings" within the text and the "situated subjectivity" of the reader, that is, "the system of social discourses within which it is implicated" (a tension in which "forces of closure" and "forces of opening" stand endlessly against one another).¹⁰ Livingstone sums up these dynamics by saying that meaning-creation through the interaction between texts and readers is "a site of negotiation between two semi-powerful sources".¹¹ Finally, Gledhill tries to open up Hall's notion of negotiation to include the dynamics that characterize the moment of production (by talking about "institutional negotiations"), the forces within the texts ("textual negotiations"), as

well as, naturally, the relationships between texts and subjects (“reception negotiation”).¹²

The fact that communication involves negotiation has also become clear to those who have approached the issue from a semiotic perspective. I am thinking, for example, about the notion of “co-operation,” articulated by Grice¹³ in linguistic terms (the idea that interpersonal conversation is based on the existence of a “principle of cooperation” to which, it is expected, conversing parties should conform) and by Eco¹⁴ within the perspective of interpretive semiotics (the meaning of a text is not given, but rather constructed and the readers are called to “fill in” the text, understood as a “lazy machine” that doesn’t exhaust the meaning that it intends to provide). I am also thinking, in terms of generative semiotics, of the notion of “communicative contract” articulated by Greimas and Courtés (it is the “implicit contract antecedent to any communication”), as well as the concept of “contract of validation” proposed by Greimas himself: both focus on the idea that there is a “confidence pact” between the partners of communication.¹⁵

Despite their specificity, these approaches bring about a common core: the idea that the relationship among communicating subjects, and between texts and addressees, is made up of a continuous confrontation, aiming at the emergence of convergences over divergences until an agreement is established among subjects, and between subjects and texts, that would allow the former to feel “in tune” with the latter.

Steps and Levels of Negotiation

Recently, I have tried to go back to the notion of negotiation in order to articulate it more efficiently, starting from this common ground among disciplines. On the one hand, I tried to define the *steps* of negotiation, on the other hand, the *levels* by which it operates within the framework of communication, and specifically of media communication.

Regarding the *steps* of negotiation – what can be described as its “syntax” – or “the” most important moments are: the realization, on the part of a subject, of what the proposals are that are addressed to him; the evaluation of such proposals in terms of what he can possibly grasp from them (possibilities derived, for example, from the fact that texts, including media texts, are “polysemic” and therefore present a multiplicity of possible readings, including some “escapist” readings); the formulation of counter-proposals, either factual (as in face-to-face communication) or merely virtual (as in deferred communication); the acceptance of the proposals and their inclusion within the value system and the conceptual universe of the addressee; the retrieval of a point of balance between proposals and expectations, or between proposals and gains, etc. These are some of the steps of negotiation. I am under the impression that in order to formalize these steps, the process of negotiation should be regarded (and that’s what subjects usually do) as a “story” taking place between text and subject (or between subject and other subjects through some texts). In this case, the unfolding negotiation could be examined through the tools of syntax analysis elaborated by narratology.¹⁶

As far as the *levels* of negotiation are concerned, three main spheres of action can be identified. The first one is specific to any communicative interaction understood as a “situated” interaction.¹⁷ It consists of the negotiation between subject, text and cir-

cumstances, within which the former has access to the latter (the same holds true if we talk about an addressee, an addresser who expresses itself through a text and the circumstances of this interaction).

The second level results from a simplification of the first: by ignoring the circumstances, we can focus on the negotiation between subject and text. This is the level where we would locate a textual interpretation.

Finally, the third level can be identified by extension and projection of the first: it can be described as the negotiation between text, subject, situation and context. At this level we can locate the negotiation directed towards the definition of the possible use, or possible functions, of a text.

Negotiation, Social Practices and Mediated Communication: Two Issues

Besides the steps and levels of negotiation, there are other fundamental issues that need to be taken into account. Here I will only consider two.

The first is the necessity of connecting negotiation with the more complex context of social actions. In this sense, while the definition of a “syntax of negotiation” in narratological terms can help elucidate the steps that subjects make, it runs the risk of obscuring the possible connection between negotiation and social practices in their broadest sense (unless, as Greimas does, we regard human action in general as a “story”). The application of concepts – e.g., articulation or suture¹⁸ which are derived from other disciplines, such as linguistics and psychoanalysis to social processes –¹⁹ will probably help in filling this gap. However, the use of these concepts must be combined with awareness of the fact that during a negotiation process we are dealing with constantly (sometimes not openly so) flexible positions on the part of subjects, and variations in the general frame of reference. Communicating, therefore, means to take on more and more masks and to live in increasingly different situations. Within this perspective, the idea of negotiation that I have been promoting here, that is, a process that enacts a systematic confrontation aiming at reaching an agreement (in other words, aiming at establishing what I elsewhere called a “communicative pact”), emphasizes how this process aims less at reaching a compromise between the parties involved, than at defining a framework, within which the complexity of one’s actions – whether they are communicative or non-communicative actions – can be situated. (A “pact” in fact, is essentially a framework determining rules of engagement, establishing roles, actions, goals, and expectations). This framework, although itself temporary and variable, helps in “giving sense” to the actions performed at a certain moment.

The second issue concerns the role of the medium within the negotiation process. There is in fact a difference between face-to-face negotiation and negotiation within a mediatic and mediated interaction.²⁰ The model I have suggested applies in both cases. However, since this model deals essentially with “situated” negotiation – between text, subject, and circumstances – and since the presence of a medium belongs to the “circumstances,” this model is strongly determined from the outset. In other words, the fact that we are dealing with a negotiation occurring with and through media, has to be accounted for from the very beginning of this process, since the presence of a medium is a determining factor of the initial situation. One more distinction has to be drawn between those media that “characterize” the environment of communication, such as

cinema, and those media that “absorb” the environment, functioning as a form of “media-environments,” such as computers.

Interpretation, Interpretive Communities and the Use of Media

Now, I would like to characterize more specifically some of the issues connected to negotiation processes.

At the level of negotiation between text and subject we are dealing with processes of interpretation. We then need to define what is negotiated through the act of interpretation. We negotiate a meaning: a meaning which is connected, on the one hand, to the “contents” of the utterance (*dictum*), on the other hand, to the “forms” that this utterance takes on, and consequently, to the roles, perspectives, distances, etc., that it establishes between the speaking parties (*modus*). As far as the latter, we need to dwell on the correlation between the “description” and the “prescription” of a role, a perspective, a distance, etc.: this difference goes under the rubric of the “ideal addressee” in a text, as opposed not so much to the “real addressee,” but rather to the addressee “performed” by the text.

Finally, we need to consider the shift between an individual addressee and a group of addressees, especially if we regard the audience as an interpretive community.

The negotiation text/subject/situation/context, instead, involves not so much the attribution of meaning to the text, but rather the attribution of a function. This allows us to move from interpretations to the function of texts. Reception can then be defined as an appropriation via use, or (which is the same thing) as the conversion of a proposal into a resource to be employed in one’s world. Recent Reception Studies have highlighted what resources are derived from a mediatic proposal²¹ or, more generally, what functions a medium can fulfill²² and the way in which such a conversion takes place,²³ a way that is essentially negotiative.

Towards a Convergence of Perspectives

To conclude, I would like to point out some elements of originality in this approach.

Firstly, this model allows connection between what the text does, through the communicative strategies enacted by it, and what subjects do in their reception practices. This correlation is fostered, on the one hand, by regarding the text as containing a series of proposals that are then transformed into resources in the text’s encounter with the addressee (for example, they can become opportunities for information, entertainment, strengthening of current relationships, definition of identities, etc.). On the other hand, the correlation is also facilitated by considering the text as a terrain in which the confrontation with the addressee is already figured and outlined. Concisely, the text is the site of a proposal subjected to negotiation, but also, at the same time, the site of the “virtuality” of such a negotiation that will then realize itself. In this sense the strategies of communication and the forms of reception can be finally seen as intimately linked.

Secondly, the model proposed also allows for extending the notion of negotiation beyond the text/subject relationship that remains the sole focus of the majority of audience studies. Negotiation, in fact, is a complex process which occurs at many different

levels, and which involves two things: the addressee is confronted with the possibilities opened up by the text, and the text and the addressee are confronted with the conditions within which the communication occurs. Finally, all of these factors and levels are confronted with broader elements influencing the context of the communicative exchange.

Of course, this extension of the notion of negotiation should not and cannot lead to simplistic analogies: the “project of negotiation” offered by the text as a terrain for confrontation does not necessarily coincide with the negotiation taking place within the actual communicative exchange. Similarly, the negotiation aiming at attributing sense to the text (i.e. negotiation between text and addressee) does not necessarily coincide with the negotiation aiming at establishing the text’s functions (i.e. the negotiation between text/subject/situation/context). These are more intercrossing paths than parallel trajectories. In particular, as far as the latter is concerned, it is necessary to point out that considering negotiation as a mechanism that involves different levels of the communicative exchange – even if they aren’t always homologous – sheds light onto the relationship between subjects and media, the subjects’ media experience, as it were. Sometimes subjects single out a text’s function by figuring out its sense; other times they attribute sense to a text after establishing the text’s functions. Consider, for instance, that sometimes it is because I read the news in a certain way that I am able to grasp what I need from it (a piece of information, a reassurance, the sense of belonging to a community, etc.), while other times it is because I am looking for something in the news that I read it in a certain way.

Regarding negotiation as taking place simultaneously at many levels, allows for a deeper understanding of the interaction between text and addressee; it also allows description of the mechanics of interpretation and reception in all their phenomenological wealth.

Certainly, at this point, it would be appropriate to discuss some specific cases in which the category of negotiation would make it possible to emphasize the mechanics of communication. I have done it elsewhere, by employing the ethnographic method to analyze television reception within the family setting,²⁴ or by collecting “life-stories” to study the process of identification of some functions of the media.²⁵ More recently I have tried to apply the notion of negotiation to macro-phenomena in communication such as film genres, by analyzing them from the linguistic perspective.²⁶ I refer the reader to these works because they are part of a work-in-progress application of the model outlined above. To conclude, I hope that by employing categories such as negotiation, it will be possible to outline new research directions in which different approaches can come together, different disciplines can open up a fruitful and productive dialogue.

[Translated from Italian by Alessandra Raengo]

1 I use here the strong image offered by Sonia Livingstone: the image of a “crossroads” is effectively evoked by the author to describe the current state of media research. According to her metaphor, on the one hand, Audience Studies describe themselves as a “crossroads” between different disciplinary fields; on the other hand, Audience Studies present themselves as if it

- were “at a crossroads,” that is, they are undergoing a reconsideration of their own trajectories of research. See S. Livingstone, “Audience Research at the Crossroads. The ‘Implied Audience’ in Media and Cultural Theory,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1998), pp. 193-217.
- 2 See S. C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
 - 3 See P. Jedlowsky, *Il sapere dell’esperienza* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1994).
 - 4 See S.E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980); J.P. Tompkins (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism. From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).
 - 5 See J. Lull, *Inside Family Viewing. Ethnographic Research on Television’s Audience* (London-New York: Routledge, 1990).
 - 6 See T.R. Lindolf (ed.), *Natural Audiences. Qualitative Research of Media Uses and Effects* (Norwood: Ablex Publishing Company, 1987).
 - 7 U. Eco, *Lector in Fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi* (Milano: Bompiani, 1979).
 - 8 See F. Casetti (a cura di), *L’ospite fisso. Televisione e mass media nelle famiglie italiane* (Milano: San Paolo, 1995).
 - 9 S. Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”, in S. Hall et al. (eds.), *Culture Media Language* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1980), pp. 117-121.
 - 10 J. Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987); J. Fiske, “Moments of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience,” in E. Seiter et al. (eds.), *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 56-78.
 - 11 S. Livingstone, *Making Sense of Television* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1990).
 - 12 C. Gledhill, “Pleasurable Negotiations,” in Pribram (ed.), *Female Spectator: Looking at Film and Television* (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 64-89.
 - 13 H. P. Grice, “Logic and Conversation”, in P. Cole, J.L. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics - Speech Acts* (New York: Academic Press, 1967).
 - 14 U. Eco, *op.cit.*
 - 15 See C. Squadrone, “Contratto e racconto. La nozione di contratto nella semiotica testuale,” *Comunicazioni Sociali*, vol. XI, no. 3 (1989), pp. 171-200.
 - 16 See G. Bettetini, F. Casetti, M. Lasorsa, I. Pezzini, “Per una microstoria del consumo dell’audiovisivo,” *Ikon. Ricerche sulla comunicazione*, no. 8 (1984), no. 11 (1985), no. 12 (1986).
 - 17 See F. Casetti, “Communicative Situations: The Cinema and the Television Situation,” *Semiotica*, vol. 112, no. 1-2 (1996), pp. 35-48.
 - 18 M. Fanchi, “Mass-media e identità. Un modello d’analisi,” *Comunicazioni Sociali, Percorsi dell’identità*, XIX, no. 4 (1997), pp. 664-683.
 - 19 L. Grossberg, “On Postmodernism and Articulation. An Interview with Stuart Hall,” in D. Morley, Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall. Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 131-149; D.J. Slack, “The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies,” in Morley, Chen (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 112-127.
 - 20 See B. Thompson, *Mezzi di comunicazione e modernità. Una teoria sociale dei media* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998).
 - 21 See for example Lull, *op. cit.*
 - 22 See F. Casetti, M. Fanchi, *Esperienze mediali. Media e mondo di vita negli anni Cinquanta e negli anni Novanta* (Venezia: Centro Studi San Salvador, 1996).
 - 23 See, for example, R. Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1994), but also F. Casetti, *L’ospite fisso*, cit.
 - 24 F. Casetti, *L’ospite fisso*, cit.
 - 25 F. Casetti, Fanchi, *op. cit.*
 - 26 F. Casetti, “Film, Genres. Negotiation Processes and Communicative Pact,” in L. Quaresima, A. Raengo, L. Vichi, (a cura di), *La nascita dei generi cinematografici/ The Birth of Film Genres* (Udine: Forum, 1999), pp. 23-35.