

Affective semiosis and perceptual semiosis: A semiotic psychoanalytic field theory grounded on Matte Blanco

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Abstract. Starting from critical points of the research agenda on emotions, this paper aims to present and discuss a dynamic field model of the interaction between *affective semiosis* and *perceptual semiosis*. Conceptually, the model is grounded in the epistemological contribution of Ignacio Matte Blanco's psychoanalytic theory, which formalizes two kinds of logic at the foundation of human experience: *asymmetrical* (the basis of the activity of conscious rational thought and functioning through distinction and separation processes) and *symmetrical* (the basis of unconscious processes, aimed at homogenization and generalization). Accordingly, affective semiosis is characterized by a predominance of symmetrizing and generalizing modalities, tending to homogenize differences and render all stimuli indistinct and undifferentiated according to a function of *pertinentization* (i.e. by the definition of a ground – *à la* Peirce). This ground offers a temporary stability to discretize the elements of experience. Conversely, perceptive semiosis focuses on discretization and identification, operating through the recognition of differences within the pertinentized field. Perceptual semiosis, which seeks to identify differences, can only function if a background serving as an element of continuity remains stable. Finally, the study explores specific dynamics that illustrate the necessary intertwining of affective and perceptual semiosis through the application of non-linear descriptive models, characterized by oscillatory and complementary trends.

Keywords: affective semiosis; perception; Ignacio Matte Blanco; psychoanalysis; semiotic dynamic field

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Introduction

This work considers emotion from a semiotic perspective, defining it as an essential aspect of the process of affective semiosis (De Luca Picione 2021, 2023, 2025; De Luca Picione, Freda 2014; Salvatore 2004; Salvatore, Freda 2011; Salvatore *et al.* 2021, 2024), namely the possibility of generating and interpreting signs starting from a matrix of the affective activation of experience.

Considering affect as a matrix of the meaning of experience implies many challenges due to both the lack of adequate terminology (we are witness to a wide polysemy, depending on different authors and paradigms) and the comparison with the scientific literature that has always understood emotion as a reaction to stimulus, albeit with many different interpretations.

In this regard, it is useful to discuss the distinction, proposed by Lisa Barrett in the neurobiological context, between *emotion* and *affect*, where the latter is no longer something “that happens” or that “affects” the subject from the outside, but rather is a fundamental tone of mental life, a form of background noise that is perpetually present in a mostly unconscious form (Barrett 2017). Therefore, at the basis of every perceptive or cognitive activity, there is always an “affective foundation”; that is, a reference to the body’s interoceptive conditions, particularly those conditions of the body balance that do not yet mediate an interpretation but express a hypothesis actively generated to the body and its internal conditions.

According to Barrett, interpretation of this state occurs at a later stage and is delegated to a subsequent cognitive activity, which attributes meaning to internal states, primarily through emotional cognition. In this perspective, therefore, there is no longer the perception of affects and emotions as phenomena that are externally activated, according to the supposed condition of original passivity of the body. On the contrary, these are processes that are constantly active within subjective life, and regulate balance and internal and external functioning. The aim of the present work is to present a model of affective dynamics in reference to processual, temporal, and topological dimensions, considering the issues of ‘difference’ (asymmetry and discontinuity) and ‘indistinction’ (symmetry and continuity).

We employ a framework of psychoanalytic and semiotic ground in our work. On the one hand, we assume Ignacio Matte Blanco’s (1908–1995) psychoanalytic thought is linked to the interaction between the symmetrical and asymmetrical functions of psychic processes. We consider the fundamental characteristics of emotional and perceptive processes, including the psychological phenomena that move between the conscious (asymmetrical way of being) and the unconscious (symmetrical way of being) in light of his model of *bi-logics*. On the other hand,

we refer to the semiotic perspective to obtain a specific focus on the semiotic processes of the production and articulation of signs.

Critical elements of the perspectives of studying emotions

The literature offers a vastness of perspectives, concepts, models, and paradigms, showing – in a certain sense – the challenge of saying something definitive about the ‘emotion’ phenomenon.

Now, there is some agreement on the notion that emotion is a *biological fact*; that is to say, it concerns the body, which generates a series of activations and modifications in physiological processes (e.g. modifications to the state of muscle tone, respiratory rhythm, the production of hormones, and facial expressions, adrenal and subcortical substances, the variation of skin conductance and sweating, etc.). Furthermore, each of these is related to neuronal and cerebral mechanisms.

However, if a great step forward has been made in attempts to observe the objective and repeatable “reality” of emotions in laboratory studies or ethological research, we observe that the pure aspect of emotions’ “naked” and “aseptic” corporeity (the “emotional embodiment”) is insufficient to support the vastness of the emotion phenomenon.

Let us recall some acquisitions from the study of emotions. Through the evolutionary perspective and neurological (both neuroanatomical and neurophysiological) studies, emotion has been read in various, often alternative, ways:

- The adaptive aspect of emotion (Darwin 1965[1872]; Panksepp 1998).
- A communicative purpose aimed at survival (Darwin 1965[1872]; Plutchik 1980).
- The purpose of preserving homeostasis and, more recently, allostasis³ (Barrett 2017) is to offer a first impact assessment of internal and external environments.
- In certain cases where survival is endangered, emotion is intended as a fast reaction not mediated by conscious thought by means of the predisposition of

³ The notion of allostasis represents an integration of the purely homeostatic logic of the organism’s psychobiological regulation processes. Through allostasis, it is recognized that there is the possibility that the organism, in particular circumstances, operates a fluctuation with respect to homeostatic set-points, depending on specific environmental needs, which activates multisystemic and coordinated, physiological, and behavioural modifications aimed at achieving a new balance and improved fitness within the environment (Tossici *et al.* 2024).

brain circuits *ad hoc* (e.g. the role of the limbic system and the amygdala – see LeDoux 2000).

According to classic theories of primary and universal emotions, some emotions are considered universal innate responses and, therefore, already given and present in a phylogenetic set transmitted with no other mediation than genetic (Darwin 1965[1872]; Dawkins 1976; Izard 1993). Thus, they rely exclusively on the success of the transmission of the genetic heritage.

There is no doubt that emotion always involves the activation of the body and a correlated predisposition to action and that, even before any research result (whether biological, ethological, neurological, or psychological), our daily experiences show us how our body “has something to do” with our emotions. However, the vision of emotion (in its multiple guises of actions, thoughts, and bodily changes) in terms of innate “mechanisms”, regulated *a priori* or explained according to the plausibility of certain pre-packaged sets of basic emotional responses, does not appear satisfactory (despite progressive elegance, the growing body of research, the wealth of detail in such models, and the methodological rigour of the experimental designs).

The fact that the literature often exhibits the notion of a difference between *primary* emotions (instinctive and trans-cultural, i.e. those that deny culturality and social learning) and *secondary*, or social, emotions (those that are learned, regulated by intersubjective mediation, and expressed according to systems of culturally codified signs) accounts for such insufficiency.

Let us critically consider another distinction. On the one hand, we have evolutionary theories (LeDoux 2000; Panksepp 1998; Plutchik 1980), which typically afford prominence (priority to exclusivity) to the speed of innate emotional processes for adaptivity and survival. On the other hand, we have theories that take a cognitive perspective (Arnold 1960, 1970; Frijda 1986, 1993; Lazarus 1966; Leventhal, Scherer 1987; Schachter, Singer 1962) to reveal how emotion is an effect generated by an evaluation of stimulus and how it is consequent to the kind of labelling undertaken (thereby opening a direction, which is not always pursued, towards subjective modality or cultural mediation in the emotion phenomenon).

Therefore, it appears that we are not discussing the same thing, or rather, the same phenomenon. Although there is an evaluative aspect of the stimulus in each perspective, on the one hand, the emphasis is on recognition starting from a wealth of innate representations, while on the other hand, the reference is to the knowledge one learns culturally from one's own experience.

The work of neurologist Antonio Damasio offers a combination of neurological and psychological aspects by investigating the relationship between thought, body, and emotion. Starting from the perspective of neurological damage, Damasio identifies the psychic functions that deteriorate or cease to exist in conjunction with brain damage of lesions. In this conception, emotions are aimed towards both the homeostatic purpose of re-establishing adequate activation levels and increasing subjective well-being (Damasio 1994, 1999, 2003). We identify an attempt to overcome the most radical evolutionism due to the extension of the focus to well-being (and not only to adaptation and survival).

The scope of such studies is of great value. However, we note that a prejudicial and *a priori* limit remains: all research paradigms on emotions (no matter to which discipline they belong) both consider emotion as a process concerning the individual and focus on the specific “treatment” of the stimulus that produces a “reaction”. In this sense, the semiotic aspect of emotion is reduced to the completion of a form of evaluation of the stimulus, starting from prior knowledge (which is occasionally considered innate, species-specific, phylogenetic or learned in one’s ontogenetic development). That is, emotion is observed as a linear phenomenon both in temporal (since the stimulus is followed by the evaluation and/or the emotional response) and spatial (since there is a need for spatial contiguity through which the individual *feels* they *must* react to a present stimulus) terms. Furthermore, in most cases, “the person who gets emotional” is observed as though they were solitary or had no relationship with the broader context and its intersubjectivity.

Important contributions for overcoming an individualistic, linear perspective have recently been proposed. Among these, we highlight Barrett’s socio-constructivist approach (Barrett 2006, 2017; Gross, Barrett 2011), in which the “theory of constructed emotions” maintains, in an alternative way compared to the classic vision, that emotions are not predefined, innate entities, nor universal (varying considerably between cultures) and, above all, are not triggered but created by the subject (Barrett 2017: XXII). As simulative predictions, emotions are redefined in terms of conjectures the brain elaborates in advance on what is happening in the subject’s internal and external worlds: nothing other than the construction, by the brain’s predictive function, of a meaning attributed to bodily perceptions in relation to what is happening in the internal world (Barrett 2017). At the core of this model, which is proposed on the basis of the very broad setting of experimental studies, there is a concept of simulation understood as a default mode for all mental activities and a mechanism common to the plurality of psychological processes (including perception, language understanding, empathy, memory, imagination, and dreams) and emotional experiences. According to

Barrett (2017), this is the key to unlocking how the brain creates emotion. This opens a sociocultural reconsideration of an emotion's generative mechanisms, which enhance the roles of culture and social environments in the neural micro-wiring processes that shape and influence how emotional characterizations are built in the brain.

In line with this approach is Salvatore's Affective Pertinentization (APER) psychodynamic semiotic model (Salvatore *et al.* 2021, 2023, 2024, 2025; Salvatore, Freda 2011), which proposes a semiotic, dimensional model capable of implying biological-embodied, subjective, and cultural-intersubjective levels. Salvatore's (2016) theory of affective semiosis is based on the notion that affects are forms of bodily activation that give meaning to the world. They act as primitive embodied meanings (beginning from the most basic thymic categories of pleasure and displeasure) that generate a holistic interpretation of the experimental field as a whole, offering an initial framework for the cognitive processing of sensory inputs. As embodied, asemantic, and over-generalized⁴ classes of meaning, affects are the fundamental and primary form of reality of interpretation on which all further positive meaning levels are based.

The advantage of this model is that it extends the scope of the meaning of affects from an intra-subjective dynamic to inter-subjective, cultural, and collective dimensions. The processes of affective semiosis perform the function of cultural meanings that connect the process of individual sense-making to the social environment. As substrates of cultural models (i.e. social representations and affectively generated worldviews), they have a value transcending the individual mind alone, which explains the high degree of performativity exerted by affective dynamics of cultural systems, even when explicit forms of social negotiation are absent (Salvatore *et al.* 2021). Namely, affects represent the pre-reflective prerequisite for the intersubjective relationship and not the conscious object of negotiation between people (De Luca Picione 2024a, 2024b; De Luca Picione *et al.* 2025c; Tossici, De Luca Picione 2024).

All of this leads to a critical reconsideration of the intrinsic linearity in the notion of temporal and spatial contiguity between the stimulus, evaluation, and emotional response. As a response attributable to a set of genetic responses or cultural categorization and labelling, emotion risks being separated from the context understood as a local, contingent, and temporary framework that

⁴ Affects are (a) embodied in the sense that their content consists of global (bipolarized) patterns of bodily activation (e.g. pleasant vs unpleasant, good vs bad, active vs passive); (b) a-semantic in the sense that each class of affective meaning merges features and exemplars, regardless of their semantic relationship; and (c) over-generalized in the sense that they refer globally to the entire field of experience, rather than to specific discrete objects.

allows us to give meaning to our experiences. In semiotic terms, we would say that studies on emotion use a *dyadic semiotic conception* of the sign (emotional behaviour) as a perfectly biunivocal and corresponding interface between the signifier (emotional stimulus) and meaning (the already available evaluation). Rather, emotion is always a local, temporary response that views a triadic relationship of meaning. That is, a sign is signified according to contextual relevance [the so-called “ground”, according to Peirce (CP 2.228; 1932)] through the mediation of a local (fielded) interpretant (Chevalier 2015). There is no exact and absolute correspondence between the signifier and the signified, but there is a connection constructed from time to time through a contextual relevance that is consistently defined by the mediations of other interpretants made available in the same field.

The fact that the perception of an emotional event (that is, capable of generating a specific emotional pattern) can be varied and different across time, both within a population of individuals and for the same individual, requires serious consideration from a viewpoint that broadens the perspective of observations of the sense-making process of experience, adding new circumstances for consideration.

We believe it would be useful to introduce the development of a field⁵ perspective (both in topological and temporal terms) into the discussion. Semiosis is, in fact, a process that always occurs within a field – that is, within the specific type of local configuration and organization of all possible directions of development of the sense conveyed by signs that the subject assumes in their relationship with the world. Any semiotic process (and, therefore, all psychological processes understood as semiotic systems of modelling and action) occurs within a field and manifests in a relationship of interdependence and reciprocity within the contextual and local dimensions. Due to the ideas of the field, therefore, it becomes possible to move from descriptions of things assumed as ontologized entities towards temporal processes and topological networks of relationships that constitute the field and in which signs – and semiotic processes – assume value.

⁵ The notion of the *field* is by now a solid acquisition of psychology and psychoanalysis. Since the last century, it has been developed widely and differently in psychoanalysis (Baranger, Baranager 2008; Civitarese, Ferro 2018; De Luca Picione, Freda 2014; Salvatore *et al.* 2021, 2023, 2024, 2025; Stern 2013a, 2013b). The notion of the field as a superordinate system of interactions in which relationships between subjects take place was originally introduced in psychology by Lewin (1936, 1951), starting from the influence of Gestalt Theory. Adopting the idea that the whole is more than the sum of the individual parts, Lewin considered the field as a dynamic system consisting of a set of forces, tensions, relationships and processes with explicit reference to electromagnetic fields.

With respect to the distinct functions of semiotic relevance that are actualized and actualizable in the field, we consider emotion as the semiotic processes (i.e. affective semiosis), which – being characterized by a predominance of symmetrizing and generalizing modalities – typically homogenize differences and make all stimuli indistinct and undifferentiated. We consider *perception* as a semiotic process (perceptive semiosis), which – being aimed at discretization and identification – can grasp the differences between what is happening in the subject's action space.

At the core of this development is Juri Lotman's (2005) central notion of identifying, as a fundamental "sense-generating mechanism", the continuous oscillation between symmetry and asymmetry within the semiotic field (the semiosphere). There are two opposing tendencies: (1) symmetrical, which tends towards indifferentiation and indistinction (in terms of similarity and identity) and, therefore, towards the homogenization of field relations, and (2) asymmetrical, which works in favour of differentiation, distinction, separation, and the construction of propositional relationships capable of generating texts (namely, sign articulation).

According to this, this vision integrates perfectly with the psychoanalytic thought of Ignacio Matte Blanco (1975, 1988), a profound innovator and systematizer of the logic of the unconscious whose theorization we present below with the salient notions and aspects of greatest interest for our proposal.

The asymmetrical logic of conscious thought and the symmetrical logic of the unconscious and emotions in the psychoanalytic theory of Ignacio Matte Blanco

According to Matte Blanco, the mind – understood as a process of interpretation and categorization – is regulated by the balance between two psychic working principles. The two principles, for reasons we will explain, can be fully considered semiotic modes and processes. These are consciousness (the asymmetrical way of being) and unconsciousness (the symmetrical way of being). Undoubtedly, it is a reformulation of the dichotomy between primary and secondary processes, which since Freud (1911) has constituted one of the cornerstones of psychoanalysis, with the introduction of elements of strong originality and innovation. This occurs for two reasons. On the one hand, according to Matte Blanco, the logics of the two functions are no longer assumed to be binary but are regarded as a *continuum* between these two modalities. On the other hand, the unconscious is no longer considered a psychic region of the individual – hidden and remaining so – but

as a semiotic process, which, starting from emotional experience, constantly symbolizes and represents everything the subject is experiencing.

In this sense, the unconscious is one way in which the mind works to *classify, organize, and categorize* the elements of experience, tracing them back to the classes to which they belong. The peculiarity of such classifications is that they do not respect the three principles of the Aristotelian logic of identity, non-contradiction, and the excluded third. The unconscious mind gives rise to apparently *paradoxical* and *contradictory* forms of thought. The result is a form of homogenizing logic that typically merges and unites things and which [in line with Freud's (1915) analysis] is guided by the processes of condensation, displacement, absence of the principle of non-contradiction, absence of time, and replacement of external reality with internal one.⁶ Compared to these Freudian outcomes, Matte Blanco's analysis makes important progress by identifying and formalizing the two fundamental principles regulating unconscious logic: the principles of *generalization* (PG) and *symmetry* (PS).

According to PG, the unconscious tends to regard an individual thing (e.g. person, object, concept) as a member or element of a class that contains other members, as though this class⁷ were a subclass of a more general one (Matte Blanco 1975). From this follows a preference for those *propositional functions* that constitute *increasing generality*, preserving the characteristics of the individual thing from which they are derived (Matte Blanco 1975).

Meanwhile, PS states that the unconscious system treats the inverse relation of any relation as though it were identical to the relation. That is, it treats asymmetrical relationships as though they were symmetrical (Matte Blanco 1975). Compelling consequences arise from this: (a) the impossibility of succession (which presupposes the concept of order and, therefore, the non-reversibility of any relationship); (b) identity between the part and the whole – the part is necessarily equal to the whole; and (c) in a conscious way, there is no exemplar or individual, only the class as an *infinite* whole. Based on these characteristics, symmetrical and generalizing logic typically regards things as homogenous and indivisible; in doing so, it involves the cancellation of differences and distinctions.

⁶ These characteristics are the specific modalities of what Freud (1911) defines as the *primary process*, rather than the *secondary process*. The former is characterized by the search for immediate gratification and the satisfaction of needs and transforms desires and needs into hallucination, while the latter is characterized by an ability and potential to delay the discharge of energy until the environmental circumstances are as favourable as possible.

⁷ According to Matte Blanco (1975: 33), the class is a whole, a collection that can contain anything within it: "A class is defined as the collection of all values that satisfy a propositional function of a variable".

Translated into the terms of everyday relationships, this way of organizing thought contributes to strange antinomies: for instance, if Tizio is the son of Caio, then – through unconscious logic – Caio can also be the son of Tizio.

However, at the exact opposite, there is the logic of rational conscious thought, which uses *asymmetric relations*; by its very essence, it *distinguishes*, *defines*, *discretizes*, and *differentiates*. Here, the semiotic methods of dealing with a class can only be of two types: conscious thought can focus on the class's boundaries or definitions (i.e. the particularities that distinguish one class from another), or the attention is fixed on the individuals that form the class (De Luca Picione *et al.* 2022). In either case, we have *propositional thinking* based on a logic that establishes relationships and connections between different elements. If an element belongs to a class, this insertion is regulated by a membership relation, which prevents us from considering more than one thing at a time. Thus, when conscious thought delimits a class or analyses the individuals of a class, it proceeds analytically with consideration of the variables of the prepositional function one by one. At the core of this type of knowledge of the world, based on systems of relationships that are connected to one another according to space-time and propositional coordinates, we find the *principle of asymmetry*, according to which all relationships are different from their inverse.

In relation to these two forms of logic, we can argue that:

- (1) These are fully semiotic methods and processes: symmetrical logic constitutes a reference epistemology of affective semiosis (therefore, of emotions as sense devices tending towards symmetrization and generalization), while asymmetrical logic is the reference of perceptual semiosis. Matte Blanco underlines how one of the fundamental components of emotion⁸ is the tendency to establish essentially unconscious and symmetrical relationships.⁹
- (2) Symmetrical and asymmetrical logics are always co-present and function simultaneously, being able to be observed as variously combined; neither one can be present in a pure, non-hybridized way under penalty of incurring forms of experience that are impracticable for the human mind.

⁸ According to Matte Blanco (1975), the concept of emotion has a position of absolute pre-eminence, defined as a psychophysical phenomenon which, in its components or psychological aspects, is composed of two different sets of phenomena: thought and sensation-feeling (i.e. by what drives action and/or by what is simply experienced as the expression of a bodily state).

⁹ In fact, every emotion refers both to the concrete object and to the class to which the object belongs, the potential of which is always at its highest level. This happens in all possible emotions, including falling in love, fear, discouragement, anger, and hatred.

The two extreme cases, in which either only perception or emotion acts, would determine the cancellation of any semiotic possibility to signify an experience. If only perception (i.e. asymmetrical logic) were active, the world would be totally fragmented into increasingly smaller and atomistic parts with no relationship between them due to the increase in the discretization of experience towards an indiscriminate proliferation of differences. Semiotic entropy would be total: the multitude of unrelated particular and punctual signs would produce a point-like reality incapable of any form of organization. At the same time, if emotion (i.e. symmetrical logic) were the only active process, it would lead every distinction to increasingly broader categories with instantaneous cancellation of all differences, diversity, and particularity within the context of interaction. Due to the full symmetrization of all relationships, each part would coincide with the whole (Matte Blanco 1975). Each sign (if there were any remaining) would be an exact replica of the whole, with no possibility of evolution or transformation.

Both conditions of the purity of the two semiotic modalities would, therefore, make any mental development impracticable due to the simultaneous presence of an infinite number of distinct signs in the case of pure perception and due to the impossibility of producing any sign because everything is made indistinct in the case of pure emotion. Emotion and perception must, therefore, be regarded as two co-present, intertwined semiotic modalities in any form of sense-making process and in memory, attention, imagination, fantasy, language, action, and so on. In all such processes, the possibility of elaborating a reasoning, developing a thought, elaborating on and retrieving a memory, imaginative and creative processes, and fantastic presentification are organized by the simultaneous presence – with different degrees and proportions – of the dividing modality of perceiving and the homogenizing modality of emotion.¹⁰

Affective semiosis and perceptual semiosis

We will now develop the two logics discussed above. In relation to emotion, the principle of symmetry shows us that the stimulus is traced back to increasingly

¹⁰ For instance, for the emergence of a memory, it is necessary to be able to trace a present experience (or a detail of it) to something already experienced, which requires distinguishing what is perceived in the experience through similarity (tending towards identification) with something experienced in the past. It is no different for imagination or fantasy, which creates a new representation in the present with a certain degree of distinction and delineation through the reorganization of semiotic materials experienced in the past. Even thought, after all, always operates through a continuous and recursive interaction of bringing parts into more general classes, identifying differences and distinctions, and establishing relationships.

greater categorization classes, being assimilated to a broader function of signification. This provides a local and temporary *version of mind* within which the world becomes observable, a scenario of performativity and meaningful actions (De Luca Picione 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; De Luca Picione, Freda 2014; Salvatore, Freda 2011; Salvatore *et al.* 2021; 2024). Therefore, the outcome of emotional processing is the construction of a hermeneutic-interpretative framework aligned with three fundamental processes:

- The *generalization* of the particularities attributed to the object, which is viewed as processing all of the characteristics or properties of the quality attributed to it and which each object with this quality could contain or express in a greater or lesser number (Matte Blanco 1975).
- The *maximization* of the magnitude of these particularities, through which the characteristics attributed to the object are supposed to be at their maximum degree or magnitude (Matte Blanco 1975).
- The *radiation* of the concrete object to every other object that is, in some way, represented by it (Matte Blanco 1975) and according to which the object comes to represent all similar objects.

Affective semiosis typically reduces diversity and differentiation. This produces the definition of a *field of experience*, which reduces the multi-potentiality of relationships becoming an effective perspective of meaning, from which point this means experiences, things, objects, people, and events. Therefore, affectivization acts as a field function, coming to define the salience of a form that summarizes and reverberates across all of the relationships activated in the context. In phenomenological terms, it is a form of *predicativity* that tends to transform the sign into a value of reality (i.e. creating a *reification* that is based on the identity and unity between the signifier and the signified). Due to this reification, a sign shifts from “*aliquid stat pro aliquo*” (“something that stands in the place of something else”) to something that is real and non-questionable because it is “taken for granted”, being generated through a local perspective (De Luca Picione, Marsico 2024).

On the one hand, affective semiosis, in this sense, reveals itself to be a purely unconscious modality, generating signs that have psychological significance and that can be intentional; that is, objects to which mental activity is directed (without which thought itself could not exist: Brentano 1874; De Luca Picione, Freda 2023; Gallagher, Zahavi 2020; Husserl 1900–1901; Searle 1983). It is a necessary and primary condition of pre-reflexivity that establishes the relational possibilities of the subject (Tossici, De Luca Picione 2024).

On the other hand, affective semiosis works as a device of *mental hypostatization* (De Luca Picione, Freda 2014; Salvatore 2004: 136; Salvatore, Freda 2011; Salvatore, Zittoun 2011) in which an object does not pre-exist the subject's experience but is generated within the mental domain through the very act of predicating it:

On the level of affective semiosis, *the relationship between predicate and argument is therefore inverted*: it is not the argument that logically precedes the predicate (as happens on the semantic level, where the predicate follows and adds an element of the not-yet-known to the already-known). Rather, the predicate *generates* the argument. (Salvatore 2004: 137)¹¹

At the basis of this hypostatization, it is possible to glimpse the persistence of the modalities of mental processing that pass under the name of *magical thinking* – that is, the modality that typically identifies the ‘sign’ and the ‘thing’ that is signified.

In *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer (1953) thoroughly explores the description of the pre-logical processes typical of magical thinking, hypothesizing that such modality represents both an ontogenetic and phylogenetic antecedent of human thought as the root of the subsequent development of scientific logic. According to this analogy, the primitive and infantile minds would share the use of this mode of thought in which the world manifests itself as a pure, expressive phenomenon and “the image does not represent the thing, but *is* the thing” (Cassirer 1953: 53). Due to this identity relation, there emerges a remarkable *trust* in one's connection with the world (whether it is nature or caregivers) in both primitives and infants. Thus, magic plays an important function of control as the first form of explanation of the world, namely a sense-making process that creates the essential background of life.

With reference to affective semiosis, the first relevant aspect we can draw from this reflection is that *magical thinking* – which Cassirer links back to the pre-scientific and expressive dimension of the ‘myth’ – is always *sentimentally connoted* and permeated by emotional elements. The sense-making process (*Sinngebung*) in action here realizes a peculiar condensation of the feeling dimension on the *favourable* or *unfavourable* value for human beings of their life environment. Similarly, as we have seen, the affective meaning affords humans an initial assessment of “good” or “bad” to stimuli from the external world. Therefore, in line with this theory, magical thinking assumes an affective connotation, and

¹¹ Our translation from Italian, emphasis added, R.D.L.P., G.T.

conversely, even affective processing is rooted in the cognitive framework of magical thinking.

Additionally, Cassirer (1944) remarks how this matrix of sense seeks to establish a relational power over reality, applying the principle of “universal sympathy”, namely “the belief that all things are connected”,¹² as a fundamental element of magical thinking. Similarly, we suggest that affective semiosis, through its symmetrical and homogenizing tendency, applies this holistic sense to the various elements of the field to provide a first basic order to reality, according to the undifferentiated notions of the Self and Other, inside and outside, signs and things, and phantasy and reality. Such considerations clarify why and how the symmetrical character of affective predicativity leads this field function to express a prevailing homogenizing tendency on the elements of the field.

As discussed in depth by David Savan (1981) in the light of the Peircean perspective of the sign, emotion works as a representamen, a sign of an immediate feeling¹³ (rather than *vice versa*) which, like every sign, stands for some ground (i.e. some respect or idea) of an object under the relationship of an interpretant, being attributed as a predicate to some subject. Affective semiosis configures a *horizon of meaning*, defining a *pertinence of the field* that makes possible the experience of the sign as present and real under a specific aspect or predicate.¹⁴

Thomas Sebeok reached similar conclusions when highlighting in Peirce a continuous tension between the polysemy of signs and the contextual relevance of a predicative function. For Sebeok, semiotic activity is not primarily aimed at communication but rather at modelling the world, given that a subject organizes and codifies the perceptual input, even before being able to communicate some-

¹² Remarkably, in *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy on Human Culture*, Cassirer (1944) unequivocally clarifies the relationship between primitive man's magical thinking and the rational ability to make differences. It is not a question of rational lack or cognitive incapacity. The fundamental assumption underlying this complex relationship between mythical magic and reason is based on affectivity: “Primitive man by no means lacks the ability to grasp the empirical differences of things. But in his conception of nature and life all these differences are obliterated by a *stronger feeling*: the deep conviction of a fundamental and indelible solidarity of life that bridges over the multiplicity and variety of its single forms” (Cassirer 1944: 109, our emphasis, R.D.L.P., G.T.).

¹³ An immediate feeling “not being mediated by a concept, is to be taken for a thing in itself, something *sui generis* and therefore is not susceptible to receiving any predicate. ‘If they are immediate, feelings are all the same’” (Savan 1976).

¹⁴ In this sense, Savan (1981), clearly explains that an emotion can produce an iconic sign of its object in terms of replication, where by *sinisgn* we mean “an actually existing thing or event that is a sign. It can only be so through its qualities; so that it implies a *qualisgn*, or rather several *qualisigns*” (CP 2.245–246; 1903).

thing (Sebeok, Danesi 2000). For the purpose of the present analysis, the relevant aspect is that this modelling of the world both responds to the species-specific biological endowment and is a contextual, local, and contingent activity in which the emotion, generated by the synergy of biological constraints with symbolic possibilities, offers the possibility for the individual to surpass simple, predefined reactivity to a stimulus (Hoffmeyer, 2014, 2015; Kull 2009, 2014, 2015).

Affective semiosis, therefore, works on the (re-)production of the semiotic field's background as a quality that is affectively experienced with respect to its individual parts, which are nothing other than its replicas. The issue of *quality* is properly connected in Peirce's Pharenoscopic Theory¹⁵ to the category of Firstness. In *Peirce's Theory of Quality*, Dewey (1935: 707) stated this relevance in such terms:

[T]he matter in question is incapable of another interpretation. Whether "feelings", for example, are or are not constituents of the natural world, it can be affirmed that, psychologically, it is through feeling (including sensation as such) that qualities present themselves in experience; that it is through volitional experiences that existence, as a matter of action-reaction, is actualized in experience, and it is through thought that continuities are experienced. All that is required on the ontological side is that existence itself is qualitative, not merely quantitative, is marked by stress and strain, and by continuities.

This argument offers important support for our proposal's semiotic approach. Affective semiosis, working on the quality of the field, offers the condition of potentiality for the concrete realization of the experience.

Complementarily, perceptive semiosis creates a salience of the figure with respect to the background, orienting towards the "differences" – that is, towards relationships of discontinuity with respect to the field.

Better to understand this second processual trajectory, pursued by perceptive semiosis, we recovered from Bateson (1979) the notion of the 'mind' (i.e. the self-regulating process of the "inside" and the "outside" of the organism in the relationship with the environment). Mind is a process activated by *differences*, the effects of which must be seen as *transformed* (i.e. codified) versions of the differences that preceded them. In this sense, perceptual semiosis can be regarded as transformations of the "difference" an individual experiences, continuously and

¹⁵ Peirce proposes three phenomenological categories defined as 'pharenoscopic' (where '*pharenon*' is a Greek term meaning 'phenomenon'): Firstness (which refers to pure qualities and potentiality), Secondness (indicating the realization, actual existence, determining relationships of reaction), and Thirdness (which refers to mediation).

within every relational system in which they participate. The implications of this are highly relevant:

- On the one hand, perception works through the delimitation of borders as primary possibilities for each potential difference (De Luca Picione 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; De Luca Picione *et al.* 2022; Puumeister *et al.* 2022).
- On the other hand, it requires an already established semiotic border that allows for the creation of relationships of *inside/outside*, *before/after*, *subject/object*,¹⁶ given that the possibility of detecting differences is, in some way, a function originally binary – that is, it is affirmative or negative with respect to some characteristic.

The purpose of this operation (and, in general, of the detection of signs in the form of percepts) is to give rise to a discretization of the world – that is, to a separation and fragmentation of a continuous flow of experiences, from which there is a need for the subsequent re-articulation of fragmented parts (De Luca Picione 2021a; De Luca Picione *et al.* 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). We find ourselves, therefore, in a situation that is opposed to that of affective semiosis, whose signs, once detected, must be articulated together through hypothesis, evaluation, judgement, correlation relations, opposition, and contradiction. In this sense, the discretization, in its succession, becomes a more mobile, transformative, discontinuous temporal dimension aimed at creating new meanings through, for example, the relations of contiguity between signs.¹⁷ In this argumentative context, Peirce's notion regarding consciousness contains highly important elements. According to Peirce (see the Lowell Lectures, held in 1866 – CP 1.358–470), all modifications of consciousness and states of consciousness take the form of an inference since they are based on ignorance, error, and fallibility rather than on self-evident certainty. Something becomes conscious when it no longer responds to the continuity of a sensation or a feeling, becoming conscious because it has collided with a difference, a discontinuity, or an unexpected reaction (in this sense, perceptual semiosis is precisely the realm of Secondness) (Fabbrichesi 2015).

¹⁶ It is very interesting to note that these three pairs are the first three splits that initiate the possibility of a conscious, reflective, and intentional process.

¹⁷ From this derives the relevance of the contiguity relationship with the *causal relationship*: the contiguity of discretized signs, in fact, is transformed into causal relationships between things and events. In this sense, we use the idea of *unlimited semiosis* as a continuous process of signification generated by the gradual succession of signs and by the interpretative work that they carry out in relation to what precedes.

The oscillatory and cyclical dynamics of affective and perceptive semiosis

We now move to a discussion of our second theoretical hypothesis, which we have advanced in relation to the two logics (symmetric and asymmetric) fuelling affective and perceptive semiosis, that is, the notion that they are always co-present and working simultaneously, only able to be observed as variously combined.

How does this intertwining work? Is it the perception of a stimulus or of an input that allows the activation of an emotion, or is it the emotion that allows a stimulus to be grasped? Therefore, the task now is to develop the discussion of their specific interaction dynamics.

As discussed at the outset of this work, the models that we defined as *linear* in the study of emotions consider the triggering of a specific emotion starting from a neutral state. However, this appears to be rather unlikely. If emotion is a state of activation of the body, it is not plausible to suppose that there is some sort of basic neutral state in which there is no emotion acting at any given moment of an individual's life. If this were the case, we would have to hypothesize that a stimulus takes over to generate any emotional activation from scratch when specific threshold levels of activation are exceeded. This type of perspective appears to be challenging to argue for and is not aligned with the phenomenology of emotional experience or with the recent acquisitions of affective neuroscience (Tossici, De Luca Picione 2022; Tossici *et al.* 2024). As Barrett (2017) sustained, there is always an “affective foundation” of an experience in every moment of life.

In line with this perspective, we propose a model of oscillatory movement in which the emotional and perceptive modes are always co-present and vary in intensity (Fig. 1) in a correlated, although not exactly matching, manner (over time, the peaks of the emotional mode do not correspond to those of the perceptual modality).

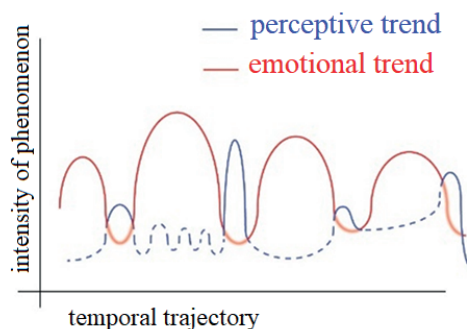


Figure 1. Examples of oscillatory and complementary trends of emotion and perception.

We believe that this oscillatory description finds a certain plausibility if we consider that every biological phenomenon (both physiological and psychological) is a process presenting a *bell-shaped curvilinear trend over time*, with phases of initiation and trigger or activation, a tendency to grow, and once reached, a final trend towards extinction.¹⁸ A large series of psychobiological phenomena can be given, such as the cyclical nature of the hunger/satiety and wake/sleep relationships, the typical trend of the attention curve, the polarization/depolarization phases occurring in the brain's synaptic connection processes,¹⁹ and the sensory capabilities of the eye and the visual process itself.²⁰

These tendencies of many somatic phenomena can also be witnessed in emotional processes. In fact, there is no emotion that is not accompanied by a wealth of bodily phenomena (e.g. heart palpitations, increased sweating, increased pressure and muscle tension, changes at the level of neurotransmitters and endocrine mediators, and changes in respiratory rhythms) that influence, above all, its intensity and duration. In terms of the amplification of experience, the empowering role of endocrine mediators (hormones) in powerfully prolonging the states of arousal that support emotional activation is now well known; this is counterbalanced in terms of the re-modulation aimed at extinguishing or reducing the emotion, by the variable of 'time.' This occurs because physiological bodily reactions are biologically time-limited and gradually weaken, although with differing durations and rates of decrease, unless contextual conditions continue to support emotional activation. It is, therefore, necessary always to consider the role of each of these factors – the body and time, in relation to the typical bell-shaped curve describing the oscillation of the affective and perceptive semiosis processes.

The oscillatory and cyclical dynamics between phases of emotional and perceptive activation are not regular in the sense of intensity or predictability. Generally speaking, we believe that affective semiosis (with a homogenizing, symmetrizing, and generalizing modality) constitutes a basin of attraction of meaning,

¹⁸ The bell curve is clearly an ideality, given that it is always subject to contextual variations. Depending on how the trigger threshold levels are reached (emotional triggering) and how they are reached over time (gradually or suddenly), particular forms of emotional development and their semiotic phenomenology can occur, for instance with phases of increased intensity that follow a gradual linear trend, a geometric progression trend, or abrupt steps in steps (De Luca Picione, Freda 2016a, 2016b).

¹⁹ We are particularly referring to the cyclical progression between the de-polarization, hyper-polarization and re-polarization phases of the cell, which define the intervals of possible activation (and refractoriness).

²⁰ In the visual process, there is an alternation of the development of receptor sensitivity and a refractory period, considered as the need for a time interval between two stimuli necessary for the second stimulus to evoke a response.

while perceptive semiosis (with the function of decreeing a discontinuity) represents catastrophic passages from one emotional basin to another (see De Luca Picione, Freda 2016a, 2016b, for in-depth analyses of the semiotic developments of René Thom's catastrophe theory). The notion stems from chaos theories and studies of complex dynamical systems since it applies very well to our discussion.

Affective semiosis, in this sense, attracts and absorbs the variations and discrepancies that perceptive processes detect towards the meanings that organize the subject's relationship with their environment, with all the more attractive force, the greater the intensity and development of the own predicative and reifying function.

In Fig. 1, during the phases in which the perceptive semiosis increases in intensity (i.e. those areas in which the peaks of the red curve tend upwards), the homogenizing semiotic modes are also activated. For instance, in an affective state of fear, an individual may find themselves within a predicative function of danger, inducing the perceptual semiotic system to linger on the "*who goes there?*" aspect with respect to any sign and event and to read each sign of the context within the frame of a sense of danger. As a process of difference, perceptive semiosis will, therefore, function within a basin of attraction of the meanings generated by affective semiosis, always requiring a framework within which to be able to define what is different or distinct, to grasp the differences only once a relevant (namely, pertinent) domain has been defined (De Luca Picione, Freda 2014). Perceptive semiosis demonstrates that it can only operate in a field of semiotic continuity. The perceptive process, therefore, can grasp the figure in the background precisely because the background is made homogeneous by an affective semiosis, which, although reduced, never ceases and guarantees the minimum conditions of homogeneity so that something distinct or different may be grasped within the field.

How can we move from one basin of affective semiosis to another? Let us assume that there are at least three typical transition situations:

- (1) The bodily activation physiologically attenuates its intensity (for example, if we are hungry and eat). So, the perceptive function acquires newly greater semiotic freedom and, therefore, the greater possibility of diversifying and distinguishing things, situations, and events. After the meal, we typically cease to mean/signify anything as a possible food and turn our attention to the surrounding world with greater degrees of freedom, extension, and vastness.
- (2) A contextual and cultural mediation creates a domain of new pertinence for the subject: the change of context diminishes the ongoing

semiotic emotional activation in favour of another, conveying novel signs that function as catalysts for a new semiotic, hermeneutic, and experiential scenario. As an example, consider entering a lunch break in a gym, in which a temporary different relevance function could be activated, generated by different emotions, such as the experience of competition and rivalry, the search for well-being and beauty, or the fulfilment of erotic desire. In this sense, cultural and social institutions work as semiotic structures of meanings that organize the relationships between components and between components and outsiders. Cultural institutions are the core of affective semiosis (Fornari 1976).

- (3) The occurrence of sudden signs makes truly catastrophic passages of meaning: the affective activation curve no longer grows gradually but rises exponentially or even jumps discontinuously and suddenly to another emotional activation level, without interpretative mediation. Think of abrupt events or sudden situations, in which the unexpected appearance of a certain sign exceeds the affective basin's attraction capacity. The sign, in that case, cannot be absorbed within the present pertinential domain of meaning, and instead generates new ones. The sudden event "triggers" a different emotion that reconfigures the relationships between the subject and the field in the name of a new pertinence (a new ground is suddenly elicited, namely a new psychic scenario of affective semiosis).

These examples of the passage from one state of affective semiosis to another are situations of transformation and change that can be read as passages from one continuity to another, through the semiotic mediation of perceived signs.

Conclusion

We began this work by presenting home critical points of study perspectives on emotions before examining the epistemological reflections of Matte Blanco's psychoanalytic theory and relating them to a semiotic perspective. This allowed us to reread emotional and perceptive processes under the lens of semiotic analysis as (semiotic) field functions. Thus, we have presented and discussed two forms of semiosis – affective and perceptive – and highlighted how the two operate on the basis of each other. These two semiotic processes have been separately analysed in their specific characteristics but are also considered always to co-present, interact,

and complement one another. The two semiotic processes guarantee the *continuity* (tending towards symmetrization) and *discontinuity* (aimed at asymmetry) of the field.

Affective semiosis makes it possible to define and create a field of meaning and performativity aimed at action through the meanings generated in it. Perceptive semiosis takes charge of defining what is different and distinct in the field, starting from the hermeneutic framework and only once a domain of pertinence has been defined by the affective function.

Finally, we undertook an examination of the specific dynamics that characterize the intertwining of affective and perceptive semiosis using non-linear descriptive models. In this sense, it has been modelled that their intertwining follows an oscillatory, complementary trend, figured as a curve with a characteristic bell-shaped trend that is recognizable in many of the psychobiological processes that relate to our physiology. This allowed us to underscore the essential role of the body, sign, and time variables in signification processes.

What does this modelling lead to? What implications can it contain?

Firstly, this reflection allows us to define affect as a phenomenon, function, and semiotic field process. In fact, affective semiosis enables the definition of the parameters of a relational field within which a certain degree of performativity and a certain directionality are possible.

Secondly, and in connection with the first point, the model indicates that it is not the individual subject who gets emotional, but rather the dynamic system of relationships is reconfigured over time (in topological and spatial terms) starting from certain pertinences and specific predications. Therefore, we do not have an “emotional individual”; rather, the entire relational context is created and predicts a certain state of the world through the emergence of reified semiotic forms. In this sense, communicative systems are an expression of the world model configured through the complementarity of affective and perceptive semiosis.

Thirdly, this gives rise to the notion that perceptive semiosis, aimed at identifying differences, can only act if a background, functioning as an element of continuity, remains stable (De Luca Picione 2022; De Luca Picione *et al.* 2025a). The differences (i.e. discrete semiotic elements) are the result of the organism’s ability to grasp transformations in some relationships while others remain unchanged. This reflection sheds new light on the notion of ground and interpretant in Peirce’s theory. Alongside functioning as a hermeneutic framework for interpreting signs, the ground allows us to maintain a temporary element of stability to discretize the elements of experience.

Within this framework, affective semiosis appears to be a theme of absolute relevance for contemporary thought as the foundational process of every form

of signification, sense-making, categorization, and construction of interpretation models of experience and the world. It is, in fact, a necessary and primordial condition of pre-reflexivity that establishes the subject's relational possibilities in the world (Tossici, De Luca Picione 2024). To examine it in its complexity, it is necessary to overcome overly simplifying visions. Emotions are not only mere reactions to one's environment, biological "facts", cognitive devices that generate appraisals of the world, or vectors to spread cultural meanings. Instead, all of these aspects contribute to the definition of the emotional experience; the proposed semiotic field model seeks to integrate and evaluate all of them in their complex dynamics of mutual interaction.

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Semiosi affettiva e semiosi percettiva. Una teoria del campo semiotico psicoanalitica fondata sulla teoria di Matte Blanco

A partire da alcuni punti critici del programma di ricerca sulle emozioni, questo articolo si propone di presentare e discutere un modello di campo dinamico a partire dall'interazione tra semiosi affettiva e semiosi percettiva. Concettualmente, il modello si fonda sul contributo epistemologico della teoria psicoanalitica di Ignacio Matte Blanco, che formalizza due tipi di logica alla base dell'esperienza umana: la logica asimmetrica (costituente la base dell'attività del pensiero razionale cosciente e del suo funzionamento attraverso processi di distinzione e separazione) e la logica simmetrica (costituente la base dei processi inconsci, volti all'omogeneizzazione e alla generalizzazione). Di conseguenza, la semiosi affettiva è caratterizzata da una predominanza di modalità simmetrizzanti e generalizzanti, che tendono ad omogeneizzare le differenze e a rendere tutti gli stimoli indistinti e indifferenziati secondo una funzione di *pertinentizzazione* (ovvero, attraverso la definizione di un *ground*– secondo Peirce). Questo fondamento offre una stabilità temporanea per discretizzare gli elementi dell'esperienza. Al contrario, la semiosi percettiva si concentra sulla discretizzazione e sull'identificazione, operando attraverso il riconoscimento delle differenze all'interno del campo pertinentizzato. La semiosi percettiva, che cerca di identificare le differenze, può funzionare solo se rimane stabile uno sfondo che funge da elemento di continuità. Infine, lo studio esplora alcune dinamiche specifiche che illustrano il necessario intreccio tra semiosi affettiva e percettiva attraverso l'applicazione di modelli descrittivi non lineari, caratterizzati da andamenti oscillatori e complementari.

Afektiiivne semioos ja pertseptiivne semioos. Matte Blanco põhinev semiootiline psühhoanalüütiline väljateooria

Võttes lähtekohaks emotsioonide uurimisel päevakorras olevad kriitilised punktid, püütakse käesolevas artiklis tutvustada ning käsitleda *afektiiivse* ja *pertseptiivse semioosi* vahelise vastastikmõju dünaamilise välja mudelit. Kontseptuaalselt põhineb mudel Ignacio Matte Blanco psühhoanalüütilise teooria epistemoloogilisel panusel, milles formuleeritakse inimkogemuse aluseks olevad kaks loogika liiki: asümmeetriline (teadvusliku ratsionaalse mõtletegevuse alus, toimib eristus- ja eraldusprotsesside kaudu) ja sümmeetriline (mitteteadvuslike protsesside alus, on suunatud ühtsustamisele ja üldistamisele). Afektiiivset semioosi iseloomustab vastavalt sümmeetrilisust soosivate ja

üldistavate modaalsuste ülekaal, mis kaldub erinevusi homogeniseerima ning muutma kõiki stiimuleid ebamäärasteks ja eristamatuteks vastavalt *olulisustamisfunktsioonile* [s.t peirce'iliku aluspõhja (*ground*) definitsiooni järgi]. See aluspõhi pakub ajutist stabiilsust, et kogemuselemente aredaks muuta. Pertseptiivne semioos keskendub seevastu diskretiseerimisele ja identifitseerimisele, toimides erinevuste tunnustamise kaudu olulisustatud väljal. Pertseptiivne semioos, mis püüab tuvastada erinevusi, saab toimida üksnes juhul, kui järjepidevuselemendina toimiv taust püsib stabiilsena. Lõpuks vaadeldakse uurimuses konkreetseid dünaamikaid, mis illustreerivad afektiivse ja pertseptiivse semioosi paratamatut läbipõimumist mittelineaarsete deskriptiivsete mudelite rakendamisel, mida iseloomustavad võnkuvad ja täiendavad suundumused.