Sign Systems Studies 45(1/2), 2017, 70–87

The clash of semiotic civilizations

Massimo Leone

Department of Philosophy, University of Turin
Turin, Italy
e-mail: massimo.leone@unito.it

Abstract. Why was Greimas' theoretical proposal so divisive? Why did his disciples worship the new analytical method, while his detractors harshly rejected it? The article claims that the strength, as well as the weakness, of Greimassian semiotics consists in positing a rational way to determine the range of meanings of a text. Semiotic interpretive methods that are more aware of the diachronic dimension, such as Eco's interpretive semiotics or Lotman's semiotics of culture, inflect this view by anchoring the rationality of interpretation to the reasonableness of a community of interpreters that is, by definition, changing over time. The article claims that, on the one hand, Greimas' theoretical stance is in line with the predominant 'culture of meaning' distilled by the Western civilization from the Greeks until the Enlightenment, stressing the value of truth as correspondence between textual evidence and its hermeneutics. On the other hand, the article also suggests that Eco's and Lotman's insistence on the dynamic character of hermeneutic communities entails a politics of meaning meant to preserve the core of the Western 'semiotic civilization' against threats that aim at deeply subverting it from both the inside or the outside of the semiosphere.

Keywords: Algirdas Greimas; Umberto Eco; Juri Lotman; interpretation; meaning; semiotics; Western civilization

"*La civilisation n'est autre chose que le mode de végétation propre à l'humanité.*"
(Victor Hugo, *Œuvres complètes* 4: 495–496)

1. Introduction

There is no better way of honouring a scholar than critically assessing and prolonging his or her work. Unfortunately, Greimas' theory was so compelling that it attracted both the best minds of his generation as well as the most intellectually subservient ones. Several decades after Greimas' passing away, the frenzy first generated by the novelty of his

https://doi.org/10.12697/SSS.2017.45.1-2.05

method long gone, it is time not only to re-evaluate structural and generative semiotics but also to defend it: in recent years, semiotics-bashing has become a popular sport, mostly performed through cliché arguments and very little knowledge of semiotics itself. Even the most authoritative critics of semiotics have often thrown out the baby with the bathwater (Leone 2014: 2–3).

There is only one serious way of talking about Greimas' contributions to semiotics, and it is to read, re-read, and comment on his texts, better if perused in the original French. The prose of the Franco-Lithuanian scholar might seem abstruse to many, or old-fashioned in its rhetorical choices, yet it is more and more evident that what came after Greimas, and is now increasingly pervading both highbrow and lowbrow culture, is such a shallow combination of superficial cultural studies and, worse, conspiracy thought, that one can only be nostalgic about the glorious time of humanities in which scholars like Greimas still believed that a rational grasp of cultural and social facts could be attained through designing and applying a rigorous method (Leone 2017).

Nevertheless, the present paper does not encourage its readers to adopt a nostalgic gaze on Greimas and his semiotics as though they represented a golden age of human thought, now lost forever. On the contrary, the paper will claim that the best attitude to look at Greimas' marvellous theoretical castle is *vintage*: contemporary semioticians should understand the principles of the internal harmony of Greimas' semiotics, pinpoint those elements that, like the wooden clogs of the 1970s or the shoulder pads of the 1980s, should never become fashionable again – not only because they are ugly, but also because they are impractical –, and select those elements that, instead, are sorely needed in the contemporary design of humanities. As the present paper will seek to demonstrate, one of them is particularly precious: rational enthusiasm.

No "vintage" assessment and refashioning, however, will ever be possible without a merciless critical assessment of Greimas' foundational texts. It is a pity that they are not read anymore as they deserve, partly because the mindset that they express is now dangerously out of fashion, partly because they are badly or poorly translated or not translated at all, and partially and mostly because they are too often diluted in companions and handbooks that transmit the superficial charm of Greimas' theory but not its fundamentals. What follows is a critical analysis of the foundations of Greimas' semiotic theory, which were first laid with the publication of *Sémantique structurale: recherche et méthode* published in 1966 by the prestigious French publisher Larousse [the (more cautious) title of the 1983 English translation is *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*].

2. Reality and signification in Greimas

In a section entitled "Signification and the human sciences" Greimas (1983[1966]: 1) writes that "[...] if the natural sciences ask questions in order to understand how man and the world are, the human sciences pose the question, more or less explicitly, of what both of them signify". This sentence posits a neat separation between knowledge of the being of reality and knowledge of the signification of reality. That could be regarded as a postulate of Greimas' semiotics. Indeed, both his own works and those of his followers tend to "de-ontologize" semiotics drastically, reframing and deconstructing in structural terms any possible indentation of 'reality' into 'language'. For Greimas and his school, reality might well exist, but it is not semiotically relevant, unless it is translated into semiotic forms, that is, into patterns of signification.

The way in which Greimas approached the issue of images and their capacity to "represent reality" is the most efficacious example of such attitude. As the Franco-Lithuanian semiotician pointed out in the essay "*Sémiotique figurative et sémiotique plastique*" ["Figurative semiotics and plastic semiotics"; 1984], images do not represent reality; admitting that would mean tainting the immanence of the semiotic meta-language with a reference to the ontological dimension. Instead, Greimas contends that images are "visual texts" that refer to the articulation of the semantic plane of the "macro-semiotics of the world" in order to shape the articulation of their own expressive plane. In simpler words, and with an example, we do not recognize grapes in Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit* because the painting faithfully represents reality, but because it skillfully refers to the semantic articulation of fruit in most Western European visual culture in order to construct its own expressive plane though the usage of the appropriate plastic formants (lines, colours, and positions). For Greimas, then, images do not depict reality but the semiotic appraisal of it that circulates in a given cultural context.

An even more macroscopic example of Greimas' attitude of de-ontologization is his treatment of time. As it is well known, most of the disagreement between Greimas and Paul Ricoeur stemmed from the fact that, whereas for the French philosopher narratives are one of the most powerful means though which human beings account for time, for the Franco-Lithuanian semiotician, time does not matter as much as temporality, that is, the illusion of a temporal dimension that, again, texts and narratives construct through their internal dynamics, whose analysis should therefore be independent from any preoccupation about the ontology of time (Greimas, Ricoeur 2000).

3. Greimas' rationality and Eco's reasonableness

Some exponents of the Greimassian school have radicalized the immanentism of structuralist, and especially generative, semiotics to an unbearable extent, translating

any potential reference to an extra-textual reality into the inner labyrinth of the theory. The philosophical purposes of this attitude, however, were clear to Greimas and, to a certain extent, were also perfectly understandable and laudable in the context of 20th-century humanities. Greimas used to summarize such an attitude with the saying "*hors du texte, point de salut*", ["outside of the text, there is no salvation"], paraphrasing the famous theological sentence "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*" ["outside of the church there is no salvation"] contained in the catechism of the Catholic Church and attributed to the 3rd-century bishop Cyprian of Carthage.

Greimas was thus attached to the idea that semiotics should deal with what is inside texts, and not with what is outside of them, for he believed that keeping faith to methodological immanentism was the only way to guarantee the rationality of interpretation. Talking about the meaning of texts as something that emanates from their inner structures and not as something that is attributed to them from the outside (by the psychology of the interpreter, by the interpretive tendencies that predominate in societies according to ethnicity, class, gender, etc., or according to reference to a reality supposed to exist outside of the text) was meant to preserve the rationality and, therefore, the inter-subjectivity of interpretation: how can an agreement about the meaning of something be reached, if this something is not seen as a structure, as a text, as a system that inherently forbids or discourages certain interpretations and encourages certain others, guiding the reader toward them?

On the one hand, Greimas' ambition – prolonging, to a certain extent, that of previous structural students of narratives, such as Vladimir Propp – was that of providing a rational method to grasp meaning, not only in plain discourse but also and above all in the elaborate, duplicitous, and subtly ambiguous linguistic creations of literature. The high point of such ambition manifested itself in Greimas' *Maupassant* (1975), a didactic exploit meant to display the utmost potentialities of the Greimassian method for the analysis of literary narratives.

On the other hand, such a project of rational description of meaning joined, also to a certain extent, that of Umberto Eco's interpretive semiotics: in Eco too, the so-called *intentio operis* is central; readers who attentively decode a text should aim neither at their subjective reading of it (*intentio lectoris*) nor at the meaning that the author supposedly intended to instill in the text (*intentio auctoris*) – which is frequently, and especially in literature, radically different from the actual meaning of the text; they should seek to seize, instead, the *intentio operis* of a text, that is, the way in which the text itself designs a "model reader" by encouraging or discouraging certain interpretive moves (Eco 1979). Drawing his philosophical semiotic framework from Peirce's vision of the sign and semiosis rather than – like Greimas – from Saussure's linguistics and, even more keenly, Hjelmslev's glossematics, Eco's proposal of a method for the inter-subjectively sustainable interpretation of texts and narratives does not strictly claim to be a rational but a reasonable one.

That is the main difference between Eco and Greimas, and that is also their strength or their weakness, depending on the point of view from which their divergences are observed. Eco does not doubt that a reasonable agreement can be found, within a community of interpreters, when seeking to determine the meaning of a text (Eco 1990). Faithful to Peirce's quite dynamic semiotic philosophy, however, Eco does not affirm that this agreement is a permanent one, eternally inscribed in the structure of a text like a Platonic idea. He suggests, on the contrary, that such reasonable agreement will essentially depend on the interpretive encyclopedia shared by the community of interpreters. Such encyclopedia is by definition mutable; Eco does not primarily focus on the causes and laws of such mutation, but aims at providing some abstract guidelines that, independently from the community and the text at stake, might guide the interpretive work of readers. From this point of view, Eco provides a sort of semiotic version of Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative rationality, in which what matters is not prescribing the rationality of the content of communication but that of the empty framework in which such content is communicatively dealt with (Habermas 1987).

According to this perspective, moreover, Juri Lotman's semiotics can be considered as a natural complement of Eco's theory, since it precisely bears on the semiotic analysis of those socio-cultural dynamics that modify the communitarian setting in which a given interpretation takes place. Lotman does not focus on causes or on agencies of changes in the semiosphere either, but at least he envisages a systematic study of how the "environment of meaning" mutates over time (Lotman 1990).

Greimas disregards time. He does not contemplate that changes in the semiosphere will affect the ways in which readers interpret texts. His ambition is to propose not a reasonable, but a rational method for the analysis of meaning, which could be valid both cross-culturally and trans-historically. He does not want only to define a framework in which interpreters would reasonably discuss the meaning of a text, like Eco, nor a dynamics that would affect the characteristics of this framework through time and space, like Lotman. Greimas wants to define a text's range of meaning, its immutably and inter-subjectively valid content, and its inherent voice. That is Greimas' strength and charm, but also his weakness, and perhaps the ingredient that has made many of his texts age much faster than those of other, less ambitious, semioticians.

4. Relativizing Greimassian semiotics: trends and dangers

Perhaps as a reaction to or even as a provocation against the universalism of structural anthropology and generative semiotics, in the last decades, anthropological research has increasingly been focusing on the extreme variability of meaning. Moreover, such research has found out that, in the passage from culture to culture both in time and space (a robust school of historical anthropology has developed in parallel with socio-cultural

and mainly synchronic anthropology), it is not only meaning that changes but also the framework of meaning. On the one hand, semiotic anthropology has investigated the variety of linguistic and semiotic ideologies, that is, ways of conceiving the production, circulation, and also the destruction of meaning in society (including those semiotic ideologies that deny the existence of a separate dimension called 'meaning') (Silverstein 1979; Silverstein, Urban 1996); on the other hand, certain trends of post-structural anthropology itself (Descola, for instance) have proposed that human groups vary even in the way in which they conceive the ontology of the world in which they live (Descola 2013). Hence, given the extreme variability of semiotic and even ontological ideologies, how is it still possible to maintain the universality of certain Greimassian theoretical ingredients and the corresponding analytical tools? How can one apply the semiotic square to the analysis of a non-Western and/or non-contemporary text, if the framework of meaning in which this text is usually read, for instance native American cosmologies, systematically disregards that principle of dialectic opposition on which the semiotic square is essentially based?

At the same time, as it was suggested earlier, one should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. First, while acknowledging the profound and sometimes extreme variety of 'cultures of meaning', the semiotic anthropologist should not give up the ambition of comparing cultures; by doing so, indeed, anthropology would turn into a poorly descriptive and quite sterile exercise, as it has been the case with too much recent post-colonial anthropology. Furthermore, such a theoretical stance would justify a fragmentary view of human culture, ignoring its lines of continuity and, what is worse, disintegrating any ground for a common ethics. In a world with no common framework for meaning, misunderstanding is the only option. Abstract semiotic models like the very articulate and powerful one developed by Greimas and his school should, therefore, be conceived not as a point of arrival but as a point of departure for comparative analysis, offering a solid framework in relation to which contrasts could be observed and differences pinpointed.

To give an example: Greimas' treatment of actors, time, and space in discourse is quite Cartesian. Meaning effects of discursive choices in the construction of these narrative coordinates are explained with reference to an abstract instance of enunciation, as though all narrative was the result of a projection of simulacra departing from this abstract point. While perfectly suitable for analysing actorial, temporal, and spatial structures in most Indo-European languages and narratives, this framework is incompatible with languages and cultures in which the articulation of space and time is radically different from the Western one, for instance in cultures where the past is seen as something that spatially lies in front of the speakers, since it is already known, and not behind them (Leone 2014: 12–13). However, it cannot be denied that, in this case too, relying on the Greimassian theory of discourse and enunciation and realizing

that it does not properly capture the construction of space and time in some linguistic and semiotic cultures is an indispensable point of departure, since it provides a negative framework in contrast to which the specificities of even the most "exotic" semiotic ideology can be described, at least in relation to what it is not.

Second, admitting that the claimed universality of the Greimassian method is shaky when it is confronted with texts distant in time and space does not necessarily mean that it should be rejected or that more universal frameworks of meaning, yet to be elaborated, should replace it.

On the one hand, it can be deduced from such interpretive difficulties that semiotics, even the most abstract one, never grows outside of a specific culture of meaning. Greimas opened one of his most important books, *Du Sens* (1970), by saying that "it is extremely difficult to speak about meaning and to say something meaningful about it" (Greimas 1987[1970]: 7); he did not say: "it is difficult to say something definitive about meaning". No matter how the meta-language of the semiotician seeks to detach itself from the language-object that it analyses, such a meta-language will always stem from a precise "culture of meaning", from a semiotic ideology that "contaminates" the designing of frameworks within which the rationality of a textual interpretation is gauged. Methods should, therefore, be considered in the same ways as Louis T. Hjelmslev (1961[1943]) would consider interpretations: even if they cannot be exhaustive, they can nevertheless be ranked. Greimas' method, like any other method, cannot be completely immune from being biased: it was conceived within a specific meta-semiotic ideology. It is, however, much less biased and more encompassing than less ambitious frameworks of meaning. To give an example, it is certainly true that Greimas' way of conceiving of narratives as essentially centred on an object of value longed for by a subject does not precisely adapt to narrative cultures that lack such a strong idea of 'subject' or do not define it as a 'chasing agent'; at the same time, it is also true that Greimas' model is more abstract, flexible, and, as a consequence, encompassing than Propp's narrative framework, on which it elaborates.

On the other hand, while refining one's awareness of the cultural specificities of one's meta-language, one should not give in to the intellectual cliché that all biases are to be immediately condemned and discarded from the compass of the researcher. There are no humanities without biases. Furthermore, in the humanities and perhaps also in social sciences, biases one is aware of are nothing but a manifestation of the point of view, as well as the specific interest, from which other cultures are observed, analysed, and interpreted. The idea that every interpretation should be in function of the 'Other', from the point of view of the 'Other', and in total obliviousness of one's 'local knowledge' is not only utopian but also, from a certain point of view, counter-productive. It generates a paradoxical semiotic ideology according to which the only way to know the 'Other' is to forget oneself or, worse, to hide oneself behind a curtain of pseudo-neutrality.

The desire to interpret texts should, indeed, never be detached from the awareness that such a desire enfolds in a conversation that links one's cognitions, but also one's emotions, with the idea of an audience. Semioticians, as well as anthropologists, do not interpret other cultures for an abstract, universal readership; they do so because they somehow anticipate the interpretive needs of a community to which they more or less belong, although in the guise of "outposts outside of the semiosphere". Cultivating one's biases means also refining the awareness that one's interpretation stems from a community and for a community, although it seeks to reach out to distant worlds, times, and spaces.

5. Toward a politics of interpretation

Admitting the inevitability of biases entails a politics of interpretation. To return to Greimas' structural semantics and the complex method that, on such premises, the Franco-Lithuanian semiotician developed all along his career, one might look at their specific biases not as something to be stigmatized and purged, but as something that hints at the specific interpretive community to which Greimas' theory spoke and still speaks. Such a community essentially coincides with the "Western culture", meant here as that complex ontological and semiotic ideology that emerged at the genesis of the Greek thought and culminated in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Entire libraries have been dedicated to describe the development, ramifications, and main characteristics of this huge and hugely influential tradition. Its features cannot be properly summarized or even hinted at in a single paper. One should at least underline, however, that a fundamental feature of the Western episteme becomes the centre of Greimas' semiotic theory: the idea of truth. In Greimas, truth does not consist, like in most logic, in a correspondence between reality and representation, ontology and semiosis. As it was indicated at the onset of this paper, for Greimas, reality is an extra-semiotic element that should not intrude in the analysis of language. But truth is an essential idea in Greimassian semiotics as well in two even more fundamental regards.

First, Greimas' generative path is articulated in such a way that the distinction between truth, secret, lie and falsity is inherent to it. 'Truth' is an effect of meaning largely independent from reality, yet this does not mean that it is independent from discourse too. In other words, Greimas seems to postulate that, within a text, it is always possible to determine rationally whether its structures convey a message of truth, disguise it under a secret, mask it in a lie, or subvert it as falsity. Truth is an effect of meaning that it would be impossible to grasp if the idea of a hierarchy of values of veridiction were not part of the epistemic background of structural semiotics. Not all cultures cherish the value of truth in the same way. The distinction between that which is and appears and that which is not and does not appear (truth/falsity), as well as the

distinction between that which is not but appears and that which is but does not appear (lie/secret) is not as sharp and does not configure such a stark hierarchy in all cultures of meaning. In certain oriental philosophies, for instance, such as some trends of Zen meditation, separating these four modalities of discursive veridiction is not as important as accepting their indistinctiveness, to the point that deconstructing the hierarchy of epistemic values even turns into the main goal of signification.

The pre-eminence of truth in the ideological semiotics that gave rise to Greimas' method is, instead, evident in the internal structure of its generative path as well as in the kind of conversation that the interpretations that Greimas and his followers have been producing thanks to this path implicitly entertain. As was underlined above, humanities inexorably utter their meta-discourse "for someone", although they are not always necessarily aware of this (but they should). The "someone" for which the Greimassian semiotic theory has worked over the last five decades can be variously defined, but it is certainly an abstract member of the community for which the distinction among a truthful interpretation, a false interpretation, a conspiracy theory, and a lie is essential. Greimas implicitly worked all his life for a community of interpreters to whom determining whether an interpretation is truthful or not – in the sense that it is more or less in keeping with the nature of the semio-linguistic features that are inter-subjectively attestable in discourse – crucially matters.

That is not always necessarily the case. One could easily think of contemporary non-Western cultures in which the efficacy of interpretation is, for instance, more important than its truthfulness (think about the way in which religious fundamentalists, for example, conceive of the hermeneutic work). But one could also easily conceive of a historical and anthropological development as a consequence of which the epistemic impulse given by the Greeks to the Western culture more than two millennia ago slowly but inexorably dwindles. One could imagine a scenario in which Western Europeans will not care anymore about truth as their ancestors did and will adhere, on the contrary, to an ontological and semiotic ideology of meaning in which, for instance, a Nietzschean idea of interpretation prevails, one in which the value of an interpretation is not a measure of its structural accuracy but a result of the rhetorical and sometimes even brutal force by which it is promoted.

It should not be forgotten that also the second pillar of the Western civilization, Jerusalem, underlined the importance of truth in one of its commandments, "do not lie". Why is such a commandment there? Because in the Judeo-Christian civilization too, the prevailing ontological and semiotic ideology was such as to push forward a social scenario in which the members of a community can live together only if they at least constantly strive to be truthful, to treasure the correspondence between what they think, feel, see, and what they say, write, represent. The Judeo-Christian idea of the morality of presenting the truth to the world has complemented, in the history of the Western civilization, the Greek idea that the world has a truth to be presented.

A sophisticated perspective on the history of the Western civilization, however, should suggest that such ethical and gnoseological pre-eminence of truth is not a biological feature of humanity but a long-term cultural choice, which could admit alternatives and be subverted. Semiotics inherently conceives of human beings as free agents, able to use their signs in order to lie as well as in order to tell the truth, or to combine both in various manners. Eco (1976: 7) famously defined semiotics as the "discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie"; he did not mean, though, that signs "must be used for lying"; they can be used for either telling the truth or lying. Nevertheless, at a meta-level, the epistemic freedom of human beings in relation to language – i.e., the fact that they are not bound to use signs as truthful signals as other animal species are but they can actually weave them to present an untruthful depiction of reality, or an untruthful interpretation of discourse – entails the possibility of different epistemic ideologies. It entails, for instance, the possibility that a society can exist or develop in which lies are not only tolerated, but also encouraged; a society in which what matters is not the correspondence between discourse and reality or the harmony between discourse and interpretation but the efficacy of simulacra, their ability to grant their utterers a modality to "get by" among more or less conflicting relations in society, for instance.

6. The mutability of the communities of interpreters

Eco's emphasis on the importance of the "community of interpreters" in a dynamic sense complements Greimas' theoretical proposal in two ways: it points at the changing nature of interpretive frameworks and ideologies and, as a consequence, makes the urgency of a 'politics of interpretation' more cogent.

As it was pointed out earlier, unlike Greimas, Eco does not seek to provide a methodology for the rational determination of the content of a textual interpretation; he tries to outline the empty framework and the general rules for the reasonable interpretation of a text. That ultimately means that, while in Greimas, for instance, there is only one way in which the abstract narrative direction of a text can be seen as shaping its meaning – that is, a direction that flows from the contract between the sender and the subject to the sanction between the subject and the receiver –, in Eco, nothing intrinsically forbids the cultural evolution of a community slowly transforming this narrative standard to the point that, at some stage, the community actually considers as meaningful those narratives in which the hero is positively sanctioned by the receiver, because he or she did not attain the object of value or even voluntarily gave up the quest for it.

To give an example, the evolution of new religious communities stemming and often violently departing from older ones often entails dramatic changes in the way

they construct not only meaning (for instance, the meaning of "sacred" texts), but also the "meaning of meaning", (that is, the way in which they maintain that a sacred text should be read in order for it to transmit some cultural value to the community). In the contemporary religious world, as an increasing number of individuals is attracted by so-called "fundamentalism", new communities are shaped around the idea that sacred texts – which these new communities apparently share with non-fundamentalist communities – should be read in a completely different way in order for them to exude that meaning which will subsequently inform the entire life of the community at every level, from the regulation of finance to sexual behaviours.

From the point of view of Greimassian semiotics, one could argue that these fundamentalist interpretations of sacred texts are wrong or, at least, that they are poorer than mainstream interpretations, since they do not adopt a rational method in order to pair the expressive plane of these texts with what they are supposed to mean. For instance, for Greimas and his school, as well as for most mainstream interpreters of sacred and non-sacred texts, the syntagmatic continuity of discourse must be taken into account when determining its meaning; the fact that a lexeme comes before or after another lexeme is an essential component of the *intentio operis* of the text, suggesting readers how to pinpoint its proposal of signification. In a fundamentalist reading, instead, the rationality of this very basic interpretive rule is subverted; excerpts are detached from the syntagmatic chain of the text and rearranged in the interpretation without particular attention to the original disposition of the elements; such work of textual *bricolage*, which allows the interpreter, for instance, to put together "quotations" whose ingredients do not actually belong to the same textual location, is evidently irrational in Greimassian terms. But is it also unreasonable in Eco's terms?

It is, of course, unreasonable, but only to the extent to which a community of interpreters holds it as such. In other words, it is unreasonable to cherry-pick words or sentences from the continuity of a text in order to set them together into pseudo-citations that supposedly reveal the meaning of the text and declare its stance and guidance as regards a certain aspect of social life, if and only if the semiotic ideology of the community perceives that the integrity of the text as it has been composed by the author or recomposed by a rigorous philological tradition is a hierarchically superior value in the community. But what if, under the pressure of alternative semiotic ideologies and, therefore, models of meaning and methods of interpretation, slowly but inexorably a community starts to find it more reasonable to obtain a pragmatic effect through the manipulation of a text than to remain faithful to its original syntactic construction? What if a rhapsodic, transient, and "*bricoleuse*" textual ideology ends up diminishing the value of textual integrity?

To a certain extent, such devaluation of philological accurateness is already gaining momentum and space in the Western semiosphere as a consequence of its revolution in terms of the technology of communication. Today more than ever, interpreters

can decompose not only a verbal text but also an image or a video and reassemble it at their will, producing new physical signifiers to be interpreted globally. On the one hand, the easiness with which the texts circulating in the digital semiosphere can be decomposed and recomposed allows interpreters to access a degree of freedom and creativity that would have been impossible under the previous technical conditions. On the other hand, though, technical possibilities are transforming the prevailing textual ideology, replacing it with one in which what a text is becomes less important than what a text is used for.

The predominance of strategic pragmatics over philological syntax is undermining and subverting one of the pillars of the interpretive framework emphasizing the reasonable character of which Eco spent most of his intellectual prestige: the difference between interpretation and use (Eco 1990). In other words, while not prescribing rigid rules for the rational definition of the meaning of a text like Greimas, Eco considered it fundamental for the reasonableness of the social exercise of interpretation in the Western world that such a difference between how texts materially are and what readers want to achieve through their interpretation be maintained and preserved. Eco probably did not believe that this standard of interpretive reasonableness was universal. Being not only a semiotician but also a historian, he knew perfectly well that semiospheres, with their textual, semiotic, and even ontological ideologies, are subject to change due to external forces that want to subvert and replace them; he knew the Middle Ages too well (and perhaps he studied the period exactly for this reason) to ignore that, in certain historical epochs, "barbarians" arrive, and it is not only folkloristic destruction that they bring; they bring, instead, a new interpretive community that disrupts the older criteria of reasonable interpretation. During the Middle Ages, unflagging monasteries preserved not only manuscripts but also the very abstract idea of textual integrity, allowing the continuity of the Western civilization between the classical epoch and the Renaissance. Such historical continuity was also an ideological one: despite the fact that our interpretation of texts is in many cases radically different from that of the ancient Greeks, our way of distinguishing between what is reasonable and what is unreasonable concerning a text is essentially the same, and it was handed down from the Greeks and the Jews and subsequently the Christians to us because it was preserved as an irreplaceable value. If, today, we consider – as Aristotle would in his time – that the meaning of a text can be obtained only by considering the integrality and the integrity of the text, and not through its capricious excision, we also owe it to the fact that this textual mindset was placed at the core of the Western semiosphere and defended against external attacks.

7. Waiting for the semiotic "barbarians"

Does this mean a "clash of civilizations" exists? Does it mean that a "Western civilization" exists? Does it mean that it must be defended from "attacks" coming from different civilizations? From a semiotic perspective, these questions make sense only if the notion of 'civilization' itself is deconstructed and reconstructed in semiotic terms. If by 'Western civilization' one means a certain way of conceiving of the relation between reality and signification; a certain way of construing the 'meaning of meaning'; and, above all, a certain way of positing the exercise of textual interpretation as a means to retrieve the meaning of a signifying reality, then 'Western civilization' certainly exists. Moreover, that entails that other civilizations also exist as adoptions of different ontological, semiotic, and textual ideologies.

Being defined as a conceptual semiosphere, 'Western civilization' marks its boundaries through different means. The geographical frontiers of this semiosphere are not perhaps the most fundamental ones but they are, nevertheless, among the series of signs that concretize the threshold between what is inside and what is outside. In other words, it is not sufficient for an interpreter to be located in France to guarantee that his or her interpretation will actually adhere to the standards of reasonable handling of texts that characterizes the Western civilization. At the same time, France is what it is exactly because its geographical boundaries more or less coincide with those of an interpretive community for which a given set of interpretive standards and criteria are considered as valuable and even binding.

It would be meaningless to ignore the geographical nature of interpretive communities: for a long time in human history, communication has been based on physical proximity; and even now, in an era in which it is tremendously easy to communicate and establish communities with individuals that do not share our own geographical space at all, the fact of occupying the same portion of physical territory still is a fundamental ingredient of most communities. This is the reason for which the Western civilization is *not only* what is marked by precise geographical boundaries – although these are constantly renegotiated through communication or fight – but it *also* is that geographical space. Being born in Europe means coming to the world in a geography with a precise history as regards the ontological, semiotic, and textual ideologies that have prevailed in this space over a long period.

Yet it would be equally meaningless to think that defending 'Western civilization' exclusively means protecting its geographical boundaries. The geographical boundaries of a civilization must be protected not only because they physically outline a space but also, and more fundamentally, because, in many cases, they are the concretization of ideological boundaries. Geographical and ideological boundaries, however, do not always coincide. Unfortunately, the "enemies of the Western civilization" are not only

beyond its geographical frontiers. They are also inside of them, thriving within its geographical space while ideologically exerting a centrifugal, disruptive agency.

Pinpointing the ultimate nature of the "clash of civilizations" comes down to the question: who are our "barbarians"? During the Middle Ages, it was clear that the barbarians were those whose political aims entailed also the destruction of the European Judeo-Christian cultural heritage, which was, therefore, protected through strategies of isolation and reproduction of the core texts of the civilization under attack. The "barbarians" that, today, seek to undermine the foundations of the Western civilization cannot be primarily conceived in geographic terms, although, as it was pointed out above, a civilization is also embodied by the physical space that it occupies. On the opposite, it is in abstract semiotic terms that the current "barbarians" must be defined.

If the "Western civilization" is that in which a community of interpreters active over several millennia painfully selected, as its core interpretive habits, the standards that allow the members of the community to determine what is true and what is false, what interpretation is coherent with the text and what is not, how the limits of a textual unit should be considered and preserved and how, to the contrary, the textual integrity of discourse is dismantled and disrupted, then the "barbarians", that is, the enemies of such civilization are not necessarily 'eastern', or 'non-Christian', or 'non-Jewish', but all those who, being geographically united into different physical communities outside of the Western semiosphere or seeking to undermine it ideologically from the inside, intentionally or unintentionally operate so that, under their continuous collective pressure, the geographical space of the Western civilization comes to adopt an alternative ontological, semiotic, and textual ideology, producing effects of meaning and, above all, relations among members in a completely different way.

To give an example, Islamic fundamentalists certainly are "barbarians", for they aim at injecting more and more ideas of truth, meaning, and text into the European civilization that are completely at odds with that which the civilization has singled out over the centuries of its history as its core semiotic standards of reasonable interpretation. ISIS represents the barbaric counterpart of Europe not only because it disregards the rule of law, but also, and perhaps more disquietingly, because it seeks to destroy the semiotic ideology that underlies such rule of law, a semiotic ideology that, for instance, considers that a certain degree of certainty in adjudication can be reached only when unbiased witnesses are taken into account (the idea that the rape of a woman must be attested by four male witnesses, for example, is against in the Western legal civilization but is also, and even more fundamentally, against the Western *semiotic* civilization).

Nevertheless, Western civilization is threatened not only by the "barbarians out there", but also by individuals and groups that could be defined as "barbarians inside" (inside the semiosphere of Western civilization). A long, painful, and often bloody

history has brought about in the West the idea that being civilized means determining and respecting the "human rights" but also, even more fundamentally, determining and respecting the "semiotic rights". Paul Grice's (1975) conversational maxims are an example of the attempt to distill these rights into a tremendously concise form. Even more generally, a fundamental "semiotic right" that the Western civilization has learned to place at the centre of its semiosphere is the idea that there should be a certain amount of correspondence between what a participant in a conversation thinks and what this participant says in the conversation. It is not difficult, however, to imagine an evolution of the Western semiotic civilization that will result not only in the prevailing of fundamentalist hermeneutics but also of *trolling hermeneutics*, that is, of a semiotic ideology in which the correspondence between the signified thought and the signifying word is less important than the fun to be had from witnessing the disruption of the conversation and from actually contributing to it. Or one may equally well witness the rise of a semiotic civilization of conspiracy, in which, again, the aesthetic pleasure of detecting secret plots beyond any socio-political phenomena will be more important than gathering coherent evidence supporting one's interpretation of facts.

Conclusion

Greimas' gigantic efforts to elaborate a theory and a method able to determine rationally the meaning of texts might well be regarded as outmoded nowadays, given the proliferation of alternative textual ideologies and, above all, given the increasing affirmation of a semiotic ideology according to which discrepant hermeneutics can coexist in a community of interpreters. Yet accepting this relativization of Greimas would be tantamount to ignoring that, behind his method, there is a long and complex history through whose painful vicissitudes a certain idea of text and interpretation became fundamental in the Western world. The historical forces that led Greimas to envisage his complex and powerful theory are the same ones that allow a judge to choose among different interpretations of facts and make this choice inter-subjectively viable for all the members of the same legal conversation. If one rejects Greimas – not as concerns the details of his theoretical creation, but as regards the overall spirit that animates it – then one rejects an important, perhaps a definitional ingredient of the Western semiotic civilization, the ingredient according to which meaning is not created through force, but through communication, through rules and not through violence.

On the other hand, Eco's theory of semiotics is there to warn us all about the fact that what Greimas considered as the only possible rational method of interpretation is actually the result of what a community of interpreters has come to recognize and actually defend for a long time as a reasonable framework for signification. In other words, Greimas tells us what the meaning of texts is, whereas Eco tells us what the

meaning of texts should be, suggesting that the semiotic ideology of the Western civilization is binding also and above all by virtue of the historical process that resulted in its triumph.

We might abandon ourselves to the currents of history, and think that, no matter what we do or say, the semiosphere will eventually shape itself according to mysterious, unfathomable laws. We might fatalistically accept that, for instance, one day we shall lose the meaning of 'truth' as this idea had been conceived from the Greeks until Greimas. But that is not the message of most 20th-century semiotics. Greimas, Eco, and also Lotman implicitly suggested that what we do and say will actually shape the semiosphere and that we should therefore take responsibility for the maintenance of the semiotic core that lies at the centre of the Western civilization. If a clash of civilizations exists, it exists above all in the form of continuous tension among different ways of conceiving of meaning, including the way that eliminates the very idea of meaning from the human horizon. If we think that this idea is important, because it is nothing but the counterpart of the ethical idea of freedom, then not only does a clash of semiotic civilizations exist, but it should also give rise to a continuous battle for the defense of the Western conception of meaning.

References

Descola, Philippe 2013[2005]. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Eco, Umberto 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

– 1979. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

– 1990. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Greimas, Algirdas J. 1983[1966]. *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

– 1987[1970]. *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

– (ed.) 1984. Sémiotique figurative et sémiotique plastique. *Actes sémiotiques* 60.

Greimas, Algirdas J.; Ricoeur, Paul 2000. In: Marsciani, Francesco (ed.), *Tra semiotica ed ermeneutica*. Rome: Meltemi.

Grice, Paul 1975. Logic and conversation. In: Cole, Peter (ed.), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts.* New York: Academic Press, 41–58.

Habermas, Jürgen 1987[1981]. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. (2 vols.) Boston: Beacon Press.

Hjelmslev, Louis 1961[1943]. *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Leone, Massimo 2014. Longing for the past: The nostalgic semiosphere. *Social Semiotics* 25: 1–15.

– 2015. Double debunking: Modern divination and the end of semiotics. *Chinese Semiotic Studies* 11(4): 433–477.
– 2017. On depth: Ontological ideologies and semiotic models. In: Bankov, Kristian (ed.), *New Semiotics Between Tradition and Innovation: Proceedings of the 12th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS/AIS).* Sofia: IASS Publications & NBU Publishing House, 1464–1471.
Lotman, Juri 1990. *Universe of the Mind.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Silverstein, Michael 1979. Language structure and linguistic ideology. In: Clyne, Paul R.; Hanks, William F.; Hofbauer, Carol L. (eds.), *The Elements: A Parasession on Linguistic Units and Levels*. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society, 193–247.
Silverstein, Michael; Urban, Greg 1996. The natural history of discourse. In: Silverstein, Michael; Urban, Greg (eds.), *Natural Histories of Discourse*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1–20.

Столкновение семиотических цивилизаций

Почему теоретические выводы Греймаса вызывали столько разночтений? Почему последователи Греймаса восхищались его новым аналитическим методом, а критики резко отвергали? Автор статьи считает, что и сила, и слабость греймасовской семиотики заключаются в том, что Греймас предлагает рациональный способ определения диапазона значений текста. Семиотические методы интерпретации, учитывающие диахроническое измерение, как, например, интерпретирующая семиотика Умберто Эко или семиотика культуры Юрия Лотмана, углубляют это представление, привязывая рациональность интерпретации к изменяющемуся во времени *common sense* сообщества интерпретаторов. По мнению автора статьи, теоретическая позиция Греймаса, с одной стороны, созвучна преобладающей «культуре значения» западной цивилизации – от греков до Просвещения, подчеркивающей ценность истины как соответствия между текстовыми доказательствами и их герменевтикой. С другой стороны, в настойчивом подчеркивании Эко и Лотманом динамического характера интерпретационных сообществ скрывается политика смысла, цель которой – сохранить ядро западной «семиотической цивилизации» от угроз как изнутри семиосферы, так и извне.

Semiootiliste tsivilisatsioonide kokkupõrge

Miks tekitasid Greimase teoreetilised ettepanekud selliseid lahkarvamusi? Miks kummardasid tema jüngrid uut analüütilist meetodit, kuid kriitikud lükkasid selle otsustavalt kõrvale? Artiklis väidetakse, et nii Greimase semiootika tugevus kui ka selle nõrkus seisnevad selles, et ta pakkus välja ratsionaalse meetodi, määratlemaks teksti tähenduste ulatust. Semiootilised tõlgendusmeetodid, mis on teadlikumad diakroonilisest mõõtmest, nagu näiteks Eco interpretatsiooniteooria või Lotmani kultuurisemiootika, moduleerivad seda seisukohta, sidudes tõlgenduse ratsionaalsuse tõlgendajate kogukonna ajas muutuva mõistuspärasusega. Autori väitel on Greimase teoreetiline seisukoht ühelt poolt kooskõlas domineeriva "tähenduskultuuriga", mille läänelik tsivilisatsioon on destilleerinud alates kreeklastest kuni valgustusajani, rõhutades tõe väärtust kui vastavust tekstipõhise tõendusmaterjali ja selle hermeneutika vahel. Teisalt osutatakse

artiklis, et hermeneutiliste kogukondade dünaamilise iseloomu järjekindlas rõhutamises Eco ja Lotmani poolt peitub tähenduspoliitika, mille eesmärgiks on kaitsta lääneliku "semiootilise tsivilisatsiooni" tuuma ohtude eest, mis üritavad seda õõnestada nii semiosfääri sees kui ka väljaspool seda.