Aprire una collana di libri specializzata in una disciplina che si vuole scientifica, soprattutto se essa appartiene a quella zona intermedia della nostra enciclopedia dei saperi — non radicata in teoremi o esperimenti, ma neppure costruita per opinioni soggettive — che sono le scienze umane, è un gesto ambizioso. Vi potrebbe corrispondere il debito di una definizione della disciplina, del suo oggetto, dei suoi metodi. Ciò in particolar modo per una disciplina come la nostra: essa infatti, fin dal suo nome (semiotica o semiologia) è stata intesa in modi assai diversi se non contrapposti nel secolo della sua esistenza moderna: più vicina alla linguistica o alla filosofia, alla critica culturale o alle diverse scienze sociali (sociologia, antropologia, psicologia). C'è chi, come Greimas sulla traccia di Hjelmslev, ha preteso di definirne in maniera rigorosa e perfino assiomatica (interdefinita) principi e concetti, seguendo requisiti riservati normalmente solo alle discipline logico–matematiche; chi, come in fondo lo stesso Saussure, ne ha intuito la vocazione alla ricerca empirica sulle leggi di funzionamento dei diversi fenomeni di comunicazione e significazione nella vita sociale; chi, come l'ultimo Eco sulla traccia di Peirce, l'ha pensata piuttosto come una ricerca filosofica sul senso e le sue condizioni di possibilità; altri, da Barthes in poi, ne hanno valutato la possibilità di smascheramento dell'ideologia e delle strutture di potere… Noi rifiutiamo un passo così ambizioso. Ci riferiremo piuttosto a un concetto espresso da Umberto Eco all'inizio del suo lavoro di ricerca: il "campo semiotico", cioè quel vastissimo ambito culturale, insieme di testi e discorsi, di attività interpretative e di pratiche codificate, di linguaggi e di generi, di fenomeni comunicativi e di effetti di senso, di tecniche espressive e inventari di contenuti, di messaggi, riscritture e deformazioni che insieme costituiscono il mondo sensato (e dunque sempre sociale anche quando è naturale) in cui viviamo, o per dirla nei termini di Lotman, la nostra semiosfera. La semiotica costituisce il tentativo paradossale (perché autoriferito) e sempre parziale, di ritrovare l'ordine (o gli ordini) che rendono leggibile, sensato, facile, quasi "naturale" per chi ci vive dentro, questo coacervo di azioni e oggetti. Di fatto, quando conversiamo, leggiamo un libro, agiamo politicamente, ci

divertiamo a uno spettacolo, noi siamo perfettamente in grado non solo di decodificare quel che accade, ma anche di connetterlo a valori, significati, gusti, altre forme espressive. Insomma siamo competenti e siamo anche capaci di confrontare la nostra competenza con quella altrui, interagendo in modo opportuno. È questa competenza condivisa o confrontabile l'oggetto della semiotica.

I suoi metodi sono di fatto diversi, certamente non riducibili oggi a una sterile assiomatica, ma in parte anche sviluppati grazie ai tentativi di formalizzazione dell'École de Paris. Essi funzionano un po' secondo la metafora wittgensteiniana della cassetta degli attrezzi: è bene che ci siano cacciavite, martello, forbici ecc.: sta alla competenza pragmatica del ricercatore selezionare caso per caso lo strumento opportuno per l'operazione da compiere.

Questa collana presenterà soprattutto ricerche empiriche, analisi di casi, lascerà volentieri spazio al nuovo, sia nelle persone degli autori che degli argomenti di studio. Questo è sempre una condizione dello sviluppo scientifico, che ha come prerequisito il cambiamento e il rinnovamento. Lo è a maggior ragione per una collana legata al mondo universitario, irrigidito da troppo tempo nel nostro Paese da un blocco sostanziale che non dà luogo ai giovani di emergere e di prendere il posto che meritano.

Ugo Volli



*Multimedial contents*

# The Waterfall and the Fountain

Comparative Semiotic Essays on Contemporary Arts in China

*edited by*

Massimo Leone
Bruno Surace
Jun Zeng

*contributions by*

Lian Duan
Yan Gao
Lei Han
Massimo Leone
Gabriele Marino
Jia Peng
Simona Stano
Bruno Surace
Mattia Thibault
Jia–jun Wang
Jun Zeng
Kui–ying Zhao
Hai–tian Zhou

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Part II
**Chinese Aesthetics from the Outside**

Introduction

# Otherness, Extraneousness, and Unawareness in Inter–Cultural Semiotics

Massimo Leone[1]

A veil of wild mist
hides the tall bridge.
By a rock on the west bank,
I ask a fisher boat:
"The peach petals keep floating
with the water the whole day.
On which side of the clear stream
can I find the cave?"[2]

Abstract: The essay pinpoints the core mission of cultural semiotics as an attempt at problematizing aspects of social life that, appear trivial to most because they have been "naturalized" but that, if read through the lenses of e discipline, che reveal the deep structures that produce meaning in a society and its culture. From this point of view, cultural semiotics is able to perceive otherness and, therefore, meaning, there where common sense would see just banal familiarity. To this purpose, the essay emphasizes the pervasiveness of the experience of otherness (the face of the other, the self as other, but especially otherness that emerges through media from the creativity of artists); it articulates three levels of unfamiliarity: otherness, extraneousness, and unawareness. Through examples taken from Chinese literature and China's everyday life in comparative perspective with the West, the essay suggests that, whereas otherness can be appropriated through a preexistent code, and whereas extraneousness requires the creation of a new code of translation, unawareness implies the incapacity to perceive

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1. Shanghai University, University of Turin.
2. 桃花溪: "隱隱飛橋隔野煙／石磯西畔問漁船／桃花盡日隨流水／洞在清溪何處邊"; Zhang Xu (Chinese: 張旭, fl. 8th century), court name Bogao [伯高]; English trans. by Edward C. Chang.

naturalized otherness, until an extraordinary experience (travel, for instance) leads to its epiphany. Whilst otherness and extraneousness are discovered in alien cultures, unawareness is revealed in relation to one's own culture, thanks to the encounter with the alien one.

## 1. Encountering the Other

Cultural semiotics often problematizes aspects of social life that seem trivial to most and, as a consequence, do not become objects of investigation for more traditional disciplines. Such aspects, however, are not void of interest per se but because they have been interiorized as second nature and common sense by an entire collectivity. They seem as natural as breathing or sleeping but they are actually not. On the contrary, analyzing them often reveals truths about a society that are all the more surprising since they do not explicitly manifest themselves anymore but remain in the exclusive domain of the implicit or even unconscious assumptions of ideology. It is overly difficult to become aware of these assumptions by simply remaining in one's society and observing it, albeit with dispassionate neutrality, acumen, and sophisticated analytical instruments. Indeed, the more such implicit features are general and abstract, the more they will exclusively reveal themselves in very specific circumstances, which usually go under the somewhat rhetorical label of "encounter with the other"[3].

One can come across otherness in many ways. It is, actually, quite hard not to have an experience of it even in the most crystallized routines[4]. The bodies of other individuals, and especially their faces (Leone, 2017), continuously provide one with an inexhaustible

3. On the topic of "anthropological translation", see Leone, 2015, *Anthropological*.

4. On the semiotics of routines, see Leone, 2011; on the emergence of significance, Leone, 2017, *On Insignificance*.

source of variety, which seems to be a foundational principle of cultures but also and foremost of the nature itself upon which cultures build their linguistic and semiotic constructions. Moreover, not only the bodies of the others, but also one's own body is the source of a quotidian experience of otherness. Time, in fact, and the changing of things through it, introduces variety in continuity. As soon as media enter the semiotic existence of an individual and its community, then, otherness is encountered beyond natural forms, in the form of the creativity offered by other people through a variety of genres, texts, and styles. Each novel is and must be different from the others; the same goes for most contemporary creative and artistic objects: that which is expected from them is exactly the ability of displacing receivers, albeit for a brief moment, from the domain of the familiar to that of the unknown or even of the disquieting[5].

On the one hand, such mediated encounters with otherness cannot be a complete shock: poets can sometimes express feelings in a revolutionary way, yet they must somehow coat this revolution within a modicum of ordinary language, if some sort of communication with readers is to take place (Riffaterre, 1978). On the other hand, the extent of this unfamiliarity increases as texts from distant lands, times, and especially from distant cultures, are received. For a present–day Italian reader unfamiliar with the Chinese language, culture, and poetry, for instance, a poem by Wang Wei[6] might sound exceedingly exotic, to the point that many, if not most of the poet's lyrics will not be understood or will be misunderstood; here follows, for instance, Wang Wei's famous poem *Mount Zhongnan* [終南山]:

> The Tai Yi peak
> is near the capital of Heaven.
> Its range stretches
> all the way to the coast.

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5. On the semiotics of innovation, see Leone, 2015, *The Semiotics*.
6. In Chinese: 王維; Qi County, Jinzhong, Shanxi, 699 – Xi'an, Shaanxi, 759 (Tang Dinasty).

As I look back,
the white clouds are close in.
As I look close up,
the blue mists suddenly disappear.
The middle ridge divides into
two ever–changing sceneries.
On dark or clear days
each valley has a different view.
Wanting to put up
at some one's place for the night,
I ask a woodcutter
on the other side of the stream[7].

## 2. A Typology of Unfamiliarity

Unfamiliarity, however, must be arranged along a spectrum that could be conceived as symmetric to the one devised by Franco–Lithuanian semiotician Algirdas J. Greimas so as to investigate the logics of meaning formation (Greimas, 1970).

### 2.1. *Otherness*

Accordingly, the most superficial level of non–intelligibility would be that of the textual surface or manifestation, that is, the level at which Wang Wei's poetry is expressed in 8th century Chinese. For an Italian reader, however, a good translation will be sufficient to cross this first linguistic barrier[8], although never without a loss of nuances of meaning, given the complexity of the poetic translation between languages and cultures that are so distant (Eco, 2003, *Dire*;

7.  "太乙近天都 / 連山接海隅 / 白雲迴望合 / 青靄入看無 / 分野中峰變 / 陰晴眾壑殊 / 欲投人處宿 / 隔水問樵夫"; Engl. trans. Edward C. Chang.

8.  For instance, through the collection *Poesie del fiume Wang*, translated by the Italian sinologist Martin Benedikter (1980).

2003, *Mouse*). At deeper levels of the textual organization, however, crossing the frontier between unfamiliarity and acquaintance would be more difficult. At the deepest level of texts, for instance, a long acquaintance with Chinese culture and history would be necessary in order to grasp the set of fundamental spiritual values that under-pins traditional Chinese poetry and to "translate" it for the western and Italian understanding of it. This operation would be easier for the contemporary Chinese reader but it would not be completely smooth either: a gap of centuries of history separates a classic Chinese poet from his present–day compatriot readers. In both cases, only study, a refined sensibility, and assiduous familiarizing with history and literature, plus a certain personal hermeneutic talent, will bridge the spatial, temporal, and cultural gap, transforming a poem into a controlled experience of otherness, that is, otherness that strikes receivers of the poem enough to alter their perception of reality but not so much as to become unintelligible and, as a consequence, ineffectual.

Experiencing otherness through traditional media and formats like books and literature is sometimes revolutionizing but it is also somehow facilitated by the adoption of textual forms that, despite local peculiarities and varieties, usually are a global phenomenon. Contemporary Italian readers coming across a poem by Li Shang-yin[9] might be totally unfamiliar with the themes of his texts, yet these readers will recognize their expression as poetry, for they will identify, in them, some formal features (the articulation of discourse into verses, for instance) that are actually more spread out and global than the contents that they express; see, for instance, the classical poem *The Cicada* [蟬]: the western reader will recognize it immediately as a poem but, although helped by the translation, will not understand the cultural reference to the cicada, which is traditionally used as an animal metaphor of incautious squandering in the west, whereas in China it is the clean animal per excellence, as it supposedly feeds only on dew and wind.

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9. In Chinese: 李商隐; courtesy name: Yishan (義山); c. 813–c. 858.

To begin with, being clean
does not free you from hunger.
Why then keep
uttering bitterness?
By the fifth hour,
your voice becomes weak and husky.
But the green tree remains
indifferent and unmoved.
As a low–ranking official,
I am but a drifting twig.
The fields at home
are wasted with overgrown weeds.
Thank you for
alerting me, my friend.
My family and I too are
just like you: pure and clean[10].

The evolution of many of these textual forms, indeed, probably went through a process of cultural transmission or, in certain cases, autonomous polygenesis that bridges linguistic, national, and even cultural frontiers. 17th century British literature met the favor of a global audience, but an even wider spatial and temporal area adopted the textual form of the sonnet, which became, as a consequence, a discursive artifact able to manifest a large variety of cultural sensibilities and themes (Kemp, 2013).

### 2.2. *Extraneousness*

As otherness is experienced not through the lenses of these global textual forms but in everyday life, grasping its relevance and contents becomes much more difficult, for, in this case, pertinence and meaning escape any formal framework and offer themselves, instead, as

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10. "本以高難飽／徒勞恨費聲／五更疏欲斷／一樹碧無情／薄宦梗猶汎／故園蕪已平／煩君最相警／我亦舉家清"; English trans. Edward C. Chang.

pure extraneousness. The difference between otherness and extraneousness resides precisely in that: otherness can be "appropriated" — and its essential charge of subversion with it — through translational operations that are already codified into culture and actually facilitated by the global circulation and, therefore, familiarity of textual forms. In extraneousness, instead, that which emerges is not the differential potential of otherness but the disquietude of what cannot be tamed and made familiar, for no conventional operations of translations subsist so as to turn the uncanny into the intelligible.

The experience of otherness might be shocking but it usually is, albeit sometimes painfully, enriching. The experience of extraneousness, on the contrary, is that of a semiotic suffering that is never rewarded, of an anxiety that never leads one from meaninglessness to meaningfulness, and never even promises the possibility of such a passage. The emotional result of the encounter with otherness is curiosity, followed by inquiry, and, in fortunate cases, cultural intercourse. The emotional result of extraneousness is, on the contrary, fear, if not panic. It generates and hands down an imaginary of monstrosity and unbridgeable distance. There is, however, a degree of unfamiliarity that is even deeper than that of extraneousness since this, at least, manages to trigger a feeling of shock and, therefore, an opportunity for self–interrogation, although that does not turn into self–awareness like in the encounter with otherness. Indeed, the highest degree of blind unfamiliarity does not even manifest itself but remains concealed in the dumbness of unawareness.

2.3. *From Otherness through Extraneousness to Unawareness: Chinese examples*

*A. Calisthenics*

A simple example will clarify the difference between otherness, extraneousness, and unawareness. An Italian present–day (early 21$^{st}$ century) observer walks through a contemporary Chinese park.